

**Pens of Iron: Echoes of the Psalms of David in Hebrew Poetry
from Samuel HaNagid to Yehuda Amichai**

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Abstract

Within Jewish history, there are two great periods of Jewish literary revival, separated by almost a millennium: the eleventh century, and the twentieth. Although these periods are nearly a thousand years apart, the poems written during these times often seem to echo similar themes of war and persecution that persist in the collective Jewish consciousness. More specifically, the poems written by Jewish poets in the eleventh and twentieth century are often deeply inspired by the Psalms attributed to King David and by the Song of Solomon during the biblical era, as well as by various prophets within the Hebrew biblical narrative. In many ways, the Psalms and the Prophets created the original template for Jewish poetic memory, reflection, and self-consciousness; most of all, their long afterlife is demonstrative of the distinctive echo chamber of Hebrew literature, which has intermittently drawn upon biblical images and themes for wisdom and inspiration over thousands of years.

Introduction

The conventional analysis of Jewish history is through the lenses of physical artifacts, archeology, oral and written testimony, and other various forms of historical documentation—they allow us to map a timeline of historical events, heritage, and migration within Jewish communities around the world, and through thousands of years. But poetry, although often overlooked in historical analysis, offers an extremely valuable record that grants us deep insight into the cultural and spiritual struggles of individuals within history, as well as the communities of which they were members. The Hebrew poetic tradition is one of intensive self-consciousness and collective memory that extends across three millennia. That tradition is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than through the most famous Hebrew poets of their respective eras, Samuel HaNagid (993-1056) and Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), who, despite writing their poetry almost a millennium apart (and in completely different parts of the world) echo the same themes of the self under siege or on the run, the fear of the enemy, and the hope of survival, that achieved their first poignant expression in the biblical Psalms composed thousands of years earlier. As Mark Twain famously observed: “History never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme.” Each of the poets intersects both the contemporary and the ancient in his work—they interpret modern Jewish life through past Jewish life, and vice versa. Most importantly, these writers’ meditations on the relationships between past and present, self and God, soldiers and civilians, and war and peace, allow us to consider both the nature of Jewish literature in Hebrew, with its echoes of the deep biblical past, and the rich complexities of Jewish history and self-consciousness.

“I have no time in the world but the time in which I am
and that lasts a moment and passes like a cloud.”¹

Before the great medieval poet, Samuel HaNagid, had even been born, times were changing in medieval al-Andalus, the territory of the Iberian peninsula under Muslim rule since 711 CE. Sometime during the middle of the tenth century, a young man named Dunash ibn Labrat arrived in the center of Andalusian culture: the city of Cordoba.² Dunash, formerly a student of, and secretary to, Baghdad’s great rabbi Saadia Gaon (892-942), the leading Talmudic and Jewish philosophical authority of the age, began to compose secular Hebrew poems using the Arab poetic style of rhythm, meter, and subject. “Let Scripture be your Eden,” he wrote, “and the Arabs’ books your paradise grove.”³ Although many Jews were scandalized by this new, non-conforming style of Hebrew poetry, it spread rapidly within the Jewish communities of al-Andalus.⁴

Why would someone like Dunash ibn Labrat, with his background in Judaic scholarship and commentary, compose poetry in the sacred language of Hebrew, using Arabic models, about secular, even heretical themes? Jews historically have not succumbed to assimilation by the foreign cultures they have resided in, especially in the Roman and Greek worlds (although there were exceptions). The truth is that, in the medieval Muslim world, things were different. Islam, unlike Greek, Roman, and later Christian culture, was strictly monotheistic— and like Judaism,

¹ Samuel HaNagid, “Hebrew Poems” in *Music of a Distant Drum: Classical Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew Poems*, translated by Bernard Lewis (Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 175–98.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1mjqtkt.8>.

² Robert Alter, introduction to *Hebrew Poetry of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Dan Pagis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

³ Quoted by Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 9.

⁴ Ibid.

it had its own book of sacred scripture that served as the core and basis for its religious beliefs and practices. Perhaps it was because of this kinship that medieval Hebrew poetry in Muslim countries was so influenced by its environment, and borrowed from Arabic poetics: “whereas the world of Greco-Roman culture was one that tradition-minded Jews felt ideologically called upon to reject in its entirety, Islam ... was close enough to Judaism in its strict monotheism and belief in a divine text revealed in human language both to pose a disturbing challenge and to serve as a permissible model of emulation.”⁵ Whether he realized it or not, by accepting that challenge and emulating Arabic poetics, Dunash would change the face of Hebrew literature forever.⁶

It was in this environment that Shmuel ibn Naghrela, whom we know as Samuel HaNagid, or Samuel the Prince, rose to prominence as a scholar, soldier, politician and poet in al-Andalus during the eleventh century. Born in the city of Cordoba in 993, Samuel HaNagid fled to Malaga as a refugee at the age of twenty when his sophisticated and cosmopolitan native city fell to the Berbers in 1013.⁷ He was the son of a wealthy merchant family, and he was given a “double-education” in Judaic studies like Torah and Talmud, and secular studies like science, philosophy, and Arabic literature.⁸

Very soon, he achieved a reputation as a gifted student of both Jewish and Arabic law and literature, as well as a highly gifted master of calligraphy.⁹ A local Granadan vizier named Abu Abbas al-Arif got word of the talented young man, and took him on as a secretary; when al-Arif died six years later, Samuel HaNagid took his place as Minister of the Treasury, a high honor for

⁵ Hillel Halkin, “The First Post-Ancient Jew,” *Commentary* 96:3 (September 1993), p. 43.

⁶ Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 2.

⁷ Simon Schama, “Poetry in Power,” in *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words: 1000 BC-1492 AD* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2017), pp. 270-278.

⁸ Robert Alter, “The Jew’s Last Sigh,” *The New Republic* (May 6, 1996), pp. 30-34.

⁹ Howard Sachar, “Under Andalusian Skies” in *Farewell Espana: The World of the Sephardim Remembered* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 7-9.

a Jew in al-Andalus.¹⁰ His excellent advice on a wide variety of public issues eventually paid off: a few years later, the ruler of al-Andalus appointed him as grand vizier.¹¹

It is remarkable that Samuel HaNagid was not just a poet; he was also a politician and a general. The integration of non-Muslims, and particularly of Jews, into Andalusian culture, society, and even politics had no equivalent in Christian northern Europe during this period; in some respects, however, it was a continuation of the intermixing of Persian and Hebrew culture that went back to the time of Babylonian Captivity.¹² Arabic and Hebrew are also similar languages, and are based on the same Semitic language structure. In these ways, Samuel HaNagid's life was deeply ingrained into Andalusian culture and politics— and yet, his poems display a kind of cultural alienation from the very world over which he wielded so much power with his high status. His poem, “The Market,” reflects the alienation he felt as a Jew in a Muslim world; it is a poem about Samuel HaNagid walking through an Andalusian meat market, where he witnesses cruel mistreatment of animals, and feels deep compassion for them:

I crossed through a market where butchers
hung oxen and sheep side by side—
there were hung birds and herds of fatlings like squid,
their terror loud
as blood congealed over blood
and slaughterers' knives opened veins.¹³

In my opinion, this poem reflects his experience of being a Jew in a foreign culture into which he was half-integrated, half-not: the strict Jewish dietary laws of *kashrut* forbid the suffering of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Brian Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), Part III.

¹³ Samuel HaNagid, “The Market” in *The Jewish Poets of Spain, 900-1250*, translated by David Goldstein. (Penguin, 1971).

animals, and it is clear that, for Samuel HaNagid, the Andalusians around him in that moment were certainly not part of that culture.

Samuel HaNagid's poetry was just as revolutionary as that of his predecessor, Dunash ibn Labrat. The distinguished literary critic and translator Hillel Halkin writes about Samuel HaNagid: "There are poems of his in which we may be witnessing the historical birth of Jewish humor, or, at least, of that Jewish propensity... to joke freely about Scripture and tradition while remaining firmly attached to them."¹⁴ Many Jews residing in medieval Muslim countries were very comfortable in Arabic, which had become their spoken vernacular, and in which they used for writing as well, although in Hebrew characters.¹⁵ Yet, as the historian Howard Sachar observed, it was, ironically, the very depth of the Jews' immersion in Arabic culture that revived their interest in Hebrew as a literary medium. Before Dunash ibn Labrat or Samuel HaNagid, Hebrew was the language of the *piyyut*, the Jewish liturgical poem— more importantly, it was the language of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁶ Like his predecessor Dunash, Samuel HaNagid used the sacred language to address secular themes. Samuel HaNagid's poems are also valuable in that they often serve as historical sources, given that he usually wrote in verse linked to specific events that allow us to date the specific time when each of his poems was written.¹⁷ In one of his poems, "A Message to His Son, Joseph, on the Raising of the Siege of Lorca," the description Samuel HaNagid uses to celebrate his brutal victory over the army of a rebelling Andalusian leader, ibn Abbas, is a valuable historical document for all who study the culture and warfare of Al-Andalus.

¹⁴ Hillel Halkin, "The First Post-Ancient Jew," *Commentary* 96:3 (September 1993), pp. 45-46.

¹⁵ Howard Sachar, "Under Andalusian Skies" in *Farewell Espana: The World of the Sephardim Remembered* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p.10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Hillel Halkin, "The First Post-Ancient Jew," *Commentary* 96:3 (September 1993), p. 46. Halkin offers, as an example of this specificity, "a poem he wrote about an unusual series of eclipses that occurred in the winter and spring of 1044-45."

More than anything, Samuel HaNagid's poetry vividly reflected his life. When his older brother, Isaac, passed away, Samuel HaNagid composed nineteen poems about him that Hillel Halkin asserts "are "the greatest body of elegiac poetry in Hebrew," and are also "unique in world literature as a poetic documentation of bereavement."¹⁸ The elegiac poems themselves are raw, honest, and timeless—the vicissitudes of the grieving process that Samuel HaNagid goes through in medieval times are no different than the wild ride of emotions people experience in the present when they suffer the loss of a loved one. What could be more vivid than this poignant description of the finality of death and the persistence of grief?

The days of my mourning are now at an end.
Yet the days of my sorrow are not complete.
Throughout the days and nights of my grief
My body laments in throes of anguish.

Alas, alas, what sorrow is mine,
How bitter my life, what grief is there,
For my own brother, my mother's son,
My forehead's diadem and my perfection.

Is this the fate that I must suffer?
How can this have befallen me?
How was it possible that in my majesty
And high estate mine should be the voice of woe?

If an enemy had taken hold of him,
I should have repelled him with all my strength.
If a large ransom could bring him back,
I should redeem him with all my wealth.

But, now, today, what can I do?
For such is the ordinance of my God.¹⁹

¹⁸ Hillel Halkin, "The First Post-Ancient Jew," *Commentary* 96:3 (September 1993), p. 49.

¹⁹ Samuel HaNagid, "The Market" in *The Jewish Poets of Spain, 900-1250*, translated by David Goldstein (Penguin, 1971).

Although Samuel HaNagid's poetry reflected his larger-than-life ego, the poet's literary voice, too, was deeply infused by his preoccupation with mortality, and not just in "The Market" or in his nineteen elegaic poems for his brother. He often wrote about his brutal experiences in warfare, since a grand vizier's duties included military leadership. In the beginning of 1038, he began military campaigns as the head of the Granadan army.²⁰ His poetry, especially the poem, "A Message to His Son, Joseph, on the Raising of the Siege of Lorca," is fraught with those experiences as he describes his trepidation before the battle and his heady sense of relief and vindictive triumph after it— and of course, how it all relates back to the glory of God.

In these ways, his poems were filled with his forceful personality and his enormous ego, never seen before in Jewish literary tradition. "He is indeed the first post-biblical Hebrew poet to display a self at all—in the special destiny of which he had a mystic belief."²¹ Historian Simon Schama writes that, "He would not be remembered for the depth of his piety, but for something else entirely: the startling union, in his person, of poetry and power... Naghrela would take the Arabized verse forms inaugurated by Dunash and use them for a radically new kind of Hebrew poetry: sensual and earthy; witty and passionate; steeped in the blood and bragging of battle; drowsy with the all-night wine parties held beside blossom-freckled pools, and even in the visceral slop and stench of the chattering souk. If anyone personified and naturalized a union of Islamic culture and power with unapologetic Judaism, it was [Samuel HaNagid]."²² The poet developed a motif that was unique in Hebrew poetry: the epic of battle and his experience in it.²³ Until that point, nothing like that had been written in Hebrew literature except for the Bible.²⁴

²⁰ Robert Alter, "The Jew's Last Sigh," in *The New Republic* (May 6, 1996), pp. 36-38.

²¹ Hillel Halkin, "The First Post-Ancient Jew," *Commentary* 96:3 (September 1993), p. 47.

²² Simon Schama, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words: 1000 BC-1492 AD* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2017), pp. 270-271.

²³ Howard Sachar, "Under Andalusian Skies" in *Farewell Espana: The World of the Sephardim Remembered* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 7-8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

And while Samuel HaNagid's poetry reflected his own life, it also echoed with the life and poetry of his ancestors— particularly, King David, whose experiences resonated with Samuel HaNagid. The narrative of King David's life includes his experiences as a warrior, a poet, a court favorite, a general, a diplomat, a lover, a mourner, and a man on the run from his enemies; and many of the Psalms attributed to David were inspired by those experiences. Like David, Samuel HaNagid's life was steeped in all these things— and as he conflated the sensual and the spiritual, his lines sometimes bordered on the blasphemous.²⁵ “Must we invoke some sort of cognitive dissonance to explain how the same man could with no apparent sense of inconsistency, live the life of a prominent rabbinical authority and that of a philandering bon vivant?”²⁶ And how was it possible for the great commander, steeped in the blood and gore of the battlefield, to have composed the most poignant expression of grief for the loss of a loved one in the long history of the Hebrew language?

But despite the apparent contradictions of his unconventional persona and his diverse body of work, Samuel HaNagid's poetry was revered far and wide; even the chief Granadan Torah scholar of the eleventh century, Moshe Ibn Ezra, praised him for his literary excellence and the breadth of his influence throughout the Jewish diaspora. Ibn Ezra writes, “His poems . . . are various and full of color, powerful in their contents, fine in their form, original in their ideas, and clear in their rhetoric. All that pertains to his compositions and works and letters is known to the uttermost edges of east and west and across the land and sea, and up to the leaders of the Babylonian community and the sages of Syria and the scholars of Egypt and the Nagids of Ifriqiya and the lords of the West and the Spanish nobility.”²⁷

²⁵ Simon Schama, “Poetry in Power,” in *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words: 1000 BC-1492 AD* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2017), p. 275.

²⁶ Hillel Halkin, “The First Post-Ancient Jew,” *Commentary* 96:3 (September 1993), p. 45.

²⁷ Peter Cole, introduction to *Selected Poems of Shmuel HaNagid*, trans. Peter Cole (Princeton, 1996).

II

“How not to love a writer who spoke often about making his poetry ‘useful,’ who insisted that each of his books of verse in Hebrew should be published in the same handy format (ten by eighteen centimetres), so that they could easily be carried in a reader’s pocket?”²⁸

Almost a thousand years later, during the twentieth century, the great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai again revolutionized Hebrew poetry— he broke away from the elevated rhetoric of early Zionism by introducing slang and the prosaic vocabulary of the modern world to emancipate modern Hebrew from its biblical matrix (which served him, nevertheless, as an ironic counterpoint to his own experience).²⁹ His rejection of the grandiose in favor of the ordinary or mundane is often laced with irony— which is interesting to read from a biographical perspective, given that Yehuda Amichai was raised Orthodox-Jewish, and no doubt had a deep belief in those religious ideas during his early years.

Like that of Samuel HaNagid, Yehuda Amichai’s life was filled with conflicts much larger than himself. His parents were Orthodox German Jews; in fact, his family had lived in Germany since the Middle Ages.³⁰ The town that Ludwig Pfeuffer (his original name) was born in, Würzburg, had a very strong Jewish community, although they were a minority of around two thousand Jews within a majority of a hundred thousand Catholics.³¹ His early education was a traditional one— he interpreted the Bible, and learned to read and write Hebrew from a young age.³² But although Würzburg’s Jewish community was strong, Yehuda Amichai describes the

²⁸ James Wood, "Like a Prayer: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai." *The New Yorker*, (27 Dec. 2015), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/04/like-a-prayer?utm_source=onsite-share&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=onsite-share&utm_brand=the-new-yorker.

²⁹ “Irreverent Israeli Poet with a Comic Eye for Detail.” *The Irish Times*, (24 Feb. 2013), <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/irreverent-israeli-poet-with-a-comic-eye-for-detail-1.1106730>.

³⁰ Interview conducted by Lawrence Joseph, “Yehuda Amichai: The Art of Poetry No. 44,” in *The Paris Review* No. 122 (Spring 1992), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2095/the-art-of-poetry-no-44-yehuda-amichai>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

antisemitism he grew up with as a bigotry that “predated Hitler”; once, when he was eight or nine years old, he was watching a local Catholic procession go by when he was hit in the face and told, “You dirty little Jew, take your skullcap off!”³³ His family eventually fled to the city of Jerusalem in British Mandate Palestine in 1936, as Hitler and the Nazis were consolidating their Nazi power in Germany; they were, at the time, one of the few Jewish families from central Europe in Palestine.³⁴ But the risk they took for survival and dignity paid off: no one in Yehuda Amichai’s family, or extended family, was killed in the coming Holocaust.³⁵ For his parents, going to Palestine was also a deeply romantic idea, motivated not only by their sense of jeopardy in Nazi Germany, but also by their longing to be in their ancestral land.³⁶

But despite their romanticized idea of an ancestral homeland, Jerusalem, too, was riddled with conflict; Yehuda Amichai served in three wars between the State of Israel and its enemies over the course of three decades—the wars of 1948, 1956, and 1973, to be specific. Also like that of Samuel HaNagid, much of Yehuda Amichai’s poetry was drawn from these conflicts—the battlefield of war, ethnic tensions within his city of Jerusalem, and the helplessness (and sometimes hopelessness) of being a person caught in a conflict between ideologies from which he himself was withdrawn. About the antisemitism he experienced in Germany, he remembered that “We were called names. We had stones thrown at us... Funny thing, the common name we were called was Isaac—the way Muslims are called Ali or Mohammed. They’d call out, Isaac, go back to Palestine, leave our home, go to your place. They threw stones at us and shouted, Go to Palestine. Then in Palestine we were told to leave Palestine—history juxtaposed can be very ironic.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Many call Yehuda Amichai the State of Israel's national poet, for his poignant, deeply personal poems that chronicled the State of Israel's tensions and sorrows during the time they were written. His contemporary, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, invited him to read his poems at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo in 1994. But while Amichai was profoundly committed to defending the new state and connected to his Jewish identity, he was also very much a critical Zionist.³⁷ He opposed extreme nationalism of any kind and campaigned against the State of Israel's war with Lebanon in 1982.³⁸ Most of all, he longed for mundane peace. In this way, Yehuda Amichai is a much more relatable poet than the great Samuel HaNagid; and it is no doubt the relatability of his poetry that has made him the most beloved of Israel's writers. Robert Alter says of Yehuda Amichai that "Much of his appeal to Israeli readers lay precisely in his ability to remain an unassuming private person in his poems."³⁹

Yehuda Amichai's persona in his poetry was also completely antithetical to that of Samuel HaNagid; while Samuel HaNagid wrote of his epic experiences with confidence in the justice of his cause and his own God-favored destiny, for Yehuda Amichai, moral clarity is intentionally more elusive and uncertain. More than anything, the truth in Yehuda Amichai's poetry, particularly his war poetry, is not filled with glory, or victory: it is filled with tenderness for his father, or remembering, while on the battlefield, how he said goodbye to his girlfriend. When he talks about bombs, it is about how their impact reverberates through the whole world. When he talks about dead bodies on the battlefield, they are the bodies of his friends. Like Samuel HaNagid, Yehuda Amichai's poems are filled with the weight of history. But unlike Samuel HaNagid, the voice in Yehuda Amichai's poems often has no idea what to make of that

³⁷ "Irreverent Israeli Poet with a Comic Eye for Detail." *The Irish Times*, (24 Feb. 2013), <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/irreverent-israeli-poet-with-a-comic-eye-for-detail-1.1106730>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Robert Alter, "Only A Man." *The New Republic*, (30 Dec. 2008), <https://newrepublic.com/article/63756/only-man>

legacy. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Amichai says, “I’ve always believed, as a general remark, that those born after World War I until, I would say, 1926, bear the weight of the twentieth century. We are the generation that inherited the aftermath of World War I and came of age during World War II. In my case, as an Israeli, I was still young enough, after World War II, to be actively involved in three additional wars. I really have the feeling that I am the result and very contents of the twentieth century.”⁴⁰

Yehuda Amichai’s strong sense of historicity, of having been a product of the time, place, and culture he grew up in, is interesting, especially in the context of analyzing Jewish history and poetry. Samuel HaNagid, too, was no doubt a product of a Jewish community within al-Andalus; this is most evident in his poems which conflate religious ideology and language with al-Andalusian wars, totally unrelated to anything Jewish (except insofar as they remind him of the biblical warrior-king, David). This is the window in which poetry, and in this case, Hebrew poetry, offers us glimpses of the collective consciousness of Jews through three thousand years of history. Julian Jaynes writes in his book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, that “In the wanderings of the Hebrews after the exodus from Egypt, it was the sacred shrine that was carried before the multitude and followed by the people, but it was the poetry of Moses that determined when they would start and when stop, where they would go and where stay.”⁴¹ Jewish literature has developed within an echo chamber that extends back to the defining memory of the Exodus experience in the time of Moses; through the checkered career of King David, who made Jerusalem the capital of ancient Israel but failed to honor the Covenant; to the eloquent pleas for the pursuit of social justice announced by the prophets, who were

⁴⁰ Interview conducted by Lawrence Joseph. “Yehuda Amichai: The Art of Poetry No. 44,” in *The Paris Review* No. 122 (Spring 1992).

⁴¹ Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Boston: (Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

arguably the world's first social critics; and to the poignant poems of hope, despair, and supplication created by the psalmists. This is the rich biblical literary tradition that Samuel HaNagid and Yehuda Amichai inherited and adapted for their own purposes, even as they wrote their poetry almost a thousand years apart.

III

“War begins like a pretty girl
with whom every man wants to flirt
and ends like an ugly old woman
whose visitors suffer and weep.”⁴²

Samuel HaNagid's poem, *Answer Me*, is filled with a powerful charge of spiritual eroticism as he calls out to God to answer him. Typical of the confidence in Samuel HaNagid's personality— often bordering on an egotistical self-perception— he begins the first half of *Answer Me* with a series of imperatives addressed to God. He says,

Build me up like a tower on the heights on your sanctuary,
And set me like a seal upon your heart.
Make me drunk with the blood of the foe on the day of war
And satisfy me with his flesh on the night of redemption.⁴³

These lines suggest an inversion of the traditional relationship between man and God: the speaker is the one giving orders, whereas God is the one receiving them. More importantly, the

⁴² Samuel HaNagid, “Hebrew Poems” in *Music of a Distant Drum: Classical Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew Poems*, translated by Bernard Lewis (Princeton University Press, 2001) pp. 175–98.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1mjqtkt.8>.

⁴³ Samuel HaNagid, “Answer Me” in *Medieval Hebrew Poetry*, 8 Nov. 2019,
<http://www.medievalhebrewpoetry.org/poets/samuel-hanagid/#answer>.

flipped positions of power in the poem offer an example of Samuel HaNagid's forceful personality shining through, given that he often viewed himself as an avatar of King David.

The eroticism within the first half of the poem is also important to note and should not be overlooked; Samuel HaNagid frequently conflates the spiritual and the physical within his poems, and has not shied away from writing about love and sex in other poems either. With each of his erotic, dominating commands—"Build me up," "Make me drunk," and "Satisfy me"—Samuel HaNagid also evokes religious images and concepts like the sanctuary, and the night of redemption, which no doubt allude to the messianic era. Samuel HaNagid even directly takes lines from Hebrew prayers and psalms and transforms them in this way. When he refers to a "seal upon your heart," Samuel HaNagid is directly quoting a chapter from one of the five writings in the Hebrew biblical text of *Ketuvim*, which is the third major section of the Hebrew Tanakh. The text from which the phrase "seal upon your heart" comes is called *Shir HaShirim*, which translates into Song of Songs, which was attributed to Solomon himself, King David's son.

The Song of Songs itself is a notoriously erotic text: the very first line is "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine." It is one of the few biblical texts that does not mention God or the Covenant, but seems rather to be a celebration of sexual love (although some commentators have interpreted it as an allegory of human yearning for God). Solomon writes in chapter eight of the Song of Songs, "Place me like a seal on your heart" for seemingly the same reason Samuel HaNagid writes it nearly two thousand years later: a beseeching of the beloved (God?) to remember him, not to forget him, and to answer him.

This conflation of the physical and the spiritual continues into the second half of Samuel HaNagid's poem. He says,

Place the cup of salvation upon my right hand
That my tongue may give voice in joy to a song of love.

Immediately, we are presented with a physical image infused with spirituality— a cup of salvation. Not only is the image of a cup, being placed into a right hand, associated with kingship, but the words “the cup of salvation” are taken directly from Psalm 116, which says, “I will lift the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.” A fitting allusion, since at its core, *Answer Me* is a poem about calling out to God, but hearing no answer. Another reference to a psalm occurs immediately in the next line, “That my tongue may give voice in joy to a song of love”; this psalm, called Song of Ascents, discusses the messianic era of the return to Zion. It says that “When the Lord will return the exiles of Zion... our tongue will be [filled] with songs of joy.” When Samuel HaNagid mentions a “song of love,” he is no doubt referring to the Song of Songs, surely the most intensely erotic poem in the Bible.

But the last two lines of Samuel HaNagid’s poem take a somber turn. He says,

For nearly a thousand years I have declared my sorrow
With many tears and fasting,— will You not answer me?

It is here that Samuel HaNagid draws upon the Jewish community’s collective memory of the diaspora, of suffering, and of waiting for the Messiah when he writes about a thousand years of sorrow, tears, and fasting. And yet, in his supplication for redemption, the poet still hears no answer from God. The despair in the poem is reminiscent of other great Jewish figures and their struggles in their relationship with God: the plight of Job as he experiences deep suffering, or King David’s supplication to God for mercy as he flees his kingdom. Job says in Job 30:20, “I

cry unto Thee, and Thou dost not answer me”; David writes in Psalm 22, “My God, I call out my day, and You do not answer.”

In this way, *Answer Me* is not a poem about one man’s relationship with God, but a poem about an entire nation’s relationship with God. The poem turns from an opening that is jubilant, commanding, and confident, to lines that are filled with sorrow, tears, fasting, and a question that seems to echo into the void— will You not answer me? Even more, the question and the lamentation cast echoes into the past; Samuel HaNagid draws upon and experiences the same existential loneliness that Jewish leaders before him experienced. And in the same way, he directly quotes Solomon’s passionate love poem, while addressing his own passionate love poem to God. The layers within many of Samuel HaNagid’s poems are akin to an echo-chamber of recurring Jewish images and themes, extending across two millennia.

The contrast of the physical and the spiritual within the poem— and in many of the psalms, prayers, and biblical images it draws from— highlights the duality of diasporic Jewish memory. Samuel HaNagid alludes, in his poem, to the sensory experiences of violence, love, sex, and drinking; and yet, before the sentences about them have even ended, he transforms these sensual experiences into existential anguish, and links them back to the agony of spiritual isolation and silence from God.

Although *Answer Me* is highly demonstrative of his relationship with God, it would be foolish, when analyzing Samuel HaNagid’s poetry, to overlook the role war played in his life and work. HaNagid himself was a high-ranking general, and his experiences of violence and war are apparent in his poems, especially in *A Message To His Son, Joseph, on the Raising of the Siege of Lorca*, and in *The Citadel*. The poems themselves, like *Answer Me*, are filled to the brim with

religious and spiritual messages that manifest themselves in the highly physical world of the poem— in this case, the presence and aftermath of war and destruction.

The Citadel begins with direct images of war, soldiers, the aftermath of destruction, and the implication of the innocent suffering:

I stationed a strong force in a citadel
Which soldiers had destroyed long ago.
We slept there, in it, and around it,
And its owners slept beneath us, down below.⁴⁴

The most unexpected aspect of this poem is that it gives us historical context for the state of minorities like Jews in tenth and eleventh-century Spain; whether Samuel HaNagid intended it or not— although given his forceful personality, I'm sure he did— the poet informs us that he was in a high-up political position, powerful enough that he could station military troops in an unspecified territory. Despite the fact that in Islamic Spain, minorities like Jews were officially considered subordinate in society, the protection of the *dhimmi* status allowed them to maintain their identity most of the time in peace and freedom. It's these circumstances that allowed Samuel HaNagid to be not only a military leader, but also a diplomat, politician, scholar, and poet.

Arguably, the most stunning part of the poem is this exploration of those many overlapping identities— because Samuel HaNagid is not just a general, or a Jew. He feels deep compassion for the former residents of the city, now abandoned, in the third part of the poem:

I said to myself: "Where are the people,
Those who lived here in years that have gone?"

⁴⁴ Samuel HaNagid. "The Citadel" in *The Jewish Poets of Spain, 900-1250*, translated by David Goldstein. (Penguin, 1971).

Where are the builders and destroyers, the slaves,
And their masters, the princes and the woebegone?
Where are the parents, the bereaved, the fathers,
The sons, the bridegrooms, and the mourners,
And the large numbers that were born after these,
As the seasons turned through the cycle of the years?

Through this introspective questioning, we begin to understand Samuel HaNagid's identity beyond his being a general, or a Jew; he has also been a bereaved mourner, which is evident through his heart-wrenching elegies and poems of grief for his deceased brother. He is also a father, and he is a son, and he has been a bridegroom; he recognizes the deep contrast between the absence of life within the city he resides in, and his own rich, vivid experiences of life within himself. And although Samuel HaNagid's identities were much more complex than just being a general or a Jew, the profound compassion and sensitivity he feels for the imagined stranger no doubt comes from his Jewish tradition, which through its own exodus story emphasizes compassion towards the stranger. Samuel HaNagid was not looking down at the abandoned city from the citadel as a general, or a diplomat, or a citizen of al-Andalus. He was, no doubt, looking at the city as a Jew, filled with *chesed*, loving-kindness for other people, and for the stranger.

This tender introspection of seeing the stranger in himself— and in this case, what very well could have been civilians in an enemy nation or territory— continues through the second half of the poem.

They were all neighbors on the face of the earth,
And now they lie together in the earth's womb.
They moved to the dust from their pleasant courts,
And from their palaces towards the tomb.
Were they to raise their heads and emerge,
They would despoil us, of our lives and possessions.

The distinct recognition of the strangers' humanity that Samuel HaNagid made was no doubt revolutionary for the time— the recognition that we are all neighbors on the face of the earth, and the recognition of the “sameness” that ties us all together: death, the ultimate equalizer. Samuel HaNagid recognizes that we may be separated by kingdoms, towns, palaces, borders, and enemy lines— but in the end, we will all lie within the same place, that being the grave. The contemplation of the dead who could “raise their heads and emerge” is no doubt an allusion to the messianic era in Judaism, which promises the resurrection of the dead. But in *The Citadel*, the dead have not mellowed any more than the living; he believes that if the dead soldiers who had fought here could return to life, they would plunder the living, and all their worldly possessions. The poet's empathy for the dead does not preclude a recognition of their bellicosity.

But Samuel HaNagid does not exclude himself from the masses of people that he believes are fundamentally the same, and no more righteous than the dead; he says in his last lines,

In truth, my soul, in truth, by to-morrow,
I shall be like them, and all my companions.

This admission of self-deprecation is rare to find within a Samuel HaNagid poem; he often perceives himself as a powerful, wise, even messianic leader, one comparable to King David or Solomon. But in *The Citadel*, Samuel HaNagid is humble enough— although still wise— to admit the reality of his own fleeting life and mortality.

Even as Samuel HaNagid demonstrated deep compassion and humility in the aftermath of war in *The Citadel*, the story of war in *A Message To His Son, Joseph, on the Raising of the Siege of Lorca* is jarringly different. The poem begins with an order to send a letter to his son;

admittedly, the poem begins with a strong aura of sweetness as he creates an image of a beautiful messenger-pigeon carrying a tiny letter to his son.

Send a carrier-pigeon, although she cannot speak,
With a tiny letter attached to her wings,
Sweetened with saffron-water, perfumed with frankincense.
And when she rises to fly away, send with her another,
So that, should she meet an eagle or all into a snare,
Or fail to make haste, the second will speed away.⁴⁵

Samuel HaNagid emphasizes the importance and urgency of this letter by sending a second carrier-pigeon after the first with the same letter, in case the first does not travel fast enough, or does not successfully make it to his son. The means by which the letter is to be sent, too, seem significant; the pigeon must be sweetened with saffron-water and perfumed with frankincense, which were ceremonially used, and almost altar-like scents and fragrances.

The description of the carrier-pigeon is almost dream-like, especially as HaNagid envisions the bird finally arriving at his son's house, and his son's joyous reaction to receiving the letter and reading it:

And when she comes to Joseph's house, she will coo on the roof-top.
When she flies down to his hand, he will rejoice in her, as with a song-bird.
He will spread out her wings, and read a letter thus:

With so much anticipation created in the vivid images of the letter traveling to his son, one can't help but wonder, what is so important and urgent about HaNagid's message to his son? What humble, compassionate reflections or advice does he have for his son that might echo the wisdom seen in *Answer Me* and *The Citadel*?

⁴⁵ Samuel HaNagid, "A Message To His Son, Joseph, on the Raising of the Siege of Lorca" in *The Jewish Poets of Spain, 900-1250*, translated by David Goldstein (Penguin, 1971).

The answer is unexpected and disturbing. Samuel HaNagid describes with brutal detail how he and his troops annihilated rebel forces, destroyed, slaughtered, and humiliated them. He begins his letter with these eleven lines:

Know, my son, that the cursed band of rebels has fled,
Scattered among the hills like chaff from a windswept field,
And among the byways like sheep astray with no shepherd.
They looked to defeat their enemy but they did not see it.
As we went to destroy them, at that very hour they fled.
They were slaughtered, falling upon each other at the crossing.
Their designs against the barred, walled city were frustrated.
They were humiliated like thieves caught in the act.
They covered themselves with ignominy as with a garment.
Calamity attached itself to them like the skin to one's face.
They drank contempt in their cups, and drained the cup of drunkenness.

The contrast between the victorious army and their defeated enemy, and the description of the latter as “scattered among the hills like chaff from a windswept field,” echoes the stark contrast between the virtuous and the wicked in Psalm 1:

1 Blessed is the one
 who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
2 but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.
3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
 whatever they do prospers.
4 Not so the wicked!
 They are like chaff
 that the wind blows away.
5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

6 For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

But it is here that we see in full glory, Samuel NaHagid, the general, and less so Samuel HaNagid, the Jew. His descriptions are raw and fresh, as if he had barely had time to wipe the blood from his hands before scrambling to his tent to write the letter to his son. As in *The Citadel*, Samuel HaNagid gives us the reflections of a great general writing from the battlefield, as well as eliciting a number of historical questions: who were these rebels, and what were they fighting for? How many of them were there? Where was this battle outside the city walls, among the hills?

We know from the documentation of the poem that the rebels he fought were the army of ibn Abbas, a neighboring Andalusian ruler.⁴⁶ But a less historical, more important question is, how can these brutal, vindictive descriptions of a defeated enemy have been written by the same Samuel HaNagid who was so moved by the aftermath of war and destruction in *The Citadel*?

When observing the destruction and suffering of rebel forces around him, Samuel HaNagid admits to feeling a pang of grief reminiscent of the grief he experienced in *The Citadel*; and interestingly, this is where he begins his characteristic poetic transformation from the physical to the spiritual. He writes:

In my heart there was the pain of a woman bearing her first child,
And God put balm upon it, like rain in the drought.
Then my eyes were heightened, and my enemies' plunged into gloom.
I sing with a joyful heart, and they utter only laments.
The voice of gladness is in my house, and theirs hears bitter weeping.

⁴⁶ Howard Sachar, "Under Andalusian Skies" in *Farewell Espana: The World of the Sephardim Remembered* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p.9.

The pain and compassion HaNagid feels in his heart are as indescribable as the pain a woman experiences through childbirth; and yet, he claims it is God himself who numbs his empathetic pain after victory. He becomes uplifted, and relishes in the enemies' suffering; his heart is joyous, and theirs, filled with weeping. What to make of this seemingly cruel relishing of victory and violence, especially from a figure who we know has demonstrated and felt deep compassion for the stranger? If this was Samuel HaNagid, the general of Al-Andalus speaking, then we might understand. But HaNagid obscures the morality of his poem even more by bringing his relationship with God and spirituality into the picture. The messages in *A Message To His Son, Joseph, on the Raising of the Siege of Lorca* are clearly not just about war, or victory; they are also messages of mixed and overlapping identities, whether or not Samuel HaNagid was aware of it as he wrote it.

It is clear Samuel HaNagid is a multifaceted person; he is a general for the state, a poet, and a Jew. He often views himself as messiah-like— and at the same time, is poignantly aware of his mortality, and the fleeting nature of life. That being said, the emotions and identities he feels in *A Message To His Son, Joseph* are complicated, and they overlap each other in different ways. When he defeats enemies— not of the Jews, but of the state of al-Andalus— he feels pious towards his God for helping him defeat them. The Jewish identity in him feels compassion for the rebels' suffering. But the general in him feels joy in the rebels' suffering— a joy that he could not have felt if it weren't for God numbing his compassion. In this way, the poem captures his personal struggle of identity as a Jew living in al-Andalus— and perhaps, captures the struggle of contrasting identities for all Jews living in the Diaspora. This sense of split, contrasting identities is no more apparent in any of his poems than this one; loyalty to the nation he resides in, and loyalty to his own Jewish nation and culture. The struggle for identity in the

Jewish Diaspora is complicated, and was no less complicated in eleventh-century Islamic Spain, where Jews were given freedom to maintain their identity— but also to assimilate into other parts of society and to occupy a variety of roles that would not have been available to them anywhere else in that era.

If the middle of the poem suggests some of the paradoxes implicit in Samuel HaNagid's role as a Jewish general commanding the forces of an Islamic state, the climax of *A Message To His Son, Joseph* becomes poignantly religious and spiritual, although HaNagid does switch into his messiah-like persona once again. He says,

To you, my rock and my tower, to you my soul sings.
When I was in trouble, my plaint was laid before you.
My son, put your heart in the glorious hand of my God.
Arise, sing my song in the full assembly of the people.
And make it an amulet to be bound on your hand
And let it be written with pen of iron in your heart.

He immediately uses and transforms direct quotations from David's psalms; the quote "to you, my rock and my tower" comes from Psalm 18:3, when David praises God for saving him from all his enemies— similar to how Samuel HaNagid believes how God saved him and made him victorious over his, for the same reason, only thousands of years later. The author of the psalm directly calls God "My rock and my fortress," as HaNagid does. And the second line of the poem, again, transforms another one of David's psalms, this time, Psalm 142:2, "I pour out my complaint before Him, I declare before Him my trouble."

He then makes multiple allusions to Jewish faith and ritual. When he tells his son to "sing my song in the full assembly of the people," he is referring to two things: first, to the messianic end of the Jewish Diaspora, when it is believed all Jews will assemble before God in their

religious ancestral homeland. Second, a “full assembly of the people” is a callback to when Jews received the Torah in their biblical narrative— it is believed in Jewish tradition that when the Jews received the Torah, they were fully assembled at the base of Mount Sinai, and collectively heard the voice of God say the Ten Commandments. When Samuel HaNagid tells his son to “make it an amulet to be bound on your hand,” he is referring to the ritual object of *Tefillin*, phylacteries containing Hebrew prayers, that Jewish men traditionally wear while praying three times a day.

But the last line, “And let it be written with a pen of iron in your heart” is an interesting, and unexpected biblical allusion. It’s not from the Psalms, but from the writings of the prophets, specifically Jeremiah. He says, when talking about the sins of idolatry and paganism within the Hebrew nation of Judah, that “the sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron.” The famous medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi, says that a “pen of iron” is an allegory for something that is deeply engraved, and cannot be erased.⁴⁷ In this way, Samuel HaNagid again has transformed a line of biblical text into his own poetic, heroic message of victory and redemption; one that he believes his son should engrave in his heart so deeply, that it could never be erased.

⁴⁷ See Rashi on Jeremiah 17:1, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Jeremiah.17.1?ven=Jeremiah,_English_translation_by_H._Freedman,_Soncino_Press,_1949&vhe=On_Your_Way&lang=bi.

IV

The man saw poetry everywhere. If anyone spoke it, it was he. You couldn't know him without being struck by the casual way in which original and sometimes startling metaphors dropped from his lips in ordinary conversation, spontaneously occasioned by something that you and he might be looking at or talking about. It wasn't just done for effect. It was just the way his mind worked. His thought was habitually associational. One thing made him think of another and what it made him think of was generally something that would not have occurred to anyone else.⁴⁸

Yehuda Amichai's poems, unlike those of his poetic counterpart, Samuel HaNagid, are often permeated with an antiheroic sense of self. While both poets are slippery with allusions to biblical narratives and psalms, in Yehuda Amichai's poems, the poet does not paint himself as messiah-like or having an exceptional relationship with God. Quite the opposite: Amichai's poetic voice is often laden with irony as he measures the distance between the biblical past and the prosaic present in his poems. As his biographer, Nili Scharf Gold, observes, "He and his peers rebelled against their predecessors' grandiose, ideological verse and proclaimed that 'understatement' would be one of their guiding principles.... From the time that they first appeared in newspapers and periodicals, Amichai's poems overturned Hebrew poetry by lowering the linguistic register and deflating the pathos of the previous literary generation."⁴⁹

Also unlike Samuel HaNagid, Amichai's poetic voice is not philosophical—he does not offer general reflections on the human condition, as Samuel HaNagid does in "The Citadel," but

⁴⁸ Hillel Halkin, "A Complex Network of Pipes," *The Jewish Review of Books* (Winter 2018), a review of *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, ed. Robert Alter.

⁴⁹ Nili Scharf Gold, *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2008). Gold continues: "His rugged rhyme schemes shattered traditional meter, and his heterogeneous vocabulary reflects the drastic changes that had taken place in Hebrew writing during World War II and the War of Independence. Amichai's poems absorb and rework everyday materials, integrating them into a poetry that had hitherto avoided modern terms so as not to mar the beauty of classical Hebrew. In Amichai's hands, airplanes, tanks, gasoline, iceboxes, legal contracts, and mathematical axioms became the building blocks of poems for the first time. He used unexpected metaphorical and linguistic combinations throughout his verse, pairing the high with the low, nature with technology, the emotional with the mechanical; storks flying over rural landscapes become jet planes and the eyes of a tired soldier close like the portholes of a tank.... Under Amichai's command, literary, biblical, and liturgical Hebrew became flexible and vibrant as he playfully interwove modern concepts with fragments of prayers and ancient prophecies."

explores the moral reality around him while remaining close to own autobiographical experience. This is especially true in his poems about King David's city, and his own: Jerusalem.

This questioning of his moral reality is nowhere more apparent than in his poem, *Jerusalem*, and he begins his first stanza with a striking image of the mundane: laundry hanging from buildings in the Old City. He says,

On a roof in the old city
Laundry hanging in the late afternoon sunlight:
The white sheet of a woman who is my enemy,
The towel of a man who is my enemy,
To wipe off the sweat of his brow.⁵⁰

The ancient city of Jerusalem historically has been fraught with invasion and conflict: by one count, the city has been captured and recaptured 44 times over the course of its long history, besieged 23 times, and destroyed twice. That being said, Jerusalem is a religiously dense city, with four quarters (Jewish Quarter, Muslim Quarter, Armenian Quarter, and Christian Quarter), and many of its neighborhoods ethnically intermixed. This is demonstrated in Amichai's first stanza of *Jerusalem*; as he overlooks the city on a rooftop, he sees his Palestinian neighbors, whom he sarcastically calls his enemies, hanging their laundry.

The image of laundry is significant for a number of reasons— firstly, it's an image of ongoing everyday life in this historic city riven by conflict. But beyond the obvious symbolism, for Amichai, the image of Palestinians hanging their laundry to dry is one of tenderness and vulnerability; after all, no matter who you are, or where you come from, it's impossible to escape the human reality of sweat, blood, and general filth that requires us to strip ourselves to bathe in order to become clean again. Which brings Amichai to his next, subtle message: even people

⁵⁰ Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, edited and translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (University of California Press, 2013).

with whom his people have been at war still do laundry in the afternoon. Even more stunning is that those “enemies” are doing their laundry within such a close proximity to Amichai— and in that moment, both experience the peace that exists in the mundaneness of the human experience.

Amichai continues his reflections on social margins, separations, and borders; he sees a kite being flown, but cannot see who is flying it due to a high wall. He writes,

In the sky of the Old City
A kite.
At the other end of the string,
A child
I can't see
Because of the wall.

The wall in this stanza is both physical and metaphorical; Jerusalem is a city of many literal walls, and also symbolic walls between people, neighbors, and children. Perhaps Yehuda Amichai is straining to see the child who holds the beautiful kite, a picture of innocence and purity. But although he tries, he is unable to overcome the walls that exist between his people and the people whom the symbolic walls separate him from. It is important to note that Amichai does not specify the ethnicity of the child who flies the kite; it very well may be a Jewish child, and just as likely may be a Palestinian child. But in Amichai’s reflection, neither matters— he or she is simply an innocent child who is playing, and whom Amichai is unable to recognize due to the enormous tension and conflict in his city.

Yehuda Amichai takes no “sides” in *Jerusalem*. In the poem, he alludes to the present conflict, but does not engage in it— only observes it. He ends on a poignant note:

We have put up many flags,
They have put up many flags.
To make us think that they're happy.
To make them think that we're happy.

The final transformation of the poem's beginning image of laundry into flags suggests a different poetic persona from that of Samuel HaNagid. While Samuel HaNagid's poems usually showcase a persona that is forceful, even aggressive, Yehuda Amichai's self-presentation is softer, and more subtle. The people on each side of Amichai's "wall" show off the various ways in which they are alive, thriving, and happy. But in reality, no one is happy. And although we hope that Amichai himself is above these so-called "walls" within his poem, given that he is on a rooftop, he makes it clear that is not the case, although that clearly causes him great sadness. After all, the roof he is perched on in the poem is not high enough to see an innocent child play with his kite.

Amichai's poetic voice is potent with this contrast between moral clarity and ambiguity, especially when alluding to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict he was embroiled within for most of his life. Another Jerusalem poem of his, *In the Old City*, again alludes to the complexities and tension that come with the experience of living in Jerusalem; and yet, even more so than in *Jerusalem*, Amichai's images are slippery and ambiguous in *In the Old City*. The first two lines of the poem are visceral, raw, and unresolved in their meaning:

We are holiday weepers, engraving our names on every stone,
infected by hope, hostages of governments and history, blown by the wind,
vacuuming holy dust,⁵¹

Understanding these first lines of the poem is difficult, to say the least; they are packed with abstract images and statements that seem to be both connected and unconnected to each other. The Jewish calendar notoriously has holidays dedicated to fasting, grieving, and

⁵¹Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, edited and translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (University of California Press, 2013).

repentance, like Yom Kippur and Tisha Ba'av; even the joyous holiday of Purim is preceded by a fast-day that recalls the Jewish people of Persia's narrow escape from genocide.

Perhaps this is what it means to be a "holiday weeper"; most holidays in the non-Jewish world are solely associated with celebration and joy, but for Jews, it's more complicated. Jewish holidays no doubt are filled with joy, singing, and often, feasting, but within the celebrations, there also exists a seed of collective memory that is sobering and melancholic. Even on the joyous Jewish holiday of Passover, which celebrates the Jews' narrative of freedom and redemption from Egypt, Jews' ritually eat bitter herbs and root vegetables dipped in salt water to remember their ancestor's bitter tears of slavery. And just as important is the remembrance of the Egyptians' suffering during the narrative's Ten Plagues; it is traditional to remove ten drops of wine with a finger as the Ten Plagues are recited, to "remove" some of its "sweetness" when recalling the Plagues that the Egyptians inevitably suffered from.

It's clear that, at least according to Yehuda Amichai, to be a holiday weeper is to remember the past. So it is fitting that the phrase "engraving our names on every stone" elicits the image of a cemetery, or memorial— because in Jewish tradition, to remember is also to grieve. Within *In the Old City*, hope is a widespread contagion that the poet himself also admits to being "infected" by, despite the history of loss and violence that the Jewish people have been subject to, or as he puts it, "hostages." He recalls that the memory of this history, now in the past, is fleeting, blown by the wind— and yet, it is also the scattered, holy dust all around us that we are still trying to sweep away.

His melancholic images do not become any less mysterious as he continues in his elegiac poem. He writes,

our king is a young child, weeping and beautiful,

his picture hangs everywhere.
These stairs always force us to bob
up and down, as if in a merry dance, even those of us who are heavy-hearted.

Who is this young king of the Jews, whom Yehuda Amichai writes about as small, vulnerable, and innocent? Similar to what he writes in *Jersusalem*, Yehuda Amichai cleaves to and reveres the innocence of children, who remain pure despite being caught in the crossfire of history and conflict. Perhaps this is what he means when he describes his community's king as a young child whose picture hangs everywhere—that they worship their children's innocence, and although they try to protect them, they are constantly reminded of their suffering in the course of the conflict.

The stairs of the Old City, too, are numerous and everywhere; their presence is also a reminder of the many obstacles, and ironies, Jerusalem's inhabitants are forced to live through. But the poem's tone suddenly changes in the second half. Yehuda Amichai writes,

But the divine couple sit on the terrace of the coffee shop: he has a mighty hand
and an outstretched arm,
she has long hair. They are at peace now
after the offering of halvah and honey and hashish smoke, both dressed in long
transparent gowns
without underclothes.

But, Yehuda Amichai writes. Amidst all the chaotic suffering we are presented with earlier in the poem, the poet now has something different to offer us. He creates an image of a couple sitting at a coffee shop whose presence obviously moves him. “A mighty hand and an outstretched arm” is frequently used in the Hebrew bible to describe God's mobilization of power to protect the Jewish people and show His glory, and is frequently used in the narrative of the Jewish exodus story. Nili Scharf Gold writes in her biography about Yehuda Amichai that,

“Under Amichai’s command, literary, biblical, and liturgical Hebrew became flexible and vibrant as he playfully interwove modern concepts with fragments of prayers and ancient prophecies.”⁵²

Yehuda Amichai does this as he describes the man at the cafe in his poem as having the biblical, omnipotent quality of “a mighty hand and an outstretched arm”, and the couple as divine. But why? For what purpose or message?

Perhaps it is because they are at peace amidst the chaos and suffering Yehuda Amichai described in his earlier stanzas; and perhaps Yehuda Amichai is conveying a message that to be at peace with your surroundings is God-like. He does not describe a miracle, or an angel, or a powerful biblical figure as “divine”: he describes an ordinary couple, drinking coffee, eating halvah, and smoking hashish. They are dressed in sheer gowns, their naked bodies visible— but instead of shame, they are comfortable in their nakedness and vulnerability.

The last few lines seem to solidify this recognition of ordinary people being God-like.

Yehuda Amichai writes,

When they rise from their resting place opposite the sun as it sets on Jaffa Gate,
everyone stands up to gaze at them.

Two white auras surround their dark bodies.

These last lines are filled with allusions to the spiritual and messianic; “When they rise from their resting place” no doubt is a nod to the traditional Jewish belief in the messianic resurrection of the dead. The ordinary couple that Yehuda Amichai describes rise like messiahs, sages, or prophets— and everyone stands in reverence and awe at the sight of them. The backdrop of Jaffa Gate, too, is significant; it is an ancient entrance into the Old City of Jerusalem, and leads to the Western Wall and Temple Mount. As the sunset’s gold light shines

⁵² Nili Scharf Gold, *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel’s National Poet* (Brandeis University Press, 2008).

onto the couple, its shadow darkens their bodies into silhouettes, and illuminates the sheer gowns that they wear into angelic, white auras. In this way, Yehuda Amichai transforms an ordinary couple, sitting at a cafe, into spiritual beings— they become divine and angelic, transformed into human symbols of hope and beauty.

What to make of this surreal symbol of redemption, especially one that contrasts so boldly with the despair and gloominess of the poem's earlier lines? Yehuda Amichai's poems have always been antiheroic, but they were also frequently imbued with a prophetic vision as he transformed the ordinary into the spiritual. *In the Old City* can be understood as a poem that asserts the message that history, especially the history of Jerusalem, is much more than the weight of political conflict, government corruption, violence, and grieving; Yehuda Amichai demonstrates in his poem that history is also made up of ordinary people who sit at cafes, and beautiful, innocent children, whose presence is everywhere. Robert Alter writes about Amichai's most ambitious poems that there is "an almost shocking explosiveness in the figurative language . . . , a power of mythic imagining, a mingling of the erotic and the theological, that might be surprising to those who think of Amichai primarily as a vernacular poet of everyday experience. He is this as well, of course, but there are also murky depths and soaring heights in his poetic world that are realized through his metaphors and through his often densely allusive Hebrew."⁵³ The poem *In the Old City* is no doubt the embodiment of that mingling of the erotic and the theological that Robert Alter describes as one of the signatures of his work.

The conflicts and struggles over Jerusalem and disputed territory are pervasive within Yehuda Amichai's poems, and like Samuel HaNagid, the poet often wrote of war and its brutal

⁵³ Robert Alter, introduction to *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, ed. Robert Alter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, p. xxiv).

aftermath. In his poem, *My Father Fought Their War for Four Years*, Yehuda Amichai describes the brutality of the wars his father fought in. He says in his first stanza,

My father fought their war for four years
And he did not hate his enemies or love them.
But I know, that even there
He formed me daily out of his little calms
So rare; he gathered them out of the bombs
And the smoke,
And he put them in his frayed knapsack
With the last bits of his mother's hardening cake.⁵⁴

In the poem, Yehuda Amichai does not describe a war he himself fought in; he describes a war his father fought in (Yehuda Amichai's father fought in World War I for the German army). Like many other soldiers, his father did not have a choice to fight; it was "their" war, Yehuda Amichai writes, "they" being the world's great powers. Because of this, Yehuda Amichai's father did not hate his "enemies" or love them—he did not even know them, and perhaps, the poem suggests, he did not even know what he was fighting for.

The most stunning, tender aspect of the poem no doubt is Yehuda Amichai's father's spiritual conception of him within the brutality of war. Yehuda Amichai was born six years after World War I ended, and yet, it was the idea of him that kept his father alive during the war—that idea of an unborn child being a symbol of hope in the face of war is stunning. In many ways, Yehuda Amichai also signifies that it was within the brutality of war that he was first conceived, which makes sense given his deep connection to a war that he did not even fight in, but which his father did fight in.

⁵⁴ Yehuda Amichai, *Selected Poems*, translated by Assia Gutmann and Harold Schimmel with the collaboration of Ted Hughes (Penguin Books, 1971).

The tenderness, too, which his father nourished despite the war, is essential to Yehuda Amichai's poetic voice, and to who he is as a person. In the poem, the ingredients Yehuda Amichai writes he was formed from are moments of calm amidst battles, bombs, and smoke. They are placed in a worn backpack, next to the last crumbs of his future grandmother's cake, which she packed for her son before he left for the war. It's clear that Yehuda Amichai's poetic voice is an infusion of all these things; it echoes with the trauma and sweetness of the past, and in this poem, his poetic identity echoes through his father's experiences.

Before he changed his name when he and his family moved to Israel, Yehuda Amichai was born as Ludwig Pfuefer in 1924. But it's clear that it was Yehuda Amichai, the poet, not Ludwig Pfuefer, who was formed through the suffering and brutality that his father witnessed. The generational trauma passed down to Yehuda Amichai from his father clearly played a significant role in shaping him, as he writes:

And with his eyes he gathered the nameless dead,
He gathered many dead on my behalf,
So that I will know them in his look and love them.
And not die like them, in horror...

When Yehuda Amichai looks into his father's eyes, he sees the echoes the past, and of the dead. The dead are unforgettable to his father; and through him, Yehuda Amichai is also a witness to the past, and to the dead. In *My Father Fought Their War for Four Years*, and many others of Yehuda Amichai's poems, the tenderness of love and the pain of war are intertwined with each other; reminiscent of Samuel HaNagid as he looks down at an abandoned city ruined from war in *The Citadel*. Perhaps Yehuda Amichai speculates that his father hoped that if his son were a second-hand witness to the suffering he had experienced in war, then he would be spared from its brutality; but Yehuda Amichai then clarifies that this is not the case. He writes,

And he filled his eyes with them in vain:
I go out to all my wars.

Although Yehuda Amichai's father tries his best to remember the dead for the sake of his own son, his remembrance of them is in vain. Like his father, Yehuda Amichai goes out and fights in many wars; in fact, he was a soldier in multiple wars between the State of Israel and its bordering countries, which are the subject of many of his poems. Paradoxically, it was by developing his own distinctive, anti-heroic persona, that he became the voice of his generation and his people: "Amichai's poetry replaced the high diction, tone, and nationalist bent of his predecessors' poetry with prosaic verse that refuses to worship heroism. Although Amichai's speaker identifies with the national struggle, he challenges the sacrifices it demands. He desires a home, a family, and normality, while subtly expressing feelings against the war that squelches such aspirations. This emphasis on the individual voice is one of Amichai's most significant contributions to Hebrew poetry. He shunned the collectivist 'we' that had dominated through the War of Independence and forged a poetic 'I'..."⁵⁵

My Father Fought Their War for Four Years is significant in that it symbolizes the impetus of Yehuda Amichai's poetic sensibility. It is layered with echoes of the past— wars and losses, the unnamed dead, and the ironies of history and generational trauma repeating themselves— similar to *In the Old City*. And while Yehuda Amichai believes his father spiritually conceived him during the War, one could argue that *My Father Fought Their War for Four Years* was conceived during the time Yehuda Amichai fought as a soldier in The State of Israel's 1948 War, given that the poem was published in 1955. In this way, Yehuda Amichai is not just a poet— he is a warrior-poet, with his and his ancestors' experiences of violence, war,

⁵⁵ Nili Scharf Gold, *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet* (Brandeis University Press, 2008).

love, and survival present in his poetic voice. It's important to note that those experiences— and that poetic voice— not only echo back to his father; they also echo back to Samuel HaNagid, and ultimately to King David. But although Amichai actually inhabited David's city, and Samuel HaNagid did not, Amichai was always conscious of the distance between his Jerusalem and that of the warrior-king who made it his capital: Amichai's "Jerusalem's a place where everyone remembers / he's forgotten something / but doesn't remember what it is." And it is "the only city in the world/where the right to vote is granted even to the dead."⁵⁶

V

I am a man with a complex network of pipes in my soul,
sophisticated machineries of emotion
and a precisely-monitored memory system
of the late twentieth century,
but with an old body from ancient days
and a God more obsolete even than my body.⁵⁷

It's clear that the poems of Samuel HaNagid and Yehuda Amichai are saturated with the echoes of their biblical past, and serve as templates of Jewish self-consciousness for their respective eras. Their poetry discloses important elements about the Jewish spiritual experience, from the biblical days to the present; it is no surprise that the collective experience of one of the oldest nations in the world is one that is suffused by memories of the deep historical past and filled with the thirst for survival, dignity, and purpose. But the two poets used the echo chamber

⁵⁶ Yehuda Amichai, "Jerusalem 1967," *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, ed. Robert Alter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 82.

⁵⁷ Yehuda Amichai, quoted by Hillel Halkin, "A Complex Network of Pipes," *Jewish Review of Books* (Winter 2018), <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/2866/complex-network-pipes/>.

of Jewish literary experience, and its biblical template, to present very different images of themselves in the contexts of their respective eras.

Samuel HaNagid presented himself as a man who, like King David, could encompass the rich diversity of life on a heroic scale: from the warrior-politician entrusted with the fate of the nation, to the grief-stricken private man, reflecting on the mortality which is the general fate of all human beings, and mourning, in particular, the irrevocable loss of his beloved brother. He avidly pursues the pleasures of life but is haunted by thoughts of death. Yehuda Amichai actually lived in the Jerusalem that the Hebrew poets of medieval Spain could only dream of, and defended David's capital in no fewer than three wars, but he presents himself as weary of the twentieth century's endless conflicts. He is also conscious of the ironic distance between himself and his biblical predecessor. One offers a heroic model of the self; the other, an anti-heroic longing for peace and privacy. But each of them became the great Jewish poet of his time, drawing on images and echoes from the Hebrew Bible for different purposes and with distinctive voices.

Analyzing their poems within the echo chamber of Hebrew literature is important because it's indicative of a unique pattern of collective consciousness and imagination that are key to the survival and purpose of the Jewish people for three millennia. Poets like Samuel HaNagid and Yehuda Amichai had one thing in common: their religious upbringing within a text-based culture, which they were ingrained with since they were children. Yehuda Amichai once said, about his religious upbringing, that he believed "religion is good for children... because it allows for imagination, a whole imaginative world apart from the practical world. The world of religion isn't a logical world; that's why children like it. It's a world of worked-out

fantasies, very similar to children's stories or fairy tales."⁵⁸ It is that very imagination evoked within Jewish culture and practice— and from a young age— that facilitated the rise of great Hebrew poets like Samuel HaNagid and Yehuda Amichai, whose powerful and poignant poems documented the collective memory and purpose of Jews scattered throughout the world, and through different eras. It is that memory and purpose— which are imbued with imagination and reverence for the past— that inform successive eras of Hebrew literature, from the voice of the proud warrior-prince in medieval al-Andalus, to that of the weary soldier-poet who imported colloquial Hebrew into the poetic tradition of the modern state of Israel.

⁵⁸ Interview conducted by Lawrence Joseph, "Yehuda Amichai: The Art of Poetry No. 44" in *The Paris Review* No. 122 (Spring 1992).

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