Postface

Many pages have gone by since the preface to this book. Throughout them, we undertook a journey into the varied and complex aspects of the processes that drove the secularization of Jewish culture. A multitude of people and places passed before our eyes along the way. Some of them became recurrent characters – such as Brener, Ahad Ha-Am, Berdichevsky, and Dubnow, to name a few – while others made only one-time appearances. It was a concerted effort on our part to present a diverse and multi-faceted overview of our theme, and therefore, compounded by the fact that this book is the fruit of the labor of a great number of authors, summarizing its contents in an orderly fashion constitutes a rather significant challenge. Thus, in lieu of a conclusion, we have chosen to bring you one last story. In our introduction, we discussed two personal secularization stories, those of Simon Dubnow and Ita Kalish, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries respectively. The theme common to both of these stories was the protagonists’ need to rebel and struggle against their social environment in order to establish an independent, secular Jewish identity. To close our discussion, we shall recount yet another personal story, this time from the second half of the twentieth century, a story that illustrates a different, later stage in Jewish secularization.

# “I knew I was transitioning from a Judaism of observance to a Judaism of fulfillment”: Ely Ben-Gal between France and Israel

Ely Ben-Gal was born in France in 1935 under the name Pierre Bloch to a secular Jewish family – “people ‘of Jewish origin’ in their own eyes” (p. 25).[[1]](#footnote-1) “My aunt was always surprised whenever anyone accused her of being an assimilated Jew: ‘What do you mean! I never eat pork on a Saturday’” (p. 33). During the German occupation and the Holocaust, Ely, his older brother, and his mother went into hiding in the village of La Berthouze, a remote Huguenot village in the heart of the Cévennes mountain range (p. 56). Later, they moved on to the neighboring village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon (p. 61). The local pastor, André Trocmé (1901–1971) was a pacifist who forbade the members of his Protestant parish to collaborate with the German occupiers and encouraged them to hide Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. After the war, Trocmé, his wife Magda, and his nephew Daniel were all awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations.[[2]](#footnote-2) Ely Ben-Gal’s father, armed with false papers, initially stayed behind in Lyon and provided for the family by selling off the textile supplies he had begun amassing in anticipation of the German invasion. Later he would join his wife and children in the countryside. When the war was over, the family returned to Lyon. Ely tells this illustrative story about his childhood:

Hold the flowers nice and gentle, you’ll ruin them! This child! Give them to your brother, is it so hard to hold a few roses?

Mom and dad in their best clothes, my brother looks dapper too. Even I’ve been dressed to look presentable, but clothes grow weary as soon as they are put on me. Shirts get wrinkled, buttons shake loose or fall off, mud leaps onto them from every puddle. This child exudes ill will, always grumpy, always hostile! We walk into Madame Jallet’s bread shop on Rue Racine. The last of the customers are paying up. Two baguettes and one butter croissant, one and a half franks. Madame Jallet hands over their change and looks at us waiting off to the side with a pretend-surprised smile, even though she knows why we’re here. “Good afternoon, Monsieur and Madame Bloch, what’s new?” Mom nudges Jean-Jacques and he steps forward all aglow with the flowers in his hands. “Give the flowers to Madame Jallet, you know she gave papa bread during the war when he didn’t have coupons.” The paper crackles and the flowers bloom red at the wide end of its funnel. Madame Jallet, fat and warm, her giant breasts resting on the old cash register, laughs and strokes my brother’s head from across the counter.

“Thank you again, to think we’ve made it through that terrible storm! I’d rather not remember any of it!” “Don’t mention it…You shouldn’t have bothered…” And then like a bolt out of blue: “You might be Jewish, but that’s no reason to kill you.” Did I hear right? Did I hear wrong? I am dumbstruck and the words thunder in my ears: “You might be…but that’s no reason…” I look at my parents. They didn’t hear. They didn’t hear…They don’t want to hear. (pp. 69­–70)

Memory and reconstruction get mixed up in my mind, the me from back then blends with the later me, but I know that this was the moment when the rift between myself and France, the country of my birth, had been torn open, never to heal shut again. That day I did not join in the social visit. I became the child who doesn’t smile, doesn’t make friends, doesn’t run around outside. […] From then on, all the French people were on one side of the line, while I was on the other. I went back to my room and began writing my diary, my only companion for many years to come. On its cover, in the thick letters of my ungainly handwriting, I wrote: “Diary of Exile.” (p. 72)

I was eleven and a half […] In the evening, when my parents came home, I let my startled mother know that from now on I would only be eating kosher food. She did not know what this meant precisely (nor did I), but at any rate, bacon was out, and so began the long and winding road towards kashrut. The details I picked up were almost random: separate meat from dairy, four hours between one and the other, food blessing after meals, kosher meat, separate sets of dishes – an impossible demand to impose on a secular French kitchen. My mother’s efforts to satisfy my requests without invoking the rage of my father who was ignoring my existence and looking to her for explanations instead: what does he want now and what will he want next? How long will he keep badgering you? And the paper plates, and the terrible scandal that erupted when I decided to stop drinking wine. This is sacrilege! How dare he drink nothing but water, without a drop of wine, he’ll fall ill, he’ll have frogs in his belly! He is crazy this boy! (p. 73).

As a secular Jewish child hiding out in occupied France during the war, Eli Ben-Gal’s Jewish identity (he still bore his French name at the time) was under a lot of pressure. For him, this identity had an element of national affiliation, as well as a significant personal dimension.[[3]](#footnote-3) In reaction to the baker’s clumsy quip, which the boy experiences as a grave insult, he decides to fortify his identity using Jewish religious rites. This is an emotional, one may say childish choice (after all, it was made by a child), one based neither on knowledge nor on rational thought. Nevertheless, it sparks off a process of learning and attempting to discover Jewish culture, or as he calls it, “opening the closed window”:

As the years went by, the differences between “French” Jews and other Jews dwindled. My parents became more and more involved in the life of the community, their visits to the synagogue grew more and more numerous, to the point where they were attending almost every holiday service. We were attending religion classes every Sunday morning, participating in the choir, we joined the Jewish Scouts. The Holocaust had changed the social atmosphere. Even though the two communities remained separate, French Jews and “Polak” Jewish were running into each other in the same places: women’s shelters, refugee and orphan aid centers. My father agreed to present his candidacy for the consistorium, the community council, and once elected, he began going to the synagogue practically every Friday. These changes didn’t bring us any closer to each other. The Sunday classes were boring and pointless. We were studying the Biblical tales as if they’d happened to people on another planet. The opulent synagogue was an arena for weekly competitive displays of fashion, prestige, money, and “heft”, on the one hand, and a place where young people – my charismatic brother chief among them – met to court each other and organize dances, on the other. In short, it was the setting for that most detestable of things – the community’s social life. The two things that mattered most to me, the Halakha and proactive Zionism, were not to be found anywhere in its vicinity. The local established Jewish bourgeoisie had given up their claim to the title of “Israelite” and looked on the events taking place in the Land of Israel with distant sympathy. Any sense of national commitment or the tug of their Jewish roots were too faint and far removed to be noticeable. (pp. 74–75)

A Jewish boy I knew from school, the son of a very pious family of German extraction (the father was known in the community as “The Pope”), told me that their synagogue, “Yeshurun”, had been blessed with a great biblical scholar whose name was Marc Breuer and who was the great grandson of none other than Samson Rafael Hirsch (the name meant nothing to me at the time). I went to hear him speak one evening at the tiny synagogue that was just two apartments joined together. The entrance lobby, which used to be the kitchen, contained a table and a few benches, while the other room served as the prayer hall. A gateway to the Talmud had opened up before me. I plunged into it as deep as I could, but emerged unconvinced. Something cold, pale, rational, Western-European would always curb my enthusiasm, turn any argument into a feeble and irrelevant justification. In the corner of the *shtiebel* stood the Polish butcher clad in a long, shiny black caftan, his black beard prodigious and wild. After the service he walked off with his young son, like a blind man with his cane: the five-year-old boy, who spoke French, served as an interpreter for the exclusively Yiddish-speaking father. I followed them through the darkened streets. The passersby turned their heads to look at this strange beast with the long black socks, the shiny coat, the wide-brimmed hat. A carnival spectacle…This odd couple, the father mumbling to himself and the quick, curious boy humming modern tunes, got on the tram, and I did the same. A thick stench of garlic and onions emanated from the butcher, and even though the tram was crowded, everyone inched away from the repulsive foreigner. Some smiling, some whispering, their eyes full of scorn. I stuck close to the couple, as close as I could get. I wanted to shout out: I’m with them! I belong with them, not with you! Can’t you see that I too am wearing the same clothes? If only I could speak one word to him, get him to look at me, to affirm in front of everyone that I was with him… He didn’t see me. After all, I looked like them and we had not one word in common. This shoddy beret atop my head, how was he to know that it was no ordinary head cover but my declaration of orthodoxy at home and at school? In his eyes, it was nothing! I knew that this humble butcher held the key to what I was looking for, what Samson Rafael Hirsch couldn’t give me: not intellectual Judaism, but a scorching, burning Jewish heart. Not justifications, but life itself.

I was a regular customer at the quasi-temple called the city public library. On Sunday afternoons, while my family members went out for walks, visited acquaintances, and conducted their social lives, I found refuge within its walls. I remember thumbing through the cards for such subjects as “Judaism, Jew, Israel, Israelite, Pogrom, Old Testament,” any word I could think of. I made a long list and went through it methodically, reading everything, every single thing, anything that might push the closed window open. I remember the astonishment of the librarian as I began my long journey, a journey that continues to this very day. I was eleven and a half […]

I remember one book I had a hard time putting back on the shelf. Thirty years have passed and I still remember every single chapter: *Jews without Money* by Michael Gold, recounting the life of poverty led by Jewish immigrants in New York at the turn of the century. I remember the suffocating nights of the scorching American summer, and the families breaking out of their crowded, stuffy apartments onto the rooftops, mattresses laid down side by side, each family in its own corner, looking for some peace and quiet, some air, some rest, hardworking laborers who would have to hurry off to the workshop the next morning, and resume their roles as slaves to the needle and the steam iron. The moon looks down upon them and recognizes them, after all, these are the same throngs that emerged out of Egypt into the scorching Sinai desert. I read this description over and over again, full of the hope that one day I too will cast off my foreign shell and go back to my naked self, and then, maybe, finally, the moon will remember me too: there, under that French garb, an original son of Israel, reborn and once more recognizable. (pp. 74–77)

Studying the Talmud fails to meet the boy’s spiritual and emotional needs. The figure he identifies with most, at least in his imagination, is that of a foreign Jew, a Polish butcher, whom Eli is drawn to because of the “burning Jewish heart” he sees within him. And yet, he fails to make contact. The life he seeks is not necessarily an intellectual life but that of natural identity. Perhaps because of this, and because of the personal significance the question of identity holds for him, he is bowled over by the charm of a novel describing the lives of Jewish immigrants in New York (see p. 216 above), who managed, through sweat and toil, to pave the way for a new generation of successful American Jews.

At age of eighteen, having graduated high school and received his baccalaureate, Eli undertakes a trip to Israel.

I spent the last night of my sea voyage on deck, ready to burst into tears at the sight of the shores of Israel. At five in the morning, a shaft of light beaming from the top of Mount Carmel signaled that my seven-year journey was coming to an end. The bright lights of Haifa kindled before my eyes, which remained dry. I saw an actual land, with hills and rocks, with humid air, with people, flesh and blood people. Not a map, but solid ground. The dream had fallen from the heavens onto the earth. (p. 88)

Similarly to the Talmud, the sight of the Land of Israel does not elicit the emotion for which the young man strives, and even Halakhic workarounds in response to the challenges of modern life fail to strike a chord in his soul:

I had come to Israel through an agency, with other young people. I had asked to join Sde Eliyahu, a religious Orthodox kibbutz, many of whose members were French immigrants. In the dirty port, I boarded a truck that took us to the Beit Shean valley. After a sleepless night on board the ship, I was tossed around in the truck, as if in a dream, and the heat was humid and sticky. To my perplexity, the kibbutz looked like a village. In my mind I had imagined it as a big agricultural compound, like the family farms so common in the Beauce and Berry regions in France. The people were open, friendly. I told myself: you’re allowed to smile, you’re home now. I didn’t dare admit to myself that I didn’t feel at home. The brown and yellow of the mountains and the view of the distant towns, one house after another, with not a hint of vegetation among them, were suffocating. If I’d wanted an artificial world – indeed everything here was artificial! – why was I finding it so hard to enjoy myself? I was at last in a place where the laws of kashrut were fully obeyed, where I didn’t have to constantly check or worry. Then why couldn’t I let myself be?

On Saturday, I went with Joe to the cowshed. He placed buckets under the udders of each cow, while a young fellow about my age came up after him to drop a stone into every bucket. On the way back to the dining hall we met the dairy farmer. Where is he going? I asked. “It’s his turn to do the milking,” they answered. And why did you put stones in the buckets? I found out the answer in conversation with the local rabbi. It turns out that it is permitted to milk cows on the Sabbath out of the need to prevent animal suffering, however the milk must spilled on the ground, in other words – stone, and straw must be spread over it. And so the farmer would milk the cows onto the stone in the bucket, which had been put there without his involvement, and then carefully sprinkle a few stalks of straw on top of the milk to mark it as Sabbath milk, which he could then use to make cheese and other dairy products. Why is this wrong? I asked myself, feeling inexplicable but unmistakable unease. Deep inside, I knew that this was not how things were supposed to work. Just as I had discovered, at the age of eleven and a half, in an instant of clarity, that my life had reached a turning point, so now I felt the answer rising up inside of me, an answer that would take concrete shape only a few years later. In that moment, sitting with the young kibbutz rabbi and watching the dairy farmer go out of the synagogue toward the cowshed, where the buckets with the stones and the straw were waiting for him, I sensed a new wind blowing, yet unfelt in the air but already audible to its listener.

[image p. 949. Eli Ben-Gal in his office at Beit Hatfutsot. 1980s.]

A week later I notified my hosts that I was going to Tel Aviv. Friends of my parents had furnished me with a letter to their cousins and I was to spend the Sabbath at their house. Wrapped up in my incongruous European clothing, scrunched up inside the ancient and crowded bus, I finally made it to the Hebrew city. To my hosts’ tiny apartment, with its cheap, modern furniture, not unlike the kind you might find in the homes of Eastern-European immigrants who’d “made it” in Lyon: shiny, frozen, trivial, full of style and empty of taste. I was angry with myself for looking it over with my mother’s contemptuous eyes. The food was the same as in the kibbutz, awful: heavy bread with margarine, tomatoes and more tomatoes, unseasoned, sweet fish, saccharine tea. That was Friday. In Sde Eliyahu the blessings and songs sung at the dining hall found their way through to my heart. In Tel Aviv, my hosts and I, along with a couple of their neighbors, spent the evening on the boardwalk. I had never before seen that many Jews together. Cafés, tables lining the sidewalks, bands playing, and all those people: this one’s a Jew, that one’s a Jew, and that one, and all of them speaking the holy tongue that was still foreign to me. Drunk on the abundance of Jews I trailed my hosts back home, where we were in for a surprise: their daughter, the soldier, was back home for an unexpected visit. Pretty in her scruffy, oversized uniform, she was standing by the fridge, eating, indifferent to the glee she’d provoked, responding to questions with half-syllables to the delight of her unoffended, unperturbed parents. I was charmed by her appearance, by the red beret on her shoulder, the hair pulled back over her ears and held together by a braid straight down the middle of her head. She didn’t grace me with so much as a look, as if I were invisible. I sensed that I was being introduced; she nodded; yes, she can see the fellow… I stood there in my dark trousers that reached up almost all the way to my chest, with the creases down the legs, before a girl in khakis hanging loose under her low-riding belt and felt that I must look so strange and foreign to her. I was given the living room sofa for the night. Perhaps I dreamt of her lovely walk, like a minimalistic dance, with not one excess motion. It would be a few good years before I could to shake off this Sabra complex. The sound of a long honk woke me. I got up sweating and tired. In the street below, an army Jeep was parked under the house. Next to it stood a young army officer and her. I couldn’t believe they were talking to me. “Come on, come down, we’ll take you for a ride around Tel Aviv.” I sped off to get dressed. On Saturday? Taking a drive in a Jeep on the Sabbath? I have but a few seconds to decide. I must stop for a moment, to consider these things seriously. My hands are busy hastily throwing clothes onto my body, ignoring the orders coming down from my head, as if the dice have already fallen, as if the outcome is known in advance. Perhaps the dice fell back there, in the cowshed in Sde Eliyahu, and now the solid wall that had been shielding me these seven years has fallen as well? Since that long day in Madame Jallet’s shop, seven years, seven times around. Then shall the walls of Jericho fall. I am wavering trying to understand why I’m not wavering, trying to analyze my final and unassailable decision. Why? What’s happened?

I sauntered down the stairs, each stair seeming to take a hundred years. I am running toward my future. All on my own I had found the way of generations, but now I must hurry to get to this latest generation, for it will not wait for me. Thus far I had added nothing new, I had only discovered the hidden, dust-covered path, restored the ancient road. Something was ending. And now I was being called not to dig and discover, but to pave the next part. So she had seen me, despite my buttoned up appearance. She hadn’t looked at me, I thought my pale figure as good as non-existent in her eyes. Not one look yesterday, and yet here I am today, coming along at her behest! I do exist for her, and she exists in my life! Without her I’ll shuffle in place, I’ll only repeat myself, ourselves, over and over. And could it be that without me she’s got no place to go and no reason to go anywhere on a purposeless, sun-drenched Tel Aviv morning? I am her longing for the past, she is my hope for the future.

She stood next to the vehicle, smiling, her hand inviting me in. Her friend was seated at the wheel. He extends a hand, I extend mine in return, but it’s not a handshake he’s after. He grabs my arm and pulls me in forcefully, next to him, between the two seats, the handbrake squarely between my legs. She gets in after me, taking up only half the seat, leaving some room for me to sit more comfortably.

He starts the engine. What’s going to happen? Will the sky come crashing down upon the earth? The Jeep lurched forward with a sudden motion. I lost my balance, and he uttered some incomprehensible, but seemingly friendly sentence. Every time someone addresses me in Hebrew I feel like an idiot child. “What?” she grabbed my left hand and placed it on the driver’s shoulder; the right hand she placed on her own. “Hold on tight to us,” she repeated his words slowly, stressing each syllable. The Jeep rumbled noisily down the empty street, and I hung there, in the uncomfortable middle, my heart growing wider. Tel Aviv is empty, lazy with Sabbath lethargy, blinding, both diaspora and very much Israel, basking in its artificial, modern inconsequence, its arrogant – albeit failed, thank God! – Westerness. All novelty and ugliness. You can feel the sand trying to break through every crack, erupting in the middle of the asphalt. Salt perfumes the air and erodes the facades of houses along HaYarkon Street, leading up to Allenby. The scent of premature old age wafts from every crevice, of youth just now gone by. Strange balconies hang off the houses, defying every law of urban design, aesthetics and logic, but at least they break up the so-called European pomp of the Hebrew city and deflate its pretentious affectations.

She shows me places, speaking freely, and her smile shows that she’s aware of the limits of my comprehension. Her voice is calm and slightly timid at the same time, though uninhibited. The presence of her friend, the officer, allows her to be herself. I’ll get to know these Sabras yet. They are brave and open only in the company of other Sabras, the improbable reincarnation of traditional communalism. Maybe they are the real diaspora Jews, with their short roots?

The vehicle cut through the burg widthwise, split it open for me. “Learning the land postpones the Sabbath,” I thought, and then corrected: “Learning the land is the true observance of the Sabbath.” I remembered the ordinance: the purchase of a house in the Land of Israel is not to be postponed, but to be performed even on the Sabbath. The rabbi added: through the mediation of a goy. What? Should a goy sign the contract in place of a Jew? Absurd, pure sophistry. The truth is that the Jewish Sages understood that building the land of Israel is the true joy of the Sabbath. But stop this trifling right this moment. You’ve come out of Egypt, these two next to you are parting the sea in twain for you, the city buildings are walls of water on your right and on your left, and a hot desert wind blows above our heads. I am smothered and squeezed between the two of them, I shall have to relearn all these teachings, this Talmud anew once I live through it. The deed precedes the word. The whole world lies open before me. I’ve gotten into their vehicle and soon enough I’ll learn to drive, soon enough I’ll be holding the navigation tools, with them beside me. I’ve got all the time I need. […] (pp. 89–92)

Getting out of the Jeep, I knew that I was transitioning from a Judaism of observance to a Judaism of fulfillment, that I was awakening from winter slumber to an Israeli spring. There’s no time, I’ve got to hurry and sign up to a HaShomer HaTzair corps, to pick a kibbutz, to enter the phase of realization, building, growth, fulfillment… One day, the day will come, the Sabbath hymn echoed in my ear like a motto, like a battle cry.

Why tell you all this? It’s not a story, it’s life. The thawing from the years-long freeze, the daily process of translation, meeting with the skeptical activists in the national kibbutz headquarters of HaShomer HaTazair, traveling to kibbutz Bar’am on the northern border, a frosty meeting with cool-tempered people, hard-living pioneers, rugged, maybe wary, a few breezeblock buildings rising from a bald hill, a few shacks, a water tower, a petrol tank resting on scaffolding, the large shack of the dining hall, something artificial and ephemeral about it all on the backdrop of the eternal Galilee, its wild landscapes, an uneven battle between nature and a few stubborn youths. I knew for certain whose side I was on. […] (pp. 93–94)

Going back to France I was a different man, long of hair, head uncovered, thirsty for action, ready to join…no not join, but to pounce on HaShomer HaTzair, believing he knows the movement as well if not better than its oldest members, the ones he’d argued with yesterday and today had the arrogance to teach. Say what they will, after all, I had met with Meir Ya’ari, and he’d listened to me and told me the thing my friends refused to believe he could ever utter. He said it to me slowly, and the words, etched in my brain, would serve me as an affirmation during the final years of HaShomer’s brand of aggressive but moribund Stalinism. “Know this,” said the old man, his bulging red eyes darting in their sockets as if trying to escape their advanced cataracts, “know these three things: one – there’s no kibbutz without the bible, two – there’s no kibbutz without the bible, three – there’s no kibbutz without the bible.”[[4]](#footnote-4) With this passport, signed with the founder’s seal, I was well equipped to face many long years of nonconformity, yes more nonconformity, but of a different kind. Not nonconformity for nonconformity’s sake, not for the sake of rupture and seclusion. A nonconformity of misunderstandings, dual values, multiple meanings. Nonconformity not as a goal, but as a given temporary state. The rumor traveled fast among my family and friends: I had come back from Israel a modern day Epicurus. Not anti-Zionist but, on the contrary, more Zionist than ever, and yet non-religious! Go figure! (p. 94)

Simon Dubnow and Ita Kalish, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries respectively, came from a distinct religious background, which they then rejected and stood up against. Unlike them, Eli Ben-Gal, in the latter half of the twentieth century enjoyed more freedom in choosing between the different identities available to him, a broader range of options. Having grown up in a secular household ­– unlike the first secular Jews who had been raised orthodox – his decision to adopt an observant lifestyle could be considered, at least in part, an act of rebellion against his parents. However, at the age of eighteen, he is faced with a decisive moment of choice: to accept the invitation to come along on a Jeep tour of Tel Aviv on the Sabbath or not? His decision is instant, even though the process of solidifying an identity to follow would be gradual and steady. The Saturday joy ride could have been nothing more than an episode, after which Ben-Gal would return to the lifestyle of his orthodox kibbutz; yet this was not to be the case. He transferred to HaShomer HaTzair, joined kibbutz Bar’am, and continued to shape his Jewish identity later as well, as a historian specializing in Jewish history, which, as we have seen, was a profession that often served as the basis for secular Jewish identity.

We could further analyze Ben-Gal’s text and insist on the choice of Jewish identity as a result of a clash with an (ostensibly) hostile environment, on the role of reading and the library in shaping the self,[[5]](#footnote-5) on the roles of the mother (in charge of food preparations) and the father (in charge of criticism), on the significance of the encounter of a diaspora Jew with the secular State of Israel and the army, and so on. In the present context, however, suffice it to point out the new delimitations of Jewishness, which allowed for a degree of choice – a choice whose dynamics were not always clear – between different Jewish identities. Often times the search for identity involves distress, frustration, wandering, the desire to leave one’s previous identity while struggling to fully accept the new one. This is the religion-faith divide, which sometimes expresses itself as a yearning for faith coinciding with the unwillingness or inability to subscribe to the social-religious structures shaped by historical Judaism, or the mythical dimensions of the traditional concept of God, or even the language of ancient Jewish culture. Such a divide is reflected in the following poem by the Israeli poet Amir Gilboa (1917–1983):[[6]](#footnote-6)

**I pray from the heart a prayerbook**

I pray from the heart a prayerbook

its edges torn and all the missing words I

see them flitting around a long while flitting

and asking to rest their feet how

can I give them relief and a worn-

edged prayerbook heart

sapped and bereft.

The poem expresses the tension between the whole prayer book – which can be said to represent traditional Judaism and the orthodox Jewish culture – and the torn, partial prayerbook together with the prayer from the heart, suspended in a state of becoming between the different epochs of Jewish life. The worn-edged prayerbook symbolizes both continuity and a break.

Another example of religiosity and mythical notions emerging out of secularity and not necessarily bound up with Judaism, can be found in the poetry of the Israeli poet Yona Wallach (1944–1985):[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Never again will I hear the sweet voice of God**

Never again will I hear the sweet voice of God

Never again will his voice amble under my window

Big drops will come down in spaces a sign

That no longer does God come to my window

How can I see his sweet body again

No longer shall I dive into his eyes searching

Glances will drift through the world like wind

How can I remember this beauty and not weep

Days will pass through my life like shudders

Next to the shards of touch memories broken further by weeping

The air is charmed by the shape of his motion as he moves

Never will the voice of longing breach the threshold

When man resuscitates him like the dead in memories, like something lived through

But his sweet gaze shall not stand by my bed and I’ll weep.

© All rights reserved to Yona Wallach and ACUM

As stated, this is clearly not a secular poem, however it can also be read as a (private) lament for a God who is no longer there, yet the memory of whose presence remains and whose absence elicits sorrow and longing. The line “How can I remember this beauty and not weep” could, therefore, among many other possible interpretations, be seen as referring to the loss of a whole beautiful (Jewish?) culture that is no longer available to secularized Jews, but one whose glow they can still feel upon them.

Another way of looking at the play of identities engaged in by secular Jews has been suggested by the scholar of Jewish thought Paul Mendes-Flohr, in his article “Contemplations upon the secularization of Jewish cultural memory.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Mendes-Flohr proposes to examine the continuity and divide between secular Judaism and traditional Judaism by comparing the traditional Jewish bookshelf with that of the secular Jew. According to him:

The bookshelf of the secularized Jew – and thus his cultural landscape – are not exclusively Jewish, and therefore, the secularized Jew is not exclusively committed to his Jewish brothers and sisters. When you collect books from different cultures, the barriers between them are lowered and erased. The gaze of the intellect, the imagination and human emotion reaches beyond the threshold of the ancient lines of distinction, and embraces humanity as a whole.[[9]](#footnote-9)

One of the manifest properties of Jewish secularization is the same opening up to general culture and universal values that shaped the European humanism of the Renaissance, and in particular the later European Enlightenment. Based on these values, the principles championed by the French Revolution – liberty, equality, fraternity – allowed the inclusion of Jews as full-fledged citizens of the nascent French state. These values became the corner stones of modern Western democracy, and ones with which secularized Jewry identifies very strongly. The challenge to which Mendes-Flohr refers as the challenge of the secularized Jew is the need to negotiate the commitment to Judaism and its values, which in part can be viewed as precursors to Western humanism but at the same time clash with it on a variety of central issues, such as equality or individual freedom.

Secularized Jews see the Jewish nationalism of the Zionist movement, which spearheaded the establishment of the State of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people, as a central means of expressing Jewishness independently of a religious, observant lifestyle. Their experience is one of an irreparable breach with the literal sense of the foundational beliefs of religious Judaism, such as the belief in God as overseeing the life of the individual, of the nation and the history of the Jewish people as a whole, or the belief in the afterlife, the resurrection of the dead and the coming of the Messiah. Moreover, they see various aspects of the Halakha as foreign, artificial and incompatible with modern, democratic reality, and seek to either adapt the Halakha to this reality when it comes to fundamental issues, or, alternatively sever the connection between the Halakha and general day-to-day life in the Jewish state. When all is said and done, secularization remains both an intricate historical process and one of the most significant challenges facing the Jews in the modern era:

The humanist enterprise that began during the Renaissance, the movement towards expanding one’s library and cultural horizons to include the cultural productions of other communities, has a staunch moral compass and enormous power. The question of how to reconcile our ties with the broader family of humanity with our commitment to Jewish cultural memory, that is the ultimate challenge with which the secularized Jew must contend.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. All references in parentheses are to the book: Ben-Gal, *When You Dine*. See also Ben-Gal, *The Deaths*, which completes the events recounted in the first book, and in particular, reveals childhood traumas suffered during the time spent hiding in the village. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/trocme.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Only in his twilight days, in his second memoir entitled *The Deaths of a Schizophrenic,* did Eli Ben-Gal reveal himself to be the victim of a sexually abusive relationship with the priest’s son, who was several years older than Eli. The relationship was abruptly cut off when the priest’s son took his own life at the age of fourteen. In light of this second book, it is possible to read passages of the first memoir, *When You Dine with the Devil*, as the post-traumatic response of an individual who had experienced sexual abuse as a child. However, upon the publication of the first volume, this had not yet been made explicit. See *The Deaths*, pp. 110–120. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more about Meir Ya’ari’s outlook on the bible and religious see: Halamish, *The Admor of Merhavia*, pp. 266–269; and Bar-Lev, *The Sabbath and the Other*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gershom Scholem also speaks of the books he began reading in his youth at the Jewish Library in Berlin as part of the process of forming his Jewish Zionist identity. See, Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gilboa, *Ketef*, p. 112; the poem was first printed as part of the collection *I Wanted to Write the Lips of Sleepers*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wallach, *Poems*, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mendes-Flohr, “Contemplations.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., pp. 334–335. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)