A Weak Messianic Power

Political Theology, Religion and Secularism in Hebrew Literature

מכון הקשרים והמחלקה לספרות עברית,
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One Moment, Silence: The Epistemological Quest and (Im)Possibility of Prophecy in the Early Poetry of Natan Zach

Dan Miron

The poem "One Moment" opens Natan Zach's most important anthology *Different Poems* with prosaic and awkward, anti-poetic lines. Their incongruousness reflects the agony of oedipal guilt in a psychoanalytical reading, or the incompetence of *mauvaise foi* in an existential one. However, the biblical overtones of the poem open the way to a third reading, which transcends the first two and puts the contrast between an epistemological "knowing" (possible only in the biblical era of prophecy and revelation) and its absence or impossibility at the philosophical, intellectual and thematic heart of the poem. The opening lines thus emerge as an appeal to the reader, and despite their declared unaestheticism they do in fact contain the nutshell of the anthology's poetic and philosophical message: the lack of true and prophetic knowledge as the key characteristic of modern life. The poet's mission is to expose humanity to its unaware state, and he thus becomes an antithetical prophet. This poetic stand has grown out of the complex tensions between poetry and prophecy and between representation and knowledge in Zach's early, formative work, and allows him to famously criticize the sublime and anagogical in Israeli poetry prior to and during the first years of independence. Therefore, though Zach is the quintessential Israeli secular poet, his work centers around a missing, yet still traceable and faintly gleaming, anagogical realm at the infrastructure of Israeli culture.

Blindness and the Abyss: Political Theology and the Secularization of Hebrew in Scholem and Bialik

Hamutal Tsamir

The article examines Gershom Scholem's famous letter to Franz Rozenzweig, "Confession on the Subject of our Language" (1926) and H.N. Bialik's essay, "Revealment and Concealment in Language" (1916) in relation to one another, as two different responses to the Zionist project of secularizing Hebrew into a spoken language. The major argument is that Bialik's essay, usually read as referring to the question of whether language in general is capable of representing reality, needs in fact to be read in relation to the historical and cultural context of its time – i.e., the particular Hebrew language in the particular time and place of the crystallization of Zionist culture. Reading this essay in detail reveals Bialik's complex and conflicting position in relation to the secularization of Hebrew, and can be viewed to some extent as a tragic confession about his own silence as a poet.

The Angel, the Names, the Poem: Walter Benjamin and the Paradox of Tradition

Galili Shahar

The essay deals with the dialectic of tradition and its paradoxes – the paradoxes of revelation and delivery and the "demonic" aspects of the sacred, represented in Benjamin's short autobiographic texts "Agesilaus Santander" of 1933. In his texts, Benjamin discusses these tensions regarding the figure of the angel, the (holy) names and the (liturgical) poem, re-interpreted from a modernist, "inverted" point of view as the work of a devil. It is the ambiguous, double structure of subjectivity, the demonic structure of desire and knowledge, that Benjamin is referring to himself (the German-Jewish author), opening also a radical view on the possibilities of the sacred in the "secular age": being inverted, ironized, becoming ambiguous, yet maintaining a messianic power.

Yehuda Amichai: Sacred Poet of the Quotidian

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi

This essay is an attempt to revisit the poetry of Yehuda Amichai at a distance of nearly 15 years after his death and in the context of the messianic fervor addressed nearly a century ago by Gershom Scholem and enacted daily in the streets of post-1967 Jerusalem. Against the backdrop of contemporary events and cultural theories – from Scholem to Derrida— and primary Hebrew sources from *Song of Songs* and *Psalms* through Shmuel Hanagid to H.N. Bialik and his successors, Amichai, in this reading, offers a "poetics of return" to sacred space and language that is mediated and inclusive. Replacing the dialectical claims of the modern Hebrew imagination with dialogical forms, Amichai's poetics also transcends other binaries, between "secular" and "religious" and between territorialized, centripetal and diasporic, centrifugal forces. The rather anachronistic term "metaphysical" is invoked here to replace prevailing ironic readings of Amichai's poetry, stretching from his early "conceits" to late poems that recognize the toxic potential of the language of comparison in a time of literalized claims to the sacred. Finally, the ethical force behind Amichai's ultimate address, the children (the next generation), is pitted against the ultimate address to the Divine or mortality itself in the poetry of his metaphysical predecessors.

"Chapters of the Book of the State" by S.Y. Agnon

Hannan Hever

Unlike the orthodox stance, which did not assign the state any religious value, for Agnon the state's spiritual transcendence is a path leading to theology. In his view, the project of the constitution of the Jewish state in Hebrew literature is highly problematic, and in "Chapters of the Book of the State" he wishes to show that the representation of the Jewish state within Hebrew literature in the modern world of Zionism is an almost impossible task. Because of the unavoidable secularism of the Zionist state, Agnon kept his distance from the political as it is materialized in the Jewish state, the form of which he strongly criticizes in "Chapters of the Book of the State". The two approaches – the Zionist linguistic break from holiness, and the

Zionist continuation of the holy language, which Agnon wishes to rehabilitate in his stories – are both correct and incommensurable. For Agnon, the only feasible literary solution to this aporia is a satire that portrays the state as a caricature. Irony offers an opening for Agnon's satire, through which he can represent the aporia of the Jewish state: like irony, the state, too, is written in a holy language that both exists and is extinct, that is, is both within history as well as outside history. Hence, the relation to political messianism is contradictory: On the one hand, "the beginning of our redemption"; On the other, the fulfillment of messianism is so deferred that it is not political anymore, since Agnon strongly opposes the notion of a linkage between Jewish messianism and the Zionist present.

The Rise of the Neo-Symbolist School as a Response to the Messianism in the Poetry of the Third Aliya

Roy Greenwald

The article examines the rise of the neo-Symbolist school in Hebrew literature during the 1930s. It argues that the poetry of the leading figures of the school, Avraham Shlonsky and Nathan Alterman, should be understood against the backdrop of the abundant use of messianic vocabulary in the poetry of the Third Aliyah (including by Shlonsky himself) at the beginning of the 1920s. Through close reading of the economic metaphors in the poetry of Shlonsky and Alterman, the article shows how the neo-Symbolist poetics was affected by inflationary conditions that befell the representations of the Zionist endeavor. Drawing on the theories of Georg Simmel (especially in *Philosophy of Money*) and situating the poetry within the context of the world financial crisis between the two World Wars, the article demonstrates how the relationship between the written word and material history in the poetry of neo-Symbolists in Eretz Israel seemed to mirror the relationship between the financial markets and the real economy – and themselves, therefore, as speculators in ideas that had lost their grounding.

Essayistic Writing as an Everyday Art: Lea Goldberg´s Debate with Russian Culture

Natasha Gordinsky

This article offers an aesthetical and political interpretation of Lea Goldberg's seminal concept of "The courage for the profane", developed in her programmatic essay from 1938. It focuses on two interrelated, yet unexplored, aspects of Goldberg's essayistic attempt to define the responsibility of intellectuals towards the society in times of political atrocities. By revealing the intertextual layer of the essay, namely, Goldberg's dialogue with two key-figures of Russian Modernism – Alexander Blok and Roman Jacobson, the article suggests an understanding of the concept "courage for profane" as Goldberg's hidden critique of the sacralisation of everyday life in Soviet and Zionist discourse. Secondly, basing itself upon a theoretical discussion of the essay as a diasporic form, it understands "courage for the profane" as Goldberg's meta-poetic statement about her essayistic writing.

The Bookcase and the Language of Grace
Shai Ginsburg

In this essay, I read Anton Shammas's novel *Arabesques* and its reception through the question of translation, which is simultaneously the question of origin and source. I suggest that this question informs the trope of the bookcase, one of the key tropes in the novel and its conceptual focus. Thus, in the first part of this essay, I examine Shammas's bookcase from the perspective of an origin, whereas in the second part, I examine it from the perspective of translation. Yet, the trope of the bookcase pertains not only to the plot of Shammas's novel, but also to the Israeli bookcase in general and to Shammas's place as an author as well as a translator in it. The third section explores this latter matter. The final section of the essay ties together these divergent threads through a short reading of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator," which is one of Shammas's own sources of inspiration.

On the Earthliness of Life in Yaakov Shabtai's Novels
Shimon Adaf

Yaakov Shabtai's novels are often referred to as either metaphysical works or as a realistic depiction of Israeli life. Yet, the experience of transcendence of everyday life that the metaphysical view suggests stands in opposition to a strong impression of earthliness that the realistic depiction has to offer. The essay "On the Earthliness of Life" explores the deep nature and world view of the two novels written by Shabtai from which these two seemingly exclusive readings stem.

Biography in the Shade of the Myth
Menachem Brinker

The essay provides a critic of Anita Shapira's biography on Brenner. It examines the problems of creating a biography of the Jewish canonic author, whose literary and fictional work is itself somewhat biographic, and the problems of discerning between the "real" Brenner and his characters; all the while dealing with periods from Brenner's life of which there is almost no documentation, and with the well established myth of Brenner, the rag-wearing, depressed, poor and neglected visionary. The goal of the essay is to acknowledge the mythologizing aspects of Shapira's Brenner, and to bring forth a clearer and more accurate perspective of the famous author.

The essay is divided into three chapters: the first is concerned with the problem of the biographic aspects of Brenner's writing. The second part unravels Brenner's Russian Narodnik influences, which Shapira ignores while phrasing Brenner's historical and Zionist stance. The third chapter of the essay deals with the manner in which Shapira analyzes Brenner's famous depressions, and the piercing visions that accompanied them. Brinker calls for a more subtle, analysis of Brenner, which would mark his literary, political and historical stances not as the visions of a "holy fool" or a madman, but as an intellectual, well-thought-out work, despite the rags it's author is wearing.

"And if thou searchest out my sin / I shall flee from thee to thee": On a Traumatic Picaresque

Ruth Ginsburg

The essay deals with David Grossman's novel *Until the End of the Land* as a political text embodying personal and communal trauma both in its plot and in its textual structure and language. Suggesting the concept of *pre-trauma,* the notion of *temporal collapse* and the generic distinction of the *traumatic picaresque*, it follows the construction of the illusion of a post-traumatic rehabilitation and its inevitable failure against the background of the recent history of Israel. The essay examines in detail the main spatial strategy of the text with which both the physical and the mental trauma-spaces are constructed, and the linguistic technique which allows both the characters and the narrator to flee from trauma to words.

A.B. Yehoshua – Retrospective: The Metaphysics of Evil and the Ethics of the State of Existence

Avidov Lipsker-Albeck

This article summarizes the literary path taken by writer A.B. Yehoshua from his short stories in the 1960s up to his late novels in the early 21st century.

The main argument presented here is that Yehoshua's early writings establish a stable situation of a "narrating subject" who had lost his main attribute of "writing subject." This moment of loss is the instant of establishing the story's fictional world (in terms of space, time, and plot). It is this moment that Yehoshua sets as the Archimedean point from which his obedient subjects generate the plots. For Yehoshua, the absence of a writing authority or the disappearance of a writing entity, are an expression of his evil "cosmic entropy," which is a recurring phobia in his stories. Release from this phobia is only possible when the hero gathers the strength to go on the journey and gets his surroundings to return his lost writing to him. In Yehoshua's early writings, such journeys are not successful.

Yehoshua generated two poetic moves to dismantle evil in his novellas and novels. First, he sealed the mouths of his despotic heroes who are devoid of subject; second, he granted himself complete poetic freedom of invention. In other words, he silenced the voice of the first-person narrator and wrote texts by an author who tells us *about* his characters, or determines their speech boundaries. By constructing arbitrary surprising poetics, and reinventing it time after time, he established for himself a position of freedom to be a moral judge of his fictional world and formed a dimension of freedom and ruling in it.

The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano

Jacques Derrida

Voices of Transmission: Haviva Pedaya in the Face of "Modern Hebrew Literature"

Shaul Setter

This article deals with the *oeuvre* of the poet, prose writer, essayist, and scholar Haviva Pedaya. It argues that Pedaya, a Jewish-Israeli writer and descendant of a renowned family of Baghdadi Kabbalists, challenges in her work the modern/modernist, secular, Europe-oriented, national history and historiography of Hebrew literature. In her poetry, Pedaya questions the monolingual dictum of modern Hebrew, fashioning instead a Hebrew informed by its non-modern pre-secular Jewish modalities and its close links to Arabic. Emphasizing the delivery of the living voice, Pedaya "returns" in her poetry to *piyyut*, a continuous tradition of oral liturgical poem, as an alternative to the modern western lyric poetic formation. In ecstatic mystical Hebrew, she addresses the divine, mobilizing a devotional, mesmerizing language of messianic potentiality. Her *piyyut* poetry challenges the view of modernity as a rupture (first secular and later national) underpinning the Eurocentric historiography of Hebrew literature. Pedaya conceptualizes, instead, the processes of transmission, in which (Jewish, or Arab-Jewish) tradition is disseminated and transformed across pre-modern and modern times, thus calling for an alternative history of Hebrew textuality, arising from and addressed to the collectivities of the Orient.

A Note on the Fictional Non-Human in Haviva Pedaya's *The Eye of the Cat*

Noam Gal

Pedaya's novel *The Eye of the Cat* (2008) draws parallel lines between different neglected beings from the margins of the urban space of poor neighborhoods in contemporary Be'er Sheva. Within the same expanded rubric of otherness, Pedaya represents stray cats, homeless people and women whose entire lives are dedicated to the maintenance of their pets. Despite this comparative approach, Pedaya clarifies that methodologically the novel has been written in a way that distinguishes documentary presentation of animals from fictional representation of human characters. My essay wishes to explore this authorial decision and tries to explain it and its effects. This important poetical decision, I argue, derives from the assumption that the fictional contradicts the natural – a contradiction which defines the natural in the first place. In Pedaya's novel, there is an ethical horizon to that assumption: the author explicitly avoids the personification of animals in her text, since personification is regarded as interruption in the animal's realness, realness that is external to the literary text. My paper will try to explain the tension between Pedaya's poetics and her ethical manifesto by investigating and developing the literary trope of personification.

On the Poetic Historiography of Haviva Pedaya

Lilach Lachman

Haviva Pedaya, an outstanding poet and one of Israel's most prominent interdisciplinary

thinkers, has established a challenging historiography, which replaces conventional attitudes to "wandering" and "exile" by a new focus on the individual's ritual performance. The act of walking becomes a bodily, as well as textual "installation", that also serves as a poetic test stone. Furthermore, the wandering rites, disclosed by Pedaya, question the accepted borderlines between self and other, both in the history of Jews and Christians in Europe and in the more recent dynamics of Israelis and Palestinians. My reading of the historical drama, anchored in Pedaya's poetry as well as in her cultural thinking, emphasizes the breakages by which the entire chronic can be newly interpreted: from the destruction of the second temple, through mystical writing in the 13th and 16th century, up to the rising nationality of the eighteenth century and new Hassidic models perceived in Modernism. Pedaya's acute attentiveness to the physical aspects of the ritual, to its feminine vehicles and the poetic images which carry it, no less than to the language in which it is embedded, reveals her as the implicit subject of the history she is writing and distinguishes her own powerful outlook as a mystical poet.

List of Contributors

Mr. Shimon Adaf was born in 1972 in Sderot, Israel. He has published three collections of poems and six novels, and won the Yehuda Amichai award for poetry for his most recent work, *Aviva-No* (Dvir, 2009). His latest published fiction is the trilogy *Rose of Judea* (Kinneret-Zmora-Bitan, 2010-2012); its second volume, *Mox Nox*, was awarded the Sapir prize in 2012. Adaf is the head of the creative writing program at the Department of Hebrew Literature of Ben-Gurion University.

Dr. Michal Ben-Naftali has a PhD in philosophy and is the writer, translator and editor of the series "The French" of Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, and of the series "aprés coup" of the Resling Publishing House. She is author of the books: *Chronicle of Separation* (2000); *The Visitation of Hannah Arendt* (2006); *Childhood, a Book – a Novella* (2007); *On Retreat: Four Essays* (2009), and *Spirit* (2012). Among her translations: *Love Stories* by Julia Kristeva (2006); *Archive Fever* by Jacques Derrida (2006); *Derrida reads Shakespeare* (2007); *Nadja* by André Breton (2007); *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* by Derrida (2010); *Blanchot Anthology – The Book to Come* (2011) and *The Literary Space* (2011).

Prof. Menachem Brinker is Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His books and articles deal with philosophy and aesthetics, literary theory and interpretation, Hebrew and general literature, modern Jewish thought and literary criticism. His contribution to aesthetic and literary theories is concentrated in his books *Beyond Fictitious: Meaning and Representation in the Fictional Work* (1980); *Aesthetics as Literary Theory* (1982); *Is Literary Theory Possible?* (1989); and *Rotating Literature: Essays on the Border of Philosophy and Theory of Literature and Art* (2000). During 1969-1970 he was the editor of the literary weekly *Masa*, and in 1974 he established the monthly *Emda: Literary and Social Criticism in Israel*, which he edited until 1978. He also established "Teamim", a series of masterpieces in aesthetics at Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House. His primary work in Hebrew literature research, "Up to the Tiberian Alley: Article on the Story and Thought in Brenner's Work" (1990), which is a panoramic consideration of Brenner's fictional and nonfictional works, won the Israel Prize for Hebrew and General Literary Research in 2004.

Prof. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi is Professor of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and has been a visiting professor at Duke, Princeton, Yale, Michigan and Dartmouth. She is the author of *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (1980) and *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (2000). Her work ranges from explorations of literary and cultural representations of the Holocaust to studies of the Jewish configurations of exile and homecoming. Prof. DeKoven Ezrahi was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2007 for her current project on "Jerusalem and the Poetics of Return," which focuses on the writing of Yehuda Amichai and S.Y. Agnon. This essay will be integrated as a chapter in the book.

Dr. Noam Gal holds a BA from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design and an MA from the Program in Cultural Studies of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His doctoral thesis "Fictional Inhumanities: Wartime Animals and Personification" was written in the Department of Comparative Literature at Yale University. The dissertation explores the relationship between humans and animals in the photography and literature of the Second World War. Gal has taught at Department of the Arts of Ben-Gurion University, at the History and Theory Department of Bezalel Academy, and at the Comparative Literature Department of the Hebrew University. Among his recent publications: "Every Teacher is an Artist: Radical Pedagogy in Joseph Beuys's Work" (2013, *Protocollage*, in Hebrew); "Nazi Dogs and other Problems of Photography" (2012, *Reality Trauma*, in Hebrew); "A Way With Nature: Notes on Methodology" (2012, *Critical Arts* 26, 1. Gal was recently appointed as the Horace and Grace Goldsmith Curator of Photography at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Dr. Ruth Ginsburg from the Department of General and Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, divides her research between translation studies and the study of trauma from a chronotopic perspective . She is an active translator of Freud from German into Hebrew. So far the following of Freud's texts have been published in her translation: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2002); *The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion* (including "The Moses of Michelangelo") (2009); *The Uncanny* (including Jentsch's essay "On the Psychology of *das Unheimliche*") (2012); and *Totem and Taboo* (2013). Her recent essays on translation include: "The Cracked Mirror of Translation: Freud's Reflection in Hebrew", Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag (2013); and "A German Gentleman-Scientist in Hebrew/Yiddish Garb –Translating Freud", University of Michigan Press (forthcoming).

Dr. Shai Ginsburg teaches literature and film studies at Duke University, North Carolina, USA. He has published articles on Hebrew literature, Israeli and American cinema, and theory. He translated Paul de Man's book *The Resistance to Theory* into Hebrew.

Dr. Natasha Gordinsky is a lecturer of Hebrew literature in the Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of Haifa. Over the past three years she has served as a research associate and head of a research unit at the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture at the University of Leipzig. In 2010 she received her PhD in Hebrew literature from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where she earned all of her academic degrees. Her book on Lea Goldberg's early writings is to be published soon by Magnes Press.

 Dr. Roy Greenwald teaches in the Department of Hebrew literature at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. His publications concern Hebrew and Yiddish modern literature. His book on the poet Avot Yeshurun is forthcoming at the Bialik Institute Press.

Prof. Hannan Hever is the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Professor of Hebrew Literature at Yale University. Among his books are *Suddenly the Sight of War: Nationalism and Violence in the Hebrew Poetry of the 1940s* (2001); *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation*

Building and Minority Discourse (2002)*; They shall dwell at the Haven of the Sea: The Sea in Modern Hebrew Culture* (2007)*; The Narrative and the Nation: Critical Readings in the Canon of Modern Hebrew Fiction* (2008); and *From the Beginning: Three Essays on Nativist Hebrew Poetry* (2008), *With the power of God: political Theology in Modern Hebrew Literature* (2013).

Dr. Lilach Lachman teaches at the Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of Haifa. She is the editor of an anthology of lullibies (forthcoming in Hasifria Hachadasha, Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing house), and is also completing a book on Avot Yeshurun while researching Israeli poetry of the seventies. She has translated and edited a selection of Dickinson's poems and letters *Perhaps the Heart (*Resling, 2004) and edited a book of essays *How is it Called Avot Yeshurun* (Kav Adom, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009); and, together with Helit Yeshurun, also edited *Milvadata: Avot Yeshurun – Selected Poems* (Hasifria Hachadasha, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009). She has published many articles on Modern and Romantic poetry in international journals and books (*Comparative Literature, Poetic Today, Gothic Studies, Emily Dickinson Journal*).

Prof. Avidov Lipsker-Albeck is a Professor in the Faculty of Jewish Studies at Bar-Ilan University. His principal areas of research are Modern Hebrew literature, from the turn of the century to the present, and thematology of the literature of the Jewish people. Most of his research in Modern Hebrew literature deals with literature of the Third and Fourth Aliyot (immigration waves), during which Hebrew Modernism was formulated, and with the poetry of the 1920s and 1930s, relating to poetic streams in Jewish and general literature and art. He is author of the following books on Modern Hebrew poetry: *The Poetry of S. Shalom* (1990); *The Poetry of A. Broides* (2000); and *Red Poem Blue Poem*: *Seven Essays on Uri Zvi Grinberg and Two Essays on Else Lasker Schuler* (2010). His study proposes a new theoretical approach called "Cultural Ecosystem", designed to replace old poetic models in the ecological literary habitat. This model provides a new critical narrative replacing the accepted historiography of the "Literary Republic". In the sphere of the thematology of the literature of the Jewish people, he created, with Prof. Yoav Elstein, a multisystem model dealing with versions of the Jewish story, and published the *Thematological Encyclopedia of the Jewish Story: Sippur Okev Sippur* (vol I-III, Bar-Ilan University Press 2005-2013). Professor Lipsker is the editor-in-chief of the journal *Criticism and Interpretation*, published by Bar-Ilan University Press, and is editor of two other series also published by Bar-Ilan University Press: "Critical Horizons" and "Thema – Thematological Studies in the Literature of the Jewish People". His book *Yitzhak Lamdan's Diary* is in print and the book *Thoughts on S.Y. Agnon* is in preparation.

Prof. Dan Miron is a researcher of Hebrew literature, a critic, an editor and a translator. He has taught both at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and at Tel Aviv University and is currently the Leonard Kaye Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He is considered one of the most prominent scholars of Hebrew and Yiddish literature of the second half of the 20th century, and the beginning of the

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21st century. He has written hundreds of articles, published some 40 research books and written dozens of literary reviews in newspapers and journals. prof. Miron was a member of the *Achshav* and *Igra* journals and since 2012 has been the chief editor of the "Afik - Israeli Literature" book series. Among his most important projects: collecting and editing works by significant Hebrew authors and poets, including the scientific edition of Bialik's poems, as well as translating and publishing translations of plays, stories and novellas by prominent writers such as Brecht, Schiller, Kafka and Sholem Aleichem. He received the Bialik Prize in 1980 and was awarded the Israel Prize for Hebrew Literature in 1993 for his life's work of research of Hebrew and Yiddish literature.

Dr. Shaul Setter is a postdoctoral fellow at the Minerva Humanities Center and teaches in the Department of Literature at Tel Aviv University and Sapir College. His PhD dissertation, Written in the department of Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley, deals with the formation of potential collectivities in Israel/Palestine, discussing works by S. Yizhar, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean Genet and Haviva Pedaya. He is interested in the relationship between history and literature, desire and political thought, Israel/Palestine and Europe.

Prof. Galili Shahar is a professor of Comparative Literature and the head of the Minerva Institute for German History at Tel Aviv University. His work is dedicated to research and teaching of Modern German and Jewish literature and thought.

Dr. Hamutal Tsamir is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Hebrew Literature at Ben Gurion University in Be'er Sheva. Her book, *In the Name of the Land: Nationalism, Subjectivity and Gender in the Poetry of the 1950s-1960s* was published in 2006 (Keter and Heksherim).

Meir Wieseltier is a prominent Israeli poet who was born in Moscow, lives in Tel Aviv, and studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His first poems were printed in 1960. So far he has published about a dozen volumes of poetry in Hebrew and a volume of selected poems in English and Italian: *The Flower of Anarchy* (translated by Shirley Kaufman, California UP, 2003); *Lontano dall'alzabandiera* (traduzione di Ariel Rathaus, Edizioni San Marco dei Giustiniani, Genova, 2003). Major literary awards include the Israel Prize (2000) and the Bialik Prize (1994). Wieseltier has worked most of his life as a translator, editor and university professor. Among his translations are seven plays by Shakespeare, plays by Marlowe, Brecht, Lope de Vega and Calderon, and books by Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, Robert Graves, Aldous Huxley, Malcolm Lowry, Philip Roth, John Updike, J. M. Coetzee, Julian Barnes and Kazuo Ishiguro.