Facing the Other: 
Moral Dilemmas in Israeli Literature

Dr. Barbara Mann

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Dr. Mann is the author of Space and Place in Jewish Studies (Rutgers University Press, 2012) and A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space (Stanford University Press, 2005), in addition to numerous scholarly articles. She is Editor Emerita of Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History. Dr. Mann has lectured and presented scholarly papers at seminars and conferences in the United States, Israel, and Europe, and has been awarded numerous honors for her work. From 1997 to 2004, she was a member of the faculty at Princeton University, where she also served as a faculty fellow in the Center for the Study of Religion. Her current project, The Object of Jewish Literature: A Material History, is under contract with Yale University Press and has been supported by fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities.
Europe, Late

Violins float in the sky,
and a straw hat. I beg your pardon,
what year is it?
Thirty-nine and a half, still awfully early,
you can turn off the radio.
I would like to introduce you to:
the sea breeze, the life of the party,
terribly mischievous,
whirling in a bell-skirt, slapping down
the worried newspapers: tango! tango!
And the park hums to itself:
I kiss your dainty hand, madame,
your hand as soft and elegant
as a white suede glove. You’ll see, madame,
that everything will be all right,
just heavenly – you wait and see.
No it could never happen here,
don’t worry so – you’ll see – it could

Hebrew poems published in 1970

Written in Pencil in the
Sealed Railway-Car

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him

אדרMAS עפ睐ורא קאמרו קהותה

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Dan Pagis cont.

**Testimony**

No no: they definitely were human beings: uniforms, boots. How to explain? They were created in the image.

I was a shade. A different creator made me.

And he in his mercy left nothing of me that would die. And I fled to him, rose weightless, blue, forgiving – I would even say: apologizing-smoke to omnipotent smoke without image or likeness.

**The Roll Call**

He stands, stamps a little in his boots, rubs his hands. He’s cold in the morning breeze: a diligent angel, who has worked hard for his promotions. Suddenly he thinks he’s made a mistake: all eyes, he counts again in the open notebook all the bodies waiting for him in the square, camp within camp: only I am not there, am a mistake, turn off my eyes, quickly, erase my shadow. I shall not want. The sum will be in order without me: here for eternity.

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This text is a translation from Hebrew into English. The original text is in Hebrew:

ןֵדוֹת

לא לא: הם הבוחנים
כ_formats משלים, פציפש.
איך הקספיטר. הם בגראים בכסלה.

אני תמיי את.
ול הגה מואר עמיר.

המק fucks לא השאיר ב машин.
קבירתהיאל, פילימי קדיל. קהל,
קופס, ח針 פומר: מקבילה.
עצור ולא עצר על ידו.
שאני לא גוח דמותי.

המלכים

הוא ענה. רछצתי כותש במקפה.
崀ישהות את נתיי: שיר לא זורק גמר.
פלצתי ח organización קהל בקרה.
פתקים קצפת לא שסטר: כל ציורים.
הואktor מצלטה במקסום קפה.
אני החוסים מקופסיטו ול(instruction).
מקבילה בלב מ wzglית: ר קרני.
אף אחד, שגיני, זה טמיד.
מקביה לשמע את ערי, מחזק את צידי.
לא חカメ, אצאם. מתשובה ילקלה.
מקзыва: כדין על כלום.

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Dan Pagis cont.

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Instructions for Crossing the Border

Imaginary man, go. Here is your passport.
You are not allowed to remember.
You have to match the description:
your eyes are already blue.
Don’t escape with the sparks
inside the smokestack:
you are a man, you sit in the train.
Sit comfortably.
You’ve got a decent coat now,
a repaired body, a new name
ready in your throat.
Go. You are not allowed to forget.

All right, gentlemen who cry blue murder as always,
nagging miracle makers,
quiet!
Everything will be returned to its place,
paragraph after paragraph.
The scream back into the throat.
The gold teeth back to the gums.
The smoke back to the tin chimney and further on and inside
back to the hollow of the bones,
and already you will be covered with skin and sinews and you
will live,
look, you will have your lives back,
sit in the living room, read the evening paper.
Here you are. Nothing is too late.
As to the yellow star: immediately
it will be torn from your chest
and will emigrate
to the sky.
An Arab shepherd seeks a kid goat on Mount Zion,
And on the mountain across, I seek my little son.
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father
In their temporary failure.
Our voices meet above
The Sultan’s Pool in the valley between us.
We both want to prevent
Our son and our kid from falling into the process
Of the terrible machine of Had Gadya.

Later, we found them in the bushes,
And our voices returned to us
And cried and laughed inside us.

The search for a kid or a son
Was always
The beginning of a new religion in these mountains.

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A Jewish Portrait

She is not your sort.
She’s a Diaspora kind of Jew whose eyes dart around
in fear.
Wears an old-fashioned dress,
her hair pulled back without a bit of grace.
Doesn’t undo her bundles.
Why should she undo her bundles?
Any place she might stumble on
is a place that won’t last.
Her bed is unmade.
No sense adorning what will not last.

On the road.
Caravans pass her by,
Ukrainian peasants in their carts
and dark-skinned refugees, screaming;
babes in arms dry up in the sun,
flies clinging to their eyes.
People carry mattresses on their heads,
a clangor of pots and pans.
People curse her as she goes by:
She’s slow,
slowing down the caravan.

She goes off to the side of the road and stops.
She has no baby,
can wait for dark.

Suddenly, she sees a coin in the dust—a spark.
She smiles an inward smile.
In her mind’s eye
rivulets well up in the thicket.
It’s wrong to think she has lost her mind.
A kernel of sun-crimson dawns in her heart.
There. She’s no longer upset.

Title, A Jewish Portrait (Heb. dyokan yehudi). Means both “Portrait of a Jew” and “Portrait in the Jewish Style”—an ambiguity, sustained throughout the poem, blurring the distinction between Diaspora Jew and Palestinian refugee.

Line 3, a Diaspora kind of Jew (Heb. yehudiya galutit). Reappropriating the derogatory Israeli stereotype about Jews with an Eastern European “ghetto” mentality, the adjective galutit can be applied to an Israeli who behaves “like a Jew from the Diaspora.”
She has no use for this business, Jerusalem.
Day after day they wrangle over the Temple Mount,
each man smites and reviles his brother,
and the dead prophet shrieks,
Who hath required this at your hand, to trample My courts?

Once the caravan has crossed,
night will fall and she’ll find her house.
Her feet stub against the sharp gravel-stones,
dust soils her dress.
She will bolt the inner door,
pull the shutters closed around her.
Only the soles of her feet will she bathe,
so boundless her weariness.
In the dark she knows the features of her face
as a blind man knows the feel of his temples.
Her eyes are the blue eyes of Khazars,
her face a broad face,
her body the heavy body of a native woman,
third generation in the Land of Israel.

June 4, 1982

Line 38, *Who hath required . . . courts?* Quoting Isa. 1:12, a condemnation of empty piety that masks unethical conduct.

Line 49, *Khazars.* A Turkic people from Central Asia, commonly believed to have converted to Judaism in the Middle Ages.

Hovering at a Low Altitude

I am not here.
I am on those craggy eastern hills
streaked with ice
where grass doesn't grow
and a sweeping shadow overruns the slope.
A little shepherd girl
with a herd of goats,
black goats,
emerges suddenly
from an unseen tent.
She won't live out the day, that girl,
in the pasture.

I am not here.
Inside the gaping mouth of the mountain
a red globe flares,
not yet a sun.
A lesion of frost, flushed and sickly,
revolves in that maw.

And the little one rose so early
to go to the pasture.
She doesn't walk with neck outstretched
and wanton glances.
She doesn't paint her eyes with kohl.
She doesn't ask, Whence cometh my help.

I am not here
I've been in the mountains many days now.
The light will not scorch me. The frost cannot touch me.
Nothing can amaze me now.
I've seen worse things in my life.

Title, Hovering at a Low Altitude. Israeli army language to describe helicopter patrols. 

"To hover" (le-rachef) is also slang for "to stay cool, dissociated from the political"


Line 24, Whence cometh my help. Negating Psalm 121:1–2, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord."
I tuck my dress tight around my legs and hover very close to the ground.  
What ever was she thinking, that girl?  
Wild to look at, unwashed.  
For a moment she crouches down.  
Her cheeks soft silk, frostbite on the back of her hand.  
She seems distracted, but no, in fact she's alert.  
She still has a few hours left.  
But that's hardly the object of my meditations.  
My thoughts, soft as down, cushion me comfortably.  
I've found a very simple method, not so much as a foot-breadth on land and not flying, either—hovering at a low altitude.

But as day tends toward noon, many hours after sunrise, that man makes his way up the mountain. He looks innocent enough. The girl is right there, near him, not another soul around. And if she runs for cover, or cries out—there's no place to hide in the mountains.

I am not here. I'm above those savage mountain ranges in the farthest reaches of the East. No need to elaborate.

With a single hurling thrust one can hover and whirl about with the speed of the wind. Can make a getaway and persuade myself: I haven't seen a thing. And the little one, her eyes start from their sockets, her palate is dry as a potsherd, when a hard hand grasps her hair, gripping her without a shred of pity.

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Line 43, *foot-breadth* (Heb. midrakh kaf-regel). Deut. 2:4–5, God enjoining the peo| of Israel: “You are crossing into the territory of your brothers the sons of Esau, who dwell in Seir. . . . Do not provoke them, for I shall not give you of their land, not much as a foot-breadth” (literal translation).

Line 59, *hurling*. Isa. 22:17–18, lit. “Behold, the Lord will hurl you away . . . ; there you will die.” See “The Hurling.”