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## Yehuda Amichai's Exilic Jerusalem

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I have set watchmen  
 Upon thy walls, O Jerusalem  
 They shall never hold their peace  
 Day or night:  
 'Ye that are the Lord's remembrancers,  
 Take ye no rest,  
 And give Him no rest,  
 Till He establish,  
 And till He make Jerusalem  
 A praise in the earth.'

—ISAIAH 62: 6–7

Jerusalem is built on the vaulted foundations  
 of a held back scream

—YEHUDA AMICHAÏ

**M**ORE THAN HALF A DECADE after his death, Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000) remains an intensely felt presence in Jewish poetics, his bold contribution to Hebrew literature more timely than ever. A multitude of readers have learned to rely on Amichai's indelible blend of lyrical and colloquial language, and on the fierce and gentle ways in which he tells us that love and war remain the essential condition of humanity, tragically entwined and cyclical.<sup>1</sup> Many of the most indelible poems from these indispensable polarities of his art interrogate the meaning of Jerusalem, in both its temporal and heavenly dimensions. This essay aspires to elucidate a few of the important myriad ways in which the poet engaged and was engaged by the eternally and temporally

troubled city surrounding him. If, as Amnon Hadari elegantly memorializes him, the greatest significance of Amichai's startling lyrical transformations resides in his power "to break the gravitational field of traditional Hebrew and send Hebrew literature into a trajectory around modernity,"<sup>2</sup> then it seems a necessary corollary of such an enterprise that Judaism's spatial relation to an ancient-contemporary conflict should also be recast with irreverence, in order to make human lives, not stones, the true center of the moral imagination. To read *Love Poems* (1981) and *Poems of Jerusalem* (1988) with this paradigm in mind is to be struck by how the ostensibly disparate categories represented by these two collections distinctly echo each other. Their iterations promiscuously intermingle, combining a falling away from blessed states or certainty into personal or social disorder, and erotic and spiritual yearning. The result is a strange mirroring.<sup>3</sup>

For many years, Amichai lived in a house in Yemin Moshe (facing David's Tower), a true pedestrian at heart, ambling through Jerusalem's streets and shopping for fruits and vegetables among the cacophony of Maḥane Yehuda's famous open market. In this way, he was in acute proximity to the inexorable and vulnerable limits of physical bodies surrounded by the city's stony eternity. But with the passage of time since his death, it no longer seems enough to merely state that the poetry presents a "walker in the city" or an "objective" perception of Jerusalem. In the aftermath of Amichai's passing, numerous readers reverently remarked on the nature of the poet's relation to his city, though not always with a great deal of specificity. For instance, poet David Biespiel felt that Amichai consistently sought to create "a language of and for the city, merging the contemporary and the eternal," while Aviya Kushner magnanimously declared that the poet was simply "Jerusalem's great friend. He wrote of her as a child, a lover, a companion, and an enigma. She was always on his mind, and he was always trying to understand her."<sup>4</sup> Such heartfelt affirmations cannot fail to move; many readers have felt the same. Yet if the city was in some ways Amichai's muse, it did not play that role in quite the same way that the term is usually intended when we describe the sensibility of other artists who dedicate themselves to capture the "spirit" of a place. Few poets before Amichai succeeded so well in writing of the city directly out of the continuum of Jewish textual tradition while still managing to liberate the language itself from its narrative and syntactic binds. Taking up the central biblical premise

of the Jewish relation to the city, with Jerusalem serving as a barometer of the relationship between the people and their God (i.e., assuming that proper collective conduct in accord with the statutes of the Law would ensure prosperity of the city, while preventing maladies such as occupation by foreign forces or exile), offered Amichai compellingly ironic means for his poetic speakers to consider the vexing new reality inherent in inhabiting the rebuilt Jerusalem. To put it another way, the poet's rich intertextuality never lets the reader forget that in these ancient sources, the "ideal" is already at odds with the "real."

The simple details of Amichai's biography, worth recalling briefly even for the most familiar reader, easily lead one to grasp the origin of the somber subject matter of his most representative poems (but provide few clues to the winsome and playful approaches he takes to the atrocity and losses they witness). Born in the Bavarian town of Würzburg during the unstable days of the Weimar Republic, Amichai immigrated with his Orthodox Jewish family to Palestine in 1936. He left behind Ruth, a childhood girlfriend who would perish in the Holocaust; until his final days she would figure in many of his most elegiac and richly disturbing love poems: "She's a stand-in for Otherness / Otherness is death, death is Otherness / Will you come back to me like the dead sometimes / Come back to the living, as if they were born again?" (*Open Closed Open* 131). After a brief stay in Petah Tikva, the family moved to Jerusalem, where Amichai would remain until his death (except for brief periods when he taught abroad at the University of California at Berkeley and New York University). His residence there bequeathed the poet a sense of a casual intimacy with the city that resonates throughout his works. He began writing poetry in 1949, soon after the War of Independence. It seems telling that he had not written poems in earlier years. "I think of children growing up half in the ethics of their fathers / and half in the science of war":<sup>5</sup> this has always seemed to be the poet's classic statement on the existential burden placed on the life of the average Israeli citizen-soldier. Little wonder, for having served in the Jewish Brigade in Egypt during World War II, Amichai fought as an infantryman during Israel's War of Independence and would serve again in the bloody wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973. Throughout those years of fighting, the beleaguered and conflicted Jerusalem stands out from the poems as a sort of moral touchstone and representative symbol for the way the world's reality perpetually eludes all the faithful adherents of the three monotheisms' visionary preconceptions and longings.

Obviously, a great deal of Israeli poetry is set in Jerusalem, and occasionally some of it is even as memorably somber and menacing as Amichai's work. But there are few examples that manage quite so consistently and convincingly to straddle both personal and collective experience. Nor is there any modern Jewish poet whose body of work about the city reaches Amichai's scope or volume. In this regard, it is worth paying heed to the poet's own regard for the critical centrality of this dimension of his oeuvre, for Amichai clearly perceived his own Jerusalem verse as greatly outstripping the works of many others who took Jerusalem as their subject, particularly poets from abroad whose results he often found banal, a critical point that I will address in greater detail later.<sup>6</sup>

With the poet's powerful stature in the modern Hebrew canon seemingly ensured (especially with the appearance of the late collection *Open Closed Open* in 1998), it is easy to forget how greatly diminished and marginalized his voice became at home for a significant period—even as his fame and popularity spread dramatically among international poetry lovers and critics to the extent that his is a ubiquitous presence within anthologies of world poetry. Nili Gold once complained of his fickle Israeli reception that (as of 1994) Amichai had “been neglected, even ignored, in academic studies and largely denounced by reviewers . . . as though his work after 1968 were superfluous, self-epigonic, even insincere.”<sup>7</sup> Of course by the time of his death this sort of comment was long forgotten by most of the secular Israeli reading public (and not a few among the religious) who often saw Amichai as one of their foremost champions in the struggle, as Amnon Hadari, a member of the Palmach generation declares, “to make the Zionist state Jewish in a civil, humanist, peace-loving, law-abiding, socially just way.”<sup>8</sup> And even for most Hebrew critics, during the apparent nadir of the 1980s, Gold asserts that the early work from 1948 to 1968 apparently remained altogether beyond rebuke. From my own perspective, it seems notable that it was during this period that Amichai crafted some of his most wounded and wounding poems about what would remain his most unwavering of subjects, Jerusalem, even as his poetic personas became more interiorized or, as Gold has it, “idiosyncratic.”<sup>9</sup> When considering the speaker of these poems, it might be said that the poet created a mythological person of himself. However, it is a striking truth that when Israelis (of his own certainly but perhaps other generations as well) read Amichai they often felt they *were* him.

My point here is that Israeli readers necessarily read his poems of Jerusalem in a particularistic mode that makes it difficult, and ultimately undesirable, to read the poems of Jerusalem from a strictly symbolic perspective (though a consideration of the Jerusalem poems ultimately brushes up against ways that critical aspects of the poet's renderings of the city have touched many readers throughout the world and should even acknowledge that there is undeniably a "universalistic" Amichai, fervently claimed by many through his widely available translations).<sup>10</sup> Gila Ramras-Rauch asserts the inescapably possessive nature of this relationship of Israeli readers very directly: "Reading and rereading Amichai is like visiting a family album, an expanded album. . . . He maps for us the stations in his life . . . and the life of the country."<sup>11</sup> Jerusalem was the great stage where the traumas and celebrations of the Israeli psyche were enacted. In this regard, it should be emphasized that, when it came to the gushing utterances of those who claimed Jerusalem from afar or who stayed for brief sojourns, Amichai had little patience. In this he proved to be as acerbically unsentimental as most Israelis of his generation, complaining on at least one occasion, "You can write the *worst* poetry in Jerusalem, although the city seems so rich. Sometimes American poets come to Israel, and suddenly it's so 'easy' there to write a poem with the old and the new. But it's the *worst* poetry that sometimes very good poets from abroad write, because they just put in a few words like the *Wailing Wall* and the *muezzin* and the *war* and *God* and *David* and *Jesus* and so on, and then the *olive tree* and whatnot. And then they are all in bad business."<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the maudlin (perhaps it would be more apt to dub it "touristy") verse he passionately disparaged, Amichai felt that the success of his own highly charged representations of the city owed to a keenly attuned sense of irony, a sensibility that many of his Israeli readers appreciated. This timbre seems to have been intrinsically linked to the simple fact of his capacity to serve as a witness to the cultural, political, and spiritually complex identities of Jerusalem's inhabitants. Jerusalem is never a simplifying reference—it's too real.

For many contemporary Israeli readers who recognized the poet's unsparing enactments of the losses exacted by psychological and historical survival as their own story, Amichai's immediacy often presented the sensation "of reading a diary without days" as Warren Bargad observes in terms strikingly congruent with Ramras-Rauch's position.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, what seems most governing in the poet's devotion to the

contingencies of time and space is his conscious struggle to avoid the half-poetic measures of the “American poets”—instead we encounter a perpetual groping for new language, and especially the riches of metaphor.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Amichai often credited the simple fact of his enduring exposure to the sheer existential intensity, the “feverish awareness” that is the condition of daily life for *any* Jerusalem dweller.<sup>15</sup> In the earliest lyrics, we already encounter evidence of the poet’s volatile conversation with the city; this is apparent in “And That Is Your Glory” with its rueful nod to the liturgy of the Days of Awe:

I've yoked together my large silence and my small outcry  
 like an ox and an ass. I've been through low and through high.  
 I've been in Jerusalem, in Rome. And perhaps in Mecca anon.  
 But now God is hiding, and man cries Where have you gone.  
 And that is your glory.

(*Selected Poems*, 11)

Here Jerusalem, characteristically appearing in the multifaceted guises that have tempted the fateful encroachments of empires in so many of Amichai’s lyrics (Y’vus of the Jebusite kingdom before David, Yerushalayim, Aelia Capitolina of the Romans, Al-Quds of Islam), is connected with other sites of faith and belief. Concurrently, the flourish of the stanza’s heartfelt coda creates an inclusive space for *any* reader’s sense of distance, estrangement, and loss. Already we encounter one of the powerfully “universalistic” gestures that would touch so many readers abroad. Elsewhere, the “spiritual” Jerusalem her seekers hope to grasp proves impenetrably elusive: “The city plays hide-and-seek among her names” (*Poems of Jerusalem*, 47). For the restless poet who in interviews often proclaimed himself “crazy about exactitude,”<sup>16</sup> that elusiveness and complexity must have provoked a sense of being perpetually challenged. The definitive Jerusalem poem would never be written. For instance, in “Indian Summer in Princeton,” a poem of mid-career, the speaker reveals how “in my dreams I look at bright, blinding Jerusalem — / And that’s why Jerusalem’s black now / Like an underexposed photograph” (*Poems* [1968], 49), as if confessing his failure to transmit the city’s true qualities, especially at such a great remove.

Perhaps more than any other merit, it is this strange mingling of secular skepticism and yearning that best explains how Amichai, whatever his intentions, always managed to attract a global readership that far exceeded the historical orientation, cultural context, and shared experience of his original Hebrew audience. At the same time, it is crucial to note that this very readership is often likely to miss the European nightmare that often swirls through the troubled undercurrents of the poems, for, although Amichai does not presume to carry the scars of the European genocide himself, it is nonetheless clear that it marks his poetry in muted but indelible ways.<sup>17</sup> Particularly in his final works, the paradigm of witnessing gains in urgency, sometimes joining or even replacing the earlier emphasis on the poet who bore the dead of Israel's wars: "I wasn't one of the six million who died in the Shoah / I wasn't even among the survivors / .... / though I still have the fire and smoke within me / that guide me . . . by night and day" (*Open Closed Open*, 7). For in this most "secular" of poets, the prophetic imperative of Jews' ultimate survival is a creatively binding feature that even the poetry's most devastatingly ironic flourishes never quite erase.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, Hanoah Guy is representative of a number of Israeli critics alert to the poet's acute sense of time and place, the fraught relation between fatal powerlessness and secure haven:<sup>19</sup>

The poet is painfully aware of his good fortune in escaping the fate of European Jewry and living in Jerusalem — the distilled essence of Judaism and the Shoah's antithesis. Being alive, however, obligated him to the previous generations. Amichai was aware that if his parents had not immigrated to Israel in 1936 he would have met his beloved "in 1944 / on the ramp in Auschwitz."<sup>20</sup>

Such self-consciousness entails Amichai's highly attuned strategy of encoding distance and proximity throughout his oeuvre. Yet in this regard, precisely when it comes to apprehending the full complexity of a poetic persona whose utterances are voiced from within the "surviving remnant," even the most enthusiastic of Amichai's non-Hebrew readers are often unaware of the revealing significance of nomenclature, and how in departing Europe for Israel, he would exchange Pfeuffer for Amichai, or, "my people lives." On the other hand, there were always readers who, in their first encounters with

lyrics resonating so consciously with losses (of childhood faith; victims of the Shoah; the fallen of various Arab-Israeli wars) misconstrued Amichai as an exclusively “angry” or bitter poet. But with the passage of time, this reductive formulation was supplanted by those who credited him with possessing an immensely pragmatic, even serene, sensibility, an artist struggling to endow both the highs and the lows of the human condition (his society’s perpetual straddling of militarism and idealism), with a deeply contemplative quality that matched his city’s own spirit in the best of times.<sup>21</sup> It seems easier for many of us today to embrace C. K. Williams’s sense of Amichai as simply “too much of a realist” to be content with merely expressing righteous indignation: “he is too experienced in the perversities of history, to be surprised or outraged by the crude discrepancies between political rhetoric and political outcomes.”<sup>22</sup> In this respect, Jerusalem invariably returns as a catalyst for some of the poet’s most observant meditations on how the sacred violates the political and vice versa in ways that Bargad, Ramras-Rauch, and so many Israelis have felt reflected their own literal and metaphoric encounters with language, history, and landscape.

Though he was not the first Israeli poet to interweave colloquial idioms or slang with biblical phrases (the lyrics of Haim Gouri and Amir Gilboa presaged this crucial development in the figurative language of modern Hebrew verse), Amichai was indisputably innovative when it came to juxtaposing the seriousness of political contexts such as war with a playful tone in his representations of the Jerusalem. As Ramras-Rauch observes of the poet’s loving attention to his city in her memorial essay, “A daily observation, a walk through a neighborhood, a momentary view of the city often serves as a springboard to a wider, more complex reality.”<sup>23</sup> In the city’s embodiment of both the highest achievements of the human spiritual imagination and the rocky altar to which human beings and their ancestors have returned to sacrifice one another again and again, Jerusalem is necessarily the beating and wounded heart of his parabolic and beguiling poetic practice.

Amichai continually tests the notion of “belonging” to Jerusalem (with all of the city’s political, social, religious, and cultural complexity) against alternative avenues of identity in ways that ultimately implicate the reader as well, particularly in their original Israeli context. In a late poem, musing on why the Jews “call their God *Makom*, ‘Place’” the speaker teasingly reveals the irony that

Now that they have returned to their place, the Lord has taken up  
wandering to different places, and His name will no longer be Place  
but Places, Lord of the Places.

*(Open Closed Open, 118)*

It would seem here that Jerusalem (from whose cycles of destruction Jews were often launched into exilic space) must cohabit with Diaspora, each Jewish realm sustaining or probing the reality of the other. This conscientious complementarity was noted by critics as early as 1968: “For Amichai . . . to be an Israeli is quite as difficult as to be a Diaspora Jew . . . his preoccupation with his parents . . . means that he assumes the burdens and dilemmas of both.”<sup>24</sup> And this reiteration much later, when, in the immediate aftermath of Amichai’s passing, Yitzhak Laor declared firmly that on the most fundamental level, “Amichai didn’t buy ‘the new Jew’ . . . it may well be said, in memory of his father and his grandfather.”<sup>25</sup>

There are still readers in Israel and abroad for whom Amichai’s poetry veered too uncomfortably between vociferous blasphemies, whether of the ideological or religious varieties. But for many others he stands apart as the quintessential poet of connections between seemingly disparate realms and identities, demonstrating a deep commitment to make some kind of coherence out of all the violent and random contingencies that shape the fragile fabric of human lives. In the classroom, I have noticed how, particularly for young Israeli readers, it is the indelible tone he achieves—a confluence of humor, indelible irony, and more than a hint of melancholy that always withstood existentialist despair even when it was not unfashionable—that ensures the likelihood of Amichai’s enduring stature as one of the most distinctly representative Israeli voices as the modern Hebrew canon continues to evolve. Whenever and wherever one happens to be situated in relation to the peaks and valleys of Israel’s triumphs and heartbreaks, to read Amichai is to experience an iconoclastic movement between the tribal and the universal, the personal and the collective. But as a forcefully Jewish voice, he also stands as one of the most dazzlingly literate and intertextual figures of our age, moving fluidly between Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, insistently demanding that readers grapple with allusions to festivals and ritual life presented in unexpected ways. He himself expresses the critical condition of the modern Hebrew poet: “Every word we use carries in and of itself connotations from the

Bible, the Siddur, the Midrash, the Talmud. Every word reverberates through the halls of Jewish history."<sup>26</sup> Yet in spite of that vast spatial and temporal landscape, Amichai's poems are refreshingly startling in the way they encounter Jerusalem without the seductive masks and retreats of fictive or archetypal personas.

Usually he speaks to his audience in the personas of living witness, or companionable guide, to everything he describes in the city. In this regard, it seems especially revealing that Amichai once told an interviewer that he conceived of his poetry as "a certain way of documentation."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps this unsparing quality of witnessing is the reason reading Amichai often proves to be such a wounding encounter. Edward Hirsch may be representative of many readers who feel that "reading Amichai's poems is a harrowing experience. The sheer accumulated weight of these losses is enormous. I find it nearly impossible to read these poems, however successful, as a merely literary performance. Their human presence is too close."<sup>28</sup> Like Amichai's own self-proclaimed precursor Yehuda Halevi, the twelfth-century Castilian whose cultural poetics remained torn between exile and Zion, and was a critical influence on Amichai and many in the generation of the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>29</sup> one would like to hope that Amichai's ironic verse will one day have a place in liturgies (as it does in the often spiritual realm of Israeli popular song) of Judaism's liberal denominations. Of course such a fate rightly strikes many as strange, not only in light of the poet's sardonic tone but because it remains true, as translators Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld argue, that the "one transcendence" Amichai had faith in was "the human capacity for language."<sup>30</sup> Undoubtedly there is fierce resistance to dogmatic absolutes in that abiding spirit of skepticism; yet such hesitancy is always expressed in uncompromising affirmations of the moral individual, often imagined as a citizen of Jerusalem, struggling under the weighty travesties of history, war, and nationalisms. With this paradigm in mind, one necessarily returns to Amichai's epic, twenty-two part "Jerusalem, 1967" (published in *Now in the Storm*) with an acute awareness of the poet's "documentary" struggle not only to transform the mute stones that have witnessed death, destruction, and God into a vernacular Hebrew that must serve the present, but also to issue a quixotic insistence that the timeless city acknowledge the human lives it encases:

I've come back to this city where names  
are given to distances as if to human beings

and the numbers are not of bus routes  
 but: 70 After, 1917, 500  
 B.C., Forty-eight. These are the lines  
 You really travel on.  
 (*Poems of Jerusalem*, 39)

In this lightly mocking stanza, blending the sense of temporal confusion that Jerusalem bestows on everyone at times, there is a pervasive sense of shared fate with all the other hapless inhabitants, all woefully out of step with the city's own uncanny logic of time, that is, its impenetrable cyclicity, its "other" logic of death and destruction, rebirth and renewal. Here as elsewhere, Amichai addresses Jerusalem with both acerbic wit and somber urgency, responses that seem intrinsic not just to the poet but to all those whose lived experience places them as direct participants in the city's travails. Since his language often seems to directly address those readers who shared that condition, the latter are constituted as alert and receptive to the poet's wryly empathic figurative language that often delineates alternative spaces such as "our little room," "the houses of tomorrow," and other insulating metaphors.<sup>31</sup> This sense often coincides with public statements such as his 1968 address to the Writers Convention: "when the writer puts his hand on his heart in an act of real pain and emotion he feels his pen in his pocket,"<sup>32</sup> which so readily voices the unique burden subsequently articulated by many other Israeli writers who feel they too uncomfortably straddle the realms of private and collective experience, in ways rarely shared by writers whose identities are rooted in the rudderless literary West.

What is perhaps most consistently apparent even in the earliest Jerusalem poems is their stoic resistance to the euphoria of any form of *proprietary* love. This seems especially remarkable just after the Six-Day War in 1967, a conflict that unleashed an unparalleled wave of highly rhetorical and ideologically inflected verse, much of it undoubtedly triumphal or otherwise awestruck, in response to the culture's access to every quarter of the city. In this period, the seductive symbols of "Jewish mysticism" relating to Jerusalem's history had an enormous impact on all the city's artists (composers, lyricists, painters, novelists).<sup>33</sup> Even in the aftermath of two intifadas and much greater cultural wariness (and weariness), one is tempted to ponder how the poetry of this period could *not* be giddily caught up in reclaimed Jerusalem's thrall. In the heartfelt, if ornate, language of Menashe Kadishman, a highly acclaimed painter particularly active in the postwar

period (for whom Jerusalem has remained a central motif ever since): "Even if I walk in Jerusalem, then too I am walking to Jerusalem. . . . When you stand on Mount Scopus and look out at Jerusalem on the one side and the Judean desert on the other—you feel that you are floating, you feel part of eternity."<sup>34</sup> What one immediately notices about this candid acknowledgement of elevated feelings for occupying holy space is how the enraptured pilgrim overtakes the critical artist. Throughout this period, the struggle of many artists to express their yearning and a sense of rootedness in the city occasionally strayed from the genuinely creative to the ritualistic. In this regard, the sharp contrast with Amichai's approach is especially evident.

Rather than presume to "capture" the city as the fantasy fulfillment of a collective dream, Amichai's Jerusalem always remains a geography of almost eroticized otherness, too complicated to be limited to a narrative of faith, historical closure, or redemption. Instead, in Glenda Abramson's cogent formulation, "the city is seen as a projection of himself and his divided life. . . . Like Jerusalem itself his life has been divided."<sup>35</sup> Perhaps his distance from the general public's responses to the triumphs of 1967 owes in part to the fact that the war coincided with a severe unrelated personal crisis, and then a breakthrough, in the poet's life.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, alongside distinctly barbed and ironic gestures to the mythic weight of the city, we discover the startling language of personal emotional loss and estrangement cast against the nationalist sentiment of "reunification": "I heard bells ringing in the religions of time / but the wailing I heard inside me has always been from my Yehudean desert" (*Poems of Jerusalem*, 39).<sup>37</sup> Happily, for the most part, Amichai wisely resists the self-indulgence of translating Jerusalem as some hidden domain of insular or mythic interiority that is beyond his reader's own grasp of experience.

Rather than serve as an indulgent conduit to private myth, his city remains all too concrete and material even when it stabs us with a sense of a natural universe or divine order in terrible disarray. A frequent sojourner in the streets and markets of Jerusalem, Amichai continually situates that personal, physical (as well as metaphoric) navigation of a city claimed also by Christians and Muslims. Correspondingly, throughout the "Jerusalem 1967" sequence, urban space is most of all the source of surprising revelations and transformations of quotidian experience, as this contemplative commemoration of an early foray into the Old City quarter inhabited by the ethnic other intimates:

ביום כפור בשנת תשכ"ח לבשתי  
 בגדי חג כהים והלכתי לעיר העתיקה בירושלים.  
 עמדתי זמן רב לפני כוך חנותו של ערבי,  
 לא רחוק משער שקם, חנות  
 כפתורים ורוקסנים וסלילי חוטים  
 בכל צבע ולחצניזת ואבזמים.  
 אור יקר וצבעים רבים, כמו ארון-קדש פתוח.  
  
 אמרתי לו בלבי שגם לאבי  
 הייתה חנות כזאת של חוטים וכפתורים.  
 הסברתי לו בלבי על כל עשרות השנים  
 והגורמים והמקרים, שאני עכשו פה  
 וחנות אבי שרופה שם והוא קבור פה.  
  
 כשסימתי הייתה שעת נעילה.  
 גם הוא הוריד את התריס ונעל את השער  
 ואני חזרתי עם כל המתפללים הביתה.

On Yom Kippur in 1967, the Year of Forgetting, I put on  
 my dark holiday clothes and walked to the Old City of Jerusalem.  
 For a long time I stood in front of an Arab's hole in the wall shop,  
 not far from the Damascus Gate, a shop with  
 buttons and zippers and spools of thread  
 in every color and snaps and buckles.  
 A rare light and many colors, like an open Ark.

I told him in my heart that my father too  
 had a shop like this, with thread and buttons.  
 I explained to him in my heart about all the decades  
 and the causes and the events, why I am now here  
 and my father's shop was burned there and he is buried here.

This breathtaking synthesis of the everyday and the sublime, suggesting that the truly sacred resides in human encounters and genuine dialogue rather than the stony edifices of the conventionally pious, proves ultimately heartbreaking because it is imagined only (“I explained to him in my heart”). Another crucial dimension of this resolutely unsentimental poem resides in its imperative to remember both the father’s religion and wounded history.<sup>38</sup> These necessarily compel the “I” to see the present differently than his compatriots.<sup>39</sup>

Amichai, ostensibly the most consummate of “native” informants, also knew that the thick skin of exile was not so easily shed. In “The Deaths of My Father,” included in his sole short story collection *Baruakh hanora hazot* (In This Terrible Wind; 1961), the poet identifies the father’s final metaphoric death in departure from Germany (the country he had fought for in World War I) to Palestine in 1935. Consequently, what seems most striking in the 1963 novel *Lo Me-Achshav lo Mi-Kan* (Not of this Time, Not of This Place) is a similarly pervasive awareness of both settings, Jerusalem and South Germany, coexisting in the same speaker so that the prose work mirrors the themes of displacement and self-division that resonate through much of the poetry. In reacting to the first major novel by an Israeli writer to address the Holocaust, Hebrew critics are intensely alert to the role of different cultural spaces in shaping its imaginative force. In this work, the protagonist Joel undergoes a peripatetic journey, through physical and emotional planes, between the diasporic past and his Jerusalem present. As Bargad suggests, Amichai’s reader, like the protagonist Joel, “waivers continually between Jerusalem and Germany; he is certain only of the imposed simultaneity of symbolic action of . . . spiritual schizophrenia.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Robert Alter saw the novel as a “brave illustration of the difficulties Israeli writers have in trying to imagine this ultimate catastrophe and how one can live with the knowledge of it.”<sup>41</sup> However, Gershon Shaked seems representative of those Israeli readers who see the author “more preoccupied with the generation of the War of Independence [than with] the nature of his nomadic character.”<sup>42</sup> Yet even in this respect, in spite of enjoying a reputation as the most “popular” poet in Israel (the speaker of the Knesset once dubbed him “the foundation stone of Israeliness”), Amichai’s perspective often contrasts sharply with others of his Israeli-born generation who had little interest in memorializing the European past.<sup>43</sup>

Repeatedly, Amichai embraces his role in the post-Holocaust textual reality, cleaving not to the illusory presumption of “rebirth” but rather to Yosef Haim

Yerushalmi's sense of the Jewish historic imagination: "The verb *Zakhor* [remember] appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times."<sup>44</sup> We find this ethos resurfacing whenever Amichai inscribes his poetic sense of the past as a humanizing paradigm essential to an ethical Jewish polity, in the wake of persecution. He chides us gently: "We keep forgetting where we came from. Our Jewish names, / From the Diaspora unmask us, evoke memories. . . ."<sup>45</sup> Amichai's spare assertion on one occasion that "History's a built-in memory that is part of reality"<sup>46</sup> goes quite far in delineating the experience of these stanzas from "Jerusalem 1967." Hence, imagining the Palestinian Arab's story as a refraction of the Jewish past of expulsion, exile, and return is a fundamentally important juncture in the poet's oeuvre as well as Israel's cultural history. Though the logic of comparing the vulnerability of his father's past in the European Diaspora with the Arab shopkeeper's present condition (now suddenly transformed into a minority in his homeland) constitutes one of the more revelatory moments in Amichai's penchant for unlikely comparisons, the Jerusalem of Arab and Jew is too intransigent a space for redemption. It is a place too filled with latent and actual violence for any utopian reconciliation or cessation of tensions over the speaker's rationales for being in that place. Bleaker still is the unhelpful question of whether the humanity of the other can be consistently perceived. *There* and *Here* are existential distances that simply cannot be traversed by the two foes:

When I finished, it was time for the Closing of the Gates prayer.  
He too lowered the shutters and locked the gate  
and I returned, with all the worshippers, home.

*(Poems of Jerusalem, 45)*

There are some poems by Amichai that so indulge in the violation of frontiers that they make the reader feel as if he or she has taken hold of a live wire. The charged comparison made in this lyric of colliding histories — an open Holy Ark with the Arab seller's open kiosk — is the kind of stunning contrast that makes it futile to try to untangle the sacred from the profane and perhaps make it a perpetual joy to read anew. This is another moment in which readers will surely miss the intentions of Amichai's original, for as Abramson parses these stanzas, the effects of the Hebrew terminology greatly under-

score the sense of the holy rupturing through the fleeting encounter: “*yakar* (a precious light), *utzeva'im rabim* (many colors), *'amadeti . . . lifnei* (I stood . . . before), *amarti belibi* (I said in my heart).”<sup>47</sup> Regardless of whether one reads the English or Hebrew versions, it may take a few moments to absorb the full audacious beauty of the speaker's sense of fellowship with the Arab as a genuinely sanctified moment in time. And then, just as it does so, we are immediately forsaken by the realization that this moment of hope and expectation remains unfulfilled, a bitter acknowledgment of the utter deferral of messianic time. Amichai never hesitates to remind us that the most idealistic hopes always collapse in the holy city.

Though Jerusalem is invoked nearly everywhere throughout Amichai's poetic development, the intimate relationship between the poet and the city is especially noteworthy in a series published in 1974, in which a link between the city's ruins (whether literal or metaphoric) and the poet's intimate sense of his own fragmentary life and self-division is made more explicit than ever before, perhaps due to the traumatic aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. Bargad and the late Stanley Chyet, observing how the poet so often juxtaposes the identities of the “soldier” alongside the “child” and the “lover” in this early period, offer this laconic reading, which I think illuminates much of the tragic irony of the early poems: “The soldier, though dedicated to his role of protector, is yet much like the child and the lover; he himself is so much in need of security and protection.”<sup>48</sup> As Abramson argues in her seminal account of the artist's concerns in this period, Amichai's “forced reencounter with Jerusalem distances him even further from his newly restored roots, as if the city and its reestablished presence in his life . . . intruded between him and the newly and tenuously recaptured setting of his childhood.”<sup>49</sup> Considering the Jerusalem poems' obdurate refusal to console, it is imperative to keep in mind Abramson's assertion that “Jerusalem's significance as a historical city is equal to its significance as an extension or analogy of the poet himself.”<sup>49</sup> Both the city and the poet raised in (and perpetually estranged from and attracted to) a household of faith are dialectically situated at some liminal space between spirituality and corporeality, tradition and modernity, life and death.

The lyric “I” leaves us with competing sensations; first of the sheer logic for potential understandings between disparate groups based on similar suffering, but secondly, of the ever diminishing prospects for any such harmony. Still, throughout

*Poems of Jerusalem*, a sense of mutuality and intertwined destinies is never quite extinguished. Consider these lines from “Jerusalem” (the bare invocation so often repeated as the title of various works in this decade):

On a roof in the Old City  
 laundry hanging in the late afternoon sunlight:  
 the white sheet of a woman who is my enemy,  
 the towel of a man who is my enemy,  
 to wipe the sweat of his brow.

(*Poems of Jerusalem*, 5)

Reading such lines reinforces the sense that Amichai is truly the quintessential poet of the “land that eats up its inhabitants” (Num. 13:32). And Jerusalem remains the poet’s template of both enmity and prophetic revelations about the human condition; in his relentless staging of each, Amichai performs an eloquent deconstruction of the contemporary abasement of Jerusalem by those who strive for her control: “We have put up many flags / they have put up many flags / To make us think that they’re happy / To make them think that we’re happy” (*Poems of Jerusalem*, 5). Congruent with the mode in which Amichai represents the looming existential threat of renewed war and violence between Arab and Jew—as if they were the repetitive errors of simple children caught up in a fatal struggle requiring the intercession of an absent parent—the Jerusalem poems startle in their portrayals of the yearnings of the faithful as poignantly—and tragically—childlike.

To the poet’s lasting credit, he consistently manages this irreverent reduction without even a hint of contempt for faith itself. “Jerusalem, 1985” provides a contemplative space expansive enough for atheist and devout readers alike to ponder the painful lessons of a credulous humanity perpetually reaching out—and the divine forever in retreat:

Scribbled wishes stuck between the stones  
 of the Wailing Wall:  
 bits of crumpled, wadded paper.

And across the way, stuck in an old iron gate  
 half-hidden by jasmine:  
 "Couldn't make it,  
 I hope you'll understand."

*(Selected Poetry, 169)*

What immediately impresses about this nearly aphoristic allegory of the *deus absconditus*, or Hidden God, is the poem's refusal to settle for the cheap trick of merely mocking the pious impulse. At the same time, the reader's anticipated orientation is gently "corrected," from the epic or eternal enigma of the stony ruin toward a human emphasis on a city of the intimate and present. Rather than mistake the stones for "holy," the first section takes us into the charged spaces around them, in which the homely scraps of hopeful prayers reside. Indeed, though the question of whether the Wall itself constitutes the "holy" remains respectfully open-ended, the poem addresses the spaces between the stones as sanctified space precisely because they so nakedly reveal the proximity of human beings in duress. Even the mischievous delivery of the cosmic (or Catskills) punchline, with its modern echo of God's famously obfuscating reply to Job, preserves the poet's powerful amendment to the meaning of sanctified space. This sense of a nearly Blakean imperative to reorient one's perception achieves particularly memorable effects in the prose poem "Tourists," where moral urgency and a contemplative tone again work together:

Once I was sitting on the steps near the gate at David's Citadel  
 and I put down my two heavy baskets beside me. A group of  
 tourists stood there around their guide, and I became their point  
 of reference. "You see the man over there with the baskets? A  
 little to the right of his head there's an arch from the Roman  
 period. A little to the right of his head." "But he's moving,  
 he's moving!" I said to myself: Redemption will come only when  
 they are told, "Do you see that arch over there from the Roman  
 period? It doesn't matter, but near it, a little to the left and  
 then down a bit, there's a man who has just bought fruit and  
 vegetables for his family."

*(Selected Poetry, 137-38)*

Of course the tourists here are only surrogates for the problem of humanity's condition as a whole, for it would seem that the question of where one's gaze ultimately settles (or how one's values are expressed) appears to be the pivotal issue on which the tantalizing prospect of messianic progress will always depend. Deflecting the reader's interest from the historical highlights conjured up by the guide, the ironically dubbed "point of reference" provocatively asserts himself as a compelling totem of resiliency and adaptation, embodying the peculiar triumphs of smallness and naked vulnerability. Ultimately, this shift from the vacuity of the tourist's gaze toward a more quotidian vision is entirely congruent with Judaism's metahistorical approach to life. As Jacob Neusner ponts out, for the Talmudic sages, "ultimate meaning [is] contained within small and humble affairs."<sup>51</sup>

As the pinnacle achievement of Amichai's last productive decade (a period once misconstrued as dormant that encompassed the poet's sixties and seventies), the appearance of *Patuah Sagur Patuah* (1998) ultimately enjoyed as much fervent critical acclaim as it had mildly skeptical anticipation. Though it may be true that Amichai never recovered the staggering heights of popularity he had enjoyed as the consummate interpreter of the experience of war and the life of the citizen-soldier in the Israeli society of the 1950s and 1960s, critics in Israel and abroad alike almost universally hailed it as a magnum opus representing the poet at the height of his powers. And it does seem that here Amichai's long-familiar capacity for juxtaposing the sacred and the profane, the political and the intimate details of lived experience, achieves its most deeply satisfying effects. Having begun to turn to increasingly private and inward forms of experience in the 1970s and early 1980s, and then falling famously "silent" for some years, Amichai produces speakers of Jerusalem who now emerge in these pages wielding a deeper tone of sadness and reflection. Yet these lyrics never succumb to the kind of nostalgia for a lost Golden Age—or resignation to a condition of permanent loss—that has settled over so many of his contemporaries.

At once familiar to readers accustomed to the poet's incessant questioning of sacred truths, through juxtaposing biblical Hebrew and the living language of Israeli streets (what Chyet identified as his "potent images of inconsistent realities"),<sup>52</sup> this collection achieves a greater complexity than any of his previous work. We have the rich evidence of the poems' audaciously barbed arguments and coun-

terarguments, their demanding paradoxes and contradictions. There is surprisingly less lament than in previous collections — and in its place a confident exuberance that seems utterly genuine. Jerusalem becomes more and more present as source and destination, metaphorically at times but ultimately quite literally. Even the relatively somber sequence titled “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Why Jerusalem” shows the poet affirming the sanctity and resilience of the city’s diverse inhabitants, finding a paradoxical response to the forces of death and destruction that Jerusalem’s precious multifariousness *also* engenders:

In Jerusalem, everything is a symbol. Even two lovers there  
 become a symbol like the lion, the golden dome, the gates of the city.  
 Sometimes they make love on too soft a symbolism  
 and sometimes the symbols are hard as a rock, sharp as nails.  
 That’s why they make love on a mattress of six hundred thirteen springs,  
 like the number of precepts, the commandments of Shalt and Shalt Not,  
 oh yes, do that, darling, no, not that — all for love  
 and its pleasures. They speak with bells in their voices  
 and with the wailing call of the muezzin, and at their bedside, empty shoes  
 as at the entrance of a mosque. And on the doorpost of their house  
                   it says,  
 “Ye shall love each other with all your hearts and with all your souls.”

*(Open Closed Open, 137)*

As in earlier writings, we encounter the jolt of the pervasively erotic attraction to the unassimilable other who shares the stage of violent conflict. Perhaps more importantly, these lines succeed as well as they do because the profanation of the sacred depends on a complex poetic attitude in which the sacred is genuinely cherished as a source of human compassion, even as devoutness and skepticism still intermingle persuasively. As in his earlier years, much of Amichai’s achievement here owes to the consistently dexterous conjoining of these spheres. For example, this same poem, lamenting the world’s obsession — “Why of all places, Jerusalem?” — later turns teasingly playful in a rich moments of whimsically imaginative imagery that

conjure up an allusion to the magical-realist transformation of David Grossman's *Ayen erech: Ahavah* (See Under: Love):

why not Vancouver with her salmon  
that ascend to her from the sea, crawling  
on their bellies up the hard mountain slope  
like atoning pilgrims, kosher pilgrims of fins and scale . . .

(*Open Closed Open*, 138-39)

An apt image this fishy trope: metonymically evoking the Jewish journey of transience, change, and adaptation, the diasporic epic through time that culminates spiritually and literally in the as yet precarious return to Jerusalem. Arguably, the ultimate effect of this litany of scattered diasporic cities conjured up here (Amichai alludes to New York, Rome, Athens, London, etc.) seems to prepare the reader to settle for the stronger cultural continuity and fulfillment of Jerusalem. Still, these late Jerusalem lyrics would ring false if they utterly withheld the poet's inevitable disappointment in their focus on the *Yerushalayim shel matab* (earthly Jerusalem):

This is not the heavenly Jerusalem, but the one down below,  
way down below. And from the sea floor, they dredge up ruined walls  
and fragments of faiths, like rust-colored vessels from sunken  
prophecy ships. That's not rust, it's blood that has never dried.

(*Open Closed Open*, 136)

At this juncture, it needs to be stressed that, after visiting the Hebrew originals, little seems lost in Bloch's and Kronfeld's sensitive English renderings of these late poems; their exquisite translations convey a great deal of the music of all the tragic and humorous, ecstatic and mournful notes of the original.<sup>53</sup> But most important of all, what Abramson forcefully delineates of much earlier period remains true at the end. The Jerusalem of the poet's lived experience is at once

beautiful but futile and murderous, and this is the principal source of his  
disappointment, for he had clearly hoped to discover something . . . to

justify Jerusalem's equivocal history. It is ironic that in view of his disdain of prophets and his recognition of the uselessness of their mission, he . . . clearly approaches the mode of prophecy, with himself the observant prophet acquainting Jerusalem with its historical turbulence and its questionable presence, yet representing not God but that portion of humanity that has been caught up in Jerusalem's history.<sup>54</sup>

Though one imagines that Amichai would likely have publicly dismissed the hint that a modern poet might be said to bear the mantle of the prophet there is the evidence of the verse, which does, after all, make frequent, if veiled, allusions to the somber burden of the poet's vocation: "And God / takes the prophet who happens to be near him at the moment, / and as if with a wooden spoon he stirs it up, stirs and stirs" (*Poems of Jerusalem*, 27). Poetic and prophetic language both depend on a rigorously matter-of-fact approach to the urgent task of communicating the most painful and necessary apprehensions of reality; in Amichai's lifetime, the pressures between Zionism's loftiest hopes and the violent present certainly accelerated.

To journey through Yehuda Amichai's Jerusalem poems is to experience his very concrete sense of dislocation, manifested in the loneliness of personal experience when the individual stands naked, extricated from the obfuscations of myth and the wrenching upheavals and the sheer violent momentum of military and national history. In the end, there may indeed have been something "prophetic" in his ability to penetrate the deepest layers of the perpetually conflicted Israeli identity. Perhaps it may be said that for Amichai, the Jews' "natural" return to Jerusalem engenders a relative homeland at best, a site of unbearably insatiable longing that only intensifies the artist's wrestling with the acute existential questions more suited to exile than national certainty that always mark Israeli identity, politics, and society. As Kushner (who happened to be in Jerusalem on the very Shabbat eve that Amichai died) observed of the death notices that appeared all over the city: "Instead of the usual wife and children listed as mourners, there in black letters were the mayor of Jerusalem and the city's top officials listed as mourners. The city itself was listed as a mourner. That struck no one as odd."<sup>55</sup> Nor, one imagines, would it be at all surprising to the poet who always saw Jerusalem as distinctly less than a geographic

setting and more a sentient and at times capricious participant in the disappointed but perpetually expectant humanity caught up in its story.

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## NOTES

- 1 Perhaps it was in this sense that leftist politician Yossi Sarid proclaimed Amichai “the chief of staff in the war to liberate Hebrew literature” to the gathering of mourners in Jerusalem’s Safra Square on September 24, 2000. See Amnon Hadari, “A Yad for My Friend Yehuda,” *Judaism* 49:4 (Fall 2000), 411–16. Quotation appears on p. 411. Amichai died on September 22, 2000 at the age of seventy-six. He had written twenty-five books of poetry, two novels, two short-story collections, and several children’s books. Poems from the following collections are cited by page number within the text throughout this essay: Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open: Poems*, trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (New York: Harcourt, 2000); *Poems*, trans. Assia Gutman (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); *Poems of Jerusalem and Love Poems: A Bilingual Edition* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1993); *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). My thanks to Shirah Hecht, Claret Vargas, and the editorial readers of *Prooftexts* for their insightful critiques of an earlier draft of this essay.
- 2 Hadari, “A Yad for My Friend Yehuda,” 413.
- 3 Fittingly these were eventually published in a combined, bilingual volume by the Sheep Meadow Press in 1993.
- 4 David Biespiel, “A Final Hard Amen’: Yehuda Amichai, 1923–2000,” *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 25:1 (2001):126–36. Quotation appears on p. 128. Aviya Kushner, “How One Nation Mourns a Poet,” *Partisan Review* 68:4 (Fall 2001): 612–16. Quotation appears on pp. 613–14.
- 5 Amichai, *Poems of Jerusalem*, 47.
- 6 Some of which, like the late Naomi Shemer’s famous lyric “Yerushalayim shel zahav” (first performed just weeks before the 1967 war) was embraced as “prophetic” following the city’s reunification, provoking A. B. Yehoshua’s apparently allergic response to the kind of verse in which “Jerusalem appears in every other line” in his drama *Laylah bema’i* (A Night in May) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1975).

- 7 Nili Scharf Gold, "A Burning Bush or a Fire of Thorns: Toward a Revisionary Reading of Amichai's Poetry," *Prooftexts* 14 (1994): 49–69. Quotation appears on p. 50.
- 8 Hadari, "A Yad for My Friend Yehuda," 411.
- 9 Gold, "A Burning Bush," 50.
- 10 When considering some of the aesthetic as well as political tensions between configuring Amichai as "universalist" or "national," it is illuminating to consider Bargad's sense of Amichai as the kind of quintessential "insider" poet who speaks urgently to communities caught up in times of crisis and emergency, a sort of "heir apparent" to Natan Alterman, whose "droll political poems" during the 1940s offered "catchy puns and tongue-in-cheek references that helped the Yishuv through some of its darkest days." At the same time, Bargad draws attention to the forcefulness with which the early Amichai "turned aside Alterman's symbolist tendency" and "highly abstract figurative patterns" in favor of "more concrete linguistic structures" (53–54). See Warren Bargad, "Children and Lovers: On Yehuda Amichai's Poetic Works," *Midstream* 21 (1975): 50–58.
- 11 Gila Ramras-Rauch, "Remembering Yehuda Amichai 1924–2000," *World Literature Today* 75:1 (Winter 2001): 86–89. Quotation appears on p. 87.
- 12 See David Montenegro, "Yehuda Amichai," in *Points of Departure: International Writers on Writing and Politics, Interviews by David Montenegro* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 216–32. Quotation appears on p. 219; italics in original.
- 13 Bargad, "Children and Lovers," 50.
- 14 Of metaphor, he often declared simply that its invention exceeded "the wheel" and "the computer" in its cultural significance (in Montenegro, *Points of Departure*, 221).
- 15 Montenegro, *Points of Departure*, 228.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 220.
- 17 Though the Holocaust is usually "a minor theme" that occasionally "appears in conjunction with the main themes," Hanoch Guy identifies "twenty-seven poems that specifically mention [it] or people who died in it." Significantly, seventeen of these appear in Amichai's final collection *Open Closed Open* (1998). Quotation appears in Guy, "Yehuda Amichai," in *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of*

*Writers and Their Work*, ed. S. Lillian Kremer (New York: Routledge, 2003), 25-30; quotation appears on p. 25.

- 18 The Hebrew phrase *sharis ha'pleyte* is attributed to Genesis 45:7: "And God sent me before you to give you a remnant on the earth, and to save you alive for a great deliverance." In Zionist discourse, the phrase seemed to surface even before the enormity of the genocide became known, in Chaim Weizmann's 1933 remark that "If, before I die, there are a half-million Jews in Palestine, I shall be content, because I know that this 'Saving Remnant' will survive." Quoted on the title page of Herbert Agar, *The Saving Remnant* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1960), the first book-length study of displaced persons.
- 19 See Guy's "Yehuda Amichai," in *Holocaust Literature*.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 27. The quotation from Amichai is from *Open Closed Open*.
- 21 I am grateful to Arnold Band for sharing his dissenting view with me. Personal communication, June 28, 2004.
- 22 C. K. Williams, "We Cannot Be Fooled, We Can Be Fooled," *New Republic* 223:1 (July 3, 2000): 29-34. Quotation appears on p. 31.
- 23 Ramras-Rauch, "Remembering Yehuda Amichai," 87.
- 24 Michael Hamburger, "Introduction," in Yehuda Amichai, *Poems*, vii-xi. Quotation appears on pp. x-xi.
- 25 Yitzhak Laor, "What the Womb Promises," *Haaretz* (August 6, 2004): 5.
- 26 Quoted in Glenda Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai: A Thematic Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 14.
- 27 Montenegro, *Points of Departure*, 217.
- 28 Edward Hirsch, *Responsive Reading: Poets on Poetry Series* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 147.
- 29 Late in life, Amichai returned to this seminal inspiration, recasting the Andalusian's classic statement of yearning for Jerusalem: "Halevi wrote, 'In the East is my heart, and I dwell at the end of the West' / That's Jewish travel, that's the Jewish game of hearts between east and west / between self and heart, / to and fro, / to without fro, fro without to, /.../ Oh, what a world this is, where the heart is in one place and the body in another (almost like a heart torn from a body and transplanted/" (*Open Closed Open*, 117-18). Interestingly, Amichai consistently claimed that he was much more influenced by Halevi and the rest of the poets of Muslim

- Spain than by more immediate forbears such as Bialik and Tchernichowsky. See Montenegro, *Points of Departure*, 226-27.
- 30 Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, "Amichai's Counter-Theology: Opening *Open Closed Open*," *Judaism* 49:2 (Spring 2000): 153-68. Quotation appears on p. 157.
- 31 Bargad, "Children and Lovers," 51.
- 32 Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*, 16.
- 33 Mordechai Omer traces those developments that gave an enormous boost to the "slumbering cultural life of the city's artists" in his essay "The Theme of Jerusalem in the Works of the Israeli Fathers of Conceptual Arts." See Dan Urian and Efraim Karsh, eds., *In Search of Identity: Jewish Aspects in Israeli Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 200-18. Quotation appears on p. 200.
- 34 Omer, "The Theme of Jerusalem," 213-14.
- 35 Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*, 126-27.
- 36 Though frequently alluded to in several interviews, the poet was reticent about its nature and cause; see especially Montenegro, *Points of Departure*, 225.
- 37 Of course, the mere presence of irony does not in itself constitute the profanation of the sacred; irony is intrinsic to the experience of reading the Books of Jonah, Job, and many other biblical narratives.
- 38 Asked whether his father still "whispered in your ear" in the poetic process, Amichai reportedly laughed and said, "sometimes really he's *twisting* my ear" (Montenegro, *Points of Departure*, 229; italics in original).
- 39 These lines evoking his father's memory, their layering of Zionist and exilic history, may be usefully compared to a lyric published in the 1974 collection titled *Me-ahorei kol zeh mistater osher gadol*:
- Jerusalem is a place where everyone remembers  
That they have forgotten something there  
But they don't remember what it is.
- In order to remember  
I wear my father's face  
On mine . . . (Abramson's translation, 139)
- 40 Bargad, "Children and Lovers," 55.
- 41 Robert Alter, "Confronting the Holocaust: Three Israeli Novels," *Commentary* (March 1966): 67-73. Quotation appears on p. 68.

- 42 Quoted in Yehudit Tzvik, *Yehuda Amichai: A Selection of Critical Essays on His Writings* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1988), 191.
- 43 Linguistically and culturally speaking, it is worth noting that (besides the fact that German was his first language) Amichai grew up in a bilingual environment, attending a bilingual kindergarten as well as a grade school in which he participated in both Hebrew and German classes. By the time he reached Palestine, he was fully fluent in Hebrew. Fifty years later, he often expressed pride that he could still read and enjoy Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus* (strong influences on his own poetics) in the original German.
- 44 Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 5.
- 45 Quoted in Guy, "Yehuda Amichai," 26.
- 46 Montenegro, *Points of Departure*, 224.
- 47 Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*, 130.
- 48 Stanley F. Chyet and Warren Bargad, *Israeli Poetry: A Contemporary Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 80.
- 49 Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*, 127.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 131.
- 51 Jacob Neusner, *The Way of Torah: An Introduction to Judaism*, 4th edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1988), 36.
- 52 Chyet and Bargad, *Israeli Poetry*, 81.
- 53 Over the years, Amichai's English translations have benefited from a number of gifted intermediaries, including the poet Ted Hughes. According to the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, Amichai has been translated into thirty-three languages. On the occasion of the poet's seventieth birthday, Robert Alter speculated that there are two critical reasons for Amichai's success in translation: "First, he is the kind of modernist who combines freshness of imagination with accessibility—more like, say, Robert Frost than a "difficult" modernist such as T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. Second, he is a highly successful practitioner of the plain colloquial style that was a revolution in Hebrew verse in the 1950s when he began to publish and that has close equivalents in English poetry and in other Western languages." In his judicious appraisal, Alter ultimately argues for the presence of Hebrew "tonalities" and "allusive twists" to "densely specific Hebrew terms" that are simply beyond the reach of the most inventive translator. See Alter's "The

Untranslatable Amichai," *Modern Hebrew Literature* 13 (Fall/Winter 1994): 28-31. Quotation appears on p. 31. Most readers familiar with even a few of Amichai's originals would undoubtedly concur that the language and cadences of Bloch's and Kronfeld's award-winning versions are inspired renderings of the poet's lively wordplay and of his fusion of the mythic and the private.

54 Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai*, 135.

55 Kushner, 613.