

Yehuda Amichai's Old-New Words: Five Fragments and a Note

LEON WIESELTIER

EVEN IN ONE'S ENTHUSIASMS, one must be wary of legends. They are impediments to understanding. Haydn was not just diligent and sweet; Wilde was not essentially frivolous; Mondrian never silenced his heart; Frost was anything but a country sage. We invent the masters we need. Reverence, too, is an interpretation. Sometimes the artist is complicit in the myth that establishes his reputation, and even his immortality; and it is the duty of his admirers to rescue him from a certain falsifying pressure of admiration. Perhaps the clarification that results is itself animated by need. Needs are not always blinding; sometimes they are revelatory. New needs often reveal new elements. The more we need, the more we see. But the more we need, the less we see. So which is it? Eventually, or so one hopes, there appears still another need: the need to get it right—the emotion of scholarship, which may help to rectify the foundations of love.

The legend of Yehuda Amichai is that he usurped the power of the formal with the power of the informal, that he overthrew the public voices and grandiose cadences of his predecessors and in their place established the rule of common words and ordinary experiences. His revolution in Hebrew poetry, according to the conventional account, was a vernacular revolution. When he addressed himself to lovers, for example, Amichai recommended not the light of the moon or the light of the fire but (as in a famous early poem) the light of the refrigerator. In a language as quick with ancient echoes as Hebrew, as easily lyrical and as effortlessly numinous, this was an exhilarating recommendation—an emancipation from uninvited and unwelcome echoes.

But as I have been studying Amichai's literary remains, the gemlike scraps in his archives, I have been struck by the incompleteness of the legend. Amichai was never only demotic. His invincibly secular verse is replete with the language and the imagery of the Jewish tradition. The Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew prayerbook were also in the poet's refrigerator. His last book, *Patuah Sagur Patuah*, or *Open Closed Open*, is really

an extended humanist midrash on a wide variety of biblical and liturgical passages. (I was once startled to observe two *ḥaredim* reading and discussing it in a bookshop, and I recall with particular glee one of the gentlemen knocking over a volume by Ratosh as he stroked his forelocks.) Amichai's keen entanglement with the verbal and symbolic resources of classical Judaism is everywhere, in all his books—playfully and seriously, affectionately or angrily. He was not only a great Hebrew poet, he was also a great Jewish poet.

Is it possible to be a great Hebrew poet and not be a great Jewish poet? But that is my own need speaking, and I will stifle it for now. What follows are five poems from the Amichai archive at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. They were transcribed, with the paleographical and interpretive sensitivity that comes from a life of intimacy, by Hana Amichai, and then translated by me. We do not know when or where these lines were written, and we have no way of knowing how finished any of them are. Some of them are quite obviously fragments. But they are also quite obviously Amichai—new Amichai, six years after his death—an unexpected benediction.



First Love

I was blind to you when you loved me long ago.
 I switched you with another, like Isaac,
 for a smell, and a taste, and an appetite for meat,
 for a fragrance of the field, and a house, and some heat.
 I have forgotten the words
 of the only letter I wrote to you.
 All that I remember is the taste of the glue of the stamp
 on my tongue.
 The fate that determined us was not really
 destiny,
 but it was as strong and as sure as the finger of the violinist
 that determines the fate of a note,
 though it, too, is as final and as decisive
 as death.



Put your shoes back on your feet,
because this place is no longer holy.
You stopped loving in it.
From here on
turn your life into a guidebook for tourists,
with descriptions of places
and the names of mountains and hotels
and the lengths of roads.



The true synagogue
is the one in which nobody any longer prays
laughter rolls through you
tears roll through
it is empty now
not a soul
I pray.



At the hour when Moses sat high up near God
writing
and recording the law that He spoke,
I sat at the edge of the classroom
dreaming and doodling
and drawing faces and flowers
and your name your name your name.
Now I am coming back down and bringing all of it with me
and you are gone.
Don't do what He says. Don't listen to it.
Leave me in peace.



The situation is dangerous,
 very dangerous.
 They are capable of making a new religion.
 We have enough.
 Someone may notice a few weird young people
 and around them a new religion will begin.
 We have enough.
 Every raising of hands
 every translation into other tongues
 could produce a new religion.
 Every descent down stone steps in a white gown
 could produce a new religion.
 We have enough.
 Every melody in a cave
 every sigh in a recess
 every match struck in the dark—
 these could all be turned into a new religion
 in this city.
 It's dangerous.
 The situation is dangerous.