

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BOX OF TRAUMAS OF THE ‘GENERATION AFTER’ IN MODERN HEBREW FICTION

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The 1980s and 1990s brought about intense departures from the traditional frontiers of Hebrew literature. Fixed traditions and models had broken down and were being refashioned, giving way to shunned pockets of society that mobilised around ethnicity, the Holocaust, and “trivial” genres—to name just a few. Israeli literature ripped open the oppositions that dynamised the aesthetic and cultural value system, including Mizrahi/Ashkenazi, Shoah survivors/native-born Israelis, high art/pop culture, female/male. More significantly, it gave a platform to the less crystallised voices oppressed by the cultural elite. The master Zionist narrative went up in smoke in the implosion of difference. The one story became many, in a movement that saw the grand plot yield to those narratives that were once regulated by a normalising frame and pushed to the edges.¹

Then and now, the hallmark of the sharp thematic changes in Hebrew literature is the fusion of the native Israeli and the old world Jew, the hero and the victim—a true amalgam of the rich imaginative diversity exemplified in the canon. Appositely, Gurevitch maintains that:

The 1980s offer a real revolution in Hebrew literature—narratives of the statistical and “emotional” minorities of Israeli society...It seems that a wind of democracy and openness is sweeping from every direction, injecting fresh air into our cultural house. Israeli society is returning to its authentic dimension: a society of minorities, a society of immigrants, a multicultural society...History again is invited to say its piece. The Shoah and repressed memory are returning to young writers...who are repeatedly attempting to find techniques to deal with this great Israeli trauma. This openness is also flowing towards “minority” groups of Israeli culture... The Orientals are subject to an unapologetic representation...All these “minority” circles I have mentioned are fighting in their own way for the same cultural aim—against the myth that claims that one can understand the world through all-encompassing theories regarding literary historiography as embedded in the artistic text, literary poetics and the critical system that tries to interpret it.²

As a result, a cluster of writers had gained prominence within the Israeli literary community. These authors were not interested in the national condition and were, to a great extent, disinclined to deal with ideological or political issues. They preferred to foreground obscure, marginal aspects. Rather than preaching and being messengers of a cause, the generation of new writers has recalibrated the stable notions of yore into a flux of fragmented identities. In response, the door opened to a more pluralistic and personal style of writing that was no longer male and Ashkenazi, or concerned with state and nation building issues. Instead, these new waves of fictions were unafraid to disengage from the Zionist superstructure and give expression to neglected landscapes. Not surprisingly, Israeli literature became more welcoming to the fostering of otherness and to the needs of the individual, rather than to the destiny of the nation.

And by virtue of this breach of silence, a new band of writers appeared, frequently referred to as the second generation of the Holocaust. Born after the war, they overcame the dual

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moral obstacles of describing a reality that they did not directly experience and making art of a subject that defies human comprehension. The reading public in the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the conspicuous and visible surfacing of a poetical direction known as “bearing witness” fiction. At the same time, the false portrait of the Jewish Diaspora as the locus of oppression, persecution, and passivity that was much derided was not only rejected, but was now accommodated and incorporated into the arena of Israeli consciousness as a vital part of the country’s persona. In that connection, we recall that in the first decades of Israeli statehood, native Israeli viewed most European Jews as passive weaklings who to their death like ‘sheep to the slaughter and thus in sharp contrast to the core myth of the heroic Sabra. This attitude began to collapse during and following the 1961 Eichmann trial. During the trial, the survivors were urged to testify about their personal inferno, bringing a significant change to the prevailing mindscape in contemporary fiction, “...Hebrew literature began to show an awareness that Holocaust victims and survivors were part of the Israeli experience and had as much literary (and social) legitimation as the new ‘Hebrews’”.³

The psychological legacy is a principal theme of the second generation canon. The tales deal introspectively with the survivors’ profusion of terrors that intermingle with their children’s’ attempts to invoke and transmute their own crisis of identity into the collective memory. Psychoanalytic studies of survivor parents and their children have found that the children have all faced similar themed problems, grouped under the heading of “survivor child syndrome”.⁴

In his treatment of the second generation, Rakoff found that a common feature exhibited by children of survivor families was, “an excessive need to curb the normal aggression and rebellion common in adolescence, and a struggle with conflicts arising out of a need to fulfil expectations their parents had for them”.⁵ Further clinical material reported that the over-protection bestowed on the child nourished phobic behaviours as well as guilt and depression flowing from the child serving as an audience to the parents’ horrific accounts. Where a survivor-parent chose a code of silence in order to spare the child, the child often fantasised a more gruesome reality than that of the parental experience. When considering that in many families the past was suppressed, we can see that it was only natural that the children would opt for a modality of fantasy to re-enact or act out their parents’ lives to fill the memory hole.

A specific symptom exhibited by children of survivors relates to their attitude to the world outside the home. Often the child viewed society as threatening—as the emotional scars of the camps were transmitted to the second generation and seriously affected their mental health.⁶ An additional pattern discernible in the case studies of mothers specifically, was a feeling that they did not provide adequate care for their first-born and therefore needed to supply them constantly with food and with material things, which they were deprived of. This, in turn, caused the children to decisively share in the mother’s obsessive pathology of fear that another Holocaust is imminent. Moreover, the burden of expectation placed on the survivor-child was especially high. Not infrequently, the child was seen as the repository of security and pleasure for the parents who expected them to perform very well scholastically, oftentimes brushing aside the child’s emotional needs.

Psychotherapist Dina Wardi, coined the Hebrew term *Nos’ei Hachotam*⁷ (Carriers/Bearers of the Mark” and translated into as “Memorial Candles”⁸ when Wardi’s book was published in English) to describe the role children of Holocaust survivors were invested with by their parents. Wardi was one of the first to use group therapy in the treatment of the second generation. Her groundbreaking book *Memorial Candles* illuminates how the Holocaust

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imprinted its own stamp on the second generation, unloading its victims' burden on to the shoulders of their children and creating an index of feelings including guilt, excessive anxiety, fear of separation and a lack of independence. It was no accident that those children exhibited symptoms that mirrored their parents' pathology. This suggested unequivocally that such disorders were transferred by the survivors onto their children, who internalised the traumatic stress foisted upon them by their families.

At heart, the emotional burden placed on the children stemmed from the role they were assigned by the generation of 1946. The babies born after the Holocaust were seen as the light that pierced the darkness. They were assigned the part of filling the terrible emptiness permeating the life of each family:

These little children were given the role of lifesavers for the confused soul of their parents. But the parents saw the children not only as lifesavers, but also as new content for their lives... one must stress the intensity of the survivor parents' expectation from their children— that they would infuse content into their empty lives and serve as compensation and a substitute for their relatives who had perished, their communities that had been wiped out and even for their own previous lives. For if they could not consider their new children a continuation of the loved ones they had lost, all their suffering and their efforts to survive would have seemed to them a worthless exercise...They were not perceived as separate individuals but as symbols of everything the parents had lost in the course of their lives.⁹

In seeing the children as extensions of themselves, as offshoots, the parents fulfilled a basic need for identity. They did not realise that their children's own growth and ability to form their own particular personality was being thwarted. To repeat, the children were aware from birth that they were assigned the special role of substitute symbols, all the more so as their parents, consciously or unconsciously, transmitted through various avenues their personal terror at the fate of relatives who had been murdered. Wardi summarises succinctly the message conveyed by survivor parents to their children, "You are the continuing generation. Behind us are ruin and death and infinite emotional emptiness. It is your obligation and your privilege to...reestablish the vanished family and to fill the enormous physical and emotional void left by the Holocaust in our surrounding and in our heart".¹⁰ The memorial candles carried the inescapable and unbearable burden of mending the severed link in the chain between their parents and their deceased families. In that vein, it is understandable that the central direction the younger writers have adopted in their fiction concentrates on:

...areas that a young Israeli writer can approach directly and faithfully on the basis of his authentic life experience. Fiction of this kind, generally realistic, asks relatively modest questions such as: how are echoes of the Holocaust audible in Israeli life today, especially in the lives of young people? Do the children of survivors undergo some special experience different from their peers? What do the survivor generation look like to its children?¹¹

In 2008, a special 20th anniversary edition of the seminal second generation Holocaust novel *Golem Be-ma'agal*¹² by author Lily Perry- Amitai, who was one of the first Israeli artists to tackle this subject. Moreover, the book was chosen by *Yediot Ahronot*, Israel's biggest selling daily, as book of the month. Accompanying the re-publication was a lengthy

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introduction, titled “A minor Israeli classic” penned by distinguished scholar Professor Dan Miron. Miron maintained that *Golem Be-ma’agal* is unreservedly a minor classic in Hebrew fiction, “Two decades after its publication, Lily Perry Amitai’s debut novel *Golem Be-ma’agal* surprises the reader with its freshness, its poignancy, and its polished readability.”¹³ Miron goes on to write that many of the canonical texts of the 1980s that tackled the subject of the Holocaust and that at the time evoked much excitement, now tire the reader and are outdated. *Golem Be-ma’agal* in contrast, Miron argued, still remains sharp and appealing, and manages to achieve a rare balance between the serious and the light, between the entertaining and the depressing. Yet, very little has been written about this astonishingly self-assured first novel.

The present essay focuses on *Golem Be-ma’agal*, a multiplex work that looks at the wrenching and thorny relationship between Miki Stav, a twenty something Tel Aviv woman and her Holocaust survivor mother. Gradually, the story reveals the intensity of Miki’s pain as she tries to detach herself from her mother’s claustrophobic, fear-laden environment. Like others who have experienced the terrifying Nazi universe, her mother Sarah (referred to in the novel as Mrs. Stav) is obsessed and preoccupied with the Shoah. In broad terms, the nub of *Golem Be-ma’agal* is how the paranoia of survivor parents affected the way the second generation was raised and about the children’s battle to individuate and separate away from their parents’ sheltering cocoon.

It has been argued that what imbues this book with such extraordinary power is its artfully drawn portrait of the protagonist, and the closely observed details of a survivor mother with all its subtle cadences of language and psychology. In addition, the book’s rawness, its painful truths about the survivor-child condition are conveyed with an economy of plot that excludes any extraordinary flights of dramatic development.¹⁴ Nestled inside the basic story structure is a secret treasure house of reflections and feelings threaded through and not quarantined from the narrative.

Miki finds it extremely difficult to become an individual. She is unable to break away from her mother’s overprotective love. Her problems echo some of the problems many children of Holocaust survivors face. In the course of the story, the heroine struggles with the normal disengagement all second generation children must undergo so that they can develop a separate identity of their own. It is clear that her efforts to form friendships and romantic relationships are stifled because of her inability to move away, physically and psychologically, from her mother, who does not realise the importance of this process. The mother possesses very little empathy for Miki’s struggle to relinquish her role in her pessimistic world.

In fact, Miki’s problems stem from a web of symptomatic conscious and unconscious inhibitions, simmering just under the surface. Consequently, Miki is sucked into her mother’s Holocaust dynamics and straitjacketed into a depressive worldview. The book’s title refers to her crippled emotional state, “The thought that everyone finds each other and that I remain stuck in the circle made me think that something in me is screwed up...I never leave signs that remind people of me. Maybe that is the reason why I always remain stuck in the middle”.¹⁵ Though her friends view her as resilient and strong, Miki sees her cynical and sarcastic deportment as a handicap inherited from her mother.

It should be emphasised that Holocaust researchers have found that in most survivor families girls were chosen as the “memorial candles”, shouldering the bulk of the emotional problems within the family unit.¹⁶ From the opening pages, we are plunged into Miki’s

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pervasive anxiety and hyper-alertness to her environment. This is a mode of behaviour that perceives everyday activities as potential hazards. To be sure, the desire of Miki's domineering mother to control her daughter's growth and environment has infected the young woman and has fostered within her excessive, unwarranted apprehensions. For example, moving into her grandmother's apartment, she opens the door cautiously, in the same manner as she would in her parents' household, "In the Stav's family house people don't walk—they float in a hysterical silence, usually close to the walls. That is why it was only natural that Ami and I would assume the nervousness that suffused the air"¹⁷

The mother lives in a state of impending inordinate danger, continually preparing for another Holocaust. Thus, she buys two of each item to store and on Miki's seventeenth birthday buys her a gold and diamond ring, even though the young girl wants boots. The mother immediately explains: such expensive rings can be traded over the fence of the ghetto for iron tablets and vitamins to strengthen the body. Similarly, the mother furnishes her house only with strong wooden furniture, ordered from a craftsman, believing that one buys furnishings that do not need to be replaced. In her gloomy world, sturdy furniture is a valuable vessel since it can be exchanged for bread or potatoes in case of another Holocaust. In a pivotal revelation, we learn that the mother has been opening savings accounts in different banks. Preparing for the inevitable catastrophe, she puts aside money to pay the gentile family that will adopt Miki the day before the outbreak of a new Holocaust.

To a large extent, children of survivors often had difficulty relating to their parents' permanent trauma, especially because of the conspiracy of silence exaggerated in the home. Here, it is Miki's father who accounts for his wife's emotional fragility and distress. He often admonishes Miki, telling her that her mother is entitled to a little understanding, that her prohibitive behaviour is due to the savagery she endured "Over There", that she is a good woman whose soul has been damaged. Along with his mother, Grandmother Hanna, Miki's father promises that one day he will describe the terrible things that devastated his wife and made her so tense and so prone to anxiety. Yet the revelations about the mother are fragmentary at best—Miki only hears about how her parents met in Cyprus, or that a Ghetto is a camp "Over There".

It is small wonder that it is the actual survivor, the mother, who is disinclined to communicate to her daughter the near-death experience she went through. Her decision is congruent with the ongoing practice of survivors who refused to sit down with their children and tell them what took place during that period. Once again, it is left to another character to explain the Holocaust experience to the inquisitive child. Here, it is the grandmother who discloses to Miki that her mother survived only because she worked for high-ranking Nazi officials. She obtained that position because of her ability to give those "pigs" the feeling that it was a princess scrubbing and cleaning their homes.¹⁸

The characteristic over protectiveness, which typifies many survivor-child bonds, resurfaces here writ large. For this reason, Miki is not allowed to explore her environment and do things like other children. In grade one, her mother keeps her busy for hours to prevent her friends from coming over to play. At her mother's behest, Miki would often stay at home reading library books borrowed by her mother, practise classical pieces on the piano or participate in invented competitions with singers Roger Whittaker and Jim Reeves, while the other girls would play with dolls or at the playground. Not surprisingly, Miki grows up with a sense of loneliness and distance from her classmates. She remembers how in school

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parties none of the boys would ask her to dance. Instead, they would pass her by and mock her with derogatory exchanges.

The mother's overreaction to particular situations and overall distrust of the world is most obtrusive when Miki is struck ill with a simple cold. A cavalcade of doctors is called up from the long list in Mrs. Stav's phone book and is heralded into the room only to be disbelieved by the worrying mother. One specific incident stands out. It concerns the purchase of a bicycle for the five-year old Miki, who sweeps away her mother's fierce objections when she promises to ride it only in the corridor linking the lounge to the other room in the house. When an accident ensues, the frightened girl dares not cry, knowing the bruise would spark hysteria in her mother. At one point, Miki notes that she was always petrified about catching a cold or admitting she has been injured.

Furthermore, on many occasions, the mother holds on so tightly, terrified that Miki would get hurt, that her desire to guarantee her daughter's safety is disquietingly debilitating. When Miki receives a new car, her mother tries to persuade her to allow her father to drive it. When they cross the road the mother insists on holding the adult Miki's hand even when the light is green. A little later, a defining moment occurs in the enmeshed relationship between the two. Gone for two days, Miki returns to her apartment to find that the police have been called to investigate her disappearance. At the same time, her mother is treated for a panic attack and is subdued with medication. We also learn that the mother rarely sleeps—Miki sees her stretched out on the couch in the lounge and says, "I tried to think when I did see her sleep, but I couldn't remember".¹⁹ Earlier, Miki recalls that her grandmother repeatedly warned her tormented daughter that she if did not learn to sleep a few hours a night she would lose her link to normality.

Knowing the mother's tendency to be overly stressed, both Miki and her father refrain from expressing any anger. They are always careful not to let her see or hear anything that will stain the problem-free environment she envisages and encourages. It is pointed out that in addition to no one being allowed to scream in the house, any usual, normal manifestation of emotional difficulties such as crying stopped when Miki reached six. One of Miki's friends tells her, "You always look so sensitive, what can I say, so sensitive that if somebody will say anything you'll immediately burst out crying".²⁰ It is noteworthy that the motif of "not crying" runs throughout the novel. This absence of normal emoting sheds light on the excruciatingly sensitive issue of children of survivors mastering their feelings and inhibiting their natural impulses, aware of the effect their conduct may have on their high-strung parents. This is given further prominence most revealingly in one central vignette. This takes place after Miki's parents present her with a new car following an accident. She aches to cry, but

...the tears did not break the barrier of the throat and I could not cry... Mrs. Stav looked sideways because she saw me excited, very excited. She cried and I hugged her very strongly and told her that it's good to cry, it's important to cry, that it helps when you cry, that it's a shame we don't cry more often, that we have to cry sometimes because we can't hold our entire life in our throat.²¹

For the most part, the mother's stamp has left disturbing footprints on Miki's inner self and outlook on life. She has adopted some of her mother's peculiar habits. For example, as a child Miki and her brother were forbidden to swim in the ocean, harangued by their mother that seawater contained so many bacteria not even laundry soap could wash it out. Since then,

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Miki carries a dislike for the sea, preferring, on one hot summer day, to stay in the air-conditioned hotel at the beach while her boyfriend Danny wandered along the seaside.

It is thus no surprise that Miki displays acute bitterness towards her mother. While she identifies with the trauma she suffered, she is repelled by the sadness and vulnerability her mother engendered in her. "I thought you changed," one of her potential boyfriends tells her, "that you are not afraid of your own shadow, that you learned to stand on two legs and not on your knees, but it seems I was wrong".²² Towards the end, Uri Rozes, a colleague in love with Miki (he asks her hand in marriage) scolds her for her dependence on her mother, for her shunning of commitment, for her prevarications and for her sabotaging of potential situations of closeness:

Do you know why you get a cold when you have to fight for something? I will tell you why. Because they put it into your head that you have blue blood in your body. Well, I am telling you that you don't. I told you a long time ago that this is a lie that your mother put into your head and taught you that you are not allowed to get your hands dirty when there is trouble in the kingdom. That you always have to be restrained and polite in each and every situation.²³

Above all, the operative theme that informs the novel is Miki's gut-wrenching battle to avoid being engulfed by the sense of powerlessness and distrust transferred onto her. She craves to stop calculating her moves and repressing her desires in accordance with her mother's frustrating code of decorum. Towards the end, while sitting in a car with Yambi, a man she has recently met, who declines her offer to join the family at a restaurant, Miki yearns to let loose with her feelings. Silently accepting his decision, she seethes with anger at her emotional impotency:

I placed one leg over another and hated the royal upbringing I received from the day I was born. How many times had I told them that...I do not walk with royal flowers, and that their manners are doing away with friends, and that I want friends. But I am engraved with their stamp, a stamp that I cannot erase. A stamp that prevents me from asking him to join me, to laugh with me at this family function, maybe to tell him that I wanted him to call so much, that I am happy to see him. But the educational treatment of the Stav family triumphed.²⁴

Soon afterwards, Yambi visits Miki to explain his reluctance to continue with a romantic relationship. Hearing him say that she is not his kind of girl results in a biting self-diagnosis that conveys Miki's general malaise:

I am the type of Lichtenstein—locked in an institute of old people who suffer from a chronic disease—my disease will be defined as chronic fear...In Liechtenstein they will give me medication and help me get rid of reality...I will sell the flat and with the savings reserved for the Polish family that has to pick me up at the beginning of the Holocaust, I will be able to invite Margalit to Lichtenstein...The medical staff will convey our warm regards and will report on Miki's progress...Mrs. Stav will not be happy with her daughter's progress. She invested all her life in that girl, and maybe she deserves this because she was too good—you are not allowed to be too good, because that is the thanks you receive in the end.²⁵

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The book culminates in the death of the mother. The death signals a chance for Miki to begin living a mentally sound life, to love and enjoy the fruits of her intimate relationship. Equally clear, however, is the reality that Miki will not be free from the symptoms of an oppressive upbringing, from the sequelae that were passed and overflowed on to her. The despair, the mistrust, and the obligation to keep her emotions in check are the central tenor of her life.

It is apparent, in the hospital, how testing this process of undoing this legacy will be. Seeing her dead mother, Miki is unable to erupt. She tries to scream but, “no voice came out—I continued to scream without a sound. I ran to Mr. Stav, who now stood behind me, I pulled his hand so he would return my voice...I looked at the blanket and continued to scream without a voice because I couldn’t be a hero anymore”.²⁶ As she walks out of the hospital, she imagines her mother warning her about getting her shoes dirty in the puddle, figuring that since she has not called in a long time something must be wrong.

¹ For an excellent discussion on the transfigurations in Hebrew literature in the 1980s and 1990s see: Yael S. Feldman, “Whose Story Is It, Anyway? Ideology and Psychology in the Representation of the Shoah in Israeli Literature”, 223-227, in Saul Friedlander (ed.) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Gershon Shaked, “Contemporary Israeli Literature and the Subject of Fiction: From Nationhood to the Self”, 95-114, in Emily Miller Budick, (ed.) *Ideology and Jewish Identity in Israeli and American Literature*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Avraham Balaban. *Gal Acher Basiporet Ha’ivrit: Siporet Ivrit Postmodernistit* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995); Ortzion Bartana. *Shmonim: Sifrut Yisre’elit ba’asor ha’hacharon* (Tel Aviv: Agudat Hasofrim Ha’ivrim be’Yisrael, 1993).

² David Gurevitch, “Chalomot memuchzarim: zramin chadashim besiporet Yisraelit achshavit,”. *Iton 77* (March/April 1992): 6-7

³ Gershon Shaked, *The New Tradition: Essays on Modern Hebrew Literature*. (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2006): 44.

⁴ Martin, S Bergman, and Milton E. Jucovy, (eds.) 1982, *Generations of the Holocaust*. (New York: Basic Books, 1982): 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-22.

⁷ Dina Wardi. *Nos’ei Hachotam: Dialogue im b’nei hador hasheni LaShoah*. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990).

⁸ Dina Wardi. *Memorial Candles*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1992): 27-47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹ Avner Holtzman, “The Holocaust in Hebrew Literature: Trends in Israeli Fiction in the 1980s,”. *Modern Hebrew Literature* 8-9 (1992): 24-25.

¹² Lily Perry Amitai. *Golem Be-ma’agal*. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1988). All translations are mine.

¹³ Dan Miron, “Mavo,” in Lily Perry *Golem Be-ma’agal*. (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2007).

¹⁴ Moti Regev, “Ma’agal shaket,” *Davar* (22 May, 1987): 19

¹⁵ Perry Amitai, *Golem Be-ma’agal*. 69, 80.

¹⁶ Wardi, *Memorial Candles*, 31-32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²² *Ibid.*, 158.

²³ *Ibid.*, 169.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁵ Ibid., 159.

²⁶ Ibid., 174-175.

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