

Yehudah Amichai, “The Synagogue in the Venice Ghetto”

(Part of presentation by Murray Baumgarten: “Venice in Modern Hebrew Poetry”

We’ve already read one poem by Amichai together and Mehnaz has sent us another, so we are now a bit familiar with his style: those very pictorial images, the short lines, the Biblical verses which echo in the background.

This poem was written in 1974 and is part of a volume entitled *Me’achorei Kol Ze Mistater Osher Gadol [Behind All This a Great Joy is Hiding]*. I didn’t do this translation (I did the one Murray will be analyzing): it was done by the poet Ted Hughes in conjunction with Amichai. As I prepared this analysis, I found a number of places where I differ, or at least want you to know other associations conveyed by the Hebrew and I’ll point them out to you along the way.

I am guessing that this was Amichai’s first visit to Venice, but we know that he returned many times and that Venice appears in many of his subsequent poems. I will go through the poem line by line, but as I do I suggest you pay attention to the images of water and of glass which appear throughout the poem and see how Amichai has selected these two aspects of Venice to convey his feelings as he sits, an Israeli Jew, in one of the synagogues in the ghetto, probably in an early stage of restoration.

It is important to note that the title in the Hebrew is “The Synagogue in the Venice Ghetto.” The word “ghetto” with all of its associations, particularly for the Israeli reader, sets the tone for the poem. It also sounds as if there is only one synagogue rather than the five that existed in one condition or another, but that may not be critical to the reading of this particular poem, but for those that know this, it does intensify the power of the poem.

The opening couplet begins with what sounds almost like a platitude about a synagogue in Venice: we would expect a reference to water, even though the use of the verb “to know” already conveys a sense of time, maturity, of age. But in the second line, we’re already in AmichaiLand with the echo of the Song of Songs: “Many waters cannot quench this love.” The water has opened out to include the Bible and the weight (and time) of Jewish tradition, along with love and the myth of romantic Venice. What this particular love is, we don’t yet know.

I find the next image a strange one. The Hebrew says, “I cover my head with my elbow” and I try to imagine it. He doesn’t use his hand as most people do when they don’t have a kippah, but he uses his whole arm. Is it to protect himself? Give himself shelter from something that might fall? Is this more associated with the idea of ghetto rather than synagogue? I don’t know. However, the next line brings it back into the context of the poem with the connection with the heart and the love from the opening couplet.

The next line, “No need for a kippah,” is a jolt in a poem about an old synagogue in a ghetto. Does this mean it’s no longer a synagogue, no longer a place for ritual? For a secular Israeli, covering his head with his arm, a strong arm probably, that extends from his heart seems to be a more authentic response, certainly more than a kippah which represents the old Orthodox ghetto world. The casual “thanks” emphasizes that he’s a visitor in a tourist site, and the refusal of the offer of a kippah sets up the distance between the Israeli and the diaspora Jew.

What is this synagogue for Amichai? It is not a place for gathering a community together, a *bet kneset*, but a *bet nechut*, a home for the disabled (not a museum as in the Hughes translation), a place for the weak and broken. It is an empty grave. It is a grave that has been emptied of those who rose up from it for a new life—we could interpret this as those who left the ghetto with the emancipation, and went out into the world and never returned. But it is a grave emptied of those who were sent to a new death—which I interpret as a reference to the Holocaust.

The next line is a surprising twist, bringing us back into the world of Venice: “No need for beautiful glass jewelry / From the island of Murano.” First no need for a kippah, now no need for glass jewelry. First no need for traditional religion, now no need for these fragile baubles (that people have probably been trying to sell him since he arrived.) And here’s the point: this colorful “blowing up,” this glittery puffing up is really only self-deception: it looks beautiful but the more you blow it up, the more fragile it becomes. Here Amichai dramatically changes his imagery at the very center of the poem: it is “the terrible cancer / Of glass and memory.” You can hear the shattering in the Hebrew: *z’chuchit vez’chira*. The glory that was Venetian Jewry was as fragile and transitory as the luxurious splendor of its synagogue that is now only an empty grave. The cancer is believing in the glitter, hanging on to those memories, which are only an illusion.

The Israeli looks at what remains and says, “It’s enough *for me* [literal translation] to have a window and the dim light.” He prefers to look out into the world with real light, even if it is dim, than to be enclosed in a room with exaggerated (blown-up) colors. If it weren’t

Amichai, we might think this is a typical Israeli response from that period: a cavalier disdain for Jewish life in the diaspora in face of the superior simplicity and “naturalness” of being a Jew in Israel (which of course was not that simple at all...)

But then comes a more moderate, nuanced Amichai in the next verse, with a return to the water and love from the opening couplet: “to be still, like a buoy (lit.: floater) on the water.” To float, to be carried by life. And “to warn” (not to reject, not a clear statement of “I need” / “I don’t need”) “To warn of gold and love / and youth that will not return.”

These are the same terms as in the previous stanza—the sounds of *z’chuchit vez’chira* are echoed in *lehaz’hir bezahav*, but the images of shattering glass are tempered by the flowing water, the stream of life, the loss of youth.

The poem ends, as it began, with a couplet, and like everything in Venice, with water. The dangerous memory has been replaced by nostalgia, and the many waters of Song of Songs are the muddy waters of the real Venice, the myth that has been sullied by its history.