

## ETGAR KERET ON LYING: THREE EXAMPLES

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In the story "Yamim Kmo Hayom" (Days Like Today), from Keret's first book, *Tzinorot (Pipelines)*, published 23 years ago, the squad commander tortures Yoav, the new soldier, by lying:

'So, what are you saying? That I'm a liar?'

'He had a malicious smile on his face, and both him and Yoav knew he was lying [...] and both of them knew that there is nothing Yoav can do about it, and he knew it even better than Yoav did.'<sup>1</sup>

Lying is the worst form of abuse for the young soldier, who explicitly declares that the things he hated most were "thieves and more than that – liars."<sup>2</sup> Rather than the military combatant he was supposed to be training for, Yoav perceives himself as a champion of justice. However, he has no choice but to be part of the IDF reality, in which "everyone is eating shit."<sup>3</sup> Yoav is caught in between the rock that is what is right in the real world and the hard place of what is right in the IDF world, where all the rules are twisted.

In Yoav's case, coping with the lie is a dilemma of a person on the border between childhood and adulthood. The young soldier has to decide whether to react

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<sup>1</sup>"Yamim Kmo Hayom", *Tzinorot*, Am Oved, 1992. Pp. 134-136. All quotes from the story were translated here by the author- D.S.S.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

again as he did "once, when he was in the Scouts,"<sup>4</sup> or as an adult, as is expected of him in the current situation. Yoav reacts with an uncontrolled, but hidden, sobbing, while he pays the price for calling the squad commander out on his lie. The lie is something wrong, cruel and immoral but the accepted social codes direct Yoav to accept it, to make peace with it, and basically to grow up: "Yoav kept repeating in his head that this is the IDF, and everyone eats shit here, he went on and reminded himself time and time again that what he was doing was exactly what's right."<sup>5</sup>

The squad commander's habitual, petty, and mostly-obvious lying is used as a "reality-check" that allows Yoav to recognize his place and act according to the situation. Or not. The wonderful ending of this story manages to hold at one and the same time the option of revenge and that of restraint, while insinuating both.

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Unlike Yoav, Robbie from "Lieland" (Leiland)<sup>6</sup> does not "eat shit." His lies have led him, ever since he was 7 years old and up to his 30s, to eating ice cream while avoiding any and all consequences. He does not use his lies to torture others nor does he torture himself over them. He lies easily to benefit himself, always using the same technique: "He made up these lies in a flash, never thinking he'd have to cross paths with them again."<sup>7</sup> Telling lies, before the discovery of Lieland, keeps Robbie in the naïve, forgetful and embracing world of childhood.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>6</sup> Etgar Keret. *Pit'om Dfika Badelet* (Or-Yehudah: Zmorah Bitan, 2010), 11-18; English translation in *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*. Trans. Miriam Shlesinger, Sondra Silverston, and Nathan Englander (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 9-19.

<sup>7</sup> *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*. 10.

Robbie dreams "a short, fuzzy dream about his dead mother."<sup>8</sup> The dream forces him to act in the real world. He wakes up at 5 AM and drives all the way to his childhood home to discover Lieland:

'Here' was a different place, but a familiar one too. [...] Stark white, no walls, no floor, no ceiling, no sunshine. Just whiteness and a gumball machine.<sup>9</sup>

This "infinite white surface" only seems empty. In fact, it contains all of Robbie's oral-history.

The idea of a closed and artificial space where one faces his or her own imagined creation had visual representations appeared on the screen as well: The late 1980s *Star-Trek: The Next Generation* introduced the Holodeck, a virtual space in which one loads different reality-programs (even though it was a black space with green coordinates rather than white). Another well-known example is the 1999 blockbuster *The Matrix*, in which the loading program is a white space called "the Construct," which holds everything and nothing at the same time. Lieland of course, is a much simpler space from the Holodeck or the Construct; its internal logic is not fully clarified, and its borders and influences are not thoroughly examined, mostly due to genre limitation (it is a short story and not part of an epic TV series or part of a philosophical film trilogy – but perhaps one day).

In the films and TV-show, as well as for Yoav, the young soldier, the main issue is controlling the lie or the narrative, and the protagonist's ability to draw the line between reality and virtual reality. On a similar note, Robbie's insight about the way people do not believe "positive lies" resembles the premise of *The Matrix*, in which the imprisoned human minds naturally rebelled against the perfect and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 13.

harmonized virtual reality, while willingly accepting the mimicry of the world as was known, and as we know it, filled with suffering, tensions and anxieties.

In the dream about his dead mother, Robbie has no control, nor does he have control over the lies in Lieland (therefore being "kicked in the shins"<sup>10</sup> and robbed by the redheaded boy). However, from the moment he discovers the mechanism, he gains control in both worlds: He can keep lying in the real world without suffering any consequences – Lieland will hold it all, ensuring that the lies will neither threaten nor undermine the real world. A perfect childish escapism. In Lieland, the quantity and nature of the lies change: Robbie actually takes better care of his lies, giving them a better life in Lieland. He is still a child in the real world (lying stupid lies and getting away with them), but becomes the good and merciful god (or father) in Lieland.

Robbie allegedly "deals with his lies," but in fact all of his lies, even those "Lies without arms, lies that were ill,"<sup>11</sup> are not mad at Robbie for making them what they are, they are o.k. with it. The redheaded kid laughs, hits and runs, Igor thanks Robbie for the crippled dog he invented for him, and even the beaten niece is not mad at Robbie for her tragic destiny and helps him and Natasha.

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In "Fat Cats,"<sup>12</sup> a short segment first published in 2010 and later in the memoir *The Seven Good Years*, Keret is the father of 4 year-old Lev, and has to deal with severe accusations as a parent. The kindergarten teacher accuses Lev of manipulating the school cook and telling lies:

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Etagr Keret. "Fat Cats." <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/24058/fat-cats>. Accessed November 26, 2017; *The Seven Good Years: A Memoir*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2015. Translated by Sondra Silverston. Pp. 96-100.

'little Lev had forged a secret pact with the school cook, that she was bringing him chocolate on a regular basis, even though the board of education had strictly prohibited children from eating sweets on school grounds.'

Lev explains to his puzzled father why he is getting a lot of chocolate, but never gives the other kids in his class:

'I always explain to them that I can't give them any, because kids aren't allowed to eat sweets in school.'

'But if kids aren't allowed to eat sweets in school, why do you think you can?' [asks the narrator]

'Because I'm not a kid,' Lev smiled a pudgy, sneaky smile. 'I'm a cat.'

'You're what?'

'Meow,' Lev answered in a soft, purry voice. 'Meow, meow, meow.'

The next morning, while reading the paper, in particular reports regarding former Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert's trial as well as the sentencing of the former Finance Minister, Avraham Hirshson, to life in prison, the narrator realizes something:

Those men, just like my son, cheat and steal and lie only because they are sure they are cats. And as adorable, furry, cream-loving creatures, they don't have to abide by the same rules and laws all those sweaty two-legged creatures around them have to obey.

Just as Natasha talks to Robbie in "Lieland" "in a gentle, almost therapeutic voice,"<sup>13</sup> and thinks that the humor of this "nutcase" and "oddball" is some form of joke, the narrator in "Fat Cat" is using the same gentle and therapeutic way to look at Olmert and Hirshson. By ascribing the kid's lie to the public figures who transgressed, a lie

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<sup>13</sup> *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*. 22.

that was sweet, harmless, and irresistible, Keret transformed a very personal family story into a cynical and sad one, as it reflects not only the parallelization of the simple man facing a public figure that bluntly lies, but also the crazy Israeli atmosphere that enables those lies to sound reasonable and even legitimate. As stated by Keret in interviews regarding his latest book (*The Seven Good Years*), it is the first book in which the child's point of view – a perspective which was considered to be indicative of Keret's prose style – is no longer present. Instead we are offered the point of view of an adult and a parent.

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When comparing these three lies, a common thread is found: even if they evoke discomfort on various plains, they nevertheless are all accepted. They do not undermine reality; Yoav probably "swallowed" his squad commander's lies. Robbie and Natasha probably made together some "happy lie, full of light, flowers, and sunshine [...] maybe even a baby or two."<sup>14</sup> And also, "the pathological-Israeli combination of violence and normality," as the world of *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door* is described by Nissim Kalderon<sup>15</sup>, will remain a good platform for corruption and lies of public figures.

In a way, Lieland may offer some twisted comfort to all of the truth-loving people in this world: it conveys the idea that even if in the real world lies are everywhere, and can "pass" as truth, lies do not disappear. They are all waiting for us in some other space to hit us "in the shins," and knock us "down on our knees."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Nissim Kalderon, "A New Challenge in writhing" (in Hebrew), <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3890014,00.html> Accessed November 26 2017.

<sup>16</sup> *Suddenly, A Knock on the Door*. 14.