**“With painful labor you will give birth to children”:**

**Docu-Poetic Theatre in Israel**

**Name**

In December 2017, the performance *Yoldot* (Parturients[[1]](#endnote-1); 2017) was first performed at the Jaffa Theatre – an alternative theatre with a critical agenda located in Old Jaffa in Tel Aviv.[[2]](#endnote-2) A female-Jewish-Yemenite song of lamentation is heard in the background, and on stage are three actresses: Sally, Moriah, and Eden. They are dressed in maternity hospital pale-blue gowns and on one leg, each wears a leg warmer embroidered with tiny coins in Jewish-Yemenite style. The space is empty, and the only objects are three piles of folded white diapers placed upstage. When the song ends, the solemn sound of Avigail Arad’s cello, played stage side, is heard; it will continue to accompany the entire performance. The three women begin by describing and performing – in a parodic-satiric, yet painful manner – the experience of childbirth in contemporary Israel.

Next, the three women perform two types of testimony: the first, testimonies of mothers whose children disappeared not long after their births in the 1950s and who were most probably abducted; the second, testimonies of nurses who cared for these children, which suggest abduction and illegal adoption by Jews from Israel and abroad. At the performance’s end, the women once again perform the experience of childbirth in Israel today, and conclude with the resonating question: “So, where is the baby girl?”

*Yoldot* is a docu-poetic performance that deals with the affair of the disappearance and abduction of Jewish children from families that immigrated from Yemen, the Middle East, and the Balkans.[[3]](#endnote-3) In the 1950s, there was a massive immigration of Jews to the newly founded state of Israel, mostly from Middle Eastern and North African countries. The new immigrants were absorbed in transition camps – comprised of tents – under extremely harsh physical conditions. These camps were strictly managed by the government, which controlled employment, education, food, and medical care. Fear of diseases and infections was acute, and infants and toddlers were taken from their mothers, often forcefully, to organized and heated nurseries supervised by nurses and doctors.

The mothers were permitted to nurse their children only at designated times, while the rest of the time the medical staff treated the children as they saw fit, without involving or asking for the parents’ consent for the type of treatment. In the course of a few days, mothers who came to nurse their babies were told that they had been transferred to a hospital, even though, according to the mothers’ testimonies, the babies were healthy. In the ensuing days, the medical staff passed through the camp and, in a cruel and indifferent manner using a loudspeaker, informed the families of their children’s deaths. Moreover, parents did not see their child’s body or attend the funeral, and neither received a death certificate nor were informed as to the place of burial.

Estimates indicate that 1500–2000 children disappeared, approximately a third of which were Jews from Yemenite origin, while most others were Jews from the Middle East, except for a small minority from the Balkans. The estimation, which is based on testimonies and documents, is that the infants were transferred to childless European Jews in Israel and abroad for adoption in exchange for money. The parents searched for their children in hospitals and Hadassah and WIZO (Zionist women organizations) child-care centers, and even turned to the police, but to no avail. Not one institutional authority provided them with answers.

In the late 1960s, approximately 20 years after the disappearance, several families received recruitment orders from the Israeli Defense Forces, as well as other official documents from the Ministry of the Interior, addressed to their children who had disappeared. This caused uproar and demands for public inquiry. The three commissions assigned to investigate the issue over the years all concluded that abductions did not occur even though they could not provide a viable explanation for the multiple disappearances of children, and contrary to disturbing testimonies and evidence. Documents related to the affair were pronounced confidential for 70 years; however, following public campaigns led by NGOs formed by the families, in 2017 the government declassified the documents. Today, the struggle continues for recognition of the families, their eligibility for treatment and compensation, and for a viable explanation for the unknown fate of their children.

The performance was created through a work process based on a collective-directing concept in which the director, Hanna Vazana-Greenwald, constructed non-dramatic texts in cooperation with the actresses. Raheli Said joined the process as a dramaturg and as an activist in Amram, an NPO that fights for the disclosure of the truth, and for the victims’ recognition and treatment. The performance is based on several materials: 1. Iris Eliya-Cohen’s poem *Yoldot* (Parturients; 2017) that deals in a satiric and painful way with the complex and difficult experience of childbirth in an Israeli hospital. 2. Mothers’ testimonies in which they convey the story of the kidnapping and insist upon not being erased from or obscured in the collective memory. 3. Protocols from the Kedmi Commission – the third investigatory commission (1995-2001) – in which nurses’ testimonies point, albeit partially, to a systematic abduction process. 4. Actress Moriah Bashari-Lipshitz’s testimony in which she relates her family’s story; how her grandmother’s daughter was abducted.

Thus, the performance explores the disturbing question of how the abductions were made possible. How did a healthcare system whose goal is to save lives, become a conduit for abducting children for illegal adoption, an act defined as a crime against humanity? I will argue that the poem, which opens and concludes the performance, provides the abduction affair with a medical context. In this light, the affair seems like less of an exception, and more a regular phenomenon, enabled by the overall orientalist and racist nature of the Israeli medical system. Likewise, *Yoldot* employs various performative devices to demonstrate the extent to which the mothers’ bodies and memories of their missing children are presented as preferable, and more credible and plausible than the state’s official version which is based on archival materials and documents.

**The Poem *Yoldot:* “Don’t ask, don’t complain, say ‘thank you.’”**

As mentioned, *Yoldot* opens with three women performing their experiences of childbirth in the form of a theatrical poem. Although written in the first-person, the performance is split between three women, thereby linking the private experience of childbirth to the attitude toward it as a social and cultural phenomenon. The three actresses describe the hospital’s formation as a parodic-satiric paraphrase of the biblical creation myth:

ACTRESSES: In the beginning God created

the heaven and the mountain.

and the hospital

**(turn to face the audience)** which is atop the mountain.

And he placed fences around it **(form a line and step forward)**

pillars of concrete

and an iron-heavy gate

and locks

MORIAH: a partition

EDEN: to separate between here

SALLY: and there.

EDEN: And God made

SALLY: the doctors

ACTRESSES: and he placed them in the hospital

as great luminaries

to govern. **(they stop)**

MORIAH: And God said: It is not good for

the doctors to be alone

EDEN: and he made secretaries and nurses and helpers

for them.

The satirical comparison between the creation of the universe and the formation of the hospital points to the medical system’s regimental and disciplined nature. The hospital is presented as a total space enclosed by concrete, iron, and locks, separated from the ostensibly free everyday reality. However, the use of the creation myth to depict the hospital’s formation marks how this site attempts to present itself as self-evident, supreme, and allegedly perfectly natural, appropriate, and irreplaceable – an institution without history, a building that always was and was never constructed. The hierarchy between the doctors, nurses, and all other personnel within the hospital, is, as it were, divinely, ethically, and rightfully justified.

The hierarchal description leads into the depiction of actual childbirth in which the pregnant woman, who is at the bottom of the pyramid, becomes a treatment object. Moriah and Eden lie on their backs on blue physio-balls, legs apart. Upstage, Sally stands facing away from the audience with one hand behind her back. Encased in a surgical glove, her hand seems to “rummage” inside the recumbent women. At the same time, Eden describes how a woman in labor is situated at the bottom of a medical pyramid; she is a passive treatment object who cannot resist and who has no opinion of her own:

EDEN: True. I was not a child. But

I was not a woman.

I was very young, too young.

I was not smart either. I was stupid.

There was always some

doctor, junior nurse or official or

clerk, intern, orderly or carpenter,

or technician.

ACTRESSES: Or the guy who prints out stickers

EDEN: who knew better than me

what I should do.

The bureaucratic hierarchy supervises the women as if they are in prison. The women receive sheets of paper, documents, and a “precise detail of all the laws/rules, list of regulations” and then “around your arm is wound/a plastic bracelet/zip tie/like a prisoner/under restraining conditions.” In addition to these metaphors of repression, the women describe the doctors, their scrutinizing gazes, and their bedside manner using a military metaphor: “five military leaders enter the room.” The hierarchy is depicted in military terms: the ward commander, the deputy, the deputy’s deputy, etc.; these figures of authority demand that the women be passive: “you are requested/not to ask/not to make things difficult/not to moan, not to whine/not to complain/to say thank you,” while “a slogan on the wall whispers/dear parturient, remember/the enemy is within you.”

Following its intermediate segments – the mothers’ stories of the abduction and disappearance, and the nurses’ testimonies at the investigatory commissions – the performance returns to the last part of the poem, concluding with a description of the end of childbirth. The military metaphor dominates this segment in the form of a parodic paraphrase of two heroic Israeli war songs: *Ballada La-Hovesh* (Ballad for the Medic; 1956), which portrays a medic who sacrifices himself on the battlefield to save a wounded soldier; and *Givat Ha-Tahmoshet* (Ammunition Hill; 1967) that describes the arduous battle for Jerusalem during the Six-Day War. The parody likens childbirth to war. Eden and Sally sit on physio-balls and quote the doctors, while Moriah lays on her back on a ball, playing the role of a woman in labor. The cello plays a rhythm reminiscent of the *Song of Songs*’ melody:

The first segment is constructed as a parody on *Ballada La-Hovesh*:

EDEN: Suddenly lightening, thunder, the deputy shouted:

SALLY: Surgery!

EDEN: Nonsense, the chief replied,

MORIAH: it’s hard for me to breathe,

EDEN: the woman then cried,

SALLY: Try to calm down, stop whining.

EDEN/SALLY: The fire is heavy, heavy, it’s hard to move,

and a shadow on the ground, and it’s chased by contractions.

MORIAH: Let my mother in,

EDEN: the woman then cried,

SALLY: absolutely not,

EDEN: the anesthesiologist replied.

EDEN/SALLY: A heavy hail pours down, a heavy interrupted hail, and she is left alone, and she is exposed to the fire.

MORIAH: Today is the day I die,

SALLY: the woman then cried.

EDEN/SALLY: Just don’t despair, just don’t despair.

While in the original song, the medic encourages the wounded soldier, in the parody the unempathetic doctors aggressively silence the woman, and deliberately ignore her pain. From the woman’s perspective, the delivery room becomes a battlefield in which the roles of the doctors become unclear: are they playing the role of the “medic” or the enemy. Rather than assisting her in childbirth they attempt to subjugate and render her an object,. The parody calls attention to the idea that as a subject the woman disrupts the process of childbirth; paradoxically, were it not for her interruptions, the doctors would have performed procedure more efficiently.

Next is a parody on *Givat Ha-Tahmoshet*, a song that describes a harsh battle in the 1967 War in which approximately a hundred Israeli and Jordanian soldiers were killed. The song is based on Israeli soldiers’ monologues, and the woman in labor uses the same language patterns to describe herself as a fighter struggling to survive labor.

EDEN: It was the morning of the fourth day of the war.

SALLY: At eight, eight-thirty

MORIAH: I saw black stars

above my head, on the walls

buzzing like flies.

EDEN: The contractions used the following strategy, first they attacked from behind,

SALLY: then they fired a round,

EDEN: then they subsided.

Between the rounds of gunfire,

MORIAH: I tried to breathe. But couldn’t always remember where to breathe from.

EDEN: At some point I realized that only me and I were left. I rise from the power of two companies, until the [birth] canal [*te’alah*] also tore.

The contractions are compared to rifle bullets that attack and threaten the woman. The Hebrew word “*te’alah*” is employed for its double meaning – it can refer to a trench in the battlefield and the birth canal. The war imagery and the birth imagery are thus intertwined, emphasizing the military character of the medical institution, which in turn, exacerbates the woman’s fear of her body collapsing like that of a soldier in battle.

Both parts of the performed poem point to the site of childbirth – a supposedly safe, pleasant, and intimate space – as a site of regimentation and disciplining. It is like a production line for babies, under constant supervision like a prison, and founded on a rigorous hierarchy like a military camp. In Goffman’s (1961) terms, the hospital is presented on stage as a “total” institution that is physically detached from the world outside. The woman is subjected to the medical team’s supervision and control and is transformed from a subject to a treatment object by way of medical and bureaucratic practices. The woman is not only obligated to follow the institution’s laws, but also internalizes them and thus becomes disciplined. While for Goffman the total institution is separate from social reality, Foucault (1977) contextualizes such institutions in terms of sexuality, medical practice, mental institution, and prison. He demonstrates how these spaces serve the state’s biopolitics (1978: 141-143) – supervision and control over the population by way of interventions in the individual’s body, such as demographics, hygiene, life expectancy, eugenics, etc. The hospital’s goal is not only to secure the woman and her baby’s wellbeing, but to cast her as an object of population management. She is obligated to keep to a set of standards that guarantee a healthy and sound birth in accordance with a strict medical protocol maintained by the medical staff.

Therefore, the dressing on stage in uniform light-blue gowns at the beginning of the performance triggers a process in which the women shed their personal identities and become treatment objects. The women’s movements within the mise-en-scène either complement one another or perform uniformly like a childbearing machine or production line in service of the population’s fertility. Likewise, in terms of Elin Diamond’s (1977: 43-55) Brechtian-feminist approach to acting, the choice to divide the character of the parturient between three actresses who indeed quote, but nevertheless do not play the doctor’s role, points not only to childbirth as a social experience shared by many women. It also exposes, in a critical light, the gender power relations between male doctors and female maternity patients, and the repressive manner in which childbirth is organized and regulated in the hospital.

Anthropologist Meira Weiss (2002) shows that biopolitics in Israel is associated with eugenics and demography and is tightly linked to the Zionist ideology and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Eugenics has been at the foundation of Zionism since its beginnings – it aims to produce a new healthy and strong Jewish body that has returned to work the land and protect the homeland, in contrast to the anti-Semitic image of a gaunt, sick, thin, and helpless Jew. From a genetic point of view, Zionism seeks to preserve the Jewish “purity of the race” and prevent degeneration. Likewise, “the demographic problem,” that is, securing a Jewish majority vis-à-vis the Palestinians, encourages fertility and birth, reflected by the extensive subsidization of various fertility technologies and medical tests required to ensure a healthy, intact baby. Weiss calls this Israeli conception the “chosen body” – a paraphrase of the “chosen people.” The state perceives the child as part of the collective and not only as belonging to its mother and family. Therefore, the mother can be regarded as an object of treatment because it is of the utmost importance, in national terms, that the child born be healthy, that they meet the chosen body’s standards and serve the nation as a Jewish citizen and soldier. Against this background, the parody on Israeli military songs is constructed as a metaphor for childbirth, which is perceived as a broad ideological process of enlisting procreation and fertility to create a brave Jewish fighter – a fighter whose education and socialization begins immediately after their coming into the world. Goffman, Foucault, and Weiss’s theoretical explanations suggest an answer to how the medical system in Israel enabled the abduction and disappearance of infants, as seen in the performance’s ensuing segments.

**The Mothers’ Stories: “They said the child died”**

This segment includes stories by over 20 mothers, as well as actress Moriah Bashari-Lifshitz’s extensive and unnerving testimony. To enhance the performance’s political effect, dramaturg Raheli Said insisted that the names and details of the abductions be factual and based on the testimonies the families had given to Amram. This does not represent a naïve perception of documentary theatre as a reliable and candid “reflection” of reality. It is rather a deliberate use of real-life stories and names to create an unsettling experience for the audience, soliciting its empathy for the families’ struggle for the truth.

The stories are arranged as a memorial service accompanied by the solemn sound of the cello, as is customary in Israel mainly in the context of Holocaust Remembrance Day. The ceremony opens with the three actresses jointly saying: “And these are the names of the daughters of Israel whose children were taken from them, and their fate is unknown.” Positioned upstage, each beside a pile of folded diapers, the actresses alternately state a mother’s name and give a brief account of her child’s disappearance while arranging the diapers in six rows. The name of a child who disappeared is embroidered on each diaper, for example:

MORIAH: Saada Tiari whose son Mines was taken from her at the Hashad camp; he was one and a half years old.

EDEN: Miriam Mauda whose daughter was taken from her at Ein Shemer hospital; she was two and a half months old.

SALLY: Miriam Abu whose son Mordekhai was taken from her at Hadera hospital; he was five months old.

[...]

MORIAH: Gomesh Yihiah whose son Zion was taken from her at Rosh Ha-Ayin camp; he was eight months old. They said they were taking the boy for a vaccine shot, and then when they came to get him, they said that he

EDEN/SALLY: had died.

MORIAH: Margalit Ronen whose twin daughters **(takes a diaper in hand and stands)**

EDEN: Rachel

SALLY: and Leah

EDEN/SALLY: were taken from her at Hadera hospital **(stand facing one another each with a diaper stretched between two hands)**, they didn’t let her see them, when she asked how they were, she was told they were healthy, because they were very small, twins, they were kept in the hospital for another week, after a few days, they said they had

MORIAH: died.

SALLY: Malka Arussi whose son Yair was taken from her at the Ein Shemer camp; he was only three and a half months old; she hid him in the tent for three weeks, but because he needed to be circumcised, she finally took him out, and they took him to the nursery. Four months later, when she came to visit him, they said he had died. They didn’t want to show her the body, but the family protested; they showed them the body of an older child, a 16-year old; they said that’s not our child; they were told – that’s all we’ve got.

On stage, the folded diapers and children’s names form a grid that evokes the structure of a cemetery – an agitating visual image that corresponds to the imagery of memorial ceremonies and pageantry. The Zionist pageantry is an ideological practice formed in the 1920s, and which played a key role in molding the character of the nation, mainly in memorial ceremonies and national celebrations. In most cases, the pageant includes recitations, dancing, and singing addressed at the audience, which is perceived as an active part of the event (Shem-Tov 2013: 353-354). Avner Ben-Amos (2004: 308) argues that since the 1990s, oppositional voices in Israel have been exploiting the pageantry format by infusing it with critical, anti-Zionist meanings. The pageant does not present fiction but rather points to real historical events and stresses their importance. Therefore, the performance employs conventions of Holocaust Remembrance Day, ceremonies in which the names of those who died are read aloud and their stories told to stress the trauma’s magnitude.

Constructing the abduction and disappearance stories as a pageant affords them ostensibly-official recognition in the framework of a theatrical event, as a utopian-performative moment, in Jill Dolan’s (2005) terms — as signifying what appropriately should take place in social reality. Dolan explains that this is not utopia in the sense of a closed political paradigm that needs to be realized. She rather points to the utopian as a temporary experience shared by all participants in the theatrical event. It is a moment in which sensibilities and emotions are temporarily aroused and experienced, social and political possibilities that are not feasible in the current reality outside the theatre, and which the performance establishes within its space. The abduction stories’ construction as a national pageant produces a temporary experience among the actresses and the audience of a utopian situation in which there is a mutual recognition of and empathizing with the pain. This is as opposed to the current situation, in which the establishment refuses to disclose the truth and recognize the injustice.

The climactic moment in the abduction stories is actress Moriah Bashari-Lifshitz’s testimony, in which she conveys her grandmother’s story and her family’s complicated attitude toward the Israeli establishment:

MORIAH: Sarah Bashari, Sarah Bashari is my grandmother.

Sarah Bashari whose daughter Yedida was taken from her at the Ein Shemer camp; she was five years old.

It was chilly, Yedida had a slight cold, she caught a cold. They took her to the infirmary in C camp. My father, Zion, went to visit her every day, the day before, they played together. She jumped from bed to bed, she laughed. The doctor told him: tell your parents to come get her tomorrow. When they came, they were told that she had died; they asked where the body was. They said to them: this is not Yemen, this is not Yemen, **(folds the diaper)** we take care of everything here. [...]

Father, why us, especially?

What do mean “us”?

Why did they take us especially?

[...]

Father’s stubborn. He’ll never say a word. And I, only after many years, understood that it was because we were at the bottom of the ladder. But I too, what can I do? I inherited the silence.

My father’s name is Zion and every Independence Day he hangs four flags like they do in the Knesset. Two in front, two in back. So that anyone passing in the street can see. In Yemen we would eat first-rate date honey, meat, natural millet flour, milk, and honey. But here? This is the state of Israel. And me, with every bite I swallow my pride, my past, with the dates, with the figs, with the honey. Here, this is for you, aunt Yedida.

Actress Moriah’s personal story crosses the boundary between fiction and reality on several levels. Moriah turns to the audience and shares her family story of Yedida’s abduction in what States (2002) calls a “collaborative mode of acting.” “The performer turns directly to the audience and transforms them from passive observers (voyeurs) to collaborators in the theatrical event in various ways” (...). This appeal to the audience is not carried out by a fictional character. It is rather embodied in Moriah’s personal statement, which in turn, strengthens her testimony’s validity. In addition, Moriah was seven months pregnant at her premier performance; this was clear to the audience and reinforced her testimony as that of a woman who was about to become a mother for the first time. The stress and anxiety in the face of childbirth and the medical system, as well as the background of the family trauma, effectively evoke empathy and a sense of collaboration and participation in the audience.

The trauma cannot be expressed openly because it is opposed to the family’s Zionist patriotism – a family which, like other Jews of Middle Eastern origin, strives to be part of, and integrated in, the Zionist project. The trauma is forced into a corner, and even Moriah must remain silent. The collaborative acting mode – Moriah standing erect looking straight at the audience – enables the articulation of both the trauma and the explicit protest against the Zionist vision. By evoking the “The Land of Milk and Honey”[[4]](#endnote-4), the Zionist vision manipulatively took advantage of the Yemenite Jews’ spiritual and messianic elevation toward the promised land. Moriah’s understanding, in hindsight, that the immigrants from Yemen were perceived as inferior and relegated to the bottom of the pyramid, facilitates the shedding of the patriotic camouflage, assigning a voice and wail of anguish to the trauma that was buried for decades.

**The Nurses’ Testimonies: “Don’t know, don’t remember.”**

To the sound of “Zemer Ha-Plugot” (The Song of the Military Companies; 1938) – a Zionist military march – the actresses remove the Yemenite leg warmers and put on white socks and military boots, while remaining clothed in the light-blue maternity gowns. They stride with forced smiles, while swinging their arms and legs in an exaggerated fashion, as a parody of a military parade, among the grid of diapers formed in the previous scene; they stand at attention when the song ends. Cellist Avigail Arad first plays the role of the chairman of the investigative commission as an offstage voice, and then appears on stage in the role of prosecutor Nahmani from the state prosecutor’s office. The nurses’ names are real, and the adapted dialogue is based on the protocol of the third commission that operated during the late 1990s.

This segment is comprised of three nurses’ testimonies: Mrs. Leikht, Tzviya Cohen, and Mrs. Ben-Shakh, and a critical presentation of the commission’s conclusions. In fact, these scenes are constructed as tribunal theatre, a sub-genre of documentary theatre based on judicial materials. As Janelle Reinelt (2009) argues, tribunal theatre does not attempt to faithfully “reflect” the judicial event on stage, but rather creates a dialogue by editing and modifying documents and protocols, while employing various performative devices to construct the playwright’s interpretation of the judicial event. In general, Reinelt claims, documentary theatre is based on real-life documents, however: “The documentary is not the object but in the relationships between the object, its mediators [artists, historians, authors] and its audience” (7). The editing of the dialogue, the structuring of the mise-en-scène, and elements of acting, such as accent and gesture, reconstruct the nurses’ testimonies and expose the tension between silencing the truth and revealing it.

While in their testimonies, Mrs. Leikht and Mrs. Ben-Shakh evade clear answers, claiming ignorance as to what took place and holding the higher echelons responsible, Tzviya Cohen’s testimony reflects an attempt to break the silence and give a voice to the Yemenite mothers who were repressed by the medical system. The differences between the two types of testimony are demonstrated in the mise-en-scène. In the framework of the evasive testimonies, the testifying nurse stands facing forward while the other actresses stand slightly behind her, each on one side, and “echo” her by precisely mimicking her hand gestures, thereby strengthening and ratifying her testimony. But the mimicry also generates a parodic effect and even undermines the witness’s authenticity by presenting her as repeating the establishment’s evasive response. On the other hand, in Tzviya Cohen’s testimony, the other actresses act as gate keepers who make skeptical comments and express, through mimicry and gestures, a repressed anger and threatening gaze in face of the witness’s attempt to break the conspiracy of silence.

Mrs. Leikht worked in WIZO’s[[5]](#endnote-5) “Mother and Child Center” in Tel Aviv where infants designated for adoption, the majority of which were presumably brought from transition camps, were accommodated. She stands downstage, while behind her the other actresses mimic her. The actress employs an east European accent and gestures that thrust her hands forward, palms open; the actresses behind do the same. This gesture is repeated to demonstrate helplessness and ignorance:

LEIKHT: The institution’s director was a British registered nurse who imposed a regiment that is hard to describe today. We, the trainee nurses, had no idea where the children were coming from.

[...]

The director or deputy never gave us their files to look at, we had no idea, we didn’t even know what country they came from.

The medical system’s strict hierarchy in the 1950s (Stoler-Liss and Shvarts 2009) enables Mrs. Leikht to avoid precise answers and to present herself as someone who knew nothing and who simply did her job; the wellbeing of the children was her sole consideration. She stresses this by telling a story about a special connection she had with an infant named Darwish; she shows a photograph of them together. She recounts that the baby was adopted, and how, against orders, she tried to find him but to no avail. On stage, she searches for the photograph among the diapers on the grid, while the other actresses imitate her. Each actress lifts a diaper and displays it as if it were a photograph. This performative act subverts the content. The diapers and names embroidered on them constitute an indexical sign for the disappearance and abduction, and their use in the nurse’s testimony forms an ironic and painful image of the nurse’s words of love for the child, on the one hand, and the concealed knowledge that the adoption was in fact illegal, on the other.

The holding of higher echelons responsible is repeated when she is asked explicitly what the criteria for adoption were:

LEIKHT: The center’s director, Mrs. Keish, would say to us: this one’s for adoption, and this one’s for adoption, and this one. That’s all. And

then, all those children disappeared.

The actresses point to various diapers on the grid to indicate those designated for adoption, thereby linking the testimony to the children’s abduction. At the end of her testimony, Mrs. Leikht hints, but again ambivalently and hesitantly, at the systematic adoption of children by wealthy women from abroad:

LEIKHT: There were delegations from the United States that came to WIZO, they were called *Friends of WIZO United States*, and we had to dress the children up, tidy them, but we never knew if they were coming to adopt a child or contribute money to WIZO. **(Palms open in front of the body, begging).**

The testimony ends with open palms expressing helplessness, ignorance, accusing the higher echelons, alluding to the corrupt adoption system.

Mrs. Ben-Shakh was a nurse at Ein Shemer hospital in Rosh Ha-ayin, situated nearby the Jewish Yemenite immigrant transition camp, when a significant number of immigrant children disappeared and were abducted. Her testimony conspicuously presents the orientalist arrogance and racism evinced toward the Yemenite Jews who she depicts as primitive and lacking an understanding of the benefits of modern medicine. On the other hand, she testifies as to the negligence in the illogical and disorderly management of registration, conduct that is not in keeping with an organized modern medical system’s rationale. The hostility in Mrs. Ben-Shakh’s testimony is conveyed through the actress’s accent and speech rhythm. She speaks rapidly and interrupts the prosecutor’s questions. Her tone is sharp, grating, and accusative, and her words primarily portray the Yemenite parents as primitive and violent and therefore, as deserving aggressive treatment. First, she notes that because they did not have distinctive surnames, their children’s registration was inefficient. When asked if registration was performed by means of official immigrant certificates, Ben-Shakh claims that she “does not recall” and evades discussing the fact that the problematic registration facilitated the disappearance and abduction. She provides a detailed account of how the parents’ visits were a problem. She describes how they did not understand what the intravenous tubes attached to their children were, how this shocked them, and how the children were taken to the ward without their permission. Therefore, a firm policy was employed:

BEN-SHAKH: And this significantly interfered with our work. Even during visiting hours. And then we stopped allowing them to come in, they could only get information about their child at the window during specific hours.

PROSECUTOR: So, the parents were prohibited from entering, [to see children] of all ages.

BEN-SHAKH: For all ages. As far as I remember they were not allowed. We could show them the child through the window, a child who could be lifted, without intravenous tubes, and shown to the parents, we did that. Now, regarding what I mentioned, the doors were actually locked. It was forbidden to open them. [...] I remember that on one Shabbat she opened the door from the inside, and parents came in and took a child out of bed and ran away. And I remember that we were so shocked from this incident that we started chasing them, and we ran outside, and then I remember, I think it was Dr. Mendel, saying: are we going to run after them and grab the child from their hands? That’s absurd.

Ending the testimony with the words – “grab the child from their hands” – sounds ironic and harsh considering the reality that children disappeared and were kidnapped from this hospital. The stern hierarchy between parents and the medical staff and the latter’s orientalist perception of the former was common and prevalent in the medical system’s nurseries, particularly among nurses and Jewish mothers from the Middle East in the 1950s. The nurses saw themselves as instructors and supervisors for immigrants who they perceived as having “a filthy and sick body that is a hazard, but which is also a threat because it can be contagious” (Stoler-Liss and Shvarts 2009: 98). Likewise, the immigrants were perceived as neglecting their children, as violent and primitive in their behavior, and as not knowing what is good for their children. The orientalist medical discourse that the nurses internalized leans on what Dafna Hirsch calls the “hygienic discourse,” which diagnosed Middle Eastern Jews as a reverse image of Western man who is hygienic, cultured, clean, rational, and responsible for his body and his offspring’s health (Hirsch 2014: 415). Educating the mothers to treat their children in accordance with the hygienic discourse is called “medicalized motherhood” – caring for an infant is perceived as a practice that requires scientific-medical instruction, and the mother must obey the medical institution and act according to its dictates. The Jewish mother from the Middle East was described as a “negligent mother,” one who did not provide satisfactory care and who worked outside the home (Hirsch 2014: 379).

This ideological and discursive context helps explain the practices noted by Mrs. Ben-Shakh of the firm separation between parents and children, restrictions on visits, and treating children without consulting or securing the parents’ consent. Meira Weiss (2001) argues that the medicalization and commodification of Yemenite Jews in fact facilitated the exercise of power to neutralize the natural and human bond between a mother and child, casting the mother as incompetent and problematic, and allowing for the abduction and illegal adoption.

Tzviya Cohen’s testimony is exceptional. While initially showing an interest in testifying by writing to the commission, at the last moment she grew anxious and eventually was subpoenaed to appear. Tzviya Cohen is Israeli born of Yemenite origin and as a young trainee nurse was assigned to the nursery at the Ein Shemer transition camp where, as mentioned, Yemenite immigrants resided. The actress stands downstage while the others are positioned upstage to the right. Their bodies are tense as they listen to the testimony. They interrupt the testimony with short sentences, to undermine it and to support the official version, becoming, in effect, gate keepers entrusted with preserving the silence.

COHEN: [...] they were separated. That is, they took the children,

NURSES: for the infants’ own good,

COHEN: to the nursery that was already prepared, and the parents to where they were supposed to be housed. The parents were extremely frightened that their children were being taken.

NURSES: We calmed them down.

[...]

COHEN: Yes, there was a rumor. That they’re taking their children.

CHAIRMAN: Nevertheless, you insisted, and they let them

in.

NURSES: We explained, we did not insist.

[...]

COHEN: They didn’t hand them over, they simply took their babies from them,

NURSES: for their own good, by the way.

The nurses’ comments are not only an attempt to misrepresent the appeasement of the immigrants, but also a theatrical demonstration of the threat hovering over Tzviya Cohen which caused her to decide against testifying despite her letter. While the nurses’ replicas are in fact based on Tzviya Cohen’s words, the dramaturg assigned them to the other nurses to externalize the witness’s ambivalence and inner conflict. This strategy in the dialogue’s adaptation underscores how tribunal theatre does not presume to faithfully “reflect” the historical judicial event, but rather deliberately attempts to shed light, by means of performative elements, on the hidden power structure that motivates the original testimony. The nurses act as supervisors who represent the official discourse overshadowing the witness. Nevertheless, she describes the patronizing orientalist attitude and even hints at the abduction of babies:

COHEN: I do not know if [the ambulance driver] took the documents. Most of the things [belonging to vacated children] were marginal. There was contempt for the mothers and they were looked upon from above. This I really remember. And I really felt bad for them. And I sat there, and explained to them, but there was not much I could do. Sometimes, mothers nagged that they wanted to see them or that they were afraid they would be stolen from them, and then they would slam the door shut in their faces. They did not even explain. **(aside)** First, talk to them. **(turns to the nurses and then back to the audience).** They sat by the door day and night, many times, in heat and cold. It didn’t bother me, I came to work. But after work hours, parents sometimes came to me to ask and I did not have a lot of answers.

Once, when I took a child, who was not ill in my opinion, I was told not to interfere. The child I took was chubby, beautiful, and big. I think he was 14 months old. Three times they wanted to fire me because sometimes I wanted to say something on behalf of the parents, then they said not to interfere.

CHAIRMAN: Do you have names? Names, do you remember? **(glances at the judge)**

[...]

But when I ask you for a colleague’s name, suddenly your mouth shuts.

COHEN: **(turns head over right shoulder)** I have no right to say anyone’s name.

The practice of separating mothers from children and the reluctance to explain what treatment the children received, is described as a cruel, racist, and orientalist practice that demeans the parents and their ability to care properly for their children based on the medical staff’s perception of them as primitive.[[6]](#endnote-6) Tzviya Cohen says that healthy children were taken to the hospital without cause and this raises heavy suspicion. But finally, the two nurses who supervise and threaten her succeed in silencing her and she refuses to provide the names of the nursery’s senior officials. The tension between speaking out and revealing the truth and silencing and keeping in line with the institutional position is apparent throughout Cohen’s testimony, and she is torn between her conscience, to convey what she experienced, and the apprehension and fear of breaching the conspiracy of silence.

After hearing the testimonies, the commission’s conclusions are presented in a critical light. Taken from the commission’s report, the chairman’s words are challenged by difficult questions. The actresses look at the audience with an accusatory gaze and, in a defiant tone, de-construct the commission’s conclusions. The chairman states that evidence of institutionalized abduction and the selling of babies for adoption was not found, and that credible and reliable records were found in hospital archives. The actresses challenge these statements:

EDEN: What about the Jewish Agency’s archive in Tzrifin?

CHAIRMAN: Most of the material was lost, some disintegrated and was thrown out, some was disposed of – probably due to an administrative mistake – when the commission was already operative.

SALLY: And Hillel Yaffe hospital?

CHAIRMAN: When the commission began its work, and before the maternity ward’s records were destroyed, the hospital was asked to preserve the records, but sadly, this request was not honored, and the records were destroyed.

MORIAH: Did you check the records from the Atlit transition camp?

CHAIRMAN: The medical archive was destroyed.

EDEN: And the hospital in Pardes Hanna?

CHAIRMAN: Lost.

SALLY: Brandeis hospital in Hadera?

CHAIRMAN: Destroyed.

MORIAH: Scottish hospital in Tiberias?

CHAIRMAN: That disappeared.

EDEN: And WIZO’s archive in Safed?

CHAIRMAN: Not located.

SALLY: The foster care institution in Haifa?

CHAIRMAN: Not located.

MORIAH: And WIZO in Rosh Ha-Ayin?

CHAIRMAN: Not located.

The actresses undermine the credibility and reliability of the commission report said to rely on hospital archives which were in fact missing or destroyed. The defiant questions present a long list of missing archives, in whose absence it is indeed difficult to reach unequivocal answers. In addition, the piercing questions evoke bewilderment as to why the commission avoided investigating the archives’ destruction despite its request to preserve them. These questions de-construct the official text and reveal both the institutional coverup and the commission’s insincerity. The actresses also undermine the commission’s “laundered” discourse:

MORIAH: They explained that there were no abductions, there were “incidental adoptions.” What exactly is an “incidental adoption?”

EDEN: It’s like taking in a stray dog.

MORIAH: These are children whose parents are looking for them; how is such a thing incidental, to give them up for adoption.

SALLY: And they said that the parents couldn’t be located.

EDEN: But when recruitment orders were sent, they knew all too well where to find them.

The phrase “incidental adoption” enables the commission to evade the truth – that the issue at hand is illegal adoption – which underscores the unethical and illegal difficulty. The actresses challenge the claim that the adopted babies’ parents could not be located, by pointing to the fact that the army knew where to locate the family when it sent recruitment orders for the children 18 years later. When the state needs soldiers who will sacrifice themselves for it, the state knows all too well how to locate them, and when the state prefers not to know where the parents are, it enables “incidental adoptions.”

At the end of this segment, the actresses present data to illustrate its painful human significance:

EDEN: Of the 1057 cases investigated by the commission, they said that in total 67 children were pronounced missing (whereabouts unknown). In total? That is what they wrote. **(they stand)** How many people are here in the hall? 100? Rows 1, 2, 3, 4,

MORIAH: 5, 6, 7.

EDEN/MORIAH: Stand up.

SALLY: Stand.

EDEN: Now disappear.

The defiant questions in face of the commission’s intentional blind spots and cover-up reach a climax in the final segment. After undercutting the written report and exposing the gaps between doing justice and the attempt to obscure the affair, the actresses employ the **audience’s body** to illustrate their argument. While the commission ostensibly “proved” that most of the children had died, it was still incapable of explaining the disappearance of 69 children. Therefore, the commission used rhetoric in its attempt to diminish its conclusions’ painful significance. The actresses face the audience and ask for most of its members to stand; they in turn, look at one another and at the actresses; there is a long moment of silence. This is followed by the command: “now disappear.” As opposed to the commission’s rhetoric, the actresses employ a performative device of collaboration with the audience to demonstrate, on a personal level, the significance of the unacceptable and inexplicable disappearance of 69 human beings. The physical demonstration by way of the audience exemplifies to the spectators themselves the extent to which both the commission’s claims and indecent rhetoric are severe and problematic.

**Repertoire Subverts the Archive**

The tension between the enacted testimonies and the commission’s protocol, which was extracted from Israel’s state archives, corresponds with Diana Taylor’s (2003: 20) distinction between “archive” and “repertoire.” While the former preserves knowledge and cultural memory by means of immutable documents (books, letters, protocols, photographs, recordings, etc.), the latter transmits knowledge and memory through the body, which is present here and now and which enacts them (e.g. homage, ritual, poetry, song, etc.). In terms of historical truth, the archive is supposedly preferable because it is immutable and preserved in an institutionalized manner, whereas the repertoire is reliant upon the changing and perishable human body and memory. According to Carol Martin (2006:10), the documentary theatre challenges and obfuscates the distinction between archive and repertoire because the testimonies that the actors enact in the performance (i.e. the repertoire) are based on the immutable evidence in the archive. In *Yoldot*, the mothers’ bodies and memories are perceived as preferable. The mothers and actress Moriah’s stories are a living memory that is transmitted from generation to generation. Likewise, this traumatic memory corresponds associatively with the difficult experiences of childbirth in the repressive medical system. It is indeed in the official documents – protocols of the commission’s deliberations and final report – that blind spots, intentional coverups, a disregard of facts, and lack of assertiveness to reveal the truth is discovered. Through their bodies and voices, the actresses unravel the nurses’ testimonies and de-construct the commission’s documents while presenting its inherent faults. Therefore, the repertoire, in Taylor’s terms, highlights the extent to which the documentary performance subverts the archival documents’ immutability and reveals the deliberate and suspect evasion of troubling questions.

The uniqueness of docu-poetic theatre is not in its providing new information, as in journalistic investigation or academic research; this theatre attempts to decipher the human and emotional dynamic behind the facts, and the interpretation and dispute surrounding the affair. As Carol Martin (2010) notes, the documentary theatre of the 21st century is not afraid of distancing itself from realism and does not presume to “reflect” the “truth,” but rather is aware of, and indeed calls attention to edits, changes, and the intermingling of fiction and reality. In this sense, *Yoldot* is a docu-poetic performance that constructs a profound political statement, not because it presumes to present, in a realistic and “close to real” manner, the Yemenite Children affair. Rather, the performative-creative linkage between the poem and testimonies and official documents transforms the theatre into a site of observation on a past trauma through the present. The interweaving of the contemporary experience of childbirth by way of the parodic, ironic, and painful poem connects the audience to the question of how the abduction could have taken place. How can the natural and human bond between a mother and her child be severed? The indifference, forceful control, and silencing are inherent parts of the experience of hospital care, and therefore this syste has the potential to commit serious crimes, even crimes against humanity such as the abduction and selling of children.

**Notes**

1. A woman who is about to give birth or is in labor. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Director: Hanna Vazana-Greenwald; Dramaturg: Racheli Said; Actresses: Sally Arkadash, Moriah Bashari-Lifshitz, and Eden Uliel; Cello: Avigail Arad; Design: Frida Shoham; Choreography: Shira Eviatar [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The description of the affair is based on the following sources: Zaid 2001; Shovali 2009; Sangero 2002; Madmoni-Gerber 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “A land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8 New International Version) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. WIZO – a Zionist women’s organization. Among its activities was the establishment of nurseries, child-care centers, daycare centers for working mothers, etc. Some of the abducted children were transferred to WIZO as a transition station before adoption. Parents who attempted to see their child were usually sent away under the false pretense that the child had died. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Hadas Ziv views the racial attitude toward the Yemenite parents as institutional racism which existed in the Israeli medical system at the time of the affair as well as in more contemporary affairs, for instance, regarding Ethiopian Jews (Ziv, Hadas. 2017. “A Cognitive Dissonant Health System: Can We Combat Racism Without Admitting it Exists.” In *Bioethics and Biopolitics in Israel*, edited by Hagai Boas, Yael

   Hashiloni-Dolev, Shai Lavi, Nadav Davidovitch, and Dani

   Filc, 76–96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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   [↑](#endnote-ref-6)