

**TWO GARDENS:  
MODERN HEBREW POEMS OF THE BIBLE**

**FOREWORD**

**by Howard Schwartz**

Where else but in Israel can so many bus riders be seen reading books of poetry? Nor are these readers limited to students—the love of poetry pervades Israeli culture. Poems are published in the weekend editions of the newspapers, and are widely read and discussed. The books of Yehuda Amichai, Israel's most popular poet, commonly sell ten thousand copies, and the first edition of his collected poems sold twice that number. Such sales figures are rare in this country, despite a reading public many times the size of Israel's.

What accounts for the widespread popularity of poetry in Israel? Surely it grows out of an almost universal knowledge of the Bible, which is a primary focus of Israeli education. After all, the language of Israel is the language of the Bible, and poetry has a central role in the Bible, not only in the Psalms and the Song of Songs, but scattered throughout the text, in key passages such as the Song at the Sea (Ex. 15:1-18). Hebrew poetry flourished in virtually every postbiblical period. So it is no exaggeration to say that poetry played a key role in keeping the Hebrew language alive over the long generations of exile, and that there is an unbroken tradition of Hebrew poetry from the time of the Bible to the present.

Perhaps no poems have had so great an impact on Jewish life as have the prayers. The prayers of the Siddur (prayerbook) and Machzor (holiday prayerbook) are drawn from the Bible, especially from the Psalms, from poems of medieval Hebrew poets such as Yehuda ha-Levi, Abraham ibn Ezra, and Shmuel ha-Nagid.

As this book demonstrates, there are an astonishing number of exceptional Hebrew poets. Of the older generation, there are Hayim Nachman Bialik, Nathan Alterman, and Uri Zvi Greenberg. Their

work was largely formal, but in the next generation Yehuda Amichai used modern, colloquial Hebrew rather than biblical Hebrew as the language of his poems, and created a revolution in modern Hebrew poetry. Amichai towers above the all other contemporary Hebrew poets, but the tradition is greatly enhanced by poets such as Yona Wallach, Dan Pagis, Dalia Ravikovich, Haim Gouri, Natan Zach, Amir Gilboa, Natan Zach, Leah Goldberg, Rachel and Zelda. There are also some very impressive younger Israeli poets, such as Nurit Zarchi, who draw on the biblical wellspring. Her poem “She Is Joseph” is a daring commentary on the story of Joseph, proposing, convincingly, that Joseph was a woman disguised as a man.

The Hebrew poems that draw on the Bible continue an ancient, uniquely Jewish method of commentary known as the midrashic method. According to the ancient rabbis, God not only dictated the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) to Moses, he also explained it to him. Or as one 7<sup>th</sup> century midrashic text puts it, “God dictated the Torah to Moses during the day, and at night He explained it to him (*Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*). Exegesis comes from Sinai! In these midrashic texts the rabbis explained any problems or contradictions they encountered in the biblical text. And modern poets, writing in Hebrew, draw on this same method. So many of the poems collected in this book can be viewed not only as poems, but also as a kind of commentary. Take, for example, the poem “Isaac” by Amir Gilboa:

Early in the morning,  
when the sun found us,  
my father gripped my hand.

The knives glinted through the trees  
and the voices in the leaves  
called out for mercy.

I was alone, waiting for you to find me.  
“Help me, father.  
Wherever I look, I see blood  
on the faces of the leaves, and everyone else  
has arrived at the noon meal.”

Then they strangled his voice,  
and breath left his lips, a star  
opening in the blue waters of the sky.

And I cried out,  
Tearing my eyes open, not wanting to believe,  
but the forest had fallen away  
and there was only smoke gathering  
over the darkened tables  
and a flower of ash on my window,  
and my hand was empty.

On the literal level, this poem is a retelling of the biblical episode found in *Genesis* 22 of the binding of Isaac. But, unlike the biblical story, the victim here is not Isaac, but his father, Abraham. That is because the poem not only recalls the biblical episode, but also represents the generation of the fathers and mothers who died in the Holocaust, and Isaac represents their surviving sons and daughters. Thus the poem draws upon the biblical model and, at the same time, links it to a contemporary catastrophe, linking the past and present together.

In his poem “The Binding” Matti Megged also draws upon the story of Isaac to represent the fear and terror of Israeli soldiers fighting in one of their many wars. Here the biblical account provides no hope, but speaks bitterly of the meaningless of the endless wars:

When I was led again  
to the sacrifice,  
not on foot, not  
on donkey—imprisoned  
in an iron womb—  
my father raised his arm,  
but the angel didn’t come down  
to restrain him.

Alone,  
father and son,  
a wind sweeping through

drawing the curtain of dust,  
my blood spilled  
on the basalt, shining  
darkly.

Above me, smoky skies  
and the smell of my ashes  
for centuries,  
and from time to time  
an old liar laughs  
at my extinction.

In both cases, and in the other poems included that look back at the biblical story, it serves as an archetype of the personal experience of the poets. This demonstrates that the Bible is not a dead text, but a living one, that can be called upon and reinterpreted in every generation.

Sometimes a biblical episode can serve as the source for satire. Consider Yehuda Amichai's poem "Jacob and the Angel:"

Before dawn she sighed  
and seized him in that way and defeated him,  
and he seized her in that way and defeated her,  
and they could see a long wave coming to the shore.  
In their holding they knew death,  
but still she wouldn't say her name.

In the dawn light,  
he saw her body—white  
in the places that her swimsuit  
had covered yesterday.

Later, they called down to her twice  
as if calling a child  
from her game in the sand  
Then he knew her name  
and let her go.

The biblical account (Gen. 32:22-31) tells how Jacob wrestled with a figure usually identified as an angel. Biblical commentaries offer a wide variety of reasons for this encounter, but when Jacob succeeds in wrestling the angel to a draw, the angel changes his name to *Yisrael*—one who wrestles with God. After that, Jacob leaves Jacob the Trickster behind, and becomes Jacob the Patriarch. Amichai's poem, set in the first person, describes the sexual wrestling of a man and a woman, a startling parallel to the profound biblical story that nevertheless sheds light and new meaning on the biblical account.

These poems all respond to the biblical source in their own ways. Like rabbinic Midrash, they not only draw upon the known—the biblical sources—but add personal interpretations that clearly demonstrate that the meanings of these biblical tales are endless and understood in many different ways. The portraits of God, of Adam and Eve, and the Garden of Eden are seen like the many facets of a jewel. In addition, the reader is treated to an exceptional collection of brilliant translations. Together Jeff Friedman and Nati Zohar translate these poems with exceptional clarity while retaining their poetic essence. The organization of the poems according to the biblical theme provides an opportunity to see how wide-ranging are the interpretations these Hebrew poets bring to the biblical text. Jeff Friedman is himself a major poet, the author of many of his own biblical poems. Nati Zohar demonstrates his remarkable ability to convey the poetic language in accurate and natural language. Jeff Friedman has recreated Nati Zohar's excellent literal translations into powerful lyrical poetry. Together they provide the reader with many profound surprises and delights.