

Hebrew Writing In Berlin



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Four new books of Hebrew literature that were published lately in Berlin raise questions about the identity of the Hebrew literary Center. Will the Hebrew literature center be open to post national questions? Or will be a continuation of Israeli national values and reject the diasporic ideas?

In the month of November 2019 three books were published in Berlin.

The collection [*Was es bedeuten soll: Neue hebräische Dichtung in Deutschland*](#) published by Parasitenpresse Verlag, located in Cologne, Germany. The collection includes 13 writers including 12 Israelis living in Germany and Gundula Schiffer a German female author from Cologne, who was also among the editors of the book (edited by Gundula Schiffer und Adrian Kasnitz).

Although the book was edited and published in Cologne, most of the authors in this book belong to the city of Berlin, like Ronen Altman Kaydar, Yael Dean Ben-Ivry, Tomer Dotan-Dreyfus, Asaf Dvori, Yemima Hadad, Zahava Khalfa, Admiel Kosman, Maya Kuperman, and Michal Zamir. Interestingly, the book was only published in full translation into German, meaning without the original poems all written in Hebrew.

Another book that was published in Vienna, Austria, [*Zwischen den Zeilen*](#) (Passagen Verlag) also has almost all of its writers based in Berlin (Edited

by Michal Zamir and Yael Almog). The book includes Hebrew and German female writers, writing in both languages, as result of a Jewish feminist event held in the city of Berlin. The third book that was published in this very month is my bilingual poetry collection [Baghdad | Haifa | Berlin](#) by the Berlin's AphorishmA publishing house.

So, three books dealing with Hebrew poetry were written mainly in Berlin and published in one and the same month. So I say, we can start talking about a new Hebrew literary center in Berlin. The fourth book was published only in May 2020 in Berlin, also published by AphorishmA Verlag. This is the book *Life is the least evil one* a collection of stories by Erez Mirenz (AmhiD). According to Mirenz, the book deals with black humor with what is happening in Israel and its very publication in Berlin is a statement about the fact that Israelis, in the broadest sense of the term, are refugees of the conflict or cultural refugees.

I say new literary Hebrew center also because these books came out as the first Hebrew books in Germany after a long pause reaching until the time during the two world wars. Back then, it was a much bigger and bustling center for book publishers, poets and poets who published books in Hebrew. It was much bigger also than the Hebrew center in Palestine. Dr. Rachel Zeelig writes in her monograph [Strangers in Berlin: Modern Jewish Literature Between East and West, 1919-1933](#) (University of Michigan Press, 2016): In the early 1920s, Berlin was home to ten Hebrew publishing houses and, by 1924, the city was producing nearly a quarter of all Yiddish books worldwide. Seelig examines four poets at length, including Ludwig Strauss, Moyshe Kulbak, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Gertrud Kolmar.

But whereas most of these old Hebrew writers dreamed of Israel back then, today the new writers come - mostly disappointed - back from a real political and social life in Israel. And one should expect a literature that expresses that kind of writing. Maybe the new Hebrew literature will deal more thoroughly with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Meaning, the rise of the Hebrew literary center in Berlin requires us to ask the question, whether it will continue Israel's Zionist ideology by following the three unspoken general rules in Israel:

- 1. Israel must not be criticized. Any criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic.*
- 2. The struggle against the occupation must not be mentioned.*
- 3. Literature and poetry should move away from being political.*

So far, there is some fight now, this kind of conflict happening on the Berlin platform. On the one hand stands the Pro-Palestinian writers, organizations, institutions and creators who mostly support the nonviolent struggle of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions). They put a mirror before every Israeli artist who lives outside Israel and compel them to question how they are facing the Palestinian struggle for justice and liberation and ending the occupation. On the other hand stands the Israeli embassy, with government institutions such as the Jewish Agency, JNF and other investors spending huge capital in recruiting any Israeli artist who lives outside Israel, to control their content and stop them from co-opting and stopping any radicalization of the cultural centers.

And as we know already from earlier episodes, Israel uses its power to influence the cultural life of Berlin and Germany for instance, when Peter Schäfer, the head of the Jewish museum in Berlin sent out a link to an article from a German website that referenced an open letter signed by 240 Jewish and Israeli scholars against a resolution at the German Bundestag, condemning BDS as anti-Semitic. In that episode, the Israeli ambassador pressured the head of the Jewish museum until he finally [resigned](#). And there are older examples. [Inna's Michaeli article](#) (2016) talks about Pro-Israeli German journalists and politicians targeting a Palestinian arts and culture festival as allegedly antisemitic. In 2018, Netanyahu urges Merkel to stop funding Berlin's Jewish Museum (2018). Finally, the above mentioned motion in the German parliament pushed by Israel for [more anti-BDS laws to ostracize critics of Israel](#) (2019), and many more examples.

No wonder a few years ago, when tens of thousands of Israelis left Israel for Berlin, Israeli politics saw this as a threat to its identity. Not only because of Berlin's Nazi past, but also because many of the immigrants to Berlin were progressive leftists with a lot of criticism against Israel. But I think, it is precisely this distance from Israel that allows the Israeli creative community in Berlin to continue politics and to create collaborations that could not happen in Israel. Not only joint demonstrations by Israelis and Palestinians could be seen against the Gaza wars. Here, Middle Eastern people from Syria or Palestine started collaborations with progressive Jews in [music](#), [poetry](#), [literature](#), [art](#) and more.

Of course, with the growth of the Hebrew Literary Center in Berlin Israel is aware of the potential inherent in communities of Israelis outside of Israel and is therefore in every way trying to influence the content and the arrangements. And

I hope, the Hebrew Literary Center can stand on its own legs and exist as a unique space where one can talk about the different views and exchange ideas. Most of us know, in the case of the Palestinian struggle for liberation and independence, there is a moral commitment on the part of every Israeli outside Israel to end the occupation of the Palestinian people. It is a literary, but also a Jewish, and ethical commitment. But how far can we go? Obviously, most Israeli artists and writers do not have the option of joining BDS because they would be losing their audience in Israel. And on the other hand, people want to maintain Israeli identity and keep their Israeli passport.

But at a time when Israel is continuing the siege of Gaza, expanding settlements and preventing any national development of the Palestinian people and not negotiating a long-term just peace agreement in Israel and Palestine. So we need to use our art must imagine the unimaginable for instance Israeli-Palestine after the fall of the wall. Berlin gives us the futuristic idea when we walk on the old remains of the wall that used to symbolize the line between west and the east.

I wish that the Hebrew Literary Center will reject any influence of embassies and their associated bodies, and understand the revolutionary potential of opposing the existing the borders of the Israeli nationalistic narrow imagination. In that way we could see the release of imagination and thinking in new values. It is already happening in Berlin with another example as for our encounters with the exiled and the Middle Eastern refugees. The only poem in my book that I wrote in English and only later got translated to Hebrew is "I dream about Israel". Literally, I tried to think of Israel and Palestine as a united Middle East. My vision is similar to the EU. After two world wars, colonialism and endless long-standing rivalries, Europe joined forces to create the EU. Likewise, I believe that the Middle East, after a real and just peace with the Palestinians, can unite into the Middle East Union. And this is an idea, actually inspired by our diaspora, by the encounter of our conflict groups in Berlin:

Thinking of Israel
Wondering what will be her future
I want to read good news on her newspapers
I want to talk Arabic
And live in peace with her.

I want to read my poems in Gaza then

I want to catch the Middle East train
To Haifa (I will take some more clothes and books) .
I plan to catch the next train so I can party with my grandmother
In Baghdad.

Thinking of Israel

I want to have a Middle Eastern union - the "MEU".
Like the European Union. Is it a lot to ask?
Israel why do you laugh at me?
I am a dreamer and you already know that Reality is made of dreams.

I want to be free like the air that stretches from Haifa to Beirut.
I want to fly like the birds all over Europe, Asia and Africa
They don't have any passports. They don't have any national identity.
They know us better then we know them.
They see our conflicts but still they migrate every year from the start
(Sadly enough I just learned that their number are declining).

Thinking about Israel

Dreaming about normality
Imagining another kind of poetry.

One good example for new post-national poem that connects that the new Jewish immigrant consciousness with the Palestinian consciousness exiled one, one could find in Maya Kuperman's poem that appeared in the anthology *Zwischen den Zeilen* (2019. Passagen Verlag. Austria):

"The is dense and beer foam
From the taps it flows
Could not forget thee, Jerusalem, if i tried
At midnight with your banished i will sing
The song of emigrant woes."

Dense air and the scent of wine
Fills the houses, soaks their walls
Trains wander between stations
In our heart of hearts we're beggars all

And I spend my nights awake
Imprisoned in her dream
The woman for whose love I ache
Her heart, too, is walled in

Bolzano, Vienna, Haifa
Berlin, Tel Aviv
Thirty years ex utero, mother
A stowaway without reprieve

The air is dense and beer foam
From the taps it flows
Could not forget thee, Jerusalem, if I tried
At midnight with your banished I will sing
The song of emigrant woes.

Kuperman's poem remind us that she relates to Jerusalem but at the same time sits with the same Palestinian people who were displaced out of it.

The author Zehava Khalfa, whose collection of poetry *Where Does It All Go* won the Zürichgeben scholarship for Jewish women for 2020 and was published at the same year in Iton 77 Publishing house.

In her poem *Mother Tongue*, which appeared in Yael Almog and Michal Zamir's

anthology 2019, she describes the special encounter with refugees from Arab countries in Berlin, which it is not possible in Israel, as well as the ability to express oneself in one's mother tongue - Arabic, which is specifically expressed and legitimized in Berlin.

Mother tongue

Umm Mahmud, who is privately called Nadschla
And officially Mrs. Mahamud
And among us nothing
And neither do I.

We speak here one language.
She explains me how to prepare Egyptian falafel.
with Ful Mukasher (peeled fava beans)
For a second I thought she'd say Kascher.
With spiced herbs and chopped parsley
and cumin,
not too much of it.

At the Ku'damm, the belly full with a little daughter
On the way to ultrasound
A leaflet distributor offers us the business lunch
At half price.

Little Mahmud looks at the pigeons and asks,
why do they eat all the time
She reminds him that this morning, he ate as well
And Mahmud continues talking and she answers muttering
A Pigeon.

Where I'm from?
Forty years
My parents are from Libya.
I answer
And my sister tells me about
the persecutions of the Jews
Thirty years ago in Syria.
Mother tongue, sometimes it flows and sometimes

it stutters.

Preparations for a Caesarean section

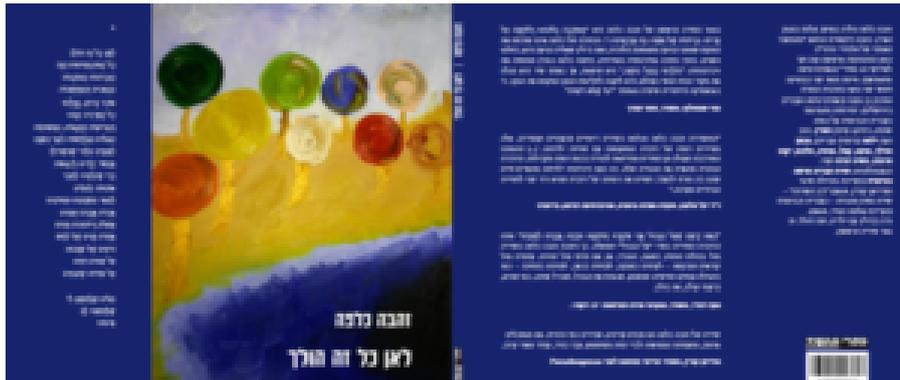
I am translating the forms into Arabic.

How should I translate thyroid gland?

You don't have any thyroid gland problems,

I scanned her eyes

soaked with sweat.



Zionism, Literature and Politics

Zionism is not a static movement. At any given moment, Zionism makes a way through map of decision and in the process, it determines its identity. With the rise of the extreme right in power over the last decade, Zionism has become grounded in the belief that all Jewish life outside Israel is one that leads to assimilation or threat to its existence. Israelis who live outside Israel have no voting rights unless they travel to Israel to vote. This creates a population of more than one million people who cannot vote and are even perceived as a threat to the State of Israel. No wonder a few years ago, when tens of thousands of Israelis left Israel for Berlin, Israeli politics saw this as a threat to its identity. Not only because of Berlin's Nazi past, but also because many of the immigrants to Berlin were progressive leftists with a load of criticism of Israel. Now with the growth of the Hebrew Literary Center in Berlin, it can be part of the forces pushing to end the occupation in Israel / Palestine. Israel is aware of the potential inherent in communities of Israelis outside of Israel and is therefore in every way trying to influence the content and the arrangements. The Hebrew Literary Center must reject any influence of embassies and their associated bodies, and understand the revolutionary potential of exiting the borders of the nation, the release of imagination and thinking in new values, with the encounter with the exile and the Middle Eastern refugees.