

Hak'hel הקהל

Conceptual conversations: Engaging with Israel through Culture

Written for the
North American Coalition
for Israel Engagement (NACIE)

by

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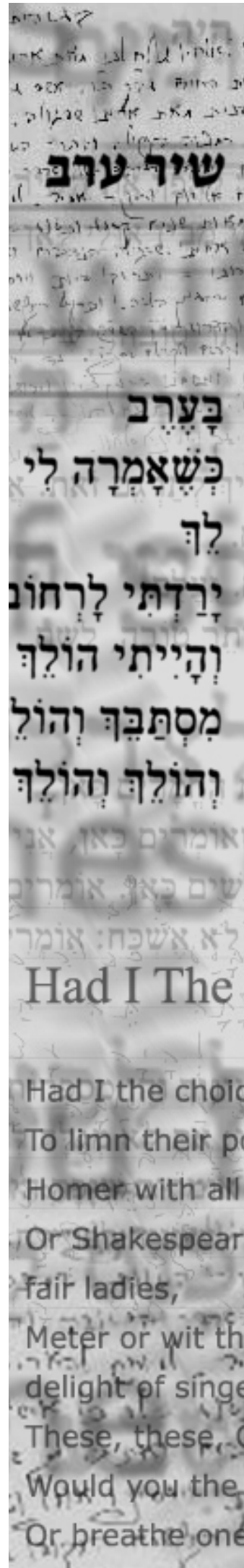
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Introduction of Hakhel

At the end of every shmita period (the fallow year, which occurs every seven years), on the pilgrimage holiday of Sukkot, there is a mitzva to gather all the Jews in Israel and read aloud certain portions of the Torah. Together, these Torah portions represent the quintessential nature of Judaism. In times when there was a king, he was responsible for reading to the people, but in his absence, any leader of the people was obliged to do so. The underlying concept of Hakhel is the establishment of a fixed, cyclical time to re-engage with the true meaning of Judaism. In the same way, these units are designed to help North American Jewish adults re-engage with and explore the essential issues that underpin their relationship with Israel.

Below are listed the six Hakhel discussion units that have been developed to date, each one intended to clarify critical issues of North American Jewish engagement with Israel.

1. **Conceptual conversation on: Why Israel?**

Is the existence of Israel a privilege and/or a necessity for the global Jewish community? Why does Israel exist and what are its reasons for existing today?

2. **Conceptual conversation on: The longing for Zion.**

What is the place of "longing" in Jewish life, in a world in which a Jewish State exists? How do we define "longing"? This unit offers a cultural Jewish perspective on the collective and personal sense of Jewish longing.

3. **Conceptual conversation on: Myth and Reality.**

Are we interested in engaging with a "mythic Israel" or with the reality of Israel in 2005? Are we comfortable engaging with this reality? What role do myths play in our relationship with Israel?

4. **Conceptual conversation on: Engaging with Israel through Culture**

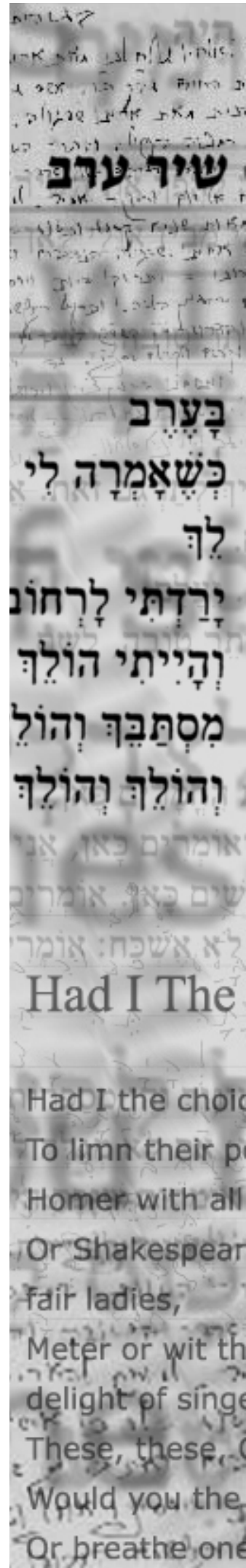
Achad Ha'Am conceived of Israel as a Jewish center that will generate a vibrant Hebrew culture. Do you agree with his vision? What is Israel's role in Achad Ha'Am's vision? Does contemporary Israeli and/or American Jewish literature express Achad Ha'Am's dream?

5. **Conceptual conversation on: Media's role in shaping our image of Israel**

What are the ramifications of constant exposure to media images of Israel on our own perceptions and attitudes? How dominant and powerful is the media in comparison to other sources of information about Israel?

6. **Conceptual conversation on: The nature of our engagements with Israel**

What are the ultimate (or desired) outcomes of our engagement with Israel? What do we perceive to be the most effective ways of actively engaging with Israel? What role, if any, do we play in Israeli society?



Introduction: "Engaging with Israel through Culture"

"American Jews have begun to define themselves more and more religiously, whilst simultaneously developing less and less interest in having a cultural connection with Israel. Should we be concerned that they appear to need traditional Torah much more than Amichai's poetry to fulfill their own spiritual needs?"

"...The religious context in the United States differs dramatically from Israel: ..., there are vast cultural differences – the army is certainly a core formative experience for Israelis which Americans are largely unable to share, and even when aspects of Israeli culture - novels, articles, songs, poetry, etc. – are translated into English, they provoke limited interest in the American Jewish community..."

"...While there is certainly a continuum of Hebrew culture from Bialik to Agnon to Amichai and beyond, Israel today is actually a multi-cultural space. It is not simply the place where a singular vibrant Jewish culture develops; it is also a place where other cultures exist and grow."

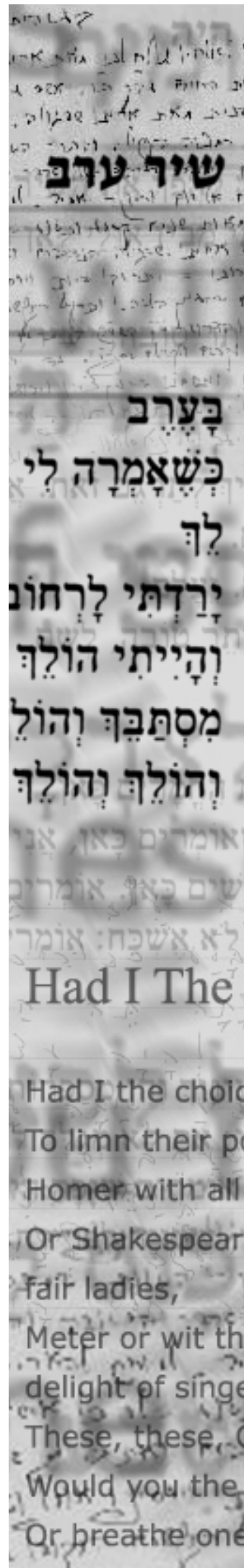
(NACIE's Philosopher's Retreat, New York, September 2003)

The above is an excerpt from the "Philosopher's Retreat," an intensive meeting held by a small group of Jewish thinkers from Israel and the United States in the summer of 2003 to address conceptual issues relating to the meaning of Israel for North American Jews. This meeting made it clear to all concerned that the task of engaging Jews in a series of discussions about Israel and its role in North American Jewish life should be at the heart of NACIE's mission. A set of educational units (six to date) is being produced as a vehicle for implementing this mission. This particular unit was designed by NACIE, the North American Coalition for Israel Engagement, as part of its ongoing efforts to encourage American Jews to discuss, explore and conceptualize their relationship to Israel.

Achad Ha'Am conceived of Israel as a Jewish center that will serve to generate the emergence of a vibrant Hebrew culture. Is the reality in Israel today consistent with Achad Ha'Am's dream? Can you and other North American Jews relate to Israeli literature? Does Israeli culture (and in particular, Israeli literature) play any role in North American Jewish life, specifically in mediating engagements with Israel? These questions and others will be explored further in this session.

B'hatzlacha,

Esti Moskovitz-Kalman, Director of Education-Israel, NACIE / Makōm



The Activity

Context

This unit will be devoted to examining the role that Israeli culture in general, and literature in particular, could and does have in Jewish education and in the general context of individuals' engagement with Israel. In this session, using literature as our vehicle, we will explore Achad Ha'am's perception of Israel as an anchor of the Jewish people and as a cultural center.

Since Israel offers a unique microcosm of Jewish existence during the last century and since certain elements of Jewish culture in Israel are unique to Israel - the claim could be made that to gain a profound understanding of the Jewish world today, one must include Israeli culture in the equation.

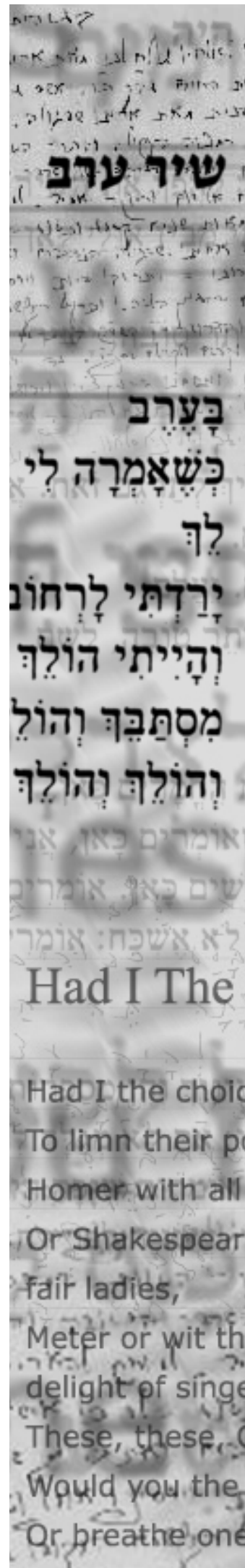
In this unit we offer one window, among many, into Israeli culture – the window of literature. We suggest that two models of culture, taken from an article by Assaf Inbari, are appropriate to our analysis: the 'culture of the River' and the 'culture of the Pond'. We invite you to work with this model, hoping it will offer interesting insights into the Israeli soul and possibly your own soul as well.

We actually invite you to a “dancing class” with an exceptional partner- it is the beginner's hour, and no previous knowledge is required on the part of the participants. Each literary piece is offered together with a short background on the author or the text. Some of the fascinating texts selected for this unit are extracts from short stories, and even occasionally novels, but all are easy to “dance with.” The session consists of examples from contemporary Hebrew literature written in Israel as well as examples of American Jewish literature for purposes of comparison. We will consider the question: Can Hebrew literature be as meaningful to American Jews as the literature written by American Jewish writers such as Potok, Bellow and Roth, and can it perhaps serve as a gateway to engagement with Israel?

The unit session closes by exploring a Catch 22 situation: in order for a person to relate to an alternative culture, it must be sufficiently familiar to fit within one's own paradigms; but in order for one to be motivated to access another culture, it must be sufficiently different and able to provide insights that one cannot obtain elsewhere.

Goals

- To compare Achad Ha'Am's vision of Israel as a cultural center of the Jewish people and participants' perceptions of this vision today
- To explore whether Hebrew literature could be meaningful to North American Jewish identity and as culturally relevant as American-Jewish authors like Potok, Bellow and Roth



- To explore whether Israeli culture, or more specifically, Israeli-Hebrew literature, while created for Hebrew readers, can be a gateway for engaging American Jews with Israel
- To engage in a conversation about North Americans' perceptions of Israeli
- To compare the ways in which Israelis and North Americans engage with Israel through culture (specifically through literature)

Target Audiences

Unit leaders: The conversations in this module require three main skills: a comfort level with the study of texts; an ability to lead a group in an open discussion, in which each view expressed is accepted, validated, and woven into the overall flow of the discussion; and a basic familiarity with the content matter.

Participants: These conversations are suitable for adults; no prior knowledge is necessary. The participants may include community lay leaders and members of various boards and committees; Jewish educators from all types of frameworks; and/or members of the public, who are interested in exploring the Meta Questions of engaging with Israel. (General comment: The texts used in this session were chosen to fit the general audience as defined above. Based on your participants' profile, you may decide to add or replace the texts used in the unit.)

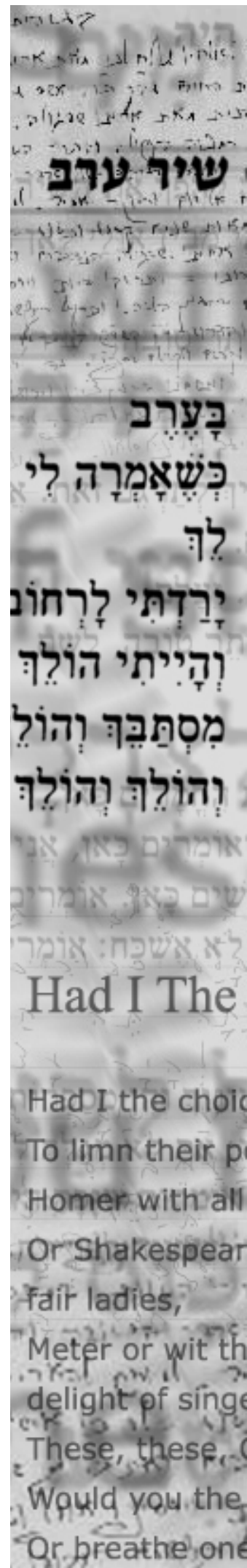
Structure and Duration of Activity

- I **Israel as a Jewish cultural center:** short Introduction by the facilitator, reading of Achad Ha'Am text and short discussion (5-10 min)
- II **River and Pond: two models of Hebrew-Jewish literature:**
Short introduction, divide into small groups to work with excerpts from Assaf Inbari's article, literary texts and worksheet (35 min)
- III **Report back** to the whole group (30 min)
- IV **Conclusion** (15-30 min)

Advance Preparation

Copies of:

- An excerpt from Achad Ha'Am –source #1
- Excerpts from Assaf Inbari's article– source #2
- Worksheet- source #3



- Literary texts (translated)- sources #4 and up (we suggest adding more North American Jewish literature, either from “Further Readings” or from your own collection)
- Optional: further readings and background materials on each of the authors

Let’s begin...

I: Israel as a Jewish Cultural Center

Introduction

We suggest that you introduce the topic (you may want to use the introduction to this unit). The following trigger should be used to engage participants with the topic from their personal perspective.

- Ask the participants to take a moment to recall the last text they read (not including the newspaper) that mentioned or discussed Israel. In what context was Israel mentioned? Was Israel the explicit or an implicit subject of the text? Is Israel a significant theme in North American Jewish literature?

Achad Ha’Am

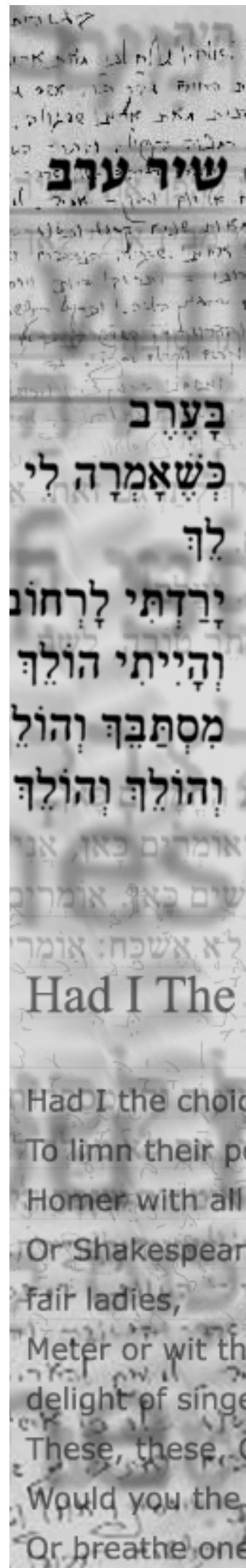
In this first text, we will explore Achad Ha’am’s vision of Israel as the Jewish People’s cultural center. Read the excerpt from Achad Ha’Am (source #1) with the whole group and discuss his thesis. (You may want to use the following questions for guidance: What does Achad Ha’Am mean when he talks about Israel as a cultural spiritual center? Do you accept his definition?) This discussion will lay the foundations for the next section.

II: River and Pond Two Models of Hebrew-Jewish Literature

A) Introduce these two models of culture taken from Assaf Inbari’s article on the ‘culture of the river’ and the ‘culture of the pond’ (source #3). The original word Inbari uses is *shlulit* in Hebrew which translates to *puddle* in English; we have chosen to use the less pejorative word *pond* instead. We suggest that you read the source together, either quietly or aloud, and ensure that participants understand the main differences between the two models.

B) Now divide the group into pairs or trios. Each participant should receive the following resources:

- 1] The model for analysis (source #3)
- 2] The worksheet (source #2)



3] The literature sources booklet (sources #4 and up), which includes excerpts from contemporary literature written in Israel and North America. If your group includes many participants and/or you have more time, you can use selected texts found in the “Culture: Additional Materials File.” The booklet includes too many texts for the group to read in the given timeframe. We therefore recommend that the facilitator assign three specific texts to each group: one long North American text, one long Israeli text, and a song of your choice.

The small groups should begin their work by reading through the description of the models (source #3), making sure that they fully understand it; the facilitator should be on hand to answer any questions. Next, they should take the first literary text they were assigned and read it together. The ensuing discussion should be guided by the questions in the worksheet (source #2). The group will then repeat the exercise with their second and third literary texts as time permits.

III: Report Back

All the small groups should now reassemble, with each reporting back to the whole group: What text did they read? Who was the author? Summarize the text.

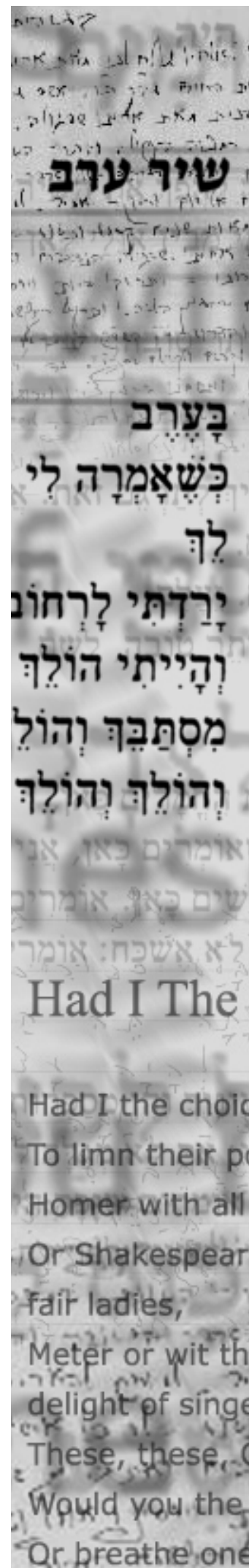
- Was the text interesting? Can you relate to it? (If not, why?)
- Did the text seem to fit more with the “river” or the “pond” model? Why?
- Is it an Israeli or an American piece? Is it likely that this piece could have been written somewhere else? Why?

(If you are short on time, you may want to ask each group to answer just one question.)

After all the groups report back, take the conversation to the macro level by asking:

- Which model (“river” or “pond”) do you find it easier to relate to or identify with in Israeli culture?
- Would you say that Assaf Inbari’s model applies to American Jewish culture as well? Do you find this model to be helpful?

IV: Conclusion



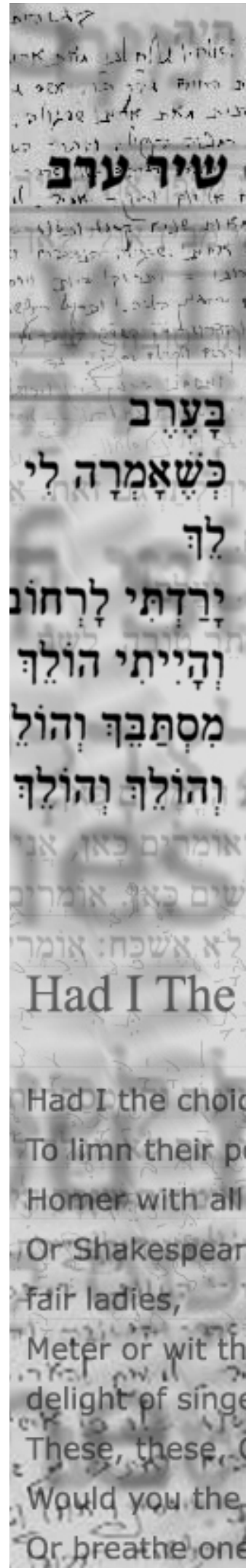
You may choose from among two options below to conclude the session; the other may be used for a follow-up activity through an e-mail list serve with the participants.

Option A: Facilitate a summary discussion based on some of the questions below:

- Do we expect Jewish-Israeli culture to be similar to our own? Can we understand or connect to a culture that seems remote from us?
- Do you agree or disagree with the following claim: "Israel will stay relevant to Jews in the Diaspora only as long as it remains unique as a Jewish culture. The moment that it becomes a mere mirror of the American Jewish community or the British Jewish community, it will lose its special attractiveness and effectiveness."
- Is it our responsibility to make the effort to find ways of connecting with Israeli literature or culture? In terms of a broader perspective: What do I do as an individual or as a community when engagement with Israeli culture is neither easy nor comfortable?
- What role does Israel play in the different models of "river" versus "pond" found in Israeli literature? In North American Jewish literature? Can you compare these roles?

Option B: Re-read the excerpt by Achad Ha'Am on Israel as a spiritual center for the whole Jewish people (source #1) aloud and discuss one or more of the questions below:

- Does Israel really play this role today (consider culture, education, literature, Jewish identity, Jewish renaissance, theater, language, music, art)
- If yes, in what ways? If not, why?
- How do you relate on a personal level to Jewish-Israeli culture? What examples of this culture are you familiar with? How comfortable are you when it comes to Israeli culture?
- What pieces of culture would you/do you bring to your community in America? Why these pieces as opposed to any others? (You may relate to content and to different forms of culture such as dance, poetry reading, book clubs, theater, music, etc.)
- What role could Israeli culture play in engaging with Israel through the community, at home or in school?

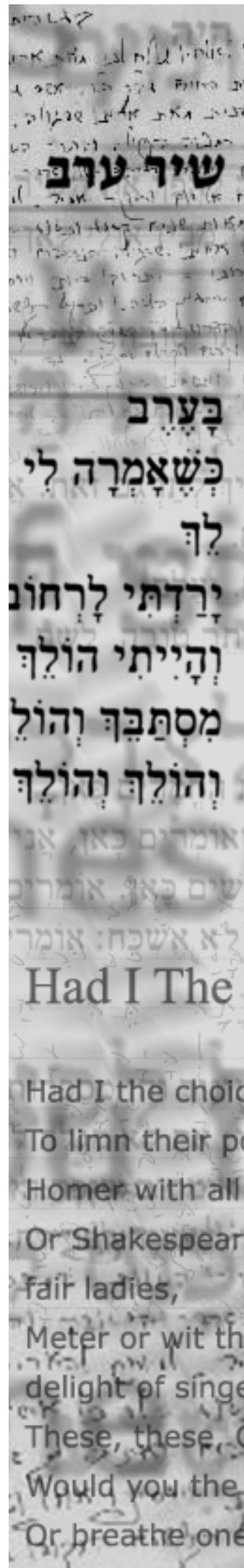


Sources

Source # 1: **The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem/Achad Ha'Am**

“...This Jewish settlement, which will be a gradual growth, will become in the course of time the center of the nation, wherein its spirit will find pure expression and develop in all its aspects to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable. Then, from this center, the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the over-all unity of our people. When our national culture in Palestine has attained that level, we may be confident that it will produce men in the Land of Israel itself who will be able, at a favorable moment, to establish a State there -- one which will not be merely a State of Jews but a really Jewish state.”

Achad Ha'Am, *The Agnostic Rabbi: The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem (1897)*, in The Zionist Idea by Arthur Herzog (New York, 1959), p. 267.

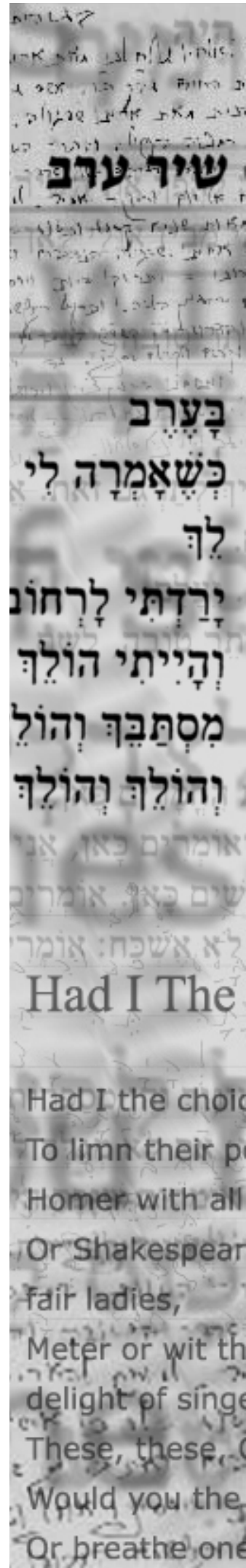


Source #2: **Worksheet**

1. Read the summary of Assaf Inbari's analysis of Hebrew literature, taken from "We Need a Melting Pot, But this Time Let It be a Jewish One," in *Ma'ariv*, Rosh HaShana, September 15, 2004.
2. Continue by reading your assigned texts. When reading your assigned texts, we suggest that you focus on the following question:
 - In what ways do the definitions of Jewish culture apply to these literary texts?
 - Into which of Inbari's models (river or pond) do you think they fall?
 - What role(s) (if any) does Israel play in the texts?
 - When you have finished reading, use the questions below to guide your discussion.

Questions to aid discussion

- Is this text meaningful to you in any way?
- Is it meaningful for your connection to Israel?
- Could this poem or piece of literature be written in a place other than Israel? Can you draw any conclusions about the writer – can you identify him/her as an Israeli or a Jew?
- What aspects of this literature makes it distinctively Jewish or Israeli?
- Inbari says that "Hebrew literature is the code for understanding the national cultural identity." If this is true, what kind of national cultural identity can be drawn from the texts provided?
- In your opinion, which model – river or pond – does this piece fit into?
- Which model (river or pond) do you find easier to relate to or identify with in Israeli culture?
- Would you say that Assaf Inbari's model applies to American Jewish culture as well?



Source #3: **River and Pond: Two Models of Hebrew-Jewish Literature**

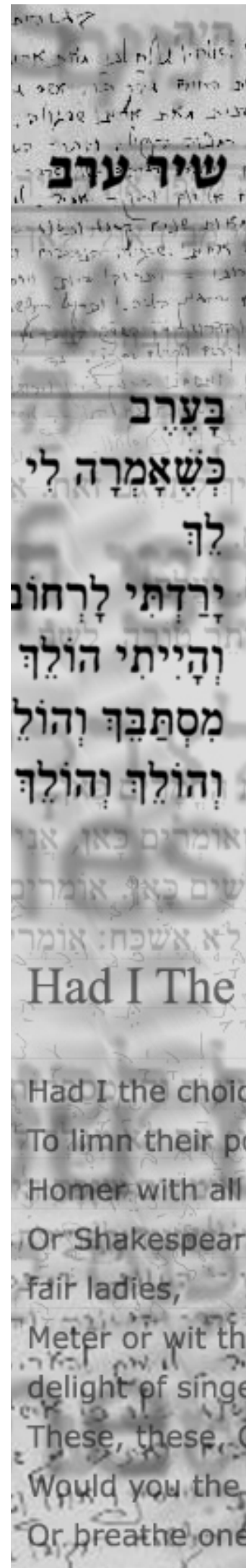
Taken from Assaf Inbari, "We Need a Melting Pot. But this Time Let It Be a Jewish One," in Ma'ariv, September 15, 2004

"Jewish writing is the net of the story without the gross. It is the compression of emotions and history into a narrative form of just a few words. For example forty years are compressed into four Hebrew words in the Biblical verse 'And the country was quiet for forty years.' It is a concise writing in which every word has meaning and there is no waste in words or analysis. Jewish writing emphasizes a life of responsibility rather than a life of destiny.

"Jewish culture (in Israel especially) can be understood according to two main models; the river and the pond. In the river model those who are traveling along the river are struggling with their identity, with time and with the evolution of history. In the pond we find those who are sitting in a single-dimension identity. There are two main types¹ in the pond. The religious, such as the ultra-Orthodox who do not dare to change or depart from the rabbis' instruction. They remain rooted in a single time, a time from hundred of years ago. They live in a past devoid of the present. Then we have the secular, in which you can find citizens whose identity is made up only of their citizenship (they are Israeli) without connection to Jewish peoplehood. They are living in a present devoid of the past.

"Hebrew literature is the code for understanding the national cultural identity. It is a narrative in which the events of a historical national Jewish life are unfolded. It is founded on a perception of time as history, a perception of the individual as part of a nation and a perception of reality as a series of actions. Even though the State was born in 1948, it is now, after 50 years, that fundamental questions are being revisited such as our existence in this area, questions of shared agreements over education and Statehood, location of culture between east and west, and immigration, multiculturalism and tribalism. The current generation and the founding generation, unlike the intervening generations, share the river mentality in facing these existential questions."

¹ Of Israelis – E.M.



Literature Sources Booklet

Source #4: **Jerusalem, Port City/ Yehuda Amichai**

Jerusalem, port city on the shore of forever.
The Temple Mount a great ship, a splendid pleasure
boat. From the portholes of her Western Wall smiling saints
look out. They are travelers. Hasidim wave greetings
from the pier, shouting *hurrah, au revoir*. She's
always arriving, always leaving. And walls and wharfs
and guards and flags and tall masts of churches
and mosques and chimneys of synagogues and boats
of praise and mountain waves. The sound of the *shofar*: one
more has set out. *Yom Kippur* sailors in white uniforms
climb on ladders and ropes of tested prayers.

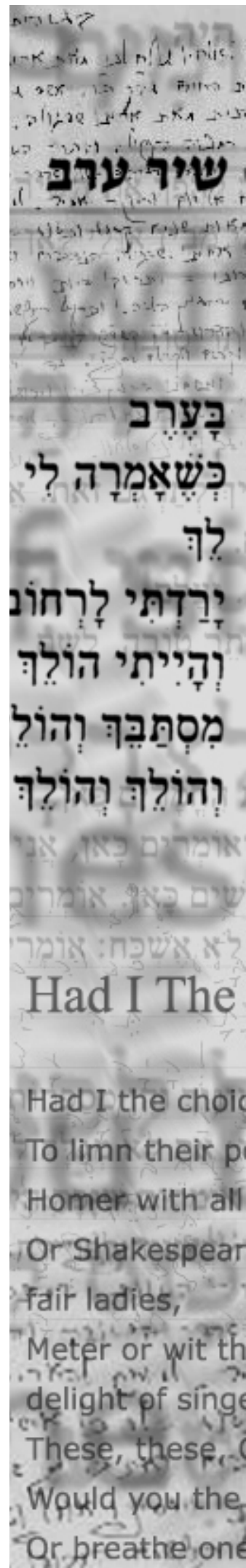
And trade and gates and golden domes.
Jerusalem is the Venice of God.

From *Voices Within the Ark-The Modern Jewish Poets*, Howard Shwartz and Anthony Rudolph, editors
(New York: Avon Books, 1980)

Source #5: **After Us The Flood/Nurit Galron**

From the album *Après Nous Le Deluge* (Hammon Records, 1989)
Translated by Michael Wegier

There is a state of stones and Molotov Cocktails
And Tel Aviv is burning from nightclubs and lecherous acts
There is a State of people in uprising, there they are treating wounds.
And Tel Aviv is celebrating, living, eating and drinking.



CHORUS

No, don't tell me about a girl who lost her home.
It just makes me feel bad, bad, bad.
It just makes me feel bad.
I haven't got strength for depressed or suffering types.

And I don't care what's happening in the territories.
Don't tell me about yellow wind, about prisoners and rebels.
Let's make love. Let's live our lives.
Tel Aviv is the life.

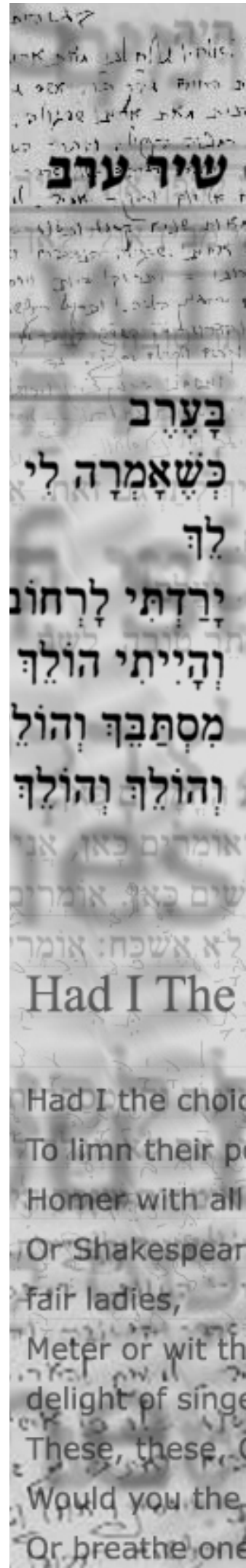
CHORUS

No, don't tell me about a girl who lost her home.
It just makes me feel bad, bad, bad.
It just makes me feel bad.
I haven't got the strength for righteous and moral types.
Let's swallow the busy streets of Tel Aviv.

CHORUS

No, don't tell me about a girl who lost her home.
It just makes me feel bad, bad, bad.
It just makes me feel bad.
Let's live in Tel Aviv but on the other side.
After us the flood.
Satisfied people cannot understand hungry people.
Tel Aviv is the life.

From: Galron, Nurit. "After Us the Flood," translated by Michael Wegier, in her album Apres Nous Le Deluge אחרינו המבול , NMC Records, 1989.



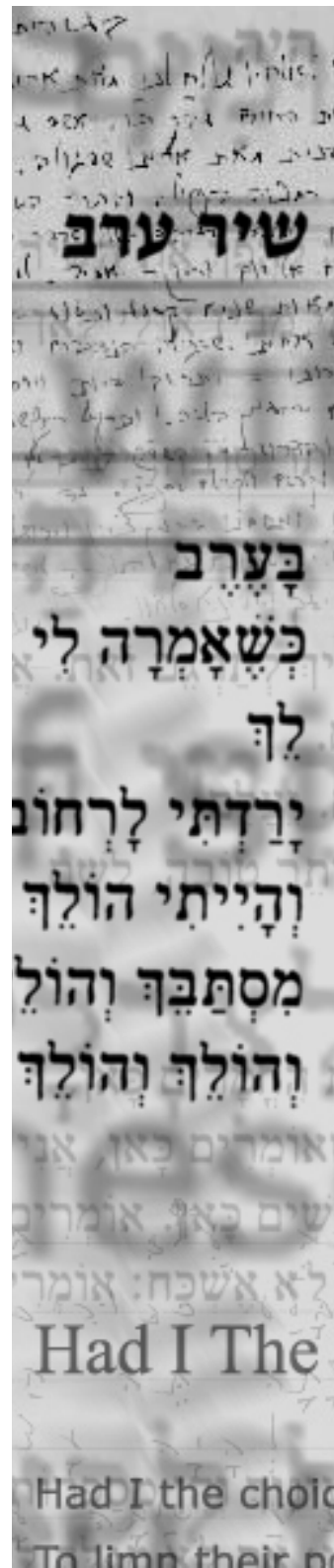
Source #6: **Shoes/ Etgar Keret, Translated by Marganit Weinberger-Rotman**

“On Holocaust Memorial Day our teacher Sara took us on bus Number 57 to visit the museum of Volhynia Jewry, and I felt very important. All the kids in the class except me, my cousin, and one other boy, Druckman, had families that came from Iraq. I was the only one with a grandfather who had died in the Holocaust. Volhynia House was very beautiful and posh, all made of black marble, like millionaires’ houses. It was full of sad black-and-white pictures and lists of people and countries and dead people. We walked past the pictures in pairs and the teacher said, “Don’t touch!” But I did touch one picture, made of cardboard, showing a thin, pale man who was crying and holding a sandwich in his hand. The tears came streaming down his cheeks like the divider lines you see on a highway, and my partner, Orit Salem, said she would tell the teacher that I touched it. I said I didn’t care, she could tell whoever she wanted, even the principal, I didn’t give a damn. It’s my Grandpa and I’m touching whatever I want.

“After the pictures, they took us into a big hall and showed us a movie about little children who were shoved into a truck and then suffocated with gas. Then a skinny old man got up on the stage and told us what bastards and murderers the Nazis were and how he took revenge on them, and he even strangled a soldier with his bare hands until he died. Djerby, who was sitting next to me, said the old man was lying; the way he looks, there’s no way he can make any soldier bite the dust. But I looked the old man in the eye and believed him. He had so much anger in his eyes that all the rampages of all the iron-pumping hoods I’d ever seen seemed like small change in comparison.

“Finally, when he finished telling us what he had done during the Holocaust, the old man said that what we had just heard was relevant not only to the past but also for what goes on nowadays, because the Germans still exist and still have a country. He said he was never going to forgive them, and that he hoped we would never ever go visit their country, either. Because when he went with his parents to Germany fifty years ago everything looked nice, but it ended in hell. People have short memories, he said, especially where bad things are concerned. People tend to forget, he said, but you won’t forget. Every time you see a German, you’ll remember what I told you. Every time you see German products, whether it’s a television set or anything else, you should always remember that underneath the fancy wrapping there are parts and tubes that they made out of the bones and skin and flesh of dead Jews.

“On the way out Djerby said again that he’d bet anything the old man never strangled anybody in his life, and I thought to myself it was lucky that we had a made-in-Israel refrigerator at home. Why look for trouble?

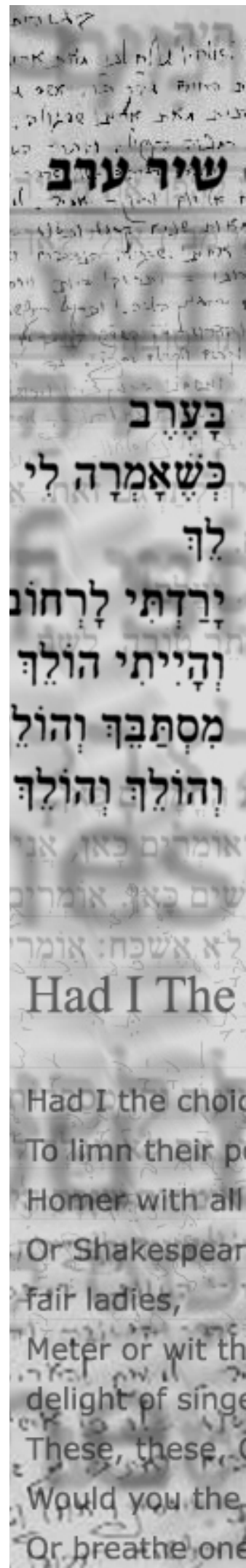


“Two weeks later, my parents came back from a trip abroad and brought me sneakers. My older brother had secretly told my mom that that’s what I wanted, and she got me the best pair in the world. Mom smiled as she handed me the present. She was sure I had no idea what was inside. But I recognized the Adidas logo on the bag right away. I took out the shoebox and said thank you. The box was rectangular, like a coffin, and in it were two white shoes with three blue stripes and the inscription ADIDAS on the side; I didn’t have to open the box to know what they looked like. ‘Let’s put them on,’ my mother said and took off the wrapping, ‘to make sure they fit.’ She was smiling the whole time, and had no idea what was going on. ‘They’re from Germany, you know,’ I told her, squeezing her hand tightly. ‘Of course, I know,’ Mom smiled, ‘Adidas is the best brand in the world.’ ‘Grandpa was from Germany, too,’ I tried to give her a hint. ‘Grandpa was from Poland,’ Mom corrected me. For a moment she became sad, but she got over it in no time. She put one shoe on my foot and started to tie the laces. I kept quiet. I realized there was nothing doing. Mom didn’t have a clue. She had never been to Volhynia House. Nobody had ever explained it to her. For her, shoes were just shoes and Germany was Poland. I let her put the shoes on me and didn’t say a thing. There was no point in telling her and making her even sadder.

“I thanked her again and kissed her on the cheek and said I was going out to play ball. ‘Be careful, eh?’ my dad called, laughing, from his armchair in the front room. ‘Don’t wear out the soles right away.’ I looked again at the pale hide covering my feet. I looked at them and remembered everything the old man who had strangled the soldier said we should remember. I touched the blue Adidas stripes and remembered my cardboard grandfather. ‘Are the shoes comfortable?’ my mother asked. ‘Sure they’re comfortable,’ my brother answered for me. ‘These aren’t cheap Israeli sneakers. These are the same sneakers that the great Cruiff wears.’ I tiptoed slowly toward the door, trying to put as little weight as I could on the shoes. And so I made my way gingerly to Monkeys Park. Outside the kids from the Borochov neighborhood had formed three teams: Holland, Argentina, and Brazil. It so happened that Holland needed a player, so they agreed to let me join in, although they never accept anyone who’s not from Borochov.

“At the beginning of the game I still remembered not to kick with the tip of my shoe, so that it wouldn’t hurt Grandpa, but after a while I forgot, just like the old man at Volhynia House said people tend to do, and I even managed to kick a tiebreaker. But when the game was over I remembered and looked at the shoes. All of a sudden they were so comfortable, much bouncier than when they were in the box. ‘Some goals, eh?’ I reminded Grandpa on the way home. ‘The goalie didn’t know what hit him.’ Grandpa didn’t answer, but judging by the tread I would say that he was pleased, too.”

From *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God & Other Stories*, (London: The Toby Press, 2004)



Source #7: **Adjusting Sights** / *Haim Sabato*, *Translated by Hillel Halkin*

Excerpts from Chapter One

“...A pure moon shone overhead. Not a cloud hid it from sight. It was waiting to be blessed by the People of Israel, as shy as a bride who waits to be veiled by her bridegroom before stepping under the wedding canopy. Ever since the moon said to God long ago, *The sun and I cannot rule as equals and share the same crown*, and the Creator rebuked it, saying, *Then wane and be the lesser light*, the moon has humbly accepted its fate. Whenever it shines, humbleness shines with it and gives it grace.

“Row after row of *Hasidim* danced before it. The younger ones wore black gabardines, the older ones, white gowns.....

“Gabardined and gowned, the *Hasidim* shut their eyes and swayed, aiming their hearts at heaven and chanting, ‘As I dance before Thee but cannot touch Thee, so may our enemies dance before us and neither touch nor harm us. May dread and fear befall them!’

“And they repeated:

‘May dread and fear befall them!’

And a third time:

‘May dread and fear befall them!’...

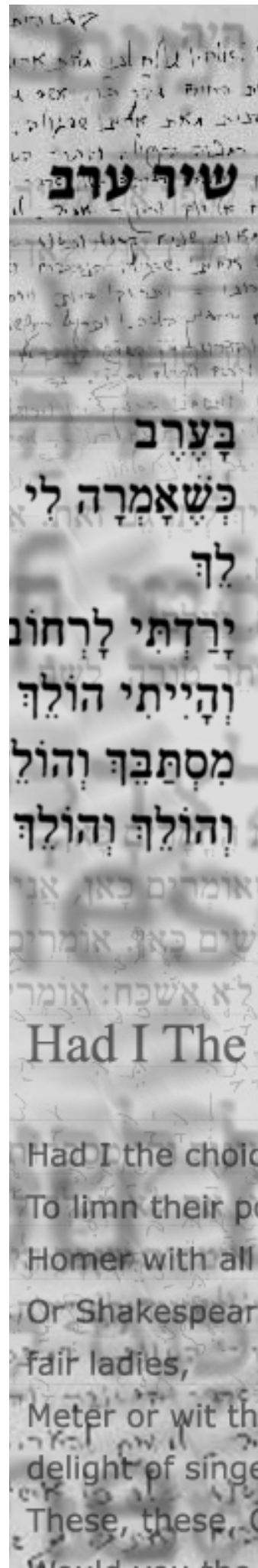
“‘Soldiers!’ they cried. ‘Soldiers! Go to the rabbi and he’ll bless you.’

“They parted to make a path and we were led to the rabbi, the old Amshinover *Rebbe*. His *Hasidim* crowded around us.

“We were two young soldiers, Dov and I. Our packs on our shoulders; we made our way to the rabbi. We had been together since coming to Israel, Dov from Rumania and I from Egypt. Each day we had walked from Beit Mazmil to the *Talmud Torah* in Bayit ve-Gan, Dov in his black beret and I in the brightly colored cap I was given by a woman who worked for the Jewish Agency in Milan. My family had been in transit there from Cairo, waiting for the night train to Genoa, from where we would sail to Haifa on the *Artza*.

“The *Talmud Torah* in Bayit ve-Gan was next to the Ashminov synagogue -- outside of which, thirteen years later, we now stood near the buses parked at our assembly point. As soon as our bus was full, an officer would take charge and we would head north to our unit.

“We had studied together at the same religious high school, Dov and I. We had gone together to the same *yeshiva*, whose students divided their time between their studies and the army. We had trained in the same tank at an armored corps base in Sinai. I was the gunner. Dov was the loader.



“Crew, prepare to mount the tank! Crew, mount! Driver, sharp left! Gunner, hollow charge, two thousand meters, fire! Down a hundred, fire! Up fifty, fire! Direct hit! Direct hit, hold your fire! Loader, reload! Faster, Dov! Stop dreaming! There’s no time to dream in a real war. You’re already in the enemy’s sights.’

‘Yes, sir. I’m doing my best.’

“The loader opened the breach...

“War,’ she had said. ‘War! What do you know about it? / know. And I know no one knows when you’ll be home again. No one.’

“As she spoke she filled a tin with homemade cookies and another with cheese pastries wrapped in foil. I knew the taste of both.

“*Ima*’ Dov said. ‘This isn’t Rumania or World War II. Think of it as a school outing -- we’ll be back in a few days.’

“To me he said softly, ‘I understand how she feels. She’s worried. Her whole family was killed in Europe. And she’s a mother. But this is just one more glorified company maneuver. We’ll be back in no time. I heard on the radio that we’re already counter-attacking. The air force is knocking out the Egyptian bridgeheads on the Canal. I’m only afraid that by the time we reservists get to the Golan, the regular army will have finished the job for us.’

“His father put down the little book of Psalms that he was reading. He kissed it and kissed his son.

“At the end of *Yom Kippur*, together we walked to the assembly point. Close to midnight we were brought to the Rabbi of Amshinov by his *Hasidim*, who were sanctifying the moon. Their rabbi, they confided, could work wonders. His blessing was worth a great deal. They stood around us, straining to hear what he would say.

“The Rabbi of Ashminov clasped my hand warmly between his own two and said, looking directly at me:

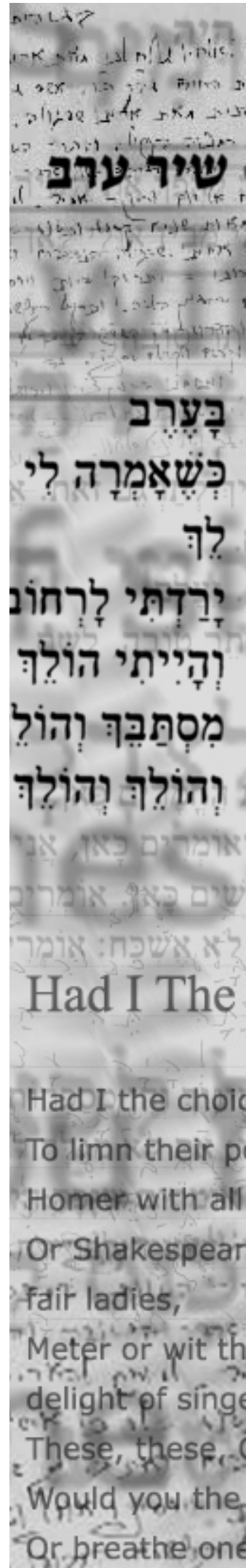
“May dread and fear befall them. May dread and fear befall them. Them and not you.’

“We parted from him and boarded the bus. We thought we’d be back soon. During the three terrible days that followed, I kept seeing the Rabbi of Ashminov before me. I kept hearing his words. Each time fear threatened to overcome me, I pictured him saying, ‘Them and not you. Them and not you.’ That calmed me.

“Until I heard of Dov’s death.

“After that the old man stopped appearing.”

If there is more time, you are invited to continue reading until the end of the chapter



“The months went by. In late spring we hosed down our tanks a last time, handed in our gear, took off our uniforms, and returned to the *Talmud* -- to the tractate of *Bava Batra* and the property laws of pits, cisterns, caves, olive presses, and fields. I kept meaning to go to the Rabbi of Ashminov and tell him what had happened to us after he blessed us. I wanted to tell him how our tanks were knocked out in Nafah quarry on the second day of the war, and how they burst into flames one by one, and how the blackened loader of 2-B hit the ground with his leg on fire and rolled there dowsing it with a jerry can of water. And how our tank commander, Gidi, shouted, ‘Gunner, fire!’ and I shouted back, ‘I don’t know what to aim at!’

”Fire, gunner! Fire at anything! We’re being shot at! We’re hit! Abandon tank!’

“And how Roni, the driver, said quietly, ‘I can’t get out, the gun’s blocking the hatch,’ and I crawled back in to free him, and the four of us ran over terraces of black earth with the bullets flying around us,

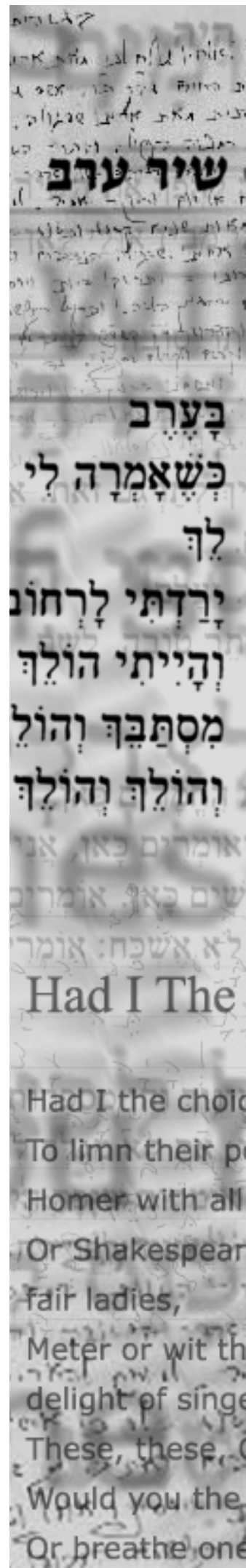
and Eli said, ‘I can’t go on,’ and we forced him to. And how Syrian commandos jumped out of a helicopter right ahead of us. There was even more I wanted to tell him -- of the thoughts I had, and the prayers I said, and the things I shouted to God and promised Him.

“It was just that, each time, I thought: When I’m done the rabbi will ask in his gentle voice, ‘What happened to the friend who was with you that night?’ And I would have to lower my eyes and tell him, ‘Dov is dead.’

“It would have made the old man sad. And so I never went to see him. I stuck to my *Talmud* with its laws of houses, cisterns, pits, and caves. The years went by. I couldn’t put it off any longer. I’ll go see him, I thought. Whatever will be, will be. I went to Bayit ve-Gan and found some Amshinov *Hasidim*.

“How is your rabbi?’ I asked.

“Just a few hours ago,’ they told me, ‘his soul departed this world.’”



**Source # 8: "For the Relief of Unbearable Urges"
p. 177-179, Nathan Englander**

Vintage Books, New York, 1999

"The beds were to be separated on nights forbidden to physical intimacy, but Chava Bayla hadn't pushed them together for many nights. She flatly refused to sleep anywhere except on her menstrual bed and was, from the start, impervious to her husband's pleading.

"You are pure," Dov Binyamin said to the back of his wife, who-heightening his frustration-slept facing the wall.

"I am impure."

"This is not true, Chava Bayla. It's an impossibility. And I know myself the last time you went to the ritual bath. A woman does not have her thing-"

"Her thing?" Chava said. She laughed, as if she had caught him in a lie, and turned to face the room.

"A woman doesn't menstruate for so long without even a single week of clean days. And a wife does not for so long ignore her husband. It is Shabbos, a double mitzvah tonight-an obligation to make love."

Chava Bayla turned back again to face her wall. She tightened her arms around herself as if in an embrace.

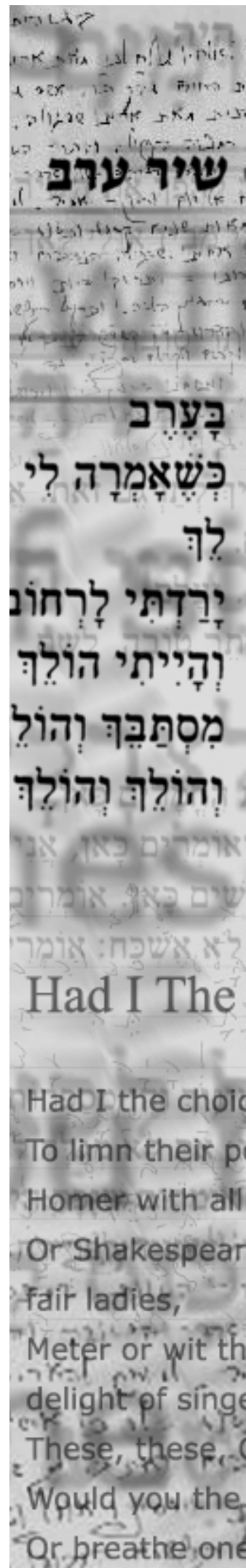
"You are my wife!" Div Binyamin said.

"That was God's choice, not mine. I might also have been put on this earth as a bar of soap or a kugel. Better," she said, "better it should have been one of those."

That night, Dov Binyamin slept curled up on the edge of his bed-as close as he could get to his wife.

After Shabbos, Chava avoided coming into the bedroom for as long as possible. When she finally did enter and found Dov dozing in a chair by the balcony, she went to sleep fully clothed, her sheitel still on top of her head.

As he nodded forward in the chair, Dov's hat fell to the floor. He woke up, saw his wife, picked up his hat, and, brushing away the dust with his elbow, placed it on the nightstand. How beautiful she looked all curled up in her dress. Like a princess enchanted, he thought. Dov pulled the sheet off the top of his bed. He wanted to cover her, to tuck Chava in. Instead he flung the sheet into a corner. He shut off the light, untied his shoes-but did not remove them-and went to sleep on



the tile floor beside his wife's bed. Using his arm for a pillow, Dov Binyamin dreamed of a lemon ice his uncle had bought him as a child and of the sound of the airplanes flying overhead at the start of the Yom Kippur war.

Dov Binyamin didn't go to work on Sunday. Folding up his tallis after prayers and fingering the embroidery of the tallis bag, he recalled the day Chava had presented it to him as a wedding gift—the same gift his father had received from his mother, and his father's father before. Dov had marveled at the workmanship, wondered how many hours she had spent with a needle in hand. Now he wondered if she would ever find him worthy of such attentions again. Zipping the prayer shawl inside, Dov Binyamin put the bag under his arm. He carried it with him out of the shul, though he had his own cubby in which to store it.

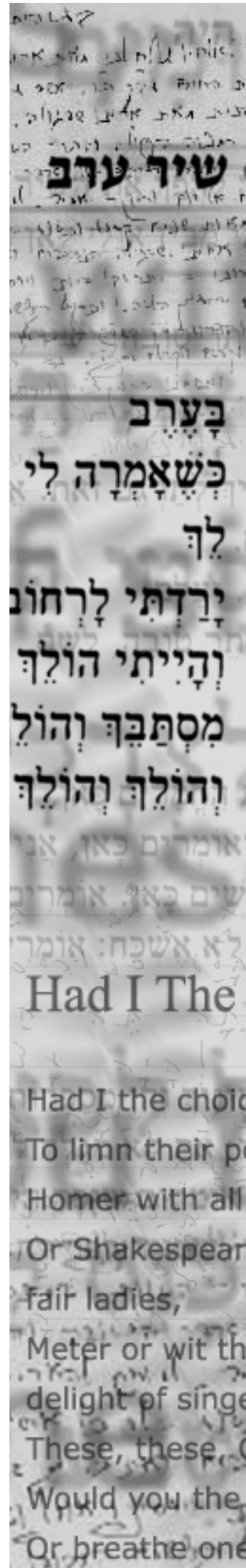
The morning was oppressively hot; a hamsin was settling over Jerusalem. Dov Binyamin was wearing his lightest caftan, but in the heat wave it felt as if it were made of the heaviest wool.

Passing a bank of phones, he considered calling work, making some excuse, or even telling the truth. "Shai," he would say, "I am a ghost in my own home and wonder who will mend my tallis bag when it is worn." His phone card was in his wallet, which he had forgotten on the dresser, and what did he want to explain to Shai for, who had just come from a Shabbos with his spicy wife and a house full of children.

Dov followed Jaffa Street down to the Old City. Roaming the alleyways always helped to calm him. There was comfort in the Jerusalem stone and the walls within walls and the permanence of everything around him. He felt a kinship with history's Jerusalemites, in whose struggles he searched for answers to his own. Lately he felt closer to his biblical heroes than to the people with whom he spent his days. King David's desires were far more alive to Dov than the empty problems of Shai and the other men at the furniture store.

Weaving through the Jewish Quarter, he had intended to end up at the Wall, to say Tehillim, and, in his desperate state, to scribble a note and stuff it into a crack just like the tourists in their cardboard yarmulkes. Instead, he found himself caught up in the crush inside the Damascus Gate. An old Arab woman was crouched down behind a wooden box of cactus fruit. She peeled a sabra with a kitchen knife, allowing a small boy a small sample of her product. The child ran off with his mouth open, a stray thorn stuck in his tongue.

Dov Binyamin tightened his hold on his tallis bag and pushed his way through the crowd. He walked back to Mea Shearim along the streets of East Jerusalem. Let them throw stones, he thought. Though no one did. No one even took notice of him except to step out of his way as he rushed to his rebbe's house for some advice."



Source 9: **"Home to Stay: One American Family's Chronicle of Miracles and Struggles in Contemporary Israel" p. 33-36, Daniel Gordis**

Three Rivers Press, New York, 2003

****previously published as "If A Place can Make You Cry"*****

"There's something strange about this year in Jerusalem, something about how easy it was to get here, how natural living here sometimes seems. It's almost uncomfortable when I think about those people who desperately want to come here but cannot, and the ease with which I could move here if I wanted to, but don't. Some days, when I least expect it, I think of two very different memories of talking to people about the possibilities of making a life here.

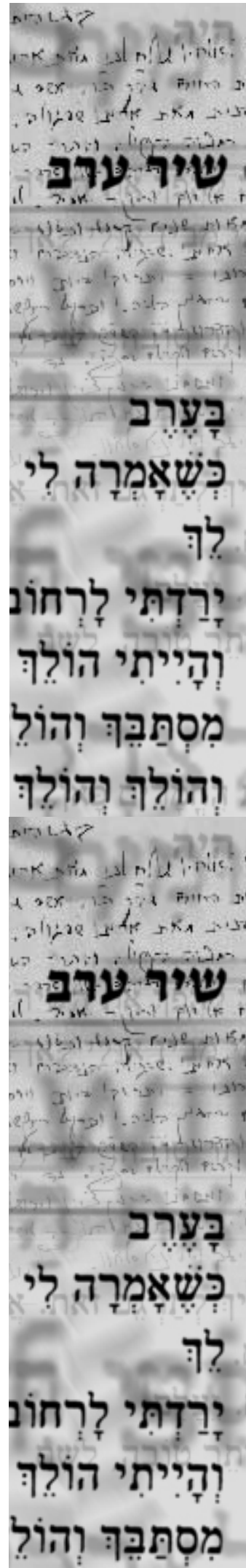
The first is of a trip we took shortly after Beth and I got married. It's January 1982 and Beth and I are in Moscow. Like lots of our friends, we've signed up to visit Soviet refusenik families, to bring them books and other items their community desperately needs, and equally important, to smuggle out of Russia the names and addresses of others who want to leave but need to be "invited" in order to apply. Using those names and addresses, the Israeli government will see to it that they receive an "invitation" from a "relative".

Professional spies we're not, but in all, we've been pretty well prepared by our contact. We've been told to expect to be followed, which refuseniks will be harder to find or reach, what kinds of things I should try and teach if we can get a study group together, what to bring for a bitter Moscow winter. We're a bit scared but feeling good about this adventure.

On one of our first nights there, we meet a Moscow family on our list. We huddle in their tiny and freezing apartment, where they introduce us to their infant, who's in a stroller outside on the porch (the cold air makes babies healthy, we're told), and offer us some fruit compote or similar concoction. We pass along the books we've brought for them and then, ill-equipped as we are, try to encourage them and bolster their moral. That, after all, is the task. We get to talking.

"When are you going to leave America and go to live in Israel?"

Uh-oh. Not one of the questions we were prepped for. It would be easy to lie and say something like "in two more years, when we finish school," but somehow, lying to people in their condition-out of work, hungry, spied on, harassed, all because they applied to leave the Soviet Union- seems a bit sick. But honesty here doesn't work much better.



“We’re still thinking about it.”

“Thinking about what?”

“About whether we’re going to move to Israel.” It’s a bald-faced lie, and it fails miserably. We’re not thinking about it all. Beth would go in a second, but after my two years there as a kid when my parents made a stab at living in Israel, I’ve done my time. The way I see it, my sentence was commuted to for good behaviour. If I were stuck in this Moscow hell-hole, I’d go to Israel. But leave Manhattan, where we were living then when we were both in graduate school, and American Jewish life for that? No thanks. The issue of moving to Israel is not on our radar screen at all-and they can tell.

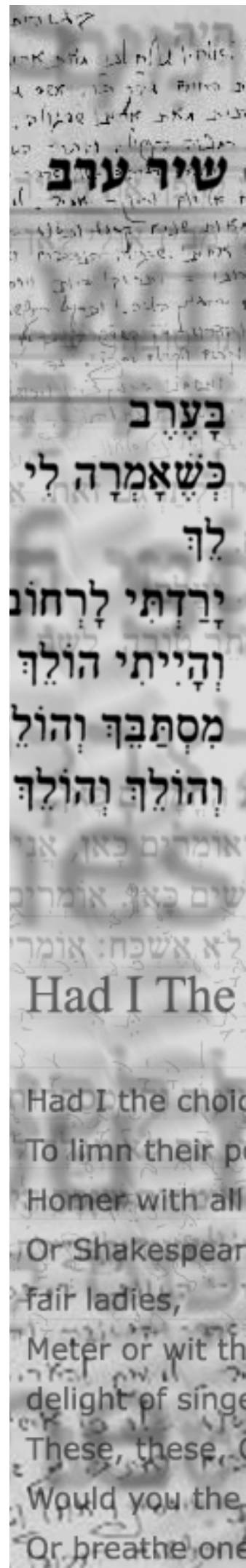
Now it’s their turn to be incredulous. They don’t say much, but we can both tell what they’re thinking. You, you have the option to go at any minute, just don’t want to? What does *that* mean? How could you not want to be there?

I don’t want to discuss it, and I don’t want to be in the apartment any longer. They’ve written us off as phonies, it’s clear, and a breath of the freezing Moscow night air would be better than this. We’re out of their apartment not too long afterwards.

This memory has stayed vivid in Beth’s memory, and in mine. Often, when we find ourselves in some freezing city, one of us jokes and says, “Time to put the baby out on the porch.” But for me the jokes are still a bit uncomfortable, almost twenty years later. Even now, whenever I think of them and their infant on the porch (and wonder if he survived that health spa), I recall the shame I felt at having no answer to their question. We’re spoiled, I find myself thinking. They, who had nothing, wanted nothing more than to be allowed to live in Israel. They, who lived in constant fear, still opened their apartment to secretive Jewish study because they were desperate to fill their lives with Jewish words and tradition, all as preparation for moving to the Jewish homeland.

And what about us? We, who have everything, don’t want to make do with less than we have. Despite everything I write and teach about the Jewish experience in the modern world, am I afraid to face the logical conclusion of all those arguments and simply move here? What is it that I don’t want to give up? Two cars? A big house? A great job? Physical safety? Since when has Jewish life been about being safe? In the scheme of Jewish history, how important are all the things that are keeping us in L.A.?

The other memory that now pops up frequently with that Moscow scene took place years later, in Los Angeles. It’s somewhere in the early 1990’s, probably ’93 or ’94. Shawn, a student of mine, is about to graduate from rabbinical school, and we’re talking about some of the things that worry her. Like lots of about-to-be-rabbis, she’s nervous about what to tell people when they ask questions she can’t answer. “Tell them the truth,” I try to reassure her. “Tell them you don’t know, and then tell them why you don’t know.”



“I suppose,” she says, sounding rather unconvinced. “After all, that’s what you did with me.”

“I did?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

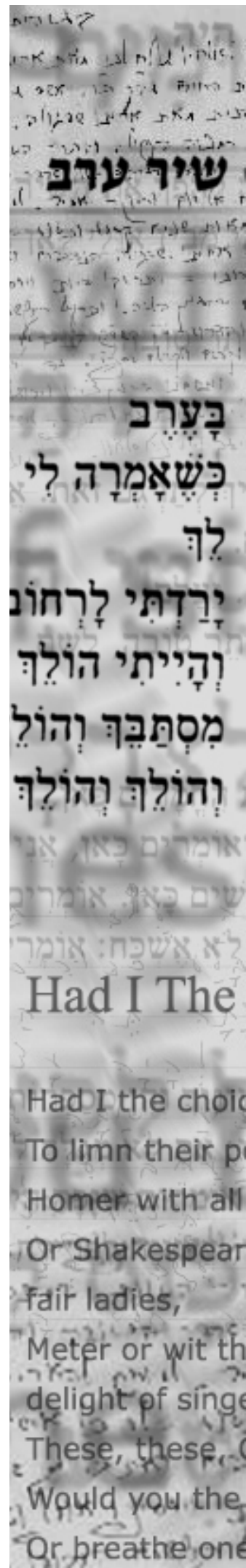
“Years ago, when I first started school here, I was just back from two years in Israel, feeling very guilty about having left. Looking to make myself feel a little better, I asked you how you came to terms with not living in Israel.”

“What did I say?”

“You said you had no good explanation, and that you struggled with it.”

I certainly had no good explanation, but I don’t remember struggling with it. In retrospect, the “struggle” line sounds a bit gratuitous, and again, I’m not feeling too great about my stance here. Shawn’s married now, living and working in Los Angeles, and we’re in regular contact with her, her husband and her three boys. No longer students, they’ve become good friends. But seeing her consistently reminds me of that comment about still struggling with where I lived. It wasn’t entirely true, I think. It’s a lot easier to say that you’re struggling than to be genuinely struggling.

I wonder, sometimes, which one of us I was deceiving.



Source #10: **The Red Tent, Anita Diamant, St. Martins Press, New York, 1997, p. 1-3**

"We have been lost to each other for so long.

My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.

This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say I was raped and continues with the bloody tale of how my honor was avenged.

It's a wonder that any mother ever called a daughter Dinah again. But some did. Maybe you guessed that there was more to me than a voiceless cipher in the text. Maybe you heard it in the music of my name: the first vowel high and clear, as when a mother calls to her child at dusk; the second sound soft, for whispering secrets on pillows.

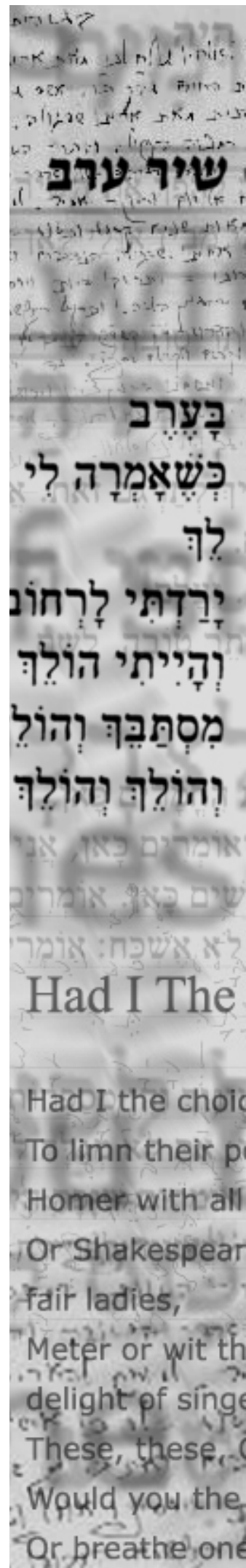
Dee-nah.

No one recalled my skill as a midwife, or the songs I sang, or the bread I baked for my insatiable brothers. Nothing remained except a few mangled details about those weeks in Shechem.

There was far more to tell. Had I been asked to speak of it, I would have begun with the story of the generation that raised me, which is the only place to begin. If you want to understand any woman you must first ask about her mother and then listen carefully. Stories about food show a strong connection. Wistful silences demonstrate unfinished business. The more a daughter knows the details of her mother's life-without flinching or whining-the stronger the daughter.

Of course, this is more complicated for me because I had four mothers, each of them scolding, teaching, and cherishing something different about me, giving me different gifts, cursing me with different fears. Leah gave me birth and her splendid arrogance. Rachel showed me where to place the midwife's bricks and how to fix my hair. Zilpah made me think. Bilhah listened. No two of my mothers seasoned her stew the same way. No two of them spoke to my father in the same tone of voice-nor he to them. And you should know that my mothers were sisters as well, Laban's daughters by different wives, though my grandfather never acknowledged Zilpah and Bilhah; that would have cost him two more dowries, and he was a stingy pig.

Like any sisters who live together and share a husband, my mother and aunts spun a sticky web of loyalties and grudges. They traded secrets like bracelets, and these were handed down to



me, the only surviving girl. They told me things I was too young to hear. They held my face between their hands and made me swear to remember.

My mothers were proud to give my father so many sons. Sons were a woman's pride and her measure. But the birth of one boy after another was not an unalloyed source of joy in the women's tent. My father boasted about his noisy tribe, and the women loved my brothers, but they longed for daughters, too, and complained among them about the maleness of Jacob's seed.

Daughters eased their mothers' burdens-helping with the spinning, the grinding of grain, and the endless task of looking after baby boys, who were forever peeing in the corner of tents, no matter what you told them.

But the other reason women wanted daughters was to keep their memories alive. Sons did not hear their mothers' stories after weaning. So I was the one. My mother and my mother-aunties told me endless stories about themselves. No matter what their hands were doing-holding babies, cooking, spinning, weaving-they filled my ears.

In the ruddy shade of the red tent, the menstrual tent, they ran their fingers through my curls, repeating the escapades of their youths, the sagas of their childbirths. Their stories were like offerings of hope and strength poured out before the Queen of Heaven, only these gifts were not for any god or goddess-but for me.

I can still feel how my mothers loved me. I have cherished their love always. It sustained me. It kept me alive. Even after I left them, and even now, so long after their deaths, I am comforted by their memory.

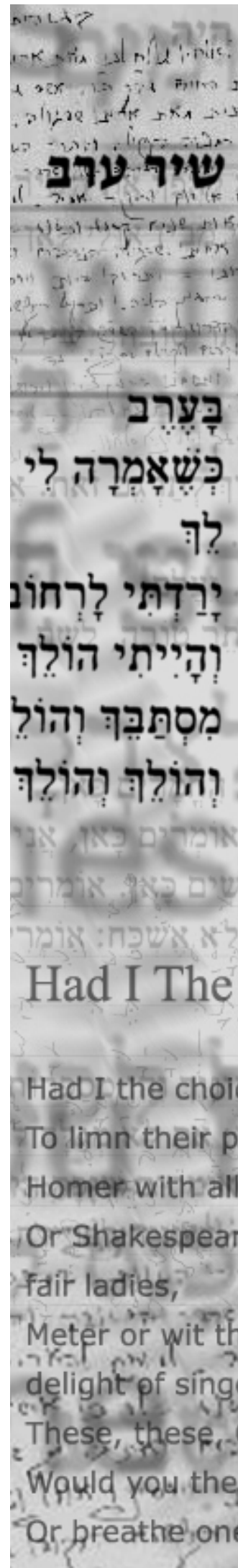
I carried my mothers' tales into the next generation, but the stories of my life were forbidden to me, and that silence nearly killed the heart in me. I did not die but have lived long enough for other stories to fill up my days and nights. I watched babies open their eyes upon a new world. I found cause for laughter and gratitude. I was loved.

And now you come to me-women with hands and feet as soft as a queen's, with more cooking pots than you need, so safe in childbed and so free with your tongues. You come hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers, and my grandmothers before them.

I wish I had more to tell of my grandmothers. It is terrible how much has been forgotten, which is why, I suppose, remembering seems a holy thing.

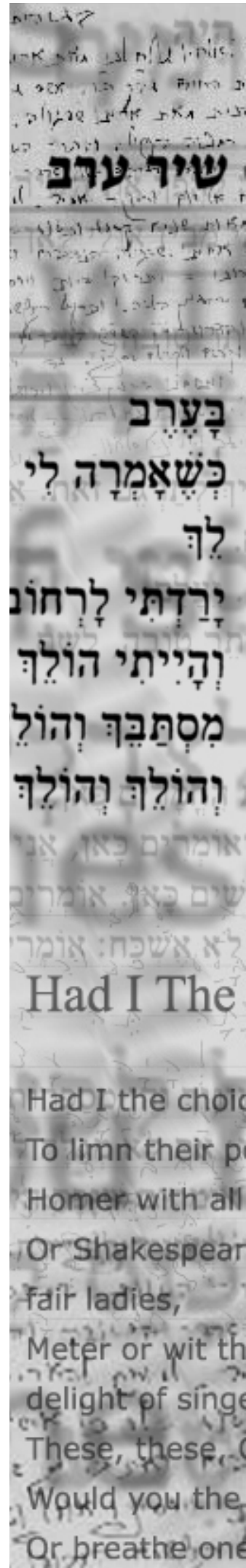
I am so grateful that you have come. I will pour out everything inside me so you may leave this table satisfied and fortified. Blessings on your eyes. Blessings on your children. Blessings on the ground beneath you. My heart is a ladle of sweet water, brimming over.

Selah.



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