

“Whence cometh a poem’s divine presence?”: An Introduction to the Poetry of Sivan Har-Shefi

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Sivan Har-Shefi is an Israeli poet, who also serves as a lecturer of literature, and leads Poetry Writing workshops at Bar-Ilan University and Herzog College. She edits the Hebrew poetry periodical *‘Atar* together with her spouse, the poet Avishar Har-Shefi, who was also her partner in the founding and leadership of the Jewish seminaries “Uri” and “Zohar Hai” that delve into Kabbalah studies and Jewish Mysticism. To date, she has published the following books: *Galut ha-Livyatan: Shirim* (Leviathan’s Exile: Poems, 2005); *Tehilim le-Yom Ra’ash: Shirim* (Psalms for a Day of Thunder: Poems, 2010); *Shemesh she-Qohelet Lo Yada’: Shirim* (Sun Which Ecclesiastes Knew Not: Poems, 2014); *Zarqa: Shirim* (Zarka: Poems, 2018) and *Anahnu be-Qarov Nihiyeh: Shirim* (We Who Will Soon Become: Poems, 2019), with Avishar Har-Shefi.

Sivan Har-Shefi’s poems are written with high emotional and linguistic awareness. She relates and responds to the small details that compose daily reality, all the while never ceasing to grant them their contexts and meanings. Her poetry is mature, precise, and rich with figurative expressions, that stem from strong religious experiences and from spiritual and psychic depths. Her poetry frequently corresponds to variegated Jewish literature, particularly about Jewish mysticism and the occult (*Torat ha-sod ve-hanistar*; literally, the world of secrets and the hidden). Deciphering the affinity and referencing the language of the sources often activates the process of reading her poetry, while, simultaneously, quite frequently, it is her poetry that activates the source text: It undermines it, challenges it, and opens it up to new possibilities. Thus, for example, her use of the phrase: “*la-menatse’ah bi-neginot*” (“for the musical conductor,” 2010: 52) in her second poem in the cycle “*Psalms for a Day of Thunder*” (the poetic anthology was named after this), echoes Psalms 61:1 and combines King David’s harp playing and his going off to battle, in accordance with the Jewish legend that says that, before he went to wage war, King David would take a special shield with him, bearing the engraving of that Psalm.

Sivan Har-Shefi anchors the combination of words “for the musical conductor” in its Israeli contexts: in songs sung on Holocaust Remembrance Day and on National Memorial Day, that move across the “*min’ad she-bein simhat ha-lev le-shivrono*” (“range in pitch from heartfelt joy to heartbreak”), and throughout the struggle against the actualization of the “Israeli Disengagement Plan” (August 2005) that unilaterally dismantled Israeli settlements in Gush Qatif, in the southern Gaza Strip (all English translations of Sivan Har-Shefi’s poems are by Ethelea Katzenell):

לְמַנְצֵחַ בְּנִגְיוֹת / אֵין דְּרֶךְ אַחֶרֶת לְנִצָּחַ /
כִּי אִם בְּשִׁפְתַי תִּפְלֶה / בְּאַהֲבָה שִׁפְתַי תִּפְתַּח

For the music conductor / there is no other way to win /
except with praying lips / with love, you will open my lips.

The term “*la-menatse’ah*,” which was first interpreted in its musical context is now interpreted as ‘for the victor’, an expression of victory (from the same Hebrew root /*n-ts-h*/), related to the political struggle surrounding that plan; “Only love will win!” was chanted by the masses that accompanied that struggle.

Har-Shefi’s poetry is unique against the landscape of current Israeli poetry, since it is nourished by strong religious and spiritual experiences and stems from her close familiarity with the gamut of Jewish literature. However, she utilizes her religious experience and the allusions to ancient sources to construct a very up-to-date Israeli identity, in a manner that dismantles the accepted conventions for description. For instance, in her poem “*Ga’agu’a qadam*” (“Longing came first), the description of the existence that preceded the Creation of the World and the characterization of the space between silence and speech are intertwined in the intimate context of the poetic speaker with God (2005: 69):

אֲנִי פְּרִיקִית שֶׁל אֱלֹהִים / עִם שִׁיר אַהֲבָה שֶׁכָּתַב לִי עַל הַזְּרוּעַ /
וְצִיור תְּחִלָּה וְסוֹף נֶעוּץ בְּטַבּוּרִי

I’m a God freak / with a love song that He wrote on my arm /
and a drawing that begins and ends stuck in my belly-button.

Again, this language is very contemporary, and the intimate connection with God is described as an act of being tattooed, out of a passion to be inscribed:

אֱלֹהִים מְקַעֵקַע בִּי אֶת תּוֹרָתוֹ / בְּכוּךְ אֶפֶל בְּעִיר הָעֵתִיקָה /
מְקַרִּין צִלְלֵי הָאוֹתִיּוֹת עַל גּוּפִי וְחוֹקֵק

God is inscribing His teaching in me / in a dark niche in the Old City [of
Jerusalem] /
radiating the letters’ shadows on my body and engraving.

The speaker’s connection with God is fashioned as a close and intimate one also in the preceding poem, “*Sheleg*” (“Snow”), in which there is an ongoing dialogue, sometimes out of closeness, other times out of wondering or distancing. As such, in the poem “Snow,” the pristine, white snow cover is likened to a kerchief, similar to the affinity between the beloved in the Song of Songs—the speaker holding one end of the kerchief, and on the other side—God, dancing with her, as with his bride (2005: 68):

On Sabbath eve
 glided and descended to the world
 a beautiful kerchief of snow
 and I held one end of it
 and God, the other end
 and we were dancing together
 with chills, distance and closeness,
 in a joyful dizziness
 of our sudden love.

בְּעֶרְבֵי שַׁבָּת
 רָחְפָה וַיֵּרְדָה אֶל הָעוֹלָם
 מְטַפַּחַת שְׁלֵג יִפְהַפֶּיָהּ
 וְאֶחְזַתִּי בְקִצָּה הָאֶחָד
 וְאֱלֹהִים בְּקִצָּה הַשֵּׁנִי
 וְהֵיינוּ שְׂנִינוּ רוֹקְדִים
 בְּצַמְרָמְרַת רַחוּק וְקִרְבָּה
 בְּסַחְרָחֶרֶת שְׂמֵחָה
 שֶׁל אֶהְבַּתְנוּ הַפְּתְאוּמִית.

Sivan Har-Shefi's poetry is characterized by the ongoing search for concrete signs that may be assigned symbolic meanings. Often, these signs arise out of distress, depression, and bitter tears; or sometimes, they sprout from "radiant laughter." Thus, for example, in the poem "*Ba-derekh*" ("Crossing," 2014: 20):

There is a traffic sign
 "Children crossing"
 There is a traffic sign hinting –
 "Deer crossing"
 But there is no sign for God, who is
 crossing
 in his world
 And there is no sign slow down
 A soul is before you
 Only in the eyes
 crying
 signs
 and in the radiant laughter
 from within the darkness.

יֵשׁ תַּמְרוּר
 "יְלָדִים בַּדֶּרֶךְ"
 יֵשׁ תַּמְרוּר שְׂרוּמָז –
 כָּאֵן עוֹבְרוֹת אֵילוֹת
 וְאֵין תַּמְרוּר לְאֱלֹהִים הָעוֹבֵר
 בְּעוֹלָמוֹ
 וְאֵין תַּמְרוּר הָאֵט
 נֶשְׁמָה לְפָנֶיךָ
 רַק בְּעֵינַיִם
 בְּבִכִּי
 תַּמְרוּרִים
 וּבְצַחוּק הַמְזֻדְדֵהָ
 מִתּוֹךְ הָעֲלָטָה

Many times, in her poems, these concrete signs may acquire symbolic meaning based on collocations with fixed meanings in the language that Har-Shefi has deconstructed and transformed into conduits for new thoughts or different observations. As such, for example, the collocation '*bekhi tamrurim*', has the original meaning of 'bitter tears', based on the Hebrew biblical source (Jeremiah 31:14). In her poem, the deconstruction of this collocation utilizes each element separately, such that the "*bekhi*" (crying) itself serves as a "*tamrur*" (traffic sign), just like the physical warning signs: "*Yeladim ba-derekh*" (Children crossing) or "*Kan 'ovrim ayalim*" (Deer crossing). Har-Shefi seeks to present the delay, the observation based on the awareness of details, the attempt to slow things down, not based on pragmatic reasons, but due to the very deep reason that "*yesh neshamah lefanekha*" (a soul is standing before

you)—the realization that each person is a soul, an entire world, a fact often overlooked during the routine and wearing race of life.

One of her poetry cycles, intended to bring attention to habitual elements and to present them in a new light, is “*ha-Kittah*” (“The class”; for the entire poem, see below). This cycle is composed of sixteen fragments that create different segments, reflecting the teaching experience from the teacher’s perspective, during a Creative Writing Workshop. These observations deconstruct the normal conventions, thus enabling different and surprising ways of looking at things, within the emotional and sensate system that accompanies interactions with children (fragment 6):

תלמידתי העוֹרֵת / בְּסֻדָּנַת הַכֶּתִּיבָה, מְלַמֶּדֶת אוֹתִי / לְרֹאוֹת.

My blind student / in the Creative Writing Workshop, / is teaching me / to see.

The ability to see, generally interpreted biologically, as the perceptual experience of receiving data from the surroundings via light—is here interpreted as the ability to look inwards, characterizing the blind student’s manner of emotional introspection. Her inability to see through her eyes is not interpreted as a disability, but rather, has granted her a special, valuable ability for observation.

Observing the students is interpreted not only against the background of the interpersonal dynamics happening before them, but primarily as a basis that leads the poetic speaker towards self-observation (fragment 7):

הַתְּלִמִּידָה שֶׁנִּרְדָּמַת מוֹלִי בְּכָל שְׁעוֹר – אֲנִי לֹא מְעִירָהּ לָהּ. / הִיא מְעִירָה אוֹתִי.

The student who falls asleep / in all my classes—/ I never comment to her. / She wakes me up.

The Hebrew word “*me’irah*” is a double-entendre: Its negative, emotive meaning is ‘to criticize [someone]’; whereas its neutral, emotive meaning is “to waken [someone].” Har-Shefi’s use of this word reflects the internal conflict characteristic of the poetic speaker. How should the speaker react in the presence of the recalcitrant female student who sleeps through all her classes? Yet, the inner conflict awakened in her, as suggested by the syntactical structure of the sentence, causes the teacher to not take the natural, appropriate action, to not wake up her student, but rather to become introspective and assess her own internal state – which, indeed, awakens the speaker.

The poem cycle “The class” was written in the shadow of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic altered all the study programs in all the educational systems in Israel and in the world, following the closure of the educational institutions and the transition to remote learning as a solution for continuing the learning routines. Sivan Har-Shefi uses the lexicon of terms characteristic of the period in order

to acquire a different perspective on the overt and covert fabrics of the connections between the teacher and her students (fragment 10):

הלמידה מרחוק
הראתה לי מקרוב:
עירם הקירות בביתה של תלמידה,
המרקם השברירי בביתה של אחרת.
העמיקה באזני שתיקתן

Remote learning
has shown me up-close:
the nakedness of the walls in the home of a student,
the fragile fabric of another one's home.
Their silence grew deeper in my ears.

Remote learning gave the teachers a glimpse of their students' homes, of their residential surroundings, that were usually not exposed. It enabled them to zoom in on their students' learning spaces, spotlighting their private lives, their physical and economic circumstances, and their conditions. Turning on the 'mute' function – activating the silence mode necessary for the smooth operation of the Zoom session – is described, in this poem, as being an edict that causes the students great emotional difficulty, in addition to other physical and emotional hardships that were revealed.

This poem cycle concludes with a spoken prayer, wishing the students success in the mission incumbent upon them (fragment 16):

קְשֹׁהֶם כּוֹתְבִים, אֲנִי מִתְפַּלֵּל: / גַּל אֶת הָאֶבֶן, פְּתַח שְׁעָרִים, עָלֵי בְּאֵר, / אֲזַיְשִׁיר
As they write, I pray:/ Roll the stone away, open the gates, well up water /
Then, they will sing

The blaze of illusions she utilizes, referencing biblical actions involving water and actions that enable and create change: Jacob, the Patriarch, who rolled the stone [cover] off the well to enable Rachel, the Matriarch, to water the sheep (Genesis 29:8); Israel's song: "Spring up, O well!" after digging wells in the desert and drawing water from them (Numbers 21:17); and "*Shirat ha-Yam*" ("The Song of the Sea," Exodus 15:1-18), sung by Moses the Prophet and the Children of Israel after safely crossing the Red Sea.

The act of writing, chiseled out of the depths of existence, is likened, in the above poem, to drawing water from a deep well. While the students were busy taking their test, the teacher was standing across from them, like Miriam, the Prophetess, observing her brother Moses. The poetic speaker stands in expectation and prayer that her creative deed will succeed and that the poems will well up, all the while knowing deep inside that she must not interfere with the flow of their creative writing.

Fragment 12 in this cycle moves between various physical aspects – the fragments of the act of teaching and the symbolic meanings associated with them:

מילא – כּתה בלי מזגן, ליד המסדרון הרועש, / כפאות מקבעים בשורות נקשות ואין

אפשרות להתעגל / בלי חלון אני לא מלמדת: מאיפה תבוא שכינת השיר?

Never mind – A classroom without an air-conditioner, near a noisy hallway, /

chairs bound in rigid lines that cannot be made round /

Windowless, I am not teaching: Whence cometh a poem's divine presence?

This fragment wends its way towards its end, seeking sources of inspiration for creative acts and for ars-poetic observation. A “window” symbolizes direct, open communications with the world and from it: Communication is, perhaps, the most distinct characteristic of Sivan Har-Shefi's poetry.