

## Who Gave You a Language, Who Told You: "Speak Now"?\*

"*Im Navo Al Haemet*":<sup>1</sup> Towards an Authentic Discourse<sup>2</sup>

Shimon Adaf

I.

About a year ago, an editor from one of the publishing houses called me to try to interest me in writing for an anthology on "Mizrahi identity" that he was working on. He wondered whether I had an article or a piece of prose or poetry that I could contribute. I replied in the negative. The piece I was working on in those days was unrelated to the topic. But still, he persisted. I told him that I had been planning for a long time to interview my mother about her childhood in Morocco and that I could do that in the near future.

I took my tape recorder and drove to Sderot. My mother and I sat on the porch, in the creeping cool October air, at the elusive end of the holidays. My mother spoke in her own way, answering her own questions, reconstructing in perfect order the dates and places, the journey and the experiences, fragments of which had been engrained in my memory since childhood. I had not liked listening to my parents' stories then, and evaded them every time they began telling them. My brother and sisters had acted similarly. She concluded the chapter on her family's arrival to the transit camp in Sderot, when she was twelve, with the story about a snake biting her, one of those snakes who used

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<sup>1</sup> The correct Hebrew expression is "*im lehodot al haemet*" (if you admit the truth). "*Im navo al haemet*" is a distorted version of this expression, used by the author's mother.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on a lecture presented at the Shenkar Conference on the Periphery and the Center, March 2006.

the tin shacks as a hatchery, and how she almost lost her life one summer evening. Appalled, I asked, "How did you agree to that? How could you go on living like that?" After a moment of silence, she answered my question directly, for the first time since the conversation had begun. "*Im navo al haemet*," she said, "I was a child and didn't really know. That was the policy, we hadn't found paradise. But mother and father—for them it was hard."

At my apartment, as I listened to the recorded conversation and transcribed it, I constantly returned to this part. Something about it troubled me, not the content of the answer, not the conciliatory, accepting tone, with which I was already familiar, but rather the formulation. I would rewind the tape to the point where my question ended, press the PLAY button and listen: first to the white noise that emanated from motion of the reels, the silence out of which the answer was born, next to the sound of the lips separating before the words emerged, and then finally to the phrase "*Im navo al haemet...*". I understood its meaning, but what was this linguistic pattern? Why did it not permeate my own lips? Why have I never written it? Who gave me a language, who told me "speak now"?

II.

I wrote my first poems when I was sixteen. I had written even before that. In fact, I have been writing ever since the day I learned to read. About four years passed from the time I wrote my first poems to the time I dared to direct a critical gaze at them. The first poems I wrote were innocent and unrelated to my life. They articulated vague desires in a language that was even more misty and

blurred. The vocabulary and the world of images I used were all drawn from the fantasy and science fiction literature I read throughout my adolescence: noble metals and sophisticated buildings made of glass and basalt, human organs exchanged for plastic and electricity, vibrating fields of light, heavy spacecraft silently hovering in the black space, raging oceans, purple, split skies, drowning girls. Yet, not a word of the geographic and emotional wilderness in which I matured permeated them. Nothing of my parents' language—entangled in its own rhythms, beating to a different grammar—was adopted. Even worse—and I'm not complaining, G-d forbid, only diagnosing a personal failure—in those years of writing I read Hebrew poetry, Zach and Amichai, Ravikovitch and Pagis, Wallach and many others, but I never assumed I had a right to talk about my life the way they talked about theirs. Out of habit, out of pure inflexibility, I found my life unworthy, made of materials unfit for poetry.

Only at the age of twenty, after writing a poem that dealt with Sderot, could I ask the fundamental question: "So why write at all?," and continue to wonder: "If we write, what makes certain materials more suitable for art?" It's difficult for me to say that I have good, complete answers to these questions. I can only testify from my experience. By observing what is close to me, I gain the power to answer.

For me, and for those of my generation who, like me, grew up in Sderot, creativity was never a place of refuge. It was a dangerous and difficult necessity. All of our parents—those of Kobi Oz, of the members of *Knessiat Hasechel* (Church of Reason), of the members of the band I played in, of filmmakers who worked during that period—they all came from North Africa in

their childhood or adolescence. With the well honed instinct of children and youth, they very quickly understood what they were facing. When they started their own families, they preserved the traditional boundaries of their parents' homes, but they sought to place us, their children, beyond those boundaries. It was as if they were saying, "there's no longer any remedy for us, but you, go, the new world awaits you."

But they were wrong. There was a world outside, but its face was different. It was proud, confident. It stood out in the gait of the children of the many kibbutzim that surrounded Sderot, in whose parents' factories our parents found their livelihoods. It emerged from the television, in a thousand voices, and said, you can come to me, but you will need to change. That was where the split was marked. We were in the middle, each of our arms tied to a horse that was galloping in a different direction—our parents and the world—and each of us understood in his own way that if he didn't hurry and determine his place, find the steel garment tailored to his measurements, sewn from conflicting elements, he was liable to be torn to pieces.

III.

Culture is an arena in which ideas and concepts battle for centrality and legitimacy. Art is the space in which they are born, and only there is synthesis possible. Culture is a system of decision-making, of replication and assimilation. But the real tools of change are forged in the creative depths. When I speak of the arts in an Israeli context, I think of two central branches: literature and music. Conceptual art is too indifferent and confined in a disconnected and

diverse interpretative space. Filmmaking is almost irrelevant; it is depleted and helpless in the face of reality. Television is too industrial, overly inclined towards uncommitted entertainment. Therefore, what we are left with are the written language and the sung language.

Luckily for most of my generation in Sderot, music, in principle, is a more immediate creative branch than literature. Air, not paper, is its medium of transmission. Therefore, the private synthesis they each worked on—the joining of the music they heard at home and the music that came from the world on tapes, that burst forth from radios, from Channel One's music programs, that was impressed on vinyl records the parents of the kibbutz youth brought back with them from their journeys abroad—was easily accepted, penetrating, during the nineties, into the aorta of Israeli culture, and was recognized as one of its most significant characteristics. They spoke then of the color, of the smells, of the organic interweaving, of the past, of the future, of authenticity. Of almost everything that was necessary to overturn the cultural agenda.

Literature was less lucky. And here too, one must distinguish between poetry and prose. Of the two, poetry, because it is an independent linguistic organism for which the need to represent is not essential, is a more fluid and free domain of creativity, open to experiment, to idiosyncratic formulations and, in any case, it is aimed at a handful of people. The same does not hold true for prose writing, which is obligated to illustrate the world and the society in which it operates.

In order to clarify, I would like to briefly address the theory of cultural intersections, of acceptance and rejection. The concepts customarily used in

this context include "Otherness," "racism," "cultural chauvinism." I am not fond of these words. They are too loud, threadbare from years of overuse. I prefer to speak of social and cultural exclusion and its connections to models of reception.

When two cultures meet, generally speaking, two kinds of exclusion are created. The first is an exclusion of those who are different. It is a blunt, primitive, stage of meeting: the dominant cultural system marks those who are different and tells them: you will not pass, you will not enter my gates as long as you are like that, and issues a set of commands and guidelines: do not listen to that kind of music, do not write about that world. And it is specifically this harshness that leads the way to change. First, because artists seek to act in opposition to what they are commanded to do, and second, because the debate is open and superficial. This model of reception is easy to overturn.

The second form of exclusion, the exclusion of the equal, is more gentle and concealed. The artist from the cultural periphery and his works are accepted as long as he understands the rules, meaning, as long as the signification system of his works is clear. He writes about typical subjects in a language that constantly points to its cultural sources, which are distinguished from the sources of the dominant culture. That is, it is accepted at the center, providing it represents the periphery and carries its message. If he seeks to evade the definitions, to create a work that blurs the distinctions between center and periphery and create something whose power is equal to that of a central work, a different compound of the elements based on a new hierarchy—he is walking on thin ice. No one will publicly condemn his kind of creativity. The

patterns of reception will rebel on their own. He will discover that he has no audience, that both sides want to expel him. Contemporary Hebrew literature is at this stage.

A brief examination of the history the reception of Mizrahi artists—and Mizrahi artists are currently the prototype of the periphery, and will be until they are replaced by others, the second generation of the Russian or Ethiopian immigration—reveals that the type of prose writings created in the periphery over the past three decades fits this definition, from Eli Amir and Sami Michael to Dorit Rabinan. These are works of literature that depict the cultural, Mizrahi, periphery with tools that are perceived as its natural literary tools, in language that is perceived as authentic language. Hardly any great literary works that seek to fuse literary models and languages, to wreak havoc on them, have been written.

Two books published in 2006 demonstrate this point, rejection by the sophisticated system, the second type of exclusion: *Shum Gamadim Lo Yavo'u* (No Gnomes will Appear) by Sara Shilo and *Mah Yesh Lakh, Ester?* (Hidden Face of Esther) by Shva Salhoov, which I edited.

Shilo's novel deals with the life of the Dadon family in an obscure northern development town in the nineteen eighties and presents monologues of five members of the family. The novel itself confirms all the stereotypes relating to distressed social classes and the mentality of the Moroccan immigrants. The parents' generation is inarticulate to the point of ridiculousness, and the children's generation is no less inarticulate and lacks the consciousness that develops, of necessity, in all second-generation children. In fact, they speak

a broken Hebrew with nauseating consistency. Their associative world is meager and unimaginative, their images flat, their lives empty. Immediately upon its release, this work was deemed an important book by leading critics. It won prizes and was lovingly accepted by readers, especially those who want to see themselves as belonging to the well educated stratum of Israeli society.

Shva Salhoov's novel, in contrast, tells the story of Esther Rubin, daughter of Libyan immigrants, who is caught between two worlds, between the slow rhythms of her parents' home, their deep traditionalism, the scents of childhood and desires of adolescence, on the one hand, and urban Israel, Tel-Aviv University, the Department of Jewish Philosophy, where the students of the greatest modern thinkers of Judaism, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem, teach, on the other. In Esther's life, as in the life of Anna Brauer, the poet whose work she is researching, there is no place for reconciliation and union. The experience of foreignness and remoteness are the essence of her existence, but the rich language, which is amazing in its literal inventions, its poetic nature, is the tool with which to create the much-needed synthesis. This is the way, Salhoov argues, the establishment of a private language, with a whole and distinct grammar, completely correct, not broken, that has no need for a stereotypical reserve of images and colors, a language that overlaps with standard, normative Hebrew, but is not identical to it. Her book did not receive the critical attention it deserved, and disappeared from the eyes of the reading audience.

*Im navo al haemet*, at the moment, in Israeli literature, there is nothing more threatening than the permeating, the synthesis, the positioning of a

different act of interpolation, no less complete, which does not require the conceptual system of the center to confirm it as a peripheral phenomenon. The mixture of languages that says: see, this is my language, and it is different, it is no better or worse than your language. It simply allows itself to dictate its own rules.