

**STAM:**

***THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BANALITY, OR  
ON THE NATURE OF ETGAR KERET'S HUMOR***

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Etgar Keret's writing, like all modernist art, possesses a paradoxical feature: while being democratic and anti-canonic, it constitutes a new hegemonic canon; while revolutionary and breaking up with the existent order, it looks for new ways of returning to it. This problem can be discussed in any poetical, rhetorical, or hermeneutical plane, and here I will focus on the plane of humor and laughter. Researchers who wrote about Keret's humor, such as Adia Mendelson-Maoz, Liza Chudnovsky, and Galia Hirsh,<sup>1</sup> have focused mostly on irony, parody, and grotesque, as they are characteristic of the contemporary literature. However, the laughter that is inherent in Etgar Keret's discourse, demonstratively differs from the types of laughter and humor that are characteristic of the modern Hebrew literature. Dan Miron, Yehuda Friedlander, Esther Fuchs, Gidi Nevo<sup>2</sup> and others have convincingly shown

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<sup>1</sup> Adia Mendelson-Maoz. "Situatzyot Kitzoniyot – Zva'atuyot Vegroteskiyut Bitziratam shel Castel-Bloom Vekeret" (Extreme Situations – The Horrendous and the Grotesque in the Works of Castel-Bloom and Keret). *Dapim Lemehkar Besifrut* 11 (1998), 269-295. Liza Chudnovsky. "Ha'im Kayamim Horim Shhorim?" (Do black holes exist?), *Iton* 77 222-223 (1998), 24-29. Galia Hirsh. "Sipur al Nahag Otobus Sheratza Lihiyot Elohim" (A story about the bus driver who wanted to be God), *Mar'a* 5 (2010), 44-61.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000). Yehuda Friedlander, *Prakim basatira haivrit*, vol. 1-4 (Chapters in the Hebrew Satire) (Tel-Aviv: Papyrus, Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1979-1994). Esther Fuchs, *Omanut Hahitamemut: Al Haironiya shel S. Y. Agnon* (The Art of Pretense: On the Irony of S. Y. Agnon) (Tel-Aviv: Katz Institute, 1985). Gidi Nevo, *Moshav Leitsim: Haretorika*

that our recent “moshav leitsim” is dominated by satire and irony. On the other hand, Alter Druyanov, Dov Sadan, Ruth Wisse, Avner Ziv<sup>3</sup> and many other researchers of Jewish humor have made huge efforts to demonstrate that the forms of ancient scholastic wit are alive in the modern folk and literal culture. And at last, the numerous followers of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival have reanimated the ostensibly Medieval-Renaissance, but in fact social-democratic and social-revolutionary popular and populist conceptions of transgressive and subversive laughter, the model of which is travesty.

The writing of Keret definitely revises all these kinds of laughter and humor. Despite his inclination to dramatic genres and comics, Keret has never been inspired by the comic and comedy. In spite of his overtly existential attitude, his laughter can be easily distinguished from the absurd of Hanokh Levin’s type. When the Israeli humor has been distinguished from the traditional exilic Jewish humor, it has become clear that it lacks any unique flavor relatively to other national forms of popular humor. However, Keret’s humor is easily recognizable, though refusing to submit to Mendele’s, Sholom Aleichem’s or Agnon’s canons, too. My purpose here is to discern the most expressed characteristic of Keret’s form of laughter. I will argue that its kernel is what will be called here the explosion of the banal. In addition, I will show that in Keret’s imagination banality serves as one of the two metaphorically converging realities, thus producing the fear of and laughter at the possibility of both sticking in the banal and losing it.

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*shel Hasatira Haivrit* (Session of Jests: The Rhetoric of the Hebrew Satire) (Or Yehuda, Beer Sheva: Dvir, Heksherim, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Alter Avraham Druyanov, *Sefer Habdikha Vehakhidud* (The Book of Joke and Wit) (Frankfurt am Main: Omanut, 1922). Dov Sadan, *Kearat Tsimukim* (A bowl of raisins) (Tel-Aviv: Newman, 1950). Ruth Wisse, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). Avner Ziv (Ed.), *Jewish Humor* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

The prevalent scholarly opinion is not different from the basic intuition concerning the essence of Jewish humor starting from Talmud to Sholem-Aleichem: laughter is a way to cope with the traumatic historical memory, the memory of *hurban*, and with the existential anxiety that stems from it—the anxiety regarding a new *hurban* that threatens to return and that is actually happening anew every moment. Scholastic wit and joke are not unique to our letters, and neither are satire and parody, mock and jeer. Therefore, attempting to characterize the Jewish humor, the research focuses on trauma and grotesque, on mix of smile and tear, the carnivalesque violence and hybridization mechanisms.<sup>4</sup> Whether we accept Freud's conception about the mechanism of replacement at the basis of the joke<sup>5</sup> or not, we cannot doubt the existence of a psycho-cultural, mental complex at the core of the Jewish joke. Indeed, the Jews produce light humor as well, which is witnessed by many folklore and pseudo-folklore traditions, such as *badchanim*, Purim tractates, *sifrey hakundas*, picaresque folk stories, Hassidic stories and Haskala feuilletons. But even these types of humorous texts are mostly based on the Scriptures, exegetical and halachic literature, moral and hagiographic books.<sup>6</sup> In both “folklore and anti-folklore,” in Dan Miron's terms,<sup>7</sup> in mythopoetic and iconoclastic traditions, laughter marks the vector of change and invention (even if it is a traumatic reinvention of pain); it denotes a rise above the visible reality, a breach in the givenness (even if it means transgression).

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<sup>4</sup> See Eliezer Diamond, “But Is It Funny? Identifying Humor, Satire, and Parody in Rabbinic Literature.” In *Jews and Humor*. L. J. Greenspoon (Ed.). (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011), 33-54; Daniel Boyarin, “Patron Saint of the Incongruous: Rabbi Me'ir, the Talmud, and Menippean Satire.” *Critical Inquiry* 35:3 (2009), 523-551.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. J. Strachey. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> David Brodsky. “Why Did the Widow Have a Goat in Her Bed? Jewish Humor and Its Roots in the Talmud and Midrash.” In, *Jews and Humor*, 13-32.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Miron. *The Image of the Shtetl*, 49-80.

The Anthology of Jewish humor by Efraim Davidson opens with what the anthologist sees as the first Jewish joke—Cain’s answer to God after the murder of Abel: “Am I my brother's keeper?” (“Hashomer achi anochi?”).<sup>8</sup> The essence of these words is a struggle between oblivion and memory, an attempt to deny the change and transgression, reduction of the new to the given: indeed, my brother is absent, but it does not matter, because I am not responsible for him. What we find here is not just denial of responsibility, but also replacement of a norm as a definition of something that ought to be (ethics) by a norm as a definition of something that is. While it is unclear yet, whether it is permitted or forbidden to kill brothers, the fact that I am not my brother's keeper is most evident and can be taken for granted. This normalization of deviation and of creation of the new embodies what we know as banality, and thus the first Jewish joke, be it the joke of the murderer or about him, is connected to banality, rather than to trauma, carnival or wit. Moreover, it looks like a deletion of the traumatic trace of the change in the memory, like a reversion of the irreversible.

This is exactly the type of humor we find in Keret’s writing. Milan Kundera suggested one of the most successful and famous definitions of Modernity—the unbearable lightness of being.<sup>9</sup> The unbearable lightness is the essential drama of the human; it is the matrix, the context, in which a myth becomes kitsch, a difference becomes a repetition. It is, in the terms of Jacques Lacan, the Real behind any

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<sup>8</sup> Efraim Davidson. *Shok Pinu* (Our Laughter). (Holon: Biblus, 1972). On humor in the Bible see: Joseph Chotzner, *Hebrew Humour and Other Essays* (London: Luzac & co., 1905); Jehuda Radday and Atalya Brenner, *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: The Elmond Press, 1990); Charles David Isbell, “Humor in the Bible.” In *Jews and Humor*, 1-12; Hershey Friedman and Linda Weiser Friedman, *God Laughed: Sources of Jewish Humor* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 87ff.

<sup>9</sup> Milan Kundera. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper, 2008 [1984]).

symbolic and imaginary order, the really unbearable desert of the Real.<sup>10</sup> But what happens when the desert of lightness arouses, at first, an utter bewilderment—“It cannot be”, and then—the feeling of infinite possibilities: “Everything can be”? What if the emptiness of the banality is actually a singularity, the Big Bang of meaning, and everything that was forbidden or impossible now finds its way to being? This event, this momentary explosion is what we know as humor and what we experience as laughter. Freud predicted this postmodern “sense of humor” in his theory of the joke, but Kundera did not notice this and remained in the too serious totality of the Nietzschean eternal return. Etgar Keret’s poetical revolution lies in the inversion of this: since nothing returns, everything can be, and the desert flourishes at once, causing us to laugh and resent like Jonah the Prophet in the shadow of the Kikayon. Nothing returns and thus nothing is really banal, and therefore everything is really new, as in the act of creation.

This explosion of banality appears as the final and highest level of the complex threefold configuration of humor, which can be presented as parallel to the three modalities of language: existing, obligatory, and possible.<sup>11</sup> The inversion in the first one—in what is—produces the laughter of the Rabelais type, or more precisely, of the Bakhtin type, the carnivalesque laughter. The inversion in the second modality, in what ought to be, produces the laughter of bewilderment, signaling the refusal to reconcile with the given and the acceptance of the task of creating the culture, and of responsibility for history. However, both the first and second modalities are confined by the principle of return of or reduction to the known, expected, predictable. Only

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Lacan. *R.S.I. Séminaire 1974—1975* (Paris: A.L.I., 2002). Translated into English by Cormac Gallagher: [https://vk.com/doc44890084\\_197467029?hash=71d3088bb37caf2e7f&dl=f550ce1a42df1eed40](https://vk.com/doc44890084_197467029?hash=71d3088bb37caf2e7f&dl=f550ce1a42df1eed40). Accessed April 25, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> The following collection can serve as a handbook on the subject: Michael J. Loux (Ed.), *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979).

the third modality—the pure potentiality, unrealized (and sometimes unrealizable) possibility—enables the absolute freedom from the givenness, predictability, banality. The theory of chaos says that most systems in natural and cultural life appear to be really unpredictable, random, nonlinear. The systematic application of the chaos theory to literature discovers that chaos is not only a metaphor or a theme, but first and foremost a mode of a narrative personality's emergence.<sup>12</sup> Laughter within a narrative, which balances on the border between natural and cultural, inherits the chaos of both. And this is the key to understanding Keret's humor: the explosion of banality creates the chaotic cloud of inexhaustible possibilities.

Let us consider several examples. Udi, the hero of "Hor Bakir" ("Hole in the Wall") realizes at the end that his angel friend "wasn't even an angel, just a liar with wings."<sup>13</sup> This phrase in English translation lacks one extremely important element that is in the Hebrew original—the word "stam": "stam ish shakran im knafa'im."<sup>14</sup> Another missing but very significant element is the word "ish" ("a man"). Without "stam," the phrase only produces absurd or fantasy poetics: "ish im knafaim" ("a man with wings"). But with "stam," it turns into humorous one. This is the humor of the unbearable lightness of banality, especially if we are taking into account the fact that a moment before Udi just killed his friend: "Udi was just fooling around. He didn't really mean to hurt the angel, just to make him fly a little, for laughs."<sup>15</sup> In Hebrew, it sounds even better: "bishvil haketa." While "for laughs" still includes a hint at the real human behavioral (laughter), "haketa" lacks any. It is purely banal, indifferent, unhuman, beyond good and evil. In this very apogee of the pure banality, humor

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<sup>12</sup> Roman Katsman. *Poetics of Becoming: Dynamic Processes of Mythopoesis in Modern and Postmodern Hebrew and Slavic Literature*. Heidelberg Publications in Slavistics (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), 99-152.

<sup>13</sup> Etgar Keret. *Missing Kissinger*. Trans. Miriam Shlesinger. (London: Vintage Books, 2008), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Etgar Keret. *Ga'agu'ay Lekissinger*. (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1994), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Etgar Keret, *Missing Kissinger*, 31.

emerges—not only as a grotesque unity of the high (angel) and the low (“stam ish shakran”), but also as a bewilderment, confusion in the face of the impossible givenness (the lightness of murder), and the emergence of a pure, that is, an unrealizable, infinite possibility: a man is possibly an angel, but an angel is possibly a liar, and is thus a man, etc.

While “Hor Bakir” concludes with the banality of murder, the story “Na'ala'im” (“Shoes”) ends in the banality of redemption. A boy who was told that German goods were made of the bones of the Holocaust victims receives a pair of Adidas sneakers as a gift. He tries to hint to his mother about Germany and his grandpa who died in the Holocaust, but “Mom was clueless. [...] And for her, shoes were just shoes.”<sup>16</sup> In Hebrew we find here the same keyword “stam”: “bishvila hana'ala'im hem stam na'ala'im.”<sup>17</sup> From the viewpoint of the boy, his mom is enchained by the banality of ignorance. The myth of metamorphosis, which he learned and adopted, blew up the banality of his being. We laugh, or at least grin, when we observe this childish radicalism, which splits reality and discovers a myth, symbol, meaning, memory, origin, and ethics—beyond the “stam,” in the imaginary depth below the surface, in the desert of reality. This is the humor of the pure possibilism.

And it becomes even more bold and pure when, at the end of the story, the boy creates a new dimension of banality. He goes to play soccer and forgets about Grandpa, forgets “not to kick with the tip of his shoes” in order not to “hurt Grandpa.” The forgetting is the beginning of the banality. After the game he remembered again,

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<sup>16</sup> Etgar Keret, *Missing Kissinger*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Etgar Keret, *Ga'agu'ay Lekissinger*, 89.

but the shoes were “so comfortable.”<sup>18</sup> This comfort is a sign of the victory of the banality. If it ended at this point, it would be only ironic and satiric. But then, the old banality explodes and gives birth to the new one—the boy starts talking to his Grandpa: “What a volley that was, eh?” I reminded Grandpa on our way home. [...] Grandpa didn’t say a thing, but from the lilt in my step I could tell he was happy too.”<sup>19</sup> It is the banality of the impossible—the unbearable lightness of metempsychosis and talking to the dead, the ordinariness of myth, legend, and fairytale—that makes us smile. The new infinite possibility has emerged here: the possibility to remember and play, to immortalize the past and to live out the moment. In the translation here, there is an element that lacks in Hebrew—the word “lilt”: “lefi hadricha yacholti lehargish shegam hu merutze.”<sup>20</sup> In the original, there is no “lilt” in the step, and “merutze” (satisfied), as well, is not exactly “happy.” The translator intuitively tried to fight the unbearable banality of the miracle and added emotional shifters, to raise a little the boy’s shoes above the surface of the footpath. However, this translator’s move is possibly not only over-interpretation, but also misinterpretation, because Keret’s thought moves here in the wake of Heidegger’s thought about shoes and footpath, where the walking is inherent in the land and world, and myth is inherent in the existence. Keret’s opposition of myth and play/walking is humorous (on the first two levels of laughter), but the discarding of this opposition is even more humorous, since it frees a chaotic cloud of unpredictable possibilities of authentic existence, and fills us with the joyful feeling of infinite power.

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<sup>18</sup> Etgar Keret, *Missing Kissinger*, 124.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.

<sup>20</sup> Etgar Keret, *Ga'agu'ay Lekissinger*, 89.



“Lahatut Kova” (“Hat Trick”) is another story about de-banalization and re-banalization of the reality in our time, which “isn’t the best time for rabbits, or for babies either.”<sup>21</sup> The children audience of the magician remains in its entropic indifference. To be more precise, the children do get excited, but not by the magic and new purely impossible possibility revealed in a miracle, but rather by the pure show, where new thrills are immediately reduced to the known experience, the invisible—to a pure visibility, the real—to simulacrum, a pure imagination. The only one who transcends beyond the banal, the givenness, the visibility is the magician himself. The real chaos that is revealed to him from his sham props hurts him badly. However, the tragic end is softened by the self-irony and humor that consists in the magician’s attempt at the re-banalization of the real with its horrors and fears by means of minimalizing litotes: “like they’re clues,” “like someone was trying to tell me something,” “this isn’t the best time,” “isn’t really the right time.” In Hebrew, Keret uses the emblematic words of banality and reduction of presence and responsibility of the subject: “ke’ilu,” “lo mamash,” “lo hachi.”<sup>22</sup> This is not typical black humor, but rather a complex configuration of transitions between all three modalities of humor: carnivalesque reversion of what is, tragic bewilderment in the face of what ought to be (but isn’t) in the ethical sense, and chaotic explosion of infinite possibilities. Everything can be, nothing is completed. Everything can overturn again and again, and thus a tragedy is also a comedy. The main point is that both banality and the overcoming of banality cause laughter, here as well as in any other place, since such is the nature of the banality and, moreover, in Keret’s thought, any struggle against banality ends in creation of a new level of banality.

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<sup>21</sup> Etgar Keret, *Missing Kissinger*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Etgar Keret, *Ga’agu’ay Lekissinger*, 23.

The words that serve as the code of banality, such as *stam*, *ke'ilu*, *lo mamash*, produce a humorous effect also in another way. Let us see the opening of the story "Pit'om Dfika Badelet" ("Suddenly, a Knock on the Door"): "The situation, I must say, is anything but pleasant."<sup>23</sup> In Hebrew: "Hamatzav, ani mode, lo mamash na'im li."<sup>24</sup> The situation is that the stranger is demanding a story to be told and waving the gun before the narrator's face. One of the well-known functions of humor and irony is protection from fear, especially in black humor, like here. But for this function to work, fear must exist. When the mechanism of laughter is based on banality, there is no fear, and its trace there, where it is expected to be, is funny by itself. The situation is "lo mamash na'im," which means that the situation is supposed to and could be really and completely pleasant, if not for a tiny insignificant detail. The "pleasant situation" is that background of banality, against which any other situation looks as nothing but an annoying and disparagingly small deviation, for good and for bad. This deviation is being immediately reduced to the level zero of indifference. Deviation is revealed as illusion, simulation, imagination, that is "lo mamash." In this configuration, the banal is the real. However, in that little split of *lo* (no), all human life comes in or, more precisely, transcends beyond and above the banality and its humor.

The humorous banality phrases like "lo mamash" are Keret's main rhetorical and stylistic code replete with powerful philosophical content. Unfortunately, English translators don't seem to be aware of this code. The hero of "Hashmanman" ("Fatso") from *Anihu*, for instance, says that he "lo mamash yode'a ma la'asot."<sup>25</sup> Neither

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<sup>23</sup> Etgar Keret. *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*. Trans. Miriam Shlesinger. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Etgar Keret. *Pit'om Dfika Badelet*. (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 2010), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Etgar Keret. *Anihu*. (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 2002), 8.

Miriam Shlesinger nor Sondra Silverston paid sufficient attention to this code, and they translated, respectively: “you have no idea what you should do,”<sup>26</sup> and “you have no idea what to do about it.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this “lo mamash” is not only a rhetorical trope, but also a gesture that points to that split in reality, in which new possibilities of being emerge, as usual—in an unbearably light manner. What is the main punch of this humorous event? Is it the split in the banality of the givenness? Or is it the fact that each one of the two new realities that have emerged after the split is also demonstratively and hopelessly banal, or the unity of the two which is not banal but does not actually exist either, since the alternative realities can only replace each other, comically chasing their tails?

Answering this question, I suggest that the explosion of banality can be presented as having a metaphorical nature. Humor serves as a shelter for the metaphoric imagination that usually escapes Keret’s “everyday” discourse. In the story “Poser,” the hero, who does everything not to do sports, particularly kickboxing and Krav Maga, says: “In the neighborhood of my youth, I’d been hit so many times for free that I couldn’t imagine paying for the privilege.”<sup>28</sup> The imaginal comic, even clownish turned-upside-down situation, in which a person pays to be beaten, was created by means of a metaphorical conjugation of two banal realities: the street violence and the officially-acknowledged sports. The narrator tries to escape both of them, and to this end, he recreates an originary scene of deferred violence, in which the cultural meaning is supposed to be produced.<sup>29</sup> But instead of the violence to be

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<sup>26</sup> Etgar Keret. *The Nimrod Flip Out*. Trans. Miriam Shlesinger. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Etgar Keret. *The Nimrod Flip-Out*. Trans. Sondra Silverston. (London: Vintage Books, 2006), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Etgar Keret. *The Seven Good Years*. Trans. Sondra Silverston, Miriam Shlesinger, Jessica Cohen, Anthony Berris. (London: Granta, 2015), 103.

<sup>29</sup> See the theory of originary hypothesis of Eric Gans and his school of generative anthropology: Eric Gans, *A New Way of Thinking: Generative Anthropology in Religion, Philosophy, Art* (Aurora:

blocked or postponed, it bursts further, thus reuniting what is supposed to be separated.

Here is another example from the same story: “The man who invented Pilates used the technique during World War I to rehabilitate wounded soldiers. Which meant that even if I didn’t find a group of pregnant women to join, there was still a chance I might meet the criteria for being accepted into a class.”<sup>30</sup> If metaphor is a double synecdoche,<sup>31</sup> in the examples under discussion it reduces both the street violence and sports to a single feature—the pain of a punch, the war and sports—to the danger and consciousness of bodily disability. The metaphor turns the memory and imagination of it into a trauma, and thus the two realities converge, the past experience returns, and therefore the banality of being emerges again, out of its own explosion. It seems to be the essence of Keret’s metaphorical humor. This is how the narrator of the story “Requiem for a Dream” comforts himself in the days of the global financial crisis, while comparing himself to Madoff: “two restless Jews who love to make up stories and have been sailing along for years in a gondola with a hole in the bottom.”<sup>32</sup> The wit is built of the inappropriate, clownish comparison, but in the end, it works as an imagistic metaphor for the Jewish destiny, comic in the same way as it is pathetic.

The stories “Pastrami” and “Suddenly, the Same Thing” are less humorous but more representative. In the former, during a rocket attack, when everyone is required to get out of the car and lie down on the roadside, the narrator proposes to his scared little son a game: he will lie as a slice of pastrami between his Mom and Dad.<sup>33</sup> The

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The Davies Group, 2011); Adam Katz (ed.), *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry* (Aurora: The Davis Group, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Dubois et al. *A General Rhetoric*. Trans. Paul B. Burrell and Edgar M. Slotkin. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> Etgar Keret, *The Seven Good Years*, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 169.

distraction works, the fear is wiped out, and the family survives the attack. Here, too, the bodily imagination creates a two-directional move: banalization of the traumatic (the war) and traumatization of the banal (the preparation of a sandwich). Thus, the everyday being can no longer be either banal or traumatic, but turns into a metaphor of sorts that unites the two in a playful, humorous, tragicomic manner. In “Suddenly, the Same Thing,” the author combines two realities by putting them together in the same place and the same time: a delivery of a baby occurs when victims of a terror attack are being brought to a hospital. A reporter, whom the narrator meets there, asks him to tell something “original” about the attack, but he answers: “It’s just that the attacks are always the same. What kind of original thing can you say about an explosion and senseless death?”<sup>34</sup> The contradiction in terms expressed in the title of the story embodies the very essence of Keret’s sense of humor as “traumabanalitv.” A wound and pain unite the delivery and the explosion in an impossible tragicomic metaphor, and they are getting compared with each other in a competition of which one is more “sudden” and urgent, or banal and “can-wait” type. The most non-banal thing about it is that a trauma becomes banal, that the terms of emergency, traumatology, and paramedicine take the place of the terms of space-time normal human values.

Laughter steaming from an open wound is a common feature of the Jewish humor, but in Keret’s stories, the wound and the laughter unite in a form of singularity, in which a “big bang” occurs out of potentially innumerable possibilities, as in “Ground Up,” in which the narrator’s father is diagnosed with cancer, but he bravely states: “This is exactly how I like to make decisions, when there’s nothing to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 5.

lose and everything to gain.”<sup>35</sup> It is not an irony or sarcasm, nor grotesque or absurd, although all these figures could be discerned in this phrase, if it were not for a unique Keret context of pathos: “Maybe this time, too, life and my father will surprise us with another unexpected deal.”<sup>36</sup> In this context, the irony or absurdity would constitute the banality of the discourse. Keret’s gesture towards pathos, quite ironically, saves the discourse from sinking into the banal, into the banality that is hidden in every tragedy. Thus the failure of the banality’s gesture towards meaning produces this specifically Keretian comic effect. Therefore, the laughter is not only the means of coping with trauma, pain, and fear, but also the way to overcome the banalization of them and their expression. In this struggle against the banal, the laughter unites with the pathos.

The mutual reflection of realities seems to belong to the carnivalesque culture of laughter. These realities are distanced from each other, and one of them is perceived as the truth and the other—as a mask, disguise, visibility. For example, the story “A Moustache for My Son” is “the story of a kid with a scribble that looked like a mustache, who almost killed a man with an umbrella that looked like a rifle, on a covert operation that looked like a war.”<sup>37</sup> Creation of simulacra to examine their realness is a common pattern in Keret’s writings. Miracles, loves, friendships, words, prejudices, stereotypes, myths, dreams, and symbols are constantly tested for their verity. In the example under discussion, the author focuses on the lucky failure of the disguises, which prevents the violence and stops the carnival. Keret’s wit is directed here not at a clownish situation itself, but at a conjunction of different, inconsistent masks, which turns the history into a masquerade. The humorous parable, if not

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 143.

caricature, of the middle-eastern reality reaches out to reveal the value of the banal but desirable truths that hide behind carnivalesque simulacra. Thus the exposure of the banal can serve as a source of laughter in two senses: as a point from which the meaning-producing deviation starts off, and as a point of return, if the deviation creates a tragic historic bewilderment and a fear of potentially traumatic experience. The lightness of banality may serve as a means to fulfill “the almost desperate human need to find good in the least likely places [...] to persist in searching for an angel that would put ugliness in a better light and create affection and empathy for every wart and wrinkle on its scared face.”<sup>38</sup>

This line of humor strengthens in the story “Throwdown at the Playground,” in which the two superposed realities are childhood and war, nursing and the development of the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>39</sup> The narrator defines himself as “a stressed-out Jew who considers his momentary survival to be exceptional and not the least bit trivial.”<sup>40</sup> When one of the mothers on the playground asks him if he wants his son (just three years old then) to serve in the army, the two realities merge in the narrator’s consciousness. What follows is an imaginary grotesque scene of a battle of babies in diapers. In the end, the banal routine of life comes to save the narrator from this nightmare. It is not the humor that remedies the fear of trauma, but banality, and its conflict with reality is what produces both fear and humor. For example, in the story “Bombs Away,” the routine of life defeats the fear of the Iranian nuclear bomb, the everyday concerns repel the geopolitical ones, and, in a comical twist, the unbearably light banality becomes a threat by itself, when the narrator repeats an old joke: “Don’t worry, honey. We’re both survivors. We’ve already survived quite a bit

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., *ibid.*

together—illness, wars, terrorist attacks, and, if peace is what fate has in store, we'll survive it, too."<sup>41</sup>

Two metaphorically combined realities can be imaginary or ideological constructs, like electronic games in smartphones and like the world of moral and pedagogical values in the story "Bird's Eye."<sup>42</sup> Even when two realities or two cultures are genuine enough, they can pretend to be one another and converge in a witting metaphor, thus mutually annihilating each other, turning each other into simulacra, or otherwise actualizing the meaning of each other in a foreign context. This makes a strong move against the banality and also attaches a substantial note of pathos to it. What in popular culture ends up in destruction of the converged cultures, in Keret's writings produces an intellectual metaphor or even a philosophical parable, seriocomic and bitterly ironic. For example, the narrator of the story "Swede Dreams" tells how his Sweden friends have perceived Yom Kippur with its customs as "an innovative Naomi Klein concept," "touch of '60s hippiedom," "fashionable low-carb diet," and as "the iPhone of all festivals."<sup>43</sup> This cultural translation can hardly be called "desacralization," because the narrator refers to the customs of Yom Kippur as a secular Israeli. Neither is it an estrangement, since both cultural languages are those of the narrator, and the two corresponding lines of signs are being produced by him. It is the de-banalization of the two cultures that creates here the effect of a really comical and, at the same time, pathetically genuine hybridization of them.

Keret's humor moves way beyond the regular forms of satire and parody, irony and grotesque, although all these can be easily found in his writings. To conclude the discussion above, one can say that at the core of his laughter production

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 86-90.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 58.



there lies the two-fold banality—its explosion which opens up new possibilities of existence, and its reconstitution which holds the torn out pieces of everyday life together, so it can be blown up again. The comic and tragic visions are united here, but not in order to compensate or console each other; rather they are two opposite looks at the banality's abortive gesture of appropriating reality: from outside of the scene of violence, and from within it, that is, from where a victim is situated. Unlike his predecessors in classical Jewish literature, Keret creates such forms of laughter that embody non-victimary and possibilist thinking, beside the typically Jewish self-torturing self-irony and criticism. The possibilist thinking also leads the writer to acknowledging the limits of the carnivalesque laughter. His humor functions as an overcoming of what is or ought to be by what can be—the mechanism that was called here the explosion of banality.