LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Ki Tavo

Vol. 7, Issue 47 • 15 Elul 5783 / September 1, 2023

BEFORE, AFTER, AND DURING: YEHUDA AMICHAI'S "BETEREM"

Wendy Zierler is Sigmund Falk Professor of Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies at HUC-JIR in New York.

I am a professor of Hebrew literature and a rabbi. And as much as I can, I strive to bring these two parts of my life—the modern literary and the devotional aspects—in conversation with one another.

One way I do this is by giving a mini-class, every Tuesday after our local 6:45 a.m. daily *minyan*, in which I choose and translate a modern Hebrew poem and offer commentary on it in relation to the prayers, the weekly portion, or other matters of the day. I call the class "*Shir Hadash shel Yom*" (New Poem of the Day, a play on the traditional liturgical daily psalm), and I teach it out of a conviction that poetry is intimately connected to prayer, and that modern Jewish (and more specifically, modern Hebrew) literature can serve as a potent, relevant, contemporary form of commentary on our traditional sources.

Not just that: I believe that modern Hebrew literature provides a model for how that which came *before* us—the whole corpus of classical Jewish legal and literary sources—can be enlivened and revivified by what is happening *now*. The Hebrew poetry of Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), for example, with its many references to prior liturgical and theological texts, combined with colloquial contemporary Hebrew, both extends and complexifies our understanding of classical sources, bringing all this prior meaning into conversation with current reality.

Perhaps the best example of this is Amichai's poem "Beterem" (Before), which highlights the theme of "beforeness," even as it intimates the crucial importance of the here and now:

Yehuda Amichai, "Beterem," in *Shirim 1948-1962* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1963), 201.

Before	בְּטֶרֶם
Before the gate is shuttered	בְּטֶרֶם הַשַּׁעַר יִסָּגֵר
Before every word is uttered	בְּטֶרֶם כָּל הָאָמוּר יֵאָמֵר,
Before I become another,	בְּטֶרֶם אֶהְיֶה אַחֵר,
Before wise blood is congealed,	בְּטֶרֶם יַקְרִישׁ דָּם נָבוֹן,
Before things in a closet are concealed,	בְּטֶרֶם יִסְגְּרוּ הַדְּבָרִים בָּאָרוֹן,
Before the cement is sealed,	בְּטֶרֶם יִתְקַשֶּׁה הַבֶּטוֹן
Before all the holes in flutes are closed	בְּטֶרֶם יִסְתְּמוּ כָּל נִקְבֵי הַחֲלִילִים
Before all the rules are disclosed	בְּטֶרֶם יִסְבְּרוּ כָּל הַכְּלָלִים
Before the dishes are disposed[1]	בְּטֶרֶם יִשְׁבְּרוּ אֶת הַכֵּלִים,
Before the law becomes clear	בְּטֶרֶם הַחֹק יִכָּנֵס לְתָקְפּוֹ,
Before God's hands disappear[2]	בְּטֶרֶם אלוקים יִסְגֹּר אֶת כַּפּוֹ
Before we leave from here.[3]	בְּטֶרֶם נֵלֵךְ מִפֹּה.

"Beterem" is a poem that enchants the reader by way of its combination of accessibility and riddling complexity. In twelve short lines, Amichai offers a list of adverbial clauses, all pertaining to time: twelve tribes' worth of transitional moments, before something important happens. The effect of linking these disparate moments into successive trios of rhyming lines is a combination of order and urgency, even anxiety. What will happen before each of these transitions? How can we make sense of these concatenations, and by extension, how do we make sense of our seemingly unrelated, consecutive life experiences?

Before I dive into interpreting the imagery chosen for these transitional moments, I would like to provide a few words on the various biblical Hebrew words for the English preposition **before,** all of which continue to be used in modern Hebrew, rather interchangeably.

There is *lifnei*, which literally means "to the face of"—**beforeness** construed here as standing or occurring in relation to a **face.** And there is *kodem*,

[1] Lit., before they break all the vessels.

[2] Lit., before God's palm is closed.

[3] Lit., before we leave from here.

which refers to east (*kedem*), and which most likely derives its meaning from the sun rising in the east **before** it sets in the west. *Lifnei* and *kodem* both combine spatial and temporal meanings.

The one Hebrew word for before, which is exclusively temporal in meaning is "***terem***" or "***beterem***." In fact, this is the first Hebrew version of the word **before** to appear in the Bible: in a description in Genesis 2:5 of an early stage in the creation of the world, **before** the creation of rain or plants or trees or human beings:

5 It was **before** any shrub of the field was in the earth, and **before** any herb of the field had sprung up; for the Eternal God had not yet caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no human to till the earth;	ה וְכֹל שִׂיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה, טֶרֶם יִהְיֶה בָאָרֶץ, וְכָל-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה, טֶרֶם יִצְמָח: כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה׳ אלוקים, עַל-הָאָרֶץ, וְאָדָם אַיִן, לַעֲבֹד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה.

It is this primary or primeval usage of the word ***beterem*** that furnishes the first description of God in the famous *piyyut* "*Adon Olam*"—אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר כָּל־יְצִיר נִבְרָא מָלַךְ בְּטֶרֶם—the Master of the universe who ruled **before** any other creature was created.

The word ***beterem*** thus takes on a kind of temporal priority, a status of liturgical "**beforeness**," reflected

in that fact that it appears in the first stanza of "*Ben Adam mah lekha nirdam*," the first *piyyut* in the *Edot ha-Mizrah nushah* of *Selihot*, the last stanza of which reads:

Human, why are you asleep? Rise up, call out in entreaty. Pour out words, seek forgiveness, from the Lord Almighty. Wash and cleanse, don't delay, **before** the days turn away.	בֶּן אָדָם, מַה לְּךָ נִרְדָּם, קוּם קְרָא בְּתַחֲנוּנִים. שְׁפֹךְ שִׂיחָה, דְּרֹשׁ סְלִיחָה, מֵ ה׳. רְחַץ וּטְהַר, וְאַל תְּאַחַר, בְּטֶרֶם יָמִים פּוֹנִים.

In his book on Yehuda Amichai's poetry, Israeli scholar -Boaz Arpaly analyzes Amichai's "Beterem" as a catalog poem—that is, a list of time descriptions and subordinate clauses without the accompanying independent clauses. It thus falls to the reader to be an interpretative detective and discern the common principle that connects the items in the catalog.

What is meant to happen "before the gate is shuttered" or "the cement hardens"? What "wise" natural process has to occur before blood can "congeal," allowing a scab to form over a wound and thus, for healing to take place? It's up to the reader to fill in the blanks and to unite the various processes into an interpretive whole.

Arpaly sees the "befores" listed in Amicha's poem catalog as both an optimistic call to do what you can **before** the rules are established, and as a pessimistic declaration about the inevitability of the **after,** which is mortality.[4]

Even though the idea of death is never directly stated in the poem, Arpaly is correct in seeing in the poem the specter of mortality. Those who are

[4] Boaz Arpaly, Ha-perahim ve-ha'agartal: Shirat Amichai: mivnah, mashama'ut, poetikah (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad, 1986), 105-106.

familiar with the varied usage of the preposition "***beterem***" in the Bible will note that this word features prominently in two **before-death** stories, first in Genesis 27:4, when Jacob summons his eldest son Esau to prepare him his favorite food and to bring it to him— בַּעֲבוּר תְּבָרֶכְךָ נַפְשִׁי, בְּטֶרֶם אָמוּת—"so that I can bless you before I die." The same construct appears much later in Genesis in chapter 45:28, where Jacob, hearing that Joseph is actually alive not dead, declares: אֵלְכָה וְאֶרְאֶנּוּ, בְּטֶרֶם אָמוּת—"let me go down to Egypt to see him **before** I die."

If the word ***beterem*** denotes the earliest or foremost **before**—*beterem kol yetzir nivra*, before existence of anything other than God—then the other end of the spectrum, the ultimate **after**, is death.

What Arpaly's reading of the poem misses, however, with its binary focus either on the moment **before** one acts or the ultimate **after** of death, is in the in-between of the present moment, which Amichai's contemporary colloquial style and incomplete sentences, evocative of actions-in-progress, so aptly capture.

Between ***beterem***—that foremost **before**—and ***mavet*** (death)—that ultimate **after**—is the present-tense "**during**" of our lives, which like the reader of Amichai's poem, we are tasked to endow with meaningful content. It is during that present tense that we endeavor to change and make a difference.

Amichai's poem opens with a reference to a famous *Neʿilah piyyut*, which marks the end of the delimited period of repentance during the Hebrew months of *Elul* and *Tishrei* that constitute a concentrated form of "**during**." The

Neʿilah piyyut reads:

Open the gate for us At the time of the locking of the gates For day has turned The day will turn The sun will come and turn And we shall come to your gates	פתח לנו שער בְּעֵת נְעִילַת שַׁעַר כִּי פָנָה יוֹם הַיּוֹם יִפְנֶה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָבֹא וְיִפְנֶה נָבוֹאָה שְׁעָרֶיךָ

By opening with the words בְּטֶרֶם הַשַּׁעַר יִסָּגֵר—before the gates are closed—Amichai conveys the sense of urgency that attends the experience of *Neʿilah*, as emblematic of the existential time pressures and importance of the human present, not just on Yom Kippur, but throughout the normal "during" of our lives.

The High Holy Days begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur, two days that embody beginnings and ends. The theme of the birth of the world, which is attached to Rosh Hashanah, reminds us of the beginning point of time—the foremost **Before**, or ***Beterem.*** On the other end of the spectrum is Yom Kippur with intimations of death. As Rabbi Irving Greenberg explains in his book *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, "On Yom Kippur, Jews enact death by denying themselves the normal human pleasures… On this day, traditional Jews [wear white or] put on a *kittel*, a white robe similar to the shroud worn when one is buried."[5]

These rituals attached to Yom Kippur remind us of the inevitable **after**–that is Death, and our duty to make the most of our lives **before** that time comes.

Filling the present-tense **during** of our lives with meaningful, impactful content is our seasonal as well as our lifetime challenge. The array of metaphors that stack up in Amichai's poem remind us of life's many possibilities and forms, expressed in the things we say, do, make, break, store, play, touch, and leave.

The elements in Amichai's catalog are as different from one another as they are the same, embodying the concrete, literal, and secular, on the one hand, and the abstract, metaphorical, and liturgical, on the other.

There is the reference in line 2 to things being said, a description both mundane and holy, resonant of everyday conversation, of God's

[5] Rabbi Irving Greenberg, The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 186-187.

speaking the world into existence in Genesis 1, as well as to the recitation of prayers.

A similar mix of mundane and holy appears in line 3 in the expression *ehyeh aher*, which can be translated simply as "I'll become different"—as in the process of *teshuvah*, when one strives to become a better person, cleaving more closely to God's commandments—or I'll become an *Aher*, an Other or apostate, like the heretic Elisha ben Abuyah, and abandon the Torah entirely.[6]

The reference in line 5 to things being closed up in an *aron* is another such example, given that *aron* can connote either a closet, a bookcase, a synagogue ark, or a coffin. The various connotations of this word combine the semantic fields of the religious and the secular, as well as the various "durational" options of one's lifetimes. One's possibilities or identity can remain hidden in a closet, can be opened and explored like the books on a bookcase or the Torah in an ark, or can be forever sealed away with death, as if in a coffin.

Likewise, the reference in line 7 to the stopped-up openings of flutes (*nikvei ha-halilim*): one can play a flute only if one sufficiently covers its holes. At the same time, "*nikvei ha-halilim*" also reminds us of the *asher yatzar* blessing, which praises God for fashioning our bodies with wisdom and creating *nekavim, nekavim, halulum, halulim* (many openings and cavities), that if stopped off, result in death. The proximity of the word *halilim* (flutes) to *halalim* (battle victims) also adds another, especially somber intimation of mortality, that is, of lives cut tragically short by war.

And then there is the reference in line 9 to *shevirat ha-kelim*, a breaking of the vessels, which denotes wanton destruction but also evokes the Lurianic account of Divine Creation of the cosmos. According to this kabbalistic account, a cosmic breaking of the vessels occurred as part of Creation, scattering a mixture of shards and sparks throughout the world. From this account of the breaking of the vessels comes the call during the "during" of our lives to gather the sparks, perform *mitzvot*, and engage in the ongoing pursuit of *tikkun ha-olam,* of repairing the broken world.

Amichai's poem is a call to action out in the world, but it also is a call to meditation and deeper consciousness of the value of every second in our lives.

The final line of the poem, "*Beterem nelekh mi-poh*"—before we all get up and leave from here—drives all of this home. Set in a Zionist context, this line is a direct response to a classic Zionist poem/song by poet Avigdor Hame'iri (1890-

[6] See for example, Hagigah 15b.

1970), entitled "*Lo nelekh mi-poh*":

We won't (31X) leave this place All our enemies All our haters Let them all leave here But we Won't leave This place.	לֹא (X31) נֵלֵךְ מִפֹּה כָּל אוֹיְבֵינוּ כָּל שׂוֹנְאֵינוּ כֻּלָּם יֵלְכוּ מִפֹּה אַךְ אֲנַחְנוּ אַךְ אֲנַחְנוּ לֹא (X15) נֵלֵךְ מִפֹּה!

Hame'iri's poem/song, which includes more than thirty repetitions in each go-around of the word "lo" offers a stubborn statement of determination to stay put in the land. What Amichai's poem acknowledges, and what we acknowledge every year at this time of year, is that even if we don't want to, eventually, *nelekh mi-poh*—we shall indeed leave this place. No matter how determined we are to stay where we are, life eventually pushes us to that elsewhere and afterward of death.

Considered in the context of synagogue prayer, *beterem nelekh mi-poh* prods us to make something meaningful of that time, while we are still sitting in the pews, before we get up and go home, and/or before we leave this world.

Often we speak of redemption and change as taking some time in some far-off future, as in the *Aleinu* prayer, when we imagine a future, perfected messianic time when "God's name" will finally "be One." Or we seek out redemption nostalgically in the past, חַדֵּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם, in the ***kodem*/before** times of our deceased ancestors.

What Amichai's "Beterem" teaches, however, is that while we are enjoined to remember our past, and while we are charged to imagine a better, future day—the real work of repentance and redemption occur not in the past or the future, but in the durational present of our lives.

Lost Literary Worlds: A Review of David Torollo's edition of Yedaya ha-Penini's *Sefer ha-Pardes*

Tamar Ron Marvin holds a Ph.D. in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Studies.

David Torollo. Sefer ha-Pardes by Jedaiah ha-Penini: A Critical Edition with English Translation (Open Book Publishers/University of Cambridge, 2022). https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0299.

Yedaya ha-Penini (c. 1285-c. 1340) is a fascinating, lesser-known figure from medieval Provence, a Jewish community whose considerable contributions were disrupted, dispersed, and largely lost to subsequent Jewish culture on account of the expulsions of Jews from France in the fourteenth century. A new translation, with a brief contextual introduction, aims to introduce a youthful work of Yedaya's to an English-speaking audience. Like *Behinat Olam*, the belletristic ethical poem for which he is best known, *Sefer ha-Pardes* is a poem of advice written in *melitza*, a turbid literary style often florid to modern ears but beloved of the chattering classes of medieval Sefarad and later Provence, too. One of the most interesting aspects of *Sefer ha-Pardes* is its closing section, which deals with rhetoric and poetics. We don't have a plethora of medieval Hebrew writing on the topic, making this a rare treat for scholars and lovers of Hebrew literature. Undoubtedly, the work bears historical significance and literary interest, and David Torollo's bilingual edition supports both Hebrew readers looking to check their understanding as well as English readers. But why *Sefer ha-Pardes*, and why now?

From the beginning of the academic study of Judaism in the nineteenth century and continuing apace until the mid-twentieth century, overlooked Jewish texts of scholarly significance were edited and introduced, usually in German, French, and later Hebrew. These freshly-edited texts were vaulted out of obscurity, often out of manuscript, and sometimes even back into the canon. Such editions remain important today, even as they lie in scattered volumes of defunct periodicals and dusty books tucked deep in the stacks (sometimes, in the recesses of the internet). It is no longer in academic fashion for doctoral students to select a forgotten text to publish as their dissertations, with the result that the field is still in want of many a critical edition—or any edition at all. This raises the question of priority: Which texts should be worked on next? And which should be furnished with a labor-intensive English translation? These questions are, of course, another way of asking: *What deserves to be read?*

For all the work of Artscroll and Koren, Sefaria and Al-HaTorah, the English-speaker with limited Hebrew bumps up against walls surprisingly soon. One only needs to go as far as the familiar Vilna daf to find that Rashi and Tosafot have no reliable direct translation. Of course, most English translations supply extra words based on Rashi, and the internet boasts at least one line-by-line English version of Tosafot, if a rough one. Still, reading Talmud commentary in English is a heavily mediated experience. It might be argued that the absence of

Tosafot on the Talmud in English creates an urgent translation need, which is currently in the process of being addressed by Artscroll. If a minor character like Yedaya ha-Penini stands barely a chance to pass before the eyes of the twenty-first century Anglophone audience, perhaps that is a matter of priority.

Or, perhaps, we might maintain that works carry inherent value that cannot be algorithmically ranked or subjected to majoritarian concerns—that they are uniquely valuable and deserving of access. This tension between the cultural influence and aesthetic worth of a text must be reconciled by each capable editor-translator who selects their next project, and by each potential reader who selects theirs. It is acute pedagogically, where educators must decide whether to pursue Hebrew-Aramaic literacy or depth of content knowledge for those with limited original-language facility. Making *Sefer ha-Pardes* available in English stakes a claim that aesthetic value and depth of inquiry are important.

Sefer ha-Pardes is surely a window into a lost world, with its late-medieval interest in the liberal arts, the didactic pleasure it takes in instructing its readers morally, and the linguistic play that clearly delights its seventeen-year-old author. [Yedaya ha-Penini's father was the noted Hebrew poet Avraham ha-Bedersi (of Béziers), who wrote, among other works, a poem called *Elef Alefin* (A Thousand *Alephs*), in which, as promised by the title, every word begins with the letter *alef*. Yedaya himself wrote a spin-off, *Bakashat ha-Memim* (The Request of the *Mems*), in which, yes, every word begins with a *mem*.)[1] "The king fears two people: the doctor and the artist," Yedaya opines.[2] "Learning is like food, and stories arouse the appetite."[3] Sections of such pithy epigrams are interspersed with longer parables, all within the conceit of the request of Yedaya's friend for "a [written] memorial of universal principles on human moral attributes."[4] Like the audience for whom Yedaya was writing, those with literary inclination will surely enjoy the peek into Yedaya's cultural values.

A particularly intriguing parable is included in the "Chapter on isolation from this World and the Mention of *meshalim* [parables] about Its Hostility." It involves a classical theodicy question: a woman whose pious husband dies young seeks to understand how a benevolent and judicious God could allow such a tragedy to occur. In Yedaya's words:

> When the man died, his wife, due to her great bitterness and fear, was utterly seized by suspicion of the order…as if she considered [his death a matter of] injustice and unfairness. She would go crying and lamenting to houses of learning and gatherings of rabbis, [asking

[1] The attribution of these two poems is debated, with some contending that they were both written by Yedaya.

[2] *Sefer ha-Pardes,* ed. Torollo, 116/117 [106a], l. 664.

[3] *Sefer ha-Pardes,* ed. Torollo, 114/115 [106a], l. 651.

[4] *Sefer ha-Pardes,* ed. Torollo, 23/24 [106a], ll. 8-9.

> whether] the judgment required [the death of a young man who never committed a sin or dwelt on idleness in his youth], and looking for an explanation, since it is supposed that the pursuit of integrity, fear of God, and perseverance in studying [Torah] prolong the lives of people…[5]

On display here is Yedaya's youthful tendency to self-righteousness (though, it must be emphasized, filtered through an accepted literary genre) and his relative inexperience with crafting language, which would find greater maturity in his later works. The moral of his story will ring no sweeter to modern ears, as the women's arrogance is revealed by a wise sage using the analogy of a fig tree:

> The sage replied: 'Look, my daughter, do you see if [the man picking figs] is differentiating between the thick and the thin ones while picking?' She answered: 'No sir, but I see that he is picking the ripe ones, whether they are thick or not.' Then the sage said: 'My daughter, the fig tree is this world, its owner is the Creator, may He be blessed; the picker of the figs is the will of God; his providence is the judges; men are the figs; the thin ones are the children and the thick ones are the elderly; the ripe ones are the God-fearing and eminent; while the unripe ones are those detested by God and the wicked…'.[6]

Bristle though we might at the sage's, and Yedaya ha-Penini's, insensitivity and moral complacency, we have here the opportunity to understand better the comfort the parable gave to its premodern readers. The deceased husband was, after all, beloved of God; he was simply ripe, ready to be picked, and his death should not be understood as punitive.

Much of the pleasure of reading *Sefer ha-Pardes*, it must be said, resides in the Hebrew, rather uncomplicated by medieval belletristic standards, and therefore plausibly accessible to most readers of Hebrew. The content of *Sefer ha-Pardes* is largely of interest to scholars of the period, also ostensibly Hebrew readers, though a lone scholar specializing in one or another European vernacular might benefit from having access to the text for comparative purposes. This begs the question of a need for a translation. Though lengthier, the more influential *Behinat Olam*, something of a best-seller, judging by the healthy number of extant manuscripts and early printings, is a contender. Yedaya is also the author of a literary-polemical response to Judah Ibn Shabbetai's *Minhat Yehudah Sonei ha-Nashim* (Judah the Misogynist) in defense of love and women, arguably of greater interest, in spite of the literary pretensions of the medieval

[5] *Sefer ha-Pardes,* ed. Torollo, 82/83 [104a], ll. 421-434.

[6] *Sefer ha-Pardes,* ed. Torollo, 83/84-85/86 [104a], ll. 447-455.-

genre, to a contemporary audience.[7]

These questions are heightened by Torollo's slim introduction, which is a focused look at *Sefer ha-Pardes* and its place in Hebrew literature. He chooses a narrow focus, largely omitting Yedaya ha-Penini's other, multifaceted literary contributions from the introduction. The aptly-titled section, "Didacticism: What to Know and How to Feel about It," is a welcome introduction to the genre. A more robust overview of Yedaya ha-Penini's life, however, might have framed this youthful work within the larger story of Jewish Provence, providing the reader with additional material that is largely locked away in specialty literature and which, unlike Torollo's work, is generally not open-access. But this is a road not taken, and this edition of *Sefer ha-Pardes* remains strictly specialized.

Torollo's translation is, overall, clear and transparent. At times a more literal approach might have better captured the language of the original: for instance, where ha-Penini characterizes ethics (*musar*) as *parperet*, an appetizer or side dish, Torollo translates the phrase as, "*musar* comes second" (with *musar* untranslated; he does note, in a footnote, the literal meaning of *parperet*). Another translation choice Torollo makes is to render *dat* according to its modern meaning, "religion"; I tend to favor "law" or "legal tradition" but sometimes "custom" or "tradition" is appropriate. The relatively frequent use of the term in *Sefer ha-Pardes* is certainly worthy of note. The question of whether a fourteenth-century person could have had a conception of what we moderns mean when we talk about religion is a complex one, and worth raising rather than eliding.

From a scholarly and literary perspective, there is no question that Torollo's edition of *Sefer ha-Pardes* has great merit. He writes in his acknowledgements that the translation originated in a larger, postdoctoral project comparatively examining Arabic, Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, and Castilian didactic literature. As such, it is a scholar's gift to the reading public to make available completed work he had done in the course of the project. That being said, the English reader misses much in translation and attains little in terms of intellectual edification or historical meaning.

[7] A substantial English translation of *Yehudah Sonei ha-Nashim* by Raymond P. Scheindlin is available in David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky, *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 269-294.