Homelands and Diasporas

Homelands and Diasporas:

Perspectives on Jewish Culture in the Mediterranean and Beyond

A Festschrift for
Emanuela Trevisan Semi

Edited by
Dario Miccoli,
Marcella Simoni
and Giorgia Foscarini

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INTRODUCTION: ACROSS AND BEYOND THE GREAT SEA

DARIO MICCOLI, MARCELLA SIMONI AND GIORGIA FOSCARINI

In the course of centuries, Jews had numerous homelands and were divided in dozens of different diasporic communities. Some of these were and are located in places far away from the biblical Land of Israel, such as the US, Latin America, Africa, India and China. Other diasporas, many of which nowadays are largely vanished, were instead very close to the ancestral Jewish homeland: think of the Jews of Syria or Iraq. For all, the Land of Israel–and, after 1948, the State of Israel–and its Mediterranean surroundings represent a familiar scenario, in which biblical memories and future hopes are located. But what is this sea all about? And where are its boundaries to be drawn?

For the French historian Fernand Braudel, the Mediterranean is "not a landscape, but innumerable landscapes. Not a sea but a succession of seas."[1] David Abulafia understands it as a space of many names: *mare nostrum*, *Mittelmeer* or, in Hebrew, *Yam ha-gadol* (Hebrew: "Great Sea.")[2] Nowadays, the Mediterranean seems to have lost much of its evocative power as a sea of encounters and dialogue, to become a divisive space, full of visible and invisible frontiers that bespeak both old and new ethno-religious and national struggles. It is true that if one looks at the Mediterranean from the point of view of classical Judaism, one of its alleged key-features–that is connectivity and the existence of social, cultural and commercial exchanges between different people of the region

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This introduction has been written collectively by the editors; specifically, Dario Miccoli is the author of pp. x-xii, Giorgia Foscarini of pp. xiii-xv and Marcella Simoni collaborated to the final revision.

[1] Fernand Braudel, "Méditerranée," in *La Méditerranée. L'espace et l'histoire*, ed. Fernand Braudel (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), 8.

[2] David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), XXIII.

–does not seem to be so prominent, since a kind of particularistic identity often dominated biblical Jewish culture. Even though an element of particularism has been always present in Jewish history, early modern and modern Mediterranean Jewish societies took a more ambivalent path when it came to intercommunal and interethnic relations: one of proximity and reciprocity, of exchange and confrontation.[3] The Mediterranean and its outer ramifications–that at times include continental Europe, Africa and other territories–were for many both a homeland and a diaspora, a space of refuge and where to build a better life, but also a region of conflict and persecution.

Homelands and Diasporas understands the Mediterranean as a historical and socio-anthropological trope through which looking at a variety of Jewish experiences of dialogue and clash, exchange and enmity, migration and settlement, both inside and outside the spatial boundaries and geographical reality of the Mediterranean region.[4] The former is a point of departure, from where to start travelling through Jewish history and identity and try answering different questions that are crucial for the field of Jewish Studies in the twenty-first century.

The volume takes 'homeland' and 'diaspora' as two overarching themes piecing together contributions that, in some cases, have to do with quite different topics and different methodological perspectives. In relation to the notion of 'homeland'–intended either as the mythical and biblical Land of Israel or, later on, as one of the many empires and nation-states where Jews lived, ending with the advent of Zionism and the birth of the State of Israel–the volume looks at it as a space where Jewish identities develop and are discussed. It can be a real, physical territory or an imagined one, or in some cases take the contours of a city, a nation, a feeling of belonging or else.

Secondly, there is no need to acknowledge to what extent the 'diaspora' has been crucial in the formation of a Jewish cultural identity, both before and after the diffusion of the Zionist movement. Considering the boom in Diaspora Studies and the recent advancements of the field, it might be useful to conceive this category in a nuanced manner as "a synchronic cultural situation applicable to people who participate in a

[3] See: Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), esp. 21-44. Consider also the five-volume work by Shlomo D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-1988).

[4] David Abulafia, "Mediterraneans," in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. William Vernon Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64-93.

doubled cultural (and frequently linguistic) location".[5] More than of one Jewish diaspora, one should perhaps talk of many diasporas, each experiencing Jewishness in its own way–so as to confirm that Jews, Amos Oz wrote, always have been "a plural noun with numerous singularities."[6] Thus, in the volume we reflect upon how different Jewish communities communicated and exchanged ideas, what kind of traditions and customs developed in Jewries far away from the ancestral homeland, and that came in contact with other religions and ethnicities; how Jews remember and express themselves in the literary arena or, finally, how the birth of the State of Israel modified the idea of diaspora itself and what consequences this has at a sociological, political and cultural level.

The organisation of the volume

This volume is divided in three parts. Part I–made of nine chapters–is a collection of essays by various scholars who have worked and researched with Emanuela Trevisan Semi, or who have been inspired by her research and intellectual travels to carry their studies further.

In the first chapter, Tudor Parfitt, linking his work to that of Emanuela Trevisan Semi on Jews and their presence in the African continent, treats the question of settlement of Jews in West Africa. In particular, he deals with Jewish influences along the coast of Africa from the sixteenth century on. The second chapter by Shalva Weil, spans over Emanuela Trevisan's interest on Ethiopian Jewry, and more specifically on the figure of Jacques Faitlovitch–one of the first scholars to research on the situation of the *Beta Israel* in Ethiopia–and then on the life of Eremias Essayas, one of his forgotten disciples. The third contribution by Yolande Cohen and Noureddine Harrami originates from yet another of Emanuela Trevisan's research path, that on the memory of the Jewish communities in North Africa, notably Morocco. Dealing with the history of a former synagogue in Meknès, this chapter sheds light on a number of interesting ethnological aspects of Jewish life in the *mellah* of Meknès in colonial and contemporary times. On the same line, dealing with the memories of Jewish communities outside Israel, the fourth chapter by Giorgia Foscarini turns to Poland, to analyse the history and activities of the Grodzka Gate as the case of a cultural institution preserving Jewish memory and material

[5] Daniel Boyarin, *A Travelling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 19.
[6] Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 176.

cultural heritage in what once was a central corner of the Ashkenazi world. The following four chapters shift the focus from the Diaspora to the State of Israel. In the fifth chapter, Dario Miccoli discusses an Israeli rabbi and writer, Haim Sabato–born in Cairo in the 1950s and nowadays known as the 'Sephardic Agnon'–to see how the Diaspora and the Land of Israel are portrayed in his literary works. The sixth contribution, by Ilan Greilsammer, deals with the present day Israeli socio-political situation, regarded from the standpoint of the relationships between religion and secularism, in a state defined since its inception as 'Jewish'. The seventh chapter of this collection, by Marcella Simoni, follows up on another interest of Emanuela Trevisan Semi, the role of museums in processes of national identity formation in Israel or in a diasporic context. Simoni's paper on the role of toys in the formation of national identity in the 1950s and 1960s in Israel was inspired by various exhibitions at the Eretz Israel Museum and other centres in Israel. The eighth contribution by Uri Ben-Eliezer treats the case of the so-called 'new wars' as a mode of waging war in the post-Cold War era. Using the Gaza Wars as an example, Ben-Eliezer frames a new theory to explain such events, discussing the Israeli civil society as well as more traditional actors such as political leaders and institutions. Finally, the last contribution is by Oren Yiftachel who wrote a paper in collaboration with Ravit Goldhaber and Roy Nuriel. Here, they explore the relations between recognition and justice, in the context of the unresolved land and planning disputes between Bedouin Arabs and the Israeli state in the area surrounding the city of Beer Sheva, in southern Israel.

For reasons of time, diverging academic interests or family matters, not all the friends, pupils and present and former colleagues of Emanuela have been able to write a scholarly piece of research to be included in this volume on *Homelands and Diasporas*. Despite its geographical breadth, it still maintains a focus on Jewish history and Israel Studies and Emanuela Trevisan Semi's research can hardly be contained in one box, regardless of how stretched. For this reason, in Part II, the editors have collected a set of testimonies of people that, in a more informal tone, tell their personal and professional encounter, intellectual exchange, friendship and the fruitful cooperation developed in the course of the years (and decades) with Emanuela Trevisan Semi. Finally, the volume ends with Part III, that we have called 'the crop', i.e. a bibliographical appendix listing the publications of Emanuela Trevisan Semi from the journal articles published soon after her graduation in the early 1970s up until today. We are sure that the list will continue to grow even more rapidly now and we are looking forward to new exciting discoveries and debates.

For the editors and for all those that, in various ways, contributed to *Homelands and Diasporas*, this is our way to honour Emanuela's academic itinerary and her great contribution to the field of Jewish Studies. For all of us she is a colleague, a mentor, a professor and most of all a sincere friend. This volume is a collective and much heartfelt thank you for the rigorous training, the generosity and the kindness that we all received over her long career, across and beyond the shores of the Great Sea.

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CHAPTER FIVE

"BECAUSE OUR PATH HAS NO END": DIASPORA AND LAND OF ISRAEL IN THE NOVELS OF HAIM SABATO

DARIO MICCOLI

A Cairo-born Jew, rabbi and grandson of rabbis, "Sephardic Agnon", cantor of the Eastern Jewish tradition, headmaster of a *yeshivah* in the West Bank settlement of Maʿaleh ʿAdumim. These are some of the definitions that can be given of the Israeli novelist Haim Sabato, whom – even though little known outside of Israel – represents quite an intriguing author of contemporary Hebrew literature. In this chapter, I present Sabato and his literary work, focusing in particular on the novels *Be-shafrir heveyon* ("In the beauty of concealment," 2014), the Sapir Prize *Te'um qavanot* ("Adjusting sights," 1999) and *Boʿi ha-ruah* ("The wind comes," 2007). The three books are based upon Sabato's personal story and set in the decades that go from the 1950s to the Kippur war (1973). They can be read as a personal literary voyage that, however, also reveals the tensions between Jewishness and Israeliness, Diaspora and return to the Promised Land, as well as the cleavages between *mizrahim* and *ashkenazim* that exist in Israel.

Haim Sabato was born in Cairo in 1952. He grew up in a traditional and religiously observant milieu, counting among his ancestors a number of important Cairo- and Aleppo-based rabbis and scholars, for example his maternal grandfather rabbi Aharon Choueka.[1] He moved to Israel as a child and lived in the neighbourhood of Qiriyat Ha-Yovel, Jerusalem. The

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In this chapter, I always quoted from the English translation of Haim Sabato's works when one was available. All citations from *Be-shafrir heveyon* are my translation from Hebrew.

[1] See his biographical profile in: Zvi Zohar, "The halakhic and religious literature," in *Egypt*, ed. Nahem Ilan (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Tzvi, 2008), 105 [Hebrew].

neighbourhood, initially known as Beit Mazmil, expanded in the 1950s to host Jewish migrants from the Arab world in newly built *shikunim* ("housing projects"). It is there that Sabato studied in religious schools and then moved to the renowned *Yeshivat Ha-Kotel*, in the Old City. In his early twenties, he was drafted in the army and fought in the Kippur war, an experience that left an indelible mark on him–as well as on many other Israelis of that generation. Later he attended the *Yeshivah Merkaz Harav*, one of the centres of religious Zionism, became a rabbi and founded near Ma'aleh 'Adumim the *Yeshivah hesder Birkat Moshe* which combines religious and military training.

From Cairo to Beit Mazmil

Sabato is in many ways an exception both when compared to other contemporary rabbis and scholars, as well as to other Israeli writers of Egyptian ancestry. In relation to the former, Sabato is considered a moderate voice, following the steps of rabbinical figures like the French-born Aaron Lichtenstein and distancing himself from neo-Hassidic ideals to propose a more nuanced approach to tradition and the *halakhah*.[2] When compared to Israeli novelists of Egyptian origin like Yitzhaq Gormezano Goren, Ronit Matalon or Nissim Zohar, Sabato instead is far from the usual portrayal of Egypt as a cosmopolitan environment, populated by polyglot and secularised men and women, who dreamt of Paris and spent the summer on the shores of Alexandria.[3] This kind of Egypt features little in Sabato's works and what is evoked, mainly is a familial environment whose contours faded upon migrating to Israel: "From time to time, mother told about her childhood, about Egypt, the school of the *Lycée* and all she had left there in Cairo. Her youth was left in Cairo, the books, the

[2] See Haim Sabato, *In quest of your presence: conversations with rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2011) [Hebrew].

[3] Let me refer to Dario Miccoli, "Another History: Family, Nation and the Remembrance of the Egyptian Jewish Past in Contemporary Israeli Literature," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 13/3 (2014): 321-39. On the history of the Jews of twentieth-century Egypt: Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews of Modern Egypt, 1914-1952* (London: IB Tauris, 1989); Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Michael Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt, 1920-1970: In the Midst of Zionism, Anti-Semitism, and the Middle East Conflict* (New York: New York University Press, 1992) and Dario Miccoli, *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s-1950s* (London: Routledge, 2015).

notebooks, the documents and her childhood friends and she liked to remember this in her stories."[4]

That of Sabato is not the typical Egyptian Jewish family, and while its members resented the Francophilia widespread among many Jews of early twentieth century Cairo, they nourished profound ties with the Land of Israel and its Hebrew culture too. In *Be-shafrir heveyon*, the protagonist's mother recalls how in Cairo her brother Jacko, "when he grew up, he used to lay under our big table, immersed in the books of Lamartine, De Musset, Verlaine. […] Father [i.e. rabbi Aharon Choueka] collected [books] from anywhere he could get them. The short stories Agnon published with Shtibel, *Giv'at ha-hol*, *Leilot*, we did not know who Agnon was and what kind of name Hemdat was. But we were moved, through the stories and Hemdat the scent of the Land of Israel came [to us]."[5]

Surely it is not a coincidence that Shmuel Yosef Agnon, one of the greatest modern Hebrew writers, is evoked–here and in others of Sabato's books, for example in *Emet me-'eretz titzmah* ("The truth will go forth from the land," 1997)–as an author frequently read in the family. As mentioned at the beginning, some critics argue that Sabato represents a kind of contemporary Agnon. This similarity is not due to the setting of Sabato's novels, that are quite distant from the surrealist and oneiric atmosphere so typical of Agnon, but to language and the usage of literary motifs derived from Jewish religious literature and folklore–even though from a Middle Eastern instead of *ashkenazi* perspective. One could think of intertextuality as another element that characterises the literary production of both writers,[6] to the point that it is possible to conceive their works as one story divided into several chapters and with recurring themes, characters and places. In the case of Sabato this is something that comes out of each of his novels too, that in some cases–for instance *Be-shafrir heveyon*–are made of interconnected short stories that do not necessarily follow a linear plot.

However, Sabato's poetics and approach to tradition are very different from Agnon's. Whereas for Agnon, "modern Hebrew literature […] is nothing less than a substitute for the sacred texts," for Sabato the two, the

[4] Sabato, *In the beauty of concealment* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2014), 53.
[5] Sabato, *In the Beauty*, 54. *Giv'at ha-hol* ("The hill of sand", 1919) and *Leilot* ("Nights", 1913) are two of Agnon's early short stories, published by the German publisher Shtibel. Hemdat is the name of one of the protagonists.
[6] Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Postfazione", in Shmuel Y. Agnon, *Racconti di Kippur* (Florence: Giuntina, 1995), 74.

secular Hebrew and the sacred Jewish texts, are part of a same canon.[7] In thinking so, Sabato shows to what extent he belongs to a line of literary and philosophical thinking different from that of Agnon. He continues a typically Sephardic rabbinic and scholarly approach that, at least since Ottoman times, mediated between past and present, Jewish law and modernity going beyond the template of the *Haskalah*.[8]

Other contemporary intellectuals of *mizrahi* origin can be said to follow a similar path, for example the poets Amira Hess, Shva Salhoov, Aviva Pedaya and Almog Behar. Yet, the case of Sabato is different from them insofar as he is not just a writer but also a rabbi and a member of the settlers' world. That said, the settlers and the life they carry on–that are the subject of the much-praised *Ha-giv'ah* ("The hilltop," 2013) by Assaf Gavron or of one of the novels of Mira Magen–do not appear in Sabato's work.[9] The author prefers to return time and again to a very precise timespan, which goes from the 1950s to the Kippur war, or in other cases goes back to the vanished world of Egypt and Ottoman Aleppo from where his ancestors came. Moreover, in contrast to a tendency to deterritorialisation that characterises a number of Israeli writers of the last two or three decades, for whom Israel is only one among the many possible spaces from where to narrate a story, Sabato chooses to connect his literature to this land in a profound manner.

This does not mean that he is continuing along the way of authors like S. Yizhar that, in *Yemei Tziklag* ("The days of Tziklag," 1958), actualised

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[7] Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 24. Consider also: Elliott Resnick, "'Literature Can Express Purity, Faith, and Closeness to God': An Interview With Rosh Yeshiva and Award-Winning Author Rav Haim Sabato," *JewishPress*, 5 August 2015, available at: http://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/interviews-and-profiles/literature-can-express-purity-faith-and-closeness-to-god-an-interview-with-rosh-yeshiva-and-award-wining-author-rav-haim-sabato/2015/08/05/, accessed 31 October 2017.

[8] This was common practice among late Ottoman and post-Ottoman rabbinical authorities. See: Zvi Zohar, "Sephardic Jurisprudence in the Recent Half-Millennium," in *Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry: from the Golden Age of Spain to Modern Times*, ed. Zvi Zohar (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 167-95.

[9] On the two authors: Yaahov Herskovitz, "Settlers Versus Pioneers: The Deconstruction of the Settlers in Assaf Gavron's The Hilltop," *Shofar*, 33/4 (2015): 173-89; Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Le contraddizioni del 'pensare in modo materno' nelle colonie ebraiche della Cisgiordania in un romanzo di Mira Magen," in *Il genere nella ricerca storica*, eds. Saveria Chemotti and Maria Cristina La Rocca (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2015): 164-77.

the (Jewish) biblical past through a new, physical (and Hebrew) contact with the land.[10] Sabato adopts a multilayered language that dismantles the boundaries between sacred and profane, biblical past and Israeli present and reinterprets everything as part of a diachronic *continuum* that cannot be disjointed. In his view, even the most mundane things and memories, from the puddles of Beit Mazmil to popular *kibbutz* tunes, are part of a sacred Israeli Jewish landscape, or better to say: "they are the Land of Israel, like the carob in the transit camp, the figs of Ein Kerem, the prickly pear of Malhah, like the anemones and the cyclamens, like Hadassah Ha-Ktanah. That is the Land of Israel, like 'Wheat in the field, blown in the wind', the first song we learnt from Aunt Nehama in Israel, a few days after we made *'aliyah* from Egypt."[11]

Even though at the beginning *Be-shafrir heveyon* only seems to be the story of "a new immigrant from Egypt. This is how they called me,"[12] it becomes the elegy for an Israeli homeland that, despite poverty and war, still embodies a Jewish dream survived through the centuries and the Diaspora. For the protagonist's aunt Nehama, arrived before 1948 from Egypt to live in a *kibbutz* near Rehovot: "Sixty-five years have gone by since then, in every orange that I see, that I smell, I look for that scent, the scent of Netzer Sereni, that pure scent of *Eretz Israel*. What, don't you grow anymore oranges like these in the gardens of *Eretz Israel*?"[13] Nevertheless, the Diaspora never entirely disappears and brings with it memories that are both sweet and sour. In the case of the Hungarian-born Farkash–the Holocaust survivor that is at the centre of *Bo'i ha-ruah*, one of the most renowned of Sabato's novels–who still remembers all the people who were with him "not in this world, but in the *other one*", everyone is forever an immigrant: "New immigrants, old immigrants, this land too, it is both old and new."[14] The past and the present give birth to a new memorial landscape that includes not only the traumas of the Diaspora or the harsh life of the *ma'abarot* ("transit camps"), but also–perhaps more than else–biblical reminiscences, traditional tunes and the perfume of the *kibbutz*'s oranges.

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[10] Yaron Peleg, "Writing the Land: Language and Territory in Modern Hebrew Literature," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 12/2 (2013): esp. 298-300.

[11] Sabato, *In the Beauty*, 72. *Shibolet ba-sadeh qora'ah ba-ruah* ("Wheat in the field blown in the wind") is the first verse of a renowned *kibbutz* song by the Polish-born Israeli composer Matitiyahu Shelem.

[12] Sabato, *In the Beauty*, 11.

[13] Sabato, *In the Beauty*, 170.

[14] Sabato (2008), *From the Four Winds* (New Milford: The Toby Press, 2010), 13.

Religion and its rich heritage help the protagonists of all of Sabato's novels to get through the difficulties of life in Israel without feelings of resentment or anger towards the nation's establishment and the *ashkenazim*. As opposed to other *mizrahi* authors, that openly criticise the approach that the Israeli establishment long had vis-à-vis the *mizrahim*–for example the poets Erez Biton and Sami Chalom Chetrit–Sabato takes a more reflexive stance. This has to do with its religious and political leanings, and is symptomatic of his approach to being a writer. Thus, as opposed to what some critics posited, *mizrahi* authors do not need to be counter-canonical or counter-hegemonic: for Sabato the real challenge is not to disrupt a literary canon that already is much more open than it used to be some decades ago, but to enlarge it from within.[15] He does not seek to subvert the *status quo*, but creates narrations that make the *mizrahi* experience known to a wider (secular and Orthodox) public, presenting it–in a way that resembles the description of the old *yishuv* and the Sephardic community of Jerusalem by Dan Benaya Seri–through elements deemed interesting for non-*mizrahim* too: for instance, the warmth of family life, biblical quotes, the Holocaust, the experience of the army.[16]

This does not imply that Sabato minimises the cleavages between *mizrahim* and *ashkenazim*, that instead are evoked with bittersweet words:

> I remember it clearly. My mother stood by the truck with tears in her eyes. She had a crying infant in one arm and a sleeping baby on her shoulder. […] my father tried to comfort her with verses from the Bible about the wonders of the Land of Israel. […] We were left by ourselves. It was our first night in the Land of Israel. We were, my father said, in a fine place.[17]

So, the author seems to contend that even in such dire times his profound religiosity helped overcoming the difficulties of the migration, that now–at a distance of several years–can be looked at with irony: "Father was certain that in Israel everyone prayed together. How naïve we were then."[18]

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[15] For example: Smadar Lavie, "Blow-Ups in the Borderzone: Third World Israeli Authors' Groping For Home," *New Formations*, 18 (1992): 90.
[16] Adia Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel: Literary Perspectives* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2014), 107.
[17] Sabato (1999), *Adjusting Sights* (New Milford: The Toby Press: 2003), 12-3.
[18] Sabato, *From the Four*, 20.

Traumatic memories in Sabato's Israel

Despite his religious-based optimism, Sabato acknowledges how a number of traumatic memories made it difficult for old and new Israelis, *mizrahim* and *ashkenazim* to "pray together." One of these memories is the Holocaust–whose presence can be found both in *Be-shafrir heveyon* and *Bo'i ha-ruah*. In the first, a young *mizrahi* child learns about it at school when on *Yom ha-Shoah*–the Israeli memorial day established in 1953 to commemorate the Holocaust and the Jewish Resistance during the Second world war–the teacher gathers all the students in the schoolyard to

> read a verse of the Book of Psalms: 'Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed'. None of the children understood the verse, none really knew what this *Shoah* was, even their parents did not know. In Beit Mazmil there were many survivors from Hungary, but in those days nobody spoke about it.[19]

But the Holocaust occupies an even more central place in *Bo'i ha-ruah*, where young Haim befriends the mysterious Hungarian survivor Farkash. In this novel, Sabato touchingly portrays the stark contrast between the warmth of the *mizrahi* families and the silence of the European immigrants arrived "from *over there*":

> An elderly couple lived in the house next door to us. The house was shut all day and night, and the windows were covered with heavy dark blinds. Our family and neighbors who had emigrated from Egypt […], we were all used to open homes, neighbors coming and going without asking permission, windows wide open, the scent of fried and spicy food wafting through the area, the voices of children joyfully playing around. But in the houses of the Hungarians there was always silence, and they always asked us, the children, to be silent, totally silent.[20]

Two different memories, two different diasporas coexist in Beit Mazmil, to the dismay of the young protagonist that does not understand fully why the Hungarians always look so sad and melancholic. As Sabato explains, back then – that is, in the early 1960s – the Holocaust was something that many wished to forget or knew little about.[21] As opposed to other novelists

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[19] Sabato, *In the Beauty*, 21.
[20] Sabato, *From the Four*, 16.
[21] See: Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yihya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley:

of *mizrahi* origin, that either portray the Holocaust and the Second world war from the perspective of their family's little known experience–think of Yossi Sucary's description, in *Benghazi Bergen-Belsen* (2013), of the Libyan Jews deported to Nazi concentration camps–or present it as a foreign but haunting memory that makes them feel estranged from the rest of the nation, as in the case of Dudu Busi's *Ima mitga'ga't le-milim* ("Mother is longing for words," 2006), Sabato views the Holocaust as both foreign and familiar.[22] Even though his family did not experience it directly, *Bo'i ha-ruah*'s protagonist grows up surrounded by Hungarian neighbours and the Eastern European tales that Farkash tells him. Beit Mazmil is presented as a microcosm where, despite poverty, Eastern and Western Judaism slowly start to re-emerge. While Sabato does acknowledge the difficulties in the process of absorption of the new immigrants to Israel, he does not criticise its rationale. As Cyril Aslanov puts it, "[he] is denouncing disparities within the system without putting in question its legitimacy as a whole, let alone the legitimacy of his own ideological system."[23]

Aside from the Holocaust and the difficulty of integration, the event that disrupts most the worldview of Sabato–and risks shaking the beauty of the Land of Israel filling it with new tragic memories, that mirror those emerging from the old Diaspora–is the Kippur war. This conflict is an existential experience and a deep personal watershed. Despite the very specific perspective of Sabato, his view reflects an Israeli generational understanding of the Kippur war as–Feige writes–"the quintessential war and […] the greatest national trauma." Furthermore, for believers and

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University of California Press, 1983); Don Handelmann and Elihu Katz, "State Ceremonies of Israel: Remembrance Day and Independence Day," in Shlomo Deshen, Charles S. Liebman and Moshe Shokeid, eds., *Israeli Judaism: the Sociology of Religion in Israel* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 75-86.

[22] Yochai Oppenheimer, "The Holocaust: A Mizrahi Perspective," *Hebrew Studies*, 51 (2010): 303-28. More generally, see: Judith Roumani, "Sephardic Literary Responses to the Holocaust," in *Literature of the Holocaust*, ed. Alan Rosen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 225-37.

[23] Cyril Aslanov, "Is There a Right-Wing Alternative to the Left-Wing Bohemianism in Israel?" *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem*, 23 (2012), available at: https://bcrfj.revues.org/6800. Sabato's view contrasts with that of the many *mizrahi* and *ashkenazi* writers – from Shimon Ballas and Sami Michael, to Aharon Appelfeld – that especially since the 1970s criticised the Israeli meltin' pot ideology, as noted by: Gershon Shaked, *The Shadows Within: Essays on Modern Jewish Writers* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 166-8.

followers of the *Gush Emunim*'s ideology, like Sabato, the war also is conceived as part of a national-religious narrative and a dramatic, but inevitable episode of suffering along the road to redemption.[24]

Sabato does not focus much neither on the bloodiest aspects of the conflict, or on the figure of the Arab enemy. However, this is not so unusual in the Israeli literary and cinematic representations of war emerged since the 1980s, in which, as opposed to what occurred in earlier periods, Arabs are often absent or appear indirectly.[25] In *Te'um qavanot*, the trauma of the war mainly is a psychological and existential one, to the point that little dimension of physical horror is uncovered. The author reflects at length about the meaning of violence and all the characters of the novel are deeply affected by the dynamics of the conflict. Furthermore, the Kippur war is evoked in conjunction with other traumatic episodes in Jewish history. This puts Haim and Dov, the two young protagonists, at the centre of a story that only the Diaspora-born elders seem to understand fully:

> And together we had parted from Dov's mother on Brazil Street in Beit Mazmil an hour before. 'War', she had said. 'War! What do you know about it? I know. And I know no one knows when you'll be home again. No one'.
> […] '*Ima*!' Dov said. 'This isn't Romania or World War Two. Think of it as a school outing–we'll be back in a few days'.
> […] We thought we'd be back soon. During the three terrible days that followed, I kept seeing the Rabbi of Amshinov before me. […] Until I heard of Dov's death.[26]

Despite the frenzy of fighting, throughout the war Haim and his comrades debate complex issues of life and death, morality and religion. If the dialogue between them at times may seem surreal, it allows to understand how a group of young Orthodox soldiers experienced and came to terms with the war:

> After a while Eli asked:
> 'What will be? Do you think the Syrians will take Tiberias? Who'll stop them, the divisional clerks?'.

[24] Michael Feige, *Settling in the Hearts: Jewish Fundamentalism in the Occupied Territories* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 58.
[25] Marcella Simoni, "'Spara e prega!' Il cinema israeliano a trent'anni dalla guerra del Libano," *Passato e Presente*, 21/88 (2010): 113 and onwards.
[26] Sabato, *Adjusting Sights*, 4-5.

> […] How could we lose the war? The Redemption was under way. The State of Israel was proof of it. Could the Redemption be militarily defeated?
> […] Gidi watched us all. He knew we were debating a religious point. He said, 'I don't know what you're talking about or what your books say, but I do know one thing. We're going to win this war. We're going to win it because we have to.'[27]

Praying and discussing theological issues in the middle of combat, is for the protagonist a kind of survival tactic and a way to continue practising religion–even its most quotidian, ritualised aspects–in such tragic circumstances.[28] For *Te'um qavanot*'s protagonist Haim, the Kippur war becomes even more challenging when, shortly after the fighting begins, his best friend Dov–who has been assigned to a different tank–goes missing and never returns from the battle. As the war comes to an end, Haim knows that he will always remember the bonds built with Dov during the years of Beit Mazmil and while studying in the *yeshivah*:

> I looked at the moon and saw Dov. We had sanctified the moon of *Tishrei* together, the two of us, in Bayit ve-Gan with the rabbi of Ashminov. […] What was it Rabbi Akiva once said? The Owner of the fig tree knows when it is time to gather His figs".[29]

The army–together with the *yeshivah*–are the two defining spaces in Haim and Dov's life. As many studies on Israeli militarism have showed, here the army and the war experience are a rite of passage during which Haim ceases to be the young immigrant from Egypt to become a more aware Jewish man and a full-fledged Israeli.[30]

But paradoxically, the war is a moment of freedom too, as for the first time the protagonist gets out of Beit Mazmil and the *yeshivah*, discovering remote corners of the Land of Israel and its ancient vestiges. In *Be-shafrir heveyon* Sabato describes how during a day off from fighting in the Golan Heights, the protagonist and some of his friends, all "sons of the *yeshivah*"

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[27] Sabato, *Adjusting Sights*, 82-3.
[28] Nissim Leon, "The Significance of the Yom Kippur War As a Turning Point in the Religious-Zionist Society," in *The 1973 Yom Kippur War and the Reshaping of Israeli Civil-Military Relations*, eds. Udi Lebel and Eyal Lewin (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015) 49-50.
[29] Sabato, *Adjusting Sights*, 143.
[30] I refer to: Uri Ben-Eliezer, *The Making of Israeli Militarism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

from Jerusalem, decided to go to Safed "to breath the air of purity."[31] This group of young Orthodox soldiers strolls in the city–known since the early modern era for being one of the greatest centres of Jewish mysticism. In Safed, they pray in synagogues, admire the beauty of the city and then recite the *piyut* that gives the title to the book, *El mistater be-shafrir heveyon* ("God hides in the beauty of concealment"), on a slope that leads to a cemetery. There, the young Zion tells his friend that:

> the *piyut El mistater be-shafrir heveyon* of rabbi Avraham Maimin, that every Shabbat we recite at the beginning of the *baqashot* [lit. "supplications", prayers recited during Shabbat], between the tanks, in the hut of the generator in Tel Hirus that is on the border with the Syrian enclave, originated here on these stones, or next to them.[32]

Similarly to other religious Zionists, Sabato assigns a redemptive meaning to the Jewish national enterprise, bringing Jewish traditional texts and symbols to the middle of today's Israel.[33] This is visible also in the author's challenging writing style, which includes not only biblical verses but also long quotes of medieval *piyutim*, or of *piyutim* written by Sabato himself. It is arguable that in his texts the Land of Israel is presented as a territory that includes the (post-)biblical Jewish past and the Israeli present. On the other hand, Palestinians are absent and even Arabs are mentioned only as enemies beyond the border. In some other cases, they appear as distant figures located in the author's family past–like when someone from the Land of Israel goes to Syria to visit the grandfather of *Emet me-'eretz titzmah*'s protagonist and found this great rabbi and Talmudist selling fabrics in the market of Aleppo, "grappling with rolls of satin fabric, a variety of glossy silk of which the Arabs of the countryside were especially fond."[34]

Here again, Sabato's approach contrasts with that of other writers of Middle Eastern Jewish origin, from the Iraqi-born Sami Michael to Moshe Sakal and his *Ha-tzoref* ("The diamond setter," 2014), that instead talks at length about Arab-Jewish relations and has a Syrian-Palestinian at the centre of the story. That Arabs are not part of Sabato's literary geography probably has to do with the author's political inclinations. More generally, it mirrors an exclusively Jewish memorial landscape within which, as one critic wrote:

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[31] Sabato, *In the Beauty*, 25.
[32] Sabato, *In the Beauty*, 28.
[33] Liebman and Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel*, esp. 205-207.
[34] Haim Sabato, *Aleppo Tales*, 203.

> Hannah and her seven sons, the Ten Martyrs, the pogroms in Ukraine, Holocaust children taken away from Judaism by Christian nuns, the pain of the *'olim* from Egypt, Syria and Libya, they are all the same thing, links in a long chain of persecution, torments and faith in the concealed God.[35]

For Sabato, there is no difference between the biblical Land of Israel and the State of Israel: the soldiers of the Kippur war are like the ancient Israelites, or the pioneers that founded the first *kibbutzim*, since all "guard the Land of Israel."[36] As for the Diaspora, it can never be the true homeland of his characters, that–while in Cairo or Aleppo–always long for *Eretz Israel*.

Conclusion

As this chapter shows, the novels of Haim Sabato are characterised by inextricable bonds between historical reality–filtered through the author's or his family's past–and literary fiction. Sabato's view of Jewish history, and of the links between Diaspora and Land of Israel, is based upon a diachronic memory in tune with the author's beliefs, that conceive the biblical past and the Israeli present as part of a Jewish *continuum*. This is why, for Sabato, today's Israelis–be they *mizrahi* Jews, Eastern European Holocaust survivors or else–can either "live in the unspeakable past, or […] move on and create the future," and it is the second option that his utopian Zionist outlook prefers.[37] Whereas the Diaspora is the site where the proud memory of a Jewish East resides–"even though neither our parents nor ourselves ever saw Aleppo or Tedef with our own eyes. We never saw them with our mortal eyes, but saw in the visions of the heart"–Israel is "our land, [that] we have been waiting for so many years and she was waiting for us as well."[38]

And if in the 1980s one of the firsts Israeli writers of Egyptian Jewish origin–the Alexandria-born Yitzhaq Gormezano Goren–depicted Egypt as

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[35] Yaad Biran, "Instead of the Zionist narrative, Haim Sabato goes back to the faith", *Ha-'Aretz*, 3 October 2014, available at: http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/prose/.premium-1.2445077 [Hebrew]. The Ten Martyrs (*'aseret harugey malkut*) were ten rabbis killed by the Romans in the period after the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem.

[36] Sabato, *In the Beauty*, 32.

[37] Yael Unterman, "Memoir: How Naive We Were Then", *Ha-'Aretz*, 20 December 2010, available at: http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/books/memoir-how-naive-we-were-then-1.331690.

[38] Sabato, *Aleppo Tales*, 4 and Id. *In the Beauty*, 70. Tedef is a Syrian town about thirty kilometres east of Aleppo.

the centre of his literary geography and Israel as one of the diasporic spaces he and his ancestors encountered since the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century,[39] Sabato follows another and perhaps more traditionally Jewish worldview. According to him, Egypt and Syria, even though worth remembering, only are the prelude to the true Israeli Jewish homeland–which, in turn, appears as the centre where everything began and eventually will end. But despite the omnipresence of Jewish tradition and the numerous quotes from the Bible or medieval *piyutim*, books like *Be-shafrir heveyon* or *Bo'i ha-ruah* could emerge only from Israel and its contemporary vicissitudes. From his own perspective–that of a Cairo-born *'oleh*, fighter in the Kippur war and West Bank *rosh yeshivah*–Sabato talks about issues that are at the core of the Israeli experience and of modern Hebrew literature: from the tensions between modernity and tradition, Diaspora and return to Zion, ending with the consequences of what Gershon Shaked defines the "Hebraisation of Judaism" in its new national environment.[40]

It is undoubted that his literature will leave some readers with a sense of discomfort, since it sometimes portrays quite an idealised Israel that stands in sharp contrast with the reality of a nation where decades-old societal, political and cultural tensions are still there and, in many respects, far from being solved. At the same time, Sabato's novels are the testimony of an Israel that rarely emerges from the literary arena and should not be overlooked: an Israel that, from its own religious and political perspective–which combines biblical reminiscences, modern nationalism and forms of ethnic pride–still believes in the existence of the Zionist dream and in the biblical idea, troubling as it might be, that "the truth will go forth from the land."[41]

Post scriptum

I wish to conclude this chapter by noting that I would not have been able to write it were it not for Emanuela Trevisan Semi, her teaching and all the advice she gave me since I first met her in a classroom of Ca' Cappello in 2003. Back then, I was an undergraduate student of Middle Eastern

[39] Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Israele come diaspora ed Egitto come centro nella Trilogia Alessandrina di Y. Gormezano Goren," in *Il mio cuore è a Oriente: Studi di linguistica storica, filologia e cultura ebraica dedicati a Maria Luisa Modena Mayer*, eds. Francesco Aspesi, Vermondo Brugnatelli, Anna Linda Callow and Claudia Rosenzweig (Milan: Cisalpino, 2008), 759-69.
[40] Shaked, *The Shadows Within*, 104-10.
[41] Psalms 85: 11.

Languages at Ca' Foscari, quite sure of the fact that I would have graduated in Arabic–perhaps with a thesis on an author of medieval Arabic literature. A trip to Israel, the felicitous meeting with Emanuela and her classes on Agnon, Amihai, Yehoshua, the *mizrahim* and Israeli society, eventually convinced me that it was Hebrew I wanted to study. Since then, we have always been together, so to say, and initiated a scholarly dialogue and then friendship that took us from Venice–I shall never forget the many evenings spent chatting, in the cosiness of her house in Castello–to places as different as Rome, Paris, New Orleans, Jerusalem and Sana'a.

It is for these and many other reasons that, for me, the human and scholarly itinerary of Emanuela has come to exemplify–were I to quote the famous kibbutz song *Shibolet ba-sadeh* that the young Haim Sabato loved so much–a "path [that] has no end" and a "chain [that] never breaks."[42]

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[42] Sabato, *In the Beauty*, 118.

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