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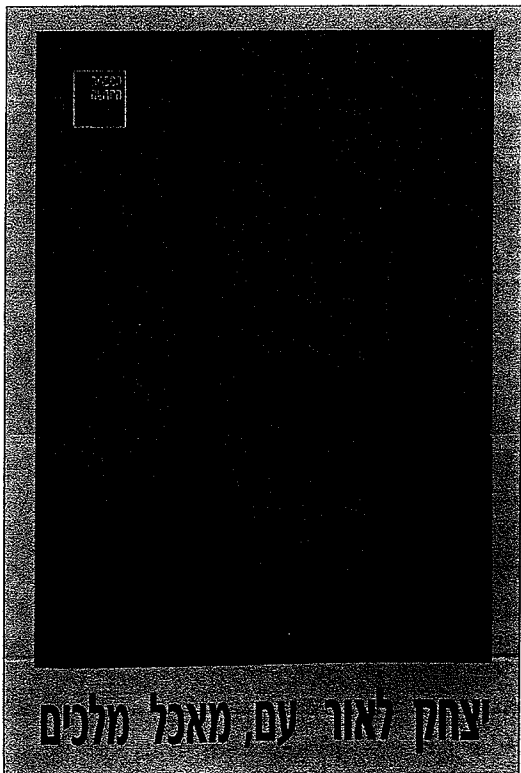
NEW SERIES

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# WHO LIES IN DARKNESS, WHO IN LIGHT?

by Amir Eshel

Yitzhak Laor, *The People, Food for Kings*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad/Siman Kriah, 1993. 536 pp.



“BECAUSE some lie in darkness/and others in light/those in light may be seen/those in darkness will not be seen.” Yitzhak Laor has chosen this short quatrain by Bertolt Brecht as an epigraph to his book *The People, Food for Kings*. Who are those who lie in darkness, and who in light? The book does not answer that riddle, perhaps because the scope of *The People, Food for Kings* is larger, and the language that Yitzhak Laor creates is immeasurably deeper than familiar literary works on people who lie in darkness or in light. In fact, this first book of prose by a leading poet is among the most significant works of Israeli literature produced in recent years.

Serving as the backdrop of the central events is a desolate army supply base in Israel’s south. This dusty and God-forsaken camp becomes a peephole through which Yitzhak Laor peers with great sharpness of vision at Israeli society in the late 1960s, and beyond that at the Zionist dream in all its greatness and ruin. But that is not all: peering through Yitzhak Laor’s peephole leads to a recognition that the fantastic, the heroic, and the sublime are tightly and paradoxically linked to the banal, the trivial, and above all to the repulsive. This incongruous paradox is not set against the magnificent backdrop of a historical novel, but rather against ugliness. After all, one finds the same people in the army base as in any other place on earth, God’s creatures, made in His image: “All the soldiers were created in God’s likeness and photographed by the same photographer,” Laor emphasizes, not without a large measure of irony. If this sounds pathetic, it is because Yitzhak Laor’s epic is about the pathetic, but pathos in its original, Greek sense. *The People, Food for Kings* is an epic on suffering.

It all begins in the autumn of 1966, a bit before the “great war” (the 1967 Six Day War) that casts its shadow over the entire book. Major Ephraim (Franz) Kishon — the name, that of a popular Israeli humourist, is not coincidental — the commander of the desolate base, dies suddenly. His meaningless death interrupts the bland routine of the soldiers at the base. Until his death the soldiers knew nothing about Major Ephraim, an unmarried Holocaust survivor. During his lifetime, he only showed paternal feelings towards Sergeant Rami, but Rami would have preferred to hear “exactly how it was to be in the Holocaust” rather than receive the Major’s unbridled sexual guidance. The riddle of Ephraim’s life and death is an enigma even as he expires operatically next to a eucalyptus tree. All that will remain of the man is a hugely powerful mask: “The first time I felt that I was really a person was thanks to him,” Rami writes about Ephraim after the latter’s death.

The description of the feeling with which the death leaves the soldiers recalls the language of S. Yizhar, and the wonderful syntax of Yaakov Shabtai: "We were a worm-eaten piece of earth; a stone was rolled off us, the fat commander was dead and people came and went and ran out and returned and again ran out, crawled, and many greenish shepherd-raven eyes surrounded, followed from within the dark limbs of the shrubs, dead groves, river, river growth, black fields, fetid scums on puddles, mucilaginous earth, potholed roads, jagged gullies lined with dry algae, from within avenues of trees a mute spring screamed, and the sprouts of corn and cotton emerged in the broad fields and the next summer's thorns looked like a pale fuzz, and the tree branches were dressed, under cover of night, by dark pustules; until, in the midst of busy monotony, one makes out the knobs, and then they have already turned into soft, tiny leaves."

And after the death? A new commander comes to the base, whose face is also no more than a mask. He is a man who can affect his soldiers' lives in any way he chooses. The new era in the soldiers' lives opens with the same unbearable slowness, all scratching and farts, so characteristic of life at the base. Through the eyes of the soldiers and via the confident voice of the narrator the figure of Major Uri, Ephraim's successor, is revealed to us. Uri is the precise opposite of the dead commander. He began his service in an acclaimed paratrooper unit, and the greatness of the honour he earned at the beginning of his army career is equal to the magnitude of his humiliation now, with his appointment as commander of the supply base. He had wanted to live up to the ideal of the brave, victorious native-born Israeli, and here he is, shouldering the responsibility for the inventory of the glorious Israeli army's noodle drainers. Uri's sufferings, and the great suffering that Uri causes his subordinates are, from here on, at the centre of *The People, Food for Kings*.

Uri's changeable, if not neurotic, moods are directed again and again at his soldiers. "Commander" Uri is for them a horrible representative of history, perceived by them as a something done to them against their will. Especially humiliating are his relations with the Hebrew teacher, Sergeant Shlomit. Each and every night he tortures her with stories of his love for the beautiful Rachel, daughter of a senior Mossad official. Yitzhak Laor is an artist of description of split-seconds, in the tracking of fragments of thought, as in his description of one of the nights when Shlomit has come to Uri's room. After he falls asleep she sits by him and wonders: "She accustoms herself to everything. She did not know which of them he had lied to, and maybe Rachel had

lied to her, because after all she had lied to Rachel when she had said how long she had known this story, and afterwards she hesitated a moment, and then stroked his hair. He was sleeping. He mumbled: 'I love you.' She did not know which of them he had addressed."

However, not only the humiliated suffer humiliation. The pity Uri's victims awaken in the reader is the existential sorrow that comes from the recognition of human weakness; the compassion produced by the text derives from the pain of the victim, but also from the feelings of nothingness and insignificance that slowly overcome Major Uri. He gradually cuts himself off from the world around him and remains in his room. From his refuge, he sets out on sporadic expeditions around the base, where his miserable soldiers are his victims. It is hard not to recall Hasek's Schweik and George Buchner's Wozzeck while reading these passages. Uri's real contact with the world is now through Rami and the base's cooks. The cooks serve him fantastic feasts to satisfy his appetite at night. At first the reader may only guess what he later realizes — that these feasts contain the excrement of the soldiers on the base. In this symbolically rich way, the master and his servants become, if only for the moment of voracious joy, one.

This is Greek mythology. It is hard not to identify the influence of Homeric motives in Laor's epic; in fact, it is an important element in the narrator's perception of himself. This story alludes to many other stories, other plots, which are all woven into the master plot. There is not only the long tradition of the war epic; Yitzhak Laor himself related, in one of the interviews he gave upon the book's publication, that the novel's name is taken from Homer's *Iliad*: "The *Iliad* interested me while I was writing the book, as a very enthusiastic story about going out to war. In the first ode the epithet 'a king who eats his people' is hurled at Agamemnon. I am not interested in the king, only in the people, so *The People, Food for Kings* is what remains." The "story" Laor is referring to is, beyond this specific tradition, the story of the Zionist enterprise as a whole and its attitude towards the sword. The result is Laor's specific point of view towards Zionism and the sword, which is perhaps representative of Israel in the 1990s. Where the great epic of the 1948 War of Independence, S. Yizhar's *Days of Ziklag*, directs attention to place, to Ziklag, the name of this book puts the people at the centre of the novel. It is about the people as the object of suffering, and about the array of national myths that bind it to this role.

The second dominant character in *The People, Food for Kings*, and perhaps to a large extent the character with which the narrator can emotionally identify, is Rafi. His father is a Communist by persuasion, a world-view that

was hardly acceptable in Israel of the late 1960s. Despite it being Rafi's explicit wish to "join the tribe" — to be a combat soldier — in the end he lands at the same God-forsaken supply base. He cannot overcome his disappointment at not "being like the rest." His *Via Dolorosa* leads him first to an army prison. Rafi's denial of his identity and his craving to belong lead him to destruction in the end. In his hellish ultimate scene we see Rafi spreading himself with his own excrement. He collapses and lies for days on end in the prison clinic with a burning fever. He cuts himself off from the world and refuses to talk.

After supreme efforts, his parents finally manage to reach him. "How I suffered until you came, Mum," the broken Rafi says to his mother. And she, a mother who had already dreamed of her son's death, answers: "I knew, the whole time you didn't write, I knew." A tear rolled down Rafi's cheeks. This strong man collapsed only because of his mother's touch, his father on the side, not knowing what to do, happy that they had found their son, the urge to take him, and in total incomprehension he went to the closet and began packing things as if they were his son's, in order to take him home." Yet the narrator has reservations about this logical "ending." *The People, Food for Kings* is a super-postmodernist book, and a sensitive writer like Laor will not suffice himself with an ending that absolves the reader of the necessity of inventing other "endings," and would take exception to the idea that history necessarily leads to a happy end, with the victory of the human spirit.

Rafi's wallowing in excrement in the prison camp is only one expression of the role bodily discharges play in the plot. Laor is a faithful reader of Freud and is acquainted with the link between hygienic education and an authoritarian world-view. The preoccupation with discharges, like the many descriptions of sex — some of them steeped in violence — often stand as challenges to the readers. Yet such descriptions also testify to Laor's desire to create an authentic narrative, to paint an unembellished picture of human society in general and of Israeli society in particular, as he sees them — as a field in which force plays too large a role, as a field in which the system of ideological pressures brings the individual again and again to the limit of his ability to survive.

*The People, Food for Kings* should be read as a comment of unparalleled sophistication on the mentality of a large portion of Israeli society, of those who say that "the whole world is against us." This belief, which has on occasion been developed into a virtual world-view, metamorphosed fatefully at the intersection of the

military victory of the Six Day War. For precisely this reason readers must, I believe, see the chain of events in the book from the spring of 1967 as its climax. At this point the soldiers on the base come across a secret document, "some sort of cable from Johnson to Eshkol, or the opposite, from Meir Amit to Johnson's aide, and then the soldiers realized that war would soon break out. Even though the document contained a promise of a six- or at most a seven-day lightning operation, the soldiers understood, as a result of their lack of faith in promises of any sort, that the war would last for many long years, and that it would have no end..." So, paradoxically, it is these soldiers, whom Laor's narrator calls "absolute imbeciles with no interest in anything of value," who give the newspapers the "real details" about the size of the Egyptian army, about it being a minor danger, and about the dangers lying in wait for all Israelis from victory in the war. The soldiers on the base finally flee from the war, despite the warnings of Major Uri, whom Yitzhak Laor at this stage calls Agamemnon. The Six Day War is prevented and this, of course, entirely changes the course of history.

This fantastical ending gives *The People, Food for Kings* a new and surprising dimension, since Yitzhak Laor does more than pose the complex question of whether the Six Day War was one Israel had an option not to fight, and does more than challenge the point of the war, with all the implications that has up to this very day. He — and this aspect is infinitely more important than the others — points out, as his plot progresses, the factors that motivate the collective and the field of influence and responsibility of each individual in this collective. While *The People, Food for Kings* deals with the collective as a "story," as an expression of the "order of discourse" — Laor is well-acquainted with the writings of Michel Foucault — it is within the ability of each of the "imbecile soldiers," each of the "retards" repulsively preoccupied with their various orifices, each of them and all of them together, to change the course of history, which they imagine as a phantom creature in whose gears they are helplessly ground to dust.

"Sing, daughter of God. Because what does the reader want?" With these words Yitzhak Laor opens his book, the ongoing dialogue, hundreds of pages long, with the readers reading the stories woven into *The People, Food for Kings* as a single story. This story has no beginning. It is the continuation of the great epic told by Hebrew literature, a language whose bounds Yitzhak Laor succeeds again and again in broadening, through hundreds of fragments of poetry scattered through his book: "And there is always a place for another silence, for another erasure. To forget, more than to forget, not

... know what I already know and what was, little by little, like a Bedouin well that the army has bravely covered, like an ever-deepening blackout, beyond which, somewhere, there is not only absolute silence, but also absolute blindness, absolute stillness, and also the darkness darker than anything else, thick, dense, that will not be broken by any lingering or squinting, nor will one ever become accustomed to it, hatchet eyes hatchet voice hatchet the thought . . .”

Since this “book” is many “stories,” one can find no end to *The People, Food for Kings*. As the author himself relates, stories have no solutions, “stories are rent, then mended, and the mend is then again rent in another place, perhaps even a larger tear, and then a mend is again attempted, and it is again mended, and then another place is rent . . .” *The People, Food for Kings* is a bold and uncompromising “rending” of any attempt to tell a tale without reservations, without criticism of the military or national myths and their incarnation as a world-view of the individual in Israeli society. This is a “rending” of a brilliant storyteller, who paints with words pictures that recall those of Hieronymous Bosch and the films of Peter Grenewiesp; pictures of agony that fill us with compassion and emotion, compassion for the necessity of rending, for the desperate attempt to mend; and emotion, if not a real sense of transcendence, at the need to tell the story and the ability to listen.

## A SHORT STORY

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# WHITE

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by Leah Aini

Translated from the Hebrew by Jeffrey M. Green

From *The Sea Horses' Loop*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad/Siman Kriah, 1991. 195 pp.

Leah Aini was born in 1962 in the south Tel Aviv neighbourhood depicted in her stories. She is a teacher and editor, an award-winning poet and a novelist.

