**The universal vs. the local:
Lea Goldberg’s writings for children during the Yishuv period**

“I believe it is much better to listen to the silliest kindergarten poems than to hear sounds of the most advanced cannons.” Lea Goldberg wrote these words on September 8th, 1939, a week after the beginning of World War II, in an article entitled ‘Al Oto Nose Atsmo’ (On the very same subject) published in *Hashomer Hatseer* magazine. Goldberg then goes on to state (and I quote) “the poet is the one who, especially in wartime, must not forgot the true values of life,” insisting further that “the poet is not just permitted to write a love poem during the war but it’s his duty, because even when there is a war, the value of love is greater than the value of murder. The poet is the one who, especially in wartime, must not forget the true values of life. His duty is to remind man that he is still a man.” )end quote(.

This humanistic statement was published at a crucial historical moment, when even poets who celebrated ‘art for art’s sake’ ideals integrated current affairs in their poetic writings. Many of them, including Goldberg’s friends and colleagues, mainly Avraham Shlonsky and Nathan Alterman, attacked her standpoint, claiming that in times like these even the most sublime poetry should reflect upon historical developments. This debate was manifested in the writings of such influential cultural figures in the Jewish Yishuv in mandatory Eretz Israel. While mainly expressed in their canonical writings for adults, in Goldberg’s case, the debate was addressed in her writings for children as well.

The field of children’s literature was central in the endeavor to shape a new Jewish youth according to Zionistic and Labor movement values. At the time, *Davar Leyeladim*, a Labor movement publication, was the major Hebrew children’s magazine. From the time she arrived in Israel in 1935, Goldberg was extremely active in *Davar Leyeladim*, contributing dozens of poems, stories, translations, critiques, short essays and even comic strips (in collaboration with illustrator Arie Navon). She also served as the magazine’s deputy editor, responsible for its literary sections. Throughout the years of Goldberg’s involvement in the magazine, her universal humanistic view of the poet’s role was evident.

But as World War II continued and threatened to reach Eretz Israel, her texts for children began to engage with the impending storm that shook the world. Gradually, she included more references to the war in her texts. These references were implicit at first, but became increasingly more concrete as the war intensified.

In this talk, I will discuss the unique way Goldberg’s writings for children embodied the conflict between her insistence on celebrating aesthetic and humanistic ideals, and her increasing involvement with historical processes, which, at a certain point could no longer be ignored. I will show how Goldberg’s writings for children incorporate both the universal and the local, the aesthetic and the political, and the universally humanistic and the distinctly Jewish and Zionist.

**‘Hag Ha’Bikkurim’ – The Arab Rebellion**

This tendency in Goldberg’s writings was apparent even before World War II. Her unique style was reflected in her writings from the time of the Arab Rebellion, which shook the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel between 1936-1939. This style stood out among most *Davar Leyeladim*’s texts – texts that emphasized the ideal of the young, brave Jewish youth working and protecting his land.

Goldberg’s poem ‘Hag Bikkurim’ (Holiday of the first fruits) was published in *Davar Leyeladim* on May 21st, 1936. This short poem was placed among the issue’s lengthy, central texts, most of which dealt with the Arab Rebellion that had begun a month earlier with an attack on Jews in Jaffa. *Davar Leyeladim*’s approach was to explain to its young readers what was happening and promote the leadership’s policy of *havlaga* (restraint). This policy entailed not reacting to violence, but rather protecting the Jewish settlements and continuing to implement *avoda* *ivrit* (Hebrew labor) in construction and agriculture.

A poem by S. Shalom entitled ‘Beyamenu Ele’ (In these our days) appeared on the issue’s cover. This poem addresses current affairs in Eretz Israel at that moment in time when a series of arsons spread throughout the country. These are the first two verses of this poem:

ילדים, הראיתם אש
 בפרדס ובקמה?
 יד זדים שם נעלמה
מציתה עמל כפינו.

הם יציתו – ואנחנו נזרע.
הם יעקרו -
ואנחנו נטע!
 אנחנו נטע את ארצנו!

Children, have you seen fire
In the orchard and in the standing grain?
A hidden evil hand
Ignites the products of our labor.

They will ignite – and we will sow.
They will uproot –
We will plant again!
We will plant our land!

Like other texts in *Davar Leyeladim*, this poem does not call to fight, but to refrain from violence. However, this restraint is tinged with militant colors – its firm spirit communicated through exclamation marks. The very short lines contribute to this spirit, thereby rendering the poem a sort of rigid declaration. The poem also creates a clear distinction between the innocent Jews who simply want to work the land and the hateful, cruel Arabs who hurt them.

Goldberg’s poem in this issue is entirely different. The issue came out before Shavuot (or Hag Bikkurim), a significant holiday in the context of the emerging agriculturally-oriented Jewish community of Eretz Israel. Traditionally, this holiday, marking the harvest of the first fruits, was celebrated extensively in *Davar Leyeladim*. But that year, due to current events, holiday-related texts, including Goldberg’s poem, were pushed to the magazine’s back pages.

ברכת אביב על השדות הללו,
ברכת פריון על אילנות הגן,
פרי ביכורים אל הגרנות יובלו,
בזוהר יום, בזוהר שפע רן.

פה רות התכופפה ללקוט הלקט
ובלבה נשאה תפלה קצרה:
"תן לקמות, האל, פריחה ושקט,
ולאדם לב טוב כבכּוּרה!"

A spring blessing on these fields,
A fertility blessing on the garden’s trees,
First fruits will be brought to the granaries
In the radiance of the day, in the radiance of singing abundance.

Here Ruth bent to gather the *leket*
And in her heart, she bore a short prayer:
“Oh, lord, grant these standing grains blossom and calm,
And to man, a good heart as his birthright!”

In its first verse, the poem establishes an optimistic and gentle atmosphere that stands in opposition to other texts in this issue. It constitutes an alternative viewpoint to the militaristic spirit of the time. The first two lines form a parallelism, a common biblical construct that contextualizes the poem within a biblical framework. The third line, however, creates a linkage between the scene and the modern Zionistic ideals the holiday embodies – the first fruits are brought to the granary, not to the Mikdash (Temple).

This alludes to the transformation of the biblical holiday to its modern Zionistic version. In addition, the parallelism highlights the connection between spring and fertility. This in turn, elicits an association between nature and femininity that challenges the masculine militaristic, agriculturally-oriented spirit of the time.

The first verse ends with the repetition of the word *zohar* (radiance, brightness), which aligns the daylight with a joyful sight (literally: singing profusion). This linkage enhances the spiritual meaning of *zohar*, thereby tinting this verse with a mystical gleam.

The second verse undermines this ideal by focusing on Ruth of Moav, the central character in the holiday’s biblical version. Ruth bends to collect the *leket* – grain left in the field for the poor. It seems that the first verse’s inspirational undertones become humble and mellow in the second. But in Ruth’s short and silent prayer that concludes the poem, Goldberg seems to uninhibitedly declare her opposing standpoint to the militaristic *havlaga* prevalent at the time.

Ruth’s prayer focuses on protecting the grain and enabling it to flourish, while calling upon all men to reaffirm their belief in the best of human nature. Like in her aforementioned article, Goldberg attempts to associate young readers with all – not only Jewish – men and women, and to remind them that we all share the same origin. The prayer ends with an exclamation mark, which at first seems incompatible with the spirit of both prayer and poem. However, at second glance, one notices Goldberg’s firm humanistic attitude toward writing in times of war implicit in this short pseudo- mellow prayer.

**‘Gam Hashanah’ – World War II**

A similar declaration appears in Goldberg’s writings a few years later, two weeks after the beginning of World War II, when the world was ablaze. In his editorial in the *Davar Leyeladim* September 13, 1939 issue, published before Rosh Hashana, editor Yitsahak Yatsiv explains the situation to the young readers in the polish front. In addition, he writes that the dawn of the new year also marks the beginning of a war, and that the Yishuv (“we”) should be prepared because it may reach Eretz Israel. The issue contained articles and literary texts endeavoring to establish a direct link between the Jewish youth in Eretz Israel and their Jewish brothers and sisters in Europe. This style of writing for children was prevalent after the war began.

Goldberg’s poem in this issue is called ‘Gam Hashana’ (This year too). It’s a very short poem placed between two short stories – the first, ‘Tashlich’ by Shay Agnon, in which the protagonist returns to Israel to study Tora; the second, by Falek Halperin, about wandering Jews in Europe, ends in a prayer for Jews wherever they may be. Apart from being graphically distinct from these stories, Goldberg’s poem is unique in the way it relates to current events without mentioning them.

כל שנה ושנה מוריק הדשא,

ועולה החמה ויורד המטר.

כל שנה ושנה אדמה מתחדשת

ומלבין החצב, ומזהיב ההדר.

בכל שנה נולדים אנשים לרב,

לדמעות ולצחוק, לאחווה ושנאה,

ויש מישהו הרוצה רק בטוב

גם השנה.

Each year the grass turns green,
The sun rises, the rain falls.
Each year the soil is renewed
The lily turns white, the citrus gold.

Each year multitudes are born,
To tears, to laughter, to brotherhood and hatred,
And there is someone who wants only goodness
This year too.

In a very simple, even naïve, style, this short poem manages to say something that defies the concrete and actual texts surrounding it.

The first verse circles around the optimistic process of renewal in nature. The second verse deals with the wide spectrum of human experience. Its ending may imply some divine being, a protecting god, but may also be interpreted as a vote of confidence in the human spirit. It is a reminder of the necessity of hope and belief in human nature, even in face of misery and existential cruelty.

In addition, the fact that there are only two words in the last line – *gam* *hashanah* (3 in English) – highlights their importance and gives a concrete meaning to the entire poem. These words stand in opposition to the poem’s somewhat naïve atmosphere, marking a shift to a firm humanistic statement like that which ends Ruth’s prayer.

In this poem, Goldberg incorporates the values of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel, which at the time was preoccupied with nature and agriculture, and with their concern for the Jews in Europe. But first and foremost, she links these values with the universal human spirit that was dwindling in those chaotic times; the spirit that the poet is responsible to memorialize.