
Cosmopolitanism and Searching for the Sacred Space in Jewish Literature

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Jewish Social Studies, Volume 9, Number 3, Spring/Summer 2003
(New Series), pp. 121-138 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press





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Amir Eshel

From its onset in Stoicism, cosmopolitanism encompassed both *ars vitae* and a philosophical attitude that equated the space of the polis with that of the entire cosmos. In relating space to human existence and to death, Stoicism followed the archaic notion that human existence is fundamentally connected to and manifested in space. Indeed, as Mircea Eliade and others pointed out, it was through the placing of a sign of human being in space that geographical places first became recognized as such, and, vice versa, that human existence obtained a form.¹ Life and death were bound to space through the placing of a mark, primarily to distinguish the ancestral burial site from the chaos of the universe. The presence of human remains at this place denoted the relation between finitude and genealogical continuation, making the act of burial the very source of signification. In fact, the ancient Greek word *sema* meant both “sign” and “grave.”²

In discussing Jews as cosmopolitans, the question of Jewish culture’s conception of human existence and space thus seems inevitable: How did concepts of human existence in space inform patterns in Jewish religion, thought, and literature? What specific metaphors and idioms did Jewish thought engender in religious writings and in literature? In what follows, I will discuss these questions while introducing the ancient Judaic concept of *makom*—that is, literally “place,” but also, as in *Ha-makom*, “God.” The noun *makom* denotes the exterior marker of an arbitrary “anywhere,” and yet it also marks the sublime itself. It signifies both the plain inhabitation of space and the urge to, the longing for, being in the ultimate sacred space, being one with God.³

The idea of makom is hence essential to understanding one of the main strains of Jewish literature from antiquity to the present: the irresolvable tension between cosmos and makom. The historical fact that through the centuries Jews inhabited almost the entirety of the human cosmos went hand in hand with a constant striving for being in and with makom. Looking at biblical narratives and a variety of works from different periods of Jewish literature, I will show how the theologically and philosophically informed tension between cosmos and makom responded to distinctive literary forms and thus constituted a marked Jewish poetics of space.⁴ The historical diasporic condition, the tension between cosmos and makom, left Jewish writers with a persistent desire to arrive in makom at least poetically, and thus to be.

Unlike Greek and Roman antiquity, biblical Judaism never sanctified the place or any ancestral burial site as such.⁵ For many archaic cultures, a certain place dictated the very notion of sacredness, but in Judaic thought and literature the sacred was instead the place of God's spiritual dwelling or the site of Godly revelation. As Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran pointed out in their remarkable essay "Al ha-makom" (On Place), the biblical narrative significantly places God not in the material dwelling, in the tabernacle, but among the living, among the Israelites: "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them [*Ve-asu li mikdash ve-shakhanti be-tokham*]" (Ex. 25, 8).⁶

The formal structure of space and the symbolic emphasis on certain places in the Bible leaves the tension between concrete, material places and the idea of makom unresolved. No place as such is rendered eternally holy. Rather, a remarkable event, an encounter with the idea of makom at a certain place, lends a specific site its sanctified substance. It is not the place that sanctifies but the performative character of language spoken or heard in a certain place. For example, when Moses first encounters God, he does so in the wilderness. It is the performative sanctification symbolized by the burning bush that leads to God's command: "Come no closer . . . for the place [*Ha-makom*] on which you are standing is holy ground" (Ex. 3, 5). It is not the place that is holy but the earth on which the mortal human stands.

Let us consider one other ur-scene of Jewish literature, Jacob's revelation dream. After Isaac commands Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman and to go at once to Padan-Aram (Gen. 28, 1–3)—a scene notably evoking God's address to Abraham, "Go from your country [*lekh lekha*]" (Gen. 12, 1)—Jacob arrives at "a certain place [*va-yifga ba-makom*]" (Gen. 28, 11). Lying there on a randomly picked stone, Jacob encounters God. It is there, in what is distinctively nowhere, that God reaffirms the promise He had made to his grandfather, Abraham: "the

land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring” (Gen. 28, 13).

To be sure, this rather transparent account also consists of a complex symbolism. The noun *makom*, which appears in this short account six times, becomes the figurative marker for Jacob’s transformation. While being in this nameless spot, while narrating the events, Jacob becomes what he will be from now on: one of the founding fathers. So read, the scene opens itself as an ancient Judaic treatise on the matter of being and space. Jacob seems to grasp this immediately, because when he wakes up, he reasons: “Surely the LORD *is* in this place—and I did not know it [*Akhen yesh adonai ba-makom ha-zeh*]! . . . How awesome *is* this place [*ma nora ha-makom ha-zeh*]! This *is* none other than the house of God, and this *is* the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28, 17; my emphasis). For Jacob, the occurrences in the dream clearly denote the ontological linkage between his previous life and his new one, as well as between his preceding and present modes of existence and the space he had entered. The gate of heaven is not in a known, named location, in a holy place that has been previously introduced as such, like Mount Moriah.⁷ Rather, heaven’s gate lies there, where God currently is: “*yesh adonai ba-makom ha-zeh*.” The place is “awesome” because of God’s presence. In fact, God *is* through revealing Himself in this nameless space. Thus, one might say, the semiotic marker “God” *is* or *becomes* by turning the nameless space into a place.

The ontological dimension of the narrative did not escape the scrutinizing eyes of the midrashic rabbis. In *Genesis Rabbah*, they unfold the allegorical account of Jacob’s revelation scene, mentioning that God Himself is called *Makom* because, as Rabbi Huna points out, He is “the Place of the world.”⁸ Yet, even if God’s presence is inscribed in the entirety of His creation, Rabbi Jose ben Halafta counters, He Himself does not dwell in our world: “His world is not His place.”⁹ *Makom*, they agree, encodes God’s presence in the entirety of space alongside His absence from any concrete, material spot.¹⁰ Rabbi Shimon goes even further and reads the syntagma “the land on which you lie” (Gen. 28, 13) as the transformation of the spatial marker *Ha-arets*, the land, into a text: the symbolic place of revelation can be folded like a notebook and carried anywhere. According to Rabbi Shimon’s reading, *makom* exists in the textual realm, in the idea of *makom*, and nowhere else.¹¹

Jacob becomes what he is because of the two facets of the cipher *makom*: he inscribes this space with its meaning, thus turning it into a place, and this *makom*—denoting both the Godly presence at a certain place and the place’s symbolic materiality—inscribes itself into the figure of Jacob. Jacob *is*, from now on, because of this place. Accordingly,

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when he wakes up from his revelation dream, he turns his nightly dwelling into a place, naming it Beth-el, the house of God. Hence, the revelation scene of Beth-el does not simply narrate the revelation. It simultaneously codifies the idea that Jacob's role in the genealogical order is contingent upon his inhabiting, imagining, depicting, giving meaning to, transgressing—in short, being in—this certain place. Beyond the widely acknowledged tension in Jewish literature between exile and homecoming, between *galut* and *shivah*, this prototypical scene points toward the ontological dimension prevalent in many literary works to come—the intrinsic longing for a place to inhabit, for makom as the precondition of a meaningful human existence.

Makom is hardly identical with Zion or the Promised Land. Rather, Jewish literature across the millennia, and especially in the modern era, is concerned with poetically inhabiting makom, with turning spaces of dwelling into places of meaningful existence, and not necessarily with physical housing or with places of worship as such. This concern, this search for makom, is most evident in what I would like to call, using the terminology of literary criticism, Jewish topographies. "Topography," in its primary use, combines the Greek *topos*, "place," and *graphein*, "to write." While rejecting the essentialist trap of viewing Jews as the mere carriers of mythological, biblical "genes" that condition their beliefs and literature in regard to the place, I believe that examining the ways in which Jewish writers depict, imagine, and transgress *topoi*—that is, the ways they unfold spatial metaphors, metonymies, and allegories of places—can reveal major aspects and shifts in Jewish culture's notion of human existence and space.

Like all literary topographies, Jewish topographies never serve as mere references to actual sites.¹² Rather, they simultaneously bear the trace of theological and philosophical concerns. From the onset of Jewish literature, topographies served as road signs in patterns of thought, markers of different conceptions about present and future modes of Jewish being. Countless biblical narratives, poems, and allegorical-philosophical accounts are organized around topographical markers. One thinks of Canaan and Egypt, the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, the cows of Bashan, the three crimes of Damascus, Jonah's Nineveh, and Job's Uz—all these are hardly merely historical and geographical references but are ciphers of cultural memory, decisive elements of Judaic ontological thought.

In post-biblical times, the Midrash, the Mishnah, and the Talmud have constantly raised questions of life and place, obviously from the perspective of exile. The destruction of the Second Temple and the expulsion of the Jews from their land increased significantly the reading

of makom as a linguistic marker for the idea that God can reveal Himself anywhere, that makom is first and foremost in the text. While the longing for homecoming was always linked with the tragic sense, already present in Genesis and Deuteronomy, that “home is a place one looks back to and forward to, but never actually inhabits except briefly,” as Arnold Eisen has strikingly shown, after the destruction, the holy, all-signifying text and the place of learning became themselves a kind of makom.¹³ Contemplating the course of Jewish history and philosophy, Franz Rosenzweig pointed out that even in the land of Israel Jews were not like any other territorially defined and confined nation:

The third exile could not be the end of the people of Israel, since from its inception the history of the Jews passes from one exile to another, and since the spirit of exile, the essential foreignness to the land, a struggle for higher forms of life against the confinement of the land and the time, is rooted in this history from its beginning.¹⁴

From this perspective, one might add, the question of how to live, practice, and continue the genealogical chain stemming from Abraham became even more crucial. Indeed, Jewish writers across the generations of exile were not so much obsessed with the urge to return to Zion—a notion many of them regarded as messianic—but were motivated by the desire to inhabit their dwelling place poetically, at least, and thus, by doing so, ontologically *to be*. Reading Yehudah Halevi’s poem “To Zion,” leaving the projections of many Zionist readers aside, one is struck by the linkage the poem makes between the ability of the “I” to imagine Zion and its own being:

O Zion! Will you not ask how your
captives are—the exiles who seek your
welfare, who are the remnants of your
flocks?

. . .

I am like a jackal when I weep for
Your affliction; but when I dream of
your exiles’ return, I am a lute for your
songs.¹⁵

As in many of Halevi’s Zion poems, the very existence of the lyrical “I”—its ability to render longing into words, to express desires in the symbolic order—is contingent upon constructing, imagining, and immersion in the topographic marker “Zion.” Hence, “Zion” is not just the material, realistic locus of desire. Rather, since the “I” is the medium of

Zion (“a lute for your / songs”), this place, this makom, serves as the precondition of poetic language itself. To be sure, in Halevi’s case, relating poetically to Zion means expressing a religious conviction in which the holiness of this particular idealized place lies at the core of the poem. Yet, as the following lines of the poem “To Zion” suggest, the poetic marker “Zion” is figured as the precondition of being: “I would pour out my life in the very / place where once the spirit of God was / poured out upon your chosen ones.”¹⁶ Hence, in order to be, the writer needs to at least poetically immerse himself in this significant sign.

Seven hundred years after Halevi’s premature death on his way to Zion, the first modern cosmopolitan Jewish poet, Heinrich Heine, used Halevi’s Zion topographies ironically, in order to ask if longing for a place, yearning for makom, must result in inhabiting Zion itself. For Heine, Halevi’s greatness lay primarily in his yearning, in his metaphorical rendition of the idea of a sacred place, rather than in his attempt actually to return home. Thus, Heine ends his loving-ironical description of Halevi’s journey to Zion not with a pathetic death scene, with Jerusalem serving as a dramatic backdrop, but with Halevi’s other homecoming—in God’s (Ha-makom’s) own home:

Tranquil flowed the rabbi’s lifeblood,
Tranquil he sang his song out
To the end, and his last dying
Sigh breathed out: Jerusalem!—

...
Up above, it states, a special
Flattering reception waited
To accord the poet honor—
What a heavenly surprise!¹⁷

Heine’s “Jehuda Ben Halevi” is not just a lyrical homage to the great poet’s life. Rather, it also serves as a virtually modernist allegory of the impossibility of return. Indeed, as Romanticism increasingly concentrated on language, topographies became even more drastically an actual site of happening. What remains valid in Heine’s Zion is thus the topographic marker of the desire to inhabit makom and thus to be. In fact, Heine’s own topographies can be read as a constant attempt to inhabit places poetically in the European cosmos, to turn them into makom and thus find himself sites of meaningful being.

Unlike Goethe in his Italy travelogue, or Madame de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne*—both topographies of highly self-conscious and self-confident European travelers of Heine’s time—Heine’s writing of places con-

stantly combines affection and distance, familiarity and radical estrangement. Works such as *The Rabbi of Bacherach*, the *Harz Journey*, the *Norderney* reflections, the journey from Munich to Genoa, the letters from Berlin, and his famous *Deutschland: Ein Wintermaerchen* are hardly just descriptions of the travels of a German writer through Europe of his time, but rather stations on the map of a converted Jew who tries to inscribe himself and his unique circumstances into the place, knowing that he does not have and will not have a home to which he can return.

Heine's topographies were contingent on his historical context as a converted Jew born 14 years after Moses Mendelssohn, in his topographical-philosophical figure *Jerusalem* (1783), coined both the separation of religion from the state and the liberation of the idea of Jerusalem from the city's actual locus.¹⁸ Mendelssohn's usage of Jerusalem as a cipher for universalized, enlightened Judaism was to be followed by several other distinguished topographies—from Moses Hess's *Rome and Jerusalem* (1862) to Gershom Scholem's *From Berlin to Jerusalem* (1980). Although always pleading for one or the other, all these topographies encode the irresolvable tension between cosmos and makom.¹⁹ Even the convinced Zionist, Scholem, noted in 1956—in what seems today to be a staggering prophecy—that a radical juxtaposition of Israel and the Diaspora is unnecessary. Indeed, Scholem says, both are in “deep crisis” because both are “lacking *utopia*” (Scholem's emphasis).²⁰ Both are not, one might add, bound to become the fulfillment of the idea of makom.

Of course, not all modern Jewish writers made use of concrete geographic ciphers such as Jerusalem or Rome to evoke the tension between cosmos and makom. Franz Kafka, who at least for a while played with the idea of return that is immigration to Zion, refrained from using concrete geographical markers in his texts. Even in works such as *Der Verschollene* (also known as *America*), one finds hardly any specific geographical indicators. Nevertheless, Kafka's works convey a strong urge to map and unfold spaces. Some of these, such as the late aphoristic story entitled “Home-Coming,” suggest a radical and constant search for a place of origin that is nevertheless accompanied by the knowledge that this desire would remain forever unfulfilled.

In Kafka's “Home-Coming,” the narrator depicts his previous home as a wasteland: torn pieces of cloth flutter in the breeze. An oblivious void reigns over all. This hollowness can hardly be read solely from the perspective of high modernism and its reaction to modern displacement and disenchantment. The story's symbolic frame points also to its Judaic ontological dimension. The narrator returns to a space significantly filled with the figure of an omnipotent, omnipresent, nameless

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father. This father figures as the symbolic marker of an ancient patriarchal society governed by the genealogical chain leading from the ur-father to father to son. In Kafka's modernist account, though, this marker points also to the father as eminent void and the resulting existential uncertainty that governs the narrator's thoughts:

I have arrived. Who is going to receive me? Who is waiting behind the kitchen door? Smoke is rising from the chimney, coffee is being made for supper. Do you feel you belong, do you feel at home? I don't know, I feel most uncertain. My father's house it is, but each object stands beside the next, as though preoccupied with its own affairs, which I have partly forgotten, partly never known.

The topographic order of "inside" and "outside," the mapping of the seen, unseen, remembered, and imagined space (kitchen, chimney, and so on), serve as the backdrop for the actual, existential question of the text: because modernity made any notion of essentialist belonging and return obsolete, what are then the preconditions of modern being in space? The decentralized subject unfolds himself through the frozen objects. These are merely signs of his constant, tortured self-questioning: "What do I mean to them?" Knowing that he does not mean anything to them, that one cannot return, and, like countless sons in the genealogical chain, that he, too, needs to seek his own place, to inhabit his own makom, the narrator discloses: "And since I am listening from a distance, I hear nothing but a faint striking of the clock passing over from childhood days, but perhaps I only think I hear it."²¹ The narrator's modern uncertainty about his perception results in a radical questioning of the kind of knowing that is the most intimate of all—childhood's sphere—and thus of knowing per se. The longer one hesitates before the door, the story concludes, the more estranged one becomes. Yet, one cannot but wait in front of the material door of one's own childhood's house, one cannot but face the imagined barrier in front of all previous modes of life.

By writing of the impossibility of crossing the border from being there to being here, from the cosmos surrounding the home to the home itself, the narrator comes to know that striving for his previous place is senseless. Thus, he asks, "What would happen if someone were to open the door now and ask me a question? Would not I myself then behave like one who wants to keep his secret?"²² Now that he has understood that there is no possible return, that modernity has collapsed the cosmos and makom together, and that what remains is a sheer, naked existence in the emptied universe, he can only tell of this emptiness, measure the void.

Kafka's topographies, emphasizing the ontological bond between being and space in light of the modern human condition, offered another classic cartographer of modern Jewish topographies, Walter Benjamin, the hermeneutic key for his own reflection on the eternal, open search for makom. In his famous essay on Kafka, Benjamin equates the village at the foot of Kafka's Castle Hill with a story told by a talmudic rabbi in which a princess languishing in exile awaits her fiancé. The rabbi in this legend deciphers the princess as the soul, the fiancé as the Messiah, and the village in which the princess lives in exile as the body. Benjamin then develops his own account of the legend: "This village is right in Kafka's world. For just as K. lives in the village on Castle Hill, modern man lives in his body; the body slips away from him, is hostile toward him. It may happen that a man wakes up one day and finds himself transformed into vermin." "Exile," Benjamin concludes, "his exile—has gained control over him. The air of this village blows about Kafka, and that is why he was not tempted to found a religion."²³

Like Kafka before him, Benjamin sensed and thematized the modern mode of life as living in an all-encompassing exile. Moreover, like Kafka, Benjamin did not believe it possible to equate redemption with return, makom with Zion, as his correspondence with Ludwig Strauss shows.²⁴ Yet, unlike Kafka, and much like Heine, Benjamin regarded his topographical excavations as a process through which one uncovers the remains of past times, informs one's own thinking, and thus reflects on one's own existence. As Benjamin maintained in his *Arcades Project*, the engagement with the past of spaces, with objects in those spaces, results in tracing the afterlife of the past and thus in participating in the present life of things. Being past, being no more, Benjamin emphasized, does not mean that the object, the street, the lava-covered city, ceased to be. In fact, for him "being past . . . is passionately at work in things" and in places.²⁵

While excavating time as it is engraved in spaces, the archaeologist of cultural history, the historian of the present past, himself changes. Significantly, Benjamin regarded his extensive cultural archaeology, his topographies, dedicated to Naples, Moscow, Marseilles, San Gimignano, and Berlin, as *Denkbilder*, thought images—that is, textual and linguistic manifestations of patterns of thought as those emerge from geographical images. *Denkbilder* were, for Benjamin, actual sites of human life as those become words and reflect current modes of human being.²⁶ In the linguistic and literary exploration of places, buildings, streets, and cities, he thus saw not only the presentation of the excavation's results but also the encounter with one's self. Writing—language—represented for him the medium through which one's life unfolds in

space, the medium of what is experienced, “just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie and buried.”²⁷ He who seeks to approach his own buried past, Benjamin concluded, “must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil.”

The metaphor of the earth encompassing old cities, remains, ruins, and the self’s buried past is prevalent in Benjamin’s philosophical topographies, his *Denkbilder*. There is thus a fluid line leading from the writing “I” to the written space and from the space and its objects back to the “I.” The result of this movement is the same in all of Benjamin’s *Denkbilder*: the inscription of the self into the described space. Characteristically, in Benjamin’s “Nordic See” *Denkbild*, the perspective shifts constantly from the depicted scene to the innermost self and back:

In the evening, heart heavy as lead, full of anxiety, on the deck. For a long time I follow the play of the gulls. . . . The sun has long since gone down, and in the east it is very dark. . . . Some brightness in the west. What now happened to the birds or—to myself?: that occurred by virtue on the spot that I, so domineeringly, so lonely, selected for myself in my melancholy in the middle of the quarter-deck. All of the sudden there were two flights of gulls, one to the east one to the west, left and right, so entirely different that the name gull fell away from them.²⁸

The gulls are the medium for the writing, lonely self. They denote melancholy as this spreads from the self to the middle of the quarterdeck and then encompasses the entirety of the concrete-space sea. The image that brings together the writer, the act of writing, and what is described is no less than the inscription of the writer, the inscription of the wandering Jew, and his hope to inhabit the spaces of his momentary dwelling at least poetically, and thus to be. The design of Benjamin’s space portraits lies in their amalgamation of nearness and alienation, as Peter Szondi rightly pointed out. Hence, they bring together the distance of the writer and the joy of the flaneur, the sufferings of the wanderer and his desire to inhabit—even if from an alienated perspective—a space.²⁹ Benjamin’s literary procedure as manifested in the symbolic dimension of his topographic writings thus exposes his own, modern variant of the archaic investigation of being and space.

To be sure, it was not only German-Jewish writers dwelling in exile who were obsessed with searching for the buried time in space, searching for a space they could poetically inhabit, a space where they could

be. The beginnings of modern Hebrew literature are packed with examples of poetic topographies. One could mention here Shalom Jacob Abramovitz (Mendele Moykher Sforim) and his allegorical epic *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*, H. N. Bialik's paradigmatic poem "El ha-Tsipor" (To the Bird), with its juxtaposition of Zion and Russia, Yonathan Ratosh's Canaanite anthems, or Yosef Hayim Brenner's masterly symbolic illustration of old Jerusalem in his *Breakdown and Bereavement*.

The most significant topography in Hebrew literature of the first half of the twentieth century, though, remains S. Y. Agnon's masterpiece, *Tmol shilshom* (Only Yesterday). Arranged around the figure of Isaac Kumer, a young Galician Zionist of the second emigration wave (1904–14), this novel is at its core an allegory of the tension between cosmos and makom. Continuing the archaic master narrative of departing sons on their way to become the next link in the chain of Jewish genealogy, Agnon begins Kumer's journey by noting that the latter "left his country and his homeland and his city and ascended to the Land of Israel to build it from its destruction and to be rebuilt by it."³⁰

Agnon's palimpsestic wording evokes not only the Zionist anthem "Anu banu artsah" ("We came to the land to build it and be built") but also the biblical ontological notion that inhabiting a place, striving for being in and with makom, is the precondition of becoming, of being. From the onset—Kumer's train travel from his hometown through Lemberg, Krakow, Vienna, and Trieste—the construction of space serves as the backdrop for Kumer's physical and mental state. After arriving in Palestine and throughout the novel, Kumer, whose name in Yiddish and German denotes grief and sorrow, is torn between two symbolic places—Jerusalem and Jaffa. Sweaty, vibrant Jaffa signifies what is Mediterranean, Oriental, and cosmopolitan, whereas the remote, holy, and transcendent Jerusalem is covered by "flaming dust." Not only is the city sunk in layers of choking dust, but

[e]ven a bird in the sky, even a dog in the street are covered with dust. You may have heard that the people of Jerusalem wear clothes of various hues, but their color cannot be seen because of the dust on them. . . . From Jaffa Gate to Mahne Yehuda a pillar of dust ascends to the heart of the sky and covers the eyes of Jerusalem. And every house is like a box of dust.³¹

The topographic juxtaposition of Jaffa and Jerusalem is paralleled in the symbolic order by Kumer's split erotic desires, for he is also torn between his wife, the compliant Shifra, who lives in Jerusalem, and his light-hearted love from Jaffa, Sonia. Yet, just as neither Jaffa nor Jerusalem will become Kumer's makom, neither Sonia nor Shifra will convey the desired feeling of homecoming.

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The impossibility of reaching makom is most radically present in the secret protagonist of the book, the dog Balak. In a moment of absent-mindedness, Isaac Kumer writes with brush and paint on the skin of the stray dog “kelev meshuga” (crazy dog), thus inscribing onto him the madness slowly creeping into Kumer’s soul—the madness whose main reason seems to be his hopeless search for a settled dwelling place. After Kumer inscribes his wandering being onto the dog’s flesh, Balak will become his fatal shadow. The dog will wander the streets of Jerusalem without finding a place of rest. Finally, in a chapter titled “Balak higia limkomo”—“Balak Reaches His Place,” but also “Balak Reaches God” and “Balak Dies”—the allegorical topography reaches its symbolic peak: the dog bites Kumer, infecting him with rabies, and thus closes the semiotic cycle of eternal wandering, madness, and death. Coming to one’s own place, being in makom, seems to be possible, especially in light of modern Jewish nationalism, only in death.

In the figure of the wandering dog who becomes one with the gray Zionist Kumer, Agnon masterfully codifies the modern radicalization of the ancient tension between cosmos and makom.³² The spatial construction centered on the bipolarity of Jaffa and Jerusalem is echoed in the absurdity of a dog running through the streets of Jerusalem as an allegory for Kumer’s sorrows and those of all his modern contemporaries.³³ One of the most colorful figures in Agnon’s kaleidoscope, Rabbi Grunam, describes the current time in the chapter “Balak Reaches His Place” as one of existential madness: “And now, gentlemen, what shall we say and what shall we claim, for we see the face of the generation as the face of a dog. And not just an ordinary dog, but a mad dog.”³⁴

Rabbi Grunam’s frantic speech toward the end of Agnon’s *Only Yesterday* addresses more than the circumstances in Palestine during the teens. As Sarah Hager has shown, Agnon’s work on *Only Yesterday* stretched over a period of more than 15 years, from around 1930 to 1945, thus covering the time of global madness surrounding questions of connectedness to material places, personal and collective identities, nationhood, and race.³⁵ The result of this period was an outburst of previously unknown brutal aggression and the almost total destruction of European Jewry. Kumer’s death at the end of the novel hints therefore not only at Agnon’s complex vision of the course of the Zionist endeavor but also at the destruction of the geographical-cultural space that Agnon eternalized in his loving literary depictions of his Galician hometown, Buczacz, during the Shoah.

To be sure, the Shoah brought a horrific loss of life and a catastrophic breach in Jewish civilization to European soil. Yet it also marked a decisive shift in the dialectic tension between cosmos and ma-

kom. As Sidra DeKoven-Ezrahi has pointed out, the loss of the ancient ancestral home and sacred center after the destruction of the second Temple was now followed by the loss of the diasporic fatherland.³⁶ From then on, cosmos would inevitably denote death, and makom would mark the void where Godly omnipresence once seemed at hand. The literary and actual “I” had become, as the Hungarian Jewish writer and survivor Imre Kertész suggested, not just an always already “other” (“Ich—ein anderer”) but also an entity deprived of place, of a significant mode of being altogether.³⁷

New topographies conveying the radical negation of being in space thus emerged as of 1945 on the surface of Jewish literature. The Hebrew poet Dan Pagis, who survived a forced labor camp in Transnistrien, gave this new situation a topographic idiom in his poem “Autobiography,” claiming that “When Cain began to multiply on the face of the earth, / I began to multiply in the belly of the earth.”³⁸ Like Aharon Appelfeld’s chilly account of the infectious German or Austrian *Badenheim*, Pagis’s topographies are the sealed railway car and the empty sky through which the new seraphim, “long convoys of smoke,” wander.³⁹

The mass killing of those who were deprived of their workplaces, parks, homes, and cities and finally left without a proper burial site shook the literary imagination of almost all Jewish writers who wrote in the face of the Shoah. Among the most radical in their search to give this condition of absolute spatial deprivation an idiom were two writers who, like Heine and Benjamin before them, chose Paris as their place of refuge: the Egyptian-born Edmond Jabès, and the Bukovina-born Paul Celan. What distinguishes their writing from that of the others is their intense topographies, which relate both to the aesthetic modernist tradition and to their conceptions of Jewish being in space.

In his famous poem “Todesfuge,” Celan juxtaposed the *Meister* death and his victims while signifying both with decisive topographic markers: the *Meister* stems from Germany. He is characterized through the comfortable self-contained being in the house where he lives, plays, and writes. However, the speaking “we” do not inhabit any place. Their existence is solely related to the graves they are digging, not in the ground but in the air. What they are left with is neither cosmos nor makom. It is only their ability to speak poetically to us, to inscribe their being not into a place but into words: “We dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined / A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes . . . he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave in the earth.”⁴⁰

Even after Celan abandoned the surrealist poetics still prevalent in his “Todesfuge,” his topography of Jewish being in the face of the



Shoah, his poetic attempt at least to inscribe the dead and the survivors into the text and thus render them present, remained consistent. A new, inverted topography of human existence emerges out of Celan's poem "Engführung." From the first line, one does not arrive at a named place but is rather thrown into a marked space, "Driven into the / terrain / with the unmistakable track." It is there, in the inverted universe, where human language is composed of imperatives ("look!", "Go!"), and the current hour has "no sister," where time is thus the time of death, that the poem's "thou" is "at home [*du bist— / bist zuhause*]." Being at home there means addressing the void surrounding the dead and the fact that they were deprived not only of their life but also of any place of eternal rest: "The place where they lay, it has / a name—it has / none."⁴¹ The place that simultaneously has a name and has none is the poetic correspondence with a previously unknown historical condition of absolute void in which the dead were left with no burial site, no gravestone, no trace but that of the words of the testimonies, the words of the poet.

A similar inverted universe, yet one relating more closely to pre-Holocaust Judaic notions of space, characterizes the writing of Jabès. Stemming from a middle-class, assimilated Jewish family, Jabès first confronted what he would later call his Jewish nomadic fate when he was forced to leave Egypt in the course of the 1956 Suez Crisis. Losing a place of origin that he never had doubted until then, Jabès came to view his historical circumstance as the manifestation of the Jewish condition *per se*—the existence of a people torn from all places, a people existent in the space between places, not in them. According to Jabès, for the Jew living out the Jewish condition, the book is the only place where he or she can find truth, can *be*.⁴² This place is indeed Israel, not the geographical locus but the Israel of Jewish history, the age-old dream of Israel, the idea of *makom*.⁴³ Jabès's lyrical prose emphasizes thus not the named, confined place but the space between things, the space between words. Like the Jew who lives between places, not in them, the text, the book, is located in between: between the cosmic void and the slant figures printed on the white page.

Jabès's highly abstract (if not hermetic) works are focused thus on the white between the black of the printed or written word, the white that enables the reader to recognize the text as such.⁴⁴ His idea of the book as *makom* finds its echo in the poetic figuration of the book as an entity with no center and no point that engenders another point "around which an eccentric utterance establishes itself, an interrogation develops."⁴⁵ This poetic place is the only one that he, as a Jewish author, can claim. "The book," Jabès points out, "is my only habitat, the first and also the final place of a vaster non-place where I live."⁴⁶

In his lyrical opus *The Book of Questions*, Jabès addresses the word, the text as both the place and the nonplace, the cosmos it encompasses. In this book, Jabès tells in a fragmentary and aphoristic mode of two young lovers, Sarah and Yukel, during the time of Nazi deportations. Yukel, the writer and Jabès's alter ego, is separated from Sarah, who is deported to a Nazi concentration camp. She will return from her captivity insane yet capable of a new language, the language of the universal void. The novel is composed of the lovers' voices and of the voice of a gallery of imaginary rabbis. The resulting choir uses decisive topographic markers to construct the word space poetically for those who were left with no other form of spatial existence.

The choir of voices, the net of assertions relating being to place, reads not just as a poetic reply to the historical catastrophe but also as a treatise on the Jewish existential condition:

Man is a written bond and place.⁴⁷

The Jew's fatherland is a sacred text amid the commentaries it has given rise to.⁴⁸

To be in the book. . . . To be able to say: "I am in the book. The book is my world, my country, my roof, and my riddle. The book is my breath and my rest." . . .

I get up with the page that is turned. I lie down with the page put down. To be able to reply: "I belong to the race of words, which homes are built with"—when I know full well that this answer is still another question, that this home is constantly threatened. . . .

If God is, it is because he is in the book. If sages, saints, and prophets exist, if scholars and poets, men and insects exist, it is because their names are found in the book. The world exists because the book does.⁴⁹

Significantly, Jabès's metaphoric universe, created in the face of the Shoah and his own exile, is not merely related to a specific historical experience. Both formally (in its fictive midrashic polyphony of rabbis representing different interpretations of the text) and thematically (the story of departure, exile, deportation, and loss), the book relates to the beginnings of Jewish literature and the initial stage of Jewish thought. Indeed, it refers back and continues from such prototypical scenes as Jacob's revelation dream. Jabès's drastic ontology "to be in the book," his anthropology, the "race of words," and his poetic insistence on the book as place and precondition of being build on such emphatic statements as Jacob's "Surely the LORD *is* in this place. . . . How awesome *is* this place!" Hence, beyond the millennial abyss, the midrashic rabbi Shimon and the Egyptian-French Jew Jabès seem to share the

conviction that the place of revelation is everywhere, that it can be folded like a notebook and carried anywhere, that makom exists first and foremost in the poetic idea, the hope, the constant striving to arrive at the unreachable while dwelling in the cosmos.

In light of contemporary Jewish writing in Israel, in the United States, in Germany, and elsewhere, it seems that Jacob's dream at Bethel as echoed in Halevi's poems, in Heine's travelogues, in Agnon's metaphorical figures, and in Jabès's lyrical language will remain a constant strain of Jewish literature. Cosmopolitan at its core and constantly oscillating between cosmos and makom, Jewish literature will further offer us—in an increasingly globalized culture—a view of what future literature might look like.⁵⁰ One can see in Jewish literature the ways in which the particular experience becomes the emblem of the universal, and how the universal is captured and preserved in particular, indeed unique literary forms.

Notes

1 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York, 1959).

2 For a thorough examination of Greek and Latin concepts of burial and hence of marking places of human existence, see Robert Pogue Harrison's intriguing essay "Hic Jacet," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 393–407.

3 The international discourse on spaces and place from philosophical, anthropological, and literary points of view has intensified considerably in the past decade. Rather than offering a coherent account, I would like to point to a recently published, summarizing collection: Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, *Thinking Space* (London, 2000). The discussion of makom appears to develop along similar lines, yet with the distinctive aspect of relating

to the etymological and theological-philosophical implications of the term. The decisive founding moment of this discourse was the publication of the seminal article by Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran, "Al ha-makom," *Alpayim* 4 (1991). After its publication, a vibrant discussion of the authors' assumptions erupted in Israel. On this discussion, see Baruch Kimmerling's polemic, "Al daat Ha-makom" *Alpayim* 6 (1992), and the authors' reply, Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran, "Ha-matbea ha-kasheh shel ha-makom," *Alpayim* 8 (1993). A fascinating, philosophical-lyrical account of makom is offered by the essayist and literary critic Ariel Hirschfeld, *Reshimot al makom* (Tel Aviv, 2000).

4 On the term "poetics of space," see Gaston Bachelard, *The Poet-*

- ics of Space* (1964; reprint, Boston, 1994).
- 5 See Sara Japhet, "Some Biblical Concepts of Sacred Places," in *Sacred Space: Shrine, City, Land*, Benjamin Z. Kedar and R. J. Zwi Werblowski, eds. (New York, 1998), 58–59, and Gurevitch and Aran, "Al ha-makom," 10.
 - 6 Gurevitch and Aran, "Al ha-makom," 11.
 - 7 Reflecting rabbinic tradition, Rashi states (in Gen. 28, 17) that the nameless location was actually the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Yet this seems to be a hermeneutic account aimed at emphasizing the sanctity of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount by posing them as the actual locus of the Genesis narrative. This interpretation leaves unaccounted for the fact that Jacob is about to go into exile and undermines the biblical rhetoric, which focuses on the nonspecificity of makom and the implied notion that God is conceived as the space in which the universe exists.
 - 8 *Midrash Rabbah*, translated and edited under the editorship of Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, 3d printing (London, 1961), 620.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, 621.
 - 10 Makom appears more than 400 times in different forms in the Old Testament while remaining absent altogether from the New Testament. On the paradoxical notion that the deity in the form of Shekhinah's dwelling is present in a particular place and at the same time throughout the world, see Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1979), 54. Urbach points out that makom served in Jewish antiquity as a metonymy for the omnipresent God who reveals Himself in whatever place He desires (*ibid.*, 72). For a thorough historical decision of the epithet makom, see *ibid.*, 6–79.
 - 11 Gurevitch and Aran, "Al ha-makom," 16.
 - 12 J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (Stanford, 1995).
 - 13 Arnold M. Eisen, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), 50.
 - 14 Franz Rosenzweig, *Naharayim* (1919; reprint, Jerusalem, 1977), 67.
 - 15 *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. and trans. T. Carmi (New York, 1981), 347.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 348.
 - 17 Heinrich Heine, *Jewish Stories and Hebrew Melodies*, trans. Charles Godfrey Leland et al. (New York, 1987), 121.
 - 18 See Eisen, *Galut*, 64.
 - 19 On Hess's *Rome and Jerusalem*, see Eisen, *Galut*, 65–69.
 - 20 Gershon Scholem, "Utopyah meshutefet lanu ve-la-golah," in his *Od davar: Pirkei morashah u-tehiyah*, vol. 2, Avraham Shapira, ed. (Tel Aviv, 1989), 130.
 - 21 Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum Glazer (New York, 1971), 445.
 - 22 Kafka, *Complete Stories*, 445–46.
 - 23 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), 126.
 - 24 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe Bd. I 1910–1918* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), 61–65, 69–73, 74–79, 81–85.

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- 25 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 833 (D, 4).
- 26 On Benjamin's Denkbilder concept, see Sigrid Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997), 57–62.
- 27 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).
- 28 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. IV, 1*, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), 385–86. I am using here the translation of the “Nordic See” Denkbild passage as it appears in Peter Szondi, “Walter Benjamin's City Portraits,” in *On Walter Benjamin*, Gary Smith, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 27.
- 29 Szondi, “Walter Benjamin's City Portraits,” 26.
- 30 S. Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, 2000), 3.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 417.
- 32 On the complex relationship between the figures of Balak and Isaac, see Dan Miron, “Mimashal le-sipur tolati: P'tihah le-diyun bi-tmol shilshom,” in *Kovets agnon: An Agnon Miscellany*, Emuna Yaron et al., eds. (Jerusalem, 2000), 102, 133.
- 33 See Gershon Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit 1880–1980*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1977), 206–9.
- 34 Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 621.
- 35 Sarah Hager, “Tmol shilshom: Hithavut ha-mivneh ve-ahduto,” in *Shai Agnon: Mehkarim, u-teudot*, Gershon Shaked and Refa'el Vaizer, eds. (Jerusalem, 1978), 154–94. See also Miron, “Mimashal le-sipur tolati,” 133, 156.
- 36 Sidra DeKoven-Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley, 2000), 144.
- 37 Imre Kertész, *Ich—ein anderer* (Berlin, 1988).
- 38 Dan Pagis, *Points of Departure*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Philadelphia, 1981), 2.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 40 Paul Celan, *Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Manchester, Engl., 1980), 50 (translation modified by me).
- 41 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 42 Paul Auster, “Book of the Dead: An Interview with Edmond Jabès,” in *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès*, Eric Gould, ed. (Lincoln, Neb., 1985), 12.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 44 See Monika Schmitz-Emans, *Zwischen weisser und schwarzer Schrift: Edmond Jabès' Poetik des Schreibens* (Munich, 1994).
- 45 Edmond Jabès, “There Is Such a Thing as Jewish Writing . . .,” trans. Rosmarie Waldrop, in Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book*, 26.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, Conn., 1972), 19.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 50 Roland Robertson—one of the most significant analysts of globalization—defined the dynamic of globalization as “the twofold process of the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular.” See his *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London, 1992), 177–78.