

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ISRAELI ATTITUDE TOWARD THE HOLOCAUST AS REFLECTED IN MODERN HEBREW DRAMA

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The appropriation of the Holocaust into the Israeli national consciousness has always been problematic and painful. Following the realization of the Jewish state in 1948, the quest for cultural identity prompted only a reserved and diffident identification with Jewish history. Most Israelis viewed themselves as being the antithesis of the perennially homeless and persecuted Diaspora Jews. In particular, it was difficult to overcome their sense of massive victimization during World War II and reconcile it with the pride and assertiveness that followed the impressive triumphs and accomplishments of the young Jewish state.

To be sure, the catastrophe of European Jewry and the building of a homeland in the land of Israel constitute two parallel courses in modern Jewish history, the former being the cataclysmic harvest of millennia of antisemitism whereas the latter was the culmination of a national revival inspired by the rise of modern western nationalism. The creation of Israel had little to do with the effects of the Holocaust. The temporal proximity of these two crucial events might invite metaphysical conjectures about their combined meaning, but historians usually agree that there was no significant causal linkage between the Nazi atrocities and Jewish independence.¹ The popular misconception of Israel as having arisen out of the ashes of Auschwitz has no historical grounds and is not shared by most Israelis. But the country has gone through some dramatic changes in its attitude toward the historical trauma, ranging from complete rejection to an identification of contemporary situations with the past predicament. In addition, specific events and developments, such as

1. Yehuda Bauer (1982, p. 348) wrote: "The state of Israel did not result from the Holocaust; in fact, had the Holocaust not occurred, it is more than likely that Israel may have risen quicker, and better and more securely."

the involvement of the Yishuv in the war efforts, the survivors' presence in Israel, the Eichmann trial, and the developing relationships with post-war Germany have established direct and indirect connections with the Holocaust and its implications, thereby compelling citizens and artists to define their attitude toward the past and to reflect on the place of the tragedy in Israeli culture.

Our study will examine the developing attitudes toward the Holocaust in the first two decades of the Jewish state as they are manifested and implied in Hebrew dramas on the subject. The focus on Hebrew drama provides a particularly revealing perspective, for in Israel dramatic literature is closely tied to its social milieu. The playwrights often gravitate toward controversial issues which supply intriguing conflicts and an opportunity to assert the author's social involvement and to state his or her ideological attitudes. Very often the playwrights' responses to current social problems and political situations turn the theatre into a public arena where typical characters and topical standpoints are analyzed and evaluated. Indeed, critics Haim Gamzo and Gershon Shaked observed once that the subjects of most Israeli plays correspond directly to the contemporary issues discussed in the daily newspapers.²

Our study will deal with six plays that treat the subject of the Holocaust from the perspective of Israeli reality—remarkably, there were no Hebrew dramas set within the world of the concentration camp, for the Israeli theatre usually shunned realistic subjects which were not part of its immediate environment.³ We exclude from our discussion plays or playlets which never gained considerable public recognition and focus on those works which were written by prominent Israeli authors and performed by the major theatre companies. The plays are: Nathan Shaham's *A New Reckoning* (*Hešbôn hādāš*, 1953), Leah Goldberg's *Lady of the Castle* (*Ba'alat hā'armôn*, 1954), Aharon Megged's *Hannāh Seneš* (1958), Ben-Zion Tomer's *Children of the Shadow* (*Yaldē haššēl*, 1963), Moshe Shamir's *The Heir* (*Hayyôreš*, 1963), and Aharon Megged's *The Burning Season* (*Hā'ônā Habbô'eret*, 1967).

Shaham's *A New Reckoning* takes place in Sodom during the early years of the reborn Jewish state. The dramatic action is triggered when Ammi, an ardent young idealist, is led to suspect that Dr. Auerbach, the local director, was a Kapo in Auschwitz. Indignant that a former col-

2. See Shoham (1975, pp. 20–21).

3. This essay deals only with the Israeli drama in the fifties and sixties. In recent years a number of remarkable works have been produced on the Holocaust, including Yehushua Sobol's *Ghetto* and plays on such figures as Anne Frank, Korczak, and Kastner. The causes for this new interest in the past catastrophe should be the subject of another essay.

laborator with the Nazis remains free and unpunished, Ammi decides to take the law into his own hands. His scheme is to extort a confession from Auerbach and then kill the survivor, for the latter cannot be legally prosecuted. In the climactic scene Auerbach admits his past position as a Kapo, but then we learn that he was also a member of the resistance movement. Realizing that it is impossible to judge the actions of those who lived in the camps, Ammi does not pull the trigger.⁴

While the drama's ending is somewhat ambivalent, suggesting that the Holocaust kingdom is beyond the comprehension or reprehension of the victims, the characterization of the dramatic agents reveals unambiguous sympathies and antipathies. Nathan Shaham draws sharp contrasts between the Holocaust survivors and young Israelis. Doctor Auerbach, his wife Helen, Pomeranz, and Veksler have conspicuously foreign names, denoting their estrangement from the biblical land. On the other hand, the protagonist's name "*Ammi*" means "my people," and that of his companion, "Srulik," is the nickname for Israel, so that the combined meaning is "my people Israel." The two handsome young veterans and kibbutz members are characterized by their idealism and devotion to hard pioneering labor. In contrast, Veksler constantly complains about the hardships; Pomeranz is "like a manager" avoiding difficult jobs; and Auerbach is the chief director living comfortably in an air-conditioned house. These survivors, burdened by the immoral behavior of their shadowy past, came to Sodom in order to escape and to forget the Holocaust trauma. Auerbach's wife, Helen, allegedly spent the war years living in comfort and luxury with a wealthy Jew! Note that she lived with a Jew, not a Gentile, so that this fantastic tale illustrates the play's negative attitudes toward the survivors. The author's view is that they must have sinned greatly in order to avoid the fate of the others, for, as Pomeranz cynically declares, good people like Ammi were the first to perish in the camps.

The juxtaposition of the Sabras with the survivors also yields alternative meanings with respect to the setting. For the Israelis, Sodom, because of its barren soil, difficult climate, and location by the Dead Sea, is a special challenge to pioneering aspiration. But in light of the survivors' presence there, the setting comes to be associated with the biblical Sodom, the city of human malice that is traditionally conceived of as being the incarnation of hell on earth. In other words, for these people, Sodom is a place giving expression to their ethical degeneration

4. Shaham's plot was undoubtedly inspired by the Kastner trial which preoccupied the entire country in the early fifties.

during the war which, in the present, can give them the opportunity to atone for their sins, should they wish to rehabilitate themselves and become like other Israelis.

A New Reckoning reflects an early attitude prevalent in Israel of insensitivity toward and impatience with the victims of the Nazis. The survivors are viewed as an alien or even infected element in need of rehabilitation. While Ammi's extreme idealism is somewhat tamed by the incomprehensibility of the concentration camp universe, he still represents an outstanding innocence, perhaps signifying a more general national purity on the part of the newly-born state that is threatened to be spoiled by those who came from the Nazi hell. Shaham's exaltation of Zionist achievements versus the survivors' world was excessive and untenable. Artistically, the play is a poor derivative of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*—Ammi being a version of Gregor Verla—but with a heavy-handed action and a lack of artistic refinement. The Kameri production was a failure, closing after less than two dozen performances.

The confrontation between the Zionist accomplishments and the conduct of European Jewry during the war is also the central concern of Aharon Megged's *Hannāh Senesh*, a homage to the heroism of the young woman, often referred to as the Israeli Joan of Arc. The Hungarian-born Hannah Senesh was sent from Palestine to parachute into Europe on a spying mission for the British army and thereafter to organize the rescue of Hungarian Jews from the Final Solution. She was captured shortly after her landing. In prison she exhibited extraordinary courage and defiance, which made her a modern Jewish martyr and a national Israeli hero. Megged, who knew Hannah Senesh personally—they were both members of the same kibbutz—wrote a semi-documentary play, based on Hannah's diaries, her mother's accounts of her childhood years, and his own research on Hannah's fate and conduct in the Hungarian prison. However, given the unabashed sympathies toward his heroine, Megged created a moving melodrama loaded with ideological content eulogizing everything Hannah stood for.

The play's action is set in the Hungarian prison after Hannah was caught and revolves around the preparation for her trial and the efforts to save her life. The dramatic action, sustained by the tension stemming from the proceedings toward the execution, focuses on a study of the central character in this edge situation. However, Megged sees Hannah's entire career, especially her Zionist identity, as the key to understanding the significance of her life and death, and thus a number of flashback scenes unravel Hannah's past, presenting the crucial moments in her decision to go to Palestine and her activities in the kibbutz.

Megged's play is a mixture of documentary theatre and unrealistic sequences—the latter include Hannah's dreams, fantasies, and memories. These scenes are designed to portray Hannah as a sensitive young person whose great spirit and determination never made her larger than life; rather we see her as being vulnerable, fallible and ultimately movingly humane. There is, however, a tendency toward mythicizing the central character, which is implicit in Megged's adoption of the formal principles of martyrology to organize the dramatic material. As in most martyrologies of ancient Jewish and Christian traditions, the action revolves around the protagonist's trial, which becomes an opportune setting to express and elaborate on the conflicting viewpoints and arguments. The hero's physical death is not a tragic ending but a gesture of willful sacrifice, signifying the spiritual triumph of the martyr's ideals. In addition to these narrative elements, Megged explicitly compares Hannah in the text with such classical martyrs from the European Christian tradition as John Huss, John Wyckliffe, and Galileo, as well as Jewish martyrs like Hannah and her seven sons.

Unlike the old Jewish martyrologies, however, Hannah's sacrifice brings vindication not to all the Jews but only to a small group of the nation, namely, the Zionists. Despite the fact that, of all the Hebrew Holocaust plays, *Hannāh Senesh* is the only one set amidst the war reality, Megged features the sharp contrasts between two modes of Jewish existence, the negative one in the Diaspora and the positive in Israel. Hannah Senesh returns to her birthplace to save fellow Jews as an essentially Israeli character. She insists on calling herself *Hannāh*, with the Jewish Hebrew sounds, and not Anna, as indeed the other characters in Hungary call out to her. As a brave army officer, Hannah is an admirable representative of the "new Jew" developing in Eretz Israel. The former winner of a poetry competition and the daughter of a distinguished Hungarian author, she decided to give up a promising career and her respectable social status because she felt the best place for her as a Jew was in the land of Israel. In the context of the Holocaust turmoil, her idealistic act is reinforced as being the only course of Jewish salvation. But Zionist ideals do not merely constitute a program to save Jews from the threats of the Diaspora existence. They manifest such supreme values as hard labor, productivity, socialism, and comradeship, values which became fully realized in the model society of the kibbutz. On the other hand, the Jews in Europe are sharply criticized for their fearfulness, passivity, and expedient self-interest. The moment which most forcefully shows the discrepancy between the two Jewish worlds occurs during the meeting between Hannah and her lawyer. The lawyer tries to

persuade Hannah to save her life and the lives of many other Jews by disclosing the broadcasting code to her interrogators. For Hannah the idea is appalling—she will never violate her loyalty, nor will she ever make any deals with murderers. The lawyer attempts to use a rational argument by claiming that Hannah's act may save the lives of many. He calls it a beneficial reckoning. Hannah replies:

A reckoning? I know another reckoning, a bigger reckoning than that, lawyer Dverechi. I know that a position of honor can save a whole nation, and that fear and capitulation kill it. (p. 77)

The real shock comes at the end of the scene; Hannah angrily asks who stands behind this offer and is answered: Jews. On top of the effect of this startling revelation, the emphasis here on the concept of "reckoning," which of course also recalls the title of Shaham's play, indicates the assessment and negative judgment upon the world of those values represented by the Diaspora Jews, in contrast with the positive ethical considerations and admirable values embraced by Hannah and the pioneers in Israel.

The Zionist achievements in Israel carry an additional significance as an alternative option to the entire European tradition that, after all, was the womb of the genocide. The encounters between Hannah and Janush, the old Christian jailer, convey the differences between two opposite mentalities. Janush turns out to be a comic figure because Hannah's stories about Eretz Israel throw him off balance—in his words, "my head turns like a wheel" (p. 72). His European values of respect for authority, recognition of social status, stereotypical views of Jews, and traditional conservative attitudes toward women cannot come to terms with the facts of this talented girl from a distinguished family who is an officer in the army, yet who shares equally the labor burden on a collective farm; he also cannot grasp how a young Jewish girl can display so much heroism against the ruthless repression of those whom he is forced to serve. He seems to understand when Hannah explains that she came from the holy land, which is for him the land of saints and miracles. As a prototype of the traditional Christian attitude, Janush, despite his benevolence and good nature, represents the failure or refusal of many Europeans to acknowledge the reality of Jews returning to their homeland and rebuilding the holy land.

The Habima production of *Hannāh Seněš* was a major contribution to the idolization of the modern Jewish martyr. Compared with Shaham's attempts to touch on complex ethical issues, Megged creates a homage to the heroism of a noble spirit struggling against the oppression of great evil. Unfortunately, in exalting Hannah's life and death, Megged tended

to overpopularize the subject, occasionally lapsing to near trivialization. Thus, the ending avoids a final note of defeat or loss because Megged concluded the drama with a dream sequence of Hannah's ghost appearing to comfort her mother. The heroine's physical stage appearance belies the sombre effect of the execution and, along with the overall exaltation of Hannah's fate, spoils any sense of tragedy. In summary, *Hannāh Seneš* is a well written popular drama commemorating an extraordinary character and a fascinating life. However, it is loaded with a simplistic and single-minded ideology, postulating an unjustified dichotomy between the Diaspora Jews and the Zionists in Israel, and implying an attitude that lacks compassion for the Nazis' victims; these shortcomings make the play somewhat outdated for contemporary audiences.

The differences between the reality of the Jewish state and the values of the old European continent constitute the basis for the dramatic conflict in Leah Goldberg's *Lady of the Castle*. Michael Sand and Doctor Dora Ringel are two emissaries from the holy land in search of relics from the Holocaust. Sand tries to recover rare books and manuscripts and Dora, a motherly figure, looks for orphans and lost children. Stormy weather forces them to spend the night in a remote castle in central Europe. Their host, Zabrodsky, formerly a count and owner of the place and currently an officially appointed custodian of the castle-turned-into-museum, reluctantly allows them to stay. When they prepare to sleep, the clock strikes ten, and from a hidden door a beautiful young girl appears. She is Lena, who was sheltered by the count during the war but continues to live in hiding because he never told her that the war was over. The play's second part focuses on their attempts to persuade Lena to go to Israel and leave behind the castle and the count. Lena is torn between her attachment to her savior and his castle and the promise of a new life in Israel which offers drastic change and challenges. After torturous deliberations and painful changes of mind, she decides to join Dora and Sand in going to the Jewish state.

The central thematic conflict in the play is delivered through the characters of Dora and Zabrodsky, the two main rivals struggling over Lena's future. In addition to the narrative clash, Goldberg characterizes each one with well defined alternative world views, charging the play with an intriguing measure of ideological and cultural contrasts. Even before Lena appears, Dora and Zabrodsky can hardly conceal their mutual dislike. Dora finds Zabrodsky's aloofness and ceremoniality to be archaic gestures of cultural pretensions that must give way to the pressing needs of modern times, which are to her mind best served by technological progress. Zabrodsky is appalled by Dora's pragmatism and her expressed defiance of the cult of beauty. For Dora, castles are

pretty but not to be lived in, whereas Zabrodsky inveighs against the “modern boxes,” i.e., the massive new apartment buildings, and the rise of industrial and vulgar culture. Goldberg also uses the two rivals to present additional differences, more directly pertaining to the Holocaust and its aftermath. After all, Zabrodsky is not only the obstacle to be overcome in the struggle to liberate the imprisoned girl, but he is also a devout Christian and a European aristocrat and, as such, a representative of the Christian European culture that attempted to destroy the Jewish people. Thus, the count and Dora represent for Lena a whole series of choices regarding life-style and values: imprisonment versus liberation, the old versus the new, Christianity versus Judaism and, ultimately, Europe’s diaspora versus Israel. Lena’s final choice is a testimony to the triumph of Jewish nationalism.

While the triumph of Zionist promises recalls the thematic concerns of Megged’s *Hannāh Senesh*, there is still a significant difference in the attitudes of these two plays. First, Hannah Senesh is a highly motivated character firmly believing in the righteousness of her ideals, which in the course of the play’s action are demonstrated as being superior to both the diaspora’s life and the gentile mentality. By contrast, Leah Goldberg does not present a clash between clear-cut positive and negative forces. Lena’s predicament is a genuine one, for she must choose between two options, both of which are equally attractive to her. Her attachment to the count was not achieved merely through deception. Zabrodsky is indeed a fascinating character. He lost his aristocratic status and property but continues to exhibit a nobility of spirit. He is deeply in love with Lena, and her departure would ruin his last source of happiness. During the war he courageously subverted the Nazis who were based in his castle and risked his life to shelter Lena. His pathetic fate and dignified character caused Gershon Shaked, the eminent Israeli critic, to consider him to be the truly tragic hero of the play while viewing Dora as the opposite expression of vulgarity and crudeness.⁵ But Shaked, in my opinion, misinterpreted Dora’s role, for she, too, is a highly complex character. After all, Dora, like Hannah Senesh, grew up in a respectable European family, and she declares that she has a firsthand knowledge of the count’s world. Her rejection from a position of familiarity adds authenticity and power to her attitude (whereas Sand’s fascination with

5. See Shaked (1958). Shaked is usually a highly perceptive reader. He wrote the review of Goldberg’s play many years ago, and I suspect that his uncritical fascination with the Count’s figure and his world are symptomatic of the contemporary Israeli feelings toward the Diaspora; i.e., for the young Israeli critic, the Count represented a fascinating and respectable European dignity which was the opposite of the rejected shtetl misery.

the count's life is a typically plebeian reaction to the presence of magnificent wealth and external dignity). Dora's current preoccupation with finding surviving children has caused her to develop a new scale of values, so that her tough-minded pragmatism and her impatience with Zabrodsky's romantic indulgences look quite understandable, if not quite justified. Dora is equally realistic about life in Israel. She explains to Lena that it is not perfect and will involve struggles and painful experiences, but she also promises the vitality of freedom and new opportunities while avoiding any ideological indoctrination.

Leah Goldberg, in her poetry as well as in her dramas, presents an outstanding attitude toward the Holocaust with respect to the future of Hebrew culture. Unlike poets such as Uri Zvi Greenberg, she refuses to view Israel as the antithesis of the gentile world that was the progenitor of Nazism. Nor is she willing to view World War II as being evidence of the bankruptcy of western civilization. In the play the Nazis are referred to as a bunch of beasts and the enemies of culture. Throughout her career as an artist, critic, translator, and teacher, Goldberg sought to create a balance between the classic treasures of western culture, Jewish tradition, and the national rebirth in the land of Israel. In *Lady of the Castle* she deals with the problematics of cultural identity and successfully avoids any expression of ultranationalism or propagandism—the choice of Zionism is a serious one, but it does not mean the complete rejection of its alternatives, specifically, the Jewish Diaspora and the gentile world; rather it involves a careful process of their appropriation.

Lady of the Castle amalgamates the principles of the well made play—a development of clear action revolving around a few well defined characters—with such motifs of gothic romances as the remote castle, the stormy night, secret doors, the mysterious beauty, the weird count, and more. Goldberg has used these popular elements to create a finely written drama whose mood is symbolic-expressionistic, while its thematic concerns address political issues against the backdrop of existential decisions. *Lady of the Castle* is to my mind one of the best Hebrew plays; its combination of artistic talent, popular motifs, and an ideological view that had a certain appeal to many Israelis made it a special favorite for Israeli audiences.

Ben Zion Tomer's *Children of the Shadow* presents a more personal account of the conflicts that underlie Goldberg's drama. The protagonist, Yoram, is a twenty-eight-year-old man in search of self-identity. At the age of fourteen he was transported out of Nazi-occupied Europe to Palestine through Teheran (Tomer himself was one of the "Teheran children", and he clearly identifies with his hero). The main dramatic conflict is basically internal, involving the protagonist's assessment of his

past *vis-à-vis* the present, while the symmetrical temporal division of his life—half of it in Europe and half of it in Israel—signifies the equal force of each side.

When Yoram came to Israel he enthusiastically adopted the Israeli identity and tried to realize it by working in the kibbutz, serving in the army, and changing his name from the traditionally Jewish “Yossele” to the more Hebrew-sounding “Yoram”. His endeavors to identify completely with the new environment never succeeded, as we learn from Nurit, who tells him, “you never managed to be Yoram to the end” (p. 48).

Yoram’s main problem is rooted in his uncritical determination to become an Israeli character while renouncing his links with the past. His parents, for example, have always reminded him of a shameful past, a “miserably poor” family in “a dirty little town” (p. 47) in Poland—a succinct summary of a prevalent Israeli attitude toward the *štetl* life. In addition to his shame, Yoram suffers from guilt feelings, the burden and curse of every survivor, which were in his case caused by the discrepancy between his relatively secure position and success in Israel and the horrors that his family had to endure in Europe. His attempts to forget his parents lead him to tell his wife that they perished. A letter announcing their coming impels Yoram to confront the reality of their existence. At the end of the first act he dreams that their ship sank, and he wakes up terrified by the recognition that this was a wishful dream. At this moment he realizes the futility and the moral degradation of his attitudes, and he then confesses the truth to Nurit as well as to himself.

Children of the Shadow signifies the transition of Israeli drama between the first and the second decades of the Jewish state. In its references to the War of Independence, the problems of soldiers adjusting to civilian life, the arrival of Holocaust survivors, and the issue of leaving the kibbutz, the play reflects the major themes of the Israeli theatre of the fifties. But Tomer’s work expresses the cultural crisis that swept Israel in the sixties, sparking a revision of the previous national assertiveness and the dismissal of the Jewish past. The crisis occurred primarily as a result of the apparent gap between, on the one hand, the development of a fairly common western society such as Israel had become and, on the other, the earlier idealistic expectations and semi-utopian visions. In particular the critics lamented the decline of the spirit of the 1948 generation, specifically the change from those ideals of pioneerism, devotion to the collective nation, and readiness for sacrifice, to what they perceived as being a manifest hedonism and growing materialism. (The critics of the young generation proved to be too harsh—they acknowledged it in the Six Day War.) Tomer presents a grotesque celebration of

Independence Day, replete with uncontrolled drunkenness and shallow revelry, in order to illustrate the current drifting and decadence. In addition, Dubi, the Sabra who once courted Nurit, is the embodiment of this social and national decline. Nurit points out that, despite Yoram's efforts, Dubi was always more truly an Israeli than Yoram. In the present, however, Dubi is attracted by foreign influences—represented in the play by jazz and jeans—and prefers to spend most of his time outside Israel, in places like Paris.

While Dubi's character signifies the vanity of Yoram's quest to be totally immersed in Israeli reality, Yoram's attempts to reclaim his personal past force him to revise his attitudes toward the Holocaust experience. The core of Tomer's drama focuses on these attitudes, which are consolidated and recognized through Yoram's complex relationship with Sigmund. Doctor Sigmund Rabinowitz was married to Yoram's sister, who perished during the war. Through his membership in the Judenrat and his collaboration with the Nazis, Sigmund was able to save himself. (It is characteristic that for the Israeli author the Judenrat is a clear symbol of betrayal and cowardice. As a matter of fact, many Judenrat members fought bravely for their Jewish brothers.) Sigmund was imprisoned at the end of the war; now he roams the streets of Tel Aviv, tortured to the point of insanity by guilt feelings.

The dramatic action is triggered when Sigmund accidentally sees Yoram and recognizes him as his brother-in-law, while Yoram begins to plan revenge and punishment against the old man. It is interesting to note that the character of Dr. Sigmund is almost identical to Dr. Auerbach's role in Shaham's *A New Reckoning*. In terms of their personal and historical backgrounds, both Sigmund and Auerbach are patriarchal figures and representatives of the old generation (in the Habimah production of Tomer's play, Aharon Meskin played the role of Sigmund, while Yoram's role was played by his son Amnon Meskin). The generation gap and the father figure are common themes and motifs in modern Hebrew literature, conveying the full weight of a burdensome past on the young Israelis. But the crucial difference between the two plays is that Shaham's young protagonist is driven by what resembles an Oedipal rage—Auerbach's control over Lisa underscores the Oedipal theme—whereas Tomer's hero relates to the haunted survivor as his alter-ego, and Sigmund indeed represents many of Yoram's anxieties and obsessions, his own roots and past traumas. Nevertheless, the concluding sequence in *Children of the Shadow* is almost identical to the climax of Shaham's *A New Reckoning*. In the crucial encounter with Sigmund, Yoram feels he must punish the former collaborator. Aware of the fact

that his hatred toward the man is also an outlet for his own frustrations and guilt feelings, Yoram is torn between the quest for vengeance and Nurit's advice to forgive and forget. Sigmund's reflective statements on the Holocaust only deepen his confusion in their lucid ideas and terrifying images. Tomer's approach to the subject is expressed in the following account of a conversation between Sigmund and a Nazi officer who had once studied Humanism with Sigmund at the University of Heidelberg. Sigmund recalls their exchange:

In the end you'll be burnt to death. I told him, we'll consume you yet. No one will consume us, he said to me, we will leave behind us a world so stripped clean of everything that there won't be a rag of an ideal to cover the nakedness with . . . And he was right . . . (after a pause). He musn't be right! He musn't be! (p. 88)

In contrast to Goldberg's reluctance to view Nazism as being an evidence of cultural bankruptcy, Tomer sees little hope for idealistic progress after Auschwitz. The playwright refrains from radical nihilism by having Sigmund crying that it musn't be like this. He makes Yoram deliver the key words: "To ask. That's the most that can be. Never to understand" (p. 88).

The chief problem in Tomer's play is that what had to be the premise of his work became its conclusion. He touches on many issues, actually on too many, but he fails to explore them, to feature a dramatic action that presents a dialectical development, or to create any meaningful resolution. In other words, Yoram's confusion is the author's confusion. Tomer attempts to identify Yoram with Hamlet through numerous references to Shakespeare's hero. However, the analogy is forced by the dialogue and has no validity beyond the direct references. The playwright, in fact, tries to use many other myths in a similarly unfounded fashion. Characters are associated with Faust (Sigmund), Orpheus (Yoram), and Ophelia (Nurit) in one or two sentences in the text with no narrative justification. The play, as a whole, is the embittered protest of a young Israeli poet in the early sixties revealing the contemporary critical mood on such issues as cultural decadence, the reevaluation of attitudes toward Jewish history, and, in particular, the enormous difficulties, both emotional and rational, of integrating the Holocaust into the Israeli consciousness.

Tomer's play features realistic characters, topical ideological problems and a recognizable social environment, but it is actually dominated by the style of poetic expressionism. The dramatic structure is based on numerous short episodes which are not connected by linear narrative development but, rather, constitute critical moments in the inner lives of the characters. The dialogues elaborate upon Yoram's torments and

Sigmund's obsessions, which induce the latter's bizarre performance. The work is richly embellished with poetic images, symbols, songs, dream sequences, and Sigmund's gothic appearance. The playwright, however, failed to accomplish an intense and gripping action; nor did he develop the supporting characters fully; and he often resorted to simplistic symbols and gratuitous references to Shakespeare's Hamlet. Nonetheless, the play's honest treatment of profound themes and serious issues won it a respectful reception.⁶ One critic praised the play "as an expression of something exceedingly personal, yet it serves as a biography of a generation bearing in the very fact of its existence the possibilities of great drama."⁷

In addition to the plights of the survivors in Israel and the dramatic encounters between the Sabras and the Jewish refugees, there were other political developments that compelled the Israelis to confront the reality of World War II. One outstanding dilemma involved the relationships with post-war Germany. A few events highlight some of the important stages of this process. In the early fifties, the decision to allow West Germany to pay reparations money for those directly affected by the Nazi persecution stirred one of the most serious controversies in Israel's history. (Menachem Begin, as leader of the opposition party, fiercely objected and delivered a number of inflammatory tirades against the proposed agreements.) Then came the Eichmann trial of 1961 that served as a catalyst to remind and inform the whole world of the Jewish genocide. And finally, in the mid-sixties Israel decided to undertake full diplomatic relations with West Germany, following a period of fairly extensive commercial connections. Israeli playwrights found material for

6. Lewis Funke, the *New York Times* critic, observed the play's weaknesses but praised its thematic concerns and its effectiveness. In his review of the Habimah production in New York, he wrote: "Conceived somewhat more in terms of the novel than the stage, episodic at times and sprawling, it nevertheless carries an impact that thrusts deep into the heart and chokes the throat. Weak at times in motivation, awkward in its meanderings, it encompasses the inescapable inner drama of its subject—the problem of building a new life in a new country by those who have known the terrors of the Nazi holocaust, the ever-present haunting past of those who in the time of the bloodletting and the crematoriums chose collaboration and life in preference to revolt and death" (February 27, 1964).

7. See Abramson (1979, pp. 132–133). Abramson's book on modern Hebrew drama includes a section entitled "the plays of the Holocaust." Less interest in the topic itself, the critic considers the treatment of the Holocaust as a subgenre and examines its place in the general evolution of Israeli drama. Abramson however discusses the dramatic themes in *Lady of the Castle* (which she calls *The Chatelaine*), *Children of the Shadow*, *The Heir*, and *Hannah Senes* in that order. This order, which is not chronological, reflects the author's judgment on the relative importance of each work in the development of Israeli drama.

dramatic conflicts and tensions in the apparent incongruity between the enormity of Germany's past crimes and Israel's normal connections with the German state in the present.

Shamir's *The Heir* was a satirical black comedy accusing the Israelis of being too eager to turn a profit from the Holocaust. The death of an Auschwitz survivor gives a young impostor the opportunity to claim compensations from the Germans. The claim eventually escapes the protagonist's control after his greedy lawyer relentlessly explores the past and makes the Germans pay a huge fortune. When the commercial empire purchased by this fortune reaches gigantic dimensions, the impostor breaks and admits his big lie. But his lawyer and secretary refuse to expose the scheme and prefer to declare him insane and take over his property. In the end his mother and girlfriend do not assist him in his efforts to prove his sanity and true identity, and he is faced with the choice of being taken to an asylum or going to jail. His fall ends with a desperate cry: "Who am I . . . who am I . . ." (p. 47).

The protagonist's final question reveals Shamir's concern with the national identity crisis in Israel at the time (the play was written in the same year as Tomer's *Children of the Shadow*). The hero, Wolf Cohen, is the Israeli prototype—among other things, he is the son of an Oriental Jew and an Ashkenazi woman. He eventually changes his name to Yigal Barnes, meaning "deliverance" and "miracle," two notions associated with Israel's birth. The play was written in the wake of the Eichmann trial, which is also the background for some of the action. It focuses on an apparent contradiction between the trial of the Nazi war criminal and the reparations agreement with West Germany. The playwright used this doubtful charge to unleash a wild attack on the Israeli society as a whole. Like Tomer, Shamir condemns the loss of pioneerism and idealism; he wishes to shock his audience through the portrayal of social hypocrisy, cynical exploitation, hedonism and limitless materialism. However, his attack was so extreme that it lost its legitimacy, for the lack of any redeeming elements made the work a sheer fantasy with an irreconcilable gap between the grotesque show and the reality it intended to address. In addition, the play's extremely negative characterization undermines its dramatic power. With all the major characters, including the protagonist, being grotesque caricatures, the hero's final pathetic predicament and his profound crisis are totally unconvincing.

The most disturbing aspect of Shamir's work is the attempt to create a funny satire with material taken from the Holocaust experience and its aftermath. For the most part, the comic style ranges from bad taste to reprehensible insensitivity. For example, when Wolf Cohen goes to meet

a former Auschwitz doctor in her clinic, he is asked about his number, "the hand . . . a blue number" (p. 44). This is supposed to be a comic moment of misunderstanding stemming from the confusion between an ordinary visit number and the notorious camp tattoos. Here Shamir is not better than those he condemns for exploiting the Holocaust for extrinsic profits. Even if he was motivated by a genuine discomfort over the disparity between the grim events of the genocide and what he termed the Israeli "circus," his satire is in the final account a product of the "circus" and a symptom of it rather than its repudiation. *The Heir* understandably stirred a public scandal. Most critics deplored its excessiveness, while few found much merit or truth value in its critical vision. Remarkably, this highly offensive play never met any calls for censorship. After all, *The Heir* was the comic complement to Tomer's *Children of the Shadow*, insofar as both plays reflect the sense of cultural crisis that prevailed among the Israeli intellectuals in the early sixties.

In the same mood, Aharon Megged wrote *The Burning Season*, an allegorical drama based on the story of Job. The names and the main action recall the biblical setting, but the play is set in present times. The plot begins after the central character, Job, has recovered completely from his great disaster. Job's current prosperity is evident from the intense activities that take place during the "burning season," which actually means the high season of agricultural production. However, the past is revived when Hadad, Job's arch-enemy, who engineered the catastrophe, is suspected of illegal actions, and his investigation leads to the reopening of Job's case. After Job decides to avenge his tragedy by providing crucial evidence against Hadad, he finds out that for many years his foreman, Knaz, had been developing extensive commercial connections with his foe Hadad, who, it turned out, was instrumental in regenerating Job's wealth. Job's embarrassment and his denials of any knowledge of these relationships encounter disbelief and suspicion. His workers, who were always hostile to the man whom they considered a foreigner in their land, erupt in an orgy of derision and destruction, finally setting the house on fire.

The Burning Season was allegedly written in response to the growing relationship between Israel and Germany culminating in 1966 with the opening of the German embassy in the Jewish state. In the play, Hadad stands for the role of Germany during the Nazi era and after the war, and Job and Knaz represent Israel and the Jewish people. Despite these analogies the political problem at the background, i.e., the German-Israeli relationship, is not resolved in terms of formulating a clear and definite attitude. On the contrary, the attempt to elicit specific analogues

interpretations between Megged's story and the present political situation results in obscure and confusing conclusions. Why should Megged find potentially catastrophic consequences in the new relationships with Germany? Is Job the Israeli prototype, or is he the representative of the recovering Jew in the Diaspora? And what is the law that seeks to punish the perpetrators? These questions and more remain unanswered. Actually, this finely written drama possesses a special power, because it transcends immediate political concerns in addressing some more profound aspects of Jewish existence. Megged's choice of Job's story as the underlying myth for his allegorical play allows him to project a vision of the Jewish predicament in all times and places, while the implied references to the Holocaust render the genocide as the most awesome manifestation of this predicament.

Megged's feelings about Israel's place in the framework of Jewish fate, and about the desirable ethical stance of the nation toward historical realities of threats and opportunities, disasters and recoveries, are expressed through the characters of Job, Knaz, and Job's two daughters, Yemima and Keziah. These four characters are carefully balanced against each other. Knaz's relentless pragmatism is motivated by the will to ensure recovery and actual strength. Job feels that Knaz is heartless and immoral; however, his own self-esteem as a paragon of virtue was facilitated by Knaz's activities. Moreover, Job's professed benevolence is the product of self-delusion and a repression of justified grievances against his enemies. Keziah belongs to Knaz's camp by virtue of her efforts to conduct normal relationships with her society—she plans to marry the gentile lawyer's son. Yemima maintains an uncompromising aloofness; unable to forget the past and always believing in the workers' unchanging hatred toward her family, she presses her father to leave the place. Compared with Yemima, Keziah is unsophisticated and almost vulgar, although she is actually a lively girl exhibiting healthy and charming vitality. On the other hand, Yemima's noble aloofness is fascinating and at times even admirable; however, in insisting on the reopening of the case against Hadad and her quest for revenge, she plays an instrumental role in bringing about the second disaster.

The Burning Season abounds with critical references to such contemporary ills in Israeli society as excessive materialism, ignoring the past, and the seemingly mindless renewal of relationships with Germany. Yet the play avoids providing a clear message, or an analysis of the problem with specific ideas for remedy, because the author tries to reflect the complexity of Israel's existence, a complexity that defies clear-cut conclusions or solutions. This approach is nowhere more evident than in the

assessment of the central character. While the biblical Job owned flocks and cattle, Megged's Job specializes in growing vineyards, and the text explicitly points out that he once did own cattle but has changed his occupation. Gideon Ofrat finds in this detail "an echo to the image of the new Jew: the Diaspora's professions—the merchant, the doctor, etc.—were converted to new professions connected with working the soil."⁸ At the same time the playwright implies that in the past Job's life was spiritually superior. One of the characters comments that Job used to have many books: "He was a rich man and a philosopher. Now—a rich man" (p. 11). However, unlike Tomer's critical indulgences and Shamir's extreme social assault, Megged succeeds in touching more profound nerves of the national psyche, elevating his drama from a specific social commentary to an intriguing vision of the essential Jewish predicament *vis-à-vis* the gentile world and its threats of pogroms and genocide. The evocation of the Job myth as potentially analogous to the Holocaust reinforces the historical fate of the Jews, who have had to endure from one fire to another. Megged's naturalistic treatment of the biblical allegory is actually dominated by the expressive images of blood, heat, intoxication and ominous signs of the inevitable and imminent doom. The frantic gathering of the grapes in the high season, the act which gives the play its title, is a major symbol of Jewish life on the edge, culminating in the final great fire. The play's artistic quality and its rigorous treatment of fundamental problems in Israeli life led to its success when it was staged on Habimah in 1967.

In conclusion, the Israeli playwrights never attempt to confront directly the Holocaust horrors, probably because of their concern with problems of their immediate reality and because of the enormity of the subject matter. With respect to the latter point much has been said about the difficulty of reconciling art and the actual atrocities. Here I would like to recall Peter Brook's admission that, after trying to create a theatrical expression of the concentration camp universe, he realized that the most effective way to convey whatever there is to be said would be to leave the Auschwitz gates open to conscientious visitors.⁹

The Israeli plays that deal with the subject of the Holocaust do so in examining the past trauma *vis-à-vis* current realities in the Jewish state. Moreover, they usually feature a dramatic conflict juxtaposing the Holocaust against Israel. Usually, the characters' names, either Hebrew or foreign, give away their background and affiliation. At times a change of

8. See Ofrat (1975, p. 163).

9. See Naveh (1977, p. 9).

name indicates an attempt to move from one group to another, as in the case of Hannah Senesh, who insists on the Hebrew pronunciation of her name, or Tomer's hero, who states: "Whoever wants to change his biography in this country, changes his name" (p. 28).

The most disturbing aspect of these Israeli plays is their palpable insensitivity to the historical tragedy. Whereas *The Heir* is an outstandingly obscene example, in most other works the authors fail to provide an adequate picture of the horrors of the Final Solution. There are many platitudes, like that of Shaham's Auerbach, "We were millions of Jews, and each one faced death in solitude" (p. 35), or unconvincing and almost clichéd references to the killing of children in *Hannāh Senesh*. In that play Megged features Fruma, a mother who lost her daughter. Unfortunately, the dramatic presentation is so superfluous that neither the character nor her story possesses any vividness or poignancy. In order to underscore the pathos involved in the killing of children, Megged puts the following statement in Fruma's mouth: "They kill them all. I saw with my own eyes how they shot a kid who was running in the street after his father" (p. 60). This is a needless redundancy, as if her own personal tragedy may not have been sufficiently moving to make the point. Then there is an additional odd contradiction. Fruma, the bereaved mother, declares that she no longer feels anything; yet, when she sees Hannah's writing of "Shalom" on the wall, the stage directions indicate that she recognizes the meaning with great excitement (p. 61). Leah Goldberg also displays a similar failure to appreciate the monumental sufferings of the victims. The growing compassion for the Count's predicament culminates with Sand's statement: "I think he's the most unfortunate man I've met in all these years" (p. 66)—a rather odd observation by a Jew about a Christian in post-war Europe.

The Israeli plays also demonstrate harsh criticism of the victims' behavior. They project the image of the European Jews killed like slaughtered sheep. Explicit references to the notion of "sheep to the slaughter" appear in *Hannāh Senesh* (p. 77). Further, in the same play the Jews plan a disgraceful bargain with the Nazis. The incident of collaboration is often mentioned. Lena suspects the Israeli emissaries because she knows that "there are Jews who work for them" (p. 43). Auerbach and Sigmund are two examples of such collaboration. Shamir goes so far as to hint at another kind of Jewish complicity in the genocide through the "ironic" information that Wolf Cohen's father-in-law was the owner of gas factories in Germany. Usually the survivors command little respect or compassion. The recurrent theme is that a moral degradation was necessary to avoid death. Pomerantz often teases the idealistic protagonist of *A*

New Reckoning by saying that people like Ammi would not have had a chance to survive the camps, and in Shamir's *The Heir* the same sentiment is echoed: "Dutch and German women died first: they were not ready . . . They did not understand that you get dirty in the war, cheat the enemy, steal, pretend . . ." (p. 44).

Having set the action by contrasting the Holocaust with Israel, the playwrights do acknowledge that the conflict is not a clash between mutually exclusive and contradictory forces. The linkage between the two worlds is manifested by the presence of a pathetic young woman who shares the values of both worlds and is torn in the middle during the unfolding of the dramatic crisis. This clearly is the underlying structure of *Lady of the Castle*, and in each of the other plays there is a similar role. In *A New Reckoning*, Lisa, Dr. Auerbach's daughter, is the goal of her father's possessive attitudes and of Ammi's passion. Lisa survived the war by hiding in a monastery, but she can also qualify as an Israeli because of her youthfulness, purity, and her belief in pioneering. She is tied to her father, but she is also moved by Ammi's fresh love. The play's ending, which shows her in a dream-like scene with Ammi, suggests the latter's implicit triumph. In *Children of the Shadow*, Nurit is "purely" Israeli, yet she is unhappy with her environment, and she displays great sympathy for Yoram's problems and for his family. Nurit is desired by both Dubi and Yosselle-Yoram, but she loves Yoram because, as she puts it, he always remained Yossele. In *The Heir*, the protagonist's beloved, Hannah, is the only non-grotesque character of the play. She follows her father to Argentina, an act that draws her into the Diaspora world, but she then decides to return to the homeland. She loves Zeev-Wolf, but she is appalled by his vanity and finally leaves him. Thus, the presence of the young heroine—a curious parallel to the character of the pathetic Jewish female in Christian literature—is another key to the drama's ideological tendencies. Hannah Senesh demonstrates a triumphant Zionism, Lena's hesitations reflect Goldberg's cultural dilemmas, and Nurit's social criticism expresses Tomer's own revision.

A diachronic view of the six works reveals a remarkable difference between the three plays written in the fifties, *A New Reckoning*, *Lady of the Castle*, and *Hannāh Seneš*, and the plays written in the sixties, *Children of the Shadow*, *The Burning Season*, and *The Heir*. In the earlier works the Holocaust is conceived of as being a bad dream, or a terrible experience which ought to evaporate or be exorcised in the new entity of Israel. Israel's actuality is confronted with European tradition and culture in Goldberg's work; Hannah Senesh is an example of a heroic and idealistic Zionist, in contrast with the passive Jews who

accept the expected death without any resistance; and the immorality of Shaham's survivors is contrasted with the idealism of the young kibbutz members. All these plays express the belief that the horrors of the Holocaust may be overcome in the new existence in Israel through a transformation of spirit and values. Clearly, that is a symptom of the great sense of exaltation in the early years of the state, when the realization of a two thousand-year-old dream ignited a belief in the visionary mission of the reborn Jewish homeland.

Disillusionment was gradual and inevitable. The forward-looking optimism gave way to an introspective contemplation of the past. The negative attitude toward the Holocaust was replaced by a search for roots and a reconciliation with the experience of the past. Practically, the plays of the sixties simply criticize the previous approach. Ben-Zion Tomer suffers precisely because in the early years of the state he was given, under tremendous pressure, to cast away his past identity for the sake of a new one. He realizes that each one is equally important for him, that he is both a new immigrant and a young pioneer, a survivor of the persecutions and a soldier fighting for his own country. In *The Burning Season*, Aharon Megged criticizes the ignorance and forgetfulness of the lessons of the past. The survivors close their eyes before another potential catastrophe, and the Israelis do not hesitate to turn a profit by signing a new contract with the devil. The apocalyptic tone of *The Burning Season* is replaced by bitter irony and black humor in *The Heir*. In Shamir's play the Israelis take advantage of the guilty German conscience, and the survivors themselves mindlessly suppress the trauma of the past. The surviving members of the Auschwitz orchestra now make their living by playing in night clubs, and they plan their joyful reunion in order to make money from an extraordinary public performance. In a way, they recovered too much. In conclusion, the plays of the sixties undermine the nationalistic assurance of the preceding works. Rather than viewing the Holocaust as being an obstacle to the full realization of the new ideals, they find the concept of national identity itself to be confusing and problematic.

The Israeli self-examination is characterized by an extraordinary rigor. Despite the significant achievements of Zionism in the twentieth century, there is a strong tendency among most Israeli intellectuals to concentrate on negative points which must be changed or improved. This critical spirit often leads to the inflation of minor problems into major crises and the aggrandizement of imperfections into unbearable flaws. (Some feel this is an admirable atavistic attitude originating with the classical biblical prophets; others regard it as a regrettable Jewish compulsion to

be unrealistically obsessed with perfect justice and morality under any circumstances.) In the case of the Israeli experience, there is an additional dimension that accounts for some misjudgment of the significance of historical developments: it is precisely the very intimate involvement with crucial events that tends to obscure the proper perspective.

The Israeli author finds himself in a paradoxical position in which his critical stance and vision compel him to be at once the judge, the witness, and the judged. In addition, he or she is often encumbered by the mundane details of civic responsibilities, annoying bureaucracy, and partisan politics, all of which frustrate the inclination to appreciate great historic moments and extraordinary predicaments. Thus, the failure to recognize the Holocaust's uniqueness and its crucial implications for the Jewish state was symptomatic of a national drama that lacks the necessary distance or the will to mythologize familiar events. In the seventies, however, after the shock of the Yom Kippur war and a recognition of Israel's new predicament in the international scene, Hebrew literature manifested a growing identification with the Holocaust Jew. Although no significant play on the subject has emerged from this mood, the Israeli theatres staged numerous productions on the Holocaust, based on international dramas and local projects.¹⁰ Of the authors mentioned in this study (with the exception of Goldberg, who died in 1970), each has demonstrated in his literary creation or personal politics the acceptance of the past trauma as an integral part of the national psyche.¹¹ The final note of Mintz's recent book is the following statement: "The long estrangement between contemporary Zionist enterprise and the full Jewish past is ready to be lessened. The encounter is just beginning" (1984, p. 269). This phenomenon undoubtedly deserves another serious study, for this encounter is part of a broader process, which is the growing acceptance by the Israelis of their identity as a Jewish state in terms of the national and historical fate of the Jewish people throughout the ages. The gestation of this attitude in the sixties and its culmination in the seventies and eighties is in sharp contrast to the Yishuv tendency to view itself as being the antithesis of the last two thousand years of Jewish history. The integration of the Jewish past involves the glorious days of biblical times and the cultural peaks of post-biblical periods as well as the great calamities of Diaspora persecutions, including the Holocaust. Thus even though there is no causal connection between the Nazi

10. See also Ramras-Rauch (1978) and Oren (1983).

11. The most dramatic example of political reversal is the case of Moshe Shamir, who has changed from a leftist socialist to a member of a right-wing, nationalist party.

genocide and the creation of Israel, the two events must be considered as crucial moments in the history of the Jewish people, and so they must be contemplated in relation to each other. The pattern reflected in the Israeli Holocaust plays is that of the gradual abandonment of the Yishuv mentality, which is being replaced by the development of a national identity in the context of the entire Jewish history. We began our discussion with the dichotomous presentation of Shaham's *A New Reckoning* and concluded with Megged's *The Burning Season*, which addresses contemporary issues relating to the Holocaust while blurring the distinctions between the Diaspora Jew and the Israeli, or between biblical trials and modern predicaments. Ultimately the course of Hebrew drama is bound by an umbilical cord to the complexities of modern Jewish history. And this is why Peter Brook once made the following statement in a radio interview: The Israelis, according to the British director, don't have to write great drama—they actually live it.

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