CREATOR, ARE YOU LISTENING?

Israel Poets on God and Prayer

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Indiana University Press / Bloomington and Indianapolis
The purpose of this book is to challenge the conventional wisdom that Hebrew poetry by contemporary Israeli writers is essentially secular in nature. Because Hebrew poetry published since the nineteenth century has been so intertwined with the spread of secularism in Jewish culture, there has been a persistent reluctance on the part of many readers to acknowledge the pervasiveness of religious themes in modern Hebrew poetry in general, and in Israeli poetry in particular. The truth is, however, that a considerable number of Hebrew poets writing in the Diaspora and in the Land of Israel over the past one hundred years in which modern Hebrew poetry has reached its highest levels of aesthetic achievement have explored the theological dilemmas of modern Jews and suggested new ways to write about God.

These Hebrew poets inherited a distinguished literary tradition from the biblical period through the Middle Ages of writing about God in Hebrew, which, according to the Jewish tradition, is the language of divine revelation. Although many had a problematic relationship with traditional Jewish faith and the observance of Jewish law, these poets could not escape the impulse to search for God's presence in their lives. They knew that the primary barrier to religious faith was the tendency of religious language to lose its vitality and relevance over time, so they persisted in reworking the language of the psalms, the traditional prayer book, and medieval sacred poetry to develop an idiom that reflected both their sense of the absence of God and their search for the possibility of discerning God's presence.
The fact that this body of poetry is in Hebrew places it in a unique position to come to terms with secular challenges to religious faith. André Neher notes an important difference between the secularization process that European Christians underwent from the Renaissance to the modern period and that which European Jews underwent from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. For European Christians, he writes, “the conflict between the sacred and the profane implied a rivalry between the secular languages and the holy tongue— in this case, Latin—and the progress of secularisation was reflected in the abandonment of Latin for the national languages.” In contrast, observes Neher, for those Jews who were committed to the development of Hebrew as the language of national renaissance, “the secularisation [took] place within the sacred tongue itself [Hebrew].” It is this choice to make use of the Hebrew language to express the move toward secularism that has kept Hebrew writers connected to the very sacred culture against which they have sought to rebel. “Chosen to be the instrument . . . of a profane and secular conquest of the world by the Jewish spirit,” writes Neher, “the Hebrew language at the same time prevented that spirit from becoming entirely secular, since the tongue in which it expressed itself remained, despite everything, sacred in its origins and in its close association with the liturgical and scholarly Hebrew which was still in use in the synagogue.” Neher insists that even in contemporary Israel, in which Hebrew serves as the vernacular of its Jewish citizens, the secular has not succeeded in defeating the sacred. Both dimensions continue to be engaged in a creative tension, because, as he puts it, “Jewish culture contains an ineradicable theological element which will not allow it to disregard the absolute.”

Writing at the end of the first decade of Israel’s existence, Eli Scheid expressed surprise at the fact that younger Israeli writers, particularly those who write lyrical poetry, evoke God in their literary works. “Young Hebrew poets,” he wrote, “whose worldview and lifestyle have no connection to religion, turn to God as if forgetting their worldview, and bother him with prayer, supplication, and blessing . . . ?” The problem, is observed Scheid, that when they evoke God, the writers “do not attempt at all to explain to themselves and to the reader to what they are referring.” While these poets may not express any explicit identification with traditional Jewish theological concepts, they are, according to Schaid, engaged in the universal longing for some form of religious experience: “The actual prayer gesture and the actual words of prayer are not fictitious, the need to pray is real and it is liable to create in the heart of the poet an actual feeling of ‘standing before,’ although this feeling still does not constitute standing before something real, and certainly not standing before God.”

Ariel Hirschfeld has observed that God continued to play an important role in later Israeli poetry: “[T]he impression that the divine presence, both as a private presence that draws on the power of the inner world of the poet and as a presence that bears with it something of the traditional religious contexts of God, was cut out of the secular world of Hebrew poetry of the nineteen-sixties, seventies, and eighties, is a mistaken impression.” In response to the recent insistence by a literary scholar that modern poetry is mainly secular in nature, Hirschfeld wrote: “The matter of religion has not only not been outside of the thematic of Hebrew literature . . . but also not at its margins. It is among the most central, if not the central matter. Faith, its contents, its struggles, the presence of God, the ways of contacting Him, and the forms of His revelation in the world, in the life of the individual and the community, religious experience, mystical and non-mystical, the love of God, are all matters of concern in the greatest parts of the writings of [the major twentieth-century Hebrew writers].” Indeed, argues Hirschfeld, “the most serious writing about [Jewish religious experience] during the past one hundred years, took place precisely and mainly in Hebrew literature, in the context of what it is customary to label 'secular.'”

Although he is a member of a secular kibbutz, Zvi Luz has played a leading role in the exploration of religious themes in modern Hebrew poetry. One could argue that he is the most prolific writer on this topic in contemporary literary criticism. In numerous monographs on modern Hebrew poets, Luz has explored specific examples of poetic conceptions of God in their work. In a recent essay on images of God in twentieth-century Hebrew poetry, Luz declares that “the God problem,” which is apparently the primary problem of our Jewishness in the modern period, still “flickers” (as [the Hebrew poet] Bialik would say) in the depths of the majority of our cultural expressions. As it flickers it becomes ignited in a most interesting and representative manner in modern Hebrew poetry, especially in the course of the twentieth century.” In this body of poetry, he argues, the “high tensions between faith and herey [are exposed], clarifying the difficulties and revealing answers,” if answers are ever still possible.” To those who would argue that only conventionally pious statements could be of religious value, he retorts, “In my opinion, it is better to listen to the [Theological] difficulties of true poets than to the official positions of ‘ordained’ rabbis, whose obligations to ‘teaching’ in the traditional manner obscures their creative originality.”

As noted above, throughout most of the twentieth-century Hebrew poetry on religious themes was written primarily by authors with a problematic relationship with traditional faith and observance. The best known exceptions to this rule were the religiously observant poets Yosef Zvi Rimon (1889-1958) and one of the poets in this study, Zelda Mishkovsky (1914-1984). Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, significant numbers of believing, religiously observant writers began to publish poetry on religious themes. As the poet and literary scholar Hamutal Bar-Yosef observes, this new trend has unequivocally established religiosity as one of the central elements of Israeli poetry in recent decades. She goes so far as to say that as the result of the emergence of this literary movement, “it is now impossible to say that secularism is the central question of Hebrew literature in our time. Alongside secular Israeli literature stands today
a literature that puts forth spiritually varied additional possibilities." Two poets included in this study, Hava Pinhas-Cohen (1955-) and Admiel Kosman (1957-) are often cited as leading figures in this movement, although, as we will see, they are not as conventionally religious in their private lives as many of the other poets who have contributed to it.

The religious dimension of modern Hebrew poetry has been featured in four anthologies of Hebrew poetry on religious themes, one published over fifty years ago, and the others more recently. In selecting which poems to include and in their introductory comments, the editors of these anthologies make important contributions to our understanding of the nature of religiosity in modern Hebrew poetry. In 1945, the publishing house of the Orthodox yeshiva Mosad Harav Kook published an anthology, *Burak va'adon: yelqut shirei tefillah attigim gam hadashim* (Singing Together: A Collection of Prayer Poems Both Ancient and Modern), edited by A. M. Habermann. The poems included in this anthology range from the early *payyetanim* (liturgical poets) of the Land of Israel to Hebrew poets of the first decades of the twentieth century. The more recent poets include both observant and non-observant Jews. In Habermann's introduction, he makes clear his belief that, in some sense, the modern poems included in the anthology have contributed to the continuation of the tradition of Hebrew liturgical poetry, even if, as he notes, the intention of the modern poets has not been to create "public prayer in the synagogue." This notion of the modern poet as *payyetan* caused Habermann to limit his selection of poems. "And as for the modern poets," he writes, "I only included poems that had in them some aspect of prayer and religious liturgy." In this anthology, the poets' works are presented in chronological order, but there is no table of contents. The only listing of the poets is in an index at the end of the book, which presents the poets in an integrated manner arranged alphabetically according to the last name of the poet, thereby reinforcing the notion of an equal religious significance shared by ancient and modern poets.

The three more recently published anthologies reflect an unprecedented intensification of interest in Israel in the religious dimension of Hebrew poetry toward the end of the twentieth century, which corresponds with the emergence in Israel of a greater number of religiously observant poets discussed above. The first of these anthologies, *Va'am tefillati: shirat hatefillah shel messorerim berei zemanenu* (Behold My Prayer: Prayer Poetry of Contemporary Poets, 1991), edited by Hillel Weiss, covers twentieth-century Hebrew poetry of Europe and Israel. Unlike Habermann, Weiss does not seek to equate modern religious poetry with traditional liturgical poetry by including both in the same anthology. Nevertheless, he does signal to the reader that he sees a connection between these modern poems and traditional expressions of faith by referring to them in the subtitle of the anthology as "prayer poetry" (shirat hatefillah) and by including throughout the anthology quotes from traditional Jewish sources that relate intertextually with the poems. Weiss explains that he "tried to trace the phenomena of the spirit and the dialogue between a nation and its God in the field of prayer during the past one hundred years, since the period of the [Jewish] national revival. I did this by including different types of prayer poems that constituted a voice for the generation and for the individual. This book attempts to reconnect them to sacred expressions and thereby to signal the possibility of healing to an extent the ruptures that developed in the House of Israel since the days of the 'Haskalah [Enlightenment].'

Weiss allowed himself greater latitude than did Habermann in his selection of poetry. He notes near the beginning of his introduction, "Perhaps the inclusion of some of the poems will arouse wonder and perhaps also complaints in some circles." As examples of possibly objectionable poems, he cites a poem by Yona Ratosh, known for his radical anti-traditional "Canaanite" ideology, and another poem by the contemporary Israeli poet Be'eri Hazak that would appear to be heretical in nature. In Ratosh's poem, Weiss argues, elements of the Jewish tradition are much more central than references to the poet's anti-traditional worldview, while the central question in Hazak's poem — Where is God? — is actually found throughout traditional texts, including the Torah and Psalms. Despite the relatively broader principle of selection employed by Weiss, as a traditionally observant Jew he still puts greater religious value on poetry written by observant Jews than that written by non-observant Jews. "In this collection," writes Weiss, "are included prayer poems by religious [i.e., traditionally observant] people, but there is no intention here to turn into religious poetry the poetry of those who are not like that [i.e., religiously observant]." Perhaps certain sparks of faith flicker in a poet, but that does not turn him into a religious person who sees in Jewish law and faith the core of his existence.

The second anthology to appear in the 1990s, *Elahim Elahim* (God God, 1992), edited by Amir Or and Irit Sela, was published as an issue of *Helicon Poetry Quarterly*, a periodical devoted to the publication of contemporary poetry. The title has a playful tone to it that signals a less religiously conservative approach than those of Habermann and Weiss. While the other anthologies bear titles that come from traditional sources, the term *Elahim Elahim* is an invention of the editors. In his introduction, co-editor Amir Or is clearly intent on pushing the definition of religiosity beyond the bounds of traditional Jewish conceptions. He draws his understanding of the nature of religious poetry less from traditional Jewish texts and more from the history of Western literature since antiquity. He notes that unlike today when we consider poetry and religion to belong to different realms, in antiquity all poetry was connected to the religious worldview that permeated Western humanity. "Even if today it will not occur to people to identify poetry with religion," he writes, "relations between the poetic and religious domains have always existed." This continues to be true today from Or's point of view. "[P]oetry that deals
with the human experience of the sublime or the holy includes not only poetry that is explicitly religious or poetry that turns directly to God, but rather it includes to no lesser degree poetry that struggles in its search for a way beyond the individual ego. Such poetry connects extremely isolated points of view to a focused religious perspective, whether it is that of an individual or it is created in a cultural context. Here poetry expresses moods that range from the longing to break through the enclosed ego to an abundance of experiences of the metapersonal.  

Clearly, there is an attempt here to expand the definition of religiosity beyond the traditional language of faith in order to make it accessible to secular readers who, it is suggested, can relate their own longing for the metapersonal to the poetry included in the anthology. Central to this approach is the notion that there is a kind of generic religious experience beyond specific cultural elements in which individuals transcend themselves. Such religious experience, according to Or, can even include what appears to be heretical or radically secular:

A perspective of protest or denial is liable to express a deep religious feeling, and even atheistic thought systems express themselves on more than one occasion bearing the same emotive weight and armed with the same symbolic and metaphorical religious jargon. Whether we speak of a doctrine of secular redemption (communism, fascism, pacifism, etc.) or an individualistic method to arrive at a trance that would transcend the ego (aesthetics, love, sex, insanity) — it is difficult to miss the religious ethos and pathos.

True to the universalistic orientation of its editors, the anthology includes religiously observant and nonobservant contemporary Israeli Jewish poets with a wide range of theological perspectives who write in Hebrew, as well as Hebrew translations of works by poets from a variety of cultural backgrounds who write in Arabic, English, French, Polish, Tunisian, Serbo-Croatian, and Finnish.

The third anthology, Shirat hadashah (A New Song, 1997), edited by Miron Issacon and Admial Kosman, was published as an issue of the literary journal Aperion. As in Elahim Elohim, the range of poetry is quite broad and the selection of Israeli poetry is contemporary. Both editors are well known for their own poems on religious themes. Their purpose in producing this anthology, as Admial Kosman puts it, is to collect “the best of the poems of those writers [including themselves] whose poetry has an affinity for religion.” In his preface, Issacon writes, “It is important for us to emphasize in this anthology the intensifying closeness between questions of faith and Jewish identity [on the one hand] and poetry [on the other]. This closeness is expressed in a variety of ways, sometimes by the use of language from sources of other periods of history, sometimes by emphasis on elements of thought.” Of particular importance to Issacon is the role that the Jewish tradition can play in enriching Israeli poetry and the way that such an enriched Hebrew poetry can contribute to the viability of Israeli culture.

A full consideration of Israeli poets who have explored the nature of religious experience is far beyond the scope of any one book-length study. I have chosen to focus on the works of six Israeli writers whose poetry has been published during a period that stretches from the late 1950s to the beginning of the twenty-first century: Zelda Mishkovsky (1914-1984), Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), Asher Reich (1937-), Rivka Miriam (1932-), and Admial Kosman (1957-). Whenever one seeks to understand a literary phenomenon by focusing on a limited selection of writers, inevitably the question arises: why were these and not other poets chosen? My initial response to this question is to confess that, in part, I chose these poets because I found myself personally drawn to their poetry. Beyond my subjective point of view, however, I do believe that the poets included in this study constitute a good basis on which to engage my fellow scholars and lovers of Hebrew poetry in a consideration of the religious dimension of Israeli poetry. I purposely chose to consider three men and three women, not merely to conform to current notions of political correctness, but because I am convinced that gender differences (whether of a biological or cultural origin) influence religious perspectives to some degree, and so it is important to consider poetry by both male and female writers.

The most significant justification for my selection is that each of these poets has had a direct personal involvement with the world of traditional Judaism as well as with modern Western culture. It is their position as mediators between the world of traditional faith and that of modern skepticism that allows us to gain important insights into the challenges of renewing the language of faith in recent decades. Zelda Mishkovsky was raised in a traditional Jewish home that was open to the influence of modern Western culture, and she remained religiously observant her entire life. Yehuda Amichai and Asher Reich were brought up in traditional Jewish homes (Amichai in a modern Orthodox Zionist home and Reich in an Ultra-Orthodox home), and while both ceased to fully observe the tradition in which they were raised, much of their poetry has continued to be informed by the language of traditional Jewish faith. Rivka Miriam’s father was a yeshiva-trained Holocaust survivor who had lost his faith as a youth, yet he imbued her with a love of Jewish tradition and made sure that she received a traditional Jewish education. While she does not formally identify with any religious Jewish community in Israel, she has maintained an active interest in the study of traditional Jewish texts, and her ways of writing about God reflect her ongoing immersion in Jewish study. Hava Pinhas-Cohen was raised in a politically leftist secular home, but became religiously observant and began studying traditional Jewish texts as a young adult. Admial Kosman was raised in a modern Orthodox home, studied in a yeshiva, and has taught Talmud at an Orthodox Zionist institution of higher learning, Bar ilan University. Nevertheless, his own theological thinking is quite iconoclastic.

These poets adopt a variety of approaches to God. They address God directly,
convey experiences of sensing God's presence or lamenting His absence, and reflect on the nature of God. Some poems partake of a degree of prayerful piety in which the speaker conveys a sense of intimacy with God as either petitioner or celebrator of God's praises. Other poems are burdened by agonizing doubts about God's existence in a world that is so plagued by moral chaos. In some poems, the speaker expresses anger or even mocks God for His failure to help humanity in times of trouble. A number of poems explore the nature of prayer itself.

Poetry and Theology

Poets have always played a central role in creating language that conveys the nature of religious experience. Moreover, whatever theological language is created by one generation of poets is inevitably transformed by a later generation of poets dissatisfied with how the understanding of divinity has been expressed in the past. The contribution of poets to the renewal of the language of religious faith was well understood by nineteenth-century European Romantics, who looked to artists in general to provide the most viable responses to criticisms of religious belief. As J. Hillis Miller writes, "romanticism . . . define[d] the artist as the creator or discoverer of hitherto unapprehended symbols, symbols which establish a new relationship across the gap between man and God. The artist is the man who goes out into the empty space between man and God and takes the enormous risk of attempting to create in that vacancy a new fabric of connections between man and the divine power."10

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European-born Hebrew writer Haim Nahman Bialik was not as confident as the Romantics in the ability of the poet to restore harmony between humanity and God. Nevertheless, he saw the poet as a kind of hero of words who is able to negotiate the complexities of the relationship between human beings and the mysteries of existence. In his 1915 essay "Gillir yekhissiy balashon" ("Revelation and Concealment in Language"), Bialik writes of poets as "the masters of allegory, of interpretation and mystery [who] spend all their days in pursuit of the unifying principle in things ... They are uniquely qualified to do so, according to Bialik, because they have the ability to reinvent language and thereby put us in touch as much as is humanly possible with the divine mysteries lying behind that which separates us from ultimate reality. "[These] masters of poetry," he writes, "are forced to flee all that is fixed and inert in language, all that is opposed to their goal of the vital and mobile in language. On the contrary, using their unique keys, they are obliged to introduce into language at every opportunity never-ending motion, new combinations and associations."11

Writing in the spirit of Bialik's essay, Yochanan Muffs has argued more recently that poets are uniquely qualified to come closest to ultimate truth and convey some sense of that truth to others. "The poet," he writes, "is essentially a visionary who strives to penetrate the outer core of reality, to enter its holy of holies and to see reality in all its clarity and horror. To do this, he converts his being into a sensitive instrument capable of reacting to every nuance of reality, of every insight hidden in stereotyped words and everyday speech."12 In seeking to discern the reality which lies beyond existing language, the poet undertakes what most people avoid doing, according to Muffs, "He realizes ever so painfully that man is afraid of confronting existence in all of its grandeur and horror and that words are more often used to block out reality instead of transmitting it; that the palliative of words may be necessary for others, but not for him: he wants to feel directly, to see immediately, to strip words of their protective coverings in order to penetrate the very core of reality—to behold the vision of reality in all of its intensity."13

Of course, much theological reflection has been expressed in prose form. Nevertheless, as Jakob Petuchowski suggests in a series of rhetorical questions, prose formulations of theology are of limited value: "What if [religious] experience transcends the capacity of rational discourse? What if it involves aspects of the human personality which lie beneath the level of consciousness? What, finally, if, by its definition, the very subject matter of theology eludes the human grasp?"14 It is poetry, not prose, argues Petuchowski, that best conveys the human understanding of God. "[T]heology is compelled to rely on intimations," he writes. "When we speak of something of which we only have hints and intimations, we can speak of it likewise only in hints and intimations. We can allude to it, and we can suggest it; but we can hardly formulate it in propositions which will pass muster before the bar of logical rigor. We had, therefore, best express it in the images and the nuances of poetry."15

Since poetry, suggests Petuchowski, is to a large extent closer than prose to the primary experience of God, he calls on theologians to admit "that the data with which theology is working are data derived from a realm of poetry and myth."16 Like Bialik and Muffs, Petuchowski believes that poetry has an important role to play as a renewer of theology. "If poetry is the medium through which 'normative' theology ('normative' at least for its time and place) best expresses itself," he argues, "then poetry becomes a still more fitting medium for the expression of theological views which, even if they are not fully heretical, nevertheless represent a challenge to what has become normative and conventional."17

The free play of imagination in poetry is a key to its effectiveness as a vehicle for expressing religious insight. As Gordon Kaufman argues, there is a universal human need to exercise the imagination in order to develop a conception of God. "The mind's ability to create images and characterizations, and imaginatively to weld them together into a unified focus for attention, contemplation, devotion, or address, is at work in the humblest believer's prayers as well as in the most sophisticated philosopher's speculations,"18 writes Kaufman. "In this respect," he
declares, “all speech to and about God, and all ‘experience of God,’ is made possible by and is a function of the constructive powers of the imagination.”

Since metaphors have always played a central role in this process of imaginative construction, poets have much to contribute to any culture seeking to express its relationship with the divine. “Metaphors . . .,” writes T. R. Wright, “provide perhaps the most important means by which language is stretched beyond the literal in order to talk of God. They play an important role in the Bible and in traditional doctrinal discourse. But they are absolutely central to poetry . . .” They abound in Gerard Manley Hopkins, who stretches language to the breaking point, and in the metaphysical poets, who violate expectations by linking sacred and profane in a series of striking metaphors.41 Like Bialik, Muffs, and Petuchowski, Wright looks to literature in general and poetry in particular to renew religious language. “It is this [ability to devise new metaphors],” he writes, “which gives poetry its potential to generate new meaning.” It is essential for poets to keep inventing new metaphors, argues Wright, because “[i]t is . . . only too easy for metaphors to become over-familiar.”42 Once they do, they lose the multi-dimensional complexity that is crucial for a fully expressive religious language.43

This focus on poetry as the most profound conveyer of theological understanding would seem to distance religious discourse from the rational scientific thinking that is so central to Western culture. In recent decades, however, there has emerged a growing appreciation of the similarities in the ways that literature, religion, and science engage in the apprehension of reality. Robert Schabbel has observed that these three modes of human discourse are connected by the fact that they depend on metaphors “to construct and tell the truth they keep on finding to tell.”44 This is so because, as Schabbel puts it, “metaphor is at the very core of the conceptual system with which we get a grasp on the world.”45 Whether we are engaged in the writing of works of literature, theology, or science, metaphor is the key to our ability to know absolute truth, and thus all we can do is approximate reality in metaphorically based language. “[R]eligion, literature and science . . .,” writes Schabbel, “are vehicles for rowing us out to the thick darkness, each exploring its own particular kind of darkness, each providing its own kind of metaphors and its own kind of provisional clarity. Each is a field of exploration useful for cutting through particular kinds of ignorance so that we can then confront the mystery that inevitably lies just on the other side of our forever opaque language.”46

Poetry and Religion in Our Time

Poets seeking in the context of our secular era to fulfill their role as renewers of the language of religious discourse have faced special challenges. As is well known, contemporary Western culture is the product of a series of cultural up-
terized by mutuality of trust and love." Langdon Gilkey writes of the ways one can rediscover God precisely as one confronts the abyss of meaninglessness: "[W]e begin to notice, to see, and to feel the immense creativity of the 'given' in life, those aspects of our being which neither we nor anyone else can create and yet which are the foundation of all that we are and love." He then goes on to observe that "[i]t is this creativity of the given that other cultures have celebrated as the main positive or to-be-loved side of the ultimate or the sacred."  

Poets in our time wish to express the possibility of reconnecting with the divine by means of the kinds of mythic imagery that have always served to express the nature of religious experience. For those like some contemporary poets who, in the words of George Steiner, have "found agnostic secularism more or less unendurable," 9 the answer has been to reconnect with the power of religious myth from which modern culture has been so distant for far too long. As explorers of mythic imagery, poets are well equipped to contribute to this necessary process of what Steiner calls "remythologization." 10 The frequent tendency of poetry to allude to the world of myth helps to reverse what Colin Falck refers to as the "mythic decline [that] took place in the modern world in the face both of the rational thought-systems of seventeenth-century philosophy and science and of the manipulative or technological thought-habits which were their inseparable accompaniment." 11

Myth has always served as the basis for religious experience, and poetry reconnects us with an appreciation for the centrality of mythic thinking in matters of religious faith. "Since there is little reason to suppose that human biological nature has significantly changed during the period in which our more rational and intellectual modes of comprehension have come about," writes Falck, "it seems likely not only that myth and mythic consciousness must lie at the origin of our subsequently more fully-articulated linguistic awareness, but also that the most important structures of our fully-articulated linguistic awareness will continue to fall within the outlines of myth and will be most satisfyingly open to 'explanation' through an assimilation to mythic patterns—some at least of which we share with the mythic consciousness of the ancient world." 12 Falck does not advocate the abandonment of rational thought. Instead, he calls for "an integrated mode of vision which comprises both the perceptual and the subjective or spiritual, and which we can recapture from the viewpoint of a later cultural stage only through a unifying and metaphorical effort of poetic imagination." 13 Like the Romantics, who reacted so strongly "against the mechanistic philosophies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries . . . ," argues Falck, "it is to the poetry or literature of our own culture (and to what is . . . accessible to us from other cultures) that we have increasingly found ourselves looking for a re-mythologizing of our spiritual landscape." 14

The body of poetry I will consider in this book reflects the radical break from religious tradition that was so characteristic of the twentieth century and continues to have a strong impact on us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, as each poem explores the range of possible orientations between the two extremes of skepticism and faith, it makes a significant contribution to the search for a religious discourse appropriate to the religious crisis of our time. Whether these poems speak of God's presence or absence, they always have much to say about the contemporary search for the divine, and, being of our time, these poems speak in uniquely direct ways to our most central spiritual concerns.
Three poets, Rivka Miriam ("In the beginning God created..."), Kosman ("When That Man Was Killed"), and Pinhas-Cohen ("A Woman’s Mourner’s Kaddish"), write of thread or strings that somehow connect humanity on earth with God in heaven.

In some poems, nature imagery represents God’s presence in the world. In Zelda’s “The Delicate Light of My Peace,” the patterns on a butterfly’s wings are signs from God. In another poem by Zelda, “At This Thought-filled Hour,” God’s presence is experienced as “a very faint tremor / passing among the leaves as they meet / the morning light.” In Zelda’s “Island,” the rediscovery of God’s presence in the midst of an experience of anxiety is portrayed as “an island in the vortex.” In Amichai’s “Footprints of birds in the sand by the sea...,” the footprints of birds in the sand are analogous to signs of God’s presence in the world. Rivka Miriam explores the relationship of God’s spirituality to our materialism by means of the image of a pear and its peel (“The Pear of Pearns”). In Rivka Miriam’s “Booths,” God is the ephemeral branches of the sukkah top. Pinhas-Cohen writes in “Photosynthesis” of the way that God’s inspiration of human beings may be analogous to the effect of light on plants.

In their poetry on God and prayer, these writers struggle with the question of whether we can discern in our largely secular existence an ultimate source for meaning, self-worth, or assistance in times of need, as well as guidance in how to conduct our lives. They are clearly not satisfied seeking enlightenment only in the usual secular sources, such as rational thought, science, social convention, or human fellowship. But, at the same time, they are all too aware of the limitations of the traditional language of faith to fully convey their own contemporary exploration of religiosity. As they reshape the language of tradition and invent new language, they write openly about how often they feel abandoned by God and also affirm the occasional glimpses of God’s presence that they experience. Underlying all of this poetic expression is a desperate desire for a contemporary equivalent of faith in the traditional God of Israel as the guarantor of meaning and security in this world.

Some might argue that, precisely because each of the six poets considered in this study has had some involvement with the world of traditional Judaism, my choice to focus on them has had the effect of “stacking the deck” in order to support the underlying thesis of this book that matters of religious concern are a central element in Israeli poetry. I admit that it is easier to demonstrate the significant role that God and prayer play in the works of such poets. It is because of that fact that it made sense to me to choose them. I do believe, however, that future studies of many other Israeli poets less directly connected to the Jewish tradition in upbringing or education will reveal that they too cannot escape the universal human drive to find some form of transcendent meaning that is analogous to the spiritual insights of the Bible and all subsequent Jewish religious literature.

NOTES

Introduction

1. In recent discussions of the religious nature of Israeli poetry, the literary scholar Dror Eydar has dismissed most modern Hebrew poems on religious themes as not truly religious. In an article in the literary supplement of Haaretz, Eydar acknowledges that modern Hebrew poetry is replete with references to God, yet he dismisses these as not referring to actual religious experience. “Modern Hebrew poetry,” he writes, “was born at the time of the death of God... The Jew of God... was replaced by new value concepts... The name of God, and even His image, which continued to appear in literary works... became from then on not more than a hollow idea, resembling references to the names of Zeus and the other gods of Olympus, a kind of interesting cultural folklore phenomenon that assumed, way back at the beginning of history, the existence of a supreme power that guided world history, and in particular His chosen people, and judged humanity for its merits and failings.” He then goes on to assert that even these references to God, so empty of vital content, became rarer over time: “But these references became fewer as the years passed, the more that modern Hebrew literature became distanced from its starting point. The God of Israel became a marginal, neglected character; other matters more pressing and compelling, were placed on the agenda and pushed aside concern with Him.” See Dror Eydar, “Elon ha-gadlu ma‘aynay levave: Men tram beferure shira: Elohim bishirah ha‘ivrit (A),” Haaretz, 21 May 2004. See also Dror Eydar, “Talmah tishq’a, aleh, kashemesh, aleh od: Elohim bishirah ha‘ivrit (B),” Haaretz, 25 May 2004. In an article that appeared later that year, Eydar presents the definition of religious poetry with which he is most comfortable, as poetry “written by a poet (1) obligated in his private life, in some way or another, to the accepted halakhic Jewish religious legal norms; (2) belonging, in some way or another, to the religious populace, including all of its different shades and trends (including the Ultra-Orthodox and the semi-Ultra-Orthodox); (3) who is accepted as such by various external circles, literary critics, the various communications media, and the general public.” Dror Eydar, “Bishirah ha‘ivrit hadah ha’kol: apiryonim, hagadiot ve‘alot ha‘ivrit,” Agudatot 15 (2004): pp. 34-39. At one point in this article, however, Eydar indicates some openness to the existence of “religious poetry written by poets who are not observant of the Torah and the commandments.” Ibid., 34. For an analysis by Eydar of the poetry of the religiously observant Hebrew poet Yosef Zvi Rimon (1889-1958), see Dror Eydar, “Shirat yamim ushebaqin be-libha: Yosef Zvi Rimon be-besefat ha‘aliyah ha-sheniyyah,” Jewish Studies, An Internet Journal 4 (2005): 61-107 (http://www.biu.ac.il/JIS/SIJ/4-2005/Eydar.pdf).
2. I am not the first to argue for a proper recognition of the religious dimension of modern Hebrew poetry. In 1990, the poet and scholar Simon Halkin, who himself wrote poetry of a religious nature, declared, “It is commonly assumed that modern Hebrew poetry is almost exclusively secular. Yet nothing could be farther from the truth than this popular notion which even the student of Hebrew literature tends to share with the average reader.” Simon Halkin, Modern Hebrew Literature: From the Enlightenment to the Birth of the State of Israel: Trends and Values (New York: Schocken, 1990), 159. To support his case, Halkin devoted two chapters of this brief history of modern Hebrew literature to a consideration of the religious dimension of modern Hebrew poetry of Europe and the Land of Israel. Halkin’s contemporary, the literary critic Baruch Kurzweil, spent much of his career vehemently arguing that the secular, anti-religious spirit of modern Hebrew literature constituted a radical break from the literature of the Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, even he recognized the ongoing importance of religious issues and the persistent presence of notions of divinity in modern Hebrew literature. “When we speak of an anti-religious affect as an important motif in our modern literature, which characterizes its secularism,” he wrote, “we do not refer to an anti-deist or anti-theistic position, and we do not intend to argue that atheism is a characteristic of our literature.” Baruch Kurzweil, Sifratenu ha-habadash: hemeshek o mapekhekha? (1959, repr. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1965), 44. See also James S. Diamond, Baruch Kurzweil and Modern Hebrew Literature (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983).


4. Ibid., 24.

5. Ibid., 24.


8. Ibid., 82.

9. Ibid.


11. Hirschfeld was referring to the articles in Haaretz by Dror Eydar (see intro., n. 1).

12. Ibid. One cannot separate the question of how secular or religious Israeli poetry is from the larger cultural context of secular and religious trends within contemporary Israel. Although these two trends have often been polarized, there is much evidence for the fact that the boundary lines between the secular and the religious in Israel are not as firmly drawn as is often assumed, and that frequently members of each camp venture into the realm of the other. This blurring of the distinction between the secular and the religious finds its expression, in part, in the poetry included in this study. For discussions of the interaction of secularism and religiosity in Israeli culture, see Charles S. Liebman, ed., Religious and Secular Conflict and Accommodation between Jews in Israel (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1990); Charles S. Liebman and Elihu Katz, eds., The Jewishness of Israelis: Responses to the Guttman Report (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); and Yair Shlechter, Hashatb’shat bet heve’er Yisrael (Jerusalem: Keter, 2000).


14. Luz, Meravim im ha’Elohim, 120.

15. Ibid.

16. Writing in the preface of an anthology of poetry on religious themes that was published in 1989, the poet Erez Biton speaks of “a group of poets growing in recent years that is characterized by a strong relationship to Jewish faith either directly or indirectly. Most of these poets are religious [i.e., traditionally observant], but not necessarily. A faith-based religious trend is not new in Hebrew poetry. Fascinating figures like Yosef Zvi Rimon and Zelda were like shining stars, but were limited, individual cases; however, now we are witness to a phenomenon that has almost become an actual movement.” Erez Biton, “Tether ha’Elohim, 127. Dvir Eydar more recently referred to this trend as follows: “Toward the end of the twentieth century there emerged, albeit with some hesitation, an extensive wave of religious [i.e., traditionally observant] female and male poets who aspire to integrate into the existing poetic discourse, without sacrificing their spiritual and cultural world, parts of which were essentially different from the prevailing tone of the hegemonic trend in Israeli literature.” Dvir Eydar, “Hashanah ha’ivrit hedatit,” 32. Eydar notes in an essay that two journals in particular served as important vehicles for the development of this trend. Dimun, edited by one of the poets in this study, Hava Pinius-Chen, and Mashiv ha’arah, edited by young religiously observant Israelis. An anthology of selected poems from the first decade of its existence may be found in Mashiv ha’arah 17 (2005). The journal Pesiqot, edited by the poet Itamar Yaaqov-Kest, who became religiously observant as an adult, has also played a role in fostering this trend. For a discussion of Yaaqov-Kest’s poetry on religious themes, see David C. Jacobson, “Bless Each Day That Passes: The Search for Religious Faith in the Poetry of Itamar Yaaqov-Kest,” in Religious Perspectives in Modern Muslim and Jewish Literatures, ed. Glenda Abramson and Hilary Kilpatrick (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), 34-54. For a discussion of a comparable phenomenon, in which religiously observant Israelis have played an increasing role in film and television production, see David C. Jacobson, “The Ma’aleh School: Catalyst for the Entrance of Religious Zionists into the World of Media Production,” Israel Studies 9, no. 1 (2004): 31-60.


19. Ibid.

20. The recent appearance of these anthologies would seem to have brought about what Halkin predicted in the middle of the twentieth century: “The historians and critics have developed this view of the nonreligious character of Hebrew literature so suc-
cessfully that it may take decades to correct their error and place the so-called secularism of this literature within its legitimate bounds.” Halkin, Modern Hebrew Literature, 179.


22. Ibid., 7.

23. Ibid., 5.


25. Ibid., 4.

26. Ibid., 3.

27. Israeli and Kosman, eds., Shirat hadasheh, 3.

28. Ibid., 2.

29. Another recent, mystical anthropology, which seeks to expand the definition of religious poetry even to those poems not explicitly on religious themes, is Oded Mizrahi, ed., Hamishim shiniha bikhun: het honem ha-hrit ha-habadosheh al pi penimiyut ha-torah (Fifty Meditative Poems: Meditations on Modern Hebrew Poetry Based on Jewish Mysticism) (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Sifri Tide, 2000). An example of this attempt to collect poetry only by observant Jews is Pincas Pelis, ed., Emunim (Jerusalem: Masada Harav Kook, 1974). In this brief preface, Pelis writes that the themes of the poetry in the anthology are “like the themes of all poetry of our generation, but we believe that the way of life of these poets, the atmosphere of Torah and the observance of commandments in which they are located, is reflected as in a mirror in their poetry.” In this preface and in that of an accompanying anthology of prose by religiously observant writers that he later published (Pincas Pelli, Hamishim sipurim (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1956), Peli expresses the hope that this body of literature by religiously observant writers will make a significant contribution to the world of Hebrew literature, which has been dominated by non-observant Jewish writers. See also the discussion of religious themes in modern Hebrew poetry from a religiously observant point of view in Avraham Bitan, Orbat enunim (Tel Aviv: Meshekat, 1985).


34. Ibid.


36. Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

37. Ibid., 4.

38. Ibid., 4-5.


40. Ibid.


42. Ibid., 130.

43. Ibid., 132.

44. “A dead metaphor,” observes Wright, “loses the tension between its two senses, settling on a single meaning ... Literature ... sets out to defamiliarize, foregrounding its violation of the literal and advertising its difference from ordinary language.” Ibid., 133.

45. As George Steiner notes, “religious thought and practice metamorphose, make narrative images of the, the ruins of the human psyche with absolute otherness, with the strangeness of evil or the deeper strangeness of grace.” George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 147. “It takes unnameable strength and abstention from recognition, from implicit reference,” observes Steiner, “to read the world and not the text of the world as it has been previously encoded for us ... The exceptional artist or thinker reads being anew ... Because we are language and image animals, and because the inception and transmission of the fabric (the mythical) is organic to language, much, perhaps the major portion, of our personal and social existence is already bespoken. And those who speak us are the poets.” Ibid., 135. Emphasis in the original.


47. Ibid. As Garrett Green puts it, “Paradigms serve the imagination analogically: by their likeness to the objects they exemplify. In the natural sciences, analogies are frequently embodied in models, which can be articulated in theories. In literature, metaphor is the typical analogical structure, the means by which the poet or novelist creates an imaginative world using the same words ordinarily employed to describe the everyday world.” Garrett Green, Imagining the Religious Imagination (1998; repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 69.


49. Few contemporary theorists, writes Frank Burch Brown, “question the thesis that metaphor, far from being a mere ornament, plays a crucial role in language almost every kind, from the scientific to the aesthetic. Many, following Aristotle’s lead, view metaphor as the central figure of speech and thought ... [M]any students of metaphor are convinced, as I am, that its unique semiotic properties are correlated with equally unique epistemological and pragmatic potentials ... From such a perspective, metaphor is seen as having the capacity to provide highly significant transformations of language, thought, and experience — transformations of a kind not duplicated by other linguistic strategies.” Frank Burch Brown, Transfiguration: Poetic Metaphor and the Languages of Religious Belief (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 4-5.

49. An articulate formulation of the crisis of religion in our time has been presented by David Tracy: “We are those Westerners shaped by the eighteenth-century scientific revolution, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and the nineteenth-century industrial revolution and explosion of historical consciousness. We late-twentieth-century Westerners find ourselves in a century where human-made mass death has been practiced, where yet another technological revolution is occurring, where global catastrophe or even extinction could occur. We find ourselves unable to proceed as if all that had not happened, is not happening, or could not happen. We find ourselves historically distanced from the classics of our tradition ... We find ourselves distanced even from ourselves, suspicious of all our former ways of understanding, interpreting, and acting.” David Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope (1987; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.

50. As J. Hillis Miller puts it, “Man the murderer of God .. . wanders through the infinite nothingness of his own ego. Nothing now has any worth except the arbitrary value he sets on things as he assimilates them into his consciousness. Nietzsche’s transvaluation of values is the expunging of God as the absolute value and source of the valuation of