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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Lawrence Freedman

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

The Poetry of O. Hillel

This thesis is the fruit of an arduous and extended process of reading, translating and interpreting the poetry of a remarkable voice of the Palmach generation, O. Hillel. The full depth of Lawrence Freedman's work can only be perceived through a close reading of the original texts, which are often as enigmatic as they are exhilarating. Since relatively little has been written about Hillel even in Hebrew, and practically nothing whatsoever in English, so there was little help for Mr. Freedman outside of the texts themselves. The material ordered from the Genazim archive did not arrive. Essentially, Mr. Friedman relied on his own painstaking reading of a goodly number of poems – virtually the entire volume – of Hillel's first edition of Eretz ha-Sohorayim.

Because of his considerable love and affinity for the spirit and ethos of the Palmach and early-Statehood period, Freedman was able to identify quite well with the codes of speech and behavior reflected in the poems. While some aspects of Freedman's introduction – because it was written somewhat quickly at the end of the process, are lacking in terms of the history of the literature – certain strengths should be acknowledged. His aforementioned affinity and intuition inform the tone of the introduction, and the reader can tell that Freedman became imbued with the spirit of O. Hillel through this process. He has come about as close as possible in explicating such a very difficult poem as "The Records Played Chopin," and I commend to the reader his remarks on the poem "Sunset on a Negev Afternoon" among many others. For the poem "Voice of the Great Sea" Freedman did some work in commentaries on the psalms. Had time allowed I would have wanted him to do some comparative work on Tchernichovski to explore the implementation of that poet's pantheistic kulturkampf in the context of a young Eretz Yisrael generation, but the feat of reading Hillel was trying enough. I want to acknowledge the fact that in doing this thesis, Freedman was starting out with only very limited literary and linguistic experience. He has extended himself, and his bravery and level of achievement are noteworthy.

It can be said safely that there is no other body of poems available in English dealing with the Palmach and War of Independence experience to match this collection, for all its humble appearance. A bare few of Chaim Gouri's poems from that period have been translated, and no one has explicated them. Those bloody and painful, but also ecstatic, days are, oddly, poorly represented in English translation when one considers the volume of English translation which have been coming out of Israel during recent decades. It

seems that there is a certain embarrassment in dealing with the heyday of Zionist fervor. It is mainly the cynical, the agonizing and the despairing features of Israeli literature and society which have been prepared for export of late. That, unfortunately, is the mood of the largest part of Israel's fine literature today. When we return, therefore, to such a sensitive and refreshingly naive and ebullient writer such as Hillel, it does much to regenerate one's own enthusiasm for the Zionist adventure.

Mr. Freedman acquitted himself well with a complex poem such "Be-Ma'aleh ha-'Aqrabim" (At Scorpion's Ascent), which one translator mistakenly called a "landscape poem." It is a magnificent anti-war poem with the notion of God "exploding" in the form of the barren desert crater perhaps suggesting God's brutal potential as being the seamy underside of God's majesty. Freedman has presented his own reading and reaction which is very much on the mark.

In some instances I tried to refrain from too much editorial domination in this process, although I was very committed to seeing a text emerge which would do justice to the imposing originals. Here and there I now see that in the very final typing Freedman opted for a word or a phrase which I might have preferred to dissuade him from using, such as "Osnat among the Demons" as a translation for "tsafiririm." The word demons sounds too malevolent. In Hebrew a "morning demon," or "shed" in Hebrew, might suggest a benevolent or playful or, at worst, only slightly mischievous, fairy. In this instance, the follow-up I recommended in some Bialik poems would have clarified the matter. Similarly I had advised some careful reading of certain secondary sources, but there simply was not enough time. The texts themselves were very demanding, and here again, as I have said, serious credit is due to Lawrence Freedman for his persistent and engaged efforts. I do not want to sound too carping in my remarks. It is only because of my enormous respect for O. Hillel that I have too note that this paper could use yet another editing by me. My being on sabbatical did not help in the communications, and our original understanding was to finish earlier. And yet we must not sound too apologetic. This is a fine work, and one which we are proud of. This thesis could open up a valuable vein of material for further exploration by scholars. I do not think that O. Hillel has received even a fraction of the attention due him, and this is, in some measure, due to his artless, uncalculating and uncareeristic approach to his poetry. It is a goldmine for the mentality of that glorious era, and Freedman has made it accessible to all.

Respectfully Submitted

Dr. Stanley Nash

March 31, 1992

THE POETRY OF O. HILLEL  
Lawrence Freedman

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
Graduate Rabbinic Program  
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## FOCUS OF THE PAPER .

The State of Israel was founded in 1948 giving cause for rejoicing all over the Jewish world. Following the war and Holocaust it was easy for even the most casual of Jews to understand the political importance of the new State. Here there would be Jews living in a Jewish land protected by Jewish soldiers with guns pointing out from the borders and not in at the populace. Here was a people that now demanded international diplomatic respect and recognition. Immediately, war was fought to preserve these new political rights leaving Israel today a sovereign nation among the community of nations. Young men and women, fresh from high school and eager with youthful enthusiasm join the army to preserve that status as Jews from all over the world come to visit, to study, and to marvel in the wholly Jewish environment. And dance the Hora.

That, at least, is the hope. Israel today is a land with a mixture of identities. There is the Israel as described above: a sun drenched, happy place with an aura of selfless devotion to the society as a whole. Then there is the Israel of bitter politics and everyday realities that disappoint both citizens and visitors. Some people know about Israel's difficulties in war and have a sophisticated understanding of the threat the country faces. Some people remember only the miraculous triumphs over enemies using more gumption than ammunition. All of these images and more are accurate or were at one time accurate. These images appeal to people's level of cynicism and their disposition towards faith.

Israel today truly is a mixture of gumption and difficulties. There can be no denying the amazing feat of a relatively small governing institution, the pre-State Yishuv, and its ability to create a state and the infrastructure for it. I, myself, have heard many stories of bravery and daring by people who lived during that time and who helped in the struggle for a state. From that point of

view the Israel of '48 sounds like a wonderful, fantastic time (in their most literal of meanings). I also have seen the Israel of today. Israel suffers from western pop culture seeping in replacing local flavor, infighting among the politicians, and the inescapable quandary over the rights of Arabs both in and out of Israel proper. That is part of Israel, too.

This paper, though, will hearken back to the former period through some of the poetry of O. Hillel from his volume "ארץ הצהר" published in 1950. The excitement of that period, the enthusiasm of the youth (Hillel was 24 then), and the thrill of a new state is all there in the poetry. For that reason, the reader should have a pleasant time. However, I must add a word of caution: the poetry is dated. Even though many of the attitudes are important and still inform Israeli society today, they are viewed as a kind of romantic nostalgia. The heroism and social values of the time are still found in general Israeli society but as poetry, contemporary readers may not find their current questions and concerns addressed.

In the course of writing this thesis I was asked if the material was useful. My friend was asking if my work was utilitarian in nature or merely searching out an academic point for its own sake. This paper will contain no groundbreaking findings for the fate of the Jewish people, but I hope it will enable those people interested in the founding of Israel to capture the spirit of the times through the pen of one writer. I hope the reader will find a part of the history of Israel that is not discussed in the newspapers very often. Hopefully, this work will allow someone unfamiliar with Hebrew the chance to understand the importance of the time back then and the feelings people had. Perhaps this paper will explain why people were able to accomplish more with gumption than with ammunition.

### O. HILLEL IN CONTEXT.

O. Hillel's romantic poetry of the land was not without precedent, of course. Chaim Nachman Bialik, who arrived in Israel in 1924 was writing a romantic poetry that weaved the classic texts and rich Jewish culture of eastern Europe into a new fluid style of Hebrew writing. His contemporary, Saul Tchernikovsky (who didn't grow up under the oppressive tutelage of strict rabbis) never saw himself as an impoverished Jew. Because of this he was able to bring a sense of the classics and a freeing spirit to Hebrew literature. A few sentences does not do either of these writers justice. However, for our purposes it is important to know that they gave voice to a new, native sound to Hebrew writing respectful of the tradition but free to move in new directions.

A classic example of native Hebrew poetry from Palestine is that of Rachel Bluwstein who went to Palestine in 1909 to live on the small agricultural cooperative called Kinneret which overlooked the lake of the same name. She wrote about the difficulties of working the land but she also wrote of the joy of working the land. She also wrote of the simple joy of being in the land. From her poem, "Here on Earth," she writes about a joy of being with the earth of Palestine, ארץ ישראל.

Not nebulous tomorrow but today: solid, warm, mighty  
 Today materialized in the hand:  
 Of this single short day to drink deep  
 Here in our own land.<sup>1</sup>

There is a joy in merely existing in Israel. The work was difficult and the cooperative ultimately failed but neither fact dimmed the fervor of her ideology. This poem is indicative of a time and a spirit. It spoke of both the land and the

<sup>1</sup>Ruth Finer Mintz, *Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p.112

need to settle it. The 1920's saw poetry speak with a rugged voice, unafraid of work. Writers like A.D. Gordon spoke of working the land as a curative for the oppressed, bookish Jews of Europe. The Jewish community, then, struggled along with a few voices presaging the eventual state. All the while, a culture was being created that saw labor as character building, and cooperative ventures as an ideal social model. Motivating all of this was the exquisite thrill of grasping the reality that Jews were learning to build a new autonomous culture in their own land.

At this point, I would like to jump forward to the late 1950's. As the new country settled in and gained more of an urban character, the social models began to be questioned. Writers began to wonder about the individual as opposed to society as a whole. Conflicts arose as mizrachi immigrants who never learned the European's labor Zionist ideals or disdain for pious religion asserted their own cultures and rebelled against the disrespect they felt coming from the Ashkenazi establishment. Further, the socialist ideology failed to satisfy the new generations. They began to question the selflessness of the 1940's generation. Yizhar Smilansky (pen name S. Yizhar) has one of his characters say,

Why shouldn't we say openly and clearly at long last: So-and-so is what I want, and so-and-so is what I don't want! Really and truly. . . You'll say: an easy life? No. It's not that. But if it's to be a hardship—why does it have to be in these ways, which aren't my ways? Why shouldn't all my powers be devoted to what really troubles me, to what is hard for me. . .

Yes. I say work and toil —yes yes of course, but what about the individual human being? The individual in himself, who's a part of his work— what about the individual?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Orot, Journal of Hebrew Literature, vol. 15 (October, 1973), p. 25.

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The ideology surrounding the establishment of the State could not survive the realities of the country or the demands of a new generation without being questioned and disputed. Writers began to write darker works about the soul searching of individual as in A.B. Yehoshua's *Three Days and a Child*. Natan Alterman wrote a collection of poems called *The City of the Dove* in 1957 which extolled the creation of the State as so miraculous as to be outside of history. Seven years later his collection entitled *Summer Feast* reflected "the slackening of conscience and behavior of the citizens of the State in these [intervening] years."<sup>3</sup> He began to question if Israel's existence was as miraculous as he thought. Perhaps it was as much a part of history as any other event.

Between the noble toil of the 20's and 30's and the questioning despair of the late 50's and 60's is a group of writers known as the Generation of the Palmach. To understand this title, we should understand the Palmach better.

#### THE PALMACH

During World War II, the Hagana (the Yishuv defense force) pledged their full support to the British in their efforts against Adolph Hitler and the Axis powers. The Yishuv lobbied for the creation of an all Jewish Palestinian unit. The British were hesitant to do such a thing. Instead, approximately 27,000 men and women from Palestine volunteered for service in the British army. Though their service reduced the ranks of the Hagana, the training the Jewish soldiers received was thought to be advantageous for the Yishuv in the long run. The British had firm control over the security in Palestine so the Yishuv didn't fear for its safety on the homefront.

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<sup>3</sup>Hamutal Bar-Yosef, "Hebrew Poetry in the Years Following the Establishment of the State of Israel." *Jewish Book Annual*, vol. 26 (1969), p. 39.

That security lasted until May, 1941 when German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel reached Egypt. Now the Yishuv had cause for alarm and it inaugurated a force of full-time soldiers for the defense of Palestine. This group was called the Palmach, an acronym for פלוגות מרחץ, meaning "striking companies." The British now helped to train the new force and the Palmach assisted the British on various missions as scouts. When the British were defeated at El Alamein in November, 1942 they removed their support for the Palmach as they retreated. By this time, the Palmach was a working army, well trained with "a distinctive esprit de corps."<sup>4</sup> What they didn't have was much money.

Due to policy disagreements in the Yishuv, funding was not forthcoming. A creative solution was devised by the kibbutz federation, Hakibbutz HaMeuchad, which offered to feed and house the army if the soldiers would contribute two weeks of work a month to the various kibbutzim. Soon soldiers were based on kibbutzim, training half a month and working half a month.

The Palmach became a "youth movement in arms."<sup>5</sup> The soldiers themselves were mostly under 20 years old (in 1945 Yigal Allon became the commander at the age of 28) and lived in a "summer camp atmosphere"<sup>6</sup> with campfires, folk dancing, and singing. Living conditions were basic but the morale was high. Living within their socialist ideology, the Palmach had an egalitarian feeling to it: officers were not afforded special privileges.

Within this atmosphere of youth, O. Hillel served first in the north and then in the Negev. His romanticism of friendships made and of the spirit of the soldiers would seem to be in keeping with the actual morale of the time. It seems

<sup>4</sup>E. Luttwak, D. Horowitz The Israeli Army. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>E. Luttwak, D. Horowitz, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup>E. Luttwak, D. Horowitz, p. 21.

reasonable to assume that the feelings he expresses in his poems are closer to reportage than propaganda in hindsight.

#### THE GENERATION OF THE PALMACH.

The writers who exemplify the Generation of the Palmach were an optimistic group of people, firm in their belief of creating a better society. They grew up with Zionist ideology either from the movements in Israel or Europe. Settling Israel and building the land was their struggle to define themselves. Pogroms, riots, Nazism, and other anti-Jewish activities, gave these Jews an even stronger impetus to build a homeland where they could build their identity unmolested.

As the reader notes in many of Hillel's poems (in particular *בית הספר הזה*) the poet stresses that more than building the land, the very *idea* of building the land is cause for celebration. This ideology was proven as structures were built and roads paved. In effect, the thrill for the generation was both in the doing and reflecting upon that doing. They had conquered the failings of the settlers in the last two decades and had yet to question seriously the naivete of their ideology.

They were not removed from social problems, of course. The reality of the day always threatened their ideology. O. Hillel wrote both dewy poems of love for a public park as well as the anguish of losing a friend in battle. The very name Generation of the Palmach implies that the military apparatus was a constant reality and Hillel does not dismiss the difficulties in war. He is frank in confronting death and has his own questions of war in general. But aside from the tragic deaths in battle, this generation had little about which to feel negative. Every new advance and every new year of statehood was cause for celebration. The poems of O. Hillel along with those of the more renowned Chaim Guri and



Abba Kovner helped define for society what it was they were doing. These romantic poems gave voice to how they felt as they struggled expressing shared experiences in an artistic manner. They are the impressions of some of the actors who lived during a very heady and exciting period of Israeli history.

#### FORMAT

I have tried to approximate the word placement as O. Hillel did. Hopefully, any flow of words to the eye has been maintained. Footnotes in the poem translations was kept to a minimum so as not to disturb the reader's eye. I did insert footnotes when they help to give immediate clarification of a word or phrase.

It is my custom not to write the name of G-d in full. Hillel had no such custom in his writing. To place my practice on his writing could alter the readers perceptions of Hillel's poetry. Therefore, the word is spelled in full.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.

I would like to thank Henry Resnick and Hagit Gal-Ed at HUC for their help in searching out a few of the more difficult words and, in Hagit's case, giving me some insight that only a native speaker could grasp immediately. Similarly, I wish to thank Rabbi Tzion Zohar for explaining some cultural aspects of Israeli society as well as clarifying the importance of some geographical spots in Israel.

Many thanks to Deborah Postelnek for proofreading the text and for keeping my procrastination to a minimum.

To Dr. Stanley Nash I offer tremendous thanks for his patience with a student whose interest far eclipsed his abilities. His contributions to the translations make their reading much more enjoyable.

Of course, the final product is my own and any failings are my responsibility.

## BIOGRAPHY

ע הלל is the pen name of Hillel Omer born in 1926 at Kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek where he was also educated. At age 22 he was very active with the Palmach serving in the defense of his native northern Israel that suffered the first attacks in the War of Independence. Later he volunteered for elite duty with the חצרות הנגב, a unit influential in the capture of the Negev. After the war, Hillel studied landscape design in Paris. He served as an advisor to the Jerusalem municipality for its public parks and also worked in Tel Aviv as a landscape engineer.

Hillel was one of the few poets to publish in Hebrew during the British mandate period. He was particularly well known for his many children's books "rescuing" Hebrew children's literature from being didactic and educational.<sup>7</sup> Instead he often wrote the stories from the child's point of view. His poetry of the land of Israel eschewed grand symbolism and pointed to an unabashed love of the country.

He died June 30, 1990 after a prolonged illness and was buried at the kibbutz of his birth. He was 64.

<sup>7</sup>Beni Tzipor, "משורר בסיבוב כפר סבא," *HaAretz* July 1, 1990, sec. 1, p. 6.

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ברוח

IN THE WIND

You, like the moon, belong to all of them  
and like her:

You're mine, mine!

You

like a wild doe,  
that in the wind

prances along the mountain — —  
flutes for nostrils,  
bared neck,<sup>1</sup>  
my child,  
you are apple blossoms!

ברוח

את של כלם בלכנה:

וקסמה:

שלי, שליו

את

בשילת-בר,

שברוח

דואח בקר — —

נחיריק חלילים,

תפת-צואר,

ילדתי,

את שרטי תפוח:

<sup>1</sup> יחפה is bare foot, unshod, ragamuffin

## IN THE WIND

This is the first of three poems that speak about a young woman. O. Hillel has written a vibrant bit of love poetry extolling the object of his affection using various aspects of the environment in his search for metaphors. He begins by comparing the woman to the moon. Like the moon, she can be appreciated by anyone just for the gazing. However, just as lovers may claim the moon their own in a romantic moment, so he claims her. Obviously, he ignores the literal idea of *שלי* as ownership preferring to think of it as an exclusive connection between himself and the woman.

Now that he is assured as her sole suitor, he continues the poem with exciting natural imagery. The land, perhaps the hills, dances like a wild doe (with precedent set in Psalm 114<sup>2</sup>) in the wind. In this one sentence are three words which set a tone of abandoned free spirit. The doe is wild *בר* meaning in her natural state, not domesticated. She is not *פרא* implying dangerous or without any control. She dances in the wind, a free flowing medium that follows its own rules in the realm of nature, uncontrollable by people. The word *נאנח* is closer to flying, soaring, or gliding in the air than a dance. The word conjures up a doe skipping about as the wind moves her both physically and (to force the Hebrew pun and allusion of *נח*) spiritually. The dance she follows is not a structured movement but a carefree prance.

The word nostril is a problem for me as an English speaker because it doesn't seem to carry even the slightest bit of grace to it. However, because the nostrils are a carrier of air, our most basic need, they become a powerful source of life. The nostrils also carry emotion found in music. Hillel associates the doe's

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<sup>2</sup> Verse 4: mountains skipped like rams, hills like sheep.

snorts with the music of flutes which have Biblical precedent for use at joyous and festive occasions.<sup>3</sup>

For us, flutes create the sweet sounds of a structured, mathematically precise musical system which sit well with our structured civilization. But here with this unbridled doe, in a wild, unstructured land, her random snorts are the music. Further, in our urban experience, a flute requires tremendous effort and skill in its construction. There, in the wild, the snout of an animal is the instrument that took no laboring by human hands but was created by the same thing that created the hills upon which the doe prances.

The phrase "bared neck" can only add to the sense of abandon of ungoverned life. The word comes from ערך meaning barefoot, unshod. Barefoot may imply poverty but it also implies a carefree attitude: free from the confines of shoes.

Finally, he allegorizes the woman to apple blossoms — a two part symbol. There is the whiteness of apple blossoms which can symbolize her innocence and the blossoms which in their very name represent a young maturing woman coming into her own. Both senses carry a temporary quality. Apple blossoms are not long for the tree. Here they help to capture the vibrancy of a young woman as she grows.

The poem is a brief exclamation of love. It is a quick sketch of a young woman who, in her carefree attitude, has captured his heart. Quick and exciting, this poem serves as a good introduction to the following poems.

---

<sup>3</sup> 1 Sam. 10:5, Is. 5:12, Is. 30:29, Jer. 48:36



יעל על שפת הנחל

Yael at the Edge of the Stream

All the heights of heaven are yours  
and all the red crocuses blossom your name:

Yael!

Who can make you laugh like a lilac - barefooted rejoicing?

Hey, hey!

I am swept away by the light

by the summer grapes,

but I am not swept away like I am by your ringing and beautiful name.

Butterflies the colors of the rainbow can not overpower you,

and all the heights of heaven flee from your beauty.

But one will best you,

by my life Yael,

it is this: your joy and dimples reflecting on the mirror of the water.

So hurry Yael.

Quickly, Yael.

Set your foot in the water's mirror —

do it —

and it will become murky.

יעל על שפת הנחל

כל גבעתי שמים לך:

וקל הכרזמים מורחים את שמך:

יעל!

מי כלי לך יצחקך - צחולת יסוף:

הי! הי!

לאור שאססך

לשאבולי שש:

לא אססך קבו אל שסך

שסלצולי וסססס.

לא ינצחוך כל פרשרי סססס.

וקל גבעתי שמים יגוס סססס:

אכל אססס חובל לך

הוי קסני. יעל,

ו סססס-גילת-גוססך שססס סססס:

על כן ססס. יעל!

ססס. יעל!

כגלך לראי סססס —

הני —

ויילח:

### Yael at the Edge of the Stream

This poem is a romantic ode to a woman, Yael, who is, in the eyes of the narrator, beautiful without comparison. (Of course, as with other objects of affection without compare, the narrator compares Yael to a butterfly.)

Yael is on the edge of the stream and here the narrator captures a moment in time. He takes in the scene of Yael at the stream's edge and realizes that this woman, because of her beauty, is a level above all other beautiful sights in nature. She owns the world, we could say and here, she owns the high places of heaven. The red crocuses beautiful in color and delicacy call out Yael's name instead of their own in deference to her beauty.

He is terribly moved by many things he sees: he is swept away! The light, and the tasty grapes all sweep him away but nothing moves him as much as her name.

The last stanza seems to change in tone drastically. Before, we had a highly stylized ode to a woman who seemed like an object on a pedestal. The movement in the poem was done by the man as he was swept away though he still seemed to be at a distance. Now, the poem takes on a more casual tone as the man becomes more playful. Smitten, he talks to Yael as though together they are on this walk. Here he tells her she is the most beautiful creature, only to tease that he remembers one better. He quickly reveals the tease and tells her it is herself reflected in the water. Then he encourages her to sully the water's placid face so that she again will be alone in beauty.

This teasing made me feel the poem had a more gentle and approachable tone. The reader is a witness to the playfulness of two lovers as opposed to a trite recitation of a man's love.

## אסנת בצפיריים

## OSNAT AMONG THE DEMONS

With laughter and chirps  
 a flock of insolent demons<sup>4</sup>  
 broke out of the pens of its night  
     huddling together  
     and with them a pleasant and reveling was their loot.  
 The flock was startled and ran with the perfume of nectars,  
 While they were still cool to the palate and the sense of smell!  
 We saw and we laughed:  
     The flock is insolent,  
     wild,  
     and behaving mischievously.  
 We will pursue!  
 We will chase them!  
 We will chase the breezes, you!  
 My feet! My eyes! All of me! — Banish sleep!  
 The demons run to kiss her, to kiss Osnat.  
 Breezes!  
 Breezes, look I have warned you;  
 She will tell me absolutely everything after this!

אסנת בצפיריים

בבזחוק וצפצופים

פברז את סקלאות לילו

פבר צפיריים

חופקים,

מפזופים

ופפדו נוחות, וחלל - שללו.

נקהל וברז הפבר עם בום הפופים.

קפום קרירים לסף וחופקים:

ראינו ופפנו:

הפבר הפופים

פופ,

ופפפפם!

נרדף!

נרדף אותם!

נרדף רוחות, אפפנו!

בגלי! פפנו! קלי - פפריחו פפנו!

פפפריים רצים לקפם לה לפפנו!

רוחות!

רוחות, קא מןפפפנו:

פפל, פפל היא הפפ לי אפפריכו!

<sup>4</sup>Morning demon according to the kabbalah.

## OSNAT AMONG THE DEMONS

"Osnat Among the Demons" is the third and last poem of the first section of the book *ארץ הצדדים*. The focus is on a girl and the poet's expression of love to that girl. The admiration is expressed with words rich in natural imagery and a tone giving the girl as much a "flighty" personality as the demons seem to have. The girl and the demons are also similar to the breezes in their capricious flying about. Everyone involved here seems to be running about giving the poem a playful and even coquettish attitude. The flock has escaped and is running wild. We are not angry with them and it seems that their running wild is almost a relief. After all, the only things they have taken are pleasantness and revelry. We watch and laugh at their enjoyment and then decide, perhaps as capriciously, to join in and we chase the demons. But our attention is divided and we chase the breezes. Or is this quick change of our prey meant to meld the two into one? The three lines that start with *נרדוף* each extend in length both in sound and to the eye and successfully add to the rush of the chasing. It is as if we are confused and wish at first simply to get in the chase and then have trouble choosing our quarry.

We are so excited about chasing that we never wish to tire but perhaps we do tire and slow down whereupon we see the demons rush to Osnat. We witness this and in true playground style, we warn the breezes that Osnat will tell us everything that happens.

"We" chase the demons, "we" chase the breezes, the demons chase the girl and everyone seems desirous of giving the other a kiss. There is almost a childish, flirty feel to the second half of the poem with everyone chasing everyone else.

It is the first part of the poem that I still don't understand. Can these demons be metaphorical? Is there anything about new immigrants to the Israel

of 1950? Could the demons be new immigrants giddy with freedom? Were they trapped in Europe during the war? If they are just birds, what is the nectar? Blossoms? The transition from the flock "behaving mischievously" to, "We will pursue!" truly stumps me. I'm lost as to who the "we" are. Could it be the readers?

This is one of three simple poems dedicated to a girl and her unique spirit. I hesitate to read more into it than how it superficially reads but I think any reader would be wise to keep in mind the spirit of that era. If this poem is not a metaphor for the era, then perhaps the time inspired the poem.

בסבוב כפר סבא  
AT THE Kfar Saba Circle

הסבוב הקרוב

ובחמישי לחמש אדר שבת עלי העולם בסערה.  
נאני ורקתי אל סתרתו צלוחי בקשמים השפתיים.  
ושפתי את כל פתח-האר ואת צלוחי-המים מראים לי בשמי:  
הנה, הנה!  
— איז סעק שחשובני פופר, או אסער התבוננו אל נשקתי בלבד.  
פילא, וסא קד.  
והעולם היה צלול כמוני, אכל סקריק ססני הרבה,  
כי אהמול נרעב בגשם עם קל אנקורי הדרור.  
וזה היה בחמישי באדר, שפתי בסבוב בקר-סבא,  
או אולי בשנה אחרת, או בקטום שפסלצל אחרת — —

הפרדסים הנוקעים שרחו הלחות-הלחות של תפוזים,  
כי אקרו לשגשגי סאחוק.  
אך אני ברחמי לי השפיקה אל המחולות התכלים-  
השקטים-רבבת!

אכל כל הסקרים הושיטו לי יד — לרדת.  
— בנראה הייתי איש-חשוב! — הו-ח!  
אכל אפלו תרגל ספשי היה שם סלף.  
אלא שאני הייתי אלהים: כי סאד צחקתי עליו.  
הוי, חסר-שחר צחקתי!  
וגם צחקתי על חסור אסד שחלף בדרך וטנה עקבי.  
שאלתי את נפשי: איך אסער להיות עקבי ביום סתרת קנח?

אָרײַן להיות נסור בְּיָדָהּ — חִיָּה אֵלֵי בְּשִׁי בְּשִׁי.

וְכִשְׁהִסְתַּחֲסֵל הַחֲסֵד, דְּמִיָּה פִּתְאֵם שְׁתַּאֲרַז בְּלֵה רָצָה לָהּ.  
בְּשִׁי אֲבוּרָה שְׁתַּחֲנוּת.

אָף לְאַחֲמֵנוּ, אֲנִי הוּא שְׁבַדְתִּי לִי עַם שְׁמִי פְרוֹת לְקַרְתְּרוּאָה  
— אֶחָת הוֹלֵנְדִית וְשִׁנְיָה בְּשִׁשְׁקָאִית.

אָף בְּסִבּוּב קְרִיטָבָא תַּקְשָׁה עֲלֵינוּ פְּרִימָת הָעוֹלָם.  
וְהַפְּרָדִים בְּלִבּוֹנוּ בְּרַעַם רִיחֻתָם

הַחֲחֻקִּים-הַחֲחֻקִּים-הַחֲחֻקִּים —

גַּם לְהַקֵּת סְטִינִיּוֹת רְאִימִי שְׁשָׁה, שְׁנִסְרָשָׁה בְּעִנְיָ הַבְּשָׁם  
וְכֵאד הַשְׁתַּלְלָה עַל בְּרָךְ.

סִיד הַבְּנֵי, שְׁהִיָּה וְזוֹ לְהַקֵּת רְגִישִׁי.  
חִוִּי, אִיוֹ לְהַקֵּת סְטִינִיָּה.

שְׁמִי הַפְּרוֹת שְׁאֲחֻנִּי לְחִבְרָתוֹ, גְּעוּ כֵּאד לְעוֹלָם,  
הַפְּרוֹת בְּלִבּוֹנוּ הָיוּ.

פֶּה קֶשֶׁה.

פֶּה קֶשֶׁה הָיָה לִי שְׁלֵא לְעִנְיָ לְאַשְׁתָּן בְּנִיעִיָּה.

הוֹי-הוֹי, כִּי בְּשִׁי רְצִימִי לְעִנְיָ לְעוֹלָם שְׁשָׁה, בְּנִיעִיָּה שְׁשָׁה.  
קָצָה אַחֲרֵי סִבּוּב קְרִיטָבָא.

כִּי שְׁשָׁה בְּאֶמֶד סִבְבֵּי הַבְּשָׁם, שְׁשָׁה בְּרִנָּה גְּאֻנִּיָּה  
וְהִיָּה מְלַעֲגָה לְשִׁשְׁ שְׁשָׁלָה לְאַגָּם.

בְּבִרְיָה הִיָּה שְׁבָרָה בְּרָח אִתָּה בְּבִרְיָה  
בְּמִנִּי בְּמִנִּי, גַּם אֲנִי סִבּוּב הִיָּה קָצָה.

וְזֶה הָיָה נִסְלָא, לְהִיּוֹת סִפְשִׁי וְלִדְעָה זֹאת כֵּאד.  
וְלִדְעָה אִיוֹ אִוֵּל אִוֵּל אִוֵּל וְנִסְלָא הוּא הָעוֹלָם שְׁשָׁה  
בְּשִׁי בְּשִׁי.

הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי בְּכִלֵּי-בְשִׁים שְׁשִׁיָּהוּ סִפְשִׁי אֵלֵי.  
אִשְׁשֶׁר שְׁהִיָּה אֲנִי זֶה, וְאִשְׁשֶׁר שְׁהִיָּה זֶה הָעוֹלָם.  
וְאִשְׁשֶׁר שְׁהִיָּה בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים.

אֲנִי רְצִימִי בְּלִבִּי לְנִסְרָשָׁה אֵת הַבְּשָׁם.  
אֵת עִנְיָ הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, אֵת הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, אֵת הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי.  
אֵת הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, אֵת הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, אֵת הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי.

הוֹי, בְּשִׁי הָיָה הַבְּשָׁם אִשְׁשֶׁר בְּלִבִּי אִשְׁשֶׁר:

בְּשִׁי רְצִימִי בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים.  
אֲבָל פֶּה יוֹדְעִים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי עַל הָעוֹלָם בְּחִיָּה, בְּחִיָּה בְּחִיָּה.

פֶּה יוֹדְעִים הֵם עַל מַחְרִיּוֹת הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי.  
וְהַרְגִּשְׁתִּי הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי.

בְּשִׁי מְלַעֲגָה לְשִׁשְׁ שְׁשָׁלָה לְאַגָּם.  
פֶּה יוֹדְעִים הֵם עַל בְּשִׁי הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי.

כִּי הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי.

הוֹי, בְּשִׁי בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים.  
בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים.

וְנִסְלָא לְהִיּוֹת סִפְשִׁי לְחִיָּה הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי.  
לְנִשְׁסָה בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, אֵת הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי.

— בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים.

הוֹי, בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים.  
וְכִלֵּי בְשִׁים הַרְגִּשְׁתִּי, בְּכִלֵּי בְשִׁים.

לְחִיָּה! לְחִיָּה!



נסכים כפר סבא

# AT THE Kfar SABA CIRCLE

And it was on the fifth of the month of Adar that the world in a storm  
blossomed upon me  
and I was thrown to its petals accosted by the happy fragrances  
and I heard all the blossoms of light and the lapping of the water calling me by  
name:

here, over here.

There's no doubt that they thought I was a butterfly or maybe they only meant  
for my soul,

It's not worth arguing, so let it be.

And the world was clear like me, but far brighter  
because yesterday it got damp in the rain along with all the swallows of freedom  
And this was on the fifth of Adar, at the Kfar Saba circle,  
or maybe in some other year, or some other place (a place that rings differently)-

The orchards that fly by blossomed joke after joke of oranges -  
they intend to drive me crazy from laughter.  
But I myself soared to the heavens, to the myriad of sky-blue dances.

But all the flowers extended a hand - to come down!

Apparently I was an important man, ha, ha.

Up there even a stupid rooster was a king,

I was God! For I laughed at him a lot,

oh, senselessly, I laughed.

And I also laughed at a donkey that walked steadily on the road  
I asked my soul, "How is it possible to be steady on such a dizzying day like this?"  
"You need to be an ass for something like that," my soul smiled back at me from  
inside.

And when I looked outside, it seemed to me that all of the land was running  
suddenly like a startled cow.

But actually, I was the one that ran with the two cows to Kfar Haroeh- one was  
Dutch and the second Damascan.

But at the Kfar Saba circle, the blossoming of the world seized us and the  
orchards dazzled us with the thunder of their sweet, sweet, sweet smell.

And a flock of swallows I saw were in a frenzy from the clouds of fragrance - very boisterous.

Immediately, I understood that this flock was my feelings. Oh, such a bewildering flock.

The two cows that invited me to keep them company mooed to the world a lot. They were completely lacking manners.

How hard, how hard it was that I could not answer them with a moo. Ha! How I wanted to moo there to the world, especially there, just a bit past that turn at Kfar Saba.

Because there in one of the pools of water a proud duck floated and she was mocking the sun that had fallen into the pool.

She was inclined to think that she had already caught it in her hand! Like her, I thought so, too. And this was wonderful. To be foolish and to know it. And to know such immense foolishness. It's wonderful, this world in which we jump about.

I felt, inadvertently, that someone was smiling at me. It's possible that I was the one doing it and it's possible that it was the world and it's possible that both of us were mixed up together.

And I wanted, so much, to take a bite out of everything, the seeing eyes, the melodious light, the flowing fragrances, the sounds, my soul!

Oh, how everything was so possible! So very possible!

I probably seemed ridiculous in the eyes of books that were in my briefcase but what do books know about the world outside, on the 5th of Adar at the Kfar Saba circle?

What do they know about the running races between the yellow flowers and the red anemone along the perimeter of the wet sports field?

What do they know about the travels of electricity that bursts its thin outside wires because it had no patience!

Oh, how laughable to be books on a day like this. On a day like this it is wonderful to be something.

And it is wonderful to be prey to the rampant blooming,  
to breathe in hundreds of overwhelmed feelings - this sudden sound! All the  
cymbals of the world!

Oh, on the 5th of Adar, at the Kfar Saba circle, it's wonderful to be. Like this, to  
be, to be!

To be!

# AT THE KFAR SABA CIRCLE

This is a poem running wild with enthusiasm. It is a poem that typified the style that ran through much of O. Hillel's poetry in this volume. It combines poetry and prose, contrasts the expected metaphors and similes with brief narrative sections and brings the narrator back and forth between observing the world and being part of it.

The scene is the narrator in his car or truck in the town of Kfar Saba at a traffic circle. It is obviously a well known place and כפר סבא may have to be translated as "rotary" or "circle" to make it clear that this is a specific place at Kfar Saba. The date, Adar 5, is early spring in Israel. The rains have diminished and the flowers are blossoming in force. Since summer in Israel can be characterized by brown and my experience has taught that winter is characterized by gray rains, the spring is a welcome relief between the two seasons. Hiking at this time is exhilarating as one can see the greenness of nature jump out of normally brown gray areas. Cities take advantage of this time, too. While irrigation has made parks forever green, the rains of spring bring on an even more intense color as the city parks take advantage of the weather and blossom madly.

As the driver passes by it seems he has his window open and can feel the cool breeze. In that breeze is the fragrance of the various flowers all around him. He sees it as a storm. A storm is a violent and uncontrollable act of nature. Here the storm of flowers is equally as uncontrollable but not violent. The image of being buffeted by flowers is an oxymoron which only helps to explain the joy he has in the experience.

The true romance of this poem begins as he engages in conversation with the flowers which see him as so joyful and perhaps erratic that they confuse him for a butterfly. But then he makes a quick retreat and acknowledges that it is not

his body that the flowers want but his soul which is the true location of his glee and excitement. The narrator then dismisses the whole notion and we all come back to earth and remember that he is not a butterfly but merely a man thrilled with clarity of the air in this season.

He drives on watching orange groves "fly by" and we can imagine his head thrown back in laughter, giddy from the beauty. He doesn't stare long. He prefers to look to the blue skies but that doesn't last long as the flowers call him back treating his attention as most important. The speed of the shifting scenes mimics the speed of his car driving by.

I am confused by the notion of a rooster being king. Perhaps he alludes to a stupid animal being elevated by naive flowers or perhaps he alludes to the natural strut of a rooster which, when bathed by the blue sky, actually achieves the characteristic of a king. Or perhaps laughing at a rooster acting as king is a sign that the narrator was of a higher order.

The third might be possible because a rooster is not the only animal that receives his derision. Pity the donkey that earns his sorrow. He is sad that on this glorious day of spring when he is feeling so carefree, this donkey must still carry its burden.

There are more animals. He sees the land emerging into spring and compares it to startled cows. I can only imagine two placid cows quietly eating when their heads lift up startled and begin to run off. Is this not the ultimate in being carefree: to eat and run with no other responsibilities. (Still, cows are ultimately penned in. Is this an irony understood in 1950 or only 44 years and 5 wars later?) And so, briefly, the narrator runs along, too. I am not sure why the nationalities of the cows are cited. Is this an east/west tension metaphor? Is he looking at the harmony shared between the western culture of the majority of

Israelis in 1950 and the adopted culture of the Middle East? Then again, they may testify only to the depth of this herd and its varied gene pool.

He returns again to his drive as the fragrance and sight of all the blossoms interrupt his day dream. What happens next is very interesting. Up to here he has carried on a narrative with semi-surreal images. It has been a smooth flow from the narrator's point of view. Now he sees a flock of sparrows intoxicated from the fragrance in the air and consciously appends metaphoric status to the birds. I note this because I was curious as to why he needed to break his flow. Did he really have to be so obvious?

What follows is a description of how his feelings were like the flock; tumultuous, erratic but always staying on some course. Flocks of birds, after all, appear to move randomly yet they all fly in formation, moving as a group. We see him wishing he could abandon his car to dance and moo with the cows, free from social responsibility. Still, he knows he cannot. This can only create even more anguish as he looks at the world he loves unable to interact with it as he wishes.

That tension is palpable as he sees a duck pleased with catching the sun in her water basin. Surely, the duck knows that the captured sun is illusory but the duck doesn't care. She can delight in the moment, love the idea and escape from the world of facts and reality. "To be foolish and know it" is the ultimate vacation from responsibility because it is a choice to play, to engage in pretending like children while being assured that a return to an adult, responsible life is not abandoned but suspended, waiting one's return. The spring will end and other less perfect seasons will come. For that matter, less perfect days may be just around the corner. The comfort of the expected, of the mundane, will return. Why not, then, grab the excitement of what is given? Why not indulge in silliness for a day?

This episode reminds me of the story of Chelm where the elders try to capture the moon in a vat of water. They felt the reflection would be theirs forever. That story delights because of its improbability and we laugh at the slapstick of the elders of Chelm. For me, that story has a sad tone: it points to wise men who are in fact stupid. It points to simpletons who are embarrassing to watch. At least this duck can enjoy the joke and be satisfied. At least this duck can enjoy the gift of the bright sun without greedily planning its capture. The duck reminds us to enjoy our foolishness because it is fun but not to forget that the enjoyment of fun lies in its very limited existence. When the novelty of fun wears off, it is no longer fun. When the duck tires of her captured sun, the idea of a captured sun becomes less whimsical and more pathetic.

The novelty has not worn off for the narrator. He has not tired of the day. His books in his briefcase only have scorn for him, though. They, after all, represent the rest of his buttoned-down life, of his daily business. He doesn't wish to think about that now and he returns the scorn. What can a book know about a fine spring day? Better to let yourself be attacked by the sights and sounds of the day and exist for the moment. The books will always be there later.

The exuberance of this poem is astounding. Hillel has managed to catch the rushing by the roadside trees and flowers and the more distant images which linger as the car drives by. He has also taken short, fleeting experiences and combined them into a long poem. It seems that his very desire to extend the moment he is feeling is accomplished in his long poem. The form itself with its prose-like quality allows the moment to last.

This is a poet in love with being where he is. He is singing an ode to his land not for the exceptional beauty, not for its historical or political significance. He is singing about an unexceptional rotary in an unexceptional town and the mundane flowers and animals found there. But the land he drives on is where



he finds himself, happy just to be there in that spot, on that day. The land does not scream out memories of wars. The land is simply his to drive upon freely. For one minute, he can forget all the history that brought about Israel and enjoy the results of all that history: to relax and absorb a beautiful spring day without a care.

# בית נפרד PROSE HOUSE

הנה הבית

פזמון בראש:

בא נדמה בית

פזמון:

היום את רחוקה

פזמון:

בית נדמה - לטוב בראש

אנחנו

הבית בראש

הנה פזמון בראש:

הנה פזמון בראש:

הנה פזמון בראש:

אם לא תהיה פזמון בראש, אולי פזמון בראש:

אולי פזמון בראש:

הנה פזמון בראש:

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הנה פזמון בראש:

בית נדמה - לטוב בראש  
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הנה פזמון בראש:

את צחנת הטבק הנרוע! את צחיות הכובעים.  
את האידש הנקנת!

את שני הנקלנים: רנוניס-רובינשטין.  
— בונים קאן בית!

לא פסלי קורנת וקריבו לו אספרונות.  
לא סיקל-אנג'לו עם קסאל נשישו לו במכחול-הלליות!

הא, גשש קשקשה!  
רק סכונת-קשון תשפך לה רגשותיה:  
חשי-חשך!

נחצוצרות הויסוף!  
סימפוניות הקללה!  
בגליבר אדיר, בקל האח-גרוגה!

היא לבדה.  
באש-התאבדות!  
צד-פסלי שעלת.  
לצאול!

ביתי —

בני הגדול!

חזק!

הו, אונחיים.

הנה שלשם קארז:

פנינת של עם-אמצות, ליריוס של פלנה, בשם של אנרכיה!

דור-דור ונמוסיו,  
דור דור ושינה!

אני אוהב את שחוק הפלס!  
את עקשנות הפשישים.

אני אוהב לשמץ הלליות-פלס!  
הכי פחותה היא מקריאת הנקר: הלליות! על אשפתות! —

לקנצם מנמור לקלסו. טקסן סוג א'.  
שניו תותבות — הלליות!  
לקנצם מנמור לשגנדר. טיח.  
בחור טוב! — הלליות!

הו, אונחיים, בונים קאן בית!  
גששו יוצאת מן הפלקט.  
הוא פרוזאי למשה-קל-בקרית!  
אכל אתם, הבוגא לי, הניחו מסתרקם ומקליתכם.  
הנה פקחונגא לבבכם אל לבבו.  
האירו אור-דקם באור-דמו —  
אור-און תבואו אל צמוגי שיריו!

אשר לא ביםים קתם-כך פרוזה או שירה.  
אלא האנשים הנם פרוזאים או משוררים!  
והקחירה חפשיה!

בית בפרוזה

# PROSE HOUSE

A placard in The Land of Israel:

Housebuilding on this site!

Contractors:

Resnick and Rubenstein.

Placard:

Apartment matters - Inquire at the site!

Citizens, please look at the sign!

Please put aside a moment of your business and your projects:

Here is a placard in The Land of Israel!

Oh, don't say, "It's nonsense."

If you haven't probed its deeper meanings, at the very least mark it in your notebooks,

and when you're looking at it later you'll get some benefit, you or your friends;

But I researched its deeper meanings!

Pay attention to me!

Look, I see the soul of a *paiton*<sup>5</sup> in a crude cage!

I hear the sound of violins crying out from the walls!

Housebuilding on this site!

Contractors:

Resnick and Rubenstein

Apartment matters - Inquire at the site!

Ha! What bold and modern lyricism!

Steel reinforced concrete!

Yes, the very soul of the plumb-lines is agog in the blueprints!

Yes, the soul of the engineer's design is storming in its very calculations!

O! I will sing a song of disgrace about the salaries of workers!

They're building a house here!

In this lot!

It can only be that its profit-mongered heart has broken and is overflowing in a rhapsody of song!

To spit its soul from the lowliness of dung hills:

<sup>5</sup>A composer of liturgical poetry.

To express itself in an ecstatic oration of thistles!

Men at work!

Hurrah for the virtuoso of stuttering!

Hurrah for the wizard of stammering in Israel.

Shame to the profiteers of these lots!

Shame to all those who drip honey from their tongues.

I hate all this flowery language like the forest's hatred for all the vacationers.

And I praise the structure rising and its strong songs, and the acrid sweat and the lyricism of those with worn out shoes!

And the stench of inferior tobacco and the ancient hats and the humpbacked Yiddish.

The two contractors: Resnick and Rubenstein

Men at Work!

The sculptors of Corinth<sup>6</sup> will not offer it ambrosia,

Michaelangelo with Raphael will not make it with pallets of halleluyah.

O, corrupt soul

Only a concrete mixer will pour out its feelings for it:

Drums of gravel

And trumpets of sand!<sup>7</sup>

A symphony of curses.

In a mighty caliber with all the hoorays of its throat

She alone,

in the fire of infatuation!

with all the rasping sounds of whooping cough

Damn!

My house -

my big son!

Be strong!

O citizens, here is a placard in the land:

The jewel of the people of the lands, lyricism of steel, in the name of anarchy.

Every generation and its reasoning.

Every generation and its song!

<sup>6</sup>A city in Greece known for its light and ornate architectural style.

<sup>7</sup>Coarse sand for making concrete.

I love the meter game!  
 the stubbornness of the hammers,  
 I love to hear "Praise mortar."  
 How much smaller it is than what the man calls out: halleluyah! On dung hills.<sup>8</sup>

To the victor, a song to Kalman. Moulder<sup>9</sup> type A.  
 His teeth inserted — halleluyah!  
 To the chief musician, a song for the tailor. Plasterer.  
 A good boy! Halleluyah!

Ho, citizens, they're building a house here!  
 It's soul goes out from the sign,  
 It's prosaic underneath every inspection!  
 But you, please give me, leave me your business, your decisions.  
 Here, please turn your hearts to its heart.  
 Brighten the light of your blood through the light of its blood -  
 or, since you will go to the deeper meanings, of its song!

That things do not exist just so, either in prose or in poetry!  
 rather these are people, they are writers or poets!  
 And the choice is free!

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<sup>8</sup>See Lamentation 4:5

<sup>9</sup>צוּר A moulder is one who erects scaffolding.

# PROSE HOUSE

This poem is wildly excited and emotional. Unlike, "At the Kfar Saba Circle" where he writes about the thrill of being in Israel, Hillel is excited about the development of the land of Israel with its building and stone-by-stone emergence.

The poem begins with a chorus that will return several times. He calls to attention the average citizens urging them on to notice that the new land, their new country is being built. He is a little disappointed that the people do not grasp the significance of the building but that doesn't stop him from explaining the significance to the reader.

He finds music in the building. There are poetry and violins trapped in the walls. They are trapped because only he can hear them. Others merely see buildings. But he understands the poetry. He knows that the buildings represent the growth of his country. The construction means that so many people are coming to the new land that apartments are needed. This makes every apartment a testament to the permanence of Israel. Every apartment adds people to an area which means a bigger economy, growth of an Israeli culture and, of course, an increase in population. The land of Israel may be beautiful but without Jews to fill it, it can not fulfill its promise as a homeland for Jews. However, people's daily business doesn't allow them to dwell on such deeper meanings of a construction site. Hillel tells them that he will do the thinking for them and he gives them this poem.

To get his point across, Hillel uses a formal style of Hebrew. The opening stanzas are filled with the relatively formal  $\text{אני}$  to entreat people to pay attention to what is going on. He could have written in the more expected style,  $\text{בשליט}$   $\text{הניחו}$   $\text{לדגה}$  and  $\text{הבישו}$  but chose the formal "please" to add a gentle, almost

pleading, tone. In the fourth stanza he writes, *אנכי אשירה*, a highly stylized phrase that gives a Biblical quality to his song.

This Biblical style is not used for a song to magnificence but a quick lament for the workers in the great building enterprise. Hillel's life on a kibbutz must have made him aware the plight workers often suffered. Here, the salaries are a "disgrace" even as the workers do great things. This is a central argument against capitalism, that the owner exploits the workers, that their hearts are "profit-mongers" as he writes. This brief sadness is overcome, however, as he sings curses to unethical developers who exploit the land with sweet words. He cannot abide developers who speak well of the land but do not appreciate it for its deeper meanings. He hates their talk "like the forest's hatred for all the vacationers." Presumably, he refers to vacationers who leave a city to go look at some nature, eat a picnic, and then, declaring that they have appreciated nature's gifts, leave behind their trash. It is a sad commentary on how people superficially view the world.

So Hillel denounces the evils in the enterprise of building but then praises the workers and their work. He sees nobility, almost, in the worn conditions of the workers with each drop of sweat and each loss of a bit of shoe leather. He even praises the embarrassing details of the Ashkenazi contractors. Their behavior reminds him too much of the *galut* and the effect it had on the Jews there. "Humpbacked Yiddish" is a marvolous image. For Israelis, Yiddish was the language of a people living under the rule of others. From that rule they learned to cower. Hebrew was a language of pride through which the people stood tall.

Standing tall also means working hard. The next sequence points to the founding of a state. There is no greater glory to the poet than watching raw material turned into finished structures. There is no greater glory than watching



a Jew, once portrayed as hunchback in anti-semitic broadsides, bent over a cement mixer struggling to build a home for himself. The architecture of the time may not have been pretty. It was not done with the light, ornate style of Corinth, Greece, he writes. It did not illuminate the Divine presence in this world as Michaelangelo and Raphael tried to do. These are the arts of people with spare time, of societies that have created basic housing and now are interested in and have the luxury for aesthetics. Instead, Hillel is enthralled by coarse, raw materials. I presume that the symphony of curses are those of the workmen with their colorful invectives so often distasteful to men of culture, so beautiful to him. To the poet, the process of building the land is just as beautiful as seeing the land built.

Nearing the end of the poem, Hillel alludes to Biblical forms of praise. Instead of saying the expected *למנצח מזמור לדוד* he attributes the song to Kalman (a name, I presume) who is not David the king and exalted poet, but a worker, exalted for his ability to erect scaffolding. Perhaps he is someone who really "sinks his teeth" into a job. The familiar opening words to the psalms are repeated again praising a humble tailor.

There is an interesting word play with the word *שניידר*. It means tailor in Yiddish. In Hebrew it is *שנייד*. The reverse spelling of the Hebrew word *שנייד* is *פטיח* or plasterer. Is he telling us that the humble *שניידר* burdened with diaspora stereotypes of working inside, pale, hunched over a sewing machine has been turned around both in spelling and in outlook? Has the weak tailor turned into the hardworking plasterer, working at various job sites, growing strong as he carries bags of plaster on his shoulder? The old idea of working fine stitches is changed to working broad strokes of a pallet. The old Jew in one seat changes to the new Jew moving around a whole building. The old Jew with agile fingers turns to the the new Jew with strong forearms.

But why use this form at all? The Psalms are a collection of odes to G-d. The Psalmists recognized G-d as the source of all creation or the protector and savior of Israel. G-d is the object to which thanksgiving offerings are made. And in all cases G-d is the object to which all praise is directed. And now, in 1950, who is the protector and savior of Israel? To whom should thanks go? To the workers, to the anonymous plasterers and moulders who build Israel.

Hillel concludes the poem returning to his call to the citizenry to appreciate the significance of this house being built. He urges the people to remember the deeper meanings of the construction. Then he reminds us that the deeper feelings felt are not exclusively literary but reflections of real people who, through their work, are writers and poets.

I found this last part to be an unusual twist. Usually a poem is a medium through which the actions of ordinary people can be expressed in such a way that they attain a deeper significance and that is what I thought he had been doing here. But then, at the end, he reminds us not to become too engrossed in the poetry of work but to view the work of people as real activity. It seems that he has used poetry to explain the deeper meanings of house building but then uses the workers to explain the need for poetry.

על מכונית משא דודג' בכביש חיפה חל אביב  
ON A DODGE TRUCK ON THE HAIFA—TEL AVIV ROAD

על מכונית משא דודג' בכביש חיפה—תל אביב

אל תראוהו שהיא בת-משקל של מושבניק מאלישיב.  
היא זו בעולם!

שם פרנגלית נבהלת, נחפזת להצות את הדביש, קל-עור  
נקשה-קאן  
מה החפזון הזה, מלכת תרכילות!:

הנה אתם!  
היו גומעים קלוא חזותיכם את רוח העולם.  
היו משוחחמים בקול! גועים בנחשק רועם והתגלגלו!  
שהארץ הזאת הדוהרת בדביש היא לבי-העולם. —  
על שהיא כאן!

ושמתכם — לבי-הארץ! אשר היא בכם!  
לא דם וורם בעורשיכם, כי אשר ונדנות היד!

אהבו את הכתמים הקטנים והגדולים השטים באוקיינוס הארץ.  
ובאגמי הפרדסים (נגזות הירק)  
נזפטו שלום לכל הערמקסיקטים הלא-יזלזלים שבדרך:  
מכללות! מכללות!

הנה שוקר סגברי, וקידו פל, הוא חולץ בדרך. משפט:  
הוא יגיע! שבו סופך הוא על רגליך!  
הנה גם גזרת, ולראשה מספחת. היא רצינית מאד. ודאי מאתקנת  
שמו, שמיים

אהבו את מכוניות-המשא הנפרעיות בדבישים!  
אהבו את בלוריתכם השחורה, או העמבהבת, העומקת  
ברום!  
ואת חלצתכם מלכנה, השחוחת והתופחת ומבדחת  
את דעתה ברום!

ואת חזותיכם הנחשים המשמאים לרום!  
אהבו את ציניכם העומקות מפצפות העולם הגואה ובלע  
אתכם!

הנה הארץ נטה ורבה!  
נאנחנו קניה שתוחים ורחבים!  
נאנחנו צוחקים לדביש המסתער עלינו. וגם אל נכשו!

הנה צמודי-הטלגרף!  
והנה צמודי המשפיל, פסח עליו!  
בפה פיוס וכדירות-דעת בשורותם!  
והו לבלוב אילנות-הפרגל —

צחוק-דקה של טיפול-זית!

הדיסו!  
עו ללנה השורת לספנתה, לוחכת היא אפספת:

אם העולם הוא צרף — הלא היא פנינתו!  
אם העולם פנינת — הלא היא גיוצתה!

סיפת יונים שרקת, פרעשכם מחצפני גבהלה!  
פילא, אל תבקשו קליטה! זה הנה בתקנית:  
עקשו הן סטות בשמים — לראות ולמות!

חי העולם!

מנה הארץ:

היונא גבוקים פעצם הפראות, סלם האור!  
היו משלוקים סן הדודג' שלכם,  
ידוע ידוע: קניתם אותה מהצבא (בסעב טובו)  
אין דבר, תנו לו להריק! חדש הוא דבר לא יהיה!

חי חי!

הנה נצח-השעה אמת-שעה-עשרים-וחמש!  
חי הדביש, זה הפכל הממקד, העומס של דמיון הוריות  
את הדודג' שלכם, הפרא, הסורר!

פילא!

גם כיונים ופלימותים, וקניסלרים קמארים, מכריכי תפוקים  
עושים פלירטים עם הפכל הזה:  
הו, הו, פלירטים קסבנים של תשעים קילומטר לשעה!  
ותוא אינו ספקי,  
חלילה: הוא נשאר דביש — דשנה!

הו, דביש!

הו, בין העולם,

התוסס וחוסר:

ומה גם שעסור הוא ורדורים וקמורים,

וקרות הפסריות את התנועת,  
גדרות תיל, וצרמות אשפה, וקלב סת, ומשפחה ערבית סקנדית,  
ועמודי תמנוז, אנד' — —

הנה גם גלילת המיים: שמכם הפנין את לכם

נושא את בדוריותיו — סקרוסקופיות ואסקופיות

אכל דם אחר איו!

על-כן אהבו את הקטנות-הגדולות,

את המסע הנפלא בדבישים, ואת כיניותכם הפריעית,

ותהי בלוריתכם צוחקת ברות!

ומלצתכם הלכנה פחוקה וסתבדרת, נחומיםכם יחסים ומשפחות

ועיניכם צוחקות, כי ישה הארץ!

ואתם, בנית, פחוקים ורחבים!

על מכונית משא דורג בכביש חיפה תל אביב

ON A DODGE TRUCK ON THE HAIFA—TEL AVIV ROAD

Love the noisy pick-up trucks on the roads!  
Love your shock of black or blond hair laughing in the wind!  
And your white shirt, open and billowing wildly in the wind.

And your bared chests agape at the wind!  
Love your laughing eyes because of the greatness of the world which swells up  
and swallows you!

Look how the earth is beautiful and vast!  
And we her children are open and wide!  
And we laugh at the road that charges us and runs away!

Look at the telegraph poles!  
And here, electricity poles, high tension!  
There is so much poetry and hilarity in their rows!  
This is the springtime of iron trees—  
The blood-laughter of civilization!

Look!  
A white goat tied to a sprinkler, she's devouring alfalfa  
Don't look down<sup>10</sup> at her for merely belonging to some moshavnik from  
Eliyashev.

She's a goat of the world!

Over there is a terrified rooster, rushing across the road, as if her life depended  
upon it!  
What's the rush, queen of gossip?

Here you are!  
Drink down a chestful of the world's spirit.  
Chatter loudly! Road with a thunderous, rolling laugh!  
For this land galloping by along the road is the heart of the world — because it's  
here!  
And your happiness is the heart of the land! Because it is in you!

<sup>10</sup>Reference to Song of Songs 1:6. "Don't stare at me because I am swarthy/because the sun has  
gazed upon me.

Blood does not flow in your arteries but rather happiness and the joy of cheering!

Love the houses small and large that sail by on the ocean of land  
and on the lakes of orchards and vegetable gardens!

Wave hello to all the unlucky hitchhikers.

Patience! patience!

Here's a Sephardi police officer, basket in his hand, walking down the road.  
Implying:

He'll make it. Because he relies on his legs!

Look, a young girl, too, with a scarf on her head. She is very serious. I bet she's  
in love! What a catastrophe!

If the world is an oyster shell, is she not its pearl?

If the world is a pearl, is she not its sparkle?

A group of doves scattered. By your brash noise, they were scared away.  
So be it, don't say you're sorry! It was all part of the plan.

Now they are flying to the sky — to see and to die!

The world is alive

The land is alive;

Indeed, be dazzled at the power of the sights, at the strength of the light.

Be infatuated with your Dodge,

We know, we know: you bought it from the army (in good condition!)

No matter, let it squeak. It won't need to be new again.

Alive! Alive!

Behold, the eternal hour: 11:25!

The road is alive, this rakish porter which bears your wild, rebellious Dodge upon  
its agile shoulders!

So be it!

Luxurious Buicks and Plymouths and Chryslers with glistening curves also flirt  
with this porter:

Oh, ho dangerous flirting at 90 kilometers an hour.

And it doesn't blush,

God forbid; it remains a road, as it always was!

Oh road!

Oh wine of the world,

Bubbly and effervescent;

Although it's adorned with thistles and donkeys, and cows that disrupt the traffic,  
Barbed wire fences, and piles of garbage, and a dead dog, and an Arab family  
from Faradis, and signposts for the Eged stations.

Here is the miracle of life's greatness: that the blood which feeds its heart, carries  
its own corpuscles - microscopic and miniscule!

Yet there is no other blood!

Therefore, love the great little things,  
the marvelous journey along the roads, and your noisy car.  
and let your shock of hair laugh in the wind!  
And let your white shirt be open, billowing wildly in the wind.  
And let your eyes laugh, because the land is so beautiful!  
And you, its children be open and expansive.

# ON A DODGE TRUCK ON THE HAIFA—TEL AVIV ROAD

It is clear that O. Hillel enjoys getting out in a car and driving hard down an open road. Given a clear day, I can just imagine how happy he is to run an extended errand for his kibbutz. His poem "In a Dodge truck on the Haifa -Tel Aviv road" races by the scenery and he watches all of it enjoying the speed at which it passes by.

I have a question about his title. Are the prepositions correct? In English, we are *in* a car and *on* a road. Here, if we take a literal translation, he is driving *on* a Dodge truck and *in* a road. This may be on purpose. Our expression in English implies that our immediate surroundings are our environment of concern. The interior of a vehicle has always been important to a driver as it defines the environment one must experience along a journey. The road becomes the carrier of transportation, the utilitarian concrete that allows for quick driving. But here, when he says he is on the Dodge and in the road, could he be implying his view of travelling in Israel? Perhaps he is on a truck, on a carrier, a device for easy travel but he is in the road which defines his environment. It is the road and all along it that is important to him. He does not see himself trapped in a car but freely moving in the external world. He is *in* the world and travelling along *on* a car.

The poem begins with an imperative form of the verb love. This poem is not a polite request but a demand to the reader to appreciate all that is about to be explained. He is so overwhelmed with his love for the land that he writes in a tone that is in part trying to convince those who do not share his love and in part demanding the reader to accept his premise as the reader's own.

He tells us we must love the noisy trucks along the road. This is quite a strange thing to love since we would imagine that the quiet gentleness found in



the field is the more expected and traditional object of our attention. But he does not illustrate the road with trite scenes.

Hillel brings a rawness and a certain sensuality as he creates a picture of a shirt open, "billowing" in the wind. The driver's chest is bare, taking in all the wind, letting the wind surround the body. There is a love, a physical love happening as the driver's body and the environment rub against each other. In the end, it is the world that overwhelms the driver in way that implies that the driver never really had a chance to resist—that is how beautiful the world is.

After he establishes our position on the road and the fact that we will be overcome by it, Hillel begins to describe the route he is on, where looking forward the road attacks but then looking behind it seems to retreat from the driver. As we take this drive, we are not looking at the usual list of beautiful scenery. Instead our attention is brought to bear on all sorts of mundane things. More to the point, we look at all sorts of man-made devices or different individuals going through their normal courses of activity. There is no gazing at soaring mountains in the distance or driving to a seaside. The things that are of natural beauty are left alone. Hillel seems more interested in pointing out the beauty of the world that a society creates.

"Look at the telegraph poles," he cries out. Today, of course, we much prefer the more expensive burying of cables and wires in order to leave a cleaner aestheticism to our airspace. But, in the early days of the Israel, the less expensive option of suspending cables is seen not as an aesthetic failure but a life-giving triumph. They stand in a repetitive order, the wires suspended in lazy, shallow arcs. I remember, as a child, I would stare out of our fast moving family car and fix my eyes on the wires as we sped past. At even a slow speed, the wires take on their own life racing down to the ground only to be urged up and up till it looked like they would fly off the pole. Then they would be thrown back down the arc

by the top of the pole for another run. There was a rhythm to this and though I still am unsure of the meaning of "hilarity, בְּדִיחוּת דַּעַת" I understand the poetry.

For the "springtime of the trees" I can imagine he may be making a two part illusion. The first may be that the tops of electrical poles often have various resistors or other metal parts that secure the lines and ensure the passage of electricity. Surely if an electrical pole can be rethought as a tree then these are its buds in springtime. Secondly, springtime carries a notion of birth, of new life, from the newly green grass to the birthing of livestock. Here, the budding "trees" are bringing life in the form of electricity. Gone are the days when food, clothes, and shelter were sufficient for life to continue. Now, an ample power supply for industry and family homes is a requirement.

Hillel muses at the poles and then shifts his gaze quite literally and abruptly from the sky to the ground. He spots a goat head down, eating. I think Hillel has very cleverly moved our mind's eye from gazing up to looking down. We have our attention skyward at the poles when the command הִשָּׁבִיט startles us. Our attention is unfocused for a moment. Then he brings our attention progressively downward by placing the picture of the goat slowly in our imaginations. First we imagine the goat, then we see her tied to a sprinkler which places us firmly on the ground, and then we learn the goat is eating which conjures the slope from the shoulder down the goat's head to the earth. It is a smooth transition from the neck craning view of the poles to the feel of the earth underneath a goat.

This transition allows us to focus on close views of things the truck passes no longer staring at the sky. The sky and the wind are giant things that make us appreciative of the world because they humble us. Here, we look at the ground, at the things around us. If they don't humble us, they certainly envelop us with a

sense of belonging to the land and the people who live there. Knowing that one is where one belongs is satisfying.

The rooster is mocked and teased but not with contempt. It seems more good natured. The rooster may act pathetically but it acts exactly as it should to fit in with the world. Hillel is thrilled to be where he is because he seems to feel that wherever he is, that is the best place to be. Any particular piece of road "is the heart of the world — because it's here!" There is no longing for a mythic place, no dreaming of hopes unfulfilled. Hillel loves being where he is and is desperately trying to appreciate every moment. Being happy is the *לב הארץ* meaning heart of the world (for a literal and romantic trope to the idiom) or center of the world. He wants Jews in Israel to realize and appreciate that there is no more longing for some other place. This is it! Wherever one walks, that is the center of Israel, *הארץ*. The dream of a Jewish state has been realized and still he wants people to remember that the center of that new state is where the people are. It is not a particular place of historical note or religious import. It is wherever the mundane happens. Using the *לב* metaphor Hillel brings us back to the heart saying that we are not filled with blood but happiness. The center of the land is each person who has happiness flowing in the body.

Hillel then describes some things that he sees: big houses, small houses, big orchards, and smaller gardens. A police officer makes the rounds determinedly, master of his beat. A young girl is swept up in her love for a boy. To her this is a completely serious matter that requires much attention. But to us, to the reader, her emotions remind us of our emotions when we were her age. There is something comforting about watching younger people get in a tumult over love. It is reassuring that the cycles of the world continue, a good omen for the continuation of a people. Just as the spring brings promise of re-birth, young love tells us that there is a new generation learning life's lessons and struggling

to grow. That is why the narrator sympathizes with a chuckle but does not dismiss the girl as immature. In fact, she is very important. She is the very thing that brings some joy in the world. Where everything else is mundane, a girl in love seems to refresh and delight those who watch her. She is the sparkle of a pearl.

Hillel is trying to urge us to recognize what is in the world, to accept the situation as what is intended and to be happy with it. There are so many people who are always looking for something different, always looking around the next corner to see what may lie ahead. There is a tendency to believe that the grass is greener somewhere else. Hillel is telling us that the grass is green below our feet. There is no need to feel that better is somewhere else. As he drives along the road, his truck startles a flock of doves. There may be an automatic urge to feel badly, to feel guilty about disturbing the doves. After all, he writes about doves specifically, not generic birds. How awful to upset the symbol of peace. Yet he does not fret over it and asks us not to ask forgiveness. The Dodge is not an intrusion upon the landscape but an equal part of it. The reason he is so in love with his landscape is because he sees himself as a very equal part of the environment, not as an intruder. Dodge trucks rumbling are as much of his sense of order as doves cooing. The Dodge is on the road and all is right with the world. There is a sense of mortality thrown in. I confess I don't think I understand his reason for this. Perhaps he is trying to say that stirring a flock of doves is not going to upset the entire natural order of things. In fact, doves live, fly in the air seeing things about which people can only dream and then die like all other living things. Perhaps he is trying to remind us that surprising some birds does not mean the end of nature's ways. Doves will continue to fly and die whether or not Dodge trucks rumble by.

Indeed, the Dodge is as much a part of the driver's world as are the birds. The poem gives voice to friends of the driver who tease him about his purchase but also remind him not to get over excited about keeping the truck in perfect condition. It, too, is part of the order of the world and while once new is no longer. That is not a depressing thought. It is a recognition of how joyful all these can be, even objects, as they pass through their lifespans. Here, the voice changes back to the narrator who anthropomorphises cars and the open road truly giving them as much life as the earlier doves.

The road becomes a porter not passively being trampled by trucks but carrying traffic on shoulders; fancier cars with their chrome "flirt" with the porter, impishly gliding about (we presume his truck is a more serious vehicle above silly flirtation). Still, his metaphor snaps back to reality and the road is a road once again. His attention turns to the side of the road filled with animals, thistles, detritus from villages and ever present road signs. These are references, perhaps, to the state of the country. There is the ever present security problem with barbed wire (Arab? Jewish? British leftovers?), garbage (The Arabs or the Jews? And does that matter?) the Arabs who now are Israelis, and the signs representing the building of the Israeli infrastructure.

Why focus on little things? Why does Hillel look up at electric poles, down at goats and around to see people behaving in their ordinary ways? He answers by returning to our *לב* metaphor. "The blood which feeds its heart, carries its own corpuscles." I think he is trying to show a relationship between the heart and blood. Blood is an organ that can only function properly if the heart pumps it around. The heart depends on healthy blood to survive. Each needs the other. Within the blood are the microscopic corpuscles upon which the entire process depends because they are the true bearers of oxygen. This system which supports the entire body depends on microscopic cells. Hillel uses an obvious apposition to

show how the great miracle of life נס גדלם החיים depends on things so small. Similarly, the greatness of his land is not in grand buildings or major philosophical arguments but in the little details of everyday normalcy. He rejoices in the mundane because he knows that the sum of all the mundane gives life to his land and makes it great. He knows that this is the only normalcy there can be and he thinks that is great. He should not wish, and indeed does not wish, for a different reality. He celebrates what he has because he appreciates the significance of it all.

He finishes the poem with a modified refrain of of the opening stanza. If we did not understand his imperative voice in the beginning of the poem, perhaps now, after all his descriptions, we will understand why we should love the land and why we should laugh with our hair in the wind. After his description how is it that we cannot but accept his orders to love the surroundings. He ends with a happy exasperation and the reader hopefully understands his exhortations.



## קול מים רבים

## VOICE OF THE GREAT SEA

קול מים רבים

ים-האֵלִילִים:

מֵאֶפֶס צָרִי אֶפֶס יָם אֶחָד בְּאֶשֶׁר אֶנֶכִּי אֶחָד.  
אֶבֶל מֵאֶפֶס צָרִי אֶפֶס — לוֹ אֶלֶף הַסִּנִּים!  
וְהוּא דִמְקַהֵל־עוֹלָם עֲזוֹת מְבַנְּתִיהָ!  
שְׁנוֹנָה יְחִיד־הַקּוֹל דָּמוֹ שִׁיר־הָאֶבֶן  
וְכִשִּׁיר תַּפִּי־שִׁבְטֵי־קַמְאִי.

הוּ, דִּיסוֹנָגָס בְּחַל־עָכוּר, מְלוֹחַ לְפָרָאָה, דָּמוֹ חֲרוֹג  
מִתּוֹךְ סוֹאִימַת הַחֲלָחֵל  
וְהוּא נִמְסָף־נִשְׁפָּף בְּאֻנְיָהֶם הַחֲרָשׁוֹת שֶׁל הַחוֹסִים  
וְכָל צוֹקֵר־מְגוּר שֶׁלִּיכָה  
וְהוּא מִכָּה בָהֶם בְּשִׁיר אִירוֹנִית־עַד  
דִּמְחָנָה לְבִיא שׁוֹחֵר־שֶׁלֶל  
כִּי כֹזֵר אֻנְיָהֶם הַחֲרָשׁוֹת שֶׁל הַחוֹסִים  
יַעֲרִירוּ לְקִרְאָתוֹ מִתְרַחֵם  
בְּסִנְתָּרִים וְכַוָּרוֹת הַנְּעוּרִים לְקוֹל שִׁירָה

הוּ יִסְתַּחֲזָוִים:

עוֹמֵד אֲנִי וּמִתְפַּעֵל מִהִכָּחוֹת הָאֲצִירִים בְּשִׁלְחוֹ.  
וּמַעֲזוֹ שִׁלְחוֹת־הַנְּעוּרִים  
הַרוֹחֶשֶׁת עָלָיו בְּסִעְרוֹ — דָּמוֹ בִּסְחָף עָלָיו שְׂחָסִים וְקֶזֶף מִשְׁפָּחָה  
וְכִנְיֵי־יִסְעָה

עַד־אֲנִי מַגִּיעִים קוֹלוֹת הַיָּם: —

אֶבֶל עֲמָצִי יִסְיוֹ עֲמָקוֹ מִתְפַּחֵחַ!  
עַד־אֲנִי מַגִּיעִים קוֹלוֹת הַיָּם: —  
אֶבֶל קוֹלוֹת נִשְׁשׁוֹ הוֹלְכִים טְרַסָּה מִתְפַּחֵחַ!  
הִכִּי מִצּוֹי עָמַס מִפְּעֻמֵּי־יָם הַחִיצוֹנִי שֶׁל יָצִיר־הַנְּצַח:!

כִּי אֵין דָּמוֹ הַיָּם.

וְכִמוֹ הַבּוֹכִים.

וְכִמוֹ הָאֵשׁ.

וְכִמוֹ הַחֲמִידָה בְּלִב־אֲדָם!

עוֹמֵד אֲנִי וּמִתְפַּחֵחַ לִיָּם.  
וּמִתְפַּעֵם בְּמוֹנָטִי מְרַבּוֹת הַמַּיִם.  
הַיָּם, הַיָּם הָאֵלִילִי!

עָצוֹם דִּמְרָדוֹ דָּמוֹ הַמּוֹן אֲדָם הַשֵּׁשׁ לְלֶחֶם וּלְמִלְחָמָה,  
מְרַעֵם גְּבוּרַת־שׁוֹאֵם־מִשְׁכָּרָיו דָּמוֹ הָיוּ סִינִים וְרָגְזִים!  
וְרַעְשׁוֹ בְּחַל וְחֵם. וְנִצְנִי וּמִתְפַּעֵר, דָּסִי שֶׁמִּתְפַּעֵר חֲלוֹם־הַבְּלָחוֹת!  
יָם־אֲדִירִים עֲתִיר־עֲצָקָה!

מַבִּים אֲנִי וּמִתְפַּחֵחַ לִיָּם. זֶה כִּסְיֵי־יִלְדוֹ מִמִּית בִּי  
כָּל הַרְהוּר וּמִתְפַּחֵחַ וְכָה  
עַד הַיּוֹתָה לְאֶשֶׁר־אֶפֶר מִשְׁתַּלֵּחַ, דָּמוֹ הָאֵשׁ הַמִּשְׁתַּלֵּחַת בְּקוֹצִים  
לְכָלִי חֲדַע בְּסוֹ.  
הוּ, זֶה הַיָּם בְּסִעְרוֹ, דָּמוֹ מִתְפַּחֵחַ אִישׁ בְּסִעְרָה; הִנֵּה שְׂנִיָּהֶם  
יָסִים בָּאֵשׁ.  
וְאִי־מִי־פֶאֶר כְּמוֹתָה.

אֵין דָּמוֹ הָאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְקָה לִיָּם הַמַּיִם.  
וְאֵין דָּמוֹ הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר יִדְקָה לְאֵשׁ.  
וּלֵיל לִב־בְּרָאֲדָם שֶׁהוּא הַיָּם וְהוּא הָאֵשׁ.

הוּ, קוֹל הַיָּם:

קוֹל יָם הַמַּיִם הַרְבִּים:

קול מים רבים

## VOICE OF THE GREAT SEA

Standing am I, amazed at the sea.  
And my very body throbs from the mass of the water,  
the sea, the pagan sea!  
As powerful as a rebellion! Like a multitude of men, eager for bread and war,  
thundering its cresting waves of power as if they were conjured Titans!  
And its noise, blue and hot, gigantic and tempestuous, like a tempestuous  
nightmare!  
An ocean of majestic forces abounding in strength!

Staring am I, amazed at the sea. This primal power kills in me  
all musing and lucid thinking  
until it becomes a cascade of ashes like a fire spreading among thorns  
without knowing any restraint.  
O, this sea in its storming, like the thinking of a man in its frenzy; behold the  
two of them are beautiful as fire,  
and as awesomely majestic as it.

There is nothing like fire to resemble a sea of water.  
And there is nothing like the sea to resemble a fire.  
Except for the heart of man which is both water and fire.

O, sound of the sea!  
Sound of the great waters of the sea!  
Sea of gods!  
From horizon to horizon, the sea is one like I am one.  
But from horizon to horizon it has a thousand faces!  
And like a chorus in the world it is stronger than its conductors!  
Whose single voiced melody is like the song of the stone and like the song of  
drums of ancient tribes.

O, muddy-blue dissonance, salty looking, like a deviation  
from out of the suite of dreams.  
And it's poured into the deaf ears of the seashores  
and into every fearsome cliff that is above them.  
And it beats against them with the song of erosion eternal  
like a pride of lions seeking out its prey!  
For indeed only the shore's deaf ears



awaken to greet its music  
like pianos and violins which waken to the sound of song.

Ho, Sea of Heroes

Standing am I, overwhelmed by the power latent in its calm,

and by the strength of titanic composure  
which hovers over it in its storming — like the hovering over it of seagulls, surf's  
foam and albatrosses.

How far do the sounds of the sea reach?

But the depths of its beauty are deeper than they!

How far do the sounds of the sea reach?

But the sounds of its soul go farther than them!

Is there to be found a depth greater than the profundity of the external beauty of  
eternal creations?

For there is nothing like the sea.

And like the stars.

And like the fire.

And like the love in a man's heart.

## VOICE OF THE GREAT SEA

The next time I go to the seashore, I should bring this poem. O. Hillel has brought his feelings for the sea to an enthusiastic poem where he tries to animate the sea's power, its impact on him, and its beauty.

To begin the poem we must look at the title first. The phrase, מים רבים, is found 28 times in the Bible. The phrase can have the simple meaning of an abundance of water like that which springs forth from the rock Moses struck in Numbers 20:11. It could also be a simile to describe a rushing movement as in Isaiah 17:13.<sup>11</sup> It can also have a connotation of a living entity which is his intention here. מים רבים has connotations of living entity, a god.

Psalm 29, known as an ode to Baal, a storm god in the Canaanite pantheon, is a good example to show how מים רבים can be construed as a god. Though it is now an hymn to G-d<sup>12</sup> this psalm has been shown to be an evolution from an earlier Canaanite hymn dedicated to the storm-god, Baal.<sup>13</sup> Changing the word Adonai to Baal in every occurrence finds the psalm to have the lesser gods of the pantheon paying tribute to Baal as he storms his way across the levant and onto the Mediterranean. The descriptions of Baal's power become far reaching as the hymn progresses. The beginning of verse 3 describes Baal as ruling over the ordinary waters. By the end of the verse Baal rules over the מים רבים.

מים רבים has the characteristic of being an entity in unto itself. Often, waters are a force that competing gods must subdue in order to show their superiority. Psalm 93 has the מים רבים rising up in a roar as if to challenge the true Divine being but G-d/Baal proves stronger. Similarly, G-d/Baal in Psalm 29

<sup>11</sup>Nations raging like massive waters!

<sup>12</sup>That is the Israelite/Jewish god Y--.

<sup>13</sup>Various but see Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) p. 175-180.

is the ultimate victor over the מים רבים. The theme of G-d defeating the waters can be found in Isaiah 51: 9-10. Here, the defeat of the sea for the Israelites escaping Egypt is compared to G-d's defeat of Rahab the sea monster and competing entity of lore.

Ultimately, this discussion gives us a new meaning of the psalm and a new connotation of מים רבים for Hillel. When he writes of being awed by "the sea, the pagan sea" he gives voice to a pre-Israelite notion that is more endemic to the shoreline itself than it is to the Jewish people who now control that shore. By reaching back he has managed to argue an exceptionally strong connection to the land of Israel and overlook any current political and socio-religious realities.

Now we can read the poem as more than mere anthropomorphism of the sea: it is giving anthropomorphic characterizations to a god! The sea that is "powerful as a rebellion" now hints of the memories of a god challenging Adonai (or Baal). "Abounding in strength" hints of more than large waves. Much of the rest of the poem must be read with this dual understanding. For example, the second stanza is powerful in its awareness of the latent power of a placid sea. The sea can drown, the sea can cause mocking dehydration and the sea can, unexpectedly, raise a storm of tremendous destruction. But if we keep in mind the pagan echo of the sea as an animate power the force of the stanza grows. I can not suggest the whole poem be read as a pagan psalm but bringing this subtle understanding as one reads can increase the poem's strength.

Besides this pagan wondering, there is a persistent drumming of descriptions of the sea. Each stanza adds more descriptions of the same thing, overwhelming the reader with a barrage of information perhaps similar to the barrage of things one sees or feels at the shore. To me this only shows how difficult it is for the poet to capture the essence of the sea that he feels. Hillel tries over and over giving new ideas. By the end he has painted a complete portrait

but only after driving the point again and again. One of my favorites is, "There is nothing like fire to resemble a sea of water./ And there is nothing like the sea to resemble a fire./ Except for the heart of man which is both water and fire." Unable to find the direct words, he makes a series of comparisons hoping the reader will be able to bring a sense of understanding. For me, he has given a sense of something absolutely fluid and uncontrollable. He has made a picture of movement completely unpredictable. His final comparison to "the heart of man" only confirms this. Do we not all understand how our heart leaps about making changes drastically on its way to a decision?

The theme of the sea as an entity and as an ever changing powerful mass continues in the fourth stanza. The "sea is one like I am one" uses the word *אני* for "I." This seems to refer to the first of the Ten Commandments. The line itself may refer to the Shema which demands allegiance to the idea of a single and unique G-d. The sea, as a mass, is one unified body. After all, every seaport can be reached from every other seaport. But each stretch of beach, every different region has a unique appearance to it also. There is a contrast between knowing that the ocean is basically the same everywhere and knowing that the ocean presents itself in various guises. Those guises add power to the sea. Every vantage point of the sea instills new, fresh awe. The poet will never tire of it and never bore with it. Though it is all one contiguous body, the sea will always captivate him. The sum of the ocean's parts are greater than the whole.

Before Hillel concludes his poem, he indulges us with another description of the sea. This time he tries to portray the sounds of the sea pouring on to the shore or beating against cliffs ("the song of erosion" continues the music). I am not sure why the shore has to be deaf unless the phrase is understood as having a shore that also cannot speak. It is true that the beach or cliffs do not speak. They make no noise on the own initiative: only when the water runs against them

does the shore make its well known soothing sound or the cliffs their famous crashes.

Hillel then begins to end the poem returning to the opening style of writing and the original sense of awe and wonder. He tries to measure the sea ("How far do the sounds of the sea reach?") but that effort is eclipsed by his own imagination and wonder. In the end, he can only ponder an unanswerable question: "Is there to be found a depth greater than the profundity of the external beauty of eternal creations?" As the reader lets his mind struggle with the inability to answer that question, the reader receives the answer in an impression if not exactly in words. All the reader can do is be amazed at "eternal creations" like the sea, stars, fire and love. None of these can be truly understood. This failure to comprehend reminds us of our place in the cosmos and how our conscious intellects are ineffective when we try to understand things massive in power.

הללו שמי כוכב  
PRAISE, HEAVENS OF STARS

אָל אַני עומד מולם תקים וקטות־נפש.

הו, שמי-העובדים !

קָדָר הַנֶּצַח מִהָיָו בָּכֶם אֶת הָעֵינַיִם הָרַעְבּוֹת,

הוּ לֵב הַמִּשְׁכָּן

וְלֹא בְעֵצָם הִשְׁעָה הַזֹּאת נִדְמָה בִּי נִשְׁבָּרִים כָּל הַסִּיגִים אֲשֶׁר  
גִּזְרִים לְעַמִּי

והפסח גהיים להויה

וְכָל אֲדָרִי אָנֹכִי רְעוּת־הַרוּם הַזֶּה.

וְיָקָה אֶכְפֹּת אִם אֲנֹכִי בֶן־דָּסָר מִמֶּרְגְּלוֹת אִסְרִים.

או גער-סטנים במסרציי-נורויג.

הו, מול קרית-העליונים, קרית-הלשם שלזאת אני חורג  
מכל

וְלֹא נִתְּרָא אֱלֹא אֲנִי - אֲנִי - אֲנִי.

אֶחָד צָרָר בְּהוֹנָה.

הללו, שמי-בוקב

הו, שמי הפוקדים !

הפוכים הללו שבלילה.

שנהגרים מקצולות הגבה, מקצולות החשך הצלול.

הבוקרים הללו שסנצ'ה מלקלס מרסליהם בחיובי-חגף.

וְאִין יָדוּ מַנְעַת עֲדִיקָם !

אשר להם עבדו הקדמונים באבותי, יסירי-הפרא.

הַנִּרְגָּעִים תִּשְׁכַּרוּנָם,

חו, עזיזי-הגרם, הו, עבתי-שרירי-עשות!

עדרי האנשים סביבי-המחלפות,

וְחָסָה עַבְדּוֹם, אֶת שְׁמֵי הַכּוֹכָבִים !

עַם דְּכָרוֹ-הָרָעוֹ אָבוֹתֵי בְּנֵה־קוֹל לֹא-קוֹל, בְּנֵי-עֵת-שָׁנִים  
וְחִיתוֹ-יִצְרוּ!

הנה הנם, אותם הפוכים עצמם!

אותם הפוכבים אשר סרפו את צעתם של פיקני דור-דור!

ולבכם של נערי כל הקסרים (נערוסיהם) האביבות!

הגת-הגם זרזים בשמי הליל:

הו, נשאים טרסק, אלסי-שנות-אור מעל-מעל אפר-אנו קליצוסי.

שֶׁאֵינֶיךָ לִקְבוּרָם מִתּוֹךְ כָּרְכִי הַמְּלוֹנִים שְׁלִי, אֲבִי-הַכָּרֶם!

הללו שמי כוכב

PRAISE, HEAVENS OF STARS

Ho, Heavens of stars.

These stars out at night,  
that shine from the depths of the heights, from the pure, dark abyss.  
These stars at whose ankles Eternity fawns with smiles of a false flatterer  
but its hand does not quite reach them.

Whom the ancient ones of my forefathers worshipped, the beautiful primitives,  
who were calmed in their drunkenness,

Ho, strong boned ones, Ho, men forged of mighty muscle.

Flocks of people of tangled braids,<sup>14</sup>

and they worshipped them, the starry heavens!

To them, my ancestors spoke — thundered, with the roar of a voice, no not a  
voice, but a lowing of oxen and beasts of the forest.

Here they are, the very stars!

Those very stars which crazed the minds of every generation's bards!  
and the hearts of all the young men and their blossoming young girlfriends of  
villages.

Here they are, scattered in the night's skies!

Carried off so far, thousands of light years beyond beyond the billowing cloud of  
my poetics  
which I scream<sup>15</sup> to their honor from out of the volumes of my thick dictionaries.

But I stand opposite them, pure, with an open soul.

And I bow down and fall face to the ground before their poetical power.

Ho, heavens of stars!

Eternity is too short to satisfy its hungry eyes gazing at you,  
they are the heart of the soul.

And thus at this very hour, it appears that all the boundaries which define  
essences are broken  
and they become one continuum of existence

<sup>14</sup>A full head of hair.

<sup>15</sup>The triumphant scream of an eagle.

And all human boundaries are foolishness,<sup>16</sup>  
and what does it matter whether I am a villager from Marg'lot Ephraim  
or a young seaman in the fjords of Norway.

Ho, facing the city of the heavenly bodies, this opal city, I transcend all my  
boundaries  
and nothing remains except for me — me — me. —  
One cricket in the chain of existence.

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<sup>16</sup>Like pursuit of the wind. Kohelet 1:14.



## PRAISE, HEAVENS OF STARS

O. Hillel was not a religious man as defined by Orthodox Jews but it is clear that he understood the role a divine being has for a culture and, based on this poem, probably understood the need for a spiritual connection to a power great enough to create the universe. A Creator, one who orders the universe, is a powerful concept that inspires awe in those who contemplate it. Accepting a Creator also gives comfort as the individual can see himself or herself as part of the Divine plan and not as an accident on Earth.

In this poem, Hillel stares up at the sky and begins to appreciate their grandeur. As one strains one's neck to stare, they appear to be at the very top of an abyss that goes on forever. This image, "depths of the heights" is a clever way of expressing the notion of infinite space. As Hillel looks he comes to understand that his ancestors looked up at the very same stars with a similar awe. What is important to realize is that by "forefathers" here he is not referring to his Jewish family of Europe or any other diaspora or even Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. In the spirit of Tchernikovsky and the perhaps of the so-called "Canaanite" literary movement, he is hearkening back to the period of the Hebrew conquerors of the land of Canaan. He is making a connection between himself as one born in the land with the earliest of Hebrew inhabitants of the land.

He recalls their worshipping the heavens. Their rough and strong bodies speak to their connection to the land through their difficult labor. He can see them standing where he is standing worshipping the very stars he sees from the very same vantage point. He also knows that these stars must have inspired more than religious worship. He finds solidarity with all the native inhabitants of his land who must also have been moved to write poetry about them. He also knows that the cycles of love and romance must have begun well before him as every generation saw its young people woo each other under the stars.

Hillel knows that he is unable to capture the majesty of the stars even as he attempts to do so. His fuzzy "cloud of . . . poetics" cannot really capture the sharpness of the stars but he has to try. He is too moved not to try. In the end, he is overcome by the mass of stars yet feels that connection which can only come when one sees one's own existence as having an equal value to the existence of larger things. His purpose is no less important than anything else in the universe. And though he is small he is still part of the "chain of existence". That chain is made even stronger as he looks back upon it and sees it unbroken back to the early Hebrews.

שקיעת צהרי הנגב  
SUNSET ON A NEGEV AFTERNOON

שקיעת צהרי הנגב

זאת אשר שרקים תרועות אל לב העולם —  
אל הארץ הזאת שרקם!  
אשר כל העולם הוא לבו של עצמו,  
רק את דקקם תנו לו ונהלם;  
שירי-תרועות אל ארץ הנגב.  
די רתקה היא, ים-לכב!  
שירו לישימוי-הקחולים, הקניעו דקתו קשירקם!  
הקניעו שאגות לביאת-הקחולים. די ציוקה היא — אין בועלים.  
קשל כחשבת עם ברבר לא נורקה מדע.

אלהים!  
הנה, רתקה רחב אדמות!  
ארץ שלם השאם, רבבות השאם!  
לא מעברוקה בגלי, די תשלו בשרקם.  
ללא-קרב תשלו קנצחיר-תש.  
את הניקא קמיני תפנות תמותו!  
הלא הוא אברו זמקם בשרקבים.  
חירי-קעתה מדיטו קנבלות תנמלים נחמורים.  
הלא אות הוא לקם;

— בשקקים יחגו אדירי-הנשר! —

... ארץ טנגב, ארץ שלם השאם,  
חיל-תנות השירות הטוסעות אל קצו, צחוק השלוח הארץ  
גמילי-אבק! מסעי הדיונות! נדיות-הספרא!  
— צאלי-איראפק —

לא מעברוקה בגלי.

הו, הגדלה!  
הגדלה אשר לא יכילנה מם אנוש נמי!  
רק לקבות יארעו לה שער,  
לפשו בוא דקם בסוד העולם ובסוד האלקות.  
ואל סוד האלקות יצפתו.

הו, הגדלה! לבי-העולם.  
השפקה טנקבית, האלהית, אפלת-הנקרים!  
הנה השקש לבדה תסב לחלות שניק  
וקני השקש בוכות-דם ובוכות-בושת.

גורי לך, ארד-לביאה;  
די יפל כך זרע-אנוש לטללך תרבות,  
הוא לא ידע רשם;  
די גדלסך תרשתו, די התגרות קינת סדעיי,  
די ידעך עצקסך ולא תורף כך!

הו, הלא-נצחה, גורי מאור-השמים!  
הוא לא יצברך בגלי, די ברנל יפל.

הוא יעברך בברך! בסד ובלוקב!  
הוא יעזר בשרך בפגלבי דבישיו, בקסלות ברזלו.

בשויי הפים, בקרית הילק, בהמוניו!

השקרי לך, הפקרה!

אשר מרגד - חשך, ונקמתו - אור!

ולא ינקה חשך מן האור!

אשר גדולת רוחו מתפריד;

כי חשך גבולותיו בו, והרוח - אין לה גבולות.

ורוח אדם נחושת.

שירו תרועות לארץ-הנגב, תרועות אכל-ליל!

שירו בקיות ללם השחם; ולכל הנשרים טורפי-הגבה.

הו, הנשרים, חוגגי-האבל,

הגואים בפסע השחור העליון אל צבאות-השקיעה הנסוגים.

אל שקיעת צהרי הניסיון.

גורי לך, ארץ-הנגב.

כי בא לילך.

העטסי ביצתיו הטבדים.

העטסי במסרשי באקביו הצואקים.

העטסי במסרשי-הלילת השחורים וצאקי -

כי לבקר יבקעך אור.

## שקיעת צהרי הנגב

## SUNSET ON A NEGEV AFTERNOON

The fanfare which you sang, to the heart of the world—  
     you sang to this land!  
 Since the whole world is its own heart,  
     only give your blood to it and it will beat;  
 Sing a fanfare to the land of the Negev,  
     for it is so wide, a heart as wide as the sea  
 Sing to the virgin wilderness, subjugate its silence with your song!  
 Subjugate the roars of the virgin lioness, for she is mighty — there are none able  
 to mate with her.  
 It is like the thought of a barbarian people not cultivated with science.

G-d!

Look, your breadth is the breadth of the land!  
 The dark brown soil of the land, the myriads of quiet!  
 You will not cross it by foot, for you will fall in the distance;  
 Without a battle you will fall vanquished by the distance,  
 You'll die the most horrible of deaths.  
 You are only wasting away your time in the expanses.<sup>17</sup>  
 Pale from a sudden fear, you will look at the corpses of camels and donkeys,  
     is it not a sign for you?

—In the heavens, the massive vultures rejoice.—

The land of the Negev  
 Land of dark, brown soil,  
 The fear-joy of caravans travelling to their destination, the laugh of the  
 terrifying calm.  
 Giants of dust! Treking over sand dunes! Untamed wadis!  
     Lotuses without horizon—

You will not cross it by foot.

O, the vastness!<sup>18</sup>

The greatness that human and animal brain cannot encompass and live.

<sup>17</sup>The phrase is not a question. I made it more of a statement than a literal translation of אלוהים might warrent.

<sup>18</sup>Also arrogance.

Only hearts can open a window of comprehension,  
in order that their hearts' blood can penetrate the secret of the world, and the  
secret of immortality.

And reaching the secret of immortality they will be destroyed.

O, the greatness! Heart of the world.

The feminine, divine desolation, with dark urges.

Here the sun alone revolves placating her

and the face of the sun cries bloodily and cries shamefaced.

You ought to be afraid, lioness-land;

When the seed of man falls into you to profane you, to domesticate you,

He will not know mercy.

Because your vastness is his shame, for you have taunted the pride of his  
knowledge.

For you knew your strength and you did not relent!

O, you unconquered one, fear the light of man!

He will not cross you by foot, because by foot, he will fall.

He will cross you by iron! Sharp and flaming!

He will subdue your flesh with the lashes of his roads, with his railroad tracks,

With his whips of water, his armour of vegetation, his multitudes!

Watch out, rebellious one!

Your anger is darkness, and his vengeance is light!

And darkness will not escape the light!

His spirit is greater than your substance;

Because substance has its limits within it, but as for the spirit — it has no limits.

And the spirit of man is unyielding.

Sing a fanfare to the land of the Negev, fanfare of mourning and of night.

Sing tears to the dark brown soil; and to all the vultures, predators of the heights.

O, the vultures who rejoice amid mourning,

who rise into the upper black journey to the retreating armies of sunset,  
to the sunset on the afternoon of wilderness.

Be warned, land of the Negev,

Because your night comes,

Be enveloped in its heavy creations,

Be enveloped in the curtains of shouting stars.

Be enveloped in the black, shouting curtains of the night—  
For in the morning, light will swallow you.

## SUNSET ON A NEGEV AFTERNOON

This is a poem in two parts that expresses both a tremendous love for the natural landscape of the Negev and excitement at the development of that land. It is similar to other poems by O. Hillel in its ecstatic style and rushing voice: there is nothing subtle here. On the other hand, it differs in that it neither thrills to the man-made environment nor delights in the natural order of pristine wilderness. In fact, neither humanity's development nor the land are presented particularly favorably. Both are vicious in what they do to each other.

The poem begins with an admiration of the Negev. Presumably we are there in the Negev viewing it knowing that it, too, is the "heart of the world." We have seen this phrase before having the meaning "center" implying that wherever one stands in Israel, that is the center of that person's world. Here the idea that the right place to be is exactly where one stands is turned back to a literal meaning. The Negev truly can be a "heart": it truly can beat with vitality. The function of a heart, though, is to move blood. Without blood, the heart has no reason to exist. If only we can donate our blood (shades of Winston Churchill's call for the "blood, sweat, and tears" of self-sacrifice) the heart will leap to work. If only we can "prime the pump" with our work, the Negev will return the favor and produce for its inhabitants.

The Negev is vast and silent compared to the sounds of human life. That silence can be overpowering as one comes to understand the enormity of space that swallows up the sounds. To enter into the Negev is a heavy undertaking. Hillel uses the metaphor of a virgin lioness for untouched land, which I imagine is because of a lioness's color, beauty, and lethargic manners between attacks on prey. One should never think a lioness's soft coat and casual demeanor imply a gentle animal.



There is that final line to the stanza that confuses me. Here with descriptions of the wilderness and a metaphor to a lion, why does he bring in a *חושל*? Is he trying to summarize his previous metaphor with a simile? Maybe he is pointing to the brutish potential of the land. If only a barbarian with the reputation of wild strength and vigor had a keen mind, he would be unstoppable. Could the Negev be the brutish power in need of the keen mind of science? I remain troubled by this line because he inserts it quickly and then leaves it as if it doesn't matter much. He moves to the next stanza and the image of the barbarian people is quickly forgotten.

The barbarian is replaced by an awe that can only draw out an appeal to the Divine. There are moments when a person is overwhelmed by a sight in nature, when one's smallness is keenly felt and the great mass of the planet is better understood. This realization brings on a wondering: what made this? Hillel appeals to G-d for a moment trying to understand.

At first I thought this unlikely. Hillel's other poems do not bring G-d into the scene. His excitement for his land is usually focused on the godless realm of "nature" or the works of the populace. He does not often include an appreciation of G-d. ("Scorpion's Ascent", a poem similar in its Negev location and wonder at the vastness of the Negev is an exception and does have a personal appreciation of G-d and G-d's creative wonder.) I thought perhaps his exclamation of "אלהים" was a reflex, however subconscious, like the English exclamation, "Lord, will you look at that". Hillel continues, though, directing his next remarks in the singular. I think here he really is expressing his awe to G-d. However he doesn't dwell on it and returns to talk to all of us in a plural 'you'.

The land is a terrible land, filled with danger. Does the voice change here? Is it now G-d who warns us that we cannot cross the land? Is it the knowing narrator speaking to us as we look out over the Negev with dreams in our eyes?

I favor the latter idea but the former appeals to me as a sub-theme; a secondary inner voice that we hear. Perhaps this brief section can be heard that way without compromising the rest of the poem's voice.

The narrator then, tells us that the wide expanse is lying in wait for us. The narrator tells us that failure in the Negev is not imminent but "in the distance", to happen later on in time without warning. The heat and lack of water are surely referred to here as promoting the "most horrible of deaths." If that warning isn't enough there is contempt for merely thinking about the idea. The person standing there in the desert starts to have doubts as he or she looks at dead camels and donkeys. The sign is clear: if a camel can't make it, how can you?

The vultures flying above anticipate an impending death and rejoice. Normally we would expect the idiom to be the cliché of "vultures circling" but Hillel has given us an interesting word play instead. The Hebrew root for circling is **ללך**. Here, Hillel has substituted the root **ללח** meaning "rejoice". The reader may be fooled and may read both meanings simultaneously.

Hillel switches tone again starting in the fourth stanza (**... ארץ הנגב**). If before there was an unabashed awe of the landscape followed by a hostile warning, now there seems to be more of a respect for both the terrific landscape and the threat of death in its midst. Caravans have made it across the desert but Hillel uses an oxymoron to describe the slow progress they make. Every hour in the desert is both an hour closer to the safety of a village but an hour farther away from the last place of water. It is exciting to move forward and terrifying to leave safety behind. If one's water were to run out, it would be a matter of days, possibly hours, before dementia could set in and alone in the vast quiet one might laugh in panic. Knowing all this must make the prospect of a journey that much more frightening but that much more thrilling when accomplished.

The voice of the poem changes also to include some sympathy for the land. The Negev is alone in the sense that none like to stay in her. The Negev is great, it is the heart of the world, but it still has these urges – the Hebrew צַדִּיק connotes sexual urges. It wants company. The sun is company with its daily bathing of the land in sun and heat. I am not sure why the sun "cries bloodily and cries shamefaced." Is it because of the death that can result from its rays? Is it because the sun is upset that the Negev has to be alone?

These lines seem to be a turning point in the whole poem. From here on, the Negev is slowly reduced in power by threats of the approach of people. The warnings start gently and build as the descriptions turn more and more violent. "When the seed of man falls into you to profane you" is the beginning of the warnings. This phrase consciously uses the idea of a seed as both the seeds of agriculture and the euphemism for semen. That the seed will profane the Negev tells me the introduction of people will not be a happy event for the land. The effect of the most preliminary development (roads, power lines) scars the beauty of the landscape.

Hillel feels the tension between the joy of gazing upon the pristine wilderness and the joy of seeing humanity reclaim land once thought of as inhospitable. Hillel, as a new settler, saw his actions as redemption of land once thought of as non-ariable. Hillel, as a poet, knows the regrettable altering of the pristine landscape that building inevitably brings.

Either way, the poem points to Hillel's exceptional appreciation of the natural environment. Where others see wasteland, he sees a terrifying beauty. Where others will view the introduction of water pipes as softening the land to be more hospitable, he calls them "whips". Roads are lashes, green vegetation (food really) is armour holding back perceived hostile threats. There is no hope in the end. Hillel calls the advance of people "light" and the wildness of the Negev

"darkness". Light always dispels darkness. Even a single match can illumine a large space to find one's way satisfactorily. There is another reason why the Negev has no hope of remaining pure. The land creates obstacles through limited physical problems: substance. The approaching Israeli has only to find a way around those barriers. He or she will do that because the Israeli has the desire, the "spirit" which has no limitations. A proper rest is all the Israeli needs in order to begin work anew in the Negev. The Negev offers only the same obstacles day after day. In time, these will fall.

Hillel begins the end of the poem with a final salute to the Negev that will soon disappear. It is a sad fanfare with mourning and tears. It is a farewell to the vultures who represent both the beauty and the violence the Negev contained. The final stanza starts with the oft said *לך גורי* and then settles into a rhythm urging the land to take advantage of the comfort soon to come in the approaching night. It will be the Negev's last night in peace before the morning's light of humanity swallows the darkness.

שיר אדמה  
LAND SONG

שיר אדמה

האנשים העוזבים את האדמה,  
הם לבדם יודעים את השליו, ואת הבטחה,  
והם לבדם יודעים את האחוה האמתית,  
החורגת מחבל חברת-האדם.

האדמה הטובה, הרחבה, הרשנה או הזבירה,  
אדמת התנובות וטפצקשים,  
השפע והצום,  
האדמה הגדולה, הנשימת נצח עונותיה —  
סמוי וחרף, אביב וג' — תמיד,  
היא מפנה את רוח פולחניה,  
זה שרש כל פלחן.

יד הגורל הצוסנת את סוד הבצרת, השפע והתנובות,  
שנח-שנה לעלמים;  
היא סיד הוירצת בלב איש-האדמה  
את זרע האלון הבביר רב-השנים  
של בטחה בתגמול ופרי.

בהרים האפר את אדמתו הנחרשת,  
הוא פרים את ריס האמונה,  
ואת ריס דמו הטכד.



שיר אדמה  
LAND SONG

The people who work the land,  
they alone know tranquility and confidence,  
and they alone know true brotherhood,  
which transcends the bonding of ordinary human society.

The land fat, wide, fertile or barren,  
the land, productive and perverse, abundant and meager,  
the great land, through the eternal breath of her seasons—  
fall and winter, spring and summer — always,  
it is she who governs the spirits of her plowers,  
this is the root of all ritual.

The very hand of fate which harbours the secret of drought the abundance and  
produce

every year, forever;  
is the hand that sows in the heart of every man of the earth  
the mighty, ancient pine seeds  
of confidence in bounty and fruitfulness.

When the farmer smells his ploughed land,  
he smells the aroma of faith,  
and the smell of his heavy blood.

And when he holds a handful of dust,  
he holds in his palm the heavy, lighthearted confidence,  
and if the face of a man of the land is wrinkled and furrowed,  
this is only the reflection of his ploughed field!  
And if in his hair, some grey is flecked,  
this is only a reflection of the clouds floating above  
carrying his fate year after year.

And if in his eyes the deep and wise fire flickers,  
this is only a reflection of knowledge of the seasons and their changes  
from seed to sprouting, from growing to fertility and fruitfulness  
and on until harvest and death.  
This is the cycle of the foundations of the world.



So too, when a man of the earth lies with his wife  
     to impregnate her to give birth,  
 he does not lie with his wife alone,  
 just as not only with her husband does she lie, when she sleeps with him,  
 because they lie with each other for the cycle of the foundations of the world.

Yes, like this do the bees gather the honey for their offspring,  
 and in their gathering they carry fertility from flower to flower,  
 and so in this way the flowers blossom to their own fertility  
 and all the songbirds coo love at their beauty,  
 and at hearing their deliberate song a young girl suddenly grows quiet  
     looks at the rising sun  
         until a boy favors her with his harp.

And just as the man of the earth is not ashamed of his lust for love and being  
 fruitful,  
 so he does not fear death unconcealed.  
 Death brings on decay and decomposition which is the salt of the earth.  
 And from the salt of the earth, its new desires to be fruitful and give birth will  
 ferment.

Therefore, when the man of the earth walks securely in his fields,  
 he will not cease when he is cut down to death,  
 and his friends will not commemorate their mourning with dirges and  
 lamentation  
 but rather in silence will they bring his body to its eternal rest,  
 for the smell of eternity rises from the silence.

And I praise the profound wise men who established their covenant with the  
 earth  
     to penetrate the secrets of the universe.



## LAND SONG

It is clear that O. Hillel has a connection to the land of Israel far deeper than a political statement, and more satisfying than a secure border. He sees his land filled with a spirituality waiting to be understood by those who join him in working the land. Only then when a person is involved thusly in the land, does the whole realm of nature and it's deeper meaning become apparent.

The first stanza of "Land Song" sets forth his argument. Only the people who work the land will ever know how much it affects the soul. This argument is not open for debate. He has discovered a truth which he will try to explain in the poem not through persuasion but by expressing his appreciation of the effects of the land. To him, understanding is obvious because he works the land. If and only if we join him, will we understand. Until that time, he makes it clear that we can only listen to his impressions.

What is most striking, I think, is that this "true brotherhood" is not made of the expected love of watching things grow or the satisfaction of seeing personally crafted items. It is not felt by happy farmers on the way to market. Instead, the brotherhood is shared by men and women who lay themselves bare to the whim of nature. Nature does not always conspire to make the land a glorious giver of all food. Sometimes it is perverse and denies humanity food by sending a drought or even blight. Though farmers try to cheat nature by irrigation or greenhouses or smudge pots, they cannot escape the cyclical motion of the seasons and the impact they make. Farmers will always have slow harvest seasons and rich harvest seasons creating deep debt and deep profit on a regular basis. There will always be easier weather and rougher weather. There is no escaping this. Therefore, farmers are always reacting to nature, never predicting, never controlling. This, in turn, must make the farmers aware that there is a more powerful force than them.

Farmers must quickly learn humility before this greater power. In a way, then, farmers create their own rituals to perform. There is repairing in winter, sowing in spring, reaping in summer. It shouldn't be a surprise that Judaism's festivals originate in agricultural festivals. Here Hillel has reclaimed the original intent of the festival to explain his own spiritual experience.

Hillel uses a word play to help explain this. The root פלח can mean plough or plowers. It is also the root for פלח meaning worship or ritual. The land accomplishes two things. The first is that the land dictates the fate and work of the plowers. The second is that the land is the cause for all ritual. He has set up a syllogism equating the farmer's plowing as a ritual.

Hillel has told us that there is a ritual and a succumbing to nature, to a greater power. All that is lacking is a sense of faith to create a religious experience. That faith is given to us in the next stanza. Even though the vagaries of nature can wreak devastation through a drought or flood at any time, the farmer knows that things normally proceed at an expected pace. It is an act of faith that weather patterns will proceed in a predictable pattern. It is an act of faith to plant crops believing that they will bring food. It is this faith that keeps the farmer farming year after year. However, it is not faith alone that brings success. The "smell of his ploughed land" is made up of the farmer's faith and his hard work. The farmer does not toss out seeds and let some power provide the produce. The farmer works and worries. Here in the next stanza ("handful of dust") the farmer worries and has a deep, light hearted confidence. There is a tension created by the dichotomy of believing that nature will proceed apace and worrying that one's ritual of planting and farming has been properly executed. Neither can occur without the other but only in one area does the farmer have any ability to contribute. After the farming is done, all he can do is worry. And

so the farmer's hair gets grey, his face wrinkles testifying to his worry; and his eyes flicker, secure in the knowledge or the faith that seeds will sprout.

Hillel moves a bit, changing focus slightly. Up to this point, he has been concerned with his faith in the land and his worry for his actions. This tension has created an inward spirituality, coloring his connection to the land. Now, he moves to connect this spirituality to the larger world. He equates working the land to marital intercourse. That behavior is not merely enjoyable for husband and wife because it brings them a child but it is vitally important to society in general. Sex, of course, creates the next generation who will work and enjoy the land.

The phrase "foundations of the world" gave me some trouble. I originally used it to mean the foundations of the world rely upon human reproduction. If this is true then it means that flora and fauna exist only for humans alone to appreciate. I'm not sure he is that self-centered regarding the purpose of the natural world. I think Hillel means that human procreation is important as the human contribution to the foundations of the world. Each species has a responsibility to continue in order to maintain the entire world ecology. As a farmer, one who is particularly sensitive to the cycles of life, he can appreciate this. For example, he shows an awareness to the role species play in continuing the ecology with his example of the bees and their offspring. Here, the bees spread fertility in the course of providing for offspring and the interdependence is clear.

All this love and fertility that is in the air (and in the case of the bees, fertility is literally in the air) sets the flowers blossoming which in turn excites the birds to sing. All this activity makes a young girl quiet. She is still amid bustling fertility and beauty. She can then use the romance in the air to send her own signals as she waits for a boy to play his violin.

The violin seems to be a vehicle to transmit the boy's emotional feelings. (One of the most famous uses of violin in this sense is in Naomi Shemer's song, *הלווא לכל שירייך אני כינור ירושלים של זהב* where she writes "Behold, I am a harp for all your songs.") The intention is that the harp is able to fulfill the promise of the song held latent by individuals.

Hillel has now mentioned various relationships with the land. He has talked about working the land, having the fear of and faith in the land, about growing old in the land and about the similar spiritual and pragmatic role procreation plays in the life of human beings and in the realm of nature. Now he discusses death and how a "man of the earth" comes to face it. It seems that death is not feared but accepted with almost a knowing satisfaction. After working the land so long, there is a matter-of-fact acceptance that now the farmer's body can return to the soil submitting its flesh to the forces of decay which allows the next generation to continue to give birth and grow.

The penultimate stanza has a wonderful quality of melancholy. The farmer is unafraid of death secure in his faith of what is in store for him after this life. It seems that Hillel has described the serenity felt by believers in an afterlife or even the effect of Christian ideas of heaven. There is no fear, only faith that what is in store is, if not better, then certainly assured. This is a belief of only the most faithful. Still, there is a touch of sadness.

Hillel writes of "dirges and lamentation." By using this idiom, Hillel has made the reader aware of the standard, expected response to a death. However, he then rejects the idea that the neighbors will have such response. The effect softens the view of the neighbors. They are not cold and unfeeling when they do not mourn with "dirges and lamentation." Rather, they run through the various responses to death including this traditional (religious) response ultimately choosing a different way more appropriate to how they feel about death.

The last line is a salute, I believe, to all those who have lived to understand the connection between the earth and themselves. Again, the imagery carries a traditional religious tone. It begins *שָׁכַח אֲנִי* the opening words to 4:2 of Kohelet. There, Kohelet says, "Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living."<sup>19</sup> Kohelet is bemoaning the oppression found on earth. Better, he feels, are those never born because they will never have to see or experience such oppression. Hillel rebuts that argument by praising the ones who have lived. Only by living could they ever have known the joy the land gives.

Hillel also uses the phrase *שְׁכַרְתִּי בְרִיתִי* which brings to mind the covenant struck between G-d and Israel and the circumcision ceremony. Here the covenant is one between people and the earth. This covenant allows men and women to understand the the rituals of ploughing and the inner meanings of procreation. Just as religious Jews would argue that one needs to be in the system of Judaism in order to fully appreciate it, so too does one need to establish a covenant with the land in order to truly appreciate what it teaches. This final note, then, is a reflection of the very first stanza. The poem never urges agreement with its argument but tries to present the argument as undebatable. This also seems to mirror the ways of religious Jews who often try no other persuasion than describing what is clear to them. The listener is left alone to decide whether to accept or reject the notion. But Hillel, in the end, will offer no further persuasion than his siding with those who share his faith in his praise of the farmers and spirituality found in the land.

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<sup>19</sup>Tanakh, 1988.

התקליטים נגנו את שופן  
THE RECORDS PLAYED CHOPIN

התקליטים נגנו את שופן

...ובגן העירוני בחוף נתניה נגנו רמדוסים.  
שם שבבתי ולעסתי נשא.

שבת שקטת-נשף  
לחשתי ריחות-נשף.

ינערות הנצו וסרחו,

בקחל, באדם, בסגנוני-צחוק.  
בעיני-אחבה, ובאור —  
התקליטים נגנו את שופן.

תינוקות הרבה שם שחקו.  
וואטוסים סצצו סקריות על מקל.  
סצצו סקריות על מקל.

אחד פצוט העיר חמת סמטרה — וברח.  
אמו קצטה הרבה, אזף אביו צעק.

מוכרי הבלונים נסחו זמר,  
פלח מחיל-הים ורעיתו לטטו כלכלב.  
איך הלה צחק בזנבו!  
התקליטים נגנו את שופן.

אי-ש-שיבה עבר ופעון סקטרת.

באשר טיל שוחח אל שסמו.  
אף העלה תמרות ארגסון.  
אי-ש-שיבה לבן.  
אי-ש-שיבה לבן.

עלמה,

אילת-ערב חלטה על שמי הפנגיות,  
קצוף קצר ענבר סחלסותיה,  
פרוסיל פניה נשק עיני,  
נשקתי פרוסיל פניה.  
העלמה טיפה היא ערש מכורת נששי.  
ואם סחלסותיה — ענבר.  
היא בנששי עד ערש דומה.

למטה, בחול, עזנו גופן נשות הרחצה,  
הן גוף נתן לאשה כי יענו.  
יגרים שופי-שקיר כבדון בפלפל וצברס.  
זקנות שתים ישובו על ספסל וקרנו גרבים לנדר.  
הן לא דברו דבר,  
לא דברו דבר.

אט-אט הלך העם,  
בטה נקלא לאט,  
בטה נקלא לאט.



עֲרֵב-אֱלֹל הָיָה.  
וְהַמְקַלִּיסִים נָגְנוּ אֶת שׁוֹפָן.

הוּ, וְרַח-אֱלֹל תְּכַל-הָאֱהָבִים!  
הוּ עֲרֵב עֲרֻמוֹנֵי-בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל!  
הַבִּיטִי, הַשְׁמִשׁ, אֶל־מִזְבֵּחַ-הָעֵינִי.  
הַבִּיטִי, הַשְׁמִשׁ, הַעֲלֵה וְנִשְׁלַח!  
אֶת כֶּגֶד הָאֹר הַטּוֹב.  
מֵאֵשׁ-נְשִׁיקוֹתֶיךָ אֶדְמוּ שְׂסָמִים.  
כִּדְם שְׁפֹתֶיךָ הַקָּפִיל יָם.

יָם!

הוּ, אֶתָּה הַעֲמֵם.

שְׁאוּצְרוֹתֶיךָ רַבּוּ סִיִּים.

יָקָרָה מְנִינֶיךָ מְנִינִים יָקָרָה.

מִצֹּלוֹת אֶפְלוֹת-אֲנִי, אֶפְקִים מִמִּסֵּי-בִּשְׁמִי.  
תְּהוֹם עַל תְּהוֹמוֹת צָלְלוּ צִי־הַזֶּהָב.  
וְאֶתָּה נִשְׁקַת וְהִב־עֲלִיוֹנִים.

יָם נְשִׁיקוֹת.

יָם נְשִׁיקוֹת.

הַמְקַלִּיסִים נָגְנוּ אֶת שׁוֹפָן

וְאֲנִי שֶׁבַחְתִּי וְלַעֲסַחְתִּי דָשָׁא.

סִלְמַשָּׁה הַבִּיט הַבִּיט הַבִּיט הַבִּיט הַבִּיט הַבִּיט.

הַבִּיטוּ צִי־י הַגֹּן, אֶת הַדָּשָׁאִים הַבִּיטוּ.  
הַבִּיטוּ הַנְּעִרֹת אֶסְמוֹת-הַזֶּהָב.

הָא, פְּרִטִי הַסֶּקֶר הַחֵיוֹ

הַעֲרֵב.

הַעֲרֵב הַבִּיט;

הוּ, מִבְּסִים, מִבְּסִי-עוֹלָם.

אֶתָּם צִפְרֵי-הַנֶּשֶׁשׁ, אֶתָּם עֲלוֹמֵי-הַגִּיל,

אֶתָּם רוּחוֹת הַעֵינִים, צִלִּילֵי הַתּוֹלְדָה.

תָּנוּ קוֹל בָּלִים נֶאֱהָבֵי-חֹף!

עָנוּ תְּרוּעוֹת הַזִּלְכָּלִים וְצִיצוּ רֶזֶת הַבּוֹלְבִלִים

בְּהִצִּיעַם תְּנוּמוֹת לֵם.

אֶמְרוּ שִׁיחַת וְנָגִים וְלִצְוֹתָם.

וְמְרוּ שִׁיר-אֵם בְּהִמּוֹת לְבָה.

תָּנוּ עַל-הַמְּסִירוֹת עַל סִסְטֵי הַגֹּן.

רְצוּ וְקוֹמוּ דְּבוּרִים אֲרוֹחוֹ!

וְהַדְרָתָם לִי, צִלִּילֵי-עוֹלָם,

וְהַדְרָתָם לִי, צִלִּילֵי-שֶׁשֶׁסֶם

צֶח-הַמַּצָּח.

וְהַדְרָתָם לִי גַם אֶת, הַהֲלָה הַמַּצּוֹסָה!

וְהַדְרָתָם לִי צוּר בְּהַבְּעָלָה

וְהַדְרָתָם לִי עוֹלָם עַל לֵב אֶתָּה

וְהַדְרָתָם לִי אֶשֶׁר עַל חוֹף שְׁסִמִּים.

אֶשֶׁר-אֶשֶׁר,

סִי הַבִּיט הַעֲלֵיו - לְגַב צִלִּילֵי-לֵב!

אֶשֶׁר-אֶשֶׁר,

סִי לִיצוֹ-הַמַּצּוֹנִים!

מִקּוֹל פְּאֻמוֹנֵיךָ רִצְצוֹת שֶׁלִּפְת־נֶשֶׁשׁ.

עֲרֵב-אֱלֹל הָיָה.

הַמְקַלִּיסִים נָגְנוּ אֶת שׁוֹפָן.

נָגְנוּ אֶת שׁוֹפָן.

החקליטים נגנו את שופן

# THE RECORDS PLAYED CHOPIN

... and in the city park on the beach at Netanya twilight played,  
there I lay down and chewed grass.

a silent Shabbat night<sup>20</sup>

whispered fragrances of the soiree.

And young girls budded and flowered,  
in blue, in red, in multi-colored whimsy  
in eyes of love, and in light—  
the records played Chopin.

Many babies played there,  
kids sucked candy on a stick,  
sucked candy on a stick.

A little child of the city, stirred up the wrath of a sprinkler — and fled,  
his mother was very angry but his father laughed.

Balloon sellers swelled up a song,  
a seaman from the Navy and his girlfriend petted a puppy.  
How he wagged his tail playfully!  
The records played Chopin.

A grey-haired man passed smoking a pipe.  
Wherever he strolled, he talked to his mustache  
He even raises up columns of purple.  
A white grey-haired man,  
a white grey-haired man.

A young woman,  
a doe of the evening,<sup>21</sup> passed by the heavens of tunes,  
her amber braids whipped about,  
the profile of her face kissed my eyes,  
I kissed the profile of her face.  
The beautiful, young woman she is the cradle, the birth-place of my soul.

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<sup>20</sup>soirée

<sup>21</sup>Also evening star.



And her braids — amber,  
 she is in my soul until the cradle of the grave.

Below, in the sand, the bathing women pampered their bodies,  
 yes, a body is given to a woman because she will take care of it.  
 and the men with their suntanned muscles treated them to falafel and sabras.  
 Two old women sat on a bench and knitted socks for a grandchild,  
     they didn't speak a word,  
     didn't speak a word.

Slowly the people stroll,  
     how wonderfully slowly,  
     how wonderfully slowly.  
 It was an evening in Elul  
 and the records played Chopin.

O, the month of Elul, Love's blue!  
 O, an evening of chestnut wings!  
 Look, the sun, a coral eye,  
 look, the sun, round and full!  
     You are the choice part of the good light,  
 from the fire of your kisses, the heavens turn red,  
 from the blood of your lips, the sea turns dark.

Sea!  
 O, you are the deep,  
     whose treasures are greater than the sea,  
     your pearls' preciousness is more precious than pearls.  
 Depths dark with legend, horizons hiding magic  
 the golden armadas sank in depths upon depths.  
 And you kissed the gold of the heavens.  
     Sea of kisses.  
     Sea of kisses.

The records played Chopin  
 and I lay down and chewed grass.  
 From below, the sea watched.  
 Large and wise, the sea watched.  
 The sprouts in the garden watched, even the grass watched, too.  
 The gold braided young girls watched

Ha, the living sugar flowers!

This evening,  
the evening watched;  
O, so many views, views of the world.  
You are birds of the soul, you are youthfulness of joy,  
you are the spirit of the eyes, sounds of life evolving.<sup>22</sup>  
Give voice, waves, the beloved of the beach!  
Answer the peals of puppies! Chirp with the song of birds as they prepared  
themselves to doze.

Talk a conversation of old men and their clowning,  
Sing a mother's song, her heart humming.  
Set the dew of the sprinkler on the benches in the park,  
sing the humming of bees to the light!  
You are wonderful to me, sounds of the world,  
you are wonderful to me, sound of silence  
humble sounds.  
You too are wonderful to me, insolent noise!

This is the way of the nectar in the lily  
and the way of a dream on the heart of a lover  
and a way that is on the edge of the lips.  
Happiness, happiness,  
long live the merry pickpocket — to steal shadows of the heart!  
Happiness, happiness,  
long live the clown of bells!  
From the sound of your bell, an evening gown rustles.

It was an evening in Elul,

The records played Chopin,  
played Chopin.

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<sup>22</sup>This word has the sense of the consequences of procreation.

## THE RECORDS PLAYED CHOPIN

O. Hillel is intent on capturing the view of wherever he is. Fast moving in a car or here, lying still in a park, he tries to capture the events around him. Why? It seems that his earlier theme of לב העולם is continued whether he mentions it or not. What I find completely thrilling is his contentment in being wherever he finds himself. He fully appreciates the fact that the real story of the young country is not in organized celebrations or in events that make news headlines. The real story, the place to truly understand the wonder of the young state, is in the mundane. While the rest of the world marvels at Israel's abilities to win a war or her latest diplomatic advances, Hillel knows that the proof of a successful country lies in the ability of its people to live out lives of normalcy. A country running to war is not proof of such normalcy but a people able to stroll in park is. Hillel chronicles the average events in a park as proof, perhaps, that his country has arrived.

The time of the poem is late Elul as Shabbat afternoon recedes. A day in late summer in Netanya is a beautiful thing. The oppressive heat of the summer is gone but still fresh in the memories. One who is out for a stroll is aware of the refreshing coolness. People are usually dressed smartly, particularly the young people hoping to flirt. Somewhere there is a record player playing Chopin which adds a softness to the scene. A knowledge of the Chopin catalogue is not important here. The idea of music playing in the background is obviously more important than the actual tune. I imagine every reader will add his or her own idea of how Chopin sounds. Myself, I hear piano impromptu and waltzes. In his 1957 version of the poem, many changes were made including the removal of any reference to Chopin. Even the title was changed to ערב אלול. It seems that Hillel did not like a soundtrack for his poem. I confess that while I enjoyed the idea of a soundtrack, the name of a European composer did attract attention to

itself in a poem filled with anonymous people. However, our version does have Chopin so we continue with that influence.

The waltz is reinforced a bit through the use of repetitive lines. These echoes create a dreamy atmosphere, one where we can imagine the narrator lying on the grass, staring at different people. The echoes add a rhythm to the stanza reminiscent of a waltz. The accent in the lines when spoken twice set up the pattern.

With the mood set and the music playing, Hillel tells us what he sees. Babies find candy, probably on the ground. Another small boy is unfamiliar with a sprinkler as he lives in the city. Fooling with it starts water to flow. The scene is quite comical. A balloon seller adds festivity to the scene both through the balloons and his mere presence. A sailor has some time off and plays with a happy puppy who shows appreciation through a heavily wagging tail. And while all this happens, the soundtrack continues.

An old man walks by talking to himself. Hillel plays with a preposition making the man talk *to* his mustache as opposed to speaking *through* his mustache. And the smoke itself rises up in spirals of purple evoking a royal image. Here, the play is on the expectation that the pipe will give off spirals of smoke. (That idiom is reminiscent of Joel 3:3. This verse was more likely well known to Hillel's readers as a line in the Pesach hagadah: וְנָתַתִּי קִוְּפֹתִים Before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, I will set protents in the sky and on earth: Blood and fire and *pillars of smoke*.)

The man on the beach turns his attention to a young woman who walks by. She is called אֵילַת עֶרֶב in contrast to the well known אֵילַת הַשָּׁחַר. The latter is the morning star, bounding into the dawn like a doe. Here that friskiness is given to an evening doe, this woman who bounds into the eve with as much

enthusiasm as the morning doe. He looks at her energy and vigor. Her blonde hair flies about. I chose the phrase, "whipped about" hoping it catches both meanings of the root פלף: either foamy, without a tight structure as well as angry. "Whipped" is ambiguous letting the reader add the connotation.

This wildness, her hair blowing, makes her so beautiful that her profile seems to jump out when he looks at her. He feels as if her face has approached him with a kiss. He stares more purposefully kissing her profile in return.

I am confused by the passage wherein the young woman remains with him all his life. Is it the vision of such a woman? Does looking at beautiful women on the beach give him a sense of rebirth, seeing another is like seeing the first? I'm not sure.

His attention now turns to the sky. He watches the moon rise. It has a blue cast (soft, too, experience tells me) which he romantically links to lovers. The sun as it sets can be looked at by the naked eye and takes on a deep red hue. He calls it a coral "eye" and it is his favorite part of the daylight. The sunset dazzles the sky and the sea no longer reflects sunlight, turning dark.

More than just color, though, this stanza has a tremendous sensuality to it. I used a capital L to denote the general sense of romance in the air. With the rhythmic parallel sentence structure, the stanza brings a warm romance that grows deeper and deeper as the sun sets. In the end, two words are used that carry both feelings of violence and feelings of passion.

Trite is the phrase, "his ardor burned," or "her full blood-red lips." While avoiding those phrases Hillel does use this idea of turning otherwise violent words into symbols of passion. It is a paper of a different scope that would investigate why passion and violence can be intertwined. That may have something to do with animal instincts and the libido. Here it is sufficient to note



that the stanza employs these ideas to give the last lines a very strong and moving presence.

The sun falls, the drama of the sunset moves him, the sea takes on a darkening luster and our narrator contemplates that sea. During this contemplation, Hillel takes us deeper and deeper into the sea. This movement is accomplished in steps with the words and supported by the placement of the lines on the page. First, he declares the sea. Then he calls in "the deep" directing us to marvel at how vast and deep is it. Indenting his line, we can only imagine what is held in those depths and how they are even more intriguing than the vastness of the sea itself. Then with another indent, we focus on one particular treasure. Within that line he tries to tell us that the "pearl's preciousness" is even greater than the pearl itself. (An attempt has been made to keep the alliteration as Hillel intended it.) Perhaps he is trying to say that the value of a pearl is from its luster more than it is from the pearl; that a thing is more valuable for the impact it makes than for its actual value. Which is more valuable a van Gogh hanging in one's own living room or a van Gogh hanging in a museum?

The rest of the stanza is a little harder. We are back to the surface of the sea staring out imagining what is beyond. I can only imagine that we are remembering many legends of storms at sea (the suddenness and violence of legendary storms: is that what he means by *עוֹרְבָן*). Ships filled with treasure, with gold — navies of gold — as if to say the sea was covered by boats overflowing with loose ingots. Legends remember the baubles often better than the sailors. *כִּי יָרַד הַזָּהָב* is a nice phrase that emphasizes the amount of gold sailing. As the gold sank deeper into the depths, the sea itself kissed the "gold of heights" (the sun?). The sea itself is full of kisses.

This reverie is broken as he becomes aware of the Chopin playing in the background. Hillel brings us out of the reverie by returning to the second line of

the opening stanza, *שכבתי ולעסתי דשא*. He is very calm and casual as he lies on grass. He watches the world go by. The sea watches the world go by as well as the plants. The girls who we watched earlier in the poem watch the goings on, too.

Everyone, it seems, is interested in watching everything. Here is a night in the town square with so many things to look at, with so many views. With each turn of his head, Hillel can conjure up a new view. There is tremendous action as his lines begin with exclamations: Give voice! Answer! Talk! Sing! Set!

Hillel concludes in a satisfied manner that this peaceful scene is as it should be. He uses lines like "a dream on the heart of a lover" and things "on the edge of the lips" to mean things heavily felt but intangible. They bring happiness but they are still intangible. They are also irresistible. A "merry pickpocket" takes anything that would diminish the brightness in one's heart. A pickpocket surreptitiously takes things, the loss of which, discovered later, leads one to wonder how the theft happened. Similarly, sadness is stolen. Contented happiness finds its way to a person's feelings with one never quite sure how it got there. The poem concludes with a gentle fade out as the strains of Chopin play on.

The beauty of this poem for me lies in its romantic vision of an Israel now found only in fiction. This is the Israeli of the perfect society. Young and old, gathering together in the common to celebrate living. The scene is not sullied by politics or war or poor housing. Nothing disturbs the peace. There is only the contented thrill of living in the Jewish state. In this way the poem reflects the others of the section in its romantic charm. It captures a way of life. It differs because it focuses so heavily on people. The others seem to center around nature.

כתה בארץ

# A PLATOON IN THE LAND

יפה נאמר

הבה אשיר על אשנה רעים,  
על דתת-נערים לא-נצחה!  
-----

גבוהים הרי סלילה,  
ואצומים מאד הבוכבים.  
לא רוח שם, לא שיר הערצרים;

בנדי, בהסתר דתת הנערים פוסעת —  
המשה, ידה על קת.

אשרת נערים,  
במותם, בכתורה: קשיחים, על-ג' גמס, פשוטי-הלוח, מאתבים,  
יש חקמים, ויש לצים, ויש בדיו-ישרות, חסדקים!  
אף לב כלם צוחק!

כי חי!

לא גבורי-קרבות,  
לא שרד ולא קדר.  
בדי, בשיגל הגס, בנצל הסמורה,  
בגרב הפלקחי הזקור!  
פוסעים אשרת ידידי, דתה,  
דתה בנצח!



כסע מאהבים, פשוטו נמשקעו, בארטה הואח.  
בזה הנדרי!  
בזה הקר סופר-הקשר.

אשרת נערים, לא תחששתם אמת,  
ולא אמת הנצרה אשר קסמה נמשם.  
איש-איש וניב צחוקו,  
איש-איש ונכשונו, בפלטה או בספר, בנגינות או בנכות,  
אשרת נערים, אך לבקם אהד —  
והוא יצוק סאך כה!

על בן לא בון יכוון לה ברשונה בנצל ובבגד;  
לא בון ולא הלל.  
שהיא עקם עד קץ,  
שהיא אקם עד חם,  
פשוטה ולא תשאל במליצים,  
אמת בכל כמו הליל!

פפצנו במליצות: רבה חשפת הליל גם סמלית!  
אכל רבה סמנה פכנה נצר אשר בחשכה.  
אך במסע הזה אשרת ידירי הנתינהם אוהה  
המצוקה סלקאירו

לא תכל הפדים להם,  
לא עקרים בדם ובחידוד,

כי עקרים בנלטה, שנתלחשה בקצב האפל,  
ובחיוץ הערמוסי ונתקסים!

גבוהים הרי הלילה  
ונצוקים מאד תכוכבים.  
לא רוח שט, לא שיר הנצצרים,  
בזרי, בהסתר דתת הנצרים פוספת —  
המשפת —  
מסע האוהבים!

עורו, עורו, אשרת רעי!  
תנו צחוקכם בעושרת, רעי!  
תנו סומורכם באש!  
קד, בשינל הנס, בנצל הסמורת,  
בגרב הפלקחי הנשור!  
עורי, הכתה הלא-נגזחה!

לא לגיונות מוקדון,  
לא פסציי-המלכ,  
לא צבא הנגליתים האדירים ברטב,  
בשריון, בקשקשים!

כי לא!  
כי בגי אפה-רוצת, נטשי נצאן בסכלאות,

נת צבא נדוד!  
והוא יפה-ציניס!  
אך לו,  
בס לו טענינה הנשים הנשחקות:  
הקת, הקת קר בבוקיו!  
טפלד נוד נעים-נסירות-ישראל!

כחזק בארץ

# A PLATOON IN THE LAND

Here now, let me sing about ten friends,  
about an undefeated platoon of youths!

-----

So high are the mountains of the night,  
and so powerful are the stars.  
The wind does not waft about, neither does a song of crickets,

In the wadi, secretly, the platoon of youths marches —  
armed. Hand on rifle butt.

Ten youths,  
As they are, so is the homeland: rigid, awkward in manners, simple in its goings,  
beloved,  
there are wise men and wise guys, and those who can't stand straight, knobby!  
But the heart of all of them laugh!  
Because they live!

They are not heroes of battle,  
no clothes of royalty, no glory  
just as is, in the coarse chenille, in the nailed boot,  
and the erect, Palmachi sock!  
My ten friends<sup>23</sup> marching, a platoon,  
a platoon in the land!

A journey of loved ones, plain and simple, in this land,  
in this wadi!  
in this mountain thorny with jagged rocks.

Ten youths, none of their ammunition is similar,  
and none of the girls who charm their souls are similar.  
Every man had his own style of joke,  
every man has his forte in farm work or with books, with melodies or with  
debating,  
ten youths but their hearts are one—  
and it is cast from the earth!

---

<sup>23</sup>buddies

Therefore, they will not scorn her for her mud on boots and clothes;  
no scorn and no praise.

For she is with them until the end,  
for she is their mother until the end  
she's simple, and no need to ask interpreters,  
they are all uniform like the night!

We have heard in flowery language: the darkness of the night is enormous and  
also symbolic!

But greater than that is the danger of trouble in the night.  
But in this journey, these, my ten friends are a light too great to shine!  
They have no vanity about uniforms.  
Their essence is not in blood or cheers,  
but their essence is in a jest, whispered in dark patter,  
and with naive, sly smiles.

The mountains of the night are high  
and the stars are very strong.  
A wind does not waft about, neither does a song of crickets,  
in the wadi, secretly, the platoon of youths wanders —  
armed —

The trek of lovers!

Wake up, wake up, my ten buddies!  
Tell your jokes in lead, my buddies!  
Sing your songs in weapons' fire!  
So, in the rough chenille,  
in the stiff boot,  
in the erect Palmachi sock!  
Awake, undefeated platoon!

-----

Not the Macedonian legions,  
not the crusades,  
not an army of great Goliaths with boasting  
in armor, in chain mail!

But no!  
For they are sons of a watchful nation, abandoning the flock in their pens,  
this is the army of David!

And he so handsome!<sup>24</sup>

For him alone the women answered as they danced:

He has slain his tens of thousands!<sup>25</sup>

King David is the sweet singer of Israel.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>1 Samuel 16:12 "Bright eyed" in *Tanakh*, JPS 1988. "Of goodly eyes," according to JPS 1955.

<sup>25</sup>1 Samuel 18:7.

<sup>26</sup>2 Samuel 23:1 "The sweet singer of Israel" according to JPS 1955.

## A PLATOON IN THE LAND

The romance of the Palmach continues as Hillel describes a night's patrol in "A Platoon in the Land," a description of a platoon's night maneuvers. My immediate response to this poem is to question whether it is right to continue such romanticism when the nature of the battle is so terrifying and the outcome of defeat surely disastrous. One wouldn't think so but Hillel obviously feels that even amid the realities of war, there was room (at least in hindsight) to remember the heroic, romantic aspect of service. This romance is heavily played here in the glory evoking opening and closing lines to the poem.

The opening *הנה אנשי עוז* begins with a lofty announcement setting a self-important, formal tone. This formal tone of declaring the intentions of a poem is common in the Bible, as in Psalm 59: 17, *ואני אנשי עוז* and perhaps most famously in Exodus 15:1 after redemption at the Reed Sea, *אז ישיר משה*.

With the tone set, Hillel takes us on patrol with a platoon of young men.<sup>27</sup> The scene is a still night with the darkness towering over the platoon. The darkness and the lack of comforting chirps of crickets gives the scene an oppressive character, as if it is falling in on you. The platoon marches in a wadi, trying to stay quiet, rifles at the ready. As they march along, looking about, there is time for us to look at them as Hillel begins to describe both the soldiers and how they represent the country.

This is not a smooth military formation, Hillel writes. Instead it is a hodgepodge of personalities thrown together for a common cause. He calls them "rigid" and "awkward in manners" and "simple." They seem to reflect the country: young, awkward. What brings them together is that common cause of creating a safe environment where they can live. Here I took some license with

<sup>27</sup>The word *כחור* in the military means platoon though the more formal word would be *מחלקה*.

the text. Literally, **כִּי חַי** means "it lives" and refers to "the heart of all of them." But this seems to obscure the intention of the line which I think is trying to share the thrill of their survival in spite of the sorry shape they are in. To say, "it lives" doesn't seem to make the phrase personal enough.

This idea of a rough hewn, ragtag group continues as we look at their uniforms. There is nothing inspiring here; no shiny medals, no sharp creases on the trousers. Instead, there is rough material, shoes barely held together and a stiff, and I must imagine, uncomfortable sock. Despite this their military expedition is not diminished. The word **כְּחַד** to describe the platoon may be more than military terminology. A platoon should evoke ideas of a well trained group of professional soldiers. Their description makes them out to be more of a local militia or, worse still, a group of school boys. Perhaps he is saying that this "local militia" can, when called upon, behave like a seasoned team. The word **כְּחַד** instead of the more formal **מַחְלָקָה** emphasizes the youth and inexperience of the group, this group of school boys.

The group marches on and Hillel reflects on their non-uniformity further. They don't have the same weapons, they don't like the same kinds of girls (or rather, each man finds himself charmed by a different kind of woman), they have different senses of humor and they all have different backgrounds and temperaments. Hillel dismisses the potential destructive influence all this may have when he points to the one thing they all have in common: a connection to the earth. The point is subtly made that they are uniform in their commitment to the land. Ultimately they have a common origin. After establishing their connection to the earth, they do not mind the earth's mud and dirt on their clothes. Instead they accept it not as a problem but as a comfort. Through a rhyme of **אִמָּה** and **עִמָּם** the dirt is as much a comfort to them as their mother. It is ever present, it seems. So together with their different uniforms, they are

uniform in dirt and without needless embellishment, they are uniform in the dark.

They don't need flowery language to describe the night, even though the reader has already read some. Flowery language may explain the symbolism of the night for a reader but it hides the troubles unknown to the soldiers walking. They walk in the night, using each other, their comradeship as a light to dispel those troubles in the night. They walk, unconcerned about their uniforms and not searching any great glory of battle. Instead, these friends have their own small jokes with each other that creates strong bonds of friendship. They march, secure in being with each other.

Now the poem changes tone rapidly. We have drifted off and let our mind wander as we studied the men. Now Hillel makes us aware of the night again as he returns to the second stanza that describes the oppressive night. We turn back to the quiet of their march. Then, fighting breaks out and all their comradeship is focused for the battle. I've changed the literal translation for their fighting. While the Hebrew elegantly uses יָדָם to mean a refocusing of their energies to shooting their guns (give your jokes to bullets, give your songs to fire), I chose to use a more English approach with standard idioms: telling jokes and singing songs. So there, as they had been telling jokes, now they focus on shooting. Where the poor qualities of the clothes had been a joke, now they are the accoutrements of a fighting force. This group of young men wake to the task and remain undefeated.

One question that arises in these linguistically precise times is the following: are these soldiers men or boys? Most were in their twenties, surely a young age, yet defending an entire country, surely a mature task. Maybe that is why Hillel writes a poem about a group of youths but refers to them as men.



Indeed, the conclusion of the poem hints at this discrepancy as Hillel compares the soldiers not to the famed armies of men but of the quintessential boy hero David.

In a final romantic flourish, the great armies who fought in Israel are conjured forth. All these armies were known for exceptional numbers or strength which the Palmach did not have. But these are not needed as Israel is compared to David, the most dashing and bravest of all Jewish warriors. His reputation as a young fighter, shorter than the foe but with more energy is paired with his beauty and sensitive artistic side. He is the perfect soldier: fearless at battle, sensitive at home. For this the girls swoon.

With this Biblical allusion Hillel firmly advances the romance of the Palmach. A cynic would say it is "p.r." or propaganda but it seems likely that Hillel was able to look back and re-create sincerely the esprit de corps that pervaded the Palmach.



לנשמת רע  
FOR A FRIEND'S SOUL

לנשמת רע

לחיים בדרור דל

חיים,

הנה שבת אל אסף,

אל האדמה הזאת אשר אטבת.

ואנחנו רעיף עוקדים ותוהים: הנה חיים הלך.

ואיש מאתנו אינו בוכה. אנחנו אנשים שאינם בוכים.

— אולי עיני רטבות מעט, מילא, אני תרגשו שבחבורה.

חיים,

אתה שבת אל אסף,

ואתה נקנס למעגל פריחותיה ותגובותיה, למעגל-הנצח.

אכל אתנו לא תהיה.

לא תסב בקסבותינו,

לא תספח עוד, לא תדעק, ולא תעשו מקטרת.

ואנחנו נשוב ונשפח עוד שנים רבות;

ואפשר שלא נזכר אותך תקיד!

אל אלהים!

אפשר שנשכח אותך!

כו. אתה לא תדעק עוד. ואנו לא נדעק להלכותיך;

הלא שבת אל אסף אשר אטבת.

וְכָבֵד לֹא נֹאמַר לָךְ: בְּשִׁמְתָּ בְּעֶשֶׂר נְשׁוּטִים, וְכֵן שָׁלַח יְרֵד גִּשְׁם!  
וְאַתָּה כָּבֵד לֹא תֹאמַר: גִּינִי וְשִׁמְתָּ זֶה שִׁמְתָּ!

חַיִּים,

אֲנִיחָנו אֶהְבֵּנו אוֹתָךְ.

בְּשִׁיר לֹא כוֹתְבִים שְׁהִיִּת חֲבוּב.

אֲכַל הִיִּת חֲבוּב!

לֹא בָכִינו עָלֶיךָ,

אֲכַל נִשְׁוֹתֵינוּ הָיוּ בּוֹכוֹת.

נִשְׁוֹתֵינוּ אֵינָנו אֲנָשִׁי-צָבָא, וְהֵן בּוֹכוֹת בְּסוֹת אַחוֹתָן.

הֲלֹא תִסְלַח לָהֶן.

הֲלֹא גַם בְּשִׁשָּׁה בְּכֻתָּה עָלֶיךָ, הִיא הִכִּיחַת אוֹתָךְ יוֹמֵר מִכְלָנוּ.

כִּי הִיִּת שְׁלֵה.

הוּא, נִשְׁוֹתֵינוּ אֵינָנו אֲנָשִׁי-צָבָא, וְאֵינָנו לְמוֹדוֹת-מִלְחָמָה:

הֵן בּוֹכוֹת בְּצַר לָהֶן.

הֵן יְלָדוֹת קְטָנוֹת.

חַיִּים,

אַתָּה הִיִּת יָלֵד יוֹמֵר מִנְשָׁשָׁךְ!

אַתָּה הִיִּת יָלֵד.

הִיִּת שְׁשׁוּם: אָדָם,

אֶהְבֵּת!

וְאַפְשָׁר שֶׁלֹּא רָאִיתָ אֶת אֲנִי-הָאֶהְבֵּת שֶׁהִלֵּךְ לְסִנְיָךְ:

אֲנִיחָנו רָאִינוּ אוֹתוֹ!

חֲכַל שֶׁלֹּא אֶפְרָנוּ לָךְ זֹאת לָכֵן.

וְאוֹלֵי אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁלֹּא יָכִלְנוּ לוֹמַר.

אֲנִיחָנו אֲנָשִׁים שְׁשׁוּטִים, וּמִקְבָּצִים בְּמִתְקָאוֹת.

עָנוּ שֶׁל אֶהְבֵּת!

כֹּן זֶה לֹא מִתְקָא-כֹּנוּ מִסְגֵּי-אִשׁ!

חַיִּים אֵין מִנְצָחִים בְּאֶהְבֵּת. אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁמִּתְקָא-מִתְקָאִים יִנְצְחוּ

בְּאֶהְבֵּת.

כִּי יִסֹּו!

לנשמת רע

# FOR A FRIEND'S SOUL

To Chaim Ben-dor, ז"ל

Chaim,

Here you have returned to your mother,  
to this earth that you loved.

And we your friends stand and are stunned: here, Chaim has passed away.

Not a man among us is crying. We are men that do not cry.

— Maybe my eyes are damp a bit, well, I'm the emotional one in our group.

Chaim,

you have returned to your mother,

and you are entering the cycle of its fruitfulness and its abundance, the cycle of  
eternity

But you will not be with us.

You'll not make the rounds of our parties,

you'll be happy no longer, you'll not laugh, and you'll not smoke a pipe.

An we will be happy again for many years;

but it's possible we will not always remember you!

My God!

It is possible that we will forget you!

Yes. You will laugh no more. And we will no longer laugh at your jokes;

because you have returned to your mother that you love.

And we will no longer say to you: We'll meet at ten o'clock on Shabbat, if it  
doesn't rain!

And you will no longer say: No, no! Shabbat is Shabbat!

Chaim,

We loved you,

we didn't write a song about how you were a great guy,<sup>28</sup>

but you were a great guy!

We didn't cry over you,

<sup>28</sup> חבוב is a macho way of saying, "sweetheart" in the way of "put her there pal."

but our souls were crying.  
Our souls are not army men, and they cry at the death of their sisters.  
Won't you forgive them?  
Didn't your soul, too, cry over you? It knows you better than all of us because you  
were its own.

Oh, our souls are not army men, and they're not used to war:  
they cry in their sorrow,  
they're small girls.

Chaim,  
you were more childlike than your soul!  
You were a boy.  
You were simply: a man,  
you loved!

And it's possible that you didn't see the cloud of love that passed before you;  
we saw it!

It's a shame that we didn't tell you this earlier.  
And maybe it's possible that we weren't able to say.  
We are simple men, and stingy with compliments.

A cloud of love !  
Though it is not a protective shield against fire!  
Today there are no victors with love. It is possible that tomorrow or the next day  
they will win with love.

I wish it were so!

## FOR A FRIEND'S SOUL

Much is made of the romance of the Palmach, the romance of fighting for one's country and motherland. There is always the threat of death, a fear that individuals may die but it seems that death is often an impersonal issue. Casualties are counted as numbers more than individuals. Soldiers are made martyrs for the cause. Death, then, can be viewed as another part of the war, as another assignment. First one serves in the infantry and then one serves as a martyr.

O. Hillel tries to remember one of his friends, one comrade, and eulogize him not as a martyr but as a friend who will be missed.

"For a Friend's Soul" is dedicated to Chaim Ben-dor. Where the romance of the Palmach often requires generalities to paint broad heroic stories, this poem is dedicated not to the nameless many who died but to one individual. That inscription forces us to remember the individual. We will not feel sorry for the loss to the community of Israel that its sons have fallen. We will feel sorry for the specific people who mourn this specific person. There is nothing grand about this poem. It is powerful because it focuses on one individual.

A word should be made about Chaim's name. It means life, of course, and adds a certain irony and pain to the poetry. When Chaim's name is called out, life may be mocked. I don't want to dwell on this because חיים is also a common name in Israel. Americans named Joy are not confused for euphoria and in fact, when one grows accustomed to the name Joy, the word becomes devoid of any happy connotations and becomes a name only.

With that warning though, the very first line of the poem uses that irony well. Chaim has returned to his mother, the earth. This line has a double meaning. First, Chaim the son returns to his mother, a grieving woman. Perhaps this refers to the coffin being transferred over to her care from the army

hearse. Perhaps symbolically she receives her son through the folded flag draped across the coffin. And if that is so, the life is returned to the source of life, its own mother. She gave forth this life and now the life is returned to her. But there is more to this. We realize that the mother refers to the motherland, the soil. Now Chaim is literally being returned to his mother(land) as he is buried within it. This play on the word life and the name Chaim will continue a soft cadence throughout the poem.

After setting up this scenario, we are introduced to the second theme, that of his friends struggling to mourn their friend. They struggle because their macho sense of identity forbids them to show any emotions that might make them seem soft. They are men that don't cry, they say. Still, Hillel concedes a small show of grief but refuses to involve his friends in this display. So with a small tear, Hillel begins to accept his friend's death. He takes comfort knowing that all men die, that death is part of the lifecycle. Emotion takes over from this rational thought. Loss of his friend is overwhelming and he mourns not seeing his friend at parties as he was so accustomed and he will miss even the small, mannerism like Chaim's pipe, a symbol of a jaunty man. Hillel is not so maudlin as to grieve that life will never be the same again. In fact, he knows that it will come very close to being the same again, only without Chaim. What he worries about is losing Chaim's memory after things do get back to normal. he already is afraid of the time when mourning concludes.. This is the most frightening of all, it seems, to have one's group of friends lose a link and then forget that link was ever there.

Hillel brings a sadness to the poem by showing us how his loss affects him. His sadness is based upon losing a friend who was part of his circle and in losing certain details of his unique friendship with Chaim. Hillel brings examples of things he will miss, including their regular Shabbat get-togethers. It seems Hillel

would call and arrange to meet weather permitting. Chaim insisted that the arrangement had always been for the friends to see each other on Shabbat: weather was never a factor as Hillel writes, "Shabbat is Shabbat!" Chaim's insistence to meet may have been annoying then, but now will be missed.

Generally speaking, Hillel has expressed the oft written lament of never fully expressing one's love and respect for a friend until it is too late. He says it, though, in an unusual way. He and his friends admit that they wrote songs about their love for him. After all, macho guys don't often write poetry to each other. Writing songs — and songs and poems are one and the same in the Hebrew — really just isn't the sort of thing men who don't cry would do. But now, in of all places a poem, he confirms how the group of friends always felt.

Too much sentimentality builds up and Hillel returns to the voice of the tough soldier. He dismisses his tears and blames it on another part of him, on his soul. It is as if the soul were distant from his conscious self. His body and his intellect are trained to be tough and ready for war. There is no room and no time on the battlefield for tears. They only slow a person down and distract from one's job. But here he cries anyway blaming the tears on his soul. His essence, his thinking that distinguishes him from a common animal, has never submitted to the training of war. His soul has always retained empathy. He apologizes for that weakness of empathy and tries to make light of the whole situation but the reader knows better. The reader knows that one cannot separate the soul from the person. The reader knows that within his denial of crying lies an admission of crying.

Chaim also had different aspects of his personality. Perhaps he was the teaser of the group or the practical joker. Hillel says he was more of a child than his soul and we have just learned that it is one's soul that does not listen to adult modes of behavior! He must have truly been a free spirit. Chaim may have



played the boy but he was also a mature man who served in an army and knew how to love others.

Hillel concludes the poem bemoaning the fact that Chaim may never have known how much his friends loved him. A "cloud of love" is the expression he uses to describe an enveloping feeling that permeates the air yet can barely be seen. Hillel and the friends saw the cloud because they knew how they felt. They couldn't tell Chaim, though, because their macho image made them less than forthcoming with kind words for each other. But all that love could not be a "shield against fire," a shield against the enemy's bullets. The poem concludes on a sad note as Hillel accepts that love among friends is no guarantee for their safety.

This poem is an elegant testimony to a friend's death and a mourner's loss. Hillel and his friends are grieved that Chaim will be with them no longer but Hillel is especially nervous about forgetting his friend. In a sense, this poem is one way for him to compensate for the natural tendency to forget people over time. By writing the poem, Hillel creates way of remembering his grief. More importantly, the poem, once published reminds many more people about Chaim. What we can never know is how many people have read this poem and used it to remember their friends. How many other soldiers wanted to cry but remained tough?



# רעות הלוחמים

## THE FRIENDSHIP OF FIGHTERS

רעות הלוחמים

לסלמיח

רעי.

הנה עולה השקש בתבור  
והוא אדם-אדם.

ואחרינו ליל-הערב.

הנה תורנו לבקש חיים ולא חיים.  
אך בקלנו מנשבת רוח חיים!

על כל גריקה בוס — אדם-אדם.

הי, חברה, יין ישמח לבב!

פשוט.

בשמים הקום וסתחוק!

חברה.

למי הפלסח!

ואיש מן הנפלים בבר לא ישוב.

אשר שאף עלינו נרשמו הנדורים.

אבל נשתחנא לחייו — חיים.

ולמי הלא-חיים.

כי רוח בנו מנשבת — רוח חיים!

היא רוח הרעות

לא ימסגנה סנות!

לא המון-דבאות צרים.

היא חזקה בטנות!

היא אדירה גם בדבאנו העציר.

דשם שהפלסח

אדיר סלוחסיו.

תמי רעות הלוחמים!

ימי צחקה-ברבר-הפלסחים!

עבת-שקס!

הסתי!

רעות נסה נאדינה וצרמוסית

בהבחושי האש שלנשיקת סיגוריות!

ונה רק שפצ-אש-אורח-רעות.

הו לבנה זורח אור בשקש!

היא נסלחה.

בשיר הזעם — העליו. העירקני.

בנקבותי הסד, בקניוני הענקים.

בנדי-אל-עמוד!

במסעות ספדה!

ברוח הקרים. —

והיא רק שפץ רוח הרעות.

שלבנה פשיב רוחות

על כל הערצ!

על יצר גניג

בפלסחי הקר!

באשדות החשש בשדות

בבאן ועד סרמבית.

הא, יתסת-היום.

הא, קשת-הלילה.

אל תתנשי במנצי היר

אשר חושבת ברשי.

הלא אצלו רורבת הסתקשת!

עברי גניו-חשכל!

שכרת ומאקבת!

באירה!

רעות הלוחמים

THE FRIENDSHIP OF FIGHTERS  
For the Palmach

My buddies,

Here comes the sun in Tabor

and it is really red.

And behind us, the night of battle.

Here we have returned to the base, the living and the not living,  
but the spirit of life breathes in all of us!

Therefore, we will lift a cup, — very red.

Hey, guys, wine makes the heart glad!<sup>29</sup>

Simply,

through its warm and sweet taste!

Guys, long live the Palmach!

And a man from among the fallen will no longer return.

It's possible that the bullets had our names on them, too.

But let us drink, please, to our life — Life

and to the lives of those who are no longer alive,  
for a spirit blows hard in us — the spirit of life!

It is the spirit of friendship

which death will not crush!

Not many armies of enemies,

it is stronger than death!

It's also greater than our young army,

just as the Palmach

is greater than its fighters.

Long live camaraderie of fighters!

Long live its jest of barbarian curls!

Of thick mustaches!

Animal-like!

A crude, delicate and crafty camaraderie

in the flickering fire of a cigarette's kiss!

And this is only a part of the fire that lights friendship,

yes, its heart streams light like the sun!

<sup>29</sup>Psalm 104:15

It's marvelous,  
 in a song of fury — of joy, Zimmerman song,  
 in the stammering of echoes, in the giant canyons,  
     in wadi El-Amud!  
     On the approach to Masada!  
     In the mountains, —  
 and this is just part of the spirit of friendship,  
 whose heart blows winds  
     over all the land!  
 Over the Ganegar Forest  
 in Hagar's curls!  
 In the vacation waterfalls in the fields  
     from here on until Merchavia.

Ha, the carefree one of the day,  
 ha, you of the difficult night  
 don't be shy from the touch of a hand  
     that supports my buddy,  
     does he not have reserve ammunition!  
 Pass like electric wine!  
 Drunk and in love!  
     Illuminating!

## THE FRIENDSHIP OF FIGHTERS

In spite of the fact that war may be hell and arguably immoral, it doesn't seem to prevent fond memories from being preserved or romantic poems being written. O. Hillel has written a quick poem extolling his good friends and their celebration of life even as they are in the midst of potential death.

The scene begins as the soldiers are at rest and the sun sets. They have come back to the base tired but feeling vibrant, flush from the day's fighting. They lift a cup for a toast remembering the Biblical phrase, "wine makes the heart glad." With the use of this line, Hillel has reminded the audience what the fight is all about. The soldier quoting, not from religious conviction but from the literature of his nation, establishes the idea that the Jewish people are fighting for a Jewish culture. In fact, I wonder if he isn't being a little jocular with his, "hey, guys" opening. If he were, that would make the point even more solid. How many American Jews are there that can quote Bible as the punch line to a joke?

So they drink to their day, remembering their fellows who died and realizing that it could easily have been them who did not return. That is one of the few sober thoughts they wish to have. Drinking to life is their preference.

They drink to their friendship and to the lasting bonds their army friendship will foster. They know that the friendship will continue past death (though the previous "The Soul of a Friend" worries about that) because the bonds made are more resilient than the life of one of the friends. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Secure in that knowledge they lift their glasses to their camaraderie and, teasing themselves, toast their macho look of wild hair and thick mustaches. The tone is jovial as they toast their more serious feelings.

Hillel cites places where the camaraderie between his friends was forged. All of them are well known and well traveled routes of Israeli youth and army hikes that serve to localize the poem. By doing this Hillel leaves abstract

descriptions of "bonding moments" and allows a host of Israelis who are familiar with these places the chance to remember the friendships they made and cemented on their hikes. Wadi El Amud is in the north, leaving Tzfah. The Ganagar Forest is between Afula and Migdal Ha-emek. Merchavia is a very old moshav in the Galil.

Only the reference to Masada is more cryptic. Spelled distinctly in the Hebrew מסדה refers to a poem by I. Lamdan. The poem "Masada" taught, "an awareness on the part of the young Jewish pioneer that in the land of Israel the Jew fights the final battle for Jewry."<sup>30</sup> This poem, a standard for many Israeli schools, emphasizes the reason these bonds form so strong. The friendship Hillel writes about is the friendship of buddies, the bond of facing a common struggle and the realization of the seriousness and importance of this struggle. The actions these soldiers take will determine in the most basic of ways the rest of their lives. Knowing that victory meant a free state and defeat might bring the worst of destruction is a pressure only those who fought can understand. This understanding is the bond he writes about.

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<sup>30</sup>Simon Halkin, Modern Hebrew Literature (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 74

דבר החילים האפורים  
A WORD OF THE GREY SOLDIERS

דבר החילים האפורים

את הדברים אשר יש על לבנו לומר לגארותינו,  
נאמר בדוקיית לשון.  
כי הדברים גדולים סכח לבנו,  
ולבנו מלחש דעקה — צאקראקה אנהנו.  
אנהנו החילים האפורים, עובדי-פדס,  
צאקים-צאקים אנהנו, כי לב לנו בחרותינו.

הנצרות,

אזהבים אנו את כל היתה ששקנו.  
כי עלינו אזהבים אנו את היתה:  
כי עלינו אנשים אזהבים אנהנו.  
אנהנו החילים האפורים, שנינו שחורות-מלחמה,  
שנחירינו צחוגי-מנת, שלשוננו נהנה מדרך.  
צאקים אנו אנהנו אל תוככי נפשותינו,  
אל גרסי צחוקנו,  
אל תוגת עינינו טהלות,  
אל מור-טהלות גוססנו,  
הוי, אל השיש הקי הנה!

כי יסיתו סכח לבנו,  
נאנו קשים מן האש. גסלעי הארץ הזאת.  
אך כמו סלע יקר מפזו טהבות בו מטה,  
בו יקר אנהנו טהבותנו בנו נפשים.

על כן הקשקנה, הנערות, אל דומית הלילה.  
אל הנערות המהלכות.  
הלא זה קולנו נבא ומסובבנו אהבה.  
הלא זאת פשיטת לבנו הנשקר לקראתנו.

#### הנערות.

הקשקנה ללילה.  
בלילה, בלילה, כן נפסון, ומפסלטי הר-האלהים.  
ומקרתני הנגב הסוהר.  
אליקו נמשותינו נוחות-בכי.  
אליקו שבורות-שבורות פרחים.  
הלא סלע לא הוביש פקין.  
ואיך הוביש נשמותינו?  
הו לא קהינו ספנות. רק פראינו האסיר.  
כי עובדי-דם קיינו  
לחם אל מולדת.

#### מולדת.

זה שם קרא לאהבתנו:  
כי יש מסתור, אליו נגיש באהרית כל דם.  
בגומותינו נגיש, או בקלי היותם.  
דפרפרים נגיעו עד שסתי שושנת,  
או בנשרים נגיעו עד שסתי השקיעה,  
נגיש עד שסותינו הקהובות,  
בשמשנים הקהובות ובשמש השוקעת.

נגיש! כי על כן ששקנו דם הרבה.  
דם רעים ודם אויבים.  
ובדם קמבנו סלקסה — ספר אקורי-ימים.

#### הנערות!

נצרותינו בנשרים ובקריאות, הסחכות של ססתנים נצח.  
אסונה לנו בקלי אהבתנו — הו אלה הם בקלי הט  
הנמקח סקו אל ירדתי מולדת.  
והוא כח לא-אלקסרי — אף נבא סקנו סלקסה.

#### הנערות!

נצרותינו הקהובות עד-שאול-ואלהי הלב!  
הקשקנה אל הדוסייה שבלבנו הצועק!  
קרינה אנוניקו לךבר המילים האפורים.  
הו, שתקנה לנו שצרי-האהבה.  
שבקנה לנו סנעולי כל הנגים.

דבר החילים האפורים

# A WORD OF THE GREY SOLDIERS

The things on our hearts, to our girls  
we'll say in a quiet whisper.

For these things are greater than the power of our hearts,  
and our hearts whisper a scream – screamers of love are we.

We are the grey soldiers, workers in blood.

We are screaming—screaming because we have a heart in our chests.

Oh girls,

we love all of the beauty within you.

For we love beauty:

For we are loving men.

We are the grey soldiers, whose hands are war-blackened,  
whose nostrils are reeking of death, whose tongues are parched from the road.  
We scream love to your innermost souls.

To the narcissuses of your laughter,

to the sadness of your blue eyes,

to the myrrh of your bodies,

O, to this living marble!

For you are more beautiful than strength of our hearts,  
and we are tougher than fire. Like the boulders of this land.  
But like a boulder gives rise to a spring of cold water when it is hit with a stick,  
so will we give rise to a cool spring of love when you strike us with longing for  
you.

Therefore pay heed, girls, to the silence of the night,

to the whispering wide open spaces.

Surely this is our voice which comes and surrounds you with love,

surely this is the beating of our heart which breaks towards you.

Oh, girls,

pay attention to the night.

At night at night from the north, and from the military posts on the mountain of  
God

and from the distances of the Negev shining with moonlight,

To you our souls are the sweet smell of crying.

To you the flowers are so intoxicated,



surely a rock doesn't dry up a well.  
 And how would we dry up our souls?  
 yes, we are not made dull by death. Only our reflection is made grey.  
     For we were workers of blood  
     fighting for our motherland.

Motherland,  
 this is the name one calls your love;  
 For there is a threshold which we will reach after all the blood has ceased.  
     With our bodies, alive or dead, we will reach it.  
 Like butterflies they will reach the lips of the lily  
 or like vultures they will reach the shores of the sunrise,  
 we will reach your beloved lips,  
     like beloved lilies and like the rising sun.

We will reach it! For that have we spilled much blood.  
     Blood of comrades and blood of enemies.  
 And in blood we wrote war — a book of cruel days.

Oh, girls!  
 Our girls in the villages and in the cities waiting by so many thresholds.  
 Grab for us chains of your love — behold, they are power lines  
     extended from you to the corners of the motherland.  
 And it's not electric power — but war is more awesome than it.

Girls!  
 Our beloved girls to the grave and God of the heart!  
 Pay attention to the silence in our screaming heart.  
 Lend your ear to a word of the grey soldiers.  
 O, open for us the gates of love.  
 Break the locks to all the gardens.

## A WORD OF THE GREY SOLDIERS

The Palmach came into existence as a formal body in 1941. The force was, at its inception, ramshackle. By any standards they were lacking in material and formal training. The corps was very young, many in their twenties. Strong friendships were sure to be made through training and through the program of kibbutz work.

The romantic image of the Palmach surely begins here. Tanned and strong, these young men and women in khaki made a handsome picture. Their youth surely played a part as well as the idea of a free Jewish army rising again. In this poem the romanticism of their plight is clear (defending the motherland, suffering to accomplish the goal) as well as their romantic interests. I must say that reading about the soldiers yearning for the girls back home was a new theme for me. I am used to reading about mothers' worry and young girls' pining. Sorrow, loneliness, and pining are not often presented as attributes of male-soldiers; that would conflict with their stoic suffering. It seems to clash with the expected yearning for freedom, for a homeland. The romance of the Palmach always seemed to me based on the selfless desire to attain the lofty goals of liberty, labor Zionism and a quasi-utopian vision engendered in a kibbutz. Here, though, the soldiers are lonely for their girls. The motherland is important and perhaps a motivation for the battlefield but here in a moment of rest, the soldier is looking for his girlfriend. That theme has made me wonder if this is a moment of softness in an otherwise tough soldier or if normally sensitive young men are moved to toughness when called.

The title, and recurring phrase **החילים האפורים**, the grey soldiers, is the first thing to investigate. Why grey? Are they neither black nor white, citizen nor soldier, but a mixture of both? Is Hillel foreshadowing their death alluding to the greyness that replaces the skin's ruddiness? Perhaps the root **אפר** hints at the

dust on their clothes giving them a grey pallor. They say they are "workers in blood" yet they are not red. Could the very nature of their work, killing, give them this ashen look as they realize what defending the nation entails? This last idea may be supported by the two descriptions the soldier offers of his fellows: *עובדי הדם* and *צועקי אהבה*. One is a man who is filled with passion, thrilling to the discoveries of youth, the other is a man involved in the blood and death of both his comrades and the enemy. Reconciling those two jobs must be emotionally unsettling.

The second stanza seems to bear out this confusion. It begins with a simple ode to women's beauty building momentum as he explains *we love all of the beauty within you/ for we love beauty/for we are loving men*. The rhythm of *כי על* helps to build the speed of the reading. But just as he explains what he is, he slips back to describe his alter-persona, the grey soldier who is sullied by war, who is surrounded by death, who suffers in the course of his duty. We, the reader, feel the hardship of his reality, the revolting flip side to the romantic soldier standing a clean post. And just as quickly, we are back to his dreaming of the girls and their beauty (pretty as a statue!).

Which is the daydream here? Is he on patrol, daydreaming about the girls or is he back at the base among their company temporarily reminded of the war he has experienced? The two are confused together. The soldier's thoughts are a jumble of emotions as his attention swings from one subject to the other.

For a few stanzas, though, the soldier's thoughts will focus on the girls. Their beauty is devastating. Hillel has given a new phrase to express heartbreak when he writes, "For you are more beautiful than strength of our hearts." The strong soldier of the battle melts when he sees the girls. Surely this is not a new idea but it does express an anguish that promotes the tender side of the Palmach soldier that is otherwise hidden. This tender side can be exposed only with the

girls presence. Like Moses and the rock waiting to give water, he is waiting to send his love. Moses only needed to ask the rock for water. Striking it was not necessary. Perhaps this is mirrored in the soldier's feelings. A young man is filled with ardor if only due to his youth. He is just waiting for some girl to approach him. However, he apparently sees the girls as so attractive that their mere presence is the catalyst to start this longing. It is out of the girls' control. She elicits his feelings whether she intended to or not. Imagine the pain this boy must feel as his emotions lead him to love regardless of any real contact with a girl. He is moved by their mere presence. He blames the girls, of course. He thinks that force his emotions.

The soldier stays strong, though and after blaming the girls for his passion he takes the lead and tells them that the silent nights carry his whispers, that his breaking heart can be heard in the night. What girl at the base can hear these words and not swoon just a little? He continues his exclamations of love as he sits in his military post in the north in a place called הר האלהים. "The mountain of G-d" phrase is found in two places in the Bible. Psalm 68 has an interesting use of it. Mount Bashan is called the הר האלהים. It is asked why it has jealousy for the mountain G-d chooses for G-d's dwelling. Different translations write, "majestic mountain" or "mighty hill." It seems to ask why a mountain so mighty and strong as Bashan should be jealous of Moriah. The interesting aspect of all this is that Bashan is a mountain in northern Israel between the Jabbok River and the Hermon. The larger point is that Hillel has established that the lonely soldiers are up in the north and down in the south, in the Negev. Wherever the soldiers are, they long for the girls. Whatever the soldiers do, they long for the girls. The image of the rock that Moses struck is brought out again. That rock did not quit giving its water. Neither can the boys, after being struck by the girls, quit their passion. Even the death around them

does not make them forget the girls. After all, even though they are "workers of blood" they can separate that from who they really are.

Indeed they must remember who they really are and why they are these "workers of blood." The Palmach encouraged the idea of "purity of arms" in order to justify why they had to use those arms to kill. The noble idea of killing for self-defense, killing for nothing less than survival is much more tolerable than the idea of using arms to suppress. I bring this up to show that he brings in the idea of survival and the rationale for fighting when he says the word, מולדת. The word motherland brings up ideas of survival, of fighting with one's back to the wall. It is a justification for fighting. It also is a smooth transition from the realities of war.

It is interesting to note that each time Hillel begins talking about the difficulties of war, he quickly moves to more pleasant subjects. He mentions that he is one of the עובדי הדם and then talks about his passion for the girls. He talks about hands black from war and then dreams of the girls' beauty. He again counts himself as one of the עובדי הדם and moves on to the more noble notion of motherland. The soldier distracts himself from the reality of the army.

What better distraction is there than to dwell on the end result of the fighting? To imagine the day when the dust literally settles and a better life is left for the victorious people must be a comforting thought during battle. Alive or dead, one's struggle will not be in vain. He compares reaching the end of the struggle to a butterfly approaching a flower and a vulture flying into the sunset. Butterflies do not make a direct line to a flower but dart about before they land, looking like they can't quite make it. A bird flying into the sunset will never make it, will always have a bit more sunset in front of it. Still they try and they persevere.



The next stanza insists on success. The soldier insists on success. There is no other option for him and not because of his own losses. He is sorry for the losses of his enemies, too. This sorrow, though, could be a recognition that he is the cause of their death. In either case, he dwells on the war and on the blood that was used to write the story of the war. Again, with his thoughts turned to blood, he turns them quickly to the girls.

Here is now what I consider to be the most expected (almost contrived) stanza of the poem. It is about the girls left behind as the boys fight it out on the lines. To this point there has been an interesting tension of selective daydreaming and of rationalizing thought. Now we have a section praising the girls on the homefront<sup>31</sup> waiting by the door sending "chains of your love." This could be the emotional security of knowing the girls are there or actual letters and phone calls that form the "link" between home and war. Their importance cannot be diminished. In fact, the soldier says they are "power lines" supplying, perhaps, the energy to get through another day, another training session, another battle. The last part of this stanza, *אך נורא ממנו מלחמה*, "but war is more awesome than it," is a little confusing. Is war more awesome than the electric lines or is war more awesome than the power of the support from home? I think that there is a movement of words increasing their strength from "chains" to "power lines" to war. The clarification of *כח כבלי* as not being true power lines is a brief digression to force an allusion. However, if we read *אך* as "for" then we could read, "for war is more awesome than [electricity]." This reading would have the lines of support more powerful than electric lines and the whole scenario of wartime elevating the importance of the whole idea. It would be

<sup>31</sup> An American term to describe those safe back at home. The connotations are correct even though in Israel the homefront and warfront are the same.

saying that war is much more dangerous and powerful than mere electric lines and the support from the homefront during war is more powerful than those lines.

The poem ends with a final call for the unwavering loyalty of the girls. The **עד** makes me think he is calling for their loyalty until death, a commitment until death. The idea of a boy and girl staying together until old age is turned on its head here. Instead, he may be asking for their loyalty even to the boy's early grave, meaning "do not forget me if I die young". He finishes the poem with a crescendo of beseeching: "Pay attention," "lend your ear." It is a desperate last minute plea. The last two lines even use classic expressions of yearning.

**פָּתַח לָנוּ שַׁעַר בְּעֵת נִעְלָח שַׁעַר** refers to the phrase in the machzor, **פָּתַח לָנוּ שַׁעַר**, "Open for us the gates, even as they are closing." This phrase is spoken as a final plea for our prayers to be answered even as time grows short for them. It is a final thrust of piety mixed with exasperation. Here, in the penultimate line of the poem, there is this final exasperated plea to have the girls listen just in case they have not been moved by the powerful lines above. The last line refers back to the locked gates in Song of Songs 4:12. Those gates are a metaphor for the girls' accepting or rejecting the advances of the suitor. Here, the soldier ask for the girls to open their hearts and let him in, let him approach and let him take comfort with her.

# במעלה העקרבנים AT SCORPIONS' ASCENT

המעלה העקרבנים

פתאם

התפוצץ אל עיני אלהים.

אירסותשכה.

אדיש הוד-תלומות, נשבר לפני — תררי-צוקים

בואקה עסק העקבה.

פרא-סרסבים.

אירצו האבן-טחנת-ונעות, אגרת שנת.

התפוצץ אל-אליהי העקבה:

רועש גבה תררי אדום, אל-אירצ-ורה.

גוף לא ישער,

צית הפתחת מחולקת.

לא רום — כי לזגס נושכת.

לא שמש — כי משפל רבכה.

ספד טדקעת הליפני מלפני אלהים

קסלפני רום קבדה.

או קסלפני שמש רועקת

או קסלפני ברצי הנפש הטשתברת.

לא משכתי מאוקת, רק נשכתי עוקרת בתכה.

נשכתי האנשים הטילים ששפדי גופים בלא-קול.

נאלי-הולם.

נאני ישכתי על הפלדה הקרה

אשר יצקיה ידי אדם.

נאני אסנתי הפלדה הקרה

אשר יצקיה ידי אדם למצו הרוג בו בעצמו

לכלי בוא בסוד נשגבות-עולם.

וגום.

קבר-נפלאות, פרוץ-שגעון-גדלות

היה אלהים לפני, קמות שהוא. נהדר-כער נרצונו

נצחי. —

לא יודע רואים!

מסשי לסרץ שפעות תסארתו, סכלי ימוחו האנשים

איו-כח לשאת המשא הזה.

אף לכלי יסכלו לנבם לו בקטנות ובחפלות.

הוא לבדו והרריו.

קדבר הפתחת הפלגטית.

קסעלת-העקרבנים הגים ברק וכשמו להיות מסלה.

קסעלת-העקרבנים התפוצץ אל עיני.

נאני אסנתי הפלדה הקרה.

ואפשר לא הייתי אני. כי צרי. ישפאל או סגרים.

אכל אדם הייתי בעולם, וידי אמונת סות

ופתחת קרה.

נאני נדה, ושואף קטנות.

יסלפני הקתער נצח!



דַּסְעוֹת עָסְמוּ אֶת עֵינַי, כִּי נָדַח הָיִיתִי.  
וְעֵינַי קָטְנוֹת מִשָּׂאת אֶרֶץ הָעֲקָרִים,  
וְאֲנִי בָכִיתִי לְאֵי־תַנְחוּמוֹת;

אֵל-אֱלֹהִים.

מִדּוּעַ יִצְרַנִּי אָדָם, וְלִבִּי מֵת לִהְיוֹת מְדַבֵּר, אוֹ לִהְיוֹת הָרִים.  
אוֹ לִהְיוֹת רוּחַ!

וְעֵינַי — לִהְיוֹת שָׁמַיִם, אוֹ שֶׁמֶשׁ!  
וְאִתָּה נִתְּתָה בְּיָדִי הַמַּתְקָה הַקְּרִי לַהֲרֹג בְּרוּאֵיךְ הַקָּטָנוֹת.  
וְאֲנִי, מִסְפֵּר אֲמוֹת קוֹמָתִי וְהוֹלֵךְ לַהֲרֹג תְּגָבִים בְּמוֹנִי,  
מִסְפֵּר אֲמוֹת קוֹמָתָם,  
בְּעוֹד בְּשִׁשׁ מִתְנַפֵּצֶת לִהְיוֹת נֶצַח!  
וְלֵךְ, אֵלַי, אִיד־קֶז שְׁנוֹת-אֹר הַנִּזְת־כָּל!  
בְּמַעֲלֵה הָעֲקָרִים, בּוֹאֲקָה עִסָּק הָעֲרֻכָּה, נֶגֶד אָדָם,  
רְאִיתִי אֶסְסוֹתַי, עַד בְּלוֹתִי בָכִי.

יְה־אֵלַי.

הוֹרֵד עַל בְּשִׁשׁ דּוֹמָתָה.

סָגַר לִבִּי מִלְּשֹׁנֶיךָ בְּשִׁשְׁרֵי אָבִן אוֹ תַּחַת.

הַסֵּר עוֹלָמְךָ מֵעֵינַי, שִׁים לִילָה עַל הָאֶרֶץ;

יְה־אֵלַי, יְה־אֵלַי, שִׁים לִילָה!

במעלה העקבים

# AT SCORPIONS' ASCENT

Suddenly

God exploded before my eyes.

There is no doubt,

indifferent, dreamily majestic, it broke before me — mountain promontories  
en route to the Arava valley.

Wide open wilderness

without end, the horrible laughing rock, a legend of stone

the Lord God of the wilderness exploded:

the top of the mountains of Edom make noise, God of a foreign land,

a view inestimable

the dreaming metallic wilderness

no wind — but a blowing Logos

no sun — but tremendous luminescence

The curtain of tears enveloped me from before God

as before a heavy wind,

or as before a thundering sun

or as before bolts of lightning from a splintered soul

I didn't think a thing. I just breathed molten lead.

And I heard the fighting men that were with me moaning without voice,  
in muted shock.

And I sat on the cold steel

that human hands cast,

And I grabbed hold of the cold steel

that human hands cast so that a man can kill Man by himself

so as not to be partner to the sublimities of the universe.

Neglected,

heavy with wonders, expansive in His megalomania

was God before me, as He is. Wonderful-ugly according to His will.

Eternal, —

knowing no seers!

Free to break the abundance of His splendor without having people die,

people who have no strength to carry this burden,

without people who act foolishly, praising Him with pettiness and with  
prayers.

He, alone, and His mountains  
the planet of flowing metal.

At Scorpions' Ascent, He set down lightning and enchanted it to become a road.  
At Scorpions' Ascent He burst before my eyes.

And I grasped the cold steel.

And its possible I wasn't me. Rather my enemy Ishmael or Egypt.  
But I was a man in the world, and my hand grabbed death

and cold steel,

and I was an outcast, and aspired to trivialities.  
and before me raged eternity.

Tears covered my eyes, for I had been outcast.  
and my eyes were too small to bear the land of the scorpions;  
and I cried without comfort.

Lord, God.

Why did you create me as a man, while my heart longs to be a desert or to be  
mountains.

Or to be wind!

And my eyes — to be sky, or sun!

And you gave into my hand the cold metal to kill one of your small creations.

And I, just a number of cubits is my height and I go to kill grasshoppers like me,  
they stand just a few cubits

and my soul is still bursting to be eternity!

And to you, my God, without end of light years, Being of all!

At Scorpion's Ascent, coming into the Arava Valley, facing Edom,

I saw my nothingness until I ceased my crying.

God, my God.

Bring silence upon my soul.

Close off my heart from before you, with gates of stone or Tophet.

Remove your world from my eyes, bring night upon the land;

Lord, my God, Lord, my God, bring night!

## AT SCORPIONS' ASCENT

Six or seven miles southeast of Dimona is a paved road called **דרך מעלה העקדבים**, or Scorpions' Ascent Road. Originally paved by the British in 1927 it was the only road to Eilat until 1956. There is a look-out at the top of the road that gives an exceptional view of the Wilderness of Zin, the Arava and the mountains of Edom. At the top of the road there is a memorial to bus passengers travelling to Beer Sheva who were set upon and killed in 1954. Besides the potential terrorist threats, there are also signs that warn of falling rocks. Clearly, Scorpions' Ascent is a place of beauty and danger.

This poem takes place as Hillel and his military unit arrive at the top of **מעלה העקדבים**. After driving up several switchbacks, the top has a view eastward of the Arava valley below. It is not difficult to imagine the slow pace of a military convoy driving through the hot desert feeling enclosed by the rock all around. Then, arriving at the top, perhaps turning a corner, the view "explodes" changing from the enclosed rocks to the wide open valley. It is here that Hillel has started his poem.

Hillel looks out at the land and tries to describe it. He recognizes the savagery in the land and its inherent dangers as he looks out. There in the distance is Edom, Jordan, making noise. Are these real bursts of artillery or imagined attacks just as threatening? He also looks out to the land and feels the presence of the Divine. There is no wind to feel the presence of the place but the Logos, an often Christian concept of the Divine presence, is there to confirm what he sees. (Later, in the 1956 version of the poem, Hillel changes the word to "ether," giving the scene an intangible presence.) There is no sun, but referring to Ezekiel's perception of the Divine presence in the eponymous book chapter 1: 4 and 27 the scene is lit by a crackling of electricity with no clear source. There is

just light everywhere.<sup>32</sup> To further portray G-d's presence, there is a "curtain of tears" that surrounds him.

With the landscape firmly established (both in the poem and by G-d) Hillel abruptly looks at the foreground. We are now looking around at a group of soldiers similarly made quiet by the scene. Hillel is sitting on "cold steel" looking out at the magnificence of G-d's creations when he realizes that the creation of Man upon which he sits (a tank? an armored personnel carrier? a jeep?) is a tool of destruction. G-d has set in motion a system of life, a balanced ecology that sustains many living things. Hillel and his army have set in motion a destructive force, an army that has been cast in steel with the purpose of killing the enemy — fellow human beings and creations of G-d. The line, "And I grabbed hold of the cold steel/that human hands cast so that a man can kill Man by himself" points out how individual people, a man, is capable of killing large amounts of his own species, Man. It also shows how Man has usurped G-d's role in deciding life and death. With due respect to a sensitivity to male-centered language, I used the words 'man' and 'Man' with their single letter distinction to help make the point. Hillel takes this irony a step further. He suggests that because humanity destroys what G-d has created they will never draw closer to understanding G-d or have any sense of the "sublimities of the universe".

Hillel looks to G-d and sees G-d "neglected" by people. G-d appears as a melange of appearances and abilities with many miracles to His credit. Anything is possible for G-d who could be wonderful or ugly or whatever He wants. G-d could "break the abundance of His splendor" without a war where people must die. What is the "abundance of His splendor"? Is it the land, creation itself? Hillel is crying out against G-d, wondering why G-d could not have found

<sup>32</sup>The word רבבה normally is "myriad" or "ten thousand." In each case, it is a hyperbole to signify a great amount. I chose the word "tremendous" to give the same overwhelming idea.

an easier way to share the wealth of the land without having people die for it or waiting for people to pray "foolishly". If G-d is so mighty, why does G-d need either war or vain praise?

The tone of anger at G-d and awe at G-d's creative powers is set as Hillel continues the poem. He sees lightning and how it looks like a road. The wonder of it all returns us to the theme set in the beginning of the poem, of G-d in the guise of the view bursting before his eyes. But this wonder again is cut short as he grabs for his gun. At this moment, Hillel is confused by what he sees and what he is supposed to do. Surrounded by all this magnificence, he realizes that he is there to wreak destruction on others who see it too. The conflict of G-d's creation versus his destruction gives him pause to feel for his enemy the Arab people and the country, Egypt. He thinks of them for a moment, identifies with them and their struggle and then remembers that he is a man with orders and he grabs his gun.

Orders are small solace to a man who is in awe of the creative powers of G-d. Instead of feeling connected with his mission, he feels like an outcast, his job profaning the beauty he sees. He is unworthy to be there and he cries from the realization that he cannot comprehend all that he sees. He pleads with G-d, angry that his soul could not have been esconced in something more grand than a man. Perhaps being a desert or a mountain or wind would bring him closer to understanding the "sublimities of the universe."

Joining any greater knowledge is not what he can expect as he bemoans his lot to only have been given the knowledge to kill. Hillel uses the word תנבים to bring to mind the story of the spies scouting the land of Israel for the people as they wandered in the desert.<sup>33</sup> Using this phrase he recognizes how small and

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<sup>33</sup>Numbers 13: 33.

inconsequential he and his enemy truly are compared to the landscape and G-d's power. He is distraught as he comes to understand the disparity between his vain hope of joining the things of eternity and the reality he lives. He comes to realize how, in comparison, he is nothing. Tormented, he cries as he begs G-d to relieve his suffering by masking the view with the darkness of night.

This poem begins as a romantic poem glorifying the beauty of the land of Israel. It ends with the breakdown of a soldier as he only begins to understand the implications of a war over land created and given by a third party. There is a sense of futility as he grabs his gun and a sense of being trapped into the realities of one perspective while slowly gaining a more spiritual perspective that necessarily brings on a conflict.



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