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Israeli Identity as Expressed in Contemporary Israeli Literature

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Summary

In five chapters, this thesis will explore the ways in which contemporary Israeli authors express their notions of Israeli identity and ethos through works of fiction, and will attempt to answer questions about the Israeli notion of the self and other. As arbiters of culture, contemporary Israeli authors are both expressing and creating the ethos and identity of their generation.

It is my belief that a shared understanding between American and Israeli Jews of what comprises and informs Israeli identity is vital to the development, growth and understanding of both peoples vis a vis their notions of Judaism and Jewish identity. If Israel is the Jewish homeland, towards which American Jews turn in prayer, and is a chosen destination for their children's summer educational programs, then it begs a greater understanding of the place and its people. Additionally, the gap between American and Israeli Jews grows ever wider as Israel continues to develop and emerge as its own nation, not a mere political satellite of the United States in the Middle East. In order to foster any sort of relationship with Israel, American Jews need to read the stories that Israelis are writing; to understand the nuances of Israeli culture, and how demography, history, and geography weigh upon the Israeli creativity.

The material is divided into three sections: the creation of the New Jew, encountering the Other, and the Israeli Existential Condition. This thesis utilizes mainly primary source material, namely, Israeli works of fiction and memoir, as well as a variety of essays on the topics of identity and identity formation.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Literary depictions of Israeli identity have long been that of the warrior underdog; a nation risen from the ashes of centuries of persecution that managed to triumphantly turn into an agent of its own destiny. Paul Newman's portrayal of the valiant and handsome Ari ben Canaan in the 1960 film adaptation of Leon Uris' epic tale of the birth of the nation of Israel, *Exodus*, burrowed its way in to the Israeli and Diaspora zeitgeist. The ideal of the Israeli soldier, having reclaimed the land and language of the Bible, has maintained its place in the world's understanding of what it means to be a citizen of the Jewish state for many years to come. Decades of war and violence have reified that image into a continuous reality that has become the Israeli national narrative. In his book, *The Sabras: The Creation of the New Jew*, Oz Almog writes about this generation of Israelis who created themselves, and their nation anew. He opens his book with the following description:

> When blond, handsome, fearless Yaron Zehavi, commander of the Hasamba gang, defied the British policeman Jack Smith, who threatened to throw him and his valiant comrades in jail, how different he seemed from the cowed and pious Diaspora *yeshiva* boy in Europe! Here was the new Jew, born and bred in his own land, free of the inhibitions and superstitions of earlier ages; even his physique was superior to that of his cousins in the old country. Zehavi, the hero of the most popular series of children's books produced by the new State of Israel, was the classic Sabra… [he] represented what has been described as a sudden and nearly total sociocultural revolution that, in a historical instant, produced a new society and culture with its own customs and codes and a new language and literature. [1]

This image of the Sabra, named after a prickly cactus fruit of the same name, became prolific through the active creation of a generation of native-born (or nearly-native born child immigrants to the land). The educational systems from before the creation of the state in 1948, guided by the principles of the labor Zionist movement, shaped this generation in to

[1] Almog, *The Sabras*, p. 1

men and women of the world, for whom carrying a rifle and tilling a field were second nature. Almog suggests that this Sabra stereotype was reinforced by authors whose works began to be published in the 1930s through the 1950s in the literature of the pioneering youth movements.[2] Citing Israeli scholar of Hebrew literature, Gershon Shaked, Almog notes that the early years of this generation's literature were published mainly through youth movement magazines and later in the labor movement's newsletters themselves. Their works were a kind of manifesto, at one and the same time reflecting the growing self-understanding of this generation as set apart and different, while also transmitting that distinction to others of their generation. "From the time they were first published," writes Almog, "the Sabra writers stressed their uniqueness, which reinforced the Israeli public's view that what had arisen was not only a new literary generation, but a new cultural generation with an authentic 'Land of Israel,' style."[3]

Israeli society began to outgrow and question the supremacy of this image of the native-born Sabra that had begun to turn into a pastiche toward the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, particularly after the Lebanon War – the first war that deeply divided Israeli society[4]. The political tensions of the region continued to create a reality where military concerns outweighed those of the rest of society, but that society was continually changing, and the Israeli narrative of self-understanding along with it. In her book, *The Israelis: Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Land*, Donna Rosenthal tries to illustrate for the outsider an picture of how Israeli society has evolved from a collection of warrior farmers

[2] Almog, *The Sabra*, p. 13
[3] ibid, p. 15
[4] ibid, p. 17

to "ordinary people trying to live normal lives during abnormal times."[5] Rosenthal unpacks the segments of Israeli society that exist today, explaining the differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds of Israelis today: "The Israelis … are a disparate mix of radically modern and devoutly traditional… Israelis are expert at living with a frequency of terrorist attacks no other people has endured for so long."[6] Israeli identity has morphed from the uniform Sabra of the first half of the 20th century, to a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic mix of Israelis. The trauma of a world that created the Sabra, that of persecution, nationalism and war has also changed; new traumas began to challenge the creation of Israeli identity-formation, and to cause people to seek new meanings in these changing circumstances. This search brought about the idea of the New Jew.

Of humanity's search for meaning, sociologist Georges Gusdorf writes, "because he is endowed with consciousness… [man] is given to himself as a problem to solve, a situation to clarify."[7] Such a quest for meaning is a consistent thread running throughout the works of contemporary Israeli authors. Violence and traumatic loss are still very real every-day challenges, but there are a host of divisive issues of difference within Israel's borders that have begun to challenge what it means to be Israeli. In his 2012 collection of short stories, *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*, Israeli author, Etgar Keret opens with a story of a man held at the point of several guns. The men holding these guns, each having arrived at his door of their own accord, have the same demand, that the author tell him a story.[8] The men demand a story from the author that will offer a reprieve from the tenuous nature of their own lives. "Things are tough," they explain, "Unemployment, suicide bombings, Iranians. People are

[5] Rosenthal, *The Israelis*, p. 1
[6] ibid.
[7] Gusdorf, "Scripture of the Self: 'Prologue in Heaven,'" pp. 121-122
[8] Keret, *Suddenly, a Knock at the Door*, pp. 3 – 8.

hungry for something else. What do you think brought law-abiding guys like us this far? We're desperate, man. Desperate."[9] Such desperation is emblematic of the tensions surrounding the Israeli's search for self, expressed by contemporary Israeli authors in this work. These authors challenge the supremacy of the New Jew ideal in the Israeli cultural consciousness.

Israeli identity-formation begins with the image of the New Jew. The early Zionists re-imagined an identity of their biblical ancestors, for whom the land was of primary concern. An overwhelmingly European understanding of Jewish emancipation led the early state builders to reject the medieval image of the emaciated and overly educated Jew, embracing instead a return to powerful self-determination, as found in the Biblical stories of the early Israelites. Rabbi David Hartman explains:

> In the Bible one encountered people fighting wars, interacting with nature, living freely and boldly. In a word, the Bible depicted the heroic age of the Jewish people when Jews were physically strong and vibrant. In order to overcome the anthropology of exile, of the frightened, emaciated, mind-obsessed Jew, Zionists turned to the Bible.[10]

Israeli Authors Meir Shalev and Amos Oz write of the experiences of these early state-builders, for whom the biblical narrative of homeland was of primary importance. Both question the viability of the New Jew narrative in the face of the human condition by exploring the interpersonal relationships between early pioneers as they worked to cultivate the land while attempting to radically change notions of personal and familial identity. Shalev writes with a nostalgic view of the past, both in novel and memoir forms. His stories offer glimpses into the ways that the Biblical Promised Land brought these early pioneers

[9] Ibid, p. 7
[10] Hartman, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition*, p. 7.

and immigrants together to shape for themselves a new identity that was tied to the land. Amos Oz writes of the experience of living in the urban centers of this newly developing land, and the ever-present shadow of danger against which the New Jew had to react. Part and parcel of these frontier experiences was the danger that created boundaries between the self and the other.

We encounter this Other here through the works of Savyon Liebrecht, Yehudit Katzir and Sayed Kashua; themselves marginalized members of Israeli society. Liebrecht's collection of short stories, *Apples from the Desert*, attacks the pre-concieved notions of many divisions throughout Israeli society. Her stories reflect the divisions between religious and secular, the lasting effects of the Holocaust in intergenerational relationships, and of the Arab-Israeli divide. Yehudit Katzir's collection of short stories, *Closing the Sea*, lends a more existential air to the exploration of the same themes as one protagonist at a time encounters them all. Sayed Kashua, himself an Arab-Israeli, expresses the dilemmas of Israel's perpetual Other living within the confines that Israeli society has set for that Other. Through these stories we experience the plight of the human condition, expressed by a sense of constantly seeking self through encounter with the Other. Sometimes the Other serves as a mirror to the self, engendering relationship between the two; and sometimes the distance between the self and the Other is so great as to only be commented upon and lamented. This difference between the self and the Other is basic to the human condition, and is reinforced by the very words we use as we try to explain our differences. Gusdorf explains,

> The creation of language precedes the creation of man. The first word, creating, gives rise to beings; then a second word intercedes to name the beings once they are created… the naming of realities works to set these realities in place once they are

> called into being; man, created in his turn will inherit a realm already organized into linguistic reasoning.[11]

These authors challenge the societal organization of man into segments of a population that are distinct and separate. By questioning the divisions between secular and religious, Arab and Israeli, old and young, and many more, they arrive at very different conclusions about what it means to be Israeli, and at the bottom of that, what it means to be human.

In David Grossman's novel, *To the End of the Land*, we explore the existential crises that arise when a mother sends her son off to war; a crisis that is continually repeated in Israeli society and one that has shaped various facets of the Israeli cultural narrative. Etgar Keret's short stories provide for the reader the ultimate view into a culture of existential questioning. Each of his characters painfully and powerfully deals with the human experiences of loneliness, belonging and ultimately the search for self amidst the volatile reality of living in a culture so tenuously bound to safety and security.

These, then, are the essential questions posed by the authors explored in this work; namely, how does one go about being human in a place where existence is challenged in very real ways on a very regular basis? The image of the New Jew has been battered and worn, and is in need of a new coat of paint. The works of Oz, Shalev, Katzir, Liebrecht, Grossman and Kashua may change the readers' understanding of what it means to be Israeli in a post-modern reality.

Chapter two explores in hindsight the creation of the New Jew through the works of Amos Oz and Meir Shalev. The chapter explores the Israeli connection to the land, and in particular the notion of the Bilical Promised Land. Concurrent with a discussion of the agriculturally-minded New Jew, I will discuss the power of differences in identity between

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[11] Gusdorf, "Scripture of the Self: 'Prologue in Heaven,'" p. 113.

the village-dweller and the city-dweller. Finally, no conversation about the creation of this New Jew would be complete without an acknowledgment of the power of war and violence on the creation of this facet of Israeli identity.

In chapter three, I explore the notion of Other in Israeli society. Explored therein are the divisions between religious and secular, young and old, immigrant and native, and of course the ever-evolving nature of the Israeli relationship with the Arab-Other. This middle chapter will begin to unravel the issues of creating and forming an identity in the face of the Other, in both terms of reflection and rejection.

Chapter four further delves into the foundational issues of self and Other introduced by the previous chapter. In it, I begin to explore the existential questions of contemporary Israeli society. Themes of loneliness and isolation abound in the works of the contemporary authors addressed in that chapter. Ultimately, they begin the work of flipping the old construction of the New Jew on its head, and questioning the validity of such a cultural foundation.

In the Conclusion I will attempt to identify a new archetype that has arisen within Israeli literature: that of the post-modern Israeli for whom there is no longer a univocal narrative of Israeli identity. Exploring stories that describe the challenges Israeli identity-formation is experiencing may help the Diaspora Jew shed a new light of understanding on their own relationships with Israel. By encountering the Israeli through these narratives that challenge the possibility of a monolithic national narrative, Diapsora Jews may be able to better understand the challenges of living in the Jewish State, while seeing the relationship between the Israeli self and other as a paradigm for a personal engagement with Israel. For

the purposes of this project, these stories were read in the English translation, so as to give the non-Hebrew speaker access to such discussions of Israeli identity.

Chapter Two: The New Jew

The so-called, New Jew, was to be just that: a picture of youth, vigor, and power. To move the Jews from a narrative of powerlessness to one of power over their own destiny would require a radical change of outlook about what it meant to be a Jew. The early Zionists, who were overwhelmingly of European origin, found in the biblical narratives of Abraham, Moses, and David a sense of what it meant to be a powerful Jew; to dedicate oneself to a cause, and to fight for that cause. It also heightened the Zionist connection to the land. The Zionist cause was to overthrow the millennia-old narrative of Jew as weak and studious, and reclaim instead an ancient understanding of what it meant to be a Jew: agricultural endeavor was elevated over text study, and the ideals of Jewish nationalism replaced Talmudic study as the new arena for intellectual debate.

Zionism required feet on the ground, legs and arms and hands to do the labor of building the state that would one day fulfill these ideological premises. The *halutzim*, the early pioneers of the Zionist experiment, perfectly embodied the values and ideals set forth by the idealogues in whose vision the state was to be created. Youth and vigor, strength of body and fortitude of spirit were required traits for these young, mostly Eastern European Jews upon whose works the Jews of the world were depending to return to the land.

These youth left behind entire lives in the pursuit of creating a state. Inspired by the dream of having a place in the world, these young adults sacrificed the lives and worlds that they knew to venture to a place full of unknowns. Many studied agriculture before arriving in the land of Israel, but many more still just came with willing hands and seemingly able bodies to set about the work of state-building, from the ground up. The world left behind did

not fade quickly, and for many it lingered and yearned to be re-created in some way. For others, a mentality of endless labor held sway.

But the dream of an uninhabited land, ready and waiting to be reclaimed by these inheritors of the Biblical promise was soon shattered when the *halutzim* arrived to find that the land was not entirely empty. What was left of the Biblical Promised Land for these Jewish settlers was often land deemed unsuitable for agriculture; and so these young pioneers set about the task of creating the land that they would then cultivate. In addition to the Diaspora vision, a counterpoint to the Zionist *halutzim* experience of village life and agriculture there was the vision of the city founders and dwellers; those who created the new Jewish city of Tel Aviv as well as those who came to live in the millennia old city of Jerusalem. Neither experience shared much in common with the other, and by Labor Zionism's standards, village life was clearly preferable to city living, but both were required in order for the Jewish State to evolve.

Amos Oz (1939 – present), and Meir Shalev (1948 – present) write vivid retellings of this early Zionist experience. Oz began his life in Jerusalem, as a city dweller, but upon the early loss of his parents he was sent to live on a kibbutz. Oz writes of both experiences with sharp alacrity and a painful lens on the past. Shalev, on the other hand, was born in to a village family, and was later raised in Jerusalem. His writings about village life lend a romantic, satirical, and poignant view of what it meant to be a pioneer in the pre-State years. The contents of this chapter draw heavily upon their works; for each author I have chosen a fictional text and works of non-fiction that reflect their experiences and memories. For Shalev, characters and events from his novel *Blue Mountain* (1988) closely resemble tales that he relates in his memoir, *My Russian Grandmother and Her American Vacuum Cleaner*

(2009). For Oz, stories from his novel *Where the Jackals Howl* (1965), share commonalities with his works of non-fiction, particularly *Under this Blazing Light* (1995), a collection of essays that Oz himself writes, in the preface to the book, could be substitutes for stories he had not yet written. Common throughout the works of both are deliberations on what was necessary in the creation of the New Jew.

Bible, Land and Language

In his novel *The Blue Moutain*, Meir Shalev writes about a small collective village, or *moshav*, whose inhabitants' lives illustrate the individual dramas that ensued in the process of tilling the land and laying the groundwork for the creation of the State of Israel. The village teacher in the novel, Piness, is a beloved character whose idiosyncratic methods highlight the ideological connections between the land and the bible. The narrator, Barukh, says of him, "Like all his pupils, I was used to his quoting from the Bible."[12] Contemporary scholar, Rabbi David Hartman, writes of the early Zionists that they, "looked to the Bible for a new anthropology. They sought in the Bible a different image of the Jew."[13] Piness, then is not merely idiosyncratic in his frequent quotations of the Bible. As the village teacher, responsible for the education and formation of the future leaders of what Shalev refers to as "The Movement" (i.e. Labor Zionism), Piness' quoting from the Bible served two primary purposes: to anchor the students' connection to the land firmly within the foundational text of the Jewish people, while emphasizing the importance of such a text to the agricultural work that was the village livelihood:

[12] Shalev, *The Blue Mountain*, p. 9
[13] Hartman, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition: An Ancient People Debating its Future* p. 4

> Piness never spoke of "years," only of "forms"… Piness liked to compare education to agriculture. When talking about his work, he was prone to expressions like "virgin earth," "an unpruned vine," "irrigation holes." His pupils were saplings.[14]

With biblical tales ringing in their ears, the early settlers, represented in *Blue Mountain* by the narrator's grandparents and their contemporaries, seem to relish the connections between their existence as farmers to their biblical ancestors experiences of settling in the land. As with many other small collective villages in pre-State Israel, once the hard work of swamp draining and irrigation setting was done, the people of these villages began to plant, in the anticipation of creating a new and self-sustaining enterprise; as the fields were sown, so too did these young adults begin to grow their own lives and families. Shalev's narrator recounts the tale surrounding the birth of the village's first child, which was unsurprisingly understood by these young Zionists in Biblical terms, "The committee counted the months and concluded that Grandmother would give birth around Shavuot, the holiday of first fruits. 'And what better first fruit could there be than the first child of the village?'"[15]

This particular scene illustrates a few of the major themes of early Zionism. First and perhaps most noteworthy to a 21st century reader, is the collective nature of the pre-State Zionist agricultural experience. The fact that a committee (here the village leadership) would be convened to discuss something as intimate as an expected due date, and all of the implications regarding conception was perhaps not so foreign at a time when the establishment of the State relied upon the fertility of both the land, and its inhabitants. The character in question, Barukh's grandmother, Fegye Levin, was from the start subject to the

[14] Shalev, *The Blue Mountain*, p. 9
[15] ibid p. 52

collective nature of the early settler's lifestyle. The foundational lore of the village is based around her and the three young men with whom she toiled, side-by-side at the start of the entire venture. The Fegye Levin Workingman's Circle is what these three young men came to call themselves, and so it comes as no surprise that when said Fegye Levin finally settled on one of the three young men with whom she drained the swamps and planted the fields, the due date of her first child would be fodder for collective village conversation. That the child was due around the time of the agricultural holiday of Shavuot seems perfectly fitting, as it was the agricultural and nationalistic holidays of Judaism that these early settlers kept. Shavuot, in contemporary Jewish practice, highlights the receiving of Torah at Mt. Sinai. In early Israeli, and particularly *halutzim* culture however, the holiday's main point of significance was as a harvest holiday upon which both the barley and wheat harvests were celebrated.[16]

As one can imagine, the news of the first child of a new village elicits a wide array of wishes, hopes and dreams for the yet-unborn child. While such wishful thinking is understandable and indeed normal for the parents and friends of any child, it is heightened to a new level of intensity in the scene from village life that Shalev illustrates here, in a conversation between Barukh and one of his father's contemporaries:

> Leiberson's wish for the baby was that he should grow up to plough the first furrow in the Negev desert. Rilov's was that he redeem the mountains of Gilead and the Bashan. My father promised to teach him the mandolin. They imagined him sowing – ploughing, bringing faraway Jews from the Urals and the deserts of Arabia to this

[16] (9) You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. (10) Then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot) for the Lord your God, offering your freewill contribution according as the Lord your God has blessed you. (11) You shall rejoice before the Lord your God… (Deuteronomy 16). JPS Translation.

> country, and developing new, sturdier strains of wheat. And what did he turn out to be? Your uncle Avraham.[17]

Barukh's uncle Avraham, as it turns out, did none of those things. Rather, he stuck close to home, and became a dairy farmer; a noble profession for one living in and contributing to village life, but apparently not quite the visionary First Son that the village had hoped for.

In his novel, *Where the Jackals Howl*, Amos Oz writes of this trope of failure of the first son. This story, also set in an agricultural setting, but here a *kibbutz*, Shimshon Sheinbaum writes about his son, who is about to return home in grand military style by parachuting on to the *kibbutz* in a pre-planned military display:

> The second generation grew up in the shadow of our achievements; that's why they are so confused. It's a matter of dialectics. But the third generation will be a wonderful synthesis, a successful outcome: they will inherit the spontaneity of their parents and the spirit of their grandparents. It will be a glorious heritage distilled from a twisted pedigree…[18]

The literary trope of the failure of the son also has its roots in the Bible. Isaac son of Abraham and Sarah, is perhaps the most overlooked of the biblical forefathers. Ever acted-upon, from the dramatic moment of his almost-sacrifice on Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22), until he is tricked in to giving his deathbed blessing to the wrong son (Genesis 27), Isaac is the proverbial forgotten son. Following the traumatic and harrowing tale of his near-sacrifice at the hands of his own father, the next time Isaac appears in the text, he is a young man of marriageable age. Abraham sends his servant, Eliezer, back to the land of Abraham's birth in order to find a bride for Isaac (Genesis 24:4). The journey that follows results in Isaac's marriage to Rebecca, who ultimately takes Isaac's place as the one who shapes the destiny of the following generation. It is Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau, who venture afar and bear

[17] Shalev, *The Blue Moutain*, p. 55
[18] Oz, *The Amos Oz Reader*, p. 35

enough children to become nations unto themselves. Isaac does not leave home, he does not found any large family, he does not even in the end, get to choose which son will receive his blessing.

In *Blue Mountain*, not only does the first born son of the village turn out to be unremarkable in terms of his contribution to the Labor Zionist movement, but such expectations further skew the development of nearly his entire generation within the village: "As ridiculous as it may seem, the myth of the firstborn child retains its power," said Meshullam Tsirkin, who never forgave his father Mandolin and his mother Pesya for finishing second. "Your grandmother Feyge carried the child of the whole village in her womb."[19]

This Zionist dream of living out the life of the Israelite in the land of the Bible had its cost. For many, a sense of loss for the world they had left behind kept them from fully integrating in to the quickly developing norms of pre-State, Zionist society. The tender ones, who were better suited to lives of study or commerce were marginalized amongst the young farmers whose mandate it was to till the soil and settle the land. In *Blue Mountain* this sad character is brought to life in the form of the narrator's great uncle, who came with his sister, the aforementioned and much lauded Fegye Levin, to the land of Israel to live out the Zionist dream. After only a short time draining swamps, however, it became clear to this uncle that agricultural life was not for him, and he returned to Tel Aviv to seek a more suitable vocation. Yet even in the city being built by European ex-patriates, the nostalgic uncle could find no reprieve:

> "The girls here," he wrote to his sister, who was then digging irrigation holes in orange groves near Hadera, "are callous and crass and pay no mind to a young man

[19] Shalev, *The Blue Mountain*, p. 53

> like me who cannot serenade them or sweeten their lives with honey. They want strong fellows who sing while they work, and I, weak and afflicted as I am, am not well liked by them. How I long for a soft, pure hand, for the fragrance of a muslin dress, for a cup of coffee with little cakes on a white table by a green riverbank"[20]

In a work of non-fiction titled, *My Russian Grandmother and her American Vacuum Cleaner: A Family Memoir*, Shalev writes about the utter commotion that occurred in his family's village of Nahalal when his mother received, as the title would imply, a vacuum cleaner as a gift from his grandfather's brother who had moved to America and became an electrical appliance salesman, rather than staying in Israel. Life in America was the choice for many who came to the land of Israel but found that they could not bear the life of hard labor and sacrifice. It was a choice that created divisions and derision between Jews on an ideological level, and here, between brothers on a much deeper, familial level when the prosperous American brother offers to share the wealth that he enjoys with his brother in the Land of Israel:

> … He was insulted to the very core of his being. American dollars?! He who had come to the Land of Israel and drained the swamps, who had plowed the first furrows in the homeland, who had planted and sown, would not touch such capitalistic money from the Jewish Diaspora. Moreover, he was no beggar and was in no need of handouts from rich men, even if this rich man was his own brother.[21]

The offer of the aforementioned money was, clearly, rebuffed by Shalev's Grandfather. Undeterred, however, the American brother decides to send goods, whose cost of returning would be prohibitive; namely, an American vacuum cleaner. Shalev writes of the commotion that occurred when the vacuum cleaner arrived. It had come by boat, then train, and finally by a horse-and-buggy to the village. The arrival of such a package from so far away elicited such excitement that very shortly after its arrival members of the village gathered around to

[20] Shalev, *The Blue Mountain*, p. 46
[21] Shalev, *My Russian Grandmother*, p. 51

witness the unveiling of whatever it was that had traveled so far to their small *moshav* of Nahalal. Shalev describes the box in which the cleaner itself arrived. The front of the box depicted the iconic image of a 1950's American housewife; hair perfectly coiffed with impeccable makeup, bright red nails, and the standard poodle skirt of the era. As one can imagine, Shalev's grandfather did not want to accept any gift from his brother, let alone a symbol of the American housewife – quite nearly the antithesis of the New Jew's understanding of what was feminine.

> But the manicure had been chosen as the most negative symbol of them all because it showed up on the fingers, the fingers of those very same working hands whose purpose was to plow and dig and plant and build. Those pioneering hands that the revolution meant to clutch from the quill and pen and commerce and the Talmudic debating and return to weapons and tools and labor and farming. Hands that would hold pruning shears and squeeze udders, hands that would grasp the handle of a scythe and pull the trigger if necessary. So how could these be used for preening and beauty?[22]

While many bemoaned such lack of creature comforts, others who were not predisposed to farming and agriculture, went to extreme lengths in order to fit in amongst these settlers of the land, these state builders with whom the future of the Jewish people, according to their narrative, lay. Meir Shalev writes about his own father, a Jerusalemite and a teacher, who went to extreme ends while wooing his mother in order to show that he was not what the villagers disparagingly referred to as a "tiligent" – slang for "intelligent," and loaded with negative connotations. Shalev writes:

> As I have already mentioned, my father was, at the time, a teacher and when the summer holiday began he wrote that he intended to visit relatives in Ein Harod, Ginosar, and Kfar Yehezkel and asked if he might also visit her in Nahalal. When he appeared, seared by the sun, his skin red and flaking, she discovered that he had made long portions of the trip on foot in order to tan and strengthen himself so that he

[22] ibid, pp. 27 - 28

> would not appear before her family in the shameful guise of the bespectacled, white, city-dwelling "tiligent" that he was. [23]

Shalev's memoir, much like his fiction, moves backwards and forwards in time, and changes location between the village of his mother's birth, Nahalal, and her adopted home, Jerusalem. Shalev was born the same year as the State of Israel, 1948. His early childhood, then, took place during the years following the Israeli War of Independence, when the dream of a Jewish state had finally become a reality, and the image of the New Jew became the gold standard of what it meant to be an Israeli. He writes of his first day in grammar school in Jerusalem, and how his mother, despite having left the village of her youth, never gave up her identity as one of those whose labor created the land upon which the State of Israel would be built.

> Today, as I write these words, I grin to myself. Imagine a boy from the French or English or Polish countryside making such a statement on his first day of school in the big city. He would be a laughingstock! But the Israel of the 1950s was a different place, and my mother made it very clear what she expected of me: "That's what you'll tell them. 'I am a son of farmers from Nahalal!' Remember. Don't ever forget."[24]

Enmity, War and Personal Sacrifice

Chief amongst the themes of the Israeli narrative is that of loss. Loss shows itself in various forms throughout the works of these authors, but most often appears as mortal loss – that of loved ones and of life itself. The early Zionist intelligentsia imagined that they were sending the youth of their movement to an uninhabited land, where the dangers would be tantamount to those found in any frontier; drought, hunger, disease. These early settlers of the State of Israel, however, faced not only these natural dangers, but also the dangers of

[23] ibid, p. 40
[24] ibid, p. 43

enmity. I will speak later about the dialogical nature of the enmity that has developed between the Arabs and Jews living in the land; here, however, I will focus on the overall gestalt that kept these young people in the land, despite the dangers that surrounded them.

"I knew that Jerusalem was surrounded by forces that wanted me dead." [25] writes Oz of his childhood in pre-State Palestine in *Under This Blazing Light*:

> A city surrounded by the sound of alien bells at night, alien shells, alien vistas. A ring of hostile villages enclosed the city on 3 sides… It seemed as though they had only to clench their fist to crush the city. In the winter night you could sense a malicious purpose coursing from over there.[26]

Jerusalem was, indeed, surrounded by Arab villages in the years prior to the existence of the State, and was an easy target for those wishing to inflict military harm in the early years of the founding of the State. Indeed, throughout history Jerusalem has been a target of many a siege. Immediately following the UN Palestine Partition Plan of 1947 it became increasingly difficult for Jewish vehicles to reach Jerusalem, particularly from the coastal plain, where the majority of Jews lived at the time, and Jerusalem did indeed come under siege, the breaking of which was a major priority for the Israeli fighters of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

Shalev shares a rare moment of "sameness" that he experienced as a child during a train ride with his mother:

> The trip started with a descent to the Refa'im stream, which we knew from stories our father told us about King David, then on to Soreq stream, familiar from stories about Samson. At that time Refa'im served as the border between Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan. Our mother pointed out the Arab farmers on the other side as they worked small, neat plots of vegetables and watered them with the Jerusalem sewer water that ran in the ravine… The tracks were right on the border… and in the first and last

[25] Oz, *The Amos Oz Reader*, p. 105
[26] ibid, 106

> carriages of our train sat several armed border patrolmen… anyway, our mother said, "They're farmers like we are, so wave hello."[27]

Such a sense of being surrounded was not limited to those living in the ancient walled city of Jerusalem. Oz writes of this same sense of feeling surrounded by forces that wished him harm in his novel, *Where the Jackals Howl*:

> It is the way of the nigh light to distort the appearance of inanimate things and to infuse them with life, cold and sinister, vibrant with venom. At the same time it slows down the living things of the night, softening their movements, disguising their illusive presence. Thus it is that we cannot see the jackals as they spring out from their hiding places. Inevitably we miss the sight of their soft noses sniffing the air, their paws gliding over the turf, scarcely touching the ground.[28]

Both the urban and rural environments shared the experience of fearing forces that felt as if they were surrounding the individual. Oz describes his Jerusalem experience in much more direct terms – he knew, even as a child, who exactly was poised ready to surround his home and family. In *Jackals*, Oz writes with a more metaphorical slant; the wilds of the countryside posed their own dangers, but the human enemies of the *kibbutzinik* felt as though they were part of that landscape, "paws gliding over the turf." The forces that wished them harm surrounded their settlements in the quietest of ways, using guerilla tactics rather than sheer displays of force as in the case of Jerusalem. Either way, the feeling of being surrounded by those who wish you harm dug its way in to the Israeli subconscious from the early years of the *yishuv* and has rested comfortably there ever since.

In *Blue Mountain* Shalev writes of the northern Jezreel Valley farmer's experience of this fear as rather distant. The day-to-day work to be done on the *moshav* takes precedent in the mind of the characters in Shalev's work, but they are not untouched by loss from violent

[27] Shalev, *My Russian Grandmother*, p. 109
[28] ibid, 12-13

confrontation. The losses incurred in the village early on were mostly related to the dangers of living in a frontier land; men and women succumbed to heat exhaustion and sickness, most famously the malaria that many a young immigrant incurred while draining the swamps the northern valleys. "It was then… that I first understood that we had founded two settlements, the village and the cemetery, and that both would keep growing," writes Shalev's narrator. Unlike the reader of Oz's works, Shalev leaves his readers relatively unscathed when it comes to creating a window into such a mentality of loss and fear. Shalev gives the impression that his characters experience loss in a less traumatic, fear-inducing way than do Oz's characters, and Oz himself. Yet Shalev cannot completely ignore the historical realities of war that situate his fictional village within the realities of Israeli history. The narrator's uncle, Efrayim, enlists with the British Military in pre-State, or British Mandate Palestine, thus bringing the reality of war directly to Shalev's quiet village:

> There was worry in the air. The war was far away, but there were times at night or in the quiet hours of the autumn afternoons when villagers fell silent, gazing to the north and west as if they could see and hear what was happening. 'The blood of our distant brothers was calling and crying out to us.'[29]

Eventually, though, the Arab-Jewish conflict reached the village of Shalev's *Blue Mountain*, when the narrator's own parents are killed by a bomb thrown, at close range, into their own home. Shalev writes,

> The village got over the tragedy. "We were made of the toughest of cloths." There wasn't a house without its dead, whether from malaria or a bullet, from the kick of a wild mule, or at the hands of the deceased himself. "Or of the nation we served, or of the Movement and its dreams."[30]

[29] Shalev, *The Blue Mountain*, p. 117
[30] ibid, p. 171

Blue Mountain is not in and of itself a story about loss from any particular war, but rather of the loss that happens at the hands of those we love and trust. Shalev's tale is not one of Jewish military prowess, it tells the story of the extended family of a small village, trying to actualize the dream of a political and social movement. In Shalev's nonfiction, he writes about his grandmother in a way that I believe represents the general conflict that exists in the lives of all of his characters, particularly those of *Blue Mountain*:

> She did not work at Hulda or Be'er Yaacov, she did not help establish Deganya or plow the fields at Sejra or Yavniel. She simply came to her family at Nahalal and began a new life, grappling on a daily basis with family difficulties she did not know how to cope with and social criticism, for her desire to beautify, decorate, and just be different.[31]

Deeply embedded in these stories of the early Israelis is a tension between the realities of life in the *yishuv* and the high ideals and goals of a movement seeking to create a nation out of a rag-tag bunch of Jews. This chapter focuses on the European element of that struggle, the men and women of European descent, born both in and out of the land, who agreed with Theodore Herzl when he famously said, "If you will it, it is no dream." The men and women of an old country who were prepared to shed the identities that they had before, and turn themselves into something entirely new. These men and women gave entire lifetimes over to the idea of a Jewish State, led by the Poalei Zion Movement.[32] It was the ideal that propelled them through the mud and malaria of the swamps. Oz writes, rather bitingly in *Where the Jackals Howl*, of such dedication to an ideological movement, which, according to his

[31] Shalev, *My Russian Grandmother*, p. 202
[32] The Poalei Zion meaning "Workers of Zion," was a movement whose vision combined the goals of socialism with those of Zionism, founded in cities across the Russian Empire in the early 20th Century.

protagonist, “is the only real mark a man can leave on the world… with his pen alone he has inscribed his name on the roll honor of our movement and our nation.”[33]

This is the tension upon which the State of Israel was founded and with which it continues to struggle to come to terms. A nation of New Jews, farmers and soldiers, more tan and physically able than a Jew had been since the days of the Bible, was ready and eager to build a state and to change the destiny of the Jewish people forever. Loss, fear, sickness and death began like rust to sink their teeth in to the dream of this new nation, but famously these men and women continued to toil; to live, love and die for the dream of a place in the world to be a nation among the nations. This is the narrative upon which the State of Israel was built, and these are the cultural memories inherited by the second and third and now fourth generations of Israelis still struggling to find and maintain a place in the world.

[33] Oz, *The Amos Oz Reader*, p. 32

Chapter Three: The Other

In the pursuit of self, there is a need for a metaphorical mirror to hold up in order to see oneself reflected therein. Ideally, we would all like our mirrored images to match up to the image of how we think we appear. More often than not, however, the mirror shows us the imperfections, both glaring and minute, that actually make us who we really are. The experience of the Other, that person or persons not included in one's notion of self, tends to provide the most troublesome yet truthful mirrors for reflecting back one's actual image. Encountering the Other first requires a definition of "other" – something external to oneself that is distinct and different enough to evoke feelings of alienation and separateness.

Philosopher Georges Gusdorf (1933) writes of the Other in this way. "The other's appearance creates a risk, but risk is not solely negative: it can take on the positive value of enrichment."[34] By acknowledging the presence of an Other, external to oneself, one opens up the possibility, the risk, of the existence of a different narrative. Traditionally, the Other has served as a foil to the self. Like similarly charged sides of a magnet, the other and self push away from each other. The irony of this metaphor is, of course, that it is because these two sides of a magnet are similar that they drive each other away; flip one around so that the negative side is facing the positive side and they snap in to place one against the other. Gusdorf continues, "The interplay of same and other forces one to go beyond appearances, in a deepening of the relationship binding me to myself; I am not what I am, what I believe I am. But who am I? Soul-searching requires the pursuit of self."[35]

[34] Gusdorf, "Scripture of the Self: 'Prologue in Heaven,'" p. 116
[35] ibid.

Israelis have long lived with the conflicting narrative of the Other, both as a threat and as a foil to the narrative of the New Jew. The New Jew, as discussed at length in the previous chapter, was to be a complete inversion of what Jews had been prior to the Renaissance in Europe. Where the Jew was weak and pale from years spent indoors, studying Talmud, the New Jew was tanned and strong from working the land of the Bible. Even when the waves of immigration from non-European countries arrived to settle the corners of the land that needed a Jewish presence, the narrative of the New Jew prevailed, setting the immigrant Jew as Other against the native-born Israeli, the ever-acclaimed *Sabra*. In addition, the pioneers of the *yishuv* began to negatively encounter their Arab neighbors, and a powerful narrative of the Other arose due to that conflict. Once the State of Israel was declared and defended in the wars that followed, that narrative became even stronger; a narrative of enmity, hatred and extreme otherness to such a point as to alienate Jew from Arab.

These divisions between and amongst Jews, and between Arab and Jew create tensions that have driven the various conflicts within and without Israel for over a century. This chapter will address some of the conflicts with the Other that arise in the formation of Israeli identity and how specific authors address them. In their collections of short stories, *Apples from the Desert* (1986), and *Closing the Sea* (1990) Savyon Leibrecht and Judith Katzir write many of these stories of the Other illustrating the topic of this chapter. Among their themes are the conflicts between Religious and Secular Jews, old age and youth, Holocaust survivors and their children who struggle to shrug off the burdensome shadow of the Holocaust, between ethnic immigrant and nationalized Israelis and of course, the ever-looming divide between Arab and Israeli. As women, these writers they represent a

marginalized Other in Israeli literary society as well. In her forward to *Apples from the Desert*, Grace Paley writes of her dismay at experiencing a lack of the female Israeli voice in a conference of Jewish writers that she attended. "It was a wonderful meeting," she writes, "but when I looked at the six Israeli participants… I couldn't help asking 'but where are my Israeli sisters?'"[36] Speaking from the margins of Israeli society, Leibrecht and Katzir shine a bright light on the cracks in Israeli culture where the divisions between human beings are particularly sharp and damaging. Amos Oz, speaking from the dead-center of the Israeli literary world, shines a similar light upon the issues dividing Israeli society in his collection of essays, *Under This Blazing Light*, cited in the last chapter as well.

The Jewish Other

No set of opposites better represents the core division between self and other in Israeli society than the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv dichotomy. Israeli hip-hop/funk band, Hadag Nachash, immortalized the stark contrasts of these two cities in their 2006 song, "Here I Come."[37] Jerusalem is painted as village with a provincial feel that the singer needs to escape. It's "grey, boring, there's no sea," where walking the streets, "feels like an ingathering of the exiles." Tel Aviv is the sparkling city by the sea that the singer longs to escape to. Yet after a while in Tel Aviv he sings, "Now that I'm 'in' I know it doesn't sparkle. How much noise? How much soot? Give me grass – give me a tree." The song is a tribute to the push and pull between Israel's two polarities of existence: the ancient, "grey," city of Jerusalem, and the weight of religious significance that it holds for Judaism, and the "sparkling" newness of Tel Aviv, a city unencumbered by the weight of the past. This dichotomy between Jerusalem and

[36] Liebrecht, *Apples from the Desert*, p. 7
[37] Hadag Nachash, "Hinei Ani Ba" from Be'ezrat HaJam, Hed Arzi Music, 2006.

Tel Aviv serves as a strong metaphor for the religious and secular as divisions in Israeli society.

For Oz, Jerusalem offers a compelling alternative to the newness and development of the rest of the young country. Jerusalem stands alone as the eternal place within the place – imbued with centuries of history and meaning, he imagines the city turning her back on the rest of the country as it progresses forward in to ever-evolving expressions of newness:

> I liked Jerusalem because it was a city at the end of the road, a city you could get to but never go through, and also because Jerusalem was never really a part of the State of Isarel: with the exception of a few streets, it always maintained a separate identity, as though it was deliberately turning its back on all those flat white commercial towns: Tel Aviv, Holon, Herzlia, Netanya… For twenty years Jerusalem stubbornly turned its back on the rhythm of free life: a very slow city in a frantic country; a remote hilly old suburb of a flat land full of new building and threatening to explode from the pressure of seething energy.[38]

Tel Aviv is an ever-evolving city of newness. Just like any other major metropolitan area, new buildings and developments arise as the city continues to grow and realize itself. In 1986 the city erected a new fountain in the middle of Dizengoff Square, one of the city's main squares originally built in 1934 and intended to be a central landmark of the then-newly growing city. Katzir writes of a first impression of this modernist, kinetic sculpture in her short story, "Closing the Sea,"

> At Dizengoff Square, she tried to admire the fountain that spins and plays music, that spits fire and water like a kind of modern dragon, the fountain they'd been talking about so much on television, but her eyes were drawn instead to the old people sitting on the hard cement benches around it. [39]

Katzir's passing mention of the elderly relegated to park benches is indicative of a larger issue in the formation of Israeli identity. In a culture where youth and vigor are paramount

[38] Oz, *The Amos Oz Reader,* p. 105 - 106
[39] Katzir, *Closing the Sea,* p. 126

values, what, then is the culture to do with the evidence of what happens when those virtues fade?

The lines between religious and secular Jews living in the Jewish State has been and continues to be a source of existential angst and "Othering" amongst Jews themselves. As noted in the discussion of differences between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, chief amongst them is the place Jerusalem holds as a religious center. Rabbi David Hartman mourns the divide between religious and secular in comparing the two cities whose religious and secular natures tend to pit one against the other in the eyes of contemporary Israeli society: "schisms that breed such estrangement, contempt and highly charged abusive rhetoric that the traditional, spiritually oriented Jerusalem and the modern cosmopolitan Tel Aviv appear to be two separate countries."[40]

Meir Shalev writes in his family memoir, *My Russian Grandmother and Her American Vacuum Cleaner,* about his firsthand experience with these stark divides between the religious Jews of Jerusalem (in this case) and the secular farmers of his family village of Nahalal:

> I tugged the cable again, harder this time and the Mack horn boomed and trumpeted a challenge to the shofars of Jerusalem of every generation, and to the ultra-orthodox who, every Sabbath, demonstrated against the Tnuva trucks that brought farm produce to the city on that holy day, and who ran for their lives when kibbutznikim and moshavnikim brought into the fray attacked them with the wooden handles of hoes in order to beat a path to the vegetables, eggs and milk they had worked so hard to bring to market.[41]

Liebrecht writes most touchingly in her short story, "Apples from the Desert," about the pain and conflict that arise within a religious family when a daughter, Rivka, defects from Jerusalem to a secular Israeli kibbutz in the desert. After half a year of absence, her mother,

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[40] Hartman, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition,* p. 11
[41] Shalev, *My Russian Grandmother*, p. 68

Victoria, builds up the courage to journey, on her own, to the kibbutz to try to talk her daughter in to returning home. What makes this story unlike another story of a teenage girl runaway from home to find love is the religious-secular dynamic:

> From her sister, Sara, Victoria already knew that her daughter was sixteen when she met him. He was an army officer and was brought in to tell them about military service for Orthodox girls. Later on there was a fuss about letting people from the army come and poison the girls' hearts, but the venom had already worked on Rivka. Cunningly, he'd sent her letters through a friend even after he had returned to his kibbutz. And she, the fool, who was known neither for her grace nor beauty… she fell for it, and when she was eighteen she picked up and went to him in the desert.[42]

There is real anger and a sense of betrayal in this character's words, an anger that is representative of the mistrust that exists between religious and secular Israelis. At present, the Israeli military service is required for all citizens over the age of 18. For religious Israelis, special accommodations are made, such as same sex battalions for men, and an alternative option of national service for women. Many orthodox women opt to serve two years in national service, *sheirut leumi*, so that they do not have to encounter issues that might keep them from Orthodox observance within the Israel Defense Forces (namely modesty issues).

It is interesting in this story that it is a representative of the IDF coming to speak to Rivka's class about military service that ultimately entices her away from home. This young man, the exact image of what the State of Israel deems ideal in its citizenry, poses a threat to the religious way of life; a life which, it turns out, was not meant for Rivka. She explains to her mother, "Papa doesn't care about anybody. Especially not me. All day long in the store and with his books and prayers. Like I'm not his daughter."[43] Ultimately, despite her many plans to get her daughter to return with her to Jerusalem, Victoria comes to understand why her daughter has chosen the path that she has. On the kibbutz, she encounters secular Israelis

[42] Liebrecht, *Apples from the Desert*, p. 66
[43] ibid, p. 68

in a way that she had not before – as human beings who value her daughter in spite of her awkward physical appearance: "'You're Rivka's mother? Congratulations on such a daughter.' And suddenly her heart swelled within her."[44]

Liebrecht's stories are full of moments of encountering the Other, such as this, where the presiding presumptions about the identity of the protagonist are called into question through an encounter with the Other. In "Apples from the Desert," Victoria returns home without Rivka, ultimately understanding that the religious life is not right for her daughter, and perhaps questioning her virulent mistrust and disapproval of a secular life. Shalev, however, does not write of such a resolution in his story of encountering the religious-Other; in his recollection of growing up in the religious hub of Jerusalem his sympathies remain with the secular farmers of his family's village.

Israel's Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, tells the tale of European Jewry's downfall as being saved by the creation of the State of Israel. The museum's exhibit juxtaposes the horrific stories of death and loss against the backdrop of the creation of the State of Israel. It reifies the Israeli narrative that the State of Israel stood as the beacon of salvation for the haunted masses of survivors who fled to its shores after the liberation of the camps in 1945. Visitors to the museum cannot help but feel the connection between the loss of life that the Holocaust inflicted, and the salvation that awaited those who survived in the land of Israel, as the main exhibit hall opens up from a narrow hallway in to a balcony with an expansive view of the Jerusalem forest. The narrative throughout the exhibit is that the victims of the Holocaust were led like sheep to the slaughter by a nation that exerted power over them, whereas at the same time, Jews were living in the land of Israel,

[44] Liebrecht, *Apples from the Desert*, p. 70

strengthening themselves as individuals and as a nation, to pave the way for a Jewish State to exist.

The trauma that the survivors brought with them to Israel left its mark indelibly upon the culture and the people of that country. The generations born to survivors have inherited the memory of pain and trauma incurred by their parents. Leibrecht writes most vividly about two instances of where the survivor generation comes in to conflict with the new generation of Israelis, for whom tales of horror from the Holocaust have become burdensome to the point of wishing to eradicate them entirely. As Liebrecht writes, "They let him talk, blocking his stories from the path to their hearts." [45]

In two of her short stories, "Hayuta's Engagement Party," and "Excision," Liebrecht tells the tale of two families for whom the survivor-generation has become a burden. Her characters have razor sharp tongues and minimal tolerance for the burdensome task left to the new generation of dealing with aging-survivor parents and grandparents. Hayuta, the young protagonist of the story, has recently become engaged, and is in the midst of planning an engagement party that will officially introduce her intended's family to her own. But Hauyta's grandfather, Mendel, has developed a habit in his old age of bringing up disturbing memories from his past in the midst of happy family gatherings, particularly those where there is an abundance of food. In an effort to pre-empt such an incident, Hayuta plans to find a way to exclude her grandfather from the party and remove the potential for embarrassment.

> Bella looked at her daughter and shuddered: here she is, already getting rid of him like an unwanted object, with that typical nonchalance that this new generation has. Hayuta had already forgotten how he raised and coddled her, ready to give up his food for her. And all these years, when Bella herself was busy at the plant with her husband, Grandfather – no longer a young man – would take his granddaughter to ballet lessons and art classes, and wait for her patiently outside, rain or shine…

[45] Liebrecht, *Apples from the Desert*, p. 87

> Monsters, thought Bella in disgust as her daughter went to answer the phone. We are raising monsters.[46]

Liebrecht's work tends to lend a sympathetic tilt toward the Other, and in "Hayuta's Engagement Party," there is a clear critique of the new generation that is tired of remembering and wishes only to celebrate. Such an impulse is understandable, particularly of a generation raised on tales of terror and trauma of the Holocaust. A young bride, Hayuta wishes to celebrate the evening without the shadow of the *Shoah* hanging over their heads, but her desire to rid herself of her grandfather for the party is greater than just that. She is worried about the potential embarrassment that he might cause. Ultimately, her grandfather is included in the celebrations, after a staunch admonishment against bringing up any dark memories during the engagement party. The story reaches its climax when the grandfather, up until now enacted upon and spoken about, finally reaches his moment of truth:

> She recognized the look, the raised hand, which always heralded lofty words. He opened his mouth to talk, but was pierced by [Hayuta's] harsh look. Across the long row of the table he suddenly smiled at her mischievously, as if caught red-handed, and called '*Lechayyim,* Haya'le, *lechayyim*!' And then he added, as if reminded, 'All the best!' And he laughed like a child who had managed to fool an adult.[47]

Hauyta's grandfather resists his instincts by raising a toast, "to life," instead of invoking the memories of death and destruction that family celebrations tend stir within him, triumphant over both his haunting memories as well as his granddaughter's harsh admonishments.

In "Excision," Liebrecht writes a heart-wrenching tale of how a grandmother handles an outbreak of head lice in her granddaughter's kindergarten with methods learned from her time in the concentration camps. The child's parents arrive home to find their young daughter's hair shorn, and her grandmother ready with the news that she had contracted head

[46] ibid, p. 83-84
[47] ibid, p. 90

lice from the children in her class. Liebrecht situates the grandmother within earshot of her daughter-in-law, Miri's rage, but helpless to say anything in her defense, as it becomes clear that this is not the first time the grandmother's memories have surfaced in less-than-convenient ways:

> "Why should I care about that now?" she heard her daughter-in-law. "So what if that's what they used to do in the camps forty five years ago. The world has advanced a little since then, and we are not in the camps now…those stories are prehistory by now… she's crazy. You must realize that your mother is crazy. I told you a long time ago. She lost some screws in her head in the Holocaust."[48]

Miri, representing the new generation, erupts further when she discovers that her daughter, just reaching the age of speech and self-identity, understands her grandmother's reasons for shaving her head, and is not angry with her. Railing against her husband, Miri cries, "I want my child to hear stories about Cinderella, not about Auschwitz!"[49]

Katzir picks up the thread of Immigrant-as-Other in her beautifully wrought tale of nostalgia, "Fellini's Shoes." The story opens with a young woman, running late to her shift at a Tel Aviv hotel restaurant. She encounters an elderly woman in the beginning of the story who foreshadows the tale that is to come. The woman grabs onto the young protagonist's arm while crossing a busy street, and then does not let go for an uncomfortable amount of time, leaving the young woman with an elderly ward for the remainder of the afternoon. The elderly woman speaks only Yiddish, a language that was passed over by the early state-builders in favor of Hebrew as a pure, untainted expression of Jewish language. So, the fact that this elderly woman only speaks Yiddish is a clue that perhaps she emigrated to Israel later-on in her life; she is not one of the early *halutzim*, but rather an immigrant who came to Israel but instead of assimilating to the New Jew ideal, she retained her Eastern European

[48] ibid, 97
[49] ibid, 98

identity. Katzir writes, "She examined me with a shrewd look, smacked her lips with pleasure, like the witch in Hansel and Gretel and said *a shayne madele*."[50]

Amos Oz writes of these later immigrants in his novel, *Where the Jackals Howl*, illustrating the challenging attitudes that they encountered once in the land of Israel that was so badly in need of immigration. "People like Sashka were forged in fury, in longing and in dedication. Matityahu Damkov, and the latter-day fugitives like him, know nothing of the longing that burns and the dedication that draws blood from the lips."[51] Damkov, the "fugitive," is a shady character throughout the story, but this dichotomy of being set against and below the *sabras* of the *kibbutz* where the story takes place illustrates the prejudice against and suspicion toward the later immigrants to Israel. The 1970's Israeli television sketch comedy show, Lool[52], captured this ironically negative sentiment toward immigrants to Israel perfectly in a scene staring Israeli film stars, Arik Einstein and Uri Zohar. The scene opens in the port city of Jaffa, with two Arab men looking on while a group of Eastern European immigrants arrive in a row boat. In an emotional display, the new immigrants kiss the ground that they land on, and engage in other antics looked down upon by the on-looking Arab men. The sketch continues, but instead of the Arab men looking on at the port of Jaffa, it is the same Eastern European men from the first scene now looking down from their perch at the port, judgmentally commenting upon the next wave of immigrants, and so on and so forth.

The sketch gets at the heart of the tendency in Israeli society for each wave of immigrants to look down upon the next as they arrive in Israel, particularly for their cultural

[50] Katzir, *Closing the Sea*, p. 32
[51] Oz, *The Amos Oz Reader*, p. 19
[52] *Lool*, Israeli Broadcasting Authority, 1969.

and social differences. It is an ironic situation that existed early on within the State of Israel: the Jewish state needed immigrants from around the world in order to grow in numbers and hold down settlements in far flung parts of the state, however, the Israelis already living in Israel were loathe to incorporate the cultures that immigrants brought along with them, thus creating a divide between Jews living in the Jewish state. As waves of immigration to Israel continue, most recently with Jews from Ethiopia and Russia, divisions between the Israeli New Jew (and subsequent *Sabra*) and foreign immigrants continue to draw deep lines of division within Israeli society.

The Arab Other

Before entering into a discourse on what is arguably Israel's ultimate other, we must address the issue of terminology. The term, "Arab," refers to a cultural, linguistic and geographical identification.[53] Contrary to common Western misunderstanding, there is no single unified Arab population living within and around Israel, rather there are distinctions between Arabs who are citizens of the state, those who are not, and those who are citizens of the surrounding states, who at present represent a different type of Arab Other; this chapter will focus on the Arab Other that Israelis most often encounter on a day-to-day basis, namely those living in the State of Israel and the Territories.

Arab-Israelis are Muslim or Christian citizens of the state of Israel. Arabs living within the Israeli territories of the West Bank, and Gaza, refer to themselves, and are often referred to by Israelis as Palestinians. The difference is quite important to understand, both for the Jewish-Israeli as well as for Arab-self-identification. As we will see in the work of

[53] Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for* Jews, p. 5

Sayed Kashua, himself an Arab-Israeli living in Jerusalem, there are very strong cultural hierarchies that exist within these communities. The works of Jewish-Israeli authors cited in this section, namely Liebrecht, Katzir and Oz, illuminate the ways in which many Jewish-Israelis interact with and identify themselves vis-a-vis the Arab minority in ways that both reify and challenge the existing status quo between these two peoples.

Writing of a rare excursion in to East Jerusalem, a part of the city rarely visited by Jewish-Israelis Oz recalls, "I saw resentment and hostility, hypocrisy, bewilderment, obsequiousness, fear, humiliation, and new plots being hatched. I walked the streets of East Jerusalem like a man who has broken in to a forbidden place."[54] The change of location from West to East Jerusalem is an unmistakable one. Whether crossing over from the Old City through the Muslim Quarter, or stumbling upon East Jerusalem from the main road that leads from the Mt. Scopus campus of the Hebrew University into the heart of West Jerusalem, there is an undeniable difference between what has essentially become Arab and Israeli Jerusalem. Entering through the Muslim Quarter one moves from the tourist-trap storefronts of the Christian quarter, whose vendors sell holy water, olivewood crosses, and other religious regalia to mostly foreign visitors, into a bustling crowded marketplace. Unlike the store fronts of the Christian and Jewish quarters, the Muslim quarter is a place where people conduct day-to-day business; the mingled smells of coffee and spices waft out of one storefront, while the thumping bass of techno music blasts out of the next. Medieval looking nun-chucks are sold next to a store that carries American sports jerseys, undershirts and socks. Crossing over from East to West Jerusalem does still feel as though it should require a passport, and there is a general sense that it is a part of the city that stands apart. These two

[54] Oz, *The Amos Oz Reader*, p.110

worlds of Arab-Israeli author, Sayed Kashua, interact in ways that one might anticipate: with deep prejudice, anger, and mistrust. There is also, however, a quiet revolt present in the writings of these authors.

Liebrecht's story, "A Room on the Roof," shines a harsh light on the conflict between Arab- and Jewish-Israelis. The story's protagonist has decided to add a room to the roof of her home while her husband is away on business. The Jewish foreman arrives on the first day of the remodeling job with three Arab men in tow. The foreman reassures her, "'They're good workers, up on scaffolds from the age of 15,' and in her ear softly, 'better than ours, believe me.'"[55] The statement is made as an innocent reassurance, but what ensues is a very personal inner struggle with the greater political situation. The story unfolds as narrator's fear of the Other, present in her house in the form of Arab workmen contrasts with moments of intimate human exchange that she shares with them. She keenly feels the power dynamic present between herself and them as there is no foreman present for the majority of the work. When the workers arrive late, she feels beholden to assert her position of power over them, demanding to know the reason for their tardiness:

> For the first time she saw the movement that was later to become routine: the jaws clamping down on each other as though chewing something very hard, digging a channel along the line of his teeth. Later she was to learn: that's how they suppress anger, hatred. They clench their teeth to suppress the wild rage that surges up, that only rarely breaks out and flashes in their pupils… She looked out of her pretty window, framed with Catalan-style wooden blocks, feeling how the three men in their tattered work clothes were defeating her, looking up at her from their places.[56]

Liebrecht's accounting of the scenario expresses the narrator's insecurity about the hierarchical nature of her relationship with the workers. The power dynamic between herself

[55] Liebrecht, *Apples from the Desert*, p. 43
[56] ibid, p. 45

and the workers is fraught with cultural undertones, as well as her own insecurities that leave her expecting danger lurking around every corner. In one particularly bittersweet moment of connection between the narrator and the workers, they prepare for her and then share a cup of coffee. Despite the narrator's desire to appear accommodating and open-minded, her deep-seeded fear of this Other creeps in to the exchange: "She sipped the bitter liquid and only part of her, the part that didn't laugh with them, thought: could these hands, serving coffee, be the ones that planted the booby-trapped doll at the gate of the religious school at the end of the street?"[57] She is torn between an urge to enjoy this simple moment of connection and a wariness born of historical enmity and compounded by recent violent trauma.

At one point in the story, the dynamic between the narrator and the workers changes as the narrator catches a glimpse of the lives that these men lead when not on the clock. After completing a day's work they ask her to use her restroom, so that they might wash up. The narrator agrees hesitatingly. The three men enter in to her home in a way that they haven't before; not quite as guests, but as fellow human beings prevailing upon her instinct toward hospitality. One of the workmen brings with him a large knapsack, and while the men are washing up in the bathroom, the narrator begins to doubt her decision to let these men in to the heart of her home. She wonders what could possibly be in that large knapsack, and begins to fear the worst. Plotting to escape upstairs, grab her sleeping child and run to the nearest police station, she is surprised when the first workman exits her guest bathroom not with an explosive device, but with freshly combed hair and a suit over a white dress shirt. The conversation that ensues further enlightens the narrator as she discovers that her worker has a

[57] ibid, p. 49

family of his own, and speaks English better than her from having studied at the American University of Beirut:

> She thought: They're nameless and ageless to me, in their faded black sweaters and their dirty elbows and stocking caps. They had a single face and uncouth words came from their mouths. Suddenly they were different: in white collars and jackets, their cheeks shaven, with a wife and baby and a child of four at home.[58]

Yet convention prevails, and when her husband arrives home from his extended business trip, she hides behind the social structure of prejudice when her husband reproaches her for being alone with the Arab workmen. "'They behaved alright? They didn't make trouble?' She took a quick, deep breath, with a whistling sound, and restraining the whirlpool of emotions stirring within her [answered], 'They were fairly decent… Arabs, you know…"[59]

These societal prejudices come from fraught beginnings. There is no denying the existence of violence between Arabs and Jews since before the founding of the State. The history of attacks upon Israeli citizens carried out by Arabs has created a security system in Israel that puts Arabs at a serious disadvantage. Border security has long been an issue of concern for Israelis, and one of severe challenge for Arabs whose livelihoods require that they cross the green line on a daily basis in order to make a living. Liebrecht's Arab workers cite having been stopped at a road block as one of their reasons for being late to work, a reality that faces many Arabs who live in the territories. In his novel, *Second Person Singular* (2012), one of Sayed Kashua's characters is an Arab-Israeli lawyer living and working in Jerusalem. His clientele are mostly Arabs from East Jerusalem and the Territories, but he maintains an office in West Jerusalem as a symbol of his integration in to Israeli society. He asserts that an Arab lawyer from West Jerusalem gives his clients a sense of security, that

[58] ibid, p. 55
[59] ibid, p. 63

they will be taken seriously because they have hired a lawyer who knows how to engage with Israeli society. His character remarks upon the difficulty that some of his clients have in getting to him from the Territories, "Palestinian families often sent a woman to Jerusalem to find a lawyer: they had a far better chance of getting through the checkpoints without the proper paperwork."[60] The political situation determines the very hours of operation of his practice:

> Friday was a day off at the office. Most of the businesses downtown worked a half day on Friday but the lawyer, whose clients were generally Arabs, decided to keep his office closed on the Muslim holy day, not least because on Fridays the security forces tightened the ring around Jerusalem, keeping worshippers from the West Bank away from the al-Aqsa, making it much harder for his clients to sneak into the city.[61]

Challenges such as these face those Arabs living within the green line as well. Living in East Jerusalem, which has the highest concentration of Arabs living in the city, also poses its challenges in transportation in to the western part of the city. As Kashua's other protagonist, a student at the Mt. Scopus campus of the Hebrew University recalls that his roommate, Majdi used to say, "that the green signal at the traffic light for the Arab cars from Beith Hanina and Shuafat was the shortest in the city. The settlers' cars got 5 minutes of green for every half minute they gave us."[62]

These two segments of the population have inherited a system of separateness that establishes the Otherness of the other, and the uniqueness of the self, from the earliest stages of childhood. As Kashua's second protagonist discovers when he comes across the report card of a Jewish-Israeli for whom he is a part-time caregiver, the two men received very

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[60] Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, p.143
[61] ibid, 138
[62] ibid, 64

different educations, both funded by the State, presumably in order to prepare them for two very different kinds of futures:

> I could see from the report cards that the Jews had a different system than we did. Instead of Arabic, they had Hebrew and in third grade they started English; in junior high he took Jewish history and Bible instead of Koran. He also had art and computers while in the village we had a few subjects that were not on Yonatan's transcripts, like carpentry and metalwork and Islamic religious studies. [63]

It is not surprising that the Arab-Muslim-Israeli would study Koran and Arabic, while the Jewish-Israeli was studying Jewish history and the Bible. The disparity in their educations lies most obviously with the craftsmanship items not listed on Yonatan's transcript. It would appear that, through primary education, the Jewish Israeli was trained to be a cosmopolitan citizen of the world, while the Arab-Israeli was trained to be his carpenter.

Katzir's narrator in "Fellini's Shoes," encounters this societal disparity between Arab and Jewish Israelis in her work at the hotel restaurant in a most disturbing way:

> Afterward I clear the tables and put the tray with the dirty dishes on the counter, where Fawzi gives me a yellow-toothed smile as he hurries off to put the leftovers in his mouth and the plates in the dishwasher. He knows that Meir will come into the kitchen in a little while to smoke a cigarette after his shift and play Arab Dog with him. In this game, Meir gives Fawzi orders, for example, Arab Dog give me a light, Arab Dog bring me a Coke, Arab Dog say your mother is a dirty Arab whore, and Fawzi has to do everything Meir tells him or he gets hit.[64]

This power dynamic is revised in Kashua's novel as well. When one of his Arab-Israeli characters starts to pass as Jewish-Israeli he witnesses this power dynamic from the perspective of the upper hand when he takes a job as a waiter in a restaurant (a job usually denied to Arab-Israelis in Jewish Jerusalem). He passes so convincingly, that his boss

[63] ibid, p. 185
[64] Katzir, *Closing the Sea*, p. 38

confides in him how best to work with Arabs, "'You have to constantly remind them who's boss… If you let your guard down even the littlest bit, they'll eat you alive."[65]

These authors tell the stories of the Jewish-Arab power dynamic in no uncertain terms; within the Israeli system, Jewish citizens are treated differently than Arabs. A similar hierarchical structure exists within the Arab communities living in and around Israel; in a hierarchy that Kashua outlines in no uncertain terms in *Second Person Singular*. Kashuah's two protagonists are both Arab-Israelis from the North of Israel. One, simply referred to as the lawyer, comes from an upwardly mobile Muslim family from a highly concentrated area of Arab villages in northern Israel, near the green line, referred to as "the Triangle." The other, who remains unnamed until the end of the book, also comes from a town in the Triangle, but from a family situation that did not set him up for the easy advancement that the lawyer enjoyed. Only son of a single mother, shunned by his father's family, the second narrator had farther to climb on the ladder of success. These two characters shed light on the system within which Arab-Israelis succeed in Israel. The lawyer follows the path that has been set before him: he attends University to learn a profession and set up a successful practice in Jerusalem, while finding a wife and starting a family. He fits in to Israeli society by climbing the ladder of the Arab-Israeli norms of success, which inherently requires an understanding of how to fit in to the system and the culture that it creates of separateness between Arabs and Jews.

The Hebrew University plays a central role for both of Kashua's characters, providing a legitimate reason for them to leave their villages and venture in to the greater Israeli society to strike out on their own as best they can. "Hebrew University remained central to my

[65] Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, p. 211

colleagues' lives. It was the reason they had left their villages and come to Jerusalem, and it was the reason they had stayed."[66] It is within this system that these two characters play out the roles destined for them. The second narrator, who was placed within the Social Work program explains the Arab experience at Hebrew University in the following:

> Everyone knows that Arabs study a trade in University. Everyone knows they want to be doctors or lawyers or accountants or at least registered nurses, and that their fallback options are education and social work. The University application gives you six departmental options and the Arab applications are all identical. My application had also had medicine on top and education on the bottom.[67]

The lawyer, obviously, was lucky. He was placed into the law department by the University, which consequently helped him attain a profession that suited his and his family's expectations. The second narrator, who lacks family standing within the Arab hierarchy, was placed in a less-desirable professional path, one with less opportunity for financial gain and societal advancement. After a short while at his internship in East Jerusalem, where his colleagues treat him like an errand-boy, it becomes clear to him that this career path is not one that he wishes to follow. As he attempts to find a way in to a better internship, one that will help him grow in a field that was chosen for him, he thinks to himself how he will manipulate the system from within:

> I'd show them that my Hebrew was as good as any native speaker's and I'd tell them that the problem with the outpatient clinic in the Arab part of town was my colleagues' miserable work ethic. I'd speak disparagingly of Arabs and the Jewish interviewer would nod; he knew what went on down there.[68]

The lawyer, who follows the rules laid out for him by Arab and Israeli society, ends up being the character with the most angst surrounding his identity. With one foot in each

[66] ibid, p. 68
[67] ibid, p. 183
[68] ibid, pp. 182-183

world, he looks down on the Arab world of the Triangle that he came from, and desperately wants to fit in to the Israeli society of Jerusalem. It is through his eyes that we learn the most about the Arab hierarchy that exists within the State. First, there is an implied hierarchy in regards to geography: "The lawyer, a native of the Triangle, had always wanted to wed a girl from the Galilee. The Galileans tended to think of themselves as superior to the natives of the Triangle, and the lawyer tended to agree with them."[69] Religious difference account for another rung of the Arab social hierarchy in Jerusalem. The Lawyer writes of his first encounters with his wife, "For some reason I was sure that Leila was a Christian, even though, as opposed to the other Christian students I had met, she did not wear a cross. Many of the Christian students wore one over their clothes, displaying it so that everyone would know: I'm not a Muslim, not really an Arab."[70]

The second narrator has to work outside of the system in order to find his place in the world. Unsatisfied with the path laid before him by the University's Social Work program he drops out of the system of hierarchies and begins to find his own identity while using that of another. Passing as an Ashkenazi Jew, which is about as mainstream Jewish-Israeli as one can get according to the New Jew ideals of the Israeli national identity, he sneaks into the system so that he may succeed outside of its strictures. It is through this experience of passing as a Jewish-Israeli that he is able to discover who he really wants to be, regardless of what Israeli society requires of him.

[69] ibid, p. 142
[70] ibid, p. 115

Chapter Four: The Israeli Existential Condition

Twentieth century philosopher, Karl Jaspers, argued that the purpose of philosophy is singular: to enable the fulfillment of human existence. A key figure in the foundational studies of Existentialism, Jaspers understood that "philosophical illumination," could be achieved by experiencing "limit situations, such as conflict, guilt and suffering," and that these were the situations that "define the human condition." [71] The psychological designation of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may also help us to understand the toll that extreme "limit situations," can have on an individual and by extension, upon a society. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association lists the diagnostic criteria for a positive diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as the following: "Diagnostic criteria for PTSD include a history of exposure to a traumatic event meeting two criteria and symptoms from each of the three symptom clusters: intrusive recollections, avoidant/numbing symptoms, and hyper-arousal symptoms. A fifth criterion concerns duration of symptoms and a sixth assesses functioning"[72]

In a recent study on the expressions of trauma in Israeli cinema, Raz Yosef explores the effects that repressed traumatic experiences, such as war trauma, traumas of Israeli occupation, the Holocaust, and "the losses entailed by the experience of immigration,"[73] have on the Israeli collective conscious and national narrative. He argues that the emergence of these themes in new Israeli cinema exposes a "deep crisis in Israeli national identity as well as reactivating unresolved complexes of guilt and ethical responsibility that have been

[71] Merriam-Webster's Concise Encyclopedia (http://www.merriam-webster.com/concise/jaspers,%20karl%20(theodor))
[72] http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pages/dsm-iv-tr-ptsd.asp
[73] Yosef, *The Politics of Loss and Trauma in Contemporary Israeli Cinema* p. 5

occupying the Israeli psyche in recent decades."[74] Recent works of Israeli authors like Keret, Kashua and Grossman, serve a similar purpose by illustrating the toll that a near-constant confrontation with "limit situations," in the form of past traumas, can take on the individual. Told through first and second person narratives, the works of these authors are parables of what I call the Israeli Existential Condition. Many of their characters are thrown into situations that result in existential crisis, defined as a moment in which the individual questions the foundations upon which their lives are built.[75] These authors hold up a mirror to the contemporary Israeli condition, expressing themes of violence and force, fear and loss, alienation and loneliness, that combined reveal an unraveling of Israeli identity and society. Put in metaphysical terms again by Gusdorf:

> Man is a metaphysical being, a being of distances and surpluses, whose journeys and wanderings are inscribed in a space that is neither physical nor geographical, a space defined by expanding values of Being. It is illuminated by a consciousness of either plentitude or deficiency, depending on whether the creature feels his state to be one of proximity or of estrangement in relation to the radical origin of this truth.[76]

It is this consciousness of deficiency, in particular a deficiency of security and safety in regard to one's very existence that plagues the characters in these works. Deeply affected by traumatic experiences these characters are shaped by the events that happen to them. They have inherited a legacy of action and reaction with very few moments of respite in-between, resulting in a fractured, reactive and misconstrued sense of self and other. Grossman explains this feeling of living in a constant state of disaster-preparedness in *To the Ends of the Land*:

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[74] ibid.
[75] James, Richard K. *Crisis Intervention Strategies* (http://books.google.com/books?id=fAFg7z93gDwC&pg=PA13#v=onepage&q&f=false)
[76] Gusdorf, 122

> The fact that we managed to walk between the raindrops without really getting splattered even once, from any rocket, grenade, bullet, shell, explosive device, sniper, suicide bomber, metal marbles, sling stone, knife, nails. The fact that we just lived out a quiet, private life. Do you get it? A small, unheroic life, one that deals as little as possible with the situation… because as you know, we already paid our price.[77]

In, *Under This Blazing Light,* Oz writes about the destabilizing experience of encountering a human reality that directly contradicts an inherited understanding of his proximity to danger. He writes,

> From over there, on the other side of the cease-fire line, a seething menace has been eyeing me through most of my life. 'Just you wait. We haven't finished yet. We'll get you too someday.'… On Sunday, June 11, 1967, I went to see the Jerusalem on the other side of the lines. I visited places that years of dreaming had crystallized as symbols in my mind, and found that they were simply places where people lived. Houses, shops, stalls, street signs.[78]

Stark confrontation with the banal realities of the human condition, such as Oz expresses, appear in the works of these contemporary authors with increased frequency, calling into question the motifs, tropes, and tales made sacred to Israel's national narrative.

Kashua's novel, *Second Person Singular*, illustrates this sense of being fed up with nationalism from the perspective of a white, Ashkenazi, Israeli-Jew with whom his second narrator has developed a friendship. In a key moment of transformation for the narrator, he retells the perspective that he ultimately adopts:

> She believed that the Arabs did a bad job of impersonating the Zionists, who did a bad job of impersonating the European nationalists of the early twentieth century. Nor did she believe in identity, certainly not the local nationalistic version of it. She said that man was only smart if he was able to shed his identity.[79]

Throughout the novel, this second narrator, himself an Arab-Israeli, gradually takes on the identity of that woman's terminally-ill son, himself a Jewish-Israeli. In taking on his identity

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[77] Grossman, *To the End of the Land*, p. 266
[78] Oz, *The Amos Oz Reader*, p.108
[79] Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, p. 290

he does more than use his government issued ID card and Jewish-sounding name to gain better employment, he also finds that he shares a passion for photography that he had not previously been privy to. Using his newfound identity and passion, he applies to the Bezalel art school of Jerusalem. When submitting his portfolio, the narrator intentionally leaves out a self-portrait, and later tells the head of the department his reason for its omission: " It hasn't come into focus yet."[80] In this way he expresses this concern with identity; he doesn't yet know who he is, or how he fits in to a system of societal rules and expectations that he, himself has begun to outwit.

The first narrator in *Second Person Singular*, as examined in detail in the previous chapter, lives exactly within the lines drawn for him as an Arab within the Israeli system. Despite his financial and professional success within that system, he too is unable to come up with a self-portrait, in a more metaphorical sense:

> The lawyer had no sense of how he looked. No one had ever told him if he looked good or bad and he himself was not a good judge. He always felt that different mirrors, on different days, provided different perspectives. Photographs didn't help, either. Like the mirrors, they showed something different each time. [81]

Where the second narrator is unable to tell a story through a photograph of whom he sees himself to be, this first narrator, the lawyer, is unable to even discern how he appears to others. Following the guidelines set before him by Arab and Israeli society, he has lost the ability to identify with his own reflection, his own image. As he mentally and emotionally unravels throughout the narrative, he confronts this lack of personal understanding once his tightly constructed system of existence begins to falter.

[80] ibid, p. 207
[81] ibid, p. 144

Keret, in his most recent collection of short stories, *Suddenly a Knock on the Door*, opens the collection with a tale of a writer, held at gunpoint by three angry men – each demanding that he tell them a story. In a move that marks a step away from old paradigms of Israeli self-understanding, Keret's beleaguered author instead, "decides to write a story about the situation. Not the political situation and not the social situation either. He decides to write a story about the human situation, the human condition."[82] The stories that follow from this introduction highlight themes of estrangement and loss, self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation, and the ultimate loneliness of the human condition. These themes come out in the recounting of intimate detail of individual's lives, in quirky and whimsical stories; but ultimately, they reflect these existential questions of how to be human in the ancient Rabbi Hillel's worlds, "a place where no one is human."[83]

The near-constant violent struggle between Arabs and Israelis in Israel has created both a hyper-vigilance against violence as well as a de-sensitization to it. The hovering threat of violence has created a culture and language of force amongst its inhabitants. Amos Oz and David Grossman both express the weariness that such extended and intense encounters with violence can leave with a person. Grossman's character, Avram, was taken prisoner, tortured and nearly killed during a military operation in Sinai. After months of torture, his captors bury him alive, with photographers and cameramen looking on. Grossman writes, "Avram no longer wanted to live in a world where such a thing was possible, where a person stood photographing someone being buried alive."[84] Avram's character spends the intervening years between his captivity and the time of the story firmly within the grip of a PTSD haze.

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[82] Keret, *Suddenly*, p. 7
[83] Mishna, Pirke Avot (2:5)
[84] Grossman, *To the End of the Land*, p.162

In an essay from *Under This Blazing Light,* Oz reflects upon his own experience of being a soldier, and writes:

> I was not born to blow rams' horns and liberate lands from the "foreign yoke." I can hear the groaning of oppressed people; I cannot hear the 'groaning of oppressed lands'… If I ever write anything about this war, I will not write about blood and fire, I shall write about sweat and vomit, pus and piss. [85]

A hyper-vigilance, resulting from years of violent attacks, can lead to a lack of social responsibility, expressed by these authors as a societal lack of consideration of others. In the case of war the individual sees oneself and one's needs as in direct opposition to the Other's. Perhaps, such a mentality of scarcity of safety has seeped into every-day encounters in Israeli society, causing individuals to use force in everyday exchanges. Kashua describes this phenomenon using a scene from Israeli life. The narrator has gone to the Ministry of the Interior to change the photograph on his newly assumed Identity Card. At the Ministry, he has taken a number, along with the rest of the patrons. When his number is called, however, he does not react quickly enough, and another person jumps to take his place. The following interaction between the narrator and clerk ensues:

> "There was no reason to be so nice to that lady," she said under her breath, taking one of my passport photos and starting to fill out the details. "People here have no shame. Just say, 'it's my turn.' What, you don't know how to deal with people around here? Only force, that's the only language they understand."[86]

A similar sentiment is expressed by one of the men who holds Keret's narrator at gunpoint in his opening story from *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*.

> "In this country," he explains, "If you want something, you have to use force." He just got here from Sweden, and in Sweden it's completely different. Over there, if you want something, you ask politely, and most of the time you get it. But not in the stifling, muggy Middle East. All it takes is one week in this place to figure out how

[85] Oz, *The Amos Oz Reader*, p. 109
[86] Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, p. 292

> things work – or rather, how things don't work… In this country, might makes right, and it doesn't matter if it's about politics, or economics or a parking space. Brute force is the only language we understand.[87]

Keret's men-with-guns continue their explanation of their own desperate use of force to the beleaguered author, citing the ills of Israeli society as the fuel for their frustrated and desperate plea: "Things are tough, you know. Unemployment, suicide bombings, Iranians. People are hungry for something else. What do you think brought law-abiding guys like us this far? We're desperate man, desperate."[88]

David Grossman's novel *To the End of the Land*, tells the story of a woman whose youngest son has been called up to fight in one of Israel's military campaigns. Like every Israeli family, she has to face the fears of sending her children off to war. Having already endured one son's military service, she explains that nothing is as it was before once these children become soldiers:

> She knew full well from her experience with Adam, who had been out of the army for three years, that they don't' really come back. Not like they were before. And that the boy he used to be had been lost to her forever the moment he was nationalized – lost to himself too. [89]

The narrator goes on to question how she came to accept these realities, to play the roles that each family member is meant to play. As mentioned in the above quote, she notes that her oldest son had been "nationalized," through his military service. Since military service is mandatory in Israel, families are constantly being forced to handle the strain of sending away a child towards danger. Israel's political reality requires such sacrifices from its citizens, and

[87] Keret, *Suddenly*, p. 3 - 4
[88] ibid, 7
[89] Grossman, *To the End of the Land*, p. 68

in order to cope, these families have developed mechanisms with which to handle the worry and fear:

> She is not one of those mothers who sends her sons to battle… Yet she is now surprised to discover that that is exactly what she is: she escorted him to the battalion "meetery," and stood there hugging him with measured restraint, so as not to embarrass him in front of his friends, and she shook her head and shrugged her shoulders as required, with a proud grin of helplessness at the other parents who were making all the same moves – where did we learn this choreography? And how do I obey it all? Obey them, those people who send him there?[90]

After she reluctantly sends her son off, the panic of losing him sets in. She immediately fears for the worst, and begins to act in irrational ways that might protect her from any impending bad news about her son:

> The lower part of the door, four short bars over thick frosted glass. She takes three sheets of A4 paper from the printer and tapes them over the glass. That way she won't see their military boots… It occurs to her that they could arrive in the middle of all sorts of things… It gradually dawns on her that every movement she makes may be the last before they knock on the door. [91]

Before her son was called up to the reserves, the two of them had planned to hike the Israel trail together. Rather than waiting at home for the bad news to be delivered, she decides to continue with her plans for the hike – anything to get to a place where she cannot be found to receive any bad news. She bargains with herself, leading herself to believe that, so long as she cannot be found, nothing bad can happen to her, "If they don't find her, if they can't find her, he wont get hurt. She can't understand it herself. She tries to. She knows it makes no sense, but what does?"[92]Throughout her trek he has moments of utter break down, unable to bear the suspense of having her son amidst the dangers of war. In one such moment, she collapses to the ground, and sobs into the earth, "What am I doing, she thought. I'm telling

[90] ibid, p. 81
[91] ibid, p. 71
[92] ibid, p. 81

the earth about him. And she realized with horror: Maybe I'm preparing her for him, so she'll know how to take care of him." [93]

At this point it is important to note that Grossman suffered the loss of his 20-year old son, Uri, while working on *To the End of the Land*. While fighting in Southern Lebanon in 2006 Uri was killed by an anti-tank missile. Prior to this loss, Grossman had kept his writing away from themes having to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict. There are schools of thought that argue for an absence of knowledge of the writer's biography when reading a work, and others who argue that such knowledge is integral to understanding the piece. In this case, understanding the loss and grief that the author endured while writing this story makes the words of the beleaguered mother that much more powerful; while it is a work of fiction, perhaps the words bear more than their fair share of truth.

Along with such sadness and loss can come a sense of isolation from the rest of the world. Loneliness is another dominant theme throughout the works of the Israeli authors cited throughout this work. Loneliness presents itself through social isolation, of course, but also through retreats in to nostalgia and memory. Memory serves a powerful function in the life of the human soul. It serves to remind us of who we once were, and where we have come from. In dealing with existential issues, memory can be either a powerful tool or destructive mechanism; there's only so much looking back that can be accomplished without losing sight of moving forward. Writing of the pioneer generation in *Blue Mountain*, Shalev's narrator muses, "[When] asked why he should bother to recite basic facts that every schoolboy in the

[93] ibid, p. 163

village knew by heart, Meshulam answered modestly that the memory of the Jews of Israel was going soft and some things needed to be saved from oblivion." [94]

Shalev's Grandfather character in *Blue Mountain* expresses this sense of loss surreptitiously, as he goes about his day, by writing down ideas on scraps of paper later to be found by his grandson. "He had a habit of jotting down his thoughts on scraps of paper, which later flew around the room like swarms of migrating butterflies. He kept awaiting the return of whomever he had lost 'to see them again become flesh before my eyes,' I had found written on a note that fluttered into my hand."[95] By the time we, the readers, encounter this grandfather, he has lost his wife, his daughter has been killed in a bombing, and his war-ravaged son has disappeared from the village. The loss that he has incurred since becoming a pioneer in the land is enough for one lifetime, and yet he also carries with him the loss of a world that he left when he decided to move to Palestine to become a pioneering New Jew.

The ghosts of this pioneering generation, who brought with them memories of other lands and other lives to this new land, live on in the souls of their children and grandchildren. A society made up of refugees and immigrants leaves even its native-born, Sabra children with an inheritance of nostalgia and loss. One could even argue that to be a Jew is to carry within a keen ability to remember, and to create nostalgia from memory. Judith Katzir writes in her story "Closing the Sea," of a young woman caught in the grip of memory, both hers and those of her neighbors:

> Ilana saw herself at fourteen in shorts and pigtails, sitting on the rug next to the big radio in the living room at dusk on Friday. She hugged her thin knees and let the beautiful Sabbath songs fill her with longing for what she had lost, while pine needles rattled against the window, and the sun, with the last of its strength turned to needles of gold… Once there had been a Rothschild House café here, with round garden

[94] Shalev, *The Blue Mountain*, p. 326
[95] ibid, p. 4

> tables and chairs with curling white metal backs, and the *Yekkes* (German-Jews) of the Carmel, as her mother called them, would come in the afternoon, dressed up German Jewish women who drank their Viennese coffee and spoke in German as thick as the Sachertorte they ate slowly and politely, spoke about their world before the War until the pines were replaced by the graceless auditorium building and the stone square by cement pavement and the white garden furniture by colored plastic tables and chairs and the Viennese coffee by instant coffee or filter coffee. They still stand here, as in a nature preserve, older but no less grand, and still ate Schertorte and listened to music and stubbornly stayed alive to remember in German the world of yesterday.[96]

Loneliness is a repeated theme in the works of Etgar Keret. Although many of his works contain heavy doses of whimsy, they manage to strike at the heart of this human condition as referenced earlier. According to this most recent batch of Keret's short stories, the human condition is one of loneliness, lies, and denial. He certainly does not pull his punches in his writing; nearly every short story begins with a sharp line that immediately lets the reader know where he is going to take them. "Have you ever wondered what word is most frequently uttered by people about to die a violent death?" [97]begins one story, while the next, reflecting the fears of Grossman's character begins, "Two people were standing at the door. A second lieutenant… and behind him a thin officer."[98] Four of the stories in this collection open with some sentiment of loneliness or loss. "Every night, ever since she'd left him, he'd fall asleep in a different spot."[99] Thus begins a story called "Healthy Start," about a newly single man who eats breakfast every morning at the same café, by himself. He begins to wave over any person who appears to be looking around expectantly, and then pretends to be whoever that person was looking for, only so that he may have another person sit across from him and argue over who is going to pay the bill. Another story begins with the words,

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[96] Katzir, *Closing the Sea*, p. 134 - 135
[97] Keret, *Suddenly*, p. 20
[98] ibid, p. 25
[99] ibid, p. 34

"It's hardest at night,"[100] told by a man whose wife has recently left him. "Three of the guys she dated tried to commit suicide. She said that sadly but with a little bit of pride too,"[101] begins another story about a young woman, written from the perspective of another boyfriend, who turns out to be the fourth who tries, and succeeds, to commit suicide. Keret's stories dig at the heart, while showing the best and the worst that humanity has to offer.

Keret's characters suffer from an isolation and loneliness that is indicative of the greater existential crisis that exists in Israel. His works, along with those of Kashua, Grossman, Katzir, Oz and Liebrecht illustrate a society isolated and alone, constantly on the verge of a breakdown. Always on the lookout for the next attack, their characters perhaps represent a deeply rooted desire to simply connect as human beings, not as political entities, or representatives of a particular segment of the population.

[100] ibid, p. 69
[101] ibid, p. 124

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Throughout this discussion of Israeli identity formation in contemporary literature I have attempted to highlight a few strong currents within the ever-moving stream of self-understanding on both the individual and collective levels. The authors cited in this work have taken on the task of telling stories that reflect deep personal truths and challenges, and in the process have managed to tap in to streams of a collective contemporary Israeli consciousness. These stories reflect trends of self-understanding that have been institutionalized in the Israeli national narrative, such as that of the *halutzim*, while at one and the same time pushing back against the notion that there can be a univocality of national identity in a post-modern era of multi-dimensional identities. In the words of Georges Gusdorf, these authors are involved in the work of, "proving oneself to oneself – crossing inner borders," a task that is, "richly replenishing to a wandering consciousness that pays this price to discover the true center."[102]

Whereas prior to the modern era the Jewish experience was perhaps more univocal, the same experience in modernity has been anything but. In the Enlightenment era of emancipation, European Jewry were let out of the ghetto and learned what it meant to be both a Jew and a citizen of the world. These communities were swept up in the nationalist fervor of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the notions of what it meant to be a Jew were being questioned as Jews became citizens of the nations that they had, until then, been excluded from. Rabbi David Hartman cites Israeli political scientist, Shlomo Avineri, when he notes, "that whereas at one time religion kept the Jewish people together, in the modern world its influence has waned and been successfully replaced by new bonds: Israel, the

[102] Gusdorf, "Scripture of the Self: 'Prologue in Heaven,'" p. 122.

Hebrew language, the mystique of Israel's military capacities, the renewal of the land and so on." [103] These bonds are no longer particularly new, and are exactly the tropes now being questioned by these Israeli authors when they challenge the relevance of a singular Israeli narrative in a world where multiple narratives exist side-by-side.

In their 2010 paper on Jewish education and identity formation, Stuart Charme and Tali Hyman Zelkowicz assert that, "identity formation is a process of becoming, a journey without a clear itinerary or destination."[104] The works of these Israeli authors illustrates the tension that arises within a society when there is already a foregone conclusion of a particular national identity toward which one must aspire. The standard of the New Jew was a powerful model for the early Israeli settlers, one that they could aspire to in the reclamation of self-determination; but it is a model in need of a revision. Citing sociologist Stuart Hall, Charme and Zelkowicz note that, "cultural identity belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical they undergo constant transformation."[105]

The Israeli experiences expressed in the above chapters ask this question: knowing where from they came - are they heading? They shine a critical light on the *halutzim* experience, on tales of encountering the marginalized Other, and ultimately on the existential issues of what it means to be human in a place where one must use force on a daily basis, just to make it through the day. Looking through this contemporary lens on the past, Meir Shalev challenges these narratives of difference, and the national imperative and strife that come

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[103] Hartman, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition,* p. 17.
[104] Charme & Zelkowicz, "Educating for Jewish Identities: Multiple and Moving Targets," p. 9
[105] ibid.

along with them. We turn again to his *moshav* teacher, the wise Piness, for whom biblical significance was waiting to be uncovered at nearly every turn. And yet even this idealistically driven man has moments of questioning the fervor with which this new nation was being constructed: "Piness envied the caveman, who had wandered to this guileless land without biblical get-thee-outs to find it unpossessed and unscarred by the petty footprints of human loyalty and love, 'driven only by his own hunger and thirst and innocent appetite retained by every living cell to this day, for that warm, moist thing we call life.'"[106]

In facing the existential issues of what it means to live in a state of such heightened hyper-awareness the dominant Israeli narrative of the underdog new nation is questioned. Personal and national security are certainly still issues that require a great deal of national attention, but the works of these authors urge the reader to turn attention inward as well, in a search for meaning. Gusdorf writes, "to know ourselves would be to understand the order of the universe and God's design. This knowledge is forbidden us, nevertheless, obstinate, agonized, we cannot resist seeking it, as if the quest contained its own justification in knowing what we do not know."[107]

While such a quest is certainly a universal element of the human condition, it is one that is increasingly breaking through the national Israeli narrative of what it means to be a citizen of the Jewish state. This search for meaning is undeniably witnessed in the ways in which young Israelis choose to set about the work of finding themselves, usually in far flung destinations around the world, after their military service – a practice that has become as widespread as military service itself. Israel as a society, much like these young adults is facing the question; having sacrificed years of life (or the entirety of a life), to serving a

[106] Shalev, *The Blue Mountain*, p. 275
[107] Gusdorf, "Scripture of the Self: 'Prologue in Heaven,'" p. 124.

country for whom national security is a seemingly endless struggle, witnessing violence and devastation firsthand, how then are they as individuals and a society to move on with the Zionist dream?

The dream did not end at the creation of a state; the dream was to create a society. Certainly there was an array of opinions of what that society would look like, would it be socialist or democratic? Yiddish or Hebrew speaking? That work of conceptualizing this new entity and answering questions pertinent to an ideal identity has been cut short by the imminent demands upon safeguarding the lives of those whom the state is bound to protect. The dream of a State for Jews has come to fruition – there now exists, in Israel, a place where Jews need not be persecuted simply for who they are. The work of becoming a truly Jewish state, one that is able to live out the seemingly utopian values of loving one's neighbor as oneself, has been left by the wayside. The voices of these authors offer their readers insight into the possibility for change.

The poet, Ezra Pound, said, "Properly, we should read for power. Man reading should be man intensely alive. The book should be a ball of light in one's hand."[108] These voices of Israeli identity stream off of the page to inspire the reader toward greater understanding, and ultimately greater harmony despite the challenges of daily existence. Reading as a non-Israeli, as I have done for this work, and read together, these representative writers of fiction and non-fiction challenge the Diaspora Jew's understanding of Israel and its place in Jewish identity.

[108] http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/4941-properly-we-should-read-for-power-man-reading-should-be?auto_login_attempted=true

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