

The German-Hebrew Dialogue

Perspectives on Jewish Texts and Contexts

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Mati Shemoelof

The Berlin Prize for Hebrew Literature

Translated by Rachel Seelig

(excerpt from a novel in progress)

1

The air was stale at Urbanstrasse Hospital on the southern bank of the Landwehr Canal. An exhibit of photographs adorned the hallway with colorful fish, including the type Helena had seen in the Red Sea when she went diving at Bir Suwair with that shabby red snorkel. Beneath the photographs running the length of the wall was a summery yellow stripe. Third floor, area 1B, building 6, room 145, where pregnant women leave behind fluids and discharge in the bathroom to the left of the examination room. Detergents had lost the fight against bodily secretions. The result was putrid. No wonder Helena refused to remain there under medical observation.

But now it was all behind her and she was sinking into warm water tinged green by foaming pine tree oil. Usually she bathed on weekends, not Tuesday evenings. But she had to rinse off the smells and stale impressions from the morning that now seemed an eternity away. Perhaps she had made a mistake telling Chezi the truth, but she had to get it out, let him know what a hypocrite he was. He didn't even call to thank his own father for the story, just left him to wither in that cheap old age home on Yitzhak Bar Moshe Street in Yahud. Helena was afraid of the future that was quickly approaching. Is that what their home would be like? Full of squabbles, with her unable even to ask for her husband's help? Lately it was one fight after the other; it seemed they couldn't get through a single day without yelling at each other. She asked herself whether Chezi could survive the truth. After all, her truth was one of the reasons she had always avoided serious relationships. One thought led to another and she was unable to answer the question. She tried to focus on her breathing, to forget the chaos that engulfed her, stretching her nerves thin.

She got up to go to the bathroom and began dripping all over the carpet, a small stream flattening tufts of dust. What would her parents say if they knew that she'd become pregnant, she wondered. Helena had thought about getting in touch many times and even made an attempt a while back. But Easter dinner fell apart after her father's remark about "those Arab immigrants" who are to blame

for the rise of sexual assaults, not to mention anti-Semitic attacks. Her mother tried to make contact a few times, but Helena couldn't forgive her father, initially for what he'd said to her and later because he gave interviews on the subject to the press. She suffered the fallout wherever she went. Her surname was a disaster. Recently her mother had begun sending appeasing text messages and emails about her father's poor health, practically begging Helena to come visit. Helena didn't want any contact with him, or with her. Not least because of the rumor she heard. One afternoon on Boppstrasse she ran into Brigitte, the downstairs neighbor from Stuttgart, who was in town visiting her son Mark. Brigitte told her the secret: Helena's mother had become a rightwing fanatic who wanted out of the European Union – "Gerxit" – in order to prevent more immigrants from entering Germany. Helena could not believe it. She blamed her dad for brainwashing her mom, who used to be a liberal. Once, her mother even put up a family of Vietnamese refugees for an entire summer – the summer Helena lost her virginity to Mark. He was fifteen at the time, she was sixteen-and-a-half. Her father texted her about a surprise party for her mother in just a few days, asking her to come. She didn't answer.

Helena feared she had miscarried the first time because she was nearing forty. To make matters worse, Chezi avoided the subject and didn't know how to handle the pain of losing the longed-for pregnancy. She didn't want to go back to work, having already prepared for a long maternity leave. Soon her coworkers would know about the miscarriage and she would return to her mindnumbing job.

2

Chezi had overslept. He woke up in a panic, worried that Helena might have already checked out of the hospital before he had even managed to call or help her home. It occurred to him that he had forgotten to ask Johannes Birne, the piano tuner, to drop by. Helena was supposed to come home to a tuned piano so that she wouldn't need to tune it herself. Chezi was disappointed in himself. He put on his clothes without even brushing his teeth and rushed off to the *Späti*.

The roses at the exit to the building opened up in front of him and he couldn't resist, plucked a few red blossoms, cupping them close to his nose, and took in the fragrance of an especially serene evening.

Helena called just as he was standing in line to pay at the only open late-night grocery store in the neighborhood. As Chezi glanced at his cell phone a Facebook invitation popped up for the Or Yehuda High School reunion. Behind Chezi in line stood a man, perhaps German, perhaps foreign, with small gray eyes, a chubby

face, and bluish stubble on a tattooed face, who had placed on the black rubber conveyer belt a sausage resembling a dissected penis, a gleaming eggplant, and some sort of spaghetti sauce that Chezi had never seen before; in front of him was a foreign woman with a large piercing, tiny bits of silver-plated iron fastened to her cheeks, a chain that looped through her eyebrow and descended to the outer edge of her lip. Chezi was repulsed by this fashion of holes in one's face and wondered what might happen if the small iron bars were to be removed from her delicate ivory skin. A man joined the back of the line, his skin covered in tattoos, with only the whites of his innocent eyes standing out, causing every shade of the greenish tattoo surrounding them to resemble a warrior from another era, perhaps from outer space.

Chezi was glad to see Helena's name appear on his screen. He listened carefully to the nuances in her voice, checked how she was feeling and when she woke up. Helena asked him to buy a specific type of cabbage that's known to be particularly healthy and prepare it for her for when she returned from the recovery room at Urbanstrasse Hospital. She mentioned the name of the cabbage in German twice, but Chezi couldn't quite make it out. He had tried to learn the local language but was dyslexic and struggled. Helena repeated the word again and again: *Grünkohl*. He heard *Grukol*. She repeated it again – *Grünkohl* – as he reached the front of the line and noticed the cashier, Rosa Luxemburg, staring at him, irritated. Chezi was hesitant to deal with her. During their many previous encounters Rosa had spoken with such speed that the translation mechanism in his brain short-circuited. He looked behind him and realized the entire line was staring back at him impatiently, but unlike the convenience store in Or Yehuda, no one said a word. Rosa had no patience for the linguistic difficulties of immigrants. She said "*Bitte*" a few times and signaled him to move forward. Chezi glanced at her and then at the long line behind him. He lifted his cell phone to his ear and asked Helena quietly not to yell at him. (That was a trick he learned from her. She often asked him to lower his voice when speaking with her.) "Text me the name," he whispered to Helena in English, and wondered whether he still had time to find the cabbage, leaving behind on the conveyer belt all the items with barcodes that the cashier was eagerly preparing to scan. Chezi asked Rosa in broken German to wait a moment and then turned to the crowd, interlacing his fingers as he lifted and lowered his hands, and mumbled in English, "I am sorry." For a moment he thought they might not understand and switched to German: "Tur mir Leid." The crowd groaned and didn't exactly consent, nor did they protest, aside from Rosa, perhaps, who frowned dramatically.

Chezi smiled like a silly child, ran through the aisles in search of the vegetable, and finally found an empty box emblazoned with the name of the salubrious cabbage. He returned in a sweat. By then Rosa had lost it and was

yelling loudly at him for holding everyone up. Nervously, Chezi put his phone down on the conveyer belt just as it lit up, displaying an email from a known address. The orange juice bottle fell out his hand and broke. Rosa got up to clean the mess, shaking her head continuously. All eyes were on Chezi. Rosa returned to her black chair silently, calmly scanned his groceries and dismissed him. Still no one said a word.

Chezi decided the road was too dangerous for a morning like this. He stepped onto the sidewalk built of large square stones and walked toward his apartment. Along the way he passed the name of the prolific German-Jewish anarchist Erich Mühsam peering at him from among the worn, brass *Stolpersteine*, “stumbling stones” covered in a thin layer of dust. In the early morning of March 28, 1933, the sun just beginning to emerge, Mühsam had been arrested by the Nazis for an unknown transgression. Josef Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, labeled Mühsam, then at the peak of his career, a subversive Jew, and claimed that he planned to escape to Switzerland (why not, come to think of it?!). Over the course of the next seventeen months Mühsam was imprisoned in the concentration camps of Sonnenburg, Brandenburg, and finally Oranienburg, where he was tortured, beaten, and eventually found hanged. Chezi had been to Brandenburg, and to Oranienburg, and found it difficult to imagine that these quiet places could have contained such evil and wickedness, and so many bitter enemies.

With his left hand Chezi put his conversation with Helena on speakerphone. She was eager to know whether he had found the cabbage, and he didn't care that the entire street could hear them. And with his right – he almost got a heart attack – he opened the incoming email that informed him he had one the Berlin Prize for Hebrew Literature. He knew that he had been nominated for the illustrious prize but was sure he didn't stand a chance of winning. Was he really going to make this big step up from the national league to the international major writers league? Authors big and small, famous and obscure sent in books from all over the world to the committee of The Berlin Prize for Hebrew Literature, the most significant prize in the world for writers of Hebrew (citizenship, religion, and territory didn't matter; the nominees could be non-Israelis, non-Jews, and citizens of any country in the world). The prize offered an enormous amount of money, translation into a dozen languages, including English, German, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Chinese, and Russian, and a contract for one more book with the international publishing house of Else Lasker-Schüler. Perhaps the greatest advantage of The Berlin Prize for Hebrew Literature, at least compared with other major German literary prizes, was that translation was not a prerequisite for entry – Hebrew books could be submitted *in* Hebrew. What's more, the competition was open to all authors who write in Hebrew, and not just to those who actually manage to make a living from it. As it happens, it was Chezi's *To Remain in*

Baghdad that won big. The words at the center of the email appeared in bold: “The ceremony will take place in six days, on June 5, 2016.”

3

Chezi stormed into the house, tossed the groceries on the small wooden table that Helena had brought from her apartment, the table he saw as a symbol of honest Christian labor, entirely devoid of opulence and ornamentation. Helena had come home from the hospital just minutes before him. She asked him to help her remove her faux leather boots as she lay down on the white shag rug in the bedroom. He tugged off the right boot, and as he shifted to the left foot, blurted out suddenly, “I won The Berlin Prize for Hebrew Literature – can you believe it!?”

“Is it for the first book or the second?” she asked, nudging him with her toes to remove the boot from her other foot.

“The second.” Chezi suddenly felt worthy, even though he had been certain just moments before reading the email that he’d never make the final cut. His second book had earned him a grant to spend a year writing in Berlin, but he had no idea what the following year would bring. He would probably have to apply for more writer-in-residence programs and pray for something to come through. “That’s not a way to live,” Chezi thought, “especially not with a pregnant wife. Don’t you want to be able to support a baby, buy a house, give your wife and child a future?” But everything was different now. The generous grant provided by The Berlin Prize for Hebrew Literature was about to relieve him, at least for a few years, of all existential fear. And, who knows? Perhaps it would even put him in the champions’ league of literature.

Fate had decided that he would win the prize. Fate crowned him and fate looked after him. It wasn’t luck, he liked to think, but hard work that had come to fruition, creativity and talent that allowed his words to ascend the biggest ladder of all, climbing toward their glorious apogee before Chezi, like all other mortals, would pass on to the world to come. In soccer the trophy goes to the player that scores the largest number of goals in the European league, and yet here was Chezi Morad from Or Yehuda taking the Golden Shoe thanks to his measly second book. All of life’s challenges, growing up under the poverty line, the constant feeling of not fitting in and doubts about his writing – gone.

Nobody in Germany is interested in yet another Israeli author who writes in Hebrew. Immigrants belonged in the immigrant ghettos. The big German publishing houses gambled only on authors with prior success in Israel. And what about the Israeli community in Berlin? *Quatsch*, they were nothing. *Gurnisht*.

Not worth translating, unless of course they offer German readers an insider's perspective on Israeli culture. But Chezi didn't write about Israel. The situation in Israel, meanwhile, wasn't all that different. No author from Or Yehuda had ever made it onto Israel's national literature team. Besides, Israelis saw Chezi as an emigrant and interloper, a traitor who had abandoned his country and boasted brazenly about life in Germany. But now everything would change. Chezi Morad would show them! Chezi would prove that it's possible to live in Berlin and win prizes in the diaspora based on his Baghdadi origins. He was the first writer the Germans recognized as capable of writing about Baghdad while remaining part of an Israeli establishment that wins prizes.

Helena excused herself to change her clothes and go to the bathroom while Chezi waited patiently on the couch in the living room. A moment before wiping herself, she noticed drops of crimson blood on the white toilet sink. Her underwear was drenched with brownish red blood. The pad she had been given at the hospital hadn't held up. She wondered whether they had just been cutting costs or had in fact purchased defective materials – was this intentional or accidental? She recalled the ultrasound that revealed damage to the amniotic sac. Bed rest hadn't been sufficient. When she finally emerged from the bathroom she asked for water. Something about her pale complexion wasn't normal. She said she felt weak, lay down, and asked Chezi to let her sleep. But then she shot up, nearly vomited and couldn't calm down, so he drew her a bath with healing oils. They met in the kitchen.

“That's not the vegetable I wanted you to buy.”

“I'm sorry. It's all they had.”

“Honey, I should have explained it in English.”

“No, no, it's good that you speak to me in German.”

Helena returned to the bathroom and Chezi ducked into the office momentarily to check his email and refresh his Facebook page, dying to find out whether people had heard the news. Should he share the email he received, he wondered? He could hear Helena writhing uncomfortably as she yelled to him to bring the green bath oil.

The sound of her favorite concerto emanated from the bathroom, Bach's Brandenburg No. 5, written for the Duke of Brandenburg in 1719 upon the composer's return from Berlin. Chezi located the foam on the top shelf of the high cupboard next to the shower and began to dribble it into the water when the cork came loose, causing the fluid to gush uncontrollably into the bathtub.

“Why did you do that?” Helena asked.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.”

“Why don’t you answer when I call you?”

“I’m sorry. I needed to check if anyone had written about the prize.” Chezi looked at the filthy floor, rolls of dust mixed with water, his dark hairs entangled with her light ones.

“I’m not feeling well and I need you to come quick if something happens, okay?” Helena looked at him impatiently, trembling.

“Yes, my love, *neshama*, I’m sorry.” Chezi looked at himself in the cloudy mirror.

“I really don’t feel well.” Helena gently splashed the water that came up to her breasts.

“Poor thing.” He lowered the volume of the music and looked at how she had changed as she lay in the water. Something childlike coursed through her and he wanted to jump into the bathtub with her.

“I don’t want your pity. It’s just— I’ve been thinking a lot about us lately.”

“Let’s talk about it later on.”

“I had a strange dream,”

“Tell me later. Right now let’s just play a game.”

“Let me guess, the one where you imitate me? No. I don’t want to play that. Not now.”

“Come on, please?”

“No.”

“Please, please, please?”

“It’s not the right time. Even now you refuse to take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Helena reluctantly complied and changed her voice to sound like Chezi.

“I’m the great Chezi Morad, I won the Berlin Prize for Fucking Literature. And you’re a big failure. You lost our child. But don’t worry, my Helenushka, I’ll buy you a child with the money I won, I’ll take you on vacations, buy you a house, everything I was always unable to afford because I was a writer living from hand to mouth. All that time I kept saying, ‘Just wait, it’ll happen.’ And now look! It happened! I won enough money to take care of us. And the money isn’t just mine, Helena, it’s also yours. Because you were there by my side and you’re the love of my life. So there, Helena, now you should feel wonderful, fabulous, elated, because your partner is no longer a loser who can’t even take care of his teeth or buy a car.... Thank you very much, kind audience. Thanks for the money. I always knew I was worth it. I promise to spend it with reckless abandon out of respect for the capitalist values of the donors, judges and respected audience. And while we’re at it, thank you for the antisemitism and for the new trend of philosemitism, and, last but not least, thanks for giving me an *Ausländer* visa for artists.” Helena had slipped out of her acting mode and was no longer impersonating Chezi’s deep voice.

Chezi smirked and began imitating Helena: “Poor me, I’m Helena. I lost my first child. I, the one who fantasizes about a big family full of kids, want to thank Chezi for winning that prize. Maybe we can use it to buy children from third-world families who are in desperate need of money and are willing to live with the biggest trauma of all in order to supply fertility to wealthy countries with an abundance of every resource other than children.”

“Stop it. You’re a lot nastier than me.” Helena pleaded, her face drained, eyes nearly shut.

Chezi wiped his nose with the toilet paper next to the sink. On each square of paper were three green hearts arranged in a diagonal row. Yet another excellent purchase from ‘Edefa’, the supermarket chain known for its soft, comfortable, ecofriendly and efficient toilet paper.

“Your dad called. I told him you’d gone grocery shopping.” Helena’s lake blue eyes gazed into Chezi’s forest-green ones.

“I love you,” he said. “I think that’s enough of that game for today. You need to get well.”

“I love you. And I’m asking you to help me, okay? Now maybe you call your dad to tell him the news?”

“If you call your dad, I’ll call mine.”

“Don’t be silly, *Schatzi*.”