**Israeli Novels of 2014–2015: Disjointed Time, Anticipation, Hauntology, and Nostalgia**

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This article identifies a mechanism of anticipation in Israeli literature that is bound up with temporal anomaly. My point of departure will be a series of prominent novels, all published in the years 2014–2015, that reflect an increased preoccupation with hope thwarted or anticipation unfulfilled. These novels, penned by some of Israel’s preeminent contemporary authors are David Grossman’s *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, Amos Oz’s *Judas*, Dorit Rabinyan’s *All the Rivers*, Yishai Sarid’s *The Third*, and A. B. Yehoshua’s *The Extra*; they evince a contemporary trend that, following Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia*, I will term “nostalgia for a lost future.” While they direct their gaze toward the past, this past is primarily characterized by its visionary, anticipatory gaze toward a better future. With the shattering of the Oslo Accords inspired hope for a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, anticipation (looking forward) has turned to nostalgia (looking backward). Yet this nostalgia is for anticipation itself: a state with an inherent connection to the deep structure of Zionism.

**The State of Anticipation**

In a 2013 article on contemporary trends in art, art historian Claire Bishop writes that while the decades after World War II were marked by “post” trends (postwar, postmodernism, post-colonialism, post-communism), the early twenty-first century has been a period of anticipation, turning toward things to come.[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, the past decade – with its climate disasters and its economic, political, demographic, social, and health crises, not to mention heightened feelings of uncertainty, helplessness, and genuine anxiety about the global extinction of the human race – has spurred us to engage in anticipation. The word “anticipation,” which suggests an awareness of or orientation toward some future occurrence, bears a wide range of meanings; it may denote not only expectation, but prognostication, foreshadowing, preparation, fervent enthusiasm for the future, and so forth. The interdisciplinary research field of anticipation studies includes scholars from the life sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, all of whom address the complex relations between views of the future and actions taken in the present.[[2]](#footnote-2) This area of thought challenges prevailing concepts of time, proposing a multidimensional view of temporality. As a concept that expresses an attempt to “live a time before its time,” anticipation represents a multilayered, placeless view of time – a view that deviates from conventional clock time, which moves from the present toward the future. The very notion of anticipation or foreshadowing enables a different understanding of the concept of “future,” usually formulated in terms of an orderly, linear view of the motion of time associated with the idea of progress. New thought on anticipation seeks an alternate framing of the discourse on times to come and the nature of their formation while still in the present. This formation takes place not as the automatic perpetuation of current conditions, but rather through longing for a different world – for the unknown that has yet to appear.

Here, I will point to the tension in contemporary Israeli literature between the multilayered temporality of anticipation and the capacity (or lack thereof) to imagine unexpected, unknown futures. The novels of 2014–2015, written approximately twenty years – the span of a single generation – after the Oslo era, are constructed on a complex temporality in which the backward gaze is inextricably linked to anxious anticipation of the future, while the forward gaze is obstructed by a sense of “the end of history.” These novels express a feeling that time has veered from its course. Further, they reflect ambivalence toward Israeli authors’ historic role as “secular prophets” who sought to set and shape the direction of the future, as the forward gaze is clouded by a gaze drawn back to a past full of hope. Yet, in these novels, the lost vision represented by Oslo becomes a “living ghost” that breathes life and movement into literature.

The temporal structure of anticipation has been foundational to the Zionist enterprise from its inception. As a revolutionary movement, Zionism embodied momentum and enthusiasm focused on the future.[[3]](#footnote-3) Theodor Herzl’s *Altneuland* (1902), a text that served as the seminal inspiration for the Zionist vision, is a utopian novel that imagines a life of ease in a future sovereign Jewish state in Palestine. The archetypal figures of Zionist literature are figures of anticipation: For instance, “the watcher of the house of Israel,” a phrase coined by Isaac Erter in the mid-nineteenth century, became a widespread figure of speech used to describe the Hebrew author’s role toward the nation and the prophetic mode attributed to him. As Hannan Hever has noted, the critical posture of “the watcher of the house of Israel” holds distinct dimensions of power, desire, and hope.[[4]](#footnote-4) Through his mighty gaze, the watcher heralds a glimmer of hope and redemption for his people, despite the anguish and helplessness of their current state. Thus, the watcher’s posture of far-seeing observation is at the same time a posture of anticipation – a look forward into the future.

That said, the forward gaze proclaimed by the Zionist posture of anticipation fundamentally entails a look far back into the past, as attested from the beginning by the oxymoronic title *Altneuland*. The very thought of an “old-new land” represents the paradoxical duality of a past and future that exist simultaneously. This duality is intrinsically connected to the multilayered temporality of Zionism, which combines two disparate views of time: a progressive, linear view of time that imagines the future as a direct line of advancement; and a messianic view of time associated with the sublime and with temporal leaps that aim to hasten redemption. In other words, Zionism’s temporality does not operate along a linear-historical axis of “homogenous empty time”; rather, it rests on a “vertical simultaneity” of events from the distant past and the future, such that the present is experienced as the re-actualization of a past instilled with new relevance.[[5]](#footnote-5) The Zionist fusion of these two opposing views of time has sometimes given rise to mutations in which rationalistic progress (the “Start-Up Nation” and the high-tech industry) is once again inextricably entangled with romantic anticipation (the messianic vision of Greater Israel).

**Time Out of Joint**

This view of temporality is partly characterized by the simultaneity of the past and the future. Therefore, it is a particularly comfortable environment for forms that deviate from conventional, linear clock time – “placelessness in time,” anticipation and delay, lateness, longing, and/or return to the past. All of these forms are based on failures of chronology (anachronisms) that create a lacuna between the experience and its significance or between the plan and its fulfillment. Many of the literary works written shortly after the establishment of the state of Israel already exude a powerful sense of damaged temporality. From the moment the Zionist dream was realized, it seems that the ghosts of the dream began to haunt Israel’s major cultural figures, expressing nostalgia for the visionary state that preceded the dream’s fruition. Artists from the central stream that had attained power and leadership were quick to voice a sense that the initial euphoria had died down, replaced by despondency and paralysis. Art had been emptied of its substance. This sense stemmed from a feeling that the ultimate goal – the establishment of the state – had been achieved, and there was nothing left to aspire to. [[6]](#footnote-6)

This view marks Zionism in general, and Israeli literature specifically, as clear modes of “hauntology” – the call to arms against the concept of presence pioneered by Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* (1993). Hauntology is a state in which “the time is out of joint,” as in Hamlet’s famous line. This concept deals with the elusive category of specters – entities whose presence is palpable but neither full nor accessible. As Martin Hägglund has written, specters manifest in the interval between “no longer” and “not yet.”[[7]](#footnote-7) They symbolize our relation to that which is no longer before us and yet continues to exert a virtual influence (as in trauma, for instance), as well as that which has not yet taken place but has already begun to shape events in the present through anticipation (as in our wait for an expected climate catastrophe).

There are several times of the specter. It is a proper characteristic of the specter, if there is any, that no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future, for the *revenant* may already mark the promised return of the specter of living being. Once again, untimeliness and disadjustment of the contemporary. In this regard, communism has always been and will remain spectral: it is always still to come. [[8]](#footnote-8)

*Specters of Marx* was written in the historical context of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet empire, in part as a scathing response to Francis Fukuyama’s influential *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). According to Fukuyama, the fall of Communism settled once and for all the ongoing conflict between the competing ideas of capitalism and Marxism. This brought the logic of history to its finish line, as no alternative to free-market economics remained; therefore, a liberal-democratic lifestyle could reign in full.[[9]](#footnote-9) Derrida was profoundly opposed to this view, claiming that what Fukuyama called “the end of history” was nothing but the end of a certain understanding of history based on the very concepts of presence that Derrida sought to refute. Fukuyama’s theory is based on a view of history as evolutionary, consistent, and teleological. It perceives the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy as the final, logical, and even ideal result of human evolution. By contrast, Derrida emphasizes that the fall of Marxism certainly cannot be said to mark its disappearance from the world stage or its departure from human consciousness, as it exists and will continue to exist as a specter; the promises, possibilities, and horizons of Marxism still “haunt” human existence and history.

In Derrida’s view, the significance of hauntology extends well beyond the specific event of the fall of the Eastern bloc; it has to do with the way we understand time and its attendant concepts – history, memory, return, delay, anticipation, and so forth. For Derrida, anticipation is a constant state, as there always is and always will be a gap between the experience and its meaning, between the promise and its fulfillment, and between a time and the feeling of that time. By contrast, Fukuyama’s idea of the “end of history” seemingly puts an end to anticipation – now that liberal democracy has achieved its destination, there is ostensibly nothing left to expect. Behind Fukuyama’s rose-colored glasses lay another, darker insight: The imagination’s horizons have been circumscribed, making it difficult if not impossible to create alternatives to the existing situation or imagine possibilities for change.

In the optimistic atmosphere in which Fukuyama’s book was conceived, a prominent sign of the times was the Oslo Accords in August 1993, which marked the beginning of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. It seemed that the end of history – here, the end of a conflict between ideological blocs – could lead to the conclusion of this bloody, long-lasting territorial conflict and the establishment of a “new Middle East” under the auspices of the liberal-democratic ideal. In practice, however, the Oslo Accords did not embody a linear view of history as presence and the realization of an ideal. Rather, it preserved the gap – so characteristic of Zionism – between the wish and its fulfillment, leaving the anticipation as it had been. It seemed that an end to the conflict was only growing more distant.

While the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan quickly led to permanent arrangements, the Oslo Accords announced the commencement of a multi-stage “peace process.” The accords led to anticipation of a future whose final form was far-off and therefore unknown. The accords could potentially have brought about a two-state solution in the distant future; however, in the meantime, Israeli policy maintained a clear interest in delaying the implementation of this solution, instead keeping the process in a state of “discussion” and “conversation” about the future. The process was structured to be ongoing and lacked an agreed-upon end date. Thus, anticipation was left hanging – and, as we know, even this anticipation was quickly dispelled. A series of violent events after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 – the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin; the failure of the Camp David Summit; the riots of October 2000; the Second Lebanon War; the disconnect between the Palestinian Authority and the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip; and clashes and combat operations on the Gaza Strip border – led to a suspension of discussion, a political blind alley, and a widespread public conviction among both Israelis and Palestinians that there was “no solution to the conflict.” This conviction bolstered right-wing parties’ rise to power and sank the past two decades into political stagnation.[[10]](#footnote-10) From year to year, it became clearer that the vision of Oslo would not be fulfilled.

**Anticipatory Nostalgia**

Dead ends – situations in which “a sense of the future” is translated into a sense that “there is no future” (or, in Mark Fisher’s words, “the failure of the future to transpire”)[[11]](#footnote-11) – pose a risk of inactivity or lack of innovation, in literature as in society. Vered Karti Shemtov and Elana Gomel write that in “a crisis of historicity” or “inability to imagine the future” (as in Fredric Jameson’s incisive diagnosis of the postmodern condition[[12]](#footnote-12)), our attention shifts from “what will be to what currently is. This is a transition from chronology to duration. Rather than concentrating on the possibilities before us in the future, our attention is directed toward the many possibilities in the present that open up at any given moment.” [[13]](#footnote-13) They identify a dominant genre in contemporary Israeli literature characterized by “limbotopic” temporality: “a category in which the continuous present is a liminal space that does not change and cannot change.” This genre is permeated with a feeling of stasis – an eternal present in which time never advances.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Alongside the limbotopic genre – identified by Shemtov and Gomel in the works of Orly Castel Bloom and Etgar Keret – I wish to point to another temporality that characterizes the current moment in Israeli literature: one that is not stuck in the present, but rather in a kind of placeless “past-future.” The dead end identified above does not only lead us to stagnation or an absence of horizons. Instead, it presents another possibility: the redirection of the gaze backward. If we look at the contemporary heirs of “the watcher over the house of Israel” – major Israeli authors who see their work as charged with a mission of social and national responsibility – we see that the energy of the anticipatory gaze cannot allow itself to be wasted in an eternal present. Instead, it finds another channel, marked by hauntology and by the “disjointed” temporality of anticipation that characterized early Zionism. Just as a ghost maintains its virtual authority even after it is no longer physically present, literature may also be haunted by events that never actually occurred – that is, by a future that was never realized but instead rendered a ghost.[[15]](#footnote-15) The post-Oslo era has therefore been characterized by a heightened hauntological tendency. This has held particularly true in the past decade, with Israel’s entrance into nationalistic and conservative-populist circles, and with its retreat from Oslo and the two-state solution.

In this article, I refer to works that turn their gaze back on the past; however, this past is distinguished by its anticipatory orientation toward a future of some sort. With the exception of Yishai Sarid’s 2015 *The Third*, all the works examined here were published in 2014 – one of the bloodiest years in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[[16]](#footnote-16) The repeated appearance of a past-future temporality attests to a style characteristic of this moment in literature. These novels are all “haunted” in one way or another: They do not imagine unexpected futures, but rather attempt to relive a lost past rich in anticipation. These works demonstrate the haunting of Israel’s cultural elite by the ghostly presence of a lost future, such as that signified by Oslo. None of these novels explicitly address the Oslo Accords as their subject; they do not take place at the time of the accords’ signing, nor do they directly acknowledge the accords. Yet each of these novels bears the faint signs of Oslo’s ghosts. Despite the ghosts’ physical absence, their activity and influence are palpable through various references – to the dead end reached by the conflict, to the occupation, to political polarization in Israeli society, or to anxiety over the possible destruction of the state.[[17]](#footnote-17)

At the time of these novels’ telling, their characters have been wrenched from their time or place – or from both their time and their place – and remain in a state of suspension or anticipation. As they wait to see how things will play out, their gaze settles on events in the past: In Amos Oz’s *Judas*, Shmuel Ash languishes in Gershom Wald’s home for a limited but unknown length of time, where he contemplates betrayal as represented by the crucifixion of Jesus and the rift between political camps before the establishment of the State of Israel. Noga, the harpist in A. B. Yehoshua’s *The Extra*, returns to Israel from Holland for a set period of time, awaiting her mother’s decision whether or not to move into an old-age home, while her ex-husband discusses with her the deterioration of their relationship. The narrator of Yishai Sarid’s *The Third* writes the history of the Third Kingdom of Judah from prison as he awaits his execution. The protagonist of Dorit Rabinyan’s *All the Rivers* is staying in New York for a long but finite visit; the story of her love affair with a young Palestinian man is rife with remembrances of childhood and adolescence from both sides, as well as nagging uncertainty as to whether the relationship can succeed. In David Grossman’s *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, the standup comic Dovaleh G. returns to the formative experience of his youth as his audience waits to hear the end of his story and the “verdict” on his life. All these stories push toward the reconstruction of a promising but ultimately disappointing past.

These novels – imprinted with the same “end of history” that featured in the hollow liberal-democratic vision of the Oslo Accords – embody a nostalgia for anticipation itself. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym notes collective outbursts of nostalgia shortly after revolutions or historical crises. Boym suggests that the object of this nostalgia is not the kingdom or the empire that has fallen, but rather the dreams unfulfilled, the possibilities abandoned, and the visions of the future that have aged and fallen out of use. This is “anticipatory nostalgia” – nostalgia that recalls something anticipated that never came to pass.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Here, the term ‘nostalgia’ does not refer to cuddly sentimentality or the attempted idealization of a problematic past. Instead, it denotes a temporal mechanism of haunting and displacement, activated by a powerful sense of missed opportunity and loss. Boym surveys dismissive views of nostalgia as an ethical and aesthetic failure – not only as a shirking of guilt and historical responsibility but as kitsch that airbrushes our picture of the past, overlooking its blemishes and its crimes. For Boym, however, nostalgia reflects not only an interest in the past but a certain attitude toward the future; fantasies about the past, fashioned according to the demands of the present, have a direct influence on future realities. Our thinking about the future requires that we take responsibility for the nostalgic stories we tell.[[19]](#footnote-19) In this sense, Israeli literature’s return to anticipation does not necessarily reflect a trend toward sentimentality. Instead, it is a yearning for a vision of a better life, for the possibility of continuity and historical advancement. This is a return to a past that “had a future.”

Boym distinguishes between preservative, “restorative” nostalgia and “reflective” nostalgia. The first contains a denial of loss, maintaining the illusion that a lost image of the past can be restored, even “stuffed and mounted.” The second concentrates on our longing for what was, heightening our awareness that this past is indeed lost to us; it cannot be restored nor integrated into our contemporary cultural landscape.[[20]](#footnote-20) In the novels addressed here, nostalgia for anticipation is largely reflective. This reflective nostalgia examines the possibilities of the past and acknowledges their loss, although the acknowledgment does not quench the thirst for the lost dream.

Nostalgia for the lost vision of Oslo is also nostalgia for anticipation itself – and for the hope that has always characterized Zionism. Nostalgia of this kind preserves Israeli literature’s commitment to the basic structures of its national culture and this unwillingness to let go of a lost future maintains the same imaginative horizons that defined anticipation in the past, preventing the novels from envisioning or delineating other, new futures – possible or impossible.

**“It’s Like Everything Could Still Be Repaired”: *A Horse Walks into a Bar***

David Grossman’s *A Horse Walks into a Bar* (2014) is a distinctly haunted novel that reconstructs performative anticipation while mourning a lost future. The entire novel is structured as a live standup comedy show told in the present. Onstage, the comedian Dovaleh G. delivers a monologue in which he returns to his youth, and in particular a dramatic episode from his childhood: At a Gadna military training camp for youth in Be’er Ora, near the southern border of Israel, he was instructed to leave the base at once for a funeral following a death in his family. The child, an only child of Holocaust-survivor parents, did not know which of his parents had died and was afraid to ask. A sizable portion of the novel is dedicated to his drive from the camp to the funeral, quoting the jokes told by his young driver to distract him from the situation while he himself was “doing his rotten accounting,”[[21]](#footnote-21) weighing which of his parents’ deaths would be more catastrophic for him. Thus, before the audience’s eyes, the artist recreates the anticipation of the knowledge of a death that has *already* taken place. During the performance, the protagonist already knows the ending, but he does not reveal which of his parents has died. Instead, he initiates the audience into his past state of ignorance. Thus, the experience of reading is infused with an anticipation of information that may explain the present – a present experienced as failure, both the failure of Dovaleh’s show and the failure of his life. We return to a specific moment in the character’s past in which his fate was supposedly decided. This return reflects nostalgia for the possible future left behind, as well as the way that the future haunts and molds the present.

This is clearly a performance of haunted anticipation: We are trapped between the “not yet” of unfulfilled anticipation of the deceased parent’s identity – anticipation that structures the performance in the present – and the “too late” of the traumatic death that took place in the past and appears here in the future. Alongside the novel’s narrator, Avishai – a former circuit judge who knew the comedian as a child and was present for the traumatic event but has not seen Dovaleh since, and who has been invited by Dovaleh to the show – and alongside the other audience members in the room, readers anticipate critical knowledge as they witness the artist’s bitterly nostalgic journey into his past-future. There are countless moments of frustrated hope, in which a glimmering moment from the past is brought to life, only to be exposed as false or disappointing. During the show, Avishai is reminded of a shared memory from their childhood:

On stage I see his old smile, charming and keen, and a little breathing room opens up: the distress that has weighed down the show from the start seems to dissipate a little, and I give in and smile to him. It’s a good moment, a private moment between the two of us, and I remember how he used to skip around me, cheering and shouting and laughing as though the air itself were tickling him. In his eyes now there is the same luminance, a little beam of light aimed at me, believing in me, and it's like everything can still be repaired, even for us, for me and him.

But the smile vanishes in an instant, like it always does, snatched from under our feet, and from my own feet in particular. Again I sense a profound, dark deception, the kind that occurs in a place words cannot reach.[[22]](#footnote-22)

*A Horse Walks into a Bar* sketches the portrait of a man and a society haunted by an incomplete past – a past of hope and anticipation demolished seemingly at one blow. Similarly, in Dovaleh’s show, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is presented as a zero-sum game in which the unrestrained, even sadistic oppression of the conquered is liable to be reversed all at once by the “fairy godmother of history.” The passage of time may resurrect ghosts and allow them to take their revenge. Dovaleh’s satirical-comic “solution” to this possible reversal of power dynamics is a silencing of the mechanisms of prediction, planning, and anticipation, instead rooting oneself strictly in a futureless present:

Because it turns out […] that the fairy godmother is a fickle bitch. That’s how fairy godmothers are. She likes to switch things around every so often, which means that after we’ve had our fun and games for a while it’ll be *us* – surprise! – singing *Biladi Biladi* at *their* roadblocks! […]. And why think about all that stuff anyway? There’s loads of time until that happens, and Yoav is absolutely right – no politics! It’s not gonna happen until our kids are grown up anyway, so it’s their problem. And who told them to stick around here eating up what we shit out? So why get annoyed about it now? Why all the fighting and arguing and civil warring? Why think about it? Why think at all? *Hands together for not thinking!*[[23]](#footnote-23)

The novel’s title – *A Horse Walks into a Bar* – is the opening line for many different jokes with many possible continuations. In this way, it is a performative utterance, a speech act of anticipation. Over and over, Dovaleh interrupts his story to tell jokes, the comedian’s obligation to his audience. This is yet another layer of anticipation in this novel, alongside the anticipation of critical information identifying the dead parent. After all, the genre of the joke is built on anticipation: The most common structure for a joke is an expectation of one thing that is then replaced by another, unexpected thing. Laughter is the result of false anticipation, of disappointment. Kant defines laughter as “an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Grossman uses this structure of thwarted anticipation, of unfulfilled promises, as the key device of his novel. In this context, it is notable that the title’s appearance in the book – as the opening line of a joke told in Dovaleh’s show[[25]](#footnote-25) – never achieves continuation; the joke is cut off in the middle by a rambling chain of associations and remains without a punchline. The initial anticipation is not relieved through laughter but rather is left hanging. The choice of an unfinished joke as the novel’s title marks unresolved anticipation as the underlying subject of this work.

In *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, thwarted anticipation is not only found in the mechanism of the joke or in standup as a genre of subverted expectations; it is also inversely represented by the audience’s increasing disappointment in the show. This audience has gathered in anticipation of the thoughtless forgetting of self that characterizes entertainment (“Hands together for not thinking!”). Instead, they find themselves at an evening of introspection and self-reflection. Indeed, many of the audience members feel cheated and walk out of the show. The character of Dovaleh G. embodies not only resistance to the proper aims and logic of a standup show (to elicit laughter, not tears) but resistance to the proper, linear progression of time. As he reveals in the show, Dovaleh had the habit of walking backward on his hands as a child. In this way, he suggests a change to the way we look at things, staring up at them from below. Anyone who wants to see him is forced to contort his body and incline his head downward. He looks at things not from the present toward the past, trying to understand “what was,” but rather from the past to the present, reconstructing and dramatizing anticipation anew.

Thus, Grossman places the protagonist, the narrator, the audience, and us readers in the tragic position of choosing which of Dovaleh’s parents will die – his weak, helpless mother, or his hot-tempered, aloof father, who nonetheless arouses compassion in his own way. This position entails an unbearable guilt that resembles the survivor’s guilt of those who lived through the Holocaust. Indeed, it is a sort of inversion of the choice described in the novel *Sophie’s Choice*, in which parents were forced to “choose” which of their children would live or die. As we may recall, Grossman’s *To the End of the Land*, which directly preceded *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, placed the mother Ora in a similar position of imagined choice – to accept or not to accept the message of her son’s death – amidst her own basic lack of control.[[26]](#footnote-26) The paradox of omnipotent choice when one is fundamentally helpless softens the exploitative and hurtful figure of the standup comedian: Despite Dovaleh’s coarseness, his incisive criticism, his severe self-judgment, and the moments in which he beats himself on stage (literal self-flagellation), he is depicted as an innocent man who is good and kind at his core. Although he denounces himself as mired in filth and guilt-stricken over his “rotten accounting” on the way to the funeral, he comes off as a victim: a vulnerable orphan worthy of the love he never received. He presents himself as the aggressor, but he is deserving of forgiveness – because he has been even more deeply hurt, and because he bears a heavy burden of guilt.

In inviting a witness from the past to act as his judge – Avishai the narrator, who indeed was a judge, then a former judge – Dovaleh transforms the comedy club into a courtroom in which the readers also participate. However, unlike the “judgment” in Kafka’s well-known story, referenced explicitly by Grossman, the trial in the comedy club leads to a victory for the defendant. Because Dovaleh G. is not presented as a singular character, but rather as a national-allegorical figure (a son of Holocaust survivors who presents himself satirically as “retribution” because he was conceived during the Suez Crisis), he reflects a broader existential situation beyond the personal tragedy of a single man. As portrayed in the figure of Dovaleh, Israeli society appears bent under an unfair burden of guilt for its own offenses. As we have noted, this is a paradoxical kind of guilt that entails no responsibility. Grossman decides to “kill” the mother rather than the father – the helpless victim of the Holocaust, whose death the novel strongly hints was due to suicide, rather than the father, who lost his entire family but was himself saved by his arrival as a pioneer in Israel just before the Holocaust (in other words, it was the Zionist paradigm of anticipation that saved him). This authorial choice reflects Grossman’s nostalgia for the Israeli soul’s victimhood, capable of providing justification and exonerating the defendant of his crimes.

In an article on legal practices that trickled into the field of literature in the post-Oslo era, Renana Keydar and Ron Dudai distinguish between “Oslo” and “post-Oslo” as two separate literary epochs. The first is characterized by an acknowledgment of the injustice done to the Palestinians, alongside the individual innocence of the novel’s Israeli characters; it diverts the investigation of the past to the national-social level. By contrast, the second epoch transitions from criticism of collective mechanisms of denial to a critical investigation of personal guilt, attempting to achieve justice and repair the wrongs of the conflict through imagined judicial procedures in the literary text.[[27]](#footnote-27) Although Keydar and Dudai note that most of these works tend to exonerate the perpetrators, they claim that the “imagined trials” conducted in the works of Grossman, Oz, Kaniuk, and others pave the way for a critical reexamination of the dominant political-ethical paradigm.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In the current political climate, I believe that there is great value to any attempt to undermine the ugly ruling narrative and present a critical ethics. Further, per Keydar and Dudai’s diagnosis, it is my view that the six novels here repeatedly create “trial positions” of various kinds; each protagonist bears a guilt that he or she wishes to examine and be absolved of. However, in contrast to Keydar and Dudai’s approach, it seems to me that the imagined trial position facilitates not only political self-examination but a nostalgic journey into hopeful anticipation that now belongs only to the past. The nostalgia for anticipation also enhances the defendant’s claim of innocence: The complicated, sometimes paradoxical mechanism of time traps the novels’ haunted protagonists between the “not yet” and the “too late,” leaving them unable to influence the past-future that haunts them. Thus, the question of responsibility is neutered, and the protagonists are absolved of guilt.

**“The Dog-Eared Partition Agreement”: *All the Rivers***

Dorit Rabinyan’s 2014 novel tells the story of a romance set in New York in 2002, just after the fall of the Twin Towers and during the Second Intifada. These were days of intense political uncertainty, at the height of the crisis in the peace process. Thus, Rabinyan meditates on a moment of breakdown from within, weaving a compelling love story between an Israeli woman and a Palestinian man. Liat and Hilmi meet in New York, where each is staying for a temporary visit. The cosmopolitan city frees them to conduct their romance at a relative remove from the demands of family, tribalism, and nationhood. Yet as their relationship deepens, those demands force their way in and push the lovers apart.[[29]](#footnote-29) The lovers’ longing for the land of Israel-Palestine, for the sensual experiences of landscape, earth, and seashore that bring them together far from their roots, triumphs over the bond between them. Further, it points to the non-mutual character of the relationship – the hierarchy between a free, sovereign citizen who can move through her land and act on her ownership of the landscape, and one who has been distanced from that landscape. In a reversal of accepted gender norms, Hilmi is the weaker party in the relationship. He is younger than Liat and cannot hold a gun (while Liat has completed her army service), drive, or swim.[[30]](#footnote-30) There is a political reason for his inability to swim: The occupation has consistently prevented him from developing this skill. At the end of the novel, Hilmi drowns in an illegal visit to an unauthorized beach on the Jaffa shore, the exact place that Liat enticed him to visit in their many conversations about the sea.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Liat’s love affair with Hilmi grants her access to the perspective of the “other side” – figuratively and literally. Through home videos sent to Hilmi from Ramallah, Liat gets to “see Israel as it appears to its enemies […]. My home in the crosshairs of a missile, from an artillery launchpad, through the telescopic lenses of God knows what.”[[32]](#footnote-32) This brings to light the difference between their imagined solutions to the conflict: Liat’s “two states for two peoples,” as expressed by Oslo, and the “binational state” espoused by Hilmi:

Hilmi, with his blind binational fantasies of Israelis and Palestinians living together, covering his ears and banging his head against the wall like a child – it was all or nothing with him. And me with my ancient, anaemic two-state compromise, a formula recited ad nauseam. Him with that insistent dreaminess, a bleeding-heart idealist still praying for reconciliation between the two peoples. And me insisting again, stomping my feet, waving practicality and logic in his face, pleading on behalf of the dog-eared partition agreement. How I hated his flowery 1960s transnational naivete, his confidence that humanistic values were on his side. He was the enlightened one, the one repairing the world, the one with vision – and I was left wearing the patriotic, unsexy, Zionist, conservative cap. He was the universalist, the peace-monger who shook off archaic definitions like state and religion and follies like national flags and anthems, while I, much as I loathed being pushed into that role, was the sober pragmatist who deals with practical peace accords and technicalities like political borders and sovereignty.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Liat’s words reveal that in her view, Hilmi’s vision of the future may be naïve and utopian, but her own is already outdated. While she claims that hers is the pragmatic approach, she senses that its time has passed. The words attributed to Hilmi are oriented toward the future – “praying,” “repairing the world,” “the one with vision” – while those attributed to Liat have to do with the past: “my ancient, anaemic two-state compromise,” “dog-eared partition agreement,” “left wearing the Zionist cap.” Both lovers are ostensibly looking forward, to a solution to the conflict. In fact, however, they stand at a temporal parting of ways, where each has chosen to turn in a different direction.

The romantic crisis between the two lovers inevitably erupts as the result of a political crisis. This friction reaches its climax in a heated debate with Wassim, “a more sophisticated, elegant version of his brother” Hilmi.[[34]](#footnote-34) Wassim claims that a two-state solution is impossible, predicting that the Palestinian birth rate will overpower Israel’s Jewish majority and lead to a binational state. He blames the Israeli public – including Liat – for not looking directly at the future: “You work so hard to push Palestinian history out of your consciousness that you can’t see ahead anymore. You’re in denial of what is bound to happen in the next thirty or forty years.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Although he asserts that the future he foresees – “joint democratic sovereignty”[[36]](#footnote-36) – will come about through nonviolent means, Liat’s response to his words is harsh and rings of victimhood. She points to the traumatized character of the Jewish people, haunted by the ghosts of its calamitous past. From her perspective, without a territorial division to separate the two peoples, the conflict can only be solved through violence. The idea of a binational state (and perhaps of binational love) thus sharpens an understanding of the conflict as a zero-sum game. In this game, each side must increase its power and its force; if it does not, it will be caught unawares and exterminated.

In the final chapter of the novel, Liat muses on the fact that no shared photographs of their love affair remain. When she and Hilmi tried to take a picture together on their final day in New York, they discovered that they had forgotten to charge the camera’s battery – that is, they had failed to anticipate the near future and prepare for it in advance. “There was only the phantom picture not taken that day, in the pale-orange golden light of Washington Square – the picture seen only in our minds’ eyes a moment before we left.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Thus, Rabinyan plays up the ethereal, ghostly existence of the binational romantic relationship. The name she gives to the Palestinian lover, “Hilmi,” can also be read as an exhortation to her heroine: to dream. The lovers’ cooperation; their friendship; their mutual care; the love between them – all are presented as a dream and a fantasy. Yet this is not a dream that arouses anticipation, like Herzl’s “If you will it, it is no dream.” Rather, upon awakening from this dream, one realizes the impossibility of its fulfillment. The end of Hilmi – drowning in the Jaffa sea – puts the dream to an end.

**“He Belonged in a Different Time”: *Judas***

Set in Jerusalem in the late 1950s, Amos Oz’s 2014 novel constructs an analogy between Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Jesus and the “betrayal” of an early Zionist – the fictional Shealtiel Abravanel – who opposed David Ben-Gurion’s method of state-building and advocated coexistence with the land’s Arab population. Through this analogy, Oz delves into the question of betrayal, depicting supposed traitors as the truest believers. This is a novel haunted by ghosts from the historical and mythological past, even as it subtly contemplates the Jewish nation-state’s more recent past and its future. In fact, Oz writes the novel as a kind of self-defense – not only a defense of the Israeli left but a defense of his involvement in the Oslo process, viewed by segments of the Israeli public as a betrayal. Through this novel, he hints at the patriotic loyalty of Oslo’s advocates, himself among them.

In an original and innovative essay on Nathan Alterman’s masterpiece “The Joy of the Poor,” Mordechai Shalev interprets the principle of betrayal not only as a fundamental motif in Jewish tradition (a sign that the nation has drifted from God) but as a kind of self-sacrifice and concern for the common good. In his reading of the poem “The Traitor,” he shows that the narrator’s indictment of the traitor as “the living dead” is turned back on him by the traitor at the end of the poem, calling into question the distinction between loyalty and betrayal. “The traitor,” writes Shalev, “is not merely a traitor […] Like a photographic negative, he represents the exact opposite of the silence and inaction of one who is ostensibly not a traitor […]. He is the negative proof that the ordinary man is the true traitor.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Oz, who quotes Nathan Alterman’s poem “The Traitor” in the epigraph of his book – specifically the lines in which the traitor is beaten and “betrayed” – suggests a similar understanding of betrayal. I permit myself to surmise that Oz was quite familiar with Shalev’s essay. In another essay, a broad and comprehensive examination of Oz’s *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Shalev returns to Alterman’s *The Joy of the Poor*, suggesting that we understand it as a fixed model of false hope: “Peace is the “Joy of the Poor” of this generation, at whose door [peace] knocked during Oslo, whose soul it animated […] and whose heart it broke.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Shalev reads *A Tale of Love and Darkness* as a novel that unconsciously records not only the collapse of the Oslo process but Oz’s “betrayal” of his original mission as an author, tempted by the chance to wield public and political influence and intervene in the policy gambits of Oslo. Perhaps we may read *Judas* as a novel written in response to Shalev’s harsh claims against Oz.

Shealtiel Abravanel, expelled from the Zionist General Council and the board of the Jewish Agency for asking to voice a minority opinion before the Special Committee of the United Nations in 1947 that would propose a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is shunned by his community as a traitor. Says Gershom Wald: “They all thought he was crazy. People abused and reviled him, they called him a traitor, they called him an Arab-lover, they even spread a persistent rumor in Jerusalem that one of his grandfathers had been an Arab gardener from Bethlehem.” [[40]](#footnote-40) These words echo the public discourse directed in the days of Oslo against leading figures in the peace process – Rabin, Peres, and even Oz himself. Ten years after Abravanel’s fall from grace, Shmuel Ash, the young student who has fallen in love with Abravanel’s aging daughter Atalia, whispers in Wald’s ear another understanding of the concept of betrayal, “which ought really to be seen as a badge of honour”:

Not long ago, in France, de Gaulle was elected President by the votes of the supporters of France rule in Algeria, and now it transpires that his intention was to abandon France rule and grant full independence to the Arab majority. Those who previously enthusiastically supported him now call him a traitor and even threaten to make an attempt on his life […].Every so often in history, courageous people have appeared who were ahead of their time and were called traitors or eccentrics. Theodor Herzl was called a traitor just because he dared to entertain the thought of a Jewish state outside the land of Israel […]. Even David Ben-Gurion, when he agreed twelve years ago to the partition of the land into two states, one Jewish and the other Arab, was called a traitor by many Jews here […]. Anyone willing to change,” Shmuel said, “will always be considered a traitor by those who cannot change and are scared to death of change and don’t understand it and loathe change. Shealtiel Abravanel had a beautiful dream, and because of his dream some people called him a traitor.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Shmuel names several great thinkers and prominent personages throughout history whose so-called betrayal later turned out to be prescience. They understood how they had to change history in order to improve the lives of others, who were not yet able to see the beneficial results of the changes the “traitors” proposed. To this list, the reader may easily add figures from the more recent past identified with Oslo and its collapse. It is no accident that the character to represent the vision of peace in the novel, Abravanel, has himself collapsed. The option for peace proposed by Abravanel has been erased from the range of acceptable options in the public consciousness, just as Abravanel himself was. Oz intimates that he also counts among these same dreamers, who aspired to the good but were cast aside because of their communities’ myopia.

The historical figures recalled by Shmuel resemble the “watcher of the house of Israel,” with his prophetic posture of responsibility and vision. However, it seems to me that *Judas* was written from the opposite posture, a melancholy posture of looking backward – “after,” not “before,” its time. Yigal Schwartz identifies *Judas* as a macabre-comic cover version of *Altneuland.*[[42]](#footnote-42) Herzl’s novelized, forward-looking utopia, driven by an aspiration to fuse the real land of Israel with the ideal land of Israel, is transformed by *Judas* into a textual dream (“Here is a story from the winter days” are the novel’s first words[[43]](#footnote-43)) that once again exposes the chasm between real and ideal. *Judas* is written with an orientation toward a distant past still steeped in a vision of the future. This mechanism suffuses the novel with a kind of nostalgic-melancholy sweetness. Melancholy, as we know, is a structure in which time deviates from its proper course.

*Judas* is a book haunted by time. Shmuel Ash, the asthmatic (that is to say, one whose breath does not conform to the regular rhythms of time) is described by his employer Wald as “a soul that’s exposed, like a wristwatch with the glass removed.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Without its glass cover, the slightest touch can spin the watch’s hands, corrupting and garbling the order of time. Time becomes vulnerable, and exposed; it is denuded of the defensive cover that allows us to treat it objectively and quantitatively. The same is true of Ash’s employers, Gershom Wald and his daughter-in-law Atalia, whose home seems to have frozen outside of conventional time. “He didn’t belong in our time. He may have come too late. He may have been ahead of his time. He belonged in a different time,”[[45]](#footnote-45) says Atalia Abravanel about her father. Her hesitation on this question allows Abravanel to be categorized twice over, numbered both among the brave visionaries ahead of their time and among the failed visionaries who came too late – such as the architects of Oslo, Oz among them.

Shmuel Ash woke each morning at nine or ten, even though he had promised himself time and time again to get up at seven o’clock the next day […] and started to argue aloud with himself: “Get up […].” And every morning he compromised with himself: […] “After all, you came here to get away from the rat-race. It’s not worth feeling hunted again.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

This hunting, this haunting by an unresolved past, is unrelenting, both for the protagonist and for his author.

**“The Future Here is Not Secure”: *The Extra***

A. B. Yehoshua’s *The Extra* (2014) also features a meditation on betrayal and a complex constellation of temporality. *The Extra* revolves around its protagonist’s long ago decision not to have children and her return to that fateful decision at a time when it may be too late for her to change her mind. The novel centers around Noga, a harpist in a philharmonic orchestra in the Netherlands, who comes to Israel for a three-month stay. During her visit, she lives in her childhood home in Jerusalem, “taking care of the house” as her mother spends a trial period in an old-age home. In her spare time, she stays occupied by taking on roles as an extra in films and theatrical productions. The self-declared marginality of the extra – who does not play an active role in bringing about events, but merely drifts temporarily and noncommittally through them – allows Yehoshua to critically examine past choices that continue to shape the present.

Noga’s visit brings her in contact with Uriah, her ex-husband (whom Yehoshua names after the ultimate biblical cuckold), who left her ten years earlier because she refused to have children and even aborted their fetus upon becoming pregnant. Although he has already married another woman and has children, Uriah is still attached to Noga, following her obsessively in an attempt to understand their shared past. He “mourns and yearns for the child not born to him.”[[47]](#footnote-47) In the guise of a light family melodrama, Yehoshua deals with weighty political matters: attachment and loyalty to home versus distance and detachment; romantic faith versus cold practicality; and hope, anticipation, and potential for the future versus the possibility (or the impossibility) of reconstructing the past. These questions are embodied in the figures of the ex-spouses. Noga defines herself as “a reasonable and rational woman”[[48]](#footnote-48) who is not stuck in the past and does not claim to predict the future,[[49]](#footnote-49) and who does not weigh considerations such as fear or utopian hope. Uriah, by contrast, represents “the right of return” to the past: For many years, he has saved the key to Noga’s childhood home, where they first consummated their love, and he remembers their time together in intricate detail. Moreover, he works as the director of the recycling department of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, thus representing the longing for recycling and restoration, the desire to live out a lost past.

Noga’s rejection of pregnancy and children is also a rejection of anticipation – after all, pregnancy is the epitome of anticipation and potentiality, while birth is a symbolic hold on the future. Unlike Noga, Uriah maintains a grasp on anticipation and hope; ironically, however, his hope is aimed at a lost past that can no longer be renewed. Noga’s mother, too, tends toward preservation. Not only does she refrain from the logical decision to leave her home in Jerusalem, but she also continues to hope that her daughter will have a child with Uriah, so that “some real part of you will remain in this world, not just musical notes that vanish into the air.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Noga herself dismisses her mother’s hopes as “delusions.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

While Noga’s choice to leave Israel is explained purely as the result of professional considerations, the novel also implies additional reasons. Noga describes Israel as “a country that never ceases to be a threat to itself”[[52]](#footnote-52) and marvels at the relative serenity of her Dutch friends: “‘These Dutch people have no other worries,’ chuckles Noga to herself. ‘Their wars ended seventy years ago […] [they] have been spared the new wave of terrorism. The euro is stable, their economy is strong, and unemployment is low.’”[[53]](#footnote-53) Noga has chosen to live her life as a junior harpist in a foreign country, where she need not feel any sense of belonging that could cause her concern about her own or her nation’s future. This choice enables her to remain uninvolved and uncommitted; she is a kind of “extra” in her own life. Similarly, her rejection of motherhood hints at the intentional avoidance of a lifelong connection – the connection to her descendants – and a reluctance to leave her mark on the world. Noga herself provides no satisfying explanation for her decision not to have children. Uriah is the one to hypothesize that her decision stems from political considerations:

* “I as a young man, swept away by love, might have interpreted your hesitation as a teenager’s fleeting radical protest against the state or against the world.”
* “The state?”
* “In the hackneyed sense that if Israel was going downhill, better not to have children here.”
* “I never said that and never thought that. And even if I was sometimes too radical for your taste, I could have given birth to radical children who would aid and abet my radicalism.”
* “In other words, the future here is not secure, full of danger.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

Despite Noga’s frequent protestations that it is too late to fulfill her old wish for a child from Uriah, as she is no longer fertile, Yehoshua concludes the novel by reopening the possibility that the hope of a lost past may be revived. Suddenly, not only Noga’s menstrual period is “restored,” but her hesitant desire to know “that I could have a child”[[55]](#footnote-55) – not exactly a desire to give birth, but a desire to live out her hope, her potential, and the possibility of orientation toward the future. In Yehoshua’s subsequent novel, *The Tunnel*, Noga makes a guest appearance; it is revealed that she has returned to Israel, chosen single motherhood, and borne a son at an advanced age.[[56]](#footnote-56) Thus, Yehoshua signals – arguably in contrast to Oz, Rabinyan, and Grossman – that birth, with its gaze forward into the future, is preferable to looking backward. Holding onto the future may not return what has already been lost, but it may imbue the promises of the past with new vitality.

**“The Mirage”: *The Third***

Yishai Sarid’s *The Third* (2015) is a dystopian novel that presents an Israel of the future: The “Third Kingdom of Judah,” a monarchy centered around the Third Temple, is built on the ruins of an Israel nearly eradicated by a nuclear explosion. The novel’s plot tracks the destruction of the Third Temple and the fall of the kingdom. It is narrated by the only survivor of the royal family, the disabled youngest son of King Yehoaz, during his imprisonment, as he awaits what he expects will be a death sentence. Like the prince, the readers know the story’s ending in advance: As in the accepted formula among early Zionist authors, the novel opens with introductory remarks by a supposedly external figure who demarcates the novel’s textual status. Here, this role is played by an “academic council” of some kind; they tell us that the text is the translation of a fifty-year-old manuscript from the archives, written by the prisoner Prince Jonathan ben Yehoaz shortly after the destruction of the last Kingdom of Judah. From the first page, Sarid creates a complex temporal constellation: a futuristic, apocalyptic story unfurling a past that has already come to an end. This is a haunted expectation, suspended between the “too late” of the kingdom’s destruction and the “not yet” of anxiety over the future.

The novel narrates the future through the open use of expressions familiar from contemporary Israeli political culture (such as the claim that certain sectors of the nation are self-hating, or denigration of a previous government that had “made concessions to our enemies and surrendered in order to appease them”),[[57]](#footnote-57) as well as familiar biblical examples (the covenant between the pieces, the binding of Isaac, the rituals of the Tabernacle, the laws of ritual sacrifice). This dystopian future is constructed using forms from the present and the past, filling the novel with textual ghosts. Likewise, the kingdom presented in the novel is at once old and new, a kind of “Altneuland.” It is an admixture of late-twenty-first-century technological advancement – surveillance cameras, nuclear missiles, identity chips implanted in the Jews’ bodies – and ancient, ostensibly extinct practices such as animal sacrifice, the establishment of a Sanhedrin, the scapegoat ceremony, and archaic punishments such as stoning. Sarid returns Judaism to its ritual world; details that have since undergone sublimation and taken on a symbolic or abstract status – for instance, the substitution of prayer or the Passover Seder for ritual sacrifice – are restored and assigned a concrete, realistic ontological status within the work of fiction. This abandonment of the metaphorical-subliminal field is presented as harmful. The replacement of the age-old Jewish anticipation for the Messiah with the supposed fulfillment of his arrival accelerates powerful and dangerous processes: The people’s redemption brings on its destruction.

In a climactic scene near the end of the novel, after his father has offered his people a martyr’s death in a doomed war, the narrator, the king’s son Jonathan, awakens from a troubled sleep. Just before the fall of the kingdom, the Temple plaza in Jerusalem fills with an oracular vision. Before the crowd’s eyes, this vision presents Yitzhak Rabin’s final speech in favor of peace, moments before Rabin’s assassination in Tel Aviv – a city that no longer exists in the novel, having been decimated in a nuclear attack.

In the middle of the night, I was awakened by the sound of the crowd, a sound that grew in force like a wave that threatened to wash away the city. My heart raced faster. I rose to my feet, and, with a burning sensation in my eyes, I went out to the balcony. I did not understand what I beheld: A flickering bluish image had appeared upon the Mount, a kind of electricity suspended in the air. It showed a large square in an unfamiliar city, filled with throngs of people with uncovered heads, awash in the glow of spotlights. At the speaker’s podium, an old, bespectacled man, his face gentle, his hair white and sparse, dressed in a suit, addressed the audience. I saw the Watchmen of Faith running toward the picture, standing below it, trying to climb up onto it, frantically asking one another how to turn it off.

“Allow me to tell you that I am also deeply moved,” said the speaker. “I wish to thank each and every one of you who has come here today to stand against violence and for peace. This government, at the head of which I am honored to stand, has decided to give peace a chance – a peace that will solve most of Israel’s problems.” […]

The people in the plaza around the Mount rubbed their eyes, and a rustle of bewilderment could be heard among the crowd. Perhaps the oldest among them knew who the speaker was. He continued his speech, visibly moved. I remember every word: “I have always believed that the majority of the people want peace and are willing to take a risk in order to achieve peace. Those of you assembled here today, along with many others who are not in attendance, prove that the people really do want peace and oppose violence. Violence erodes the foundations of Israeli democracy. We must condemn it, cast it out, isolate it. It is not the way of the state of Israel.” […]

The audience in the mirage responded with thunderous applause. Among our own audience – a stunned silence. The image vanished. A hoarse, mocking laughter resounded in my head. [[58]](#footnote-58)

Sarid quotes the historical speech almost verbatim, casting this moment as the breaking point that rendered the vision of Oslo unattainable. The ghost of the assassination has come back to haunt Israel, proclaiming the destruction that will be visited upon Israel in punishment for having abandoned the option of peace. The novel juxtaposes the hopeful audience in the Tel Aviv of the mirage and the audience of starved, despondent believers in the Temple plaza, portraying them as two options that cancel one another out. Both are “floating” events devoid of real existence; one belongs to the past, one to the future. This split mirrors the two ghosts that haunt Jonathan – a religious ghost, the spirit of an angel who trails him and needles him about his father’s path, and a national ghost, embodied in the mirage of the assassinated Prime Minister.

Sarid emphasizes the auditory dimension of the vision: The noise of the crowd, the echo of the speech, the applause, and the mocking laughter in Jonathan’s head highlight the ghostly presence of the voice arising from the ether. Oslo appears here as a tragic reminder of “original sin” – it tells us that there once was another possibility, a possibility since abandoned. In Derrida’s hauntology, haunting is the result of failed mourning. The refusal to give up on a ghost, or the ghost’s refusal to give up on us, forbids us to be reconciled to the loss of hope for other possibilities.[[59]](#footnote-59) Thus, Sarid’s return to the past does not ask the reader to finish the work of mourning and bring this historical episode to a close but rather uses it as an admonition for the future.

Following Derrida, Michal Ben-Naftali writes that the disjunction of time “is a call, a call of duty, a voice that calls us (from whence? from within us? from outside us? from the heavens? from the grave?) to thoroughly reorient ourselves with respect to ourselves, to others, to the world. It is a voice that provides no shelter, a voice that haunts us and awakens other, sleeping voices – a kind of chain reaction, a dance of demons that stir within us without warning.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Sarid attempts to send out a “call” of this kind, summoning the ghosts of the past in the imagined future, to caution us that we must create a different future. Yet the future he creates is entirely cut from the cloth of the past. His book, fraught with anxiety over the destruction of Israel and the annihilation of the Jewish people, conceives its dystopian future according to earlier Jewish paradigms of calamity – destruction, exile, Holocaust. We have already encountered the nostalgic longing for past anticipation, for hope lost; anxiety of this kind is the other side of the coin.

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The novels surveyed here all echo the spectral voices of lost hope. These works are built on the temporal constellation of a past experienced anew as a time rich in anticipation of the future. Twenty years after Oslo, which was an era of anticipation and hope for an end to the conflict and permanent peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, Hebrew literature is haunted by the ghostly presence of that lost future. Therefore, it tends toward a mechanism of disjointed time, time that has deviated from its course, lingering between the “not yet” of unfulfilled anticipation and the “too late” of foiled hope. Anticipation is a fundamental element of Zionist thought, in which a profound awareness of the past serves as a springboard into the future. “The watcher over the house of Israel” is understood to fill the role of the prophet, and his far-reaching gaze – into both the distant past and the remote future – grants him power, knowledge, and responsibility. In this way, he also represents tidings of hope for his people. For contemporary authors, it may be too late to adopt this posture. However, these authors are deeply nostalgic for this foundational aspect of Zionism.

In the “concentrated moment” of 2014–2015, anticipation is steeped in lost hopes that are suited to models from the past. The continuing presence of these hopes leaves the novel’s protagonists stripped of the power to act – the power to design their future with their own hands and to imagine other, new, surprising futures. Their entrapment in past anticipation raises the question: Among the major Hebrew authors of our day, how much room, if any, remains for the unknown? How much room is left for unexpected futures not yet revealed or experienced, whether possible or impossible? Yet perhaps these authors are voicing the urgent need to conceive new hopes, to jolt us awake, to make the ghosts of the past present. In this way, we may build a different future than the one expected of us.

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1. Claire Bishop, Radical Museology, Or What’s Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art? (London: Koenig Books, 2013), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While the discipline of anticipation studies is relatively new, several academic journals and book series have already been published on the subject. See Routledge, “Book Series: Routledge Research in Anticipation and Futures,” <https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Research-in-Anticipation-and-Futures/book-series/RRAF>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hannan Hever, “Sifrut yisraelit akhshavit al sipah shel begidah,” *Teoria ubikoret* 45 (Winter 2015): 284. See also Dan Miron, *Im lo tihyeh yerushalayim: masot al hasifrut haivrit beheksher tarbuti-politi* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson relies on the concepts of time presented by Benjamin, claiming that one of the primary conditions for the birth of a nation as an imagined community has to do with a fundamental change in the view of time – a transition from the “messianic time” that characterized the cultural reign of the great religions to “homogenous empty time,” secularized time, measured in hours and years. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983). In Zionism, these two concepts appear to merge, both operating at once; alongside the perception of Zionism as acting and moving toward sophistication and progress, characteristic of homogenous empty time, Zionism was also perceived as repair and fulfillment – the reactualization of an age-old vision bequeathed to the nation by its biblical patriarchs. This view creates a “dialectic leap,” according to Benjamin’s formulation; skipping over thousands of years, it connects the present of the pioneers (*haluẓim*) to the ancient, legendary past of the chosen people. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See: Gershon Shaked, “Mevo,” in Gershon Shaked and Yaron Golan (ed.), *Ḥayim al kav hakeẓ* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1982); Hamutal Tsamir, *Beshem hanof: leumiut, migdar vesubyektiviut bashirah hayisraelit bishnot haḥamishim vehashishim* (Jerusalem: Keter; Beer Sheva: Heksherim Center at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2006), 43; Yigal Schwartz, *Hayadata et haareẓ sham halimon poreaḥ* (Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2008); Amir Banbaji, *Mendele vehasipur haleumi* (Or Yehuda: Dvir; Beer Sheva: Heksherim Center at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev; Sapir Academic College, 2009), 69–79; Michael Gluzman, *Shirat hatevuim: hamelankholiah shel haribonut bashirah haivrit bishnot haḥamishim vehashishim* (University of Haifa; Yedioth Ahronoth, Sifrei Hemed, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2008), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 2006); Peter Fritzsche, “Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity,” The American Historical Review 106, no. 5 (2001): 1587–1618. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ## As’ad Ghanem, Mohanad Mustafa and Salim Brake, *Israel in the Post Oslo Era: Prospects for Conflict and Reconciliation with the Palestinians* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mark Fisher, “What is Hauntology?” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Vered Karti Shemtov and Elana Gomel, “Utopia, dystopia, limbotopia: al harḥavat hazhenreim shel haatid basifrut haivrit haakhshavit,” *Ot* 7 (2017): 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Shemtov and Gomel, “Utopia, dystopia, limbotopia,” 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (Winchester, UK and Washington: Zero Books, 2013), 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 2014 was marked by a series of violent events. In July-August 2014, these reached their climax with Operation Protective Edge, which began shortly after the murder of three kidnapped young men – Naftali Fraenkel, Gil’ad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrach – by Hamas operatives and the murder of young Muhammad Abu Khdeir by Jewish terrorists. Over the course of Operation Protective Edge, 80 Israelis (68 soldiers and 12 civilians) and over 2,000 Palestinians (the precise figure is subject to debate) were killed. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. To this set of novels I would also add Zeruya Shalev’s *Pain* (2015), which is beyond the scope of this article. The book begins with the return of long-elapsed pain: both the pain of the protagonist’s wounds from a terror attack and the pain of a lost love from her youth. These pains push her to reconstruct a promising past that has since proven false. Ilai Rowner’s *Deserter* (2015), which describes the haunting of a young Israeli man in Paris by memories of his military past, also operates according to a similar temporal mechanism. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XVI. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. David Grossman, *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, trans. Jessica Cohen (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Grossman, *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Grossman, *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, 54–55. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Grossman, *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In fact, this novel is also built on a temporal mechanism of haunting and anachronism, represented by Ora’s flight from the message that awaits her. See David Grossman, *To the End of the Land*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New York: Vintage Books, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Renana Keydar and Ron Dudai, “Mishpat medumyan: ḥevrah ezraḥit, sifrut veẓedek maavari bikorti beyisrael,” *Teoria ubikoret* 50 (Winter 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Keydar and Dudai, “Mishpat medumyan,” 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. In December 2015, the Israeli Ministry of Education banned Rabinyan’s book from the official literature curriculum, as they saw it as liable to encourage relationships between Jews and non-Jews – although the book’s plot thwarts Liat and Hilmi’s romance, recognizing that the two nations are far from reconciliation. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Dorit Rabinyan, *All the Rivers*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New York: Random House, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. In his doctoral thesis, Tomer Gardi lays out Rabinyan’s novel as a murder plot: Liat brings about Hilmi’s death in order to solve the conflict of her love for a man perceived as an enemy. See Tomer Gardi, *Globalization and Contemporary Hebrew World Literature* (Ph.D. diss., Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Rabinyan, *All the Rivers*, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Rabinyan, *All the Rivers*, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Rabinyan, *All the Rivers*, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Rabinyan, *All the Rivers*, 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Rabinyan, *All the Rivers*, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Rabinyan, *All the Rivers*, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Mordechai Shalev, “Mi mefaḥed mesimḥat aniyim?” in *Gonvim et habesorah: masotav hasifrutiot shel mordekhai shalev* (Or Yehuda: Dvir, Heksherim Center, 2018), 179–180. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Mordechai Shalev, “Huledet hatragedia mitokh ruaḥ hamuzikah,” in *Gonvim et habesorah*, 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Amos Oz, *Judas*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016), 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Oz, *Judas*, 457. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Yigal Schwartz, “Dat, politikah veerotikah: shloshet hamafteḥot shel amos oz,” *Haaretz*, November 14, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Oz, *Judas*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Oz, *Judas*, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Oz, *Judas*, 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Oz, *Judas*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. A. B. Yehoshua, *The Extra*, trans. Stuart Schoffman (London: Halban, 2016), 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Yehoshua, *The Extra*, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Yehoshua, *The Extra*, 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Yehoshua, *The Extra*, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Yehoshua, *The Extra*, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Yehoshua, *The Extra*, 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Yehoshua, *The Extra*, 235–236. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Yehoshua, *The Extra*, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Yehoshua, *The Extra*, 297. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. A. B. Yehoshua, *The Tunnel*, trans. Stuart Schoffman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Yishai Sarid, *Hashlishi* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2015), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Sarid, *Hashlishi*, 220–222. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Michal Ben-Naftali, “Masah mevaeret: Historiah shel haprat – Al *Hamlet*,” in *Derrida kore Shakespeare,* 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)