

* Excerpts from a lecture at Mishkenot Sha'ananim by Prof. Yehuda Leibes (Prof. of Jewish Studies, Hebrew University), in honor of Michal Govrin's newly published novel, The Name.

Michal Govrin's novel, The Name, represents an innovative and ground-breaking contribution to modern Hebrew Literature. The novel addresses the poignant issue of Jewish sources within our contemporary cultural horizon. It seems to me that we are not rich enough to forgo the vast cultural treasures which have accrued after so many generations.

The book we discuss here does not deal with Jewish sources as folklore, or as a sociological kind of enterprise, (which can be found in numerous books) but rather, the author draws deeply from the sphere of ancient Jewish creativity: from a place of Jewish cultural and spiritual vitality, and not from external religious forms.

Indeed, this use of ancient sources presents a difficulty to numerous readers when they suddenly understand that they don't know everything. This is a blow to their ego. But I suggest not to be intimidated--Literature does not have to be chewed and swallowed like a television series. There isn't anything wrong if a book arouses the readers curiosity to reach beyond a sheltered and self-sufficient ignorance.

The Name is a book which stimulates. The book can be described as a person's unique and profound journey towards spiritual and personal identity. The ancient sources are at the core of this book. The heroine's consciousness develops through her encounter with these ancient Jewish sources, and she in turn develops the sources in a contemporary and individuated way.

The plot provides the reader and the writer, the critical distance of irony which is of essence to the novel; as it also creates the suspense which gives a kind of relief from the emotional and ideological tensions at the core of book. This form of writing represents the world of the author--that of skeptical criticism and artistic creation, as opposed to the religious literature of belief.

Although the plot extracts "The Name" from Kabbalistic Literature, incorporating it within the tradition of the novel, I would add, that the chasm between these two traditions is not as infinite as would seem at first sight. It is usually accepted that the Kabbalists speak only about higher worlds, and not about themselves. This is also how the great scholar, Gershom Scholem, has characterized Jewish Mystics in the preface to his book, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. But with your permission, I differ with this conception and have tried to show through extensive research that in a number of Kabbalistic books, and in fact, in those which are of central importance, self-awareness and the writer's persona (including the root of his soul and previous incarnations) are extremely important issues (although at times revealed in a concealed or camouflaged manner). Even a writer's partial identification with a literary persona is not alien to Jewish mystical literature, as we can see, for example, from the case of the Zohar.

Amalia is not satisfied with what the religious seminaries offer her and follows her journey into the deeper strata of mystical

religious experience--into those layers of renewal and creation which come out of a direct and intimate reading of Jewish texts before their crystalization into an authoritative corpus which addresses the community at large. Here one can see Govrin's knowledge of Jewish sources, of Midrash and Kabbalah. Amalia becomes a Kabbalistic innovator or creator in the full sense of the word. And through her Govrin, the literary author is also becoming a Kabbalistic author in some particularized sense.

Like the Kabbalist's Amalia creates her own idea of god and even God Himself ("as if"- as usually expressed in these circumstances.) She meditates on His Name and on His attributes and so He is created for her as God. Which is in truth what the Kabbalist's did -- fully conscious of their deed. In many places within the Jewish esoteric tradition there is no distinction between the Name of God and His essence, as it is said in the the Kabbalistic book, Sefer Hahailot (Book of Palaces): "He is His Name and His Name is He."

The time-frame of the story is the counting of the Omer. Kabbalistic sects centered their lives around this period of the year which is loaded with erotic tension, (even more so than during the rest of the year), which is described in an impressive way in various books on Kabbalistic customs. The night of the Pentacost was conceived as an appropriate time for mystical revelations during which the soul of the Kabbalist would become extinguished from the overwhelming splendor of mystical union (which is always related to in the language of sexual union).

Amalia has totally appropriated for herself the erotic tensions of this time, both in its ritualistic and theoretical aspects. Indeed, the character of her eroticism is very different from that which is described in the Kabbalah--primarily because here a woman speaks, while all the Kabbalists were men. But, in fact, a woman is very appropriate here...particularly as Amalia adapts for herself a private ritual: during the counting of the Omer, she weaves a curtain for the Holy Ark. The weaving is a holy work destined for women from the time of the Tabernacle: "And all the women that were wisehearted did spin with their hands" (Exodus 35;25), which has an aspect of erotic sublimation. Here I would like to draw attention to a very interesting parallel in Agnon's story, "Agunot" where the destined groom, whose name, Ben Uri, echoes Bezal'el, the creator of the Tabernacle, invests most of his erotic energy into constructing the Ark for the synagogue. The weaving is also a theurgical act, creating god, as Amalia weaves into the curtain God's holy Name. Here there is also a hint to the act of literary creation, with the double meaning of the word text in its Latin origin (texture, textile).

The contemplation of the Jewish nation's history from the time of the Exodus from Egypt, reveals to Amalia the complex relationship of love, jealousy and hatred which has always existed between God and His creation. She finds herself in a hard conflict with her divine mate; the classical myths and rituals do not satisfy Amalia. Now she uses antinomian myths and rituals characteristic of Shabbatai Zvi's redemption through sin -- as the conquering of the city through the sewer. She associates herself with a Kabbalistic Rabbi, excommunicated by the orthodox community, who preaches redemption through desire,

sin and death. It is not by accident that this Rabbi's name is Abuya, as the name Elisha ben Abuya, the Talmudic archetype of the heretical scholar. His family name is Assaraf, which alludes to the burning fire (seraph) in his bones that would consume his life.

But towards the end of the counting of the Omer the relationship between God and Amalia goes through another stage--in the end she gives up her suicidal inclination and begins to live a less intense spiritual existence. One shouldn't mistake this with a late acceptance of conventional religion, the repentant's ideal. Something else here is at stake which is the deep intuition that in this world one should not search or look for perfection, but rather an acceptance of a world which is often arbitrary and accidental.

The end of the novel casts an ironical glance at the hubris of human ambitions. There is no total redemption, or solution to the questions of the human soul. Yet I believe that the whole book is a recommendation to continue in the search.

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Prof. Leibes, along with Prof. Moshe Idel represent a new and audacious generation in Jewish scholarship. He is distinguished in his wide scope of research, and particularly in his understanding of the psychological background of mystical texts.

Among his books:

The Messiah in the Zohar

Eros and the Zohar

New Revelations about the Sabbatean Movement