THE JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, XCII, Nos. 1–2 (July–October, 2001) 237–242

SIDRA DEKOVEN EZRAHI. *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 358.

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* is the work of an engaged and serious Jewish intellectual who is willing to ask hard questions. It is also a beautifully written book that illustrates how tropes and figures, the language of metaphor, configure Jews, Judaism and Jewishness in contemporary imagination. Ezrahi brings together the flowering of modern Jewish literature in both Hebrew and Yiddish in the 19th and 20th centuries, the devastation of the Shoah, and the creation of the State of Israel. This is no easy task but, in Ezrahi's hands, these disparate and contradictory legacies are given coherence. *Booking Passage* offers no easy explanations but, by focusing on the tropes and figures of exile and homecoming, it steers readers through a complicated dreamscape and, at the end of this journey, we are led to a different, more complicated, and richer understanding. These contradictory desires characterize Jewish history and continue to define both the Jewish present and the future.

At the heart of this book is the re-territorialization of Jewish imagination in the 20th century. Ezrahi argues that this experience perhaps more than any other poses the most difficult challenges for the continuation of Jewish imagination. As Ezrahi explains, specifically in relation to the Israeli writer:

> The ultimate challenge . . . is how to keep images from becoming icons, archeology from becoming eschatology, "arrival" from becoming the terminus of a vengeful excess of memory, the eros of an unconsummated journey from being extinguished in the killing fields of exclusive visions—how to *reopen* the narrative so that narrative itself can continue and one can hear the suppressed, the silenced, the restless and unpatriated voices. (p. 23)

Ezrahi writes in order to open up what has become an all too exclusive modern Jewish literary tradition. With this in mind, she rereads canonical texts in order to undo the effects of a kind of reification that has made it difficult to hear the marginalized voices of those suppressed and silenced within this modern canon. To this end, *Booking Passage* chronicles the dangers and pitfalls of ending Jewish narrative with homecoming on the one hand and the romanticization of Jewish exile on the other. Although she herself does not yet get to other, noncanonical, texts, one can only hope that in her next book, Ezrahi will offer us readings of these other works.

Ezrahi offers a strong rereading of the "poetics of exile and return" within the Ashkenazi canon of modern Jewish literatures in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English. Here Ezrahi builds on her groundbreaking work on the Shoah and Jewish imagination to also speak to the problems of re-territorialization.[1]

By historicizing the poetics of exile and return as a much larger literary legacy in the West, this book also speaks to literary critics and cultural studies scholars outside of Jewish studies. Ezrahi connects the tension between contemporary writers like Steiner and Jabès, who place their faith in the power of the text as the only homeland, and those like Uri Zvi Greenberg who mistake the metaphoric Jerusalem of Jewish longing with the literal re-territorialization of the land, demanding that these other scholars take a broader view of these poetic inheritances.

To this end, Ezrahi clarifies the biblical roots of these preoccupations. With an eloquence that comes from a deep knowledge of sacred texts, something often sorely missing from so many literary studies, Ezrahi sets up her overarching argument about the imbrication of the desires for both exile and return. In her introduction, for example, she describes the confusion between "upper and lowercase homelands" in Yiddish and Hebrew fictions of the 19th and 20th centuries in biblical terms. As she explains:

> Jews constructed not only the memory of temples and Sabbaths out of the ruins of their material existence but also the stories out of their relics of hearths that were abandoned along the way and were, by definition, remote from the sacred center. (p. 15)

She continues this discussion by reminding readers of the biblical Rachel who "carried her *teraphim*, her household gods, from place to place, even when admonished that holiness could not be confined in local icons and lowercase homelands" (p. 15). In other words, Jews have been able to take their gods with them into exile, but not by physically hiding them on their persons. Instead, "the safest and most enduring hiding places for the lares of deserted homes were the stories that contained and superseded them" (p. 15). Ezrahi uses biblical tropes and figures like the narrative of Rachel to explain a more recent phenomenon: the tension between text and territory in modern Jewish writing. These continuities and differences are central to Ezrahi's argument and, as if to embody precisely her argument with this example, her most important points are always presented metaphorically. Ezrahi places her own precious critical lares within a series of interrelated narratives. It is only in this way that she is able to present the complexity of her subject matter. There is no more direct access to these legacies than through stories, metaphors and literary figures. These literary echoes animate and give texture to all of her readings. They color her reading of the

[1] Sidra Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago, 1980).

promises of 19th- and early 20th-century Hebrew and Yiddish literatures on the one hand, and the devastation of the Holocaust and more recent efforts to reanimate Jewish literary imagination in its aftermath on the other hand. In order to once again stress the poetics of this text, I reproduce Ezrahi's opening epigraphs:

> A Barren land, bare waste. Vulcanic lake, the dead sea: no fish, weedless, sunk deep in the earth. No wind would lift those waves, grey metal, poisonous foggy waters. Brimstone they called it raining down: the cities of the plain: Sodom, Gomorrah, Edom. All dead names. A dead sea in a dead land, grey and old. Old now. It bore the oldest, the first race. . . . The oldest people. Wandered far way over all the earth, captivity to captivity, multiplying, dying, being born everywhere. It lay there now. Now it could bear no more. Dead: an old woman's: the grey sunken cunt of the world.
>
> James Joyce, *Ulysses*

> Often around 5 or 6 o'clock I see an elderly woman on the kibbutz sitting on a bench, singing to herself, and I don't know what she sings, because it's Polish. And I think to myself: That woman 45 years ago must have been a romantic girl with braids sitting by a stream somewhere in Poland singing a Hebrew song about Jerusalem. . . .
>
> Amos Oz, "*After the Sound and the Fury: An Interview*"

As I have already suggested, for Ezrahi the Zionist legacy of homecoming and its contemporary disappointments are at the heart of this book. This helps to explain her choice of these passages from James Joyce and Amos Oz to frame her study. For Joyce, the promised land is a deadly place, a barren wasteland now grown old, filled by a dead sea and dead land. It is a place abandoned by its wandering people who have gone from "captivity to captivity, multiplying, dying, being born everywhere," except for here. And thus, the land which can no longer bear its abandonment becomes for Joyce an uncanny place of death. A site that once gave birth to the world is now only a "grey sunken cunt." And yet, for Ezrahi, James Joyce, the quintessential modernist, does not have the last word on this place.

Without denying the power of Joyce's account, Ezrahi nevertheless juxtaposes this wretched, feminized place with Amos Oz's very different account of a literal old woman in a reborn Zion. The elderly woman Oz writes about has returned to the promised land of her dreams and, as a kibbutznik, has helped bring life to Joyce's barren wasteland. Nevertheless, she is not fully at home. Her homecoming remains incomplete. She maintains ties to the place of her presumed captivity, the Poland of her childhood. It too remains a part of her, a site of longing and lyric. With these contrasting visions of the promised land, Ezrahi challenges her readers to reconsider

how both of these old women have come to represent contemporary Jewish imagination, both exile and homecoming within modern Jewish writing.

Booking Passage is divided into two sections. The first, "Jewish Journeys," offers readers an account of Jewish pilgrimage narratives. Although this section opens with a reading of Yehuda Halevi's medieval journey, Ezrahi's focus is on the narratives of Abramovitch, Agnon, and Aleichem. Despite her efforts to broaden her account to include this earlier literary tradition, her use of Halevi only serves to reinforce the Ashkenazi focus of her study as it echoes various other modern attempts to reread Halevi as a precursor to modern Zionism. Nevertheless, by opening with Halevi, Ezrahi links the Eastern European Jewish tales of travel at the center of this section of the book to a larger romantic legacy. The connection is beautifully illustrated in the frontispiece to Ezrahi's introduction. Here readers are presented with a reproduction of the opening page of the 1899 Russian translation of Abramovitch's *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*, clearly understood to be the Jewish Don Quixote.[2]

Throughout "Jewish Journeys" Ezrahi reminds readers of the utopian promises that modern Jewish literature produced in both Yiddish and in Hebrew, a legacy often lost in the aftermath of the Shoah. Thus, perhaps most striking in this regard is Ezrahi's reading of the railroad stories by Sholem Aleichem in the final chapter of "Jewish Journeys." Here Ezrahi turns to Sholem Aleichem to help readers remember, among other things, that train travel in Eastern Europe did not always lead to Auschwitz. As Ezrahi explains, "trains shuttled Jews back and forth in the Pale of Settlement and provided the locus for their stories and jokes for several decades before becoming the metonymy of their collective doom" (p. 109). By offering a "naive" reading of these tales, Ezrahi resists the tendency to "backshadow,"[3] i.e., to see these tales only in light of what would come later. Nevertheless, the Shoah is never far from these pages. And, despite her efforts to build some kind of bridge between parts one and two of her book, the Shoah presents a loss so great that no argument can ever fill it in.

Given this, Ezrahi begins the second part, "Jewish Geographies," by addressing precisely this problem. As she explains:

> With the twelfth century as designated point of origin and the twentieth as point of entry, the Jewish journey was represented in the first

---

[2] S. Y. Abramovitch, *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*, trans. Klemens Iunosha Kazan, Russia, 1899).

[3] Here Ezrahi explicitly builds on the powerful work of Michael André Bernstein. It should also be noted that Bernstein was an author in the inspired and now defunct "Contraversions: Critical Studies in Jewish Literature, Culture, and Society" series at the University of California Press. Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley, 1994).

> part of this book as the pursuit of utopian space in its epic and anti-epic dimensions. Six years and six million deaths changed all that. For the survivors of the *Shoah*, the Jewish journey would become a more urgent exercise in the recovery of a lost continent. Acts of re-call, fueled by grief, despair, or nostalgia, are the broken echoes at the end of our century of the utopian yearnings at its beginning. (p. 135)

In "Jewish Geographies" Ezrahi beautifully brings together the disparate voices of Bukovina as represented by three of her native sons, Paul Celan, Dan Pagis, and Aharon Appelfeld. In so doing, she presents readers with three very different responses to the Shoah. Celan remains in Europe and continues to write in his native German. Pagis, writing in Hebrew, reclaims the prosaics of memory even as he remains haunted by the world of his childhood. By contrast, Appelfeld uses Hebrew to attempt to reconstruct over and over again his lost world at the brink of its demise. Although I can not do justice to Ezrahi's nuanced readings of these works in the pages of this review, I call readers' attention to her careful use of these canonical figures who share a similar past to suggest the complications of this traumatic legacy as it has been expressed through literature. For Ezrahi, once again there are not simple answers to what a writer might do with such a traumatic legacy of loss. What she offers instead are thoughtful readings of these very different literary works.

The final chapters of "Jewish Geographies" are devoted to the writings of I. B. Singer and Philip Roth, both of whom write from the United States, the former in Yiddish the latter in English. Ezrahi demonstrates how both try to re-imagine the legacy of Eastern European culture after the Shoah. For Singer the challenges are numerous. Without Yiddish readers, he was to write among strangers in a dying tongue. For Roth, the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Eastern Europe becomes, as it did for the old woman singing Polish songs at 5 or 6 o'clock on the Kibbutz, ironically, the new Jewish homeland. Moreover, after the Shoah, this homeland, like its predecessor, is as desolate and depleted of Jews as the land that Joyce described. In these chapters, Ezrahi argues that despite the anachronism of Singer writing in Yiddish, by the end of the 20th century, Roth's fictional "diasporism" breaths new life into the Pale as a site of ongoing Jewish imagination.

Throughout *Booking Passage* Ezrahi reopens the canonical texts of modern Jewish imagination in order to write beyond the ending.[4] Here neither the Holocaust nor the creation of the state of Israel are worthy endings for this story. Instead Ezrahi concludes *Booking Passage* with a call for "the imagination of return and the return of imagination." But here, as in

[4] Here I am indebted to Rachel Blau DuPlessis for her ongoing efforts to write beyond other kinds of endings. See her *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (Bloomington, 1985).

her introduction, re-territorialization seems to pose the greatest challenge. And so, in order to resist the closure of return, Ezrahi demands that readers let go of the language of authenticity, especially in terms of Jewish claims to the literal holy land of Palestine. Instead, she argues that readers should take seriously the ways in which this place has been constructed anew as a modern site of both Jewish politics and Jewish imagination and can no longer be confused with some mythical, original homeland. As she explains, "And when it will be finished, it will be a lovely work of construction but it will be worth nothing, because after all it will not be the REAL THING, just a facsimile" (p. 244). And, it is precisely as a new construction that this place becomes more precious according to Ezrahi:

> It won't be worth fighting for and killing over. It will, that is, be worthless and therefore it will be priceless. It will have the value of imitation diamonds that sparkle like the real ones but are not in danger of theft, of dreams and desires that need never arrive, and of tolerance for everyone else's fake diamonds and glittering dreams. (p. 244)

These are bold words. They demand a whole new vision of what constitutes an identity or, for that matter, a home. These are the words of a literary scholar of great imagination and much courage.

Booking Passage is that rare book that can truly be called magisterial, the work of a master teacher, reader, and writer. It is an authoritative study that effectively demonstrates the power of imagination. This is a book that should be read by all who are committed to the labor of Jewish study and who struggle with the most difficult legacies of the 20th century. It shows us how to begin to imagine a different future.

Temple University LAURA LEVITT