# **Yeshurun, Avot (1904–1992)**

# Throughout his life, Avot Yeshurun remained split between two cities: his childhood village Krasnistav and the city of Tel-Aviv, where he lived until his death. Born on Yom Kippur, 1904, in Neskhyzh in the Ukraine, Yechiel Perlmutter (his original name) grew up in Poland. At the end of World War I he experienced displacements and exiles, and by 1925 arrived in what was then Palestine. After World War II, he discovered that his whole family had been liquidated, and his world collapsed: "Hebrew literature will set the prayer", he said, alluding not only to the breakage the Jewish people underwent, but to the disaster that left its mark on the twentieth century and threw the entire lyrical tradition into question. The story of his name-change (in 1948) from Yechiel Perlmutter to the Hebrew name Avot Yeshurun (literally: "the fathers will see", but the poet paraphrased it as "For the fathers mirror in us") is re-told in his poetry and prose as a narrative of abandonment and betrayal, endowing him both with a subjectivity that is incomparable in Israeli Modernism and with the authoritative speech of the witness.

# Yeshurun forged a personal idiom that embodies the breakage he suffered in his severance from family and home. His writing, molded as a "human being" marked by time and history, radically challenged Israeli poetry in its language and themes, in its refusal to participate in the Israeli rejection of the Diaspora and the Yiddish, and in its regard for the plight of the Palestinian other. Contrary to Zionist and Israeli modernist resistance to fusing canonical Hebrew poetry with foreign voices, Yeshurun envisages a symbiotic relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish, one modeled on his mother's tongue. This, in turn, becomes a model for all polylingualisms. Yeshurun received belated recognition when, just before his death, he was awarded the Israel Prize in 1992.

His first poem was published in *Turim*, a modernist review, edited by Avraham Shlonsky, a leading poet of the time. Yeshurun's first book, *Al Khachmot Drachim* (On the Wisdom of Ways, 1942), depicted his dissonant encounter with Eretz Israel (The Land of Israel). His language unravels the analogy between the lot of the displaced Jew and the one who is soon to become the expelled Arab. The troublesome issue of identity continues to preoccupy him in his second book, *Re'em*(See to Them, 1961). In his provocative "Pesach-al-Kukhim" (Passover on Caves, 1952) poem whose political radicalism prompted a series of parodies, he exposes conflicting attitudes to the issue of "abandoned property" and challenges the notion of one homogenous view of the land.

In *Shloshim Amud shel Avot Yeshurun* (Thirty Pages of Avot Yeshurun, 1964), (reference to the thirty days of Jewish mourning), he translates his relatives' letters from Yiddish into Hebrew. This book represents Yeshurun's first experiment in lending speech to the absent by using unpoetic language, omitted syntax, jarring rhymes, and implanting alien emphases and mispronunciations. Such de-standadization of Hebrew evolves into an explicit dialogical principle in *Hashever Hasuri Afrikani* (The Syrian African Rift,1974)and *Kapella Kolot* (Chapel of Voices, 1978).

His famous prose passages from this period formulate this concern further. By legitimizing the Yiddish speech that "sold hot doughnuts in Warsaw's streets", Yeshurun challenges Hebrew as the central source of imagery and allusions that preserved the continuity of canonical Hebrew poetry throughout its long history and wide geographical dispersal. His unique vowel-less script that evolved in the 1980's likewise calls attention to the dissonance between Yiddish vocality and Hebrew orthography. In this regard, his style, shaping new ways to echo the lost mother tongue, is akin to Hebrew translations of familiar phrases from sacred texts.

In the 1970's and 1980's, along with Yona Wallach, Meir Wieseltir and Yair Hurvitz, Yeshurun published in the influential quarterly *Siman Kri'a* (1972), edited by Menakhem Perry. His eccentric, radical ethos and his strength in evolving a language that was not that of the collective led to his central role within this avant-garde group known as the Tel-Aviv poets, for whom he served as a prototype. Rediscovering the Romantic poet Bialik and attracted by his autobiographical poems, these younger poets were intent on creating, out of their private worlds and in a personal idiom, counter-mythologies to the grand Zionist narrative.

*Hashever Hasuri Afrikani* (1974), which was written during and shortly after the 1973Yom Kippur War, marks a turning point in Yeshurun's poetry and in its reception. Its opening cycle, which expresses the shock of unexpected war, responds to the cracks that had cleaved the Zionist dream and reveals the fear of aberration and the distress caused by the Zionist repression of the Shoah experience, manifests a daring poetic historiography. As he explores the Syrian African Rift as a geo-political event, his investigation awakens previous traumas that disrupt the narrative thread, causing it to unfold through displacements in memory rather than through chronological linking. Examining the process by which the poet has become a witness, Yeshurun abruptly shifts from the Jewish Day of Atonement in a Tel-Aviv synagogue to a childhood memory; then to the shattering of the statel, on to a fateful event on the poet's own birthday and from there to the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. Whatever has happened in the past occurs again as a breakage in a new intersection. The unsettling montage oscillates from the historical to the personal perspective, from deep engagement to a clinical perspective, as he attempts to observe the effects of the breakages from a distance, creating a fresh if disturbing perspective on a series of traumas woven into collective and personal memory.

With his last two books (1990, 1992), his 1980's avant-garde poetry evolves into a testament, or what he named "The work of re-membering". His last poems on Jesus and Mary, witnessing, and the poet's own dying close the cycle of death and birth begun in his 1932 "Ballad of Mary Magdalene and Her White Son" (1932). Here the language of prayer and entombment crystallizes into warm, raw speech. The broken musicality is built on translating anew ancient languages through the mother tongue, in a living voice, here and now.

**List of Works**

Yeshurun, Avot (1995–2001). *Kol Shirav* I-IV, ed. Benjamin Harshav and Helit Yeshurun. Tel-Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, Siman Kri'a.

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**References and Further Reading**

Gluzman, Michael (2003). "The Return of the Politically Repressed: Avot Yeshurun's 'Passover on Caves'", in *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modern Hebrew Poetry.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lachman, Lilach (2000). "'I Manured the Land with My Mother's Letters': Avot Yeshurun and the Question of Avant-Garde", *Poetics Today* 21, 1.

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Stahl, Neta (2012). "'Why Have You Forsaken Them?': Jesus in the Poetry of Avot Yeshurun", in *Other and Brother: The Figure of Jesus in the 20th Century Jewish Landscape*.New York: Oxford University Press, 147–162.

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**Film**

*Avot Yeshurun* (1990), directed by Amir Harel. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPJIOk4Ad7k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPJIOk4Ad7k" \t "_blank)

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