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*Hebrew Union College
Rabbinic Thesis
March 2003*

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Images of Jerusalem

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank two individuals who have helped me throughout the development of this project. First and foremost my advisor, Dr. Susan Einbinder, Professor of Hebrew Literature at Hebrew Union College - Cincinnati. Her intellectual energy, creative input and good humor was invaluable. She is my teacher, guide and mentor. Not to be outdone is Ms. Ida Kuhr. She is endlessly patient, supportive and loving. Thank you both. The Writing Lab of University of Cincinnati provided great insight into the process of writing a scholarly work. Finally, I would like to thank Hebrew Union College for its support in my education, training and growth.



Matt L. Berger
Cincinnati, Ohio
19 March 2003
17 Adar I 5763

Images of Jerusalem

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ABSTRACT

More than any other place, Jerusalem forces people to confront the eternal issues of life. The Hebrew Bible idealizes Jerusalem as a glorious place at the center of the world. Today, the Old City of Jerusalem stands as a sentinel, if not at the earth's center than at least within yards of the current borders of the city. To the writers of the Talmud, Jerusalem possessed nine-tenths of the world's beauty, but it is a city known in modern times more for its divisiveness - between Arab and Jew, ultra-Orthodox and secular Jew. Contemporary Israeli poets who write about Jerusalem articulate two basic motifs: the ideal, holy Jerusalem, and the mundane city and its inhabitants. These poets wonder what will make this divided city the "whole city" implied by her name.

This thesis proposes to examine Jerusalem through the work of two leading poets - Yehuda Amichai and Zelda. Both view Jerusalem through the lens of their unique backgrounds and experiences. Both call Jerusalem home. Together they afford the reader tremendous insight into the complexity and wonder that embody Jerusalem.

Yehuda Amichai expresses the secular mindset. Born in Germany, his family came to Israel when he was eleven. They settled in Jerusalem where he lived for the remainder of his life. Amichai grew up religious, but as a teenager became secular. Much of his poetry deals with the internal dilemma between his father's traditions and the modern individual. Amichai writes about daily existence, revealing the deep divisions between Jew and Arab. He speaks of the spiritual atmosphere that pervades the entire city. Amichai represents the secular Israeli, proportionately loving and critical towards his home.

Zelda represents the religious perspective. The granddaughter of an important rabbi in Russia, Zelda came to Jerusalem with her family in 1925 when she was eleven.

She chose to publish her poetry under the name "Zelda" in order to establish a personal connection with her readers without identifying her family name. She remained a devout Orthodox Jew and lived in Jerusalem throughout her life. Zelda's poetry is clearly based on her sense of the divine in the world. Much of her language echoes the language of prayer and her Hasidic roots.

The following themes will serve as an analytical template in discussing these two poets: the intensity of Jerusalem, its religious significance, relations between Jews, and the conflict between Jews and Arabs.

I. Significance of Jerusalem in biblical, rabbinic and modern Hebrew literature

The connection between the Jewish people and Jerusalem is ancient and powerful. Judaism proclaimed Jerusalem a holy city over 3,000 years ago. Jews pray in its direction, mention its name in daily prayers and recall the city in blessings at the end of each meal. Jerusalem remains an enduring presence, an echo of eternity.¹ A brief overview of the biblical, rabbinic and modern epochs will demonstrate the import and significance of Jerusalem. At no time have Jews ceased their dialogue with the city.

It is impossible to assess the spiritual significance of Jerusalem without taking into account its physical importance. The separation of religion and state, a central feature of Western nations, is alien to the Jewish way of thinking. Jews consider the two complementary and inseparable.

Jerusalem did not occupy a special role in the patriarchal period (c. 2000 BCE). Other Canaanite cities such as Hebron, Beersheba and Shechem played more prominent roles in the biblical account. Jerusalem is mentioned but once in the Pentateuch. The Melchizedek, king and priest of *Shalem*, brings forth bread and wine in order to bless the future patriarch Abraham.² There is an ensuing reference to a mountain in the land of Moriah in the *Akedah* (lit. "binding" of Isaac) narrative, however it is not certain if this geographical location is Jerusalem itself.³

There are a flood of references to Jerusalem in the biblical narrative. The Hebrew Bible refers to the city by name over six hundred times.⁴ *Zion*, a term synonymous with the holy city, first related to the Temple Mount. Its usage in prophetic material, however, sealed the association between the term and the capital city.⁵

¹ Heschel, A. *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1969) 7.

² Gen. 14:18

³ Gen. 22:2

⁴ Even Shoshan, A. *New Concordance*. Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sefer (1997) 495-96.

⁵ Amos 1:2

The centrality of Jerusalem is a result of religious and political decisions made by David, King of Israel. In the biblical narrative, God chooses Jerusalem as the site for the Temple.⁶ After his conquest of the city, David established Jerusalem as the national capital of the united kingdom of Israel (c. 1000 BCE). He transferred the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and bought a site for an altar. These actions set Jerusalem as the religious and political center of the Israelite nation.

Solomon, David's son, built the first Temple in Jerusalem which cemented the association between the city and God.⁷ The Temple became the exclusive site permitted for sacrificial ritual and the object of religious pilgrimages. With the exception of the Babylonian exiles (598-538 BCE), Jerusalem remained the cultic center of Judaism throughout the first and second Temple periods.⁸

Following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (586 BCE), the Jews faced the reality of how to survive and conduct worship services without the Temple. The psalmist expressed the problem in a poignant longing that became over the centuries a symbol of Jewish allegiance: *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand lose its cunning.*⁹ The prophets too augured the symbolic import of Jerusalem. Isaiah prophesied that the Lord will comfort His people [Jews] and redeem Jerusalem.¹⁰ Zechariah exclaimed that the divine presence ultimately rests in the midst of Zion.¹¹ Amos declared that the voice of God emanates from Jerusalem.¹² The significance of these passages is clear. During periods of forced exile from Jerusalem, Jews did not remove the city from their hearts.

Many authorities feel that the events culminating in the emergence of the synagogue are to be dated to the Babylonian exile. Scholarly speculation is that the exiles

⁶ II Sam. 7:1 ff.

⁷ I Kgs. 5:19

⁸ Wigoder, G. (Ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House (1989) 248.

⁹ Ps. 137:5

¹⁰ Isa. 52:9

¹¹ Zech. 2:10

¹² Amos 1:2

met from time to time, perhaps every Sabbath, to seek consolation over the loss of their land, to study Scripture and perhaps to pray.¹³ With the return of the exiles from Babylonia and the rededication of the Temple (515 BCE), synagogues, or proto-synagogues, probably developed in the land of Israel. The Mishnah tells of a synagogue on the Temple Mount, beside the Temple itself.¹⁴ The Jerusalem Talmud claims that there were some 400 synagogues in Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, a figure that may be exaggerated but point to their multiplicity.¹⁵

The development of the synagogue in the Diaspora outpaced that of *Eretz Yisrael* (land of Israel). Early synagogues are known to have existed in various Mediterranean communities. By the end of the first century CE, wherever Jews lived they had their synagogues.¹⁶ This was to prove vital to the people's success in surviving the destruction of the Second Temple and reconstructing Jewish life. After the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 CE, Jerusalem's role in national life diminished. The destruction of the Temple marked the end of the priesthood as an authoritative entity.¹⁷

Jerusalem endured as a central component of Judaism in the rabbinic period (c. 70-1789 CE). The rabbis, however, recast its image and meaning. Jerusalem, no longer a cultic reality, emerged as the embodiment of religious faith, a symbol of spiritual glory even during periods of exile. The rabbis painted an extravagant picture of Jerusalem in order to glorify it. A few references to the city in *midrash*, compilations of homilies and commentary on the Bible written between 400 and 1200 CE, will attest to the centrality of Jerusalem.¹⁸ Of the ten measures of beauty that came down to the world, Jerusalem secured nine.¹⁹ For the rabbis, Israel was the geographic center of the world, with

¹³ Wigoder, G. (Ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House (1989) 678.

¹⁴ *Sotah* 7:8; *Yoma* 7:1

¹⁵ *Megillah* 3:1

¹⁶ Wigoder, G. (Ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House (1989) 678.

¹⁷ Sachar, H. *A History of Israel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf (1996) 18.

¹⁸ Holtz, B. *Back to the Sources*. New York: Simon & Schuster (1984) 178.

¹⁹ *Kiddushin* 49b

Jerusalem its focal point.²⁰ The praise of Jerusalem extended to its inhabitants. A prominent rabbi of the Amoraic period (3rd-6th CE) stated that God expiated the sins of Jerusalemites daily.²¹

Throughout the liturgy and various ritual practices, the rabbis kept the Jew mindful of the religious institutions he might hope to see restored. The mention of Jerusalem is an obligatory aspect of many statutory prayers. The central prayer in Jewish liturgy, the *Amidah* (lit. "standing" prayer) devotes an entire blessing to Jerusalem. Two of the most sacred ceremonies of the Jewish calendar (Yom Kippur and Passover seder) conclude with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem." The hope of a rebuilt of Jerusalem and its Temple is fundamental to rabbinic ideology. The rabbis' veneration of Jerusalem rested upon the belief in the messianic restoration of the Jewish commonwealth.

The onset and expansion of the Holy Roman Empire did not augur an immanent return to the land of Israel. Constantine the Great (306-337 CE) was the first Roman emperor to radically limit the rights of Jews in the Roman Empire. As Christianity grew in power it influenced the emperors to limit further the civil and political rights of the Jews. Most of the imperial laws that deal with the Jews since the days of Constantine are found in the Latin *Codex Theodosianus* (438 CE) and in the Latin and Greek code of Justinian (534 CE). Both of these works enable scholars to trace the history of the progressive deterioration of Jewish rights.²² Jacob Marcus notes:

The Jews were never more than a tolerated group even when accorded exceptionally favorable privileges, and they were nearly always cordially disliked. Thus, in general, it is safe to say that large patches of the medieval period were characterized by political and social disabilities.²³

Despite these circumstances, Jerusalem remained the spiritual nexus of the Jewish people. The rabbis continued to stress the superior religious qualities of *Eretz Yisrael* (land

²⁰ Sanhedrin 37a

²¹ Pirke de Rav Kahana 55b

²² Marcus, J. *The Jew in the Medieval World*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press (1990) 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

of Israel). The Zohar, a 13th century mystical treatise, echoed the sentiment of the prophet Jeremiah when it proclaimed that the divine presence (*shekhinah*) never departs from Jerusalem.²⁴ At times, individual Jews reached the holy land. Joseph Nasi, a distinguished financier, secured the grant of the village of Tiberias in 1564.²⁵ Historically, the motivating factor of the constant trickle of Jews who returned to Zion over the centuries was religion.

The physical connection between Jews and the land of Israel never expired. A small number Jews remained in and around Zion throughout the Roman era. An estimated 300,000 Jews lived in the land of Israel by the year 1000 CE. However, the arrival of the Crusaders nearly decimated the Jewish population (11th-13th CE). Groups of refugees arrived from Spain and Portugal after the expulsions of the late 15th century.²⁶ Their arrival corresponded with the Ottoman conquest of the Levant (countries bordering east of the Mediterranean) in 1517 CE.

One such group established the great kabbalistic center in Safed. Other settlements, however, such as the communities in Hebron and Tiberias, were less impressive. Throughout the medieval period, indeed as late as the mid-eighteenth century, Jerusalem remained a small city with a population well under ten thousand Jews.²⁷ The holy city remained an ideal rather than a concrete reality.

The revolutionary changes that swept through France in the latter part of the 18th century affected Jews greatly. Gentile intellectuals championed the cause of Jewish liberty on the basis of a fundamental bill of rights.²⁸ The trend toward emancipation gained momentum, not only in France but in the surrounding countries captured by Napoleon's armies. Many Jews adopted a sympathetic attitude toward secular culture and Western philosophy.

²⁴ Jer. 3:17; Zohar 2:157a.

²⁵ Marcus, J. *The Jew in the Medieval World*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press (1990) 320.

²⁶ Sachar, H. *A History of Israel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf (1996) 18-19.

²⁷ Ibid., 20.

²⁸ Wigoder, G. *Encyclopedia of Judaism*. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House (1989) 326.

The *Haskalah* (lit. "enlightenment") movement revitalized the Jewish religion in a number of ways. Liberal Jews welcomed secular studies as an integral part of Jewish education. Jewish leaders promoted the study of Hebrew as a living language. Secular values, as expressed in philosophy, history and the sciences established a bridge between Judaism and the non-religious environment. A growing sentiment emerged; Judaism must be modernized.²⁹

The historical perspective of the *Haskalah* corresponded to modern notions of historical process. Like other nations of the world, many Jews expressed the desire to have a homeland. The ideological adoption of nationalism rejected the traditional belief in Messianic deliverance. The *maskil* (Jewish intellectual) wrote in Hebrew rather than Yiddish, the language of exile and segregation. *Haskalah* literature glorified the idealized Jerusalem.³⁰ Initially, the *maskil* did not want to return to the land of Israel. Only in the wake of disappointment with the Enlightenment did the *Haskalah* intellectual join the national struggle for a homeland.

The notion of the European nation-state ignited the ancient Jewish desire for a commonwealth. The Zionist (Jewish nationalist) movement desired to resettle the Jewish people in a sovereign state. Its ideology secularized a basic tenet, namely that the land of Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people. In 1895, Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, described the Jewish State as a world necessity.³¹

A significant period of Jewish settlement in the land of Israel (*yishuv*) occurred between 1881-1947. Contemporary writers depicted Jerusalem as the eternal symbol of the Jewish people and the embodiment of its destiny. Zionist poets linked politics with the physical return to Zion. At the heart of this renaissance was the image of the pioneer

²⁹ Meyer, M. *The Origins of the Modern Jew*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press (1967) 86.

³⁰ Bayer, B. "Jerusalem" in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1997) CD-ROM Edition.

³¹ Sachar, H. *A History of Israel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf (1996) 39.

(*halutz*).³² Jewish settlers rebuilt the land of Israel by means of their hands. They made the dream of Jewish existence in the land a concrete reality.

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 presented fresh challenges for the Jewish world. Jerusalem was no longer an ideal vision, rather a capital city. Jews from every corner of the Diaspora (areas outside land of Israel settled by Jews) flooded into Israel. Thousands of survivors of the *Shoah* (Holocaust) emigrated from Europe. In addition, there was a great mass migration from North Africa and the Middle East. At the end of 1951, the Jewish population had been doubled by the arrival of over 650,000 immigrants.³³

The newcomers were divided almost equally between *Ashkenazim* (Eastern/Central European Jews) and *Sephardim* (North African/Middle Eastern Jews), whereas before 1948 almost 90% had come from Europe. The confrontation between the Ashkenazim, who in large part built the State, and the oriental communities, which differed widely in language, outlook, and manners, had profound implications.

The new government was an entanglement of political parties. The shortcoming of Israeli democracy evinced itself in crowded government offices and endless bureaucracy. Mass immigration aggravated the economic difficulties. Additionally, passions ran high and vocal concerning institutionalized religion. The conflict between Arab and Jew raged. The threat of war loomed.

The transition from settlement to statehood involved struggle. Scholars argue it is impossible to understand the great crisis of Hebrew literature in the fifties without understanding this process.³⁴ A growing disparity emerged between the vision and reality of the modern state. Thousands of immigrants (*olim*) arrived on Israeli soil from many different countries. They needed housing, work and education. The government faced a

³² Ritov, I & Slutsky, Y. "He-Halutz" in Encyclopedia Judaica (1997) CD-ROM Edition.

³³ Porath, Y. "State of Israel" in Encyclopedia Judaica (1997) CD-ROM Edition.

³⁴ Shaked, G. "You Want a State? Have a State!" in *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 46 (1988) 89.

daunting task. The turbulent period of the new state affected Israeli writer. Its challenges offered a fertile wellspring of material.

Prior to the 1980s, the setting of a great deal of Israeli prose is Jerusalem. It is the spiritual heart of Israel, at once perceived as the traditional image of Zion and metaphor for Jewish history. The city itself is laden with emotion, nostalgia and antiquity. Within its borders lie the holy sites of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. It is hallowed in the thoughts and prayers of millions each day. Jerusalem, more than any other city, is the conduit between God and man.

Poetry is the attempt to create an imaginative awareness of experience by means of language.³⁵ By choosing and arranging language the poet generates an emotional response via meaning, sound and rhythm. The Hebrew poet in particular has a twofold responsibility, a desire to utilize the resonance of the Hebrew language without losing its past richness and religious overtones. He/she engages in an internal battle of the self, reconciling the religious and secular.

³⁵ Woolf, H. (Ed.). *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster (1977) 887.

II. Yehuda Amichai and the religious perspective

The writing of Yehuda Amichai mirrors his life. Facets of his life history and emotional development emerge throughout his work. Amichai weaves disparate and antithetical themes into an effective personal poetic. His poetry represents a unique blend of personal, religious and societal themes. A prominent theme in his work is wrestling. Amichai wrestles with his past, walking the narrow bridge that connects religious and secular society. He writes a great deal about the impact of his parents and, in particular, his relationship with his father. Finally, Amichai wrestles with the reality of war and the conflict between Arabs and Jews. He fought in all of Israel's major wars between 1947-1967.

As we shall see, Amichai lived most of his life in Jerusalem. His childhood memories, his mature loves and his everyday observations are all tied to the city. He is unique in bringing the overwhelming drama of the city down to human dimensions. Amichai captures the Israeli *zeitgeist* (spirit) by means of an intimate and autobiographical poetic form. His work speaks to Israeli readers who live in a land of constant tension. A general discussion of the poet's life and work will lead to a focus on his treatment of Jerusalem.

Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) was born in Wurzburg, Bavaria, to a family of Orthodox Jews. They observed the *mitzvot* (commandments), and like many German Jews, led a double life - loyal to both their Jewish heritage and the greater German community. Both of Amichai's grandfathers were farmers, living nearby in small rural Jewish communities. His father was an itinerant haberdashery peddler.¹ Amichai was educated in an Orthodox school (*heder*), learning Hebrew by means of daily prayer. Although Wurzburg was a communal center for Southern German Jewry, antisemitism

¹ Maoz, R. "Amichai's Struggle with Faith" in *Thinkers and Teachers of Modern Judaism*. New York: Paragon House (1989) 222.

was a reality. Even before the rise of the Nazi antisemitism, Amichai recalls the cry: "Dirty Jew, go to Palestine."² Amichai's father decided to relocate the family to Palestine following the rise of the Nazi Party.

In 1936 the family emigrated, settling first in Petach Tikva and then Jerusalem. Amichai attended the religious high school *Maaleh* and completed his studies there. At the age of fifteen Amichai abandoned formal religious practice. He viewed the *mitzvot* as rituals that served to artificially distinguish Jews from non-Jews in the Diaspora (areas outside of Israel). He felt, as did many secular Israelis, that living in the land of Israel was a sufficient mark of his Jewish identity.³

Amichai's religious worldview transformed during his adolescent years. He joined the Socialist-Zionist youth movement, an atheist organization that negated many religious traditions associated with the Diaspora. Amichai felt that institutionalized religion, predicated upon the performance of *mitzvot*, diminished the spiritual experience of God. He described some Jewish rituals, such as the *mitzvah of Biur Chametz* (removing all leavened bread prior to the Passover festival), as useless and artificial.⁴

The poet's traumatic experiences as a young Israeli soldier in the War of Independence (1948) further reinforced his initial loss of faith. In many ways this war shaped Israeli consciousness. For Israelis, the war of 1948 was more important than the Holocaust, an event that occurred in far off lands, with its vast number of victims. Amichai's visceral engagement with the realities of war triggered his poetry. As a soldier he read works of modern English poetry, particularly those of Auden and Eliot, whose colloquial use of language influenced his own writing.⁵

Amichai's generation participated in all of Israel's wars. The near perpetual state of combat left an indelible mark on Israel's collective psyche. Amichai spoke as an

² Amichai, Y. "Dorot be'Aretz" in *La-Merhav*. May 3, 1968.

³ Maoz, R. "Amichai's Struggle with Faith," in *Thinkers and Teachers of Modern Judaism*. New York: Paragon House (1989) 224.

⁴ Amichai, Y. "My Father on Pesach Eve" in *Akshav baRaash*. Jerusalem: Schocken (1968) 45.

⁵ Maoz, R. "Amichai's Struggle with Faith," in *Thinkers and Teachers of Modern Judaism*. New York: Paragon House (1989) 231.

individual, yet represented an entire generation "confronted with the deep disillusionment of a society emptied of its values."⁶ The decades of strife between Arab and Jew took its toll. The rooted faith of the pre-state *chalutzim* (pioneers) vanished as a dream deferred. Amichai recalls this period:

The generations prior to 1948 had many 'I believes.' The generation of the fifties had only 'I do not believe.' It is a generation of doubts and contradictions, uncertainties and suspicions, in both words and deeds.⁷

Amichai's home of nearly four decades was in Yemin Moshe, a neighborhood that rises over the Valley of Hinnom and affords a magnificent view of the Old City. Amichai, however, did not choose this location for its vantage point. In the early 1960s the city was still divided. Yemin Moshe marked the edge of the rubble-strewn border between Jordan and Israel. It was the type of neighborhood that a poet, living on a school teacher's salary, could afford.⁸

There are a number of innovative stylistic elements in Amichai's poetry. Amichai establishes a connection with his audience due to his choice of language. He presents images and ideas by means of colloquial rhetoric. He uses words that are in the Israeli vernacular, unpacking lofty formulas with clear prose.⁹ In one of his earlier poems, Amichai approaches the subject of God with powerful yet simple language:

God has pity on kindergarten children
He has less pity on school children
And on grownups he has no pity at all
He leaves them alone
And sometimes they must crawl on all fours
In the burning sand
To reach the first-aid station
Covered with blood.¹⁰

אלהים מרחם על ילדי הגן,
פחות מזה על ילדי בית-הספר.
ועל הגדולים לא ירחם עוד,
ישאירם לבדם.
ולפעמים יצטרכו לזחל על ארבע
בחול הלוהט,
כדי להגיע לתחנת האסוף
והם שותתי דם.

At times his use of rhetoric is jarring. In "Revelation" God emerges as in a game of hide-and-seek: Today God revealed himself to me. He placed his hands over my eyes from

⁶ Maor, R. "Amichai's Struggle with Faith," in *Thinkers and Teachers of Modern Judaism* (1994) 221.

⁷ Amichai, Y. "Dorot ba'Aretz" in *La-Merhav*, May 3, 1968.

⁸ Alter, R. "Israel's Master Poet" in *New York Times Magazine* (June 8, 1986) 40.

⁹ Fuchs, E. Remembering Yehuda Amichai: Homage to an Israeli Poet in *Midstream* (May/June 2001) 27.

¹⁰ Amichai, Y. "God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children" in *Israeli Poetry: A Contemporary Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University (1986) 22.

behind: Guess who!¹¹ The notion of man as a divine plaything is ironic and perchance sacrilegious in a monotheistic context. Amichai strikes a chord in his poetry precisely because many secular Israelis search for meaning in their lives. Jews engage in theological dialogue using religious language and metaphor.

Another stylistic innovation of Amichai's poetry is his autobiographic form. Amichai rejected the collective voice of the generation before him. Instead he emphasizes the individual voice in his poetry by speaking in the first person singular. In many instances the lyric "I" narrates the action and tenor of his verse.¹² Amichai's introspective style affords profound insight into his own personal history. Amichai does not, however, render a composite life story. Rather he describes significant life events which form his fundamental character.

Amichai's autobiographical statements serve as symbolic landmarks demarcating his journey as a human being.¹³ For example, Amichai imbues a great deal of his poetry with the subject of memory and the burdens of memory. Jerusalem in particular awakens a rich flow of memories:

Jerusalem is a place where all remember
That they have forgotten something
But they don't remember what
And for the sake of this remembering
I wear my father's face on mine.¹⁴

ירושלים, מקום שהכל זוכרים
ששכחו בו משהו
אבל הם אינם זוכרים מה שכחו.
ולצורך זכירה זו אני
חובש על פני את פני אבי.

Amichai is unique among Palmach (first generation Israeli) poets in his incorporation of God as a central element of his work.¹⁵ To read an Amichai poem is to witness one man's great struggle with faith. The poet mourns the loss of belief in man and God. He longs for the confidence of belief from which he and his generation were expelled. At times he strikes out bitterly towards a deity that does not seem to care. In

¹¹ Amichai, Y. "Revelation" in *Akshav Baruch*, Jerusalem: Schocken (1968) 200.

¹² Abramson, G. *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*. Albany: SUNY Press (1989) 17.

¹³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴ Amichai, Y. "Songs of Zion the Beautiful" in *Shirei Yerushalayim*, Jerusalem: Schocken (1989) 89.

¹⁵ Abramson, G. "Amichai's God" in *Prooftexts* 4 (1984) 111.

"Lamentations for the War Dead" he lays the blame of war on God's shoulders, calling Him "terrible" and "toothless."¹⁶ Amichai searches in vain for the omnipotent and all-powerful God of his youth. A poem in the same compilation concludes with a desperate yet fervent hope in God's existence.¹⁷ Amichai's poetry reveals an individual who has achieved a degree of spiritual maturity after years of religious discontent. God remains a weighty element of his identity, an arbiter of his personal fate.

Like many Palmach writers, Amichai did not possess the traditional faith of traditional (Orthodox) Judaism. His literary cohort broke from the past through the use of secular ideas and ideals. Many recast classical texts and religious imagery to respond to the needs of modernity. Amichai excels in this process of modern exegesis. He demonstrates a thorough knowledge of traditional sources due to his orthodox upbringing. He uses biblical and liturgical texts as a springboard to create wholly modern ideas that speak to his life and that of his generation.¹⁸

Amichai frequently contrasts the sacred and the profane in his work. The purpose of his iconoclastic imagery is not to deny God and religion. On the contrary, it reflects the journey of an individual who seeks dialogue with God. He intends to shake hallowed concepts that have grown rigid. Amichai declares in one of his later poems:

You [God] divided the waters	והכרלת בין מים אשר מעל לרקיע
Above the firmament from the waters below	ובין מים שמתחתיו.
We asked for knowledge of good and evil	בקשנו דעת טוב ורע
And you gave us laws like rules for football	ותתת לנו קללים וחוקים כמו קללי כדורגל
Dos and dont's	למחר ולאסור לשקר ולענש
Reward and punishment. ¹⁹	

Despite his issues with traditional Judaism, he greatly admires the poetry of liturgical, biblical and rabbinic texts. His love of Jewish tradition is apparent throughout his work. "Every word we use," he says of Hebrew, "carries in and of itself connotations

¹⁶ Amichai, Y. "Lamentations for the War Dead" in *Meahorei Kol Mistater Osher Gadol*, Tel Aviv: Schocken (1974) 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸ Abramson, G. "Amichai's God" in *Proof texts* 4 (1984) 111.

¹⁹ Amichai, Y. "A Way of Life" in *Me'adam ata ve'el adam tashuv*, Jerusalem: Schocken (1985) 68.

from the Bible, the Siddur, the Midrash, the Talmud. Every word reverberated through the halls of Jewish history.²⁰

Amichai's struggle with faith is an integral element of his poetry. Amichai quarrels with God and tradition via textual exegesis and reinterpretation. His theological speculation places him, as Amichai himself acknowledges, squarely in the tradition of Abraham and Job:

I think my sense of history and God, even if I am against history and God, is very Jewish. It's an ancient Jewish idea to fight with God, to scream out against God.²¹

Amichai's measures his faith against the world of his father. The secular world of the poet emerges as confused and uncertain as compared to the firm beliefs of traditional Judaism. He describes this dilemma in a poem entitled "In a Right Angle: A Cycle of Quatrains":

In the sands of prayer my father saw angels' traces.	בְּחולות התפלה ראה אבי עקבות מלאכים.
He bequeathed me a route but I answered him with many ways.	הוא צנח עלי דרך ונעתי לו בדרכים
That is why his face was bright and mine scorched.	לכן פניו היו בהירים. לכן פני חרוכים.
Like an old office calendar, I am covered with dates. ²²	כלית משדר יסן. אני מכסה פאריכים.

Amichai feels unfaithful, not only to his biological father, but also to a greater "father" - the Jewish people as a whole.²³ A number of literary critics quote the above passage as a confession of a generation that is aware of its spiritual malady and envies the secure religious world of traditional Judaism.²⁴

Amichai considers himself to be inextricably connected with the past: Just as Jerusalem has been shaped by "generations upon generations" of Jews, so too has the poet been "donated bit by bit" over time. Amichai represents but one of the individual links in the chain of Jewish tradition. He speaks for those of his generation who feel "bound" by heritage (Judaism).²⁵

²⁰ Abramson, G. *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*. Albany: SUNY Press (1989) 13.

²¹ Merrin, J. "Yehuda Amichai: Down to Earth" in *Judaism* (Summer 1996) 291.

²² Amichai, Y. "In a Right Angle: A Cycle of Quatrains" in *Shirim*. Jerusalem: Schocken (1962) 120.

²³ Burnshaw, S., Carmi, T., & Spieckhändler, E. (Ed.). *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*. New York: Schocken (1965) 167.

²⁴ Maoz, R. "Amichai's Struggle with Faith" in *Thinkers and Teachers of Modern Judaism* (1994) 231.

²⁵ Amichai, Y. "Songs of Zion the Beautiful" in *Shirai Yerushalayim*. Jerusalem: Schocken (1989) 9.

A prominent theme that develops in Amichai's poetry is the uniqueness of Jerusalem. There are few places in the world where individual layers of history are so visible. From the window of his study, Amichai could see vestiges of the Ottoman walls of the Old City, a Herodian citadel and a mosque dating from the seventh century.²⁶ Amichai utilizes archeology as an important metaphor for the human condition. He sees both the individual and history as an elaborate depositing of layers. Nothing is ever entirely buried from sight:

Above the houses
Houses with houses above them
This is all of history
This learning in schools
Without roof, walls, chairs and teachers
This learning in the absolute outside.²⁷

על בתים — בתים שעליהם בתים. זוהי
כל ההסטוריה.
הלמידה הזאת בבתי-ספר בלי גג
ובלי קירות ובלי ספסל ובלי מורים. הלמידה
הזאת בחוץ המחלט

Amichai contemplates Jerusalem with a mixture of love and exasperation. He is intimately aware of its physical and emotional landscape. As a poet, he sees Jerusalem as an insider and an outsider, reflecting his experience of two different worlds. Despite the political realities that divided Jerusalem for nearly twenty years, Amichai believes other factors separate the city. Jerusalem is divided by its two natures, namely the physical and the spiritual. Amichai invokes each of these realities in his poetry:

In vain you will look
For the fences of barbed wire
You know that such things do not disappear
A different city perhaps now being cut in two
Two lovers separated
A different flesh torments itself now
With these thorns, refusing to be stone.²⁸

לשוא תחפש את גדרות התיל הדוקר.
אתה יודע שדברים כגון אלה
אינם נעלמים. עיר אחרת אולי
נחמכת עכשו לשתיים: שני אוהבים
מפודים; בשר אחר מתסר עכשו
בקוצים אלה, מסרב להיות אבן.

A great deal of Amichai's poetry evinces the constant tension amid heavenly and earthly Jerusalem. The city is in perpetual turmoil. Between 1948 and 1967, a significant portion of Amichai's career, much of Jerusalem remained in Jordanian hands. Amichai

²⁶ Ibid., 42.

²⁷ Amichai, Y. "Jerusalem, 1967" in *Shirei Yerushalayim*. Jerusalem: Schocken (1987) 69.

²⁸ Amichai, Y. "Jerusalem, 1967" in *Shirei Yerushalayim*. Jerusalem: Schocken (1987) 51.

comments on the divide between Arab and Jew in "Jerusalem." In this poem Amichai describes the view from his home: "Past the wall was enemy territory."²⁹ Amichai, however, defuses the danger of the situation by humanizing his enemy. He finds an element of commonality in the everyday activity of inveterate enemies. The white linens drying on a rooftop in the Old City transcends the political struggle. The laundry reminds us that we all share the same bodily functions. We all use sheets to lay our bodies upon and towels to wipe off our brows.

Amichai challenged the assumption that only good could come from the rebuilding of Jerusalem (post-1967). His forthright prose compels the reader to confront reality head-on. "Mayor" adopts a cynical tone. The role of mayor cannot be fulfilled by a mere mortal. But the mayor must *do* something. So he will build, build, build.³⁰ These ancient stones that surround Jerusalem offer an endless supply of raw material with which to build. Amichai speculates on the true cost of reconstruction. Perhaps these stones will "rise at night like wolves" to encircle the newly built edifices. Amichai likens the domestication of Jerusalem stone to the enslavement of civilization. It is a sobering realization. Those who attempt to dominate nature may become enslaved by their own handiwork.

Amichai laments artificial divisions between human beings. Jerusalem in particular causes divisions between people. The Old City walls, originally constructed to protect its inhabitants, now serve to symbolically divide Arab and Jew. Israeli and Palestinian nationalism separate one people from another. For this reason Amichai provides the visual image of the flag in "Jerusalem." National flags wave in the sky, giving the impression of happiness.³¹ Amichai implies that the color and mirth of the flags are superficial. Without a physical connection between Arab and Jewish society, the ultimate fruit of nationalism will

²⁹ Amichai, Y. "Jerusalem" in *Shirei Yerushalayim*. Jerusalem: Schocken (1987)10-11.

³⁰ Amichai, Y. "Jerusalem" in *Shirei Yerushalayim*. Jerusalem: Schocken (1987) 38-39.

³¹ Amichai, Y. "Jerusalem" in *Shirei Yerushalayim*. Jerusalem: Schocken (1987)10-11.

be bitter. Amichai refuses to demonize the enemy. Above all he raises the consciousness of Israelis to embrace a shared humanity.

Amichai's strongest feeling for Jerusalem is one of desire. Both the quiet stillness of the city and its urban movement draw the poet near. Victory in the Six-Day War (1967) reunited Jerusalem. It was a time of celebration. However the opportunity for quiet and calm was short-lived. The demands of the city pressed: politics, commerce, advancement.

Amichai captures the energy and tension of the city as both citizen and emigre in "Jerusalem, 1967":

This year I traveled a long way
To view the silence of my city
A baby calms down when you rock it
A city calms down from the distance
I dwelled in longing.³²

השנה נסעתי הרחק כדי
לראות את השקט של עירי.
תינוק נרגע בנענועים, עיר נרגעת במרחק.
גרתי בגעגועים.

Jerusalem is like a baby whose birth is celebrated as a sign of new life. But like a baby, the city does not allow anyone calm. A baby's needs are pressing from the moment of birth. Amichai captures this touching human moment, when tired parents long for quiet and respite from their beloved child. Sometimes one needs to travel a long distance to appreciate what is right in front of them.

The poetic career of Amichai is one of the longest and most productive in the history of modern Hebrew literature. It has elicited a sizable body of criticism, mostly favorable. Amichai developed a new poetic style by incorporating into his imagery the most common elements of the vernacular, technological and military terms. Amichai's unique ability to express the Israeli *zeitgeist* resulted in a wide Israeli and international following. As a poet he occupies two separate worlds, that of religion and modernity. As a modern Israeli, he longs for hope and consolation, for a solid source of certainties and belief. Indeed his Jobian quarrel with God and Jewish tradition never ceases.

³² Amichai, Y. "Jerusalem, 1967" in *Shirei Yerushalayim*. Jerusalem: Schocken (1967) 42-43.

During his lifetime scholars regarded Amichai as a master poet.³³ His work received many accolades, including the Shlonski Prize (1955), Bialik Prize (1975) and the prestigious Israel Prize (1982) for life-long contribution to Hebrew literature. He lectured at universities throughout Israel, the United States, Europe and South America. His books continue to be translated into many languages.

Amichai is the most widely read modern Israeli poet, both in the original Hebrew and in translation, especially to English.³⁴ His poetry is an integral component of most literary curricula. Israeli school children, adolescents, college and graduate students in both Israel and the United States study his work. Amichai's literary corpus continues to engage academia and foster scholarship.³⁵ He is unique in bringing the overwhelming, historic, dramatic Jerusalem down to human, non-heroic dimensions.

³³ Alter, R. "Israel's Master Poet" in *New York Times Magazine* (June 8, 1986) 40.

³⁴ Abramson, G. *The Experienced Soul*. Boulder: Westview Press (1997) 9.

³⁵ Kronfeld, C. "Reading Amichai Reading" in *Judaism* (Summer 1996) 31.

III. *Zelda and the religious perspective*

Zelda's poetry is honest and open. Personal experience and desires, grounded in Judaic values, nurture her poetry. Zelda displays an exceptional ability to hear the suffering and sadness of her fellow man. She is a romantic poet whose love embraces the entire universe. Her verse declares an abiding awareness of the beauty of nature and of her city, Jerusalem. Although an observant Jew, her outlook is not restricted by her Orthodox background, but enriched in surprising ways, as seen below.

Zelda is modern in poetic style but not in her choice of themes. An intricate blend of religious and universal themes forms the basis of Zelda's faith and art. Her style alternates between prosaic colloquial speech and poetic expressions evoking biblical and mystical overtones. Zelda composes verse with restrained power and bold metaphor.¹

Zelda Schneerson-Mishkovsky (1914-1984) was born to a renowned family. Her father and grandfather served as rabbis in the Hasidic (mystical sect of Judaism) movement. She spent her childhood in Chernigov, a city in the Ukraine. Her grandfather, Rabbi David Zvi Chen, was one of Russian Jewry's leading figures. Zelda's first cousin was the Lubavitcher *rebbe* (religious leader), Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Her father, Rabbi Shalom Shlomo Schneerson, was the *rebbe's* uncle. Although a female Zelda received a thorough religious education. Her writing is saturated with biblical, rabbinic and mystical sources. Zelda half-jokingly describes herself as "a Hasid by temperament."²

Zelda wrote her first poem at the age of ten in Russian. She belonged to a group of "underground" Zionist children in Chernigov, her native city in the Ukraine. She wrote:

You were born at a dreadful moment
You were born in a foreign land,
For everyone you are foreign there, not understood.
Your heart reaches out for the place where everyone understands you.³

¹ Kolber, N. "Zelda's Poetry" in *Journal for Semitics* 3/2 (1991) 209.

² Morris, B. "Zelda: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Poet" in *Present Tense* 10 (1982) 17.

³ Zvi, A. "The Poetry of Zelda" in *Ariel* 65 (1986) 58.

Zelda did not feel comfortable as a Jew in Russia. She lived in a strange land where she was considered *acher* (other), and where an age-old hatred toward the Jews found its expression in both folk songs and literature.⁴ Zelda eschewed social injustice. She identified with the world's unfortunates, such as the Jews as well as Russian peasants who lived in crushing poverty. The masses looked for a safe outlet to vent their frustrations. The czarist regime organized pogroms (organized massacres of Jews) in towns and villages throughout the Russian Pale (territory of czarist Russia wherein Jews could live).

Zelda's early years were shaped by the volatile social and political scene of the Russian Revolution (1917). She witnessed pogroms in her native city and the mocking chants of the populace against the local rabbis. Her uncle, Rabbi Chen of Niyedzhin, was murdered in a nearby pogrom.⁵ The upheaval following the Russian Revolution compelled the Schneerson family to resettle. Zelda emigrated to Palestine with her family in 1926. They settled in a religious neighborhood of Jerusalem.

Zelda graduated from a religious high school in the early 1930s. She was a teacher by profession, educating both primary school children and adults. Nothing, she said, gave her greater joy than "introducing little children to the Garden of Eden or to Abraham and David and Solomon."⁶ At the age of thirty-six, she married Haim Mishkovsky. Their love imbued Zelda's poetry with warmth and emotion. The couple lived in Keren Avraham, an Orthodox neighborhood not far from the Old City.

A number of influences advanced Zelda's literary sense. The basic literary form she learned as a child was the Hasidic tale. The legends of Jewish lore spoke to her with power and vitality. As a child Zelda's mother introduced the young poet to secular Russian literature and modern Hebrew writers.⁷ Zelda was remarkably open to the

⁴ Beizer, M. "Ukraine: Hatred of the Jews" in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1997) CD-ROM Edition.

⁵ Zwi, A. "The Poetry of Zelda" in *Ariel* 65 (1986) 58-59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ Morris, B. "Zelda: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Poet" in *Present Tense* 10 (1982) 17.

literature of other nations. Secular writers such as Walt Whitman⁸ and the Egyptian author Naguib Mahfuz influenced her work.⁹

Zelda resumed her writing career in Palestine during the late 1930s. She gave voice to her thoughts and desires in *Dvar Hapoelet*, the literary organ of the Council of Pioneer Women. The editors, Rachel Shazar and Rivka Alper, encouraged her writing with warmth. Zelda published her "Notes of a Teacher" in 1939.¹⁰

Zelda felt somewhat detached from society following the conflict and struggle of the War of Independence (1947). One poem expressed the alienation and tension between herself and her generation, "A harsh generation, a generation of businessmen."¹¹ Two veteran Hebrew writers motivated Zelda in this period of isolation. Shin Shalom, an accomplished poet and Yeshurun Keshet, a translator and essayist, devoted much attention to her poetry.

By the 1960s Zelda expressed a need to share her poetry with a wider audience. The young poet Yona Wallach urged Zelda to collect and publish her poetry in book. Wallach, herself unpublished, extended a strong, assured hand to her elder. Essayist Aza Zwi spent two years with Zelda sorting and consolidating her poetry. This led to the publication of Zelda's first book of poetry, *Penai* (Leisure), in 1967.¹² Zelda was fifty-three years old at the time.

Several innovative stylistic features emerge in Zelda's poetry. Amidst the overwhelming secular stance that characterizes contemporary Hebrew poets, hers is a lone religious voice rooted in piety and spiritual feeling.¹³ Zelda's work derives its power from her sense of the divine. *Penai* includes no less than five poems dedicated to the subject of

⁸ Sharoni, E. "Luminous Mirror of the Human Spirit" in *Modern Hebrew Literature* 10 (1984) 35.

⁹ Zwi, A. "The Poetry of Zelda" in *Ariel* 65 (1986) 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹ Zelda, "Drunk and Conflicted Will" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 34.

¹² Zwi, A. "The Poetry of Zelda" in *Ariel* 65 (1986) 61.

¹³ Wineman, A. "Zelda's Poems on Shabbat" in *Conservative Judaism* 37 (1984) 32.

Shabbat. The ritual acts and objects of Shabbat are keys to an inner freedom, revealing the marvel concealed within the mundane.¹⁴

Zelda exhibits a remarkable ability to integrate her religious voice with modern sensibility.¹⁵ Religious themes appear side by side with universal themes. At times her poetry blends the sacred and the profane. Jerusalem, where Zelda made her home, serves as the setting for a great deal of her poetry. In "I Stood in Jerusalem" (1967), Zelda's connects the city with death and sex. The poet stands at a funeral on a rainy day in Jerusalem. The horizon is blurred and indistinct. Death arrives to annihilate her existence. Jerusalem, the eternal city, looms larger than any one person. Like death it envelopes the individual personality:

I stood in Jerusalem
Jerusalem suspended from a cloud
In the graveyard with people weeping
And a crooked tree.
Blurred mountains and a tower...
Why were you afraid of me
Yesterday in the rain?
Death spoke to me.
Am I not your quiet older brother?¹⁶

עמדת
בירושלים
התלויה על ענן.
בבית הקברות
עם אנשים בוכים,
עץ עקום.
הרים מטושטשים
ומגדל.
מדוע פחדת ממני אתמול בגשם?
דבר אלי היום.
הלא אני אחיך
השקט והגדול.

In "The Shadow of the White Mountain" (1974) the poet juxtaposes fear and hope. The glaring light of Jerusalem casts a shadow over Zelda's face and hands, which brings thoughts of death. Suddenly, there is music and "the joy of a bride and groom." The image evokes the *Sheva Berachot* (Seven Blessings) recited after the reading of the *ketubah* (marriage contract) at traditional Jewish weddings. The prayer voiced at the end of the poem is both a personal request for the couple and a collective hope for Jerusalem and the Jewish people:

¹⁴ Wineman, A. "Zelda's Poems on Shabbat" in *Conservative Judaism* 37 (1984) 34.

¹⁵ Kolber, N. "Zelda's Poetry" in *Journal for Semitics* 3/2 (1991) 202.

¹⁶ Zelda. "I Stood in Jerusalem" in *Shirei Zelda. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad* (1985) 63.

The shadow of the white mountain
Covered my face and hands
I pictured my soul as free as a dead man's...
I went out to see the joy of bride and groom
I saw them weaving a delicate hope.
I requested secretly:
Creator of humanity
Let no devils and evildoers
Overtake their imaginings
Let their building be everlasting.¹⁷

צל הלבן הלבן
כסה את פני וידי
ורמתי שנישתי חקשתי
בטח
יצאתי אל משוש חתן וכלה
וראיתי
כי הם שוקרים
תקוה גדולה עד מאד
וראיתי
כי הנה שחקים
תקוה אמתית
ורב בפשתי בחשאי:
יוצר האדם -
שלא יסתצור שדים ומזימים
אל ופקינם
שיתנה נגדם
ביום צד-שני.

Zelda's poetic style grounds everyday activities within the framework of Jewish religion. Judaism marks the transitions of everyday life by means of ritual. Zelda addresses the spiritual dilemmas of society and the individual through her poetry. She perceives that which troubles humanity. Zelda offers the possibility of *teshuvah* (Jewish concept of personal repentance) in this poem as a "delicate" hope.¹⁸

Traditional Jewish sources play a decisive role in Zelda's memory and symbolism. She evinces masterful integration of biblical, rabbinic and mystical wisdom into her poetry. In "With My Grandfather" (1967) the poet compares her grandfather to Abraham, a man of perfect faith. Like the patriarch, Zelda's grandfather "bound his son on the altar" (*Akedah*).¹⁹ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Chen, murdered in a pogrom during the Russian Revolution, was Zelda's maternal uncle. She echoes the Talmudic cry, "there is no justice, no judge."²⁰ When he learned of his son's fate on the eve of Shabbat, Zelda's grandfather insisted on observing the Sabbath:

The same perfect faith
In the midst of the flames
The same dewy gaze
And soft curling beard.
Outside it snowed
Outside they roared:
There is no justice, no judge.²¹

אותה אמונה שלמה
בחור השלהבת,
ואותו מבט טלול
וזקן רך-גלים.
בחור ירד השלג,
בחור ששאגו:
אין דין ואין דין.

¹⁷ Zelda, "The Shadow of the White Mountain" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 141.
¹⁸ Furstenberg, R. *Images of Jerusalem*. New York, NY: Hadassah (1995) 131.
¹⁹ Gen. 22:9
²⁰ Yerushalmi Kiddushin 42a
²¹ Zelda, "With My Grandfather" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 23.

The poem "You Concealed Your Soul" (1967) alludes to the hiding of the face, a symbol of alienation and death. The candle refers to the desecration of the holiness of Shabbat. The river represents the hidden divine realm. The Hasidic origin is most probably connected to Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (18th CE).²² He wrote: "Every moment God is creating, for every moment God causes an influx of vitality to all that lives."²³ Creativity is stifled when a river's source is cut off.

You hid your soul from me
No more in me was the sound of the full river
Overflowing its banks.
My life was cut off from the song,
I stood in the pit ashamed
Without sun, without moon, without candle.²⁴

הסמרת את נפשך ממני
ולא היה בי עוד קול הנהר המלא
הצולה על גדותיו.
נחמו חיי מהנסך
ואצמד בכף וקלמך
כלי ששש
ובלי ירח
ובלי נר.

Zelda conveys the ever changing nature of spiritual experience through the use of ritual objects and acts. In the following poem, "Silver Candlesticks" (1967), religious artifacts serve as the catalyst in the act of transformation. The poem begins:

Silver candlesticks, a glowing legacy
Transformed my room to an ancient castle,
To a castle in the heavens, to a starlit firmament...
Their living flames kissed my soul
My thoughts became a river of pink blossoms...
I became as one wholly burning
In a fire of freedom and of joy in God.²⁵

פמסות הכסף, וגהות הירקות,
הפכו את חדרי לסירה צחקה,
לסירה בשמים, לזבל בקליפה נוקבת.
שלהבותם החיות -
נשקו נפשי,
והגיגי נעשו נהר ציצים
נאני בלי נשית יוקנה
תפשיה, שמחה באלהים

Candles serve as an image of spiritual freedom and creativity. An artisan creates a pair of silver candlesticks from raw materials. Zelda marvels at such beauty and wonder. The simplest of metals can result in *klei kodesh* (holy objects). Connected here with the Shabbat ritual, the candleholders have the capacity to transform a person's experience. The "living flames" of the candles have mystical import, a meaning that touches the soul. The "fire of freedom" evokes the ecstatic experiences of the Jewish mystic.

²² Waldman, N. "Revelations: The Poetry of Zelda" in *Reconstructionist* 12 (1984) 28.

²³ Kedushat Levi on Gen. 1:1.

²⁴ Zelda, "You Concealed Your Soul" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 53.

²⁵ Zelda, "Silver Candlesticks" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 25.

Zelda's poetry is replete with traditional and Hasidic allusions. Students of her work explicate these references. Hillel Barzel notes that the word *ayin* (nothingness) in her poems derives from the Hasidic master, Schneour Zalman of Liadi.²⁶ Aryeh Weinman also explores the imagery of Zelda and traces it to the Hasidic Rav Nachman of Bratslav.²⁷ Nahum Waldman contends that Zelda reports genuine mystical experiences in her poetry, "conscious of illuminations from the divine sphere."²⁸ Zelda yearns to embrace the divine sparks of creation, even those that flow into vessels already broken.

A prominent innovation of Zelda's poetry is her use of duality and contrast. Zelda embeds three categories of existence into her poetry: life/death; dream/reality; holy/profane. The dialectical mode serves as a means to pursue elusive answers in poetic form.²⁹ The poem "Two Elements" (1984) presents a quarrel between the irreconcilable spirits within her. It exudes the elemental tension present in life and death. After a lifetime of revolt, the cypress tree seems ready to cease its argument against nature. Zelda leaves us with a sense of doubt. Perhaps the lone cypress is not prepared to abandon its calling:

The flame says to the cypress
When I see how serene you are
How clothed in pride
Something within me goes wild.
How can one pass through life
This terrible life:

Without a hint of madness
Without a hint of the spiritual
Without a hint of imagination
Without a hint of freedom
In stern and antique pride?³⁰

הַלֵּהֶבֶת אֹמֶרֶת לְכֹרֶשׁ
כַּאֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רוֹאֶה
כִּמָּה אַתָּה שְׁאֵנוֹ
כִּמָּה עוֹטָה גָאוֹן
מִשְׁהוּ בְּתוֹכִי מִשְׁתּוֹלֵל
אֵיךְ אֶפְשֶׁר לַעֲבֹר אֶת הַחַיִּים
הַנּוֹרָאִים הָאֵלֶּה
בְּלִי שִׁמְצָה שֶׁל טְרוֹף
בְּלִי שִׁמְצָה שֶׁל רוֹחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ
בְּלִי שִׁמְצָה שֶׁל דְּמִיוֹן
בְּלִי שִׁמְצָה שֶׁל חֵירוּת
בְּגָאוֹן עֲתִיקָה וְקוֹדֶרֶת.

Zelda explores the dichotomy of dream and reality in "On Facts" (1984). It is clear she longs to explore the recesses of the soul and its mystical resonance. Zelda affirms that sensory experience is fundamental to existence. We witness the interplay that takes place

²⁶ Barzel, H. "Bein Galut Lermisped" in *Mibifnim* 40/1 (1978) 121-132.

²⁷ Weinman, A. "Hedim shel Hasidut Bratslav Beshirat Zelda" in *Shidmat* 65 (1978) 57-61.

²⁸ Waldman, N. "The Poetry of Zelda" in *Reconstructionist* 12 (1984) 30.

²⁹ Sharoni, E. "Luminous Minor of the Human Spirit" in *Modern Hebrew Literature* 10 (1984) 36.

³⁰ Zelda. "Two Elements" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 225.

within the poet that serves to impede metaphysical annihilation. Zelda captures the mystical experience of surrender to a will beyond one's own:

My soul says: The facts conceal the sea
My senses say: The facts are an island in the ocean
My soul says: The facts are a wall around the self
My senses say: The facts are a window it up in the dark
A skylight to my innermost being.³¹

נפשי אומרת:
העובדות מסתירות את הים.
חשמי אומרים:
העובדות אי באוקינוס.
נפשי אומרת:
העובדות חוסמת סביב האני.
חשמי אומרים:
העובדות חלון מואר בחשך.
צהר לפנימייתי.

Zelda combats the hubris of man in "Proud as a Constellation" (1984). Man is formed in the image of God. Indeed our primary purpose is *imatatio dei* (to emulate God).³² God affords us the ability to make tremendous advances in the fields of science, technology and medicine. Man should not, however, wield his "gleaming measuring tools" in an attempt to defy the "time-scheme" of God. Zelda's precise and simple diction recalls the dialogue between Job and God.³³ She looks to *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) for answers to her profoundest questions:³⁴

Proud as a constellation
Whose life is light-years
A man born of woman sprang forth
With gleaming measuring tools
Into the midst of a glassy wasteland
To examine each stone
To mark with a havoc of signposts
The time-scheme of God.³⁵

גאה כאחד המזלות
שחיייו שנות-אור
זנק ילד אשה
עם כלי מדידה מבהיקים
אל תוף ישימון וגו'ג'
לבדוק כל אבן
לסמן במהמח שלטים
את הזמן האלוהי.

A prominent theme that develops in Zelda's poetry is her sense of social consciousness. Evident throughout her work is an intense love for the Creator of the universe and all forms of existence. Zelda's love of humanity and strong social consciousness emanate from basic Jewish teachings such as "Love your neighbor as yourself."³⁶ She has a special affinity for those who do not belong to her social circle.

³¹ Zelda, "On Facts" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 226.

³² Lev. 19:2

³³ Job. 38:2-11

³⁴ Sharoni, E. "Luminous Mirror of the Human Spirit" in *Modern Hebrew Literature* 10 (1984) 37.

³⁵ Zelda, "Proud as a Constellation" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 217.

³⁶ Lev. 19:18

Zelda opens her heart to the lonely and the alienated. The poem "In the Bosom of the Weeds He Cried" (1971) describes the tortured soul of Levi Neufeld, a survivor of Auschwitz suspected of murder. He committed suicide in 1963. In an interview Zelda stated that the affair haunted her "like a *dybbuk*" (evil spirit).³⁷ Zelda expresses her pain and suffering through her poetry by identifying with the less fortunate.

Zelda's poetry extols the beauty of God's universe. Her love of nature, mankind and her city Jerusalem emerges from her belief in divine creation. Images of nature abound in her poetry: flowers, butterflies, vine leaves, almond trees. Zelda displays an idyllic type of love that is both pure and painful.³⁸ One finds spiritual and sensual love poetry in her work. "A Wall of Love" (1977) describes the protective wall she and her husband build to allay trouble and hardship. The work conveys a message of positive dependency:

His caresses are a wall of love	לטיפוח שלו חומה של אהבה
His caresses are the flowers	סביב כח מדמה נפתח
Of an almond tree. ³⁹	של רעיה באיבה.
	פרחי שקד לטיפוח שלו.

Jerusalem serves as the axis of religion and soul.⁴⁰ The city is the center of Zelda's existence. It embodies her spirit, passion and enthusiasm. Jerusalem is the conduit between heaven and earth. "I Flowered in a Stone House" (1967) recalls her entrance into the city:

Jerusalem entrapped my free soul.	ירושלים לכדה
I drowned in the light.	את נפשי התפשית.
I forgot my name. ⁴¹	טבעתי באור.
	שכחתי את שמי.

Zelda spent her entire life within the sphere of traditional Judaism. Her family drank the "old wine" of their religious neighborhood in Chernigov. Zelda chose to reside in an Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem. The poem "A New Fruit in the Age of Childhood" (1971) describes the spiritual aura that drew Zelda to Jerusalem. The Holy

³⁷ Morris, B. "Portrait of Zelda" in *Jewish Affairs* 36 (1981) 31.

³⁸ Kolber, N. "Zelda's Poetry" in *Journal for Semitics* 3/2 (1991) 208.

³⁹ Zelda, "A Wall of Love" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakhibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 150.

⁴⁰ Zwi, A. "The Poetry of Zelda" in *Ariel* 65 (1986) 65.

⁴¹ Zelda, "I Flowered in a Stone House" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakhibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 12.

City is the source of life. The gray bird awakens Zelda to the visceral sights and sounds of Jerusalem. The wonders of God's earth bring the poet contentment:

An unexpected gray bird
Who came to eat bread spread a celestial glow
Our tears mingled with the sunset light
Fused with the orange splendor.
A sudden little bird
Prepared my soul for the hum of grass
For the wondering scent of olive trees
For the joy of clouds
And the flicker of splintered glass.⁴²

צפור אפרה בלתי צפויה
שקאה לאכל לחם.
הפיצה נגה רקיעים
ודמעות עינינו התערבבו
באור השקיעה.
נכללו בפאר הכתם.
צפור קלילה פתאומית
הכינה את נפשי לקראת גגון העשבים
לקראת ריח התהיה של עצמי הויה
לקראת שמחת העננים
והבהוב מכתות הזכוכית.

Zelda fell captive to the Holy City. Over the course of fifty years as a Jerusalemite the city grew tenfold in size. Dust covered streets and alleys became broad thoroughfares choked with city traffic. Despite its vitality and growth, Zelda insists Jerusalem is eternal. In an interview she concludes:

Have no fear, Jerusalem will never change. The light of Jerusalem will continue to shine. The air over Jerusalem will remain pure. The stones of Jerusalem will stand tall and proud.⁴³

The poetic career of Zelda was short yet dynamic. Her poetry aroused considerable interest and surprise due to her integration of religious verse and modern sensibility. Her work displayed honesty and openness. She spoke with a generous spirit in an age of cynicism and selfishness. Her belief in God and the goodness of man did not wane. Critics praised her collections of poetry. She achieved great popularity in her time. Zelda received a number of literary prizes, including the Bialik Prize for Literature (1978).

Zelda's Jerusalem poetry reveals a journey of revelation and discovery. The mystery of the city ensnares her soul from an early age. It evokes memories suffuse with religious import. It serves as a conduit for mystical experience. For Zelda, Jerusalem exists more in a dream state than reality. Ultimately, the city is the nexus of her inner psychological and emotional landscape.

⁴² Zelda "A New Fruit in the Age of Childhood" in *Shirei Zelda*. Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (1985) 75.

⁴³ Morris, B. "Portrait of Zelda" in *Jewish Affairs* 36 (1981) 27.

IV. Legacy of Amichai and Zelda

The connection between the Jewish people and Jerusalem is ancient and powerful. More than any other place, Jerusalem forces people to confront the eternal issues of life. The city served as the ritual center of Judaism for hundreds of years. Rabbinic literature lauded the city as the spiritual center of the world. A great deal of biblical, rabbinic and modern Hebrew literature is devoted to Jerusalem. In 1948, the dream of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel became a reality once more. At no time have Jews ceased their dialogue with the city.

Prior to the 1980s, the setting of a great deal of Israeli prose was Jerusalem. Modern Hebrew poets view the holy city through the lens of their unique backgrounds and experience. Amichai and Zelda are longtime residents of Jerusalem. Each poet affords the reader tremendous insight into the complexity and wonder of this capital city. Drawing on the insights of the previous chapters, this chapter will summarize and conclude the discussion regarding the two poets.

The poetic career of Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) is one of the longest and most productive in the history of modern Hebrew literature. Scholars regard Amichai as a master poet. His work receives accolades and predominantly favorable criticism. His poetry is an integral component of Israeli literary curricula and academic scholarship. Amichai aptly expresses the Israeli *zeitgeist* by means of colloquial language. He employs elements of the colloquial in his poetry. As a poet he occupies two disparate worlds, that of religion and modernity. As a modern Israeli, he longs for social and religious peace in his beloved Jerusalem.

The poetic career of Zelda was short yet dynamic. Her poetry aroused considerable interest and surprise in literary circles. Zelda deftly blended religious verse with a modern sensibility. She spoke with a generous spirit in an age of cynicism and egotism. Her work achieved great popularity in her time. Zelda spent her entire life within

the sphere of traditional Judaism. Though she wrote her first poem as a child, she did not publish any verse until her fifties. Zelda was a romantic poet. Her verse proclaimed an abiding awareness of the beauty of nature and her city, Jerusalem. The city remained the center of Zelda's existence. It embodied her spirit, passion and enthusiasm.

The poetry of Amichai and Zelda offers striking contrasts. A number of innovative stylistic elements emerge in Amichai's poetry. The poet rejects the collective voice of the generation before him. Amichai emphasizes the individual voice in his poetry by speaking in the first person singular. The lyric "I" frequently narrates the tenor of his verse. This introspective style affords profound insight into his personal history. Amichai describes significant life events which form his fundamental character.

Like many writers of his generation, Amichai did not possess the traditional faith of Orthodox Judaism. Amichai was born to a family of Orthodox Jews. Raised in a traditional household, he experienced antisemitism as a child. Upon emigration to Palestine, he attended a religious high school. At the age of fifteen the poet abandoned formal religious practice. He felt, as did many secular Israelis, that living in the land of Israel was a sufficient mark of his Jewish identity. Amichai joined the Socialist-Zionist youth movement, an atheist organization that negated many of the religious traditions of the Diaspora.

The poet's traumatic experiences as a soldier in the War of Independence challenged traditional faith. As a result, his verse frequently contrasts the sacred and profane. Amichai's iconoclastic imagery does not aim to deny God or religion. It reflects the journey of an individual who seeks dialogue with the divine. Amichai intends to shake hallowed concepts that have grown rigid.

The Jobian struggle with faith is an integral element of his poetry. The poet quarrels with God and tradition by means of textual exegesis and reinterpretation. Amichai's world emerges as confused and fragmented as compared to the firm religious beliefs of his ancestors. Though a secular Jew, Amichai considers himself to be a

significant link in the chain of Jewish tradition. His is a generation of doubts and dissonance. It is at once bound by tradition and eager to break free from it.

The poetry of Zelda exhibits stylistic innovations as well. Her poetry is honest and open. Personal experience and emotions nurture her work. She displays an ability to respond to the suffering and alienation of her fellow man. She is a romantic poet whose love embraces the entire universe. A prominent theme in her poetry is her sense of social consciousness. Zelda's love of humanity emanates from basic Jewish teachings.

Zelda displays an emotional maturity in her work. One scholar comments that reading her poetry is like receiving a personal letter.¹ Zelda uses dialogue in an attempt to reach the reader. The restrained power of her writing is immediately discernible. She deals with deep feelings, yet rarely permits herself an emotional outburst. There is nothing impulsive in her work. Her words are carefully chosen.

Zelda's poetry contemplates the contrast between the dream world and reality. A great deal of her poetic work represents this inner struggle. Unlike Amichai, she spent her entire life within the sphere of traditional Judaism. Her inner struggle focuses upon aspects of duality and contrast: life and death, dream and reality, holy and profane. The dialectical mode serves as a means to pursue elusive answers in poetic form. In this way the poet captures the mystical experience of her Hasidic training and education.

A great divide exists between the religious beliefs of our two poets. To read an Amichai poem is to witness a spiritual struggle. He searches for the omnipotent and all-powerful deity of his youth. He yearns for a firm belief in God's existence. Amichai uses traditional concepts and metaphors in a unique manner. He seeks a new model for religion; a Judaism rooted in traditional sources while disassociated from the religious establishment. His poetry reveals a degree of spiritual maturity after years of religious discontent.

¹ Zwi, A. "The Poetry of Zelda" in *Ariel* 65 (1985) 65.

Zelda was born into a renowned Hasidic family. She received a thorough religious education both in Russia and Palestine. Her writing is saturated with biblical, rabbinic and mystical sources. Traditional Jewish sources play a decisive role in her memory and symbolism. She evinces masterful integration of Jewish wisdom into her poetry. Her poetry is replete with traditional and Hasidic allusions. Indeed, one scholar contends that Zelda reports genuine mystical experiences in her poetry.²

The poetry of Zelda extols the beauty of God's universe. Her love of nature, mankind and her city Jerusalem emerges from her belief in divine creation. Her belief in God and the goodness of man did not wane. The legends of Jewish lore spoke to her with power and vitality. Her poetic style grounds everyday activities within the framework of traditional religion. Zelda exhibits a great respect for Jewish tradition. She addresses the spiritual dilemmas of society and the individual through her poetry.

Amichai and Zelda's generation lived through all of Israel's wars. The near perpetual state of aggression impacted the lives of every Israeli citizen. Nevertheless, each poet uniquely portrayed Israel's societal ills. Amichai spoke as an individual yet represented an entire generation. Decades of strife between Arab and Jew took its toll. What remained was an amalgam of "doubts and contradictions, uncertainties and suspicions."³ Amichai struck a chord in his poetry precisely because many secular Israelis searched for meaning in the midst of conflict. He refused to dehumanize the enemy. He longed to find elements of commonality amidst a sea of hate.

The point of departure of Zelda's poetry is the reconciliation between individuals. Her love of humankind emerges from her belief in the divine. Pure and refined love is the source of the strength and flow of her poetry. Zelda displays a sensitivity toward the downtrodden of modern society. Much of her poetry is suffused with religious feeling. She has an exceptional ability to hear the suffering and passion of her characters. Her poetry is

² Waldman, N. "The Poetry of Zelda" in *Reconstructionist* 12 (1984) 30.

³ Amichai, Y. "Dorot ha'Aretz" in *La-Merhav*, May 3, 1968.

honest and open. Zelda is painfully aware of the harsh world in which she lives. She opens her heart to the lonely and the deprived. Social consciousness is the subtext of much of her verse.

A prominent theme that develops in the work of both poets is the uniqueness of Jerusalem. Amichai's Jerusalem breathes history. It is a city in which individual layers of history are visible. He utilizes archeology as a metaphor for the human condition. Both the individual and time itself deposit layers of history. Amichai is intimately aware of the city's physical, emotional and historical beauty.

His strongest feeling for Jerusalem is one of desire. The quiet stillness of the city and its urban movement seduce the poet. His verse captures the energy and tension of a city at once ancient and modern. The poet laments artificial divisions between human beings, whether Arab or Jew, religious or secular. He contemplates Jerusalem with a mixture of love and exasperation.

Jerusalem is the center of Zelda's existence. It embodies her spirit, passion and enthusiasm. The city, where she made her home, serves as the setting for a great deal of her poetry. She views the city as the conduit between heaven and earth. Long ago she fell captive to the holy city:

The air and the hills remain. The city overcomes its inhabitants and what they may try to do to it. New waves of people come. But they too are absorbed and become Jerusalemites.⁴

Zelda's poems of Jerusalem are romantic and moving. She lauds the beauty of God's universe. One can sense a feeling of exalted holiness in her work. Unlike Amichai, her verse deals with the intangible aspects of life, such as the inner soul. Zelda's Jerusalem is fundamentally a spiritual city. Her poetry is both a prayer for the welfare of her city and the Jewish people. Despite its vitality and growth, she insists that Jerusalem is eternal.

⁴ Morris, B. "Zelda: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Poet" in *Present Tense* 10/1 (1982) 16.

Modern Hebrew poets contribute to the ongoing body of work devoted to Jerusalem. Each individual lyricist invests his/her poetry with singular personality and character. Amichai and Zelda present radically different images of the holy city. Each treat Jerusalem in a particular way. Amichai examines the conflict and chaos of a modern capital city. Zelda escorts the reader into the mystical and eternal world of the spirit. Both utilize the richness and resonance of Jewish tradition to reconcile the religious and secular world.

V. Lesson Plan (Multi-Session Course)

Images of Jerusalem in Modern Hebrew Poetry *Lesson One: Significance of Jerusalem*

Subject Matter

- Jerusalem in Jewish and secular history
- Hebrew Bible
- Rabbinic Literature

Objectives

- Examine biblical and rabbinic sources that discuss Jerusalem
- Recognize that the image of Jerusalem shifts over time
- Understand that modern-day Jerusalem rests upon 3,000 years of history

Opening Blessing

Baruch ata Adonai, eloheinu melech haolam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, vitzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah. We bless you, Adonai our God, who commands us to study Torah.

Introduction (Brainstorm)

What are your images / pre-conceptions of Jerusalem?
How does the media portray Jerusalem?
What did you learn in religious school regarding Jerusalem?
Can you describe the current conflict(s)?

Epochs of Hebrew literature

A. Biblical period (Tanakh)

The city is mentioned but once in the Torah (Gen. 14:18)

King Melchizedek of Shalem brought out bread and wine.
He was a priest of God Most High.

The Akedah narrative specifies its periphery - Mt. Moriah (Gen. 22:14)

Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh [the Lord will see]
Whence the present saying, "On the mount of the Lord there is vision."

God chooses Jerusalem as site for Temple (II Sam. 6:12)

*Thereupon David went and brought up the Ark of God
From the house of Obed-edom to the City of David, amid rejoicing.*

Jerusalem (Zion) serves as the ritual / cultic center of the monarchy (I Kgs. 8:64)

*That day the king consecrated the center of the court
That was in front of the House of the Lord.*

Prophets augur the symbolic import of Jerusalem (Zech. 8:3)

*Thus said the Lord: I have returned to Zion
I will dwell in Jerusalem. Jerusalem will be called the City of Faithfulness.*

B. Post-biblical / Medieval periods (Midrash, Talmud, Liturgy)

Jerusalem is recast as the embodiment of religious faith during exile
The rabbis paint an extravagant picture of Jerusalem in order to glorify it
The city secures nine of the ten measures of beauty (Kiddushin 49b)

*Of the ten measures of beauty that came down to the world
Jerusalem secured nine.*

It is the geographic center of the world (Sanhedrin 37a)

*Israel is the geographic center of the world
Jerusalem is its focal point.*

Praise of Jerusalem extends to her inhabitants (Pirke d'Rabbi Kahana 55b)

*The inhabitants of Jerusalem
Were granted atonement for their sins daily.*

The mention of Jerusalem is an obligatory aspect of many statutory prayers
It is mentioned in *Amidah*, *Pesach seder*, *Yom Kippur* ("Next Year in Jerusalem")
The hope of a rebuilt Jerusalem and its Temple is fundamental to rabbinic ideology

C. Modern period (Haskalah, Zionism, Yishuv, State of Israel)

Haskalah

The French Revolution (1789) radically changed Europe
Gentile intellectuals championed the cause of Jewish liberty
Many Jews adopted a sympathetic attitude toward secular culture and Western philosophy

The *Haskalah* (lit. "enlightenment") revitalized the Jewish religion
Liberal Jew welcomed secular studies as an integral part of Jewish education
The Western ideal of the nation-state ignited the Jewish desire for a homeland
Haskalah literature glorified the idealized Jerusalem

Initially the *maskil* (intellectual) did not want to return to the land of Israel
The *maskil* joined the nationalist struggle in the latter half of the 19th century

Zionism

Zionism (Jewish nationalist movement) began with Theodore Herzl in 1890s
The movement desired to resettle the Jewish people in a sovereign state
Its basic tenet - the land of Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people
Zionist poets linked politics with the physical return to Zion

Yishuv

A significant period of Jewish settlement in the land of Israel occurred between 1881-1947
The *Yishuv* (settlement) period ushered a physical return to Zion
The heart of this renaissance was the image of the *halutz* (pioneer)

State of Israel

The creation of the State of Israel presented fresh challenges
Jerusalem was no longer an ideal vision - it was now a capital city
Jews from every corner of the Diaspora flooded into Israel
The threat of war between Arab and Jew loomed

Conclusion

Jerusalem is a city with 3,000 years of history
It receives attention in biblical, rabbinic and modern Hebrew literature
The images of Jerusalem changed during these major epochs
The transition from settlement to statehood involved struggle
Realities of a modern state greatly impact Israeli writers

* *Biblical translations from JPS Tanakh*

Images of Jerusalem in Modern Hebrew Poetry
Lesson Two: Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000)

Subject Matter

- Modern Hebrew poetry
- Life and poetry of Amichai

Objectives

- Identify major events that influence Amichai's poetry
- Recognize unique features of Amichai's poetic style
- Explore major issues in Amichai's work

Opening Blessing

Baruch ata Adonai, eloheinu melech haolam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, vitzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah. We bless you, Adonai our God, who commands us to study Torah.

Introduction

Poetry mirrors his life
Amichai wrestles with the past (traditional religion, family, war)
He captures the Israeli *zeitgeist* (spirit)
Amichai is intimately connected to Jerusalem

Character development

Orthodox upbringing in Wurzburg, Germany
Move to Palestine as a teen
Effect of war as an Israeli soldier (5 wars)
Life in Yemin Moshe, a neighborhood of Jerusalem

Innovative poetic style

Colloquial language, use of vernacular
Autobiographical form, the lyric "I"
God as a central feature of poetry, unique among secular lyricists
Interweaving of traditional knowledge with secular irreverence

Major issues in his work

Struggle with sacred texts, religious faith and his past
Uniqueness of Jerusalem as a city (spiritual tension, layers of history, modern realities)
Conflict between Arab / Jew

"Jerusalem" Yehuda Amichai

On a roof in the Old City
Laundry hanging in the late afternoon sunlight
The white sheet of a woman who is my enemy
The towel of a man who is my enemy
To wipe off the sweat of his brow.

In the sky of the Old City a kite
At the other end of the string
A child I cannot see because of the wall.

We have put up many flags
They have put up many flags.
To make us think that they are happy
To make them think that we are happy.

Questions

Why does Amichai discuss the linens hung on the roofs of Arab homes?
What is the significance of the flags?
How would this poem characterize the enemy?

"Ecology of Jerusalem" Yehuda Amichai

The air over Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams
Like the air over industrial cities
It's hard to breathe.
From time to time a new shipment of history arrives
And the houses and towers are its packing materials.
Later these are discarded and piled up in dumps.

Sometimes candles arrive instead of people
Then it is quiet.
Sometimes people come instead of candles
Then there is noise.

In enclosed gardens heavy with jasmine
Foreign consulates
Like wicked brides that have been rejected
Lie in wait for their moment.

Questions

What is Amichai's emotional state in this poem?
Why does he compare Jerusalem to a baby?
What do the foreign consulates represent?

על גג בעיר העתיקה,
מכסה מוארת באור אחרון של יום:
סדין לבן של ארבה,
מגבת של אדם
לנגב בה את זעת אפו.

ובשמי העיר העתיקה
צפיתון.
ובקצה המוט —
ילד.
שלא ראיתי אותו,
בגלל החומה.

העליו הרבה דגלים,
העלו הרבה דגלים.
כדי שנתשכ שהם שמחים.
כדי שנתשכו שאנחנו שמחים.

האוויר מעל לירושלים רווי תפלות וחלומות
כמו האוויר מעל לערי תעשייה כבדה.
קשה לנשום.

ימזמן לזמן מגיע משלוח חדש של היסטוריה
והבתים והמגדלים הם חמרי אריזה,
שאחור בה משלכים ונערמים בערמות.

ולפעמים באים נרות במקום בני אדם,
או שקט.
ולפעמים באים בני אדם במקום נרות,
או רעש.

ובחור גנים סגורים, בין שיחי יסמין
קלאי בשם, קונסוליות זרות,
כמו בלות רעות שנתנה,
אורכות לשעתן.

"Jerusalem 1967" Yehuda Amichai

This year I traveled a long way
To view the silence of my city
A baby calms down when you rock it
A city calms down from the distance.

I dwelled in longing. I played the hopscotch
Of the four strict squares of Yehuda Halevi:
My heart. Myself. East. West.

I heard bells ringing in the religions of time
But the wailing that I heard inside me
Has always been from my Judean desert.
Now that I have returned I am screaming again.

השנה נסעתי הרחק כדי
לראות את השקט של עירי.
תינוק נרגע בנענועים, עיר נרגעת במרחק.
גרתי בנענועים. שחקתי במשחק
ארבע המסבצות החמורות של יהודה הלוי:
לבי. אנכי. מזרח. מערב.

שמעתי פעמונים מצלצלים ברחות הזמן,
אך היללה ששמעתי בחוכי
היתה תמיד של מדברי יהודה.
עכשו כששבתי, אני צועק שוב.

Questions

What does Amichai means by the "four strict squares" of Yehuda Halevi?
How is Jerusalem described once Amichai has "come back?"
In what way does this poem represent the concept of emotional distance?

"All The Generations Before Me" Yehuda Amichai

All the generations before me donated me, bit by bit,
So that I'd be erected all at once here in Jerusalem,
Like a house of prayer or charitable institution.
It binds. My name is my donor's name. It binds.

I am approaching the age of my father's death.
My last will is patched with many patches.
I have to change my life and death daily
To fulfill all the prophecies prophesied for me.
So they are not lies. It binds.

I have passed forty. There are jobs I cannot get because of this.
Were I in Auschwitz they would not have sent me out to work,
But gassed me straightaway. It binds.

כל הדורות שלפני תרמו אותי
קמעה קמעה כדי שאוקם כאן בירושלים
בבת אחת, כמו בית תפלה או מוסד צדקה.
זה מחייב. שמי הוא שם תורמי.
זה מחייב.

אני מתקרב לגיל מות אבי.
צוואתי מטלאת בהרבה טלאים,
אני צריך לשנות את חיי ואת מותי
יום יום כדי לקיים את כל הנבואות
שנבאו אותי. שלא יהיו שקר.
זה מחייב.

עברתי את שנה הארבעים. יש
משורות שבהן לא יקבלו אותי
בשל כך. אלו הייתי באושרין,
לא היו שולחים אותי לעבוד.
היו שודפים אותי מיד.
זה מחייב.

Questions

Describe how the concept of "donation" operates here.
What does the "age" of his father's death represent?
What binds the poet to Jerusalem?

* Translation of poems by Matt Berger

Conclusion

Amichai had a long and productive poetic career
Most widely read Israeli poet
Amichai lives between two separate worlds (religion and modernity)

In what ways do these poems challenge your images of Jerusalem?
Do these poems reinforce your pre-conceived notions of Jerusalem?

Learning Experience

Try to write a poem about either Jerusalem or the city that you live in

Images of Jerusalem in Modern Hebrew Poetry
Lesson Three: Zelda Schneerson-Mishkovsky (1914-1984)

Goals

- Modern Hebrew poetry
- Life and poetry of Zelda

Objectives

- Identify major events that influence Zelda's poetry
- Recognize unique features of Zelda's poetic style
- Explore major issues in Zelda's work

Opening Blessing

Baruch ata Adonai, eloheinu melech haolam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, vitzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah. We bless you, Adonai our God, who commands us to study Torah.

Introduction

Zelda's poetry: honest and open
A romantic and emotional poet
Religious themes appear alongside universal themes

Character development

Traditional upbringing (Orthodoxy / Hasidism / *yichus*)
Early memories (Russian antisemitism / social injustice / journey to Jerusalem)
Diverse literary influences (mother, Israeli writers, non-Israeli writers)
Life in Jerusalem (traditional neighborhoods / work as a teacher / love of husband)

Innovative poetic style

A "lone" religious voice amidst modern (secular) Israeli poets
Masterful integration of biblical, rabbinic and mystical wisdom into poetry
Use of duality and contrast (life/death, dream/reality, holy/profane)

Major issues in her work

Social consciousness (belief in God, love of humanity)
Love (God / man / nature / Jerusalem / husband)
Jerusalem is the axis of religion and soul (mysticism, spirituality, beauty)

"The Invisible Carmel" Zelda

When I die to become another essence
The invisible Mt. Carmel, which is all mine
All the quintessence of joy
Whose needles, cones, flowers and clouds
Are carved into my flesh
Will part from the visible Carmel
With its boulevard of pine trees
Descending to the sea.

Does the pleasure of a red sunset
Come from the mortal element in me?
The pleasure of earth's perfumes
The moment when the sea bursts into spray
The moment of return to the stern gaze of Jerusalem's sky
To the Supreme One. Is all this from the mortal element?

Questions

How does Jerusalem compare with Haifa?
What is the invisible / visible Carmel?
Why does Jerusalem's sky have a "stern gaze?"

"I Stood in Jerusalem" Zelda

I stood in Jerusalem suspended from a cloud
In a graveyard with people weeping
And a crooked tree.
Blurred mountains and a tower.
You are not! Death spoke to us.
You are not! He turned to me.

I stood in the midst of Jerusalem
Jerusalem bejeweled in the sun
Smiling like a bride in the field
Beside slender green grass.

Why were you afraid of me
Yesterday in the rain? Death spoke to me.
Am I not your quiet older brother?

Questions

How is Jerusalem associated with death / sex in this poem?
What happens when the sun finally comes out?
Describe the image of death as a "quiet older brother."

כאשר אמות
לעבר למהות אחרת -
יפרד הכרמל האי-נראה
שהוא כלו שלי,
כלו תמצית האשר,
שמחטיו, אצטרבלי, פרחיו וענניו
תקוים בבשרי -
מן הכרמל הנראה
עם שורת הארנים שירדח לים.

האם תענוג השקיעה האדמה
הוא מיסוד התמותה שבי?
ותענוג הבשרים
ורגע ערפלי המים
ורגע השיבה
למבט התקיף של שמי ירושלים,
לעליון על הכל -
האם מיסוד התמותה הוא?

עמיתי	עמיתי
בחוץ ירושלים	בירושלים
המשבצת בשמש	החלוקה על ענן,
המחיצת כמו כלה	קבית-הקברות
בשדה	עם אנשים בוכים,
על יד עשב דק וירק.	עץ עצם.
	הרים מטושטשים
	ומגדל.
מדוע פחדת ממני אחמול בגשם?	הלא אינכם?
דבר אלי המות.	דבר אלינו
הלא אני אחיך	המות.
השקט והגדול.	הלא אינך!
	הוא פנה אלי.

"I Flowered in a Stone House" Zelda

I flowered in a stone house
Without yoke, without goal, an eccentric fiction
As a red cyclamen bursting through the rock.

Jerusalem captured my free spirit
I drowned in light. I forgot my name.

Her abyss captured my joyous soul
I drowned in darkness in emerald.

Her secrets caught my living soul
I drowned in her mysteries.

Questions

Why did Zelda use the same syntax as Adon Olam in this poem?

What does "drowning" represent?

Describe the "mysteries" and "secrets" of Jerusalem.

"With My Grandfather" Zelda

Like our father Abraham
Who counted stars at night
Who called out to his Creator from the furnace
Who bound his son on the altar
So was my grandfather.

The same perfect faith
In the midst of the flames
The same dewy gaze and curling beard.

Outside it snowed
Outside they roared
There is no justice, no judge
In the shambles of his room
Angels sang of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Questions

Why does Zelda compare her grandfather to Abraham?

What is the meaning of the phrase: "There is no justice, no judge?"

What is happening outside of the house in the final stanza?

** Translation of poems by Matt Berger*

פרחתי בבית אבן
בלי על, בלי תכלית,
בכדיה תמהונית,
ברקפת בסלע.
ירושלים לכדה
את נפשי התפשית,
טבעתי באור,
שכחתי את שמי.
תהומה לכד
את נפשי הצוהלת.
טבעתי בחשך,
כאומרגד.
סודה לכד
את נפשי החיה,
טבעתי ברויה.

באברהם אבינו
שבלילה ספר מילות,
שקרא אל בוראו
מתוך הכבשן,
שאת בנו עקד -
היה סבי.
אותה אמונה שלמה
בתוך השלהבת,
ואותו מבט טלול
וזן רד-גלים.
בחור ירד השלג,
בחור שאגו:
איז דיו ואיז דין.
ובחדרו הקדוק, המנפץ
שרו כרובים
על ירושלים של מעלה.

Conclusion

Short yet dynamic poetic career
Open and generous spirit in an age of cynicism and selfishness
Unshaken belief in God's existence and goodness

*In what ways do these poems challenge your images of Jerusalem?
Do these poems reinforce your pre-conceived notions of Jerusalem?*

Learning Experience

Try to write a poem about either Jerusalem or the city that you live in

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