**Ethical Conundrums**

**Translation agents as ambassadors of Israeli morality to the United States**

I begin by outlining the first coping pattern and the discursive traditions that shaped it. As background, let us look at recent scholarship on the reception of Hebrew literature in America. Scholars may be divided on a variety of issues. One assumption, however, raises no controversy: any success Hebrew literature had with its Jewish-American audience was firmly linked to the relinquishing of the ideological constraints to which previous generations had been bound, and to its evolving in the 1960s into a more critical literature. In Gershon Shaked’s words, “Hebrew literature in translation began to reach American Jewish readers and make any serious contribution it has made only from the 1960s onward, when a new generation began to take over the literary stage.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The works of these young writers, Shaked argued, defied the literature of the previous generation by demonstrating that “the norms of the ‘new Hebrew’ were a false front.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Moreover, he saw a strong connection between this generation’s undermining of the ethos of redemption in the Land of Israel and its renouncing of the ‘rough Sabra’ image, and the works' relevance for the Jewish-American reader.

Nicholas De Lange, literary scholar and Amos Oz’s long-time translator, took a similar approach in his definition of ‘Modern Hebrew Literature’ in *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* from 2000. Following the standard generational division, De Lange distinguished between writers of the so-called ‘Palmach Generation,’ who played an active role in the struggle for the establishment of the state and whose literature was bound to the Zionist cause, and the younger generation, led by Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua, often dubbed ‘the Generation of the State,’ who strongly rejected their predecessors’ stylistic and ideological principles. According to De Lange, these new writers benefited from an increasing interest in Israeli literature in America and England, and from opportunities to collaborate with professional translators in commercial, rather than institutionalized Zionist, frameworks.[[3]](#footnote-3) De Lange also pointed to the success among English readers of poets such as, Yehuda Amichai, Natan Zach, T. Carmi, and Dan Pagis as a result of their being “[the] furthest from the somewhat parochial concerns of the Zionist milieu.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In a similar vein, both Robert Alter and Alan Mintz found the literary achievements of the ‘Palmach Generation’ limited due to this generation’s indebtedness to the socialist-positivistic ideology of the time.[[5]](#footnote-5) In contrast, “the explosion of literary talent”[[6]](#footnote-6) of the 1970s and 80s constituted a peak in Hebrew writing unprecedented “since the time of the Bible and ancient liturgical poets”[[7]](#footnote-7)—literary excellence that had led, in their view, to a surge in English translations. Thus, it is implied that the shedding of the enlisted constraints of the past fueled the expansion of Hebrew literature’s translation into English.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This linkage between the dissenting voice of 1960s and 70s’ Hebrew literature and its relevance for the American reader was also acknowledged much earlier and outside the academic milieu. Contemporaneous with the emergence of this new literature, influential agents in the American literary field introduced its moral criticism as a core feature that rendered it worthy of translation. Highlighted as epitomizing ‘Jewish morality,’ the ethical underpinnings of certain Israeli works were framed in terms of the age-old Jewish literary tradition of bold and unyielding social critique. In his preface to the anthology *Israeli Stories* (1962), editor Joel Blocker acknowledged that the absence of a “narrowly partisan […] tough minded ideology”[[9]](#footnote-9) in the stories was a primary consideration for their selection for translation. Regardless of Israeli literature’s politicization, Blocker argued, “there is a great deal more to contemporary Israeli writing than mere ideological posturing,” adding that it is precisely such works that the anthology seeks to offer its readers.[[10]](#footnote-10) In his introduction, Robert Alter used humanistic, moral terms to describe what he perceived as the new writers’ unwillingness to accommodate the nationalistic blueprint:

If one considers the circumstances in which a young Israeli writes, one must admire his integrity and his firmness of resolution. In a new state surrounded by enemies, compelled to keep up a large military establishment, one might expect the literary output to be marred by frequent displays of well-meaning patriotism or misguided chauvinism. [[11]](#footnote-11)

Alter not only pointed to the fact that the works dealt with moral issues and reflected moral values, but also highlighted the very act of *writing* works that address moral values within such a complex historical moment as reflecting a deeply embedded moral code. This morality associated with Hebrew literature was also sometimes referred to as a quintessential embodiment of ‘Jewish character.’ In his introduction to the anthology *A Whole Leaf* (1957), editor Shalom Kahn identified three fundamentally ‘Jewish’ traits as basic characteristics of the new Hebrew literature—humor, emotional sensitivity, and conscience—the latter being the most conspicuous in the stories and realized in “the probings of conscience – in relation to God and one’s own self and one’s fellow-man and ideals of society.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In line with the typical discourse surrounding national anthologies,[[13]](#footnote-13) in editors’ introductions, and literary reviews alike, Kahn looked to the selected texts to draw generalizations about Israeli society: “One of the heartening outcomes of reading these selections is the picture one gets of Israel’s younger generation, in particular, as maintaining the age-old traditions of self-criticism and spiritual search.”[[14]](#footnote-14) As a rule, American discourse identified ‘Jewish morality’ with Israeli works that did not only depict engagements with the national Other, but which seemed to articulate a non-violent, forbearing attitude toward it. A case in point is Henry W. Levy’s review in the *Baltimore Sun* of Hanoch Bartov’s novel, *The Brigade*, from January 1968. Recounting the journey of a company of Jewish British Brigade soldiers through defeated Nazi Germany at the end of WWII, the novel focuses on Elisha who not only resists the temptation to avenge the Nazis, but also persuades his comrades to do the same. For Levy, Elisha represents an “unquestionably pure Judaism in its highest moral stance.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Similarly, in his reading from 1975 of S. Yizhar’s “The Prisoner”—a portrayal of an Israeli platoon’s violent harassing and imprisonment of an Arab shepherd during Israel’s War of Independence—Robert Alter associated the story’s ideological underpinnings with Jewish moral values enrooted in “the historical memory of the Jewish people.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Implied in this emphasis on morality as a cornerstone of Hebrew writing was the assumption that the new Hebrew literature was a porthole to the genuineIsraeli reality, to Israeli existence as it really is. In his review from January 1962 of Kahn’s anthology, for example, Thomas Lask of the *New York Times* felt obligated to inform his or her readers that “[they] will not find in these tales facile heroics, or hymns to pioneering hardships. No monuments are erected; no scrolls inscribed,”[[17]](#footnote-17) while praising the stories for dealing with “the human situation […] and human personality.”[[18]](#footnote-18) This review calls attention to what some American readers may have expected to encounter in literature about Israel—that it be highly dedicated to the national cause—precisely by putting these expectations to rest. In this vein, voices in the critical discourse attributed the works’ merit to their ability to penetrate Israeli reality and show it for its true colors. Praising Yehudit Hendel’s *The Street* *of Steps* in December 1963, Rinna Samuel typically wrote: “*The Street of Steps* won’t take you into the slick palatable fantasyland of *Exodus*, but it will bring you smack into the very midst of the people who, in the final analysis, hold the future of Israel in their uncertain hands.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Indeed, reading Hebrew literature in translation was sometimes evoked as a way to balance the superficiality of both news coverage of Israel and American best-sellers about Israel, and to serve as a more profound source of knowledge on life in Israel. The literary works were attributed with what Alan Mintz later called a “truth-telling capacity”: the ability to reveal some hidden truth—however much it may be obscure—about Israel. “When journalism falters and diplomacy fails,” literature and cultural history scholar, Morris Dickstein, concluded succinctly in 1978, “fiction sometimes rushes in to tell us what we want to know.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The perception of Hebrew literature as a ‘truth-detector’ of sorts in the Jewish American literary discourse was not always entwined with depictions of the literature as a morally critical corpus. But although sometimes appearing independently, for the most part they were fused, and even perceived as being derived from one another in a causal relationship. Particularly from the 1960s onwards, there was an implied linkage between moral opposition and a proclivity to portray the *true* Israeli existence.

This linkage strengthened after the Six-Day War, especially from the early 1970s onwards, with the first translations of works by Oz and Yehoshua. During that time, the moral aspect attributed to Hebrew literature acquired a distinctive political undertone. Prominent voices in the American literary and journalistic discourse called attention to the affinity between Oz and Yehoshua’s works and the authors themselves, and the political Left in Israel. Hebrew literature’s moral-humanist themes began to be predominantly described in terms of what they expressed vis-à-vis the Israeli-Arab conflict, the occupation, and Palestinian refugees. Taking a supportive, often admiring tone, these voices highlighted both the undermining of the national ethos and empathy for the Arab Other as standard motifs in contemporary Hebrew literature as a whole.[[21]](#footnote-21) In an essay written in December 1970 for the progressive weekly *The Nation*, Jewish-American poet Macha Louis Rosenthal (following a visit to Israel) aligned the rise of the Israeli Left with the generation of young authors, but at the same time implicitly assumed a tendency for subversion and criticism in modern Hebrew literature in its entirety.[[22]](#footnote-22) Rosenthal expressed sympathy for the young authors’ public activity and inclination toward ‘dovish’ compromises; and, while suggestively mocking Haim Gouri, a member of the older generation who held right-wing views regarding the occupied territories, by pointing to a “kind of idealistic patriotism that would seem […] an anachronism in Western countries,” also marked with appreciation the skeptical attitude toward the Zionist meta-narrative in Gouri’s novel *The Chocolate Deal*.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Outside the literary milieu, articles dealing with Israeli politics and culture marked the new Israeli authors (led by Oz) as the principle voice challenging the institutional hegemony. Meyer Levin’s review in the *New York Times*, in August 1977, of Howard Sachar’s *A History of Israel* epitomizes how writers on all matters pertaining to Israel cited these authors: Levin described Sachar’s political position as “closest to the socially critical Israeli authors, such as Aharon Megged, Amos Kenan, Yizhar Smilansky, Amos Oz, Avraham Yehoshua, Amos Elon, all of whom illuminate certain strains of guilt toward displaced Arabs.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The implied premise that American readers would be more familiar with these authors than with a roster of political figures demonstrates the extent to which Hebrew literature and the Israeli Left were intertwined within the journalistic discourse on all levels, including mundane news items in which authors were identified with the Left and as spokespersons for the political opposition in Israeli society. Thus, in way of a self-nurturing pattern, the mentioning of Hebrew literature in political sections, interviews, news items, etc., guaranteed that the linkage between the writers and the Left would catch the attention of many readers.

Although enrooted in the American discourse, the affiliation between Hebrew literature and the Israeli Left was not generated exclusively by the Americans. For example, during this time, the *New York Times* provided a platform for leftwing Israelis including future-MK from the Meretz Party, Amnon Rubinstein, and author and *Haaretz* journalist, Amos Elon. In an article published in July 1970, Rubinstein associated the recent revival of Leftist critique with the writers of the ‘Generation of the State’: “The deepest and most significant expression of dissent is to be found not in the mass media, but in contemporary Israeli literature. There one can find the most stirring, controversial and soul-searching words written on the Arab-Jewish conflict.” He argued, with an irrefutable bent toward exaggeration, that “the young generation of authors, has, almost without exception, expressed empathy for the Arab side which comes as a shock to the uninitiated.” [[25]](#footnote-25) Employing yet another over-generalization, Rubinstein concluded that “the feeling of guilt toward the Arab is the theme which dominates the latest Israeli literature.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Three years later, on Israel’s twenty-fifth anniversary, Amos Elon published an article on the cultural climate in Israel in which he argued that Hebrew literature was in fact unique in comparison to other national literatures due to its deeply embedded moral-humanist imperative. Drawing on the theme of guilt toward the Arabs, Elon wrote: “Far from resembling the literature of the other national cultures in the spring of their nationality, the novels and dramas of the past six or seven years are sadder, more politically skeptical, ambivalent and anguished than one could ever imagine.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Canadian-Israeli journalist and political scientist, Bernard Avishai, expressed comparable notions in his piece in *Vogue* from May 1979. Assuming that the authors’ political orientation and attitudes toward the issue of the occupied territories not only pertained to their literary oeuvre, but were also highly relevant to the American readership, Avishai demonstrated a similar propensity for over-generalization by stating that “Almost every artist and writer in the country’s fresh, secular culture is a dove of varying intensity, anxious to exchange land for peace and to settle with the Palestinians on the basis of mutual recognition.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

These and other voices in the literary discourse attributed to the works the moral capacity to expose the reader to the troubled complexity of Israeli history and reality. However, many did not rely on this point alone in their reviews, and ascribed a third powerful quality to the translated literature: the ability to reveal the *collective* Israeli psyche and its hidden complexes. By identifying tropes of a national or political nature in the literary works, and marking them as figurative representations of the Israeli subconscious, these agents framed Hebrew literature as a window into the soul of Israeli mentality. Various reviews of Oz’s *My Michael*, for instance, noted its ability to illuminate the “national psyche,” “the Israeli consciousness,” “a nation’s private soul,” etc. Notably, reviews skeptical of such readings also attested to their pervasiveness. In a *New York Times* article from 1978, Morris Dickstein argued that, contrary to the common assumption, in *My Michael*, Oz in fact failed to represent the “national psyche.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The heroine’s “depressive interior monologues” and the book's “unrelievedly gray and devitalized” tone, Dickstein claimed, are precisely why it is not a reliable representative of “the national psyche.” By arguing that allegorical readings of Hannah Gonen’s character are unconvincing, Dickstein implied that she was indeed meant to serve as a collective symbol to begin with; that is, he had to assume that an attempt at national symbolism had been made in order to describe its failure. America’s reception of Oz, who since has become Israel’s most translated author and an internationally acclaimed figure, seems to have been significantly instrumental in creating Hebrew literature’s moral, oppositional image. As in major literary markets, in which canonical authors of minor literatures are represented as agents of, or defining, their national literature, in the American market Oz’s works were often perceived as representing Hebrew literature in its entirety, and he himself as a metonymy for Hebrew literature.

Thus, literary critiques, news items, pieces on the cultural zeitgeist, and commentaries in national anthologies combined to create one of the dominant patterns in the introduction of Hebrew literature to the Jewish-American reader. At times, the moral issue downright framed the polemic on, and interpretation of, translated Hebrew works; it was implied in the American discourse as a challenge facing the Israeli literature, which the Israeli authors successfully overcame. Given its canonical writers’ dynamic participation in the public discourse, this image of Hebrew literature seemed to become well-known even outside the literary world. Clearly, this is not to suggest that an alternative perception of Israeli works did not exist, or that this was the only prism through which translated Israeli literature was reflected to the American readers. Indeed, there were several cases that strayed from, and even contradicted, this pattern. For instance, in a *New York Times* article from January 1974 by author and journalist, Naomi Shepherd, Hebrew literature is alluded to as evidence of Israel’s blindness toward Arabs. A writer of historical monographs on Israel, Shepherd referred to representations of Arabs in Hebrew literature as a symptom of both flaws in Israel’s strategic thinking, and the defective morality ingrained in Israeli society.[[30]](#footnote-30) In his review of the *Firstfruits* anthology from September 1973, Arthur A. Cohen claimed that the translated works reflected positions that were anything but oppositional, describing them as conformist and nationalist (though he laid the blame for this with the American-Jewish audience as well).[[31]](#footnote-31) And still, these were exceptions rather than the rule. By and large, Hebrew literature and the Israeliness it depicted were portrayed in the American discourse as distinctively humanistic and self-critical, an image constructed over the decades within mainstream literary and journalistic venues. Although Israel and its policy in the West Bank were found deserving of criticism, critiques tended to focus on writers associated with the Left and recognized for their political boldness, rather than on the problematic situation these writers’ criticism provoked. First and foremost, reviewers expressed appreciation for a country that can take pride in such dissenting, ethical voices. In the following section, I will demonstrate how this discursive pattern occasionally stood in contradiction to the ways in which specific Hebrew works were mediated to their American readers. Subtly, and sometimes furtively, the mediating discourse refashioned and appropriated Hebrew literature, at times even in the very same introductions and reviews mentioned earlier, and in the translations themselves.

**The propagandistic trend**

Not every ideologically charged issue in the source literature constitutes an identical challenge for the target culture. Representations of sexuality and eroticism in canonical Hebrew literature, for example, were far more restrained than those in works by Jewish-American authors, and did not pose a great challenge to Jewish-American culture. Comparing Israeli writers’ relative puritanism with works by their American counterparts, a reviewer of an Israeli anthology in translation published in 1969—at the time of the scandal surrounding Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*—tellingly noted: “It is difficult to imagine a collection of current American short stories with only a few sex scenes – and those understated.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Depictions of Israel’s moral failings and wrongdoings presented the Jewish-American reader with a greater challenge. Hebrew literature was perceived as Israeli society’s virtual envoy to the American readership. Therefore, its agents felt the need to mediate descriptions of ethically questionable conduct, particularly in issues pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In what follows, I will demonstrate how, through the 1960s, 70s, and to some extent, 80s, Israeli society’s moral image, as well as the moral reckonings of the Israeli historical narrative, were appropriated and tempered. I will show that propagandistic principles were applied in the selection of texts for translation; the modification or omission of ideologically charged subject matters in the translations themselves; the meticulous formulation of introductions to anthologies to reflect their editors’ obligation to depict a positive moral image of Israeli society; and, in literary reviews, the interpretive inclination to ignore unpalatable issues. The source literature was celebrated in the literary discourse as daringly critical and humanistic, but parts of this criticism and humanism were left by the wayside on route to the American audience.

I wish to pause for a moment to stress that my focus here is not on the degree of subversion in Hebrew literature, nor do I wish to openly participate in the post-colonial debate on the extent to which Israeli authors expressed a tangible opposition to the hegemonic atmosphere of their era. In recent years, studies taking a post-colonial perspective may have doubted the moral daring of the ‘Generation of the State’ in Hebrew literature—and still, this issue is not the focus of this book. Instead, this study focuses on the *changes* that occurred in politically charged representations—largely perceived as subversive in the mainstream Israeli discourse—in their mediation to the Jewish-American reader. Whether we accept the post-colonial approach or not, that is, whether works in (canonical) Hebrew literature did in fact undermine the Zionist meta-narrative and emphasize the importance of describing moral injustices involved in the Zionist project, or whether they were less humanist, accepting of the Other, and skeptical of the national story than it seems, this does not affect the main claim of this chapter. In any event, the mediation of Hebrew literature to the Jewish-American audience generated a far more subdued and less oppositional version of this literature in moral and political terms, than it was originally, within Israeli culture.

Let us start by exploring a prototypical character that has been charged with symbolic meaning in Israeli cultural and literary discourse, time and again—the combat soldier. From the very beginnings of Israeli culture, representations of the soldier’s conduct in literature and film were seen as constituting a benchmark for the society as a whole. His morality symbolized, for better or for worse, the collective’s morality. In American literature and culture, and certainly in Jewish-American discourse, the combat soldier epitomized Israeliness as well. Ari Ben-Canaan, the protagonist in Leon Uris’s best-seller *Exodus*, and his film counterpart (played by Paul Newman), is but one well-known example. Images of tough, disciplined Israeli soldiers abounded in popular non-fiction books about Israel, as well as in contemporary issues of *Time*, *Life*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*, among others.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The military context garnered interest and acquired similar collective significance in the mediating processes of Hebrew literature to American audiences. Pulitzer Prize winner and American author, James Michener’s introduction to the national anthology *Firstfruits* (1973), is an effective example. Published on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the State of Israel by the Jewish Publication Society of America, the anthology was, in the words of author and one of the publication’s chief editors, Chaim Potok, “our gift to the new land on its twenty-fifth birthday.”[[34]](#footnote-34) The celebratory context in which the book was published largely dictated the nature of Michener’s introduction, much of which diverged from literary topics. For instance, Michener saw fit to dedicate a paragraph to the Israeli army, arguing that the military transforms Israelis into better people: “Israel used the necessity of its army as a heaven-sent excuse to educate its young people to a higher standard than they might otherwise have attained. This is one of the brightest successes of Israel’s first twenty-five years, and one least appreciated in the outside world.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Referring to the military service of authors included in the anthology, Michener created an implicit link between the Israeli writer and the image of the combat soldier: “I was struck by the number of writers in this anthology who had some of their education in uniform. I doubt if they liked it at the time, but the system of which they were part seems to me the finest in the world, a prime example of converting necessity to virtue.”[[36]](#footnote-36) In light of the representativeness of the Israeli army in American popular discourse, Michener attributing it with high moral values carries a significant collective meaning: its morality implies the morality of the state.

The inextricable linkage between representations of soldiers and warfare, and the issue of morality is salient in most of the major protest stories in Hebrew literature. These stories were often grounded in military incidents and contexts, and seen as offering commentary on Israeli history and ethics. This renders their mediation to the Jewish-American audience particularly interesting, as well as highly revealing. Let us look, for instance, at S. Yizhar’s “Khirbet Khizeh” and “The Prisoner,” both published in Hebrew in 1949.

These two stories... [[37]](#footnote-37)

Laureate of the Israel Prize for Literature in 1959, Yizhar was arguably the most prominent writer of his generation. “Khirbet Khizeh” and “The Prisoner” are his most widely read works, and, apart from the novel *The Days of Ziklag*, his best known ones. Despite, or perhaps due to, the controversy they caused, these two stories “have come to occupy an exceptional, almost mythical place in the Israeli literary canon.”[[38]](#footnote-38) But regardless of its seminal importance in the history of Hebrew literature, “Khirbet Khizeh” was not translated until 2008; it was passed over for six decades following its publication in 1948—decades of significant growth in the translation of Hebrew literature, that saw the publication of various literary anthologies which included far less influential works. Especially conspicuous is the story’s absence from the first collection of Yizhar’s stories, *Midnight Convoy and Other Stories*, published in 1962 by the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature (this remained Yizhar’s only title in English until 2007). In addition to “Khirbet Khizeh,” Yizhar’s “The Prisoner” was also excluded from this collection, although it did appear in English in the 1962 anthology *Israeli Stories*, and later in two other anthologies published in America. Given that factors such as commercial considerations and linguistic challenges did not prevent the translation of other stylistically demanding, less marketable Hebrew stories for the American reader, the causes for the prolonged abstention from translating “Khirbet Khizeh” can be traced to the particularities of its subversive ideological underpinnings. Unlike “The Prisoner,” the events in “Khirbet Khizeh” directly touch upon what is still one of the most charged questions in the conflict’s historiography and politics. Israel's responsibility for the expulsion of Palestinians from their villages in 1948 is a volatile topic which, over the years, became a near taboo in the Israeli mainstream public discourse, and consequentially, in American Jewry.

The ways in which American readers may have encountered “Khirbet Khizeh” are indicative of the gap between Hebrew literature’s constructed image as oppositional and moral, and its protective mediation for the American audience. In 1978, following Israeli censorship of the story’s film adaptation and the ensuing public outburst, the American press covered the story outside literary supplements. Thus, not only did American readers encounter recaps of the story’s controversial content in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Chicago Tribune*,[[39]](#footnote-39) they became aware of its critique of Israel’s moral ethos and the Israeli public’s outrage over its censoring. The story itself, however, could not be read, as it had not yet been translated. Another revealing instance involves mention of the story in an article by Levi Gertned about Yizhar, published in *The Jewish Advocate* as early as 1957—notably, one in which the author is described as his generation’s literary representative and moral compass. Significantly, in his brief recap of the story, Gertned avoids using the word “Arab.” Employing rather “the enemy” and “[the enemy] of the people,”[[40]](#footnote-40) Gertned thereby obfuscates the story’s pertinent national context. Clearly, such de-nationalizing and de-historicizing measures—presumably meant to cloud the backdrop of the Israeli-Arab conflict—undermine Yizhar’s major themes and, to some degree, eclipse the story’s purpose and potency.

Even as late as...[[41]](#footnote-41)...[[42]](#footnote-42)...[[43]](#footnote-43)

This is not to say that literary portrayals of dubious combat conduct or morally-flawed soldiers were not translated into English in earlier decades. Concurrent with works that adopted the constraints of the hegemonic national narrative, such as popular accounts of the Six-Day War that tended to attribute mental pain and moral superiority to the victors rather than the victims, or nostalgic novels about the British Mandate that tended to portray Arabs as cruel and culturally inferior,[[44]](#footnote-44) several critical works were published in English (in addition to Yizhar’s “The Prisoner,” mentioned above). First published in 1957 (and again in 1969), Natan Shaham’s story “The Seven” portrays the moral and mental collapse of a platoon of soldiers whose mission is to hold an army post surrounded by undetected landmines.[[45]](#footnote-45) As fear of detonation spirals, the soldiers send two Arab prisoners running around the post to detonate the mines; finally shooting one in the back, as the second hits a mine. Aharon Megged’s surrealist social satire *Fortunes of a Fool*, published in English in 1962, depicts social reality in Israel as governed by bureaucracy and aggression.[[46]](#footnote-46) The novel’s principle chapter, “White City,” deals with Gaza’s occupation during the Kadesh Campaign in 1956 by focusing on the anonymous narrator’s refusal to kill a young Arab against the harsh context of the population’s suffering under the Israeli soldiers’ callous hostility. Testament to the chapter’s import was its selection for an anthology of short stories published in English in 1965 by the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature in Israel.[[47]](#footnote-47) The depiction of contemporary Israeli life and values is no less ambivalent in Yoram Kanuik’s novel, *The Acrophile*, published in English in 1961.[[48]](#footnote-48) The story of an Israeli living in New York struggling to adapt to American life, *The Acrophile* delves into the entrails of the protagonist’s compulsive guilt over accidently killing an Arab child while a soldier in the War of Independence. Within the Israeli literary discourse, this tormenting sense of guilt was not only understood as motivating the protagonist to leave Israel, but for some, it represented a subversive attitude toward the fundamental Zionist principle of the moral claim to the land.

In the early 1970s, the American reader was also exposed to A.B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz’s important early works, which presented characters pathologically afflicted by a nagging sense of individual guilt over actions taken for the national cause.[[49]](#footnote-49) For these writers, this guilt was associated with the historical transition from a society in a mode of self-defense to a sovereign state which, in its struggle for independence, banished part of the Arab population. In the framework of the complex relationship between Arabs and Jews, Oz and Yehoshua’s works revolve around the perverse pathologies of their Jewish protagonists: the forest ranger’s desire to set fire to a Keren Kayemet forest planted on the ruins of an Arab village in Yehoshua’s “Facing the Forests,” a young kibbutz woman’s fantasy of being raped by a Bedouin in Oz’s “Nomad and Viper,” and Hannah Gonen’s often-cited fantasies of sadistic-masochistic sexual encounters with Arab twins, and of devastating terrorist attacks on Israeli targets in Oz’s *My Michael*.[[50]](#footnote-50) Although these works do not deal with the Palestinian calamity directly, and do not bear the historical significance of stories such as “Khirbet Khizeh,” they express, in Avner Holzman’s words, “an alienated, critical attitude toward the foundations and fixtures of the Zionist project,”[[51]](#footnote-51) and as such, reverberated throughout the Israeli public discourse.

While Yizhar’s “Khirbet Khizeh” and other incisive stories about Israel’s combat morality were not selected for translation, these works by Kanuik, Megged, Yehoshua, and Oz presented Jewish-American readers with a reality that was far more ambiguous and complex than that which they had encountered until then, in the mainstream American press, commercial best-sellers or even nonfiction books on Israel. The American reader could otherwise hardly encounter novels and stories that engaged with the Zionist meta-narrative as a central theme, and treated it so critically. However, examination of the ways in which critical aspects in Israeli works were mediated to the American readership reveals phenomena that curtail the bold, dissenting impression arousing from the decision to translate them. One finds that the Jewish-American cultural discourse was not as open to a critical image of Israeliness as perhaps it had initially seemed. Agents partaking in the mediating enterprise—translators, anthology editors, annotators to the translated texts, literary critics, and university professors—moderated the American reception of the works, and the portrayals of the Israeli military that they offered.[[52]](#footnote-52) This moderation often carried distinct propagandistic features.

In what follows, I provide examples of this protective tendency. I begin with the ideological manipulation of translations pertaining mostly to descriptions of violence perpetrated against Arabs by Israeli protagonists – mainly soldiers, but also other representative figures such as pioneers and educators.

Of course...[[53]](#footnote-53)

The cases of interference in the texts presented here are organized chronologically according to their year of publication in English, and span from the 1960s through the mid-80s. Although not all works consisting of contentious matter translated during these years were subjected to some form of ideological manipulation, the findings here do indicate this tendency’s consistency over several decades.

We begin with Natan Shaham’s “The Seven,” in which the soldiers’ merciless attitude toward Arab prisoners—notwithstanding the circumstance of mortal danger in a minefield—contradicts the image of the Israeli purity of arms. In both of its English translations, we find slight discrepancies from the source text in terms of the representation of at least one aspect of the soldiers’ combat ethics. D. Briskman’s translation (*A Whole Leaf*, 1957) tempers the soldiers’ conduct after occupying the hill: unlike the source, in this translated version, the soldiers show respect for the Arabs’ bodies by covering them in dirt (in this citation and those that follow, phrases omitted in the English translation are added but indicated by ~~strikethrough~~, while what was added in the English translation is indicated by [**boldface in brackets]**): “After taking the ridge, we were posted into the positions deserted by the enemy, in readiness for an all-out defense. We ~~hurled~~ [**buried]** the enemy dead in a pit which had been dug, apparently, for garbage.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Similarly, in the version published in *The New Israeli Writers* anthology (1969), Israel Meir Lask’s translation mitigates the soldiers’ treatment of the dead: “after the occupation we took up position for an all-round defense in the posts the enemy had left. We ~~hurled~~ [**placed**] his dead in a trench that had apparently been cut as a cesspit.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Although differing in most of their stylistic choices, both Briskman’s and Lask’s translations facilitate a somewhat more ethical portrayal of the Jewish soldiers than the source text.

Another work...[[56]](#footnote-56)

Nicholas...[[57]](#footnote-57)

Reuven...[[58]](#footnote-58)

Another instance of textual interference in the novel moderated the image of the Israeli soldier Grisha. Chapter Eight, all of which was omitted from the translation, included a paragraph relating a looting incident during the war. The chapter describes “huge, magnificent boots [...] from the Iranian Shah’s Alpine Corps” that ended up on an Iraqi brigadier’s feet, “and from the Iraqi brigadier’s feet Grisha peeled them off with his own two hands [...] near Tulkarem in the days of the 1948 war.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Not only the act of looting, but also the hyperbolic verb describing it (“peeled”), construct Grisha’s character as lacking moral inhibitions. These features, as well as others that allude to unsavory effects of militarization on Israeli society, were left out, in their entirety, from the translation.

For instance, ...[[60]](#footnote-60)

In other words, the translation that ‘cleansed’ Oren of his aggression, circuitously exonerated Israeli society from its responsibility for this volatile violence—violence which, cultivated by the Arab-Israeli conflict, had become inherent in Israeli masculinity, Oz intimates. The blurring of the violent acts fostered a more palatable picture, not only of the youngsters, but also of the society that shaped them.[[61]](#footnote-61) Although motivation for these omissions may have been to tame Oz’s associative style, temper his stream-of-consciousness technique, or simply render the text accessible by shortening it, we cannot ignore the implications of these exclusions—exclusions that provided the American reader with a different, softer, version than that encountered by the Israeli reader.

Another example...[[62]](#footnote-62)

For the final example...[[63]](#footnote-63)...[[64]](#footnote-64)...[[65]](#footnote-65)

Such interferences as we have seen here prompt the question as to who is responsible for these textual shifts. Who among the translators, editors, publishers, and even authors, are responsible for the translation’s final version? And given that these translations were published decades ago, is this at all determinable?

When asked...[[66]](#footnote-66)...[[67]](#footnote-67)...[[68]](#footnote-68)...[[69]](#footnote-69)...[[70]](#footnote-70)...[[71]](#footnote-71)

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The obfuscation of moral critique in the translated works also took place in articles and reviews in newspaper literary supplements, i.e., in the journalistic and literary discourse. Unlike publication decisions, or manipulations in the translated text, here it was no longer about materials that could be kept from the American reader. The work had already been translated and put in print, and any mediation had to occur on the level of interpretation. Perhaps less dramatic in terms of its conspicuous censorial outcomes—it does not include the blunt omission of entire sentences or paragraphs—this stage may have had even more impact than interventions in the actual translations. Through its extensive circulation, the literary discourse in the mainstream American press reached a wide audience, constituting an effortless and accessible way for Jewish-American readers to stay updated on Israeli life and culture. Considering that many readers must have read the reviews without reading the books themselves, one can argue that literary supplements in the major American newspapers instilled in readers, to a large extent, a single image of the book and its meanings.

The literary supplements of leading newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Post* are the main discursive sites explored in this section. Journals with limited, intellectual readerships such as, *The Nation* and *Commentary*, and more specifically-targeted publications such as, the American Library Association’s *Booklist*, serve as another frame of reference. Obviously, these varied platforms did not differ only in terms of the scope of their readership; what is more relevant to the discussion here is that they often differed in their ideological orientation. However, it is precisely for this reason that the features they *did* share, even if not completely or exclusively, enable us to point to a relatively widespread common denominator in the response of American-Jewish discourse to the challenging literary portrayals of Israel it faced. It is the exploration of such different venues that allows us to outline the broad contours of an ideological common ground. Referring to the interpretation of works from the past, sociologist and semiotician Pierre Bourdieu wrote that “the text serves [the pundit] according to the manner in which he uses the text; however, this is only under the condition that he is seen by himself and by others as serving the text, and not as serving his own interests by means of the text.”[[72]](#footnote-72) The reviewers discussed here, from newspapers and journals alike, represented themselves, and were most likely perceived by their readers, as “serving the text.” The examples that follow demonstrate how their ideological orientation was reflected in their interpretations, and how their readings contributed to the construction of the contemporary image of Israeli morality.

My focus will be on the reception of works in which the Israeli literary discourse tended to find dissenting, subversive meaning. In some of these works, the moral injustice caused by a soldier was inscribed as a momentous trauma that disrupted his life, and the historical circumstances of this injustice were charged with profound symbolism. In others, the pathological fantasy of a detached, estranged protagonist stems from guilt associated with the destruction of Palestinian villages in the War of Independence. And still, the important point common to them all—from S. Yizhar’s “The Prisoner,” Megged’s “White City,” and Yehoshua’s “Facing the Forests,” to Kanuik’s *The Acrophile* and Oz’s *My Michael*—is that they were perceived as communicating a subversive message that pertains not only to a character or event in the text, but also to the Israeli *nation*, its history, and moral image – a message that, in short, undermines the Zionist meta-narrative. The mediation of the works in the Jewish American literary discourse, however, often took a different direction. American critics obliged their readers by ignoring the works' subversive materials, by blurring their symbolic meaning through selective interpretation, or even by explicitly contending their validity.

Let us first look...[[73]](#footnote-73)...[[74]](#footnote-74)...[[75]](#footnote-75)

We find a similar approach in Gertned’s previously mentioned review of Yizhar’s “Khirbet Khizeh” from April 1957, and in Sylvia Rothschild’s review of “The Prisoner” from July 1963 (also in the *Jewish Advocate*) in which the word ‘Arab’ is avoided, although it is pertinent to both stories’ thematic core and symbolic connotations.[[76]](#footnote-76) Robert Alter’s articulate opposition to a political interpretation of Oz’s *My Michael* in his review from May 1972 in the *New York Times*, entitled “An Apolitical Israeli,” also downplays a work's national-political implications, albeit he does so explicitly. Alter argued that Oz’s novel “manages to remain so private, so fundamentally apolitical in its concern, even as it outs to use the most portentous political materials,” and claimed, in regard to Hannah Gonen’s character, that “any consideration [...] of a Palestinian question is irrelevant to her conjuring with the Arab twins.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Such clouding of the particular national context in oppositional scenes was, therefore, one way in which critics could assuage challenges to the hegemonic Zionist narrative—challenges that were daring and dissenting for their time.

Another approach...[[78]](#footnote-78)...[[79]](#footnote-79)...[[80]](#footnote-80)...[[81]](#footnote-81)

A subtler protective tactic involved acknowledging the works’ political subversive meanings, sometimes even with the highest regard, while describing their plots and meanings in a manner that undercut their subversive subtexts. Jewish-American poet Masha Louis Rosenthal employed this strategy in an article he wrote after visiting Israel, published in *The Nation* in December 1970. Rosenthal celebrated the critical tenacity of the new Israeli literature, yet when addressing its themes and subjects, he elegantly side-tracked those involving morally and politically charged questions, preferring instead to concentrate on less provocative issues. Hence, he chose to discuss, at some length, Yehuda Amichai’s “The Battle for the Hill”—a satire on heroic war literature whose theme is the institutionalized Israeli discourse on warfare, not the battles themselves, and which therefore, lacks unpalatable representations of Israeli soldiers’ aggression.[[82]](#footnote-82) However, when Rosenthal described more morally fraught works such as Yizhar’s “The Prisoner” and Bartov’s *The Brigade*, which portray barbaric behavior on the part of Jewish soldiers in the Israeli army and British Brigade, respectively, he did so very concisely, while largely pacifying their acerbity:

The novel...[[83]](#footnote-83)

By merely describing the ‘new role’ of the Jew in *The Brigade* “as man of action and victor,” while avoiding some of the Jewish soldiers’ vindictive and violent behavior, including an attempt to rape German women, Rosenthal evaded dealing with the pertinence of these incidents to Bartov’s novel. Likewise, he avoided addressing the moral failing in “The Prisoner” by not mentioning the abuse inflicted upon an innocent Arab prisoner by a group of Israeli soldiers—a key scene in the narrative. Instead, Rosenthal refers obscurely and non-committedly to the “self-irony” with which the Jews perceive “[their] new role as ‘victor.’” Thus, his piece concurrently realized both coping patterns in the Jewish-American discourse, as mentioned above: the tendency to link Hebrew literature with leftist principles and present it as humanistic and self-critical, on the one hand, while safeguarding the reader against the immoral and inhumane reality often rendered in it, on the other.

The responses discussed so far to condemning representations of Israeli morality in the translated works were inferred, often subtle. Moreover, they were confined to the literary text, its description, and interpretation. There were, however, other reviewers who took a less oblique path, and directly assaulted the works’ credibility as authentic representations of Israel, its society, and culture. This is a sort of photographic negative of the tendency to attribute Hebrew literature with the moral daring to expose Israel without embellishment; here, unpalatable portrayals were simply dismissed as untrue. In his review of *The New Israeli Authors* anthology in the *Saturday Review* (1969), Jewish scholar, author, and translator, Curt Leviant, for instance, explicitly opposed the critical representation of the Israeli army in the collection’s stories:

The three stories...[[84]](#footnote-84)

Taking a rather emotional tone, Leviant defended the Israeli army’s image as reflected in the stories, while delivering his subjective perception as *the* authentic view of army life in Israel. Leviant’s adherence to the established narrative regarding Israel’s military is all the more conspicuous considering that he later criticized the anthology’s failure to reflect Israeli society truthfully as divided both ethnically and religiously.[[85]](#footnote-85) Leviant’s acquaintance with Israel’s domestic problems far exceeded the norm in mainstream American journalism during that period; here he displayed rather deep understanding of the inequality inherent in Israeli society and did not shy away from criticizing it. However, this also demonstrates that the inter-ethnic tensions in Israel were, for him, a far more legitimate topic to criticize than the army, whose negative representation, in his view, was practically taboo.

Such a defensive standpoint regarding Israeli reality, which maintains that this reality is not as immoral as its fictional representations, can also be found in Alter’s commentary on Yizhar’s “The Prisoner” published in the *Modern Hebrew Literature* anthology (1975) which he edited. While Alter did select this scathing story for the collection, he tempered its discordant message in two ways: first, by setting it against his description of the *real* Israel: “One need not assume that the beating of an Arab prisoner is in any way typical Israeli behavior (as predictably, Arab protagonists, capitalizing on the story, have done).”[[86]](#footnote-86) Second, by historically contextualizing the soldiers’ violent behavior (even though he had just described it as unrepresentative): “It takes only a little historical imagination to see what in the experience of young Jews growing up in Palestine of the 30s and 40s, repeatedly subject to murderous Arab incursions, would prompt this sort of feeling.”[[87]](#footnote-87) The representation of prisoner abuse as atypical, as well as the historical background that Alter proposes as its motivation, were designed to moderate the problematic image of the Israeli soldier emanating from the story. He later linked the story’s ideological underpinnings to ‘Jewish’ moral values enrooted in Jewish history: “The crucial point is that the plea on behalf of the conscience is made here on the strength of values embedded in the historical memory of the Jewish people; a Jew knows from bitter experience what it means in concrete terms to be the helpless target.”[[88]](#footnote-88) Like Rosenthal, then, Alter mediated the Hebrew text for the American reader both by generating a moral-humanistic discourse to facilitate its understanding, and by mitigating the image of an immoral Israel it presents.

We find similar...[[89]](#footnote-89)...[[90]](#footnote-90)...[[91]](#footnote-91)

In one of the incidents...[[92]](#footnote-92)...[[93]](#footnote-93)…[[94]](#footnote-94)

Alter’s arguments coincide with the translations, reviews, and anthology annotations that dealt, each in its own way, with literary depictions of Israeli existence as tainted with moral failings—representations that challenged the dominant image of an ethical Israel within the Jewish-American discourse. Due to these mediations, portrayals of the immoral aspects of Israeli reality, and the subversiveness they embody, were significantly moderated on route to their English readers.

**“An abortion that simply had to be corrected”: rendering (and refashioning) the Palestinian fate from Hebrew to English**

A complementing aspect of the mediation of Hebrew literature for an American readership had to do with the representation of Palestinian fate and Palestinian identity. Even though works dealing directly with the fate of the Palestinian population in Israel were few and far between, and they too did not always provide an authentic depiction of Palestinian otherness, their public significance cannot be underestimated—they played a central oppositional role in Israeli discourse, especially following the Six-Day War. Some authors gave a Palestinian character a voice of its own as a means to infuse its identity with a sense of national otherness, while anchoring it in particular historical circumstances; others focused on the Israeli sense of responsibility and guilt over the destruction of Palestinian villages – guilt that was highlighted as having a traumatic effect on Israeli identity, in both individual and collective terms. However, when mediated for the American reader, both literary designs were adjusted to provide less complex and contentious representations of Palestinian identity on the one hand, and more morally acceptable renditions of modern Israeli history, on the other.

I begin with manipulations performed in the translations of the literary works. Based on my correspondence with translators and authors (who could still be contacted), it is my impression that, as in the textual manipulations discussed above, here too most modifications of charged subject matter were occurred at the editing stage. An interesting example of a novel dealing with the effects of the national conflict on Palestinian life, while employing a Palestinian protagonist who narrates in the first person is Amnon...[[95]](#footnote-95)

Katherine’s child...[[96]](#footnote-96)...[[97]](#footnote-97)...[[98]](#footnote-98)...[[99]](#footnote-99)

As a result...[[100]](#footnote-100)...[[101]](#footnote-101)

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Direct and indirect references to the Palestinian *Nakba* and other repercussions of the national conflict on Palestinian life were manifest in Hebrew literature not only in terms of their integration in constructions Palestinian characters. They also marked a collective traumatic experience that threatened to corrode Israeli consciousness and identity to its demise. Both Oz and Yehoshua, for instance, highlight the Palestinian calamity as a source of Israeli guilt eating away at the basic premise of the Zionist discourse—the moral right over the land. In what follows, I will demonstrate how such themes were mediated for the American reader in Hillel Halkin’s English translation of Oz’s *A Perfect Peace*, and in an interpretation of Yehoshua’s “Facing the Forests.”

Like in Bilu’s...[[102]](#footnote-102)...[[103]](#footnote-103)...[[104]](#footnote-104)...[[105]](#footnote-105)...[[106]](#footnote-106)...[[107]](#footnote-107)...[[108]](#footnote-108)

In Yehoshua’s “Facing the Forests,” the Israeli trauma enrooted in the Palestinian demise and its symbolic implications for the Zionist project as a whole, were not obfuscated in the translation itself. Rather, ideological mediation took place at a later stage, in the context of interpretation and commentary in the American literary discourse. In this way Yehoshua’s story, a cornerstone of the Hebrew canon, loses some of its subversive edge. For instance, by completely ignoring the eradication of the Arab village that led the Jewish protagonist to help set the Keren Kayemet forest on fire, Hugh Nissenson, in his *New York* *Times* review from October 1970, circumvented any discussion on how this event symbolically challenges the Zionist claim to the land:

A graduate...[[109]](#footnote-109)

As pointed out by Gilead Morahg, “there is an almost complete critical consensus that ‘Facing the Forests’ constitutes an assault on the dominant national narrative in Israel.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Nonetheless, whether for a lack of knowledge of Israeli history or a conscious decision to defend Israel’s image before the American reader, Nissenson attributed the forest ranger’s crazed act of self-destruction to his obsession over the plight of the Jews at the time of the Crusades. Considering that Nissenson lived on a kibbutz for a few years in the late 1960s, and later published stories that take place in Israel, we can assume that he may have been familiar with the domestic literary discourse. Even so, his American readers encountered a rather unconventional interpretation which, instead of highlighting the Palestinian *Nakba*, stressed the persecution of the Jews in earlier periods.

Like the approach taken in his reading of Yizhar’s “The Prisoner,” Alter’s commentary on “Facing the Forests” in his 1975 anthology undercuts the story’s affinity with Israel’s reality and actual historical circumstances. Although briefly mentioning Israeli guilt over the Palestinians’ devastation in the context of the narrative, he questioned the story’s historical accuracy, claiming that its cause is more imaginary than factual: “The national forest that has been planted over the site of a destroyed Arab village suggests, with the symbolic aptness of a guilt-ridden psychology though not necessarily with historical accuracy, the State of Israel itself.”[[111]](#footnote-111) Alter also appealed to the reader asking that the story not be read only as a political allegory. Adhering to his own directive, Alter focused almost entirely on other dimensions of the story; his analysis of its poetical and psychological aspects fills two full pages, while his discussion on the ideological-political element is limited to a mere two lines. In contrast, scholarship and public discourse in Israel continued to pay special attention to this dimension of the story, which seems to be the decisive reason behind its central place within the Israeli canon as a work that is repeatedly returned to, taught and discussed. Alter’s important anthology, which served generations of students in Hebrew literature courses at American universities, thus contributed to a significant difference between the story’s reception in Israel and its reception in America—and, perhaps, to differences in the way the story was taught as well.

Naturally, the ideological worldview that served as background to Jewish-American mediations of Israeli portrayals of the Palestinian calamity was not formulated explicitly in the literary discourse. Such practice, of course, would defeat the purpose. Translation editors and literary critics could not very well offer reasoning for textual shifts or interpretative tendencies—ideological mediation, as Bourdieu has shown, must appear devoid of ideology for it to be effective.

However,...[[112]](#footnote-112)...[[113]](#footnote-113)...[[114]](#footnote-114)

While the argument...[[115]](#footnote-115)...[[116]](#footnote-116)

Allusions to the issue of Palestinian refugees or any politically critical stance were not seen by Michener and his partners at the Jewish Publication Society as appropriate matter for an introduction to an anthology published to salute Israel’s twenty-fifth anniversary. They preferred instead to present the Jewish-American reader with a more desirable image of Israel, its history, military, and culture, and by doing so not only reflected the prevalent trend in Jewish-American discourse, but made yet another contribution to it. Thus, the few expressions of national otherness in representations of Palestinian identity, as scarce as they may have been, were conciliated on their way to the American audience.

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What is the broader context for understanding the encounter of the Jewish-American discourse with the more contentious works in Hebrew literature? How might we make sense of this protective mediation, in the larger framework of the relationship between the two major Jewish centers? First, things must be put in the proper perspective by acknowledging that Hebrew literature could still fulfill an eye-opening role for its Jewish-American readership, even beyond the screen of mediation. “Works of Israeli novelists and poets in translation,” as Sylvia Barack-Fishman put it, “have worked to counteract the stereotype of Israel as an idyllic and morally untroubled land.”[[117]](#footnote-117) Broadly speaking, the findings presented here stand in no disagreement with this assumption, a common one in the scholarly and public discourse: the translated works still constituted a balancing factor for the dominant, uncritical image of Israel in the largely naïve, more supportive than skeptical, Jewish-American community from the establishment of the state through the 1980s. This is particularly true considering that any attempt from within the community to pass judgment on Israel was met with severe objection from the Jewish American establishment itself. Against this background, it is clear that the translated Hebrew works could provide readers with a more complex image of Israel, while articulating a more critical alternative to the prevailing discourse.

That said, we have seen that one cannot simply assume that works harboring an oppositional stance had crossed the linguistic and geographical boundaries between the two cultures “untouched.” Although moral critique was framed as a principal ‘Jewish’ quality of contemporary Hebrew literature, and despite the common notion that this literature exposed readers to Israel’s complex reality, literary representations that undermined the construction of the Zionist narrative as morally sound were often obscured when mediated for the Jewish-American reader. In the previous chapter, the Zionist transformation of America’s Jews provided a backdrop to the shifts in the translation and reception of Hebrew literature in the 1950s, when compared to earlier decades. Here, the Zionist context helps us better understand the—very different—nuanced politics of negotiation over images and ideas that were part of translation processes from the 1960s onwards. The subdual of the critical dimension in literature translated from Hebrew in quite a wide variety of textual and extra-textual phenomena was by no means accidental. It points to the difficulty American Jewish cultural agents faced when confronted with a perspective that undermined the moral foundations of their Zionist disposition, and, no less important, with the threat of exposing these failings to their fellow Americans. Viewed through a social prism, then, the varied forms of mediation in the literary discourse can be seen as practical efforts to defend Israel’s image in the eyes of not only Jewish-American readers, but also American readers at large. Agents of Hebrew literature in America chose to assume a social-ideological role that extended beyond the literary domain: filtering and modifying the national image emanating from the translated works.

And yet, we cannot fully understand this inclination if we do not consider the significance of the Jewish-American consumption of these images of Israel within the framework of the construction of Jewish identity in America. Aside from Israel, an important component in Jewish-American identity and self-perception has historically been the moral dimension. In Jewish-American intellectual thought, ethical principles and moral reflection have been traditionally considered as a central feature of American manifestations of Jewish identity, both in actual political practices and in mediums of imaginative creation. This perception has also been prevalent in the scholarly discourse on topics ranging from Jewish American social history to Jews in American popular culture.[[118]](#footnote-118) The notion that humanistic values are at Judaism’s core has been part of the formal theology of the Reform movement, and constituted a prominent motif in Conservative, and even Modern Orthodox thought. In this context, the protective mediation of Hebrew literature in America could be seen as rooted in the perceived necessity to produce a certain image of Jewish-American identity, of which Israel is a constituent. As I mentioned in the introduction, from the 1960s through the 1980s, different Jewish-American thinkers had discussed Israel, particularly its relation to, and significance for, Diasporic Jewry, in religious terms. Arthur Hertzberg and Leonard Fein even suggested that Israel became *the* religion of American Jews following the Six-Day War.[[119]](#footnote-119) However, because Israel was assigned a quasi-religious role as a mainstay of Jewish-American communal identity, and as this identity was seen as deeply enrooted in moral principles, images of Israel in Hebrew literature had to be aptly appropriated. For Israel of the literary discourse to partake in constructing Jewish American identity, the humanistic image of Hebrew literature had to be bolstered, even if this involved obscuring unpalatable depictions of Israeli society. The translation and mediation of Hebrew literature in American culture call attention, therefore, to the inherent, unresolved tension between two crucial components of contemporary Jewish American identity—Zionism and morality–which did not always go hand in hand. These practices also exemplify the subtle, yet relentless, effort, on both overt and covert levels of the literary discourse, to appease this tension.

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31. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Katz, Bringing Zion Home, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
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42. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. This translation is part of a more widespread trend regarding Yizhar’s story in recent years, which we can attribute to the increasing interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to critical attitudes in European countries toward Israel. “Khirbet Khizeh” was translated and published in Germany in book form (together with “The Prisoner”) in 1998, in Italy (also with “The Prisoner”) in 2005, in Spain in 2009, in France in 2010, in Norway in 2011, in Holland in 2013, and in Denmark in 2016. It was purchased for translation as well by Greek and Swedish publishing houses. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. According to Oppenheimer, the objective of popular non-fiction accounts of the war such as Yael Dayan and Shabtai Tevet’s was to represent the Israeli combat soldier as sensitive, decent, and more spiritually developed than the Arabs, while the novels about the British Mandate era by Shulamit Hareven and David Shachar swayed attention from the present reality of the occupied territories to the multi-culturalism in Jerusalem of the 1930s, and “represented its Arab subjects from a Western or colonialist point of view: if as dissident and heated mobs incited by religious leaders, or as individuals willing to embrace their ruler’s culture and become part of it.” Oppenheimer, *Across the Fence*, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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46. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
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48. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Several lesser known protest stories than Yizhar’s “Khirbet Khizeh” from a literary standpoint, yet which criticized with similar intensity the Israeli conduct in the war, were published in the years following the War of Independence. These works showed awareness and empathy to the Palestinian woes. Aharon Amir’s “Boker Hadash” and Shraga Gafni’s “Hashevach Lael” depicted the occupation of a Palestinian village by Israeli soldiers who treated its residents with pointless violence; “Hamatmon” by Aharon Megged, told from the point of view of a Palestinian refugee forced out of his home, articulates the Arab’s longing and rage, and his desire to avenge his deportation; and “Sipur al Hagamal VeHanitzahon” by Dahn Ben-Amotz describes the meaningless killing of a refugee’s camel by an Israeli soldier yearning to feel part of the war experience. While these stories attracted some interest and polemic in Israel, they were never translated into English. It is possible that this reflects something of the need to defend Israel’s image, however, one should be careful not to ascribe too much significance to this factor. Unlike Yizhar’s stories, the stories by Amir, Gafni, Megged and Ben Amotz came to occupy a rather marginal position in the Israeli literary discourse. Not one of them became engraved in the collective memory like “Khirbet Khizeh.” Their marginality in Israeli culture renders their non-translation into English as less significant from a socio-political perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
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80. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Challenging representations of the Israeli army were also moderated, as in the anonymous review in *Booklist* from March 1977 of A. B. Yehoshua’s collection *Early in the Summer of 1970*, in order to present the works in a popular and accessible way, and to frame the book in simplified, commercially effective terms. The three stories in the collection demystify any aspect of war, yet the review completely ignored their complexities, while dramatizing their military themes. The consequences of downplaying the national context and subversively absurd underpinnings of the stories was the softening of their subtle criticism on the role of the military ethos in Israeli society. ("Early in the Summer of 1970", *The Booklist*. March 1 1977, 993) [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
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