

# *Lullaby and Mother Tongue: Poetic Performance and the Hebrew Lullaby*

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**ABSTRACT:** What is the role of form-making in the reception of the lullaby? How does the cradlesong radicalize the lyric's tension between the drive to approximate the earliest syllable preceding speech and its verbal transmission to a historicized reader? This article traces the shapings of mother tongue(s) in the lullaby and accounts for this form's roles in culture through three stages: (1) a Babylonian (Akkadian) baby-incantation that exemplifies the infiltration of magic poetry into written speech; (2) Dahlia Ravikovitch's keening "Lullaby" (1986), in which the lullaby is reframed as a dense rhythmic phonic pattern, thereby engaging the reader in constructing a historical memory site to which she or he becomes the witness; and (3) Avot Yeshurun's "Your Face to My Face" (1991), an entombment poem that radicalizes the lullaby's potential by distilling its core address to an other. Each of these instances, in which the intimate relational structure of the lullaby is mediated through sound and rhythm patterns, engages us in an active mode of poetic attention ("listening"), while emphasizing different aspects of the act of readership. Although a fuller historical review is beyond the scope of this essay, my contention is not only that the lullaby may be read as a poem on the very possibility of poetry but that this minor form has played a significant part in shaping modern Hebrew (Jewish-Israeli) poetry.

**T**he idea for this study began long ago with the tuneless songs my mother recited to us.<sup>1</sup> She was severed not only from her German mother tongue and the songs of her childhood but also from the speech gestures and body codes vital to any language. That was the cost many of her generation paid as their immigrant tongues were violently displaced by Hebrew. Traditional Jewish tunes or sad Slavic melodies were set to words that conformed to the common ideology, avowing "pride in Hebraism, a sense of mission, a commandment to conquer."

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<sup>1</sup> The project began as an essay published in the Hebrew poetry magazine *Hadarim* 15 (2003–4), has recently materialized in Lilach Lachman, ed., *Yavo gdi zahav: An Anthology of Lullabies* (Tel Aviv: Hasifriah Hachadasha Leshira, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2015), and is part of a book-length study.

The songs were to convey to the infant “the people’s afflictions and wandering” and to nourish “faith in Israel’s revival.” Mothers transmitted such messages, singing amid one war and the next. Courageous but exhausted, they sung: “the smoke rises / Sleep, son, sleep.”<sup>3</sup>

The dissonance between the disruptive drama of the world and the lullaby’s rhythm and calming sounds is not unique to Hebrew poetry. Marina Warner points to a double perspective that informs what she calls the “domestic lullaby”: officially “settling the infant to sleep, to banish the fear of dark,” but in fact also aiming “to calm the mother or caregiver, and make the daily struggle bearable,” the lullaby expresses the child’s outlook but carries female voices and concerns.<sup>4</sup> More than half a century earlier, Federico García Lorca, describing Spanish lullabies, locates this double action in the disparity between the text and its rhythmic performance: “the text evokes . . . states of uncertainty and fear, with which the blurred hand of melody that soothes and grooms the little prancing horses in the infant’s eyes must contend.”<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the post-Renaissance lyric, which, as Marjorie Perloff remarked, has remained a verbal, rather than a musical, discipline,<sup>6</sup> the lullaby’s written form is coupled with its oral performance (whether sung or recited). Apart from the fascinating studies of García Lorca and Warner, so far the lullaby has received little attention as a poetic form.<sup>7</sup> The interplay between the cradle-song, the lyric, and history has been particularly neglected.

How does the lullaby’s passage from the page to the ear work? I am particularly interested in its transmission as printed text in relation to its “total” rhythm—the voice, the tone of address, sound, and gesture—rhythm in the sense proposed by Henri Meschonnic, as the interweaving of the speaking subject in and by the discourse.<sup>8</sup> Working as both a “preform” and a “superform,” rhythm in the lullaby functions in multiple ways that interconnect the singer, the listener, and the poem. Materializing the steady beat in the transition from wakefulness to sleep, it shapes the ritual that turns the night into singing and charts the opening distance between the baby’s and the mother’s face. This movement exists as an encounter among three rhythms: that of the mother’s speech and body (reflected in the song), that of life cycles absorbed by the song, and that of the song/poem itself. The lullaby links the ear-rhythm, the body-rhythm, and life cycles. As such, it is both a performative utterance that provokes a response and a mode of listening/reading.

Thus, the lullaby, originating in the mother’s intimate address to her baby, approximates the conditions of hearing a foreign language. The intuition endemic to poetry, that one can perceive aspects of language without comprehending its message, is accordingly radicalized in the cradle-song. As Charles Bernstein observed in relation to poetic performance, “we hear it as language,

<sup>2</sup> Oz Almog, *Hatzabar: Dyokan* [The Sabra: The creation of the new Jew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), 35. See also Yael Darr, *Misafsal halimudim lukachnu* [Called away from our school desks] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> In Emanuel Harusi’s “Lullaby” (1929), written to his son Avner, one hears an echo of the 1929 pogrom in Hebron.

<sup>4</sup> Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998), 192.

<sup>5</sup> Federico García Lorca, “On Lullabies: Las nanas infantiles,” talk given in Madrid in 1928 (2008), <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Spanish/Lullabies.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “The Sound of Poetry,” in *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1–9.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Bess Lomax Hawes, “Folksongs and Functions: Some Thoughts on the American Lullaby,” *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (1974): 140–48; E. Metzger, “The Lullaby in Yiddish Folk Song,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3–4 (1984): 318–27; and S. Manasseh, “A Song to Heal Your Wounds: Traditional Lullabies of the Jews of Iraq,” *Musica Judaica* 12 (1991): 1–29.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982).

not music or noise.<sup>9</sup> The lullaby's drive, evident in most cultures, to approximate the earliest syllable, the utterance at the commencement of learning to speak, reinforces its mode of attention.

In Hebrew, the lullaby is often ruled by the verb *num*, "be drowsy," "sleep"; this word includes the phonemes n-m- of which the early sounds in many languages are produced. As Marina Warner notes, the *n* sound is doubled in *nenia*, the Latin word for lullaby (literally, "silly trifles," "nonsense," as well as "nurse's song") and recurs in words that signal the lullaby, the action that it motivates, or the female figure who sings it ("Granny," "Nonna," "Nan," and "Nanna").<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as lullabies tend to shuttle between nonsemantic refrains, onomatopoeias, and other patterns of repetition, the prior sound pattern often continues on underneath, creating a densely layered asemantic texture. This is true despite the fact that, as Benjamin Harshav observed, "the magic is not in the sound patterns themselves but in their interaction with a few, perhaps elementary, words and suggested themes."<sup>11</sup> Hebrew lullabies are often overshadowed by the recurring words *Laila lu-li-olali-yaldi-yaldati*. Such sound patterns do not, of course, carry any inherent meaning. The predominance of phonic patterning, along with the thrill of voice, often distracts us from semantics and draws us into unintelligible dreamworlds. As separate words dissolve into sound chains that overrule the night, the room and the song gradually absorb the world's distinct objects.

In tandem with the song's enduring tune, the borderlines between the subject and its objects, between dream and reality, collapse. Such dissolved borders are evident in Glatstein's experimental opening of "From the Nursery" (קינדער-צימער; 1937): "Clock and Mommy / A click ticks and she a / is warm and eye / and eye and ha and hand and hand / and close and click / click and click click."<sup>12</sup> The senses record perception of the mother's disconnected parts. Sound precedes touch and sight. The onomatopoeic staccato tick creates an analogue to the infant's experience of the mother before she is synthesized as a distinct, separate being. Just as the baby is tuned to hear the mother before he or she is able to position her in space, so the rhythm-sound envelops the listener. Overruled by aural patterns, lullabies frequently relapse into non-sense syllables described as "humming"—disparate forms in which one hears the limits of referentiality.

We may accordingly be tempted to perceive the lullaby, minimally, as "a repetition of two different notes, prolonged in duration and effect";<sup>13</sup> but historically, from ancient chants to medieval drama, Ladino *romances* and later Romantic *ballads*, nineteenth-century Jewish songs from Iraq, Yiddish folk songs, and contemporary children's poems and parodies, the cradlesong intersects with an array of genres and forms: ballads, allegories, prayers, charms, elegies, laments, nonsense poems, and nursery-mumbles.<sup>14</sup> In this respect the lullaby, like the lyric, is a hybrid of forms.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Warner, *No Go the Bogyman*, 194–95.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 106.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Harshav, ed., *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 264–65.

<sup>13</sup> García Lorca, "On Lullabies."

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., James Porter, "Lullaby," in *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007–15), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.w.ezproxy.nypl.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/17160>; Humphrey Carpenter, "Lullaby," in *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Dov Noy and Aliza Shenhar, "Lullabies," in *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, ed. Raphael Patai and Haya Bar-Itzhak (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2013).

Given its fluidity, particularly its kinship with the lyric, which was traditionally defined by reference to its musical qualities,<sup>15</sup> the lullaby can be distinctively perceived in relation to the roles of the mother tongues that shape it. I use the term “mother tongue” in two interrelated ways: the first is to mark the “primary” language acquired in early childhood. The second, derived from the first, is associated with the body, with work gestures, and with nationality.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, the re-framed mother tongue works as prepoetry or metapoetry, honing our attention to the conditions of hearing a language whose meaning we cannot immediately process. This notion of the “semiotic,” which is applicable to the rhythmic, nonreferential elements of any poetry, is radicalized in the cradlesong. Set against the father’s language, which represents order and control, the reversion into the amorphous movement that is associated with the mother tongue fulfills varied roles within the layered address that motivates the lullaby.

On the one hand, the mother tongue functions aurally and bodily as a preverbal performative utterance, which acts as an untranslatable foreign language; the lullaby thereby facilitates the fusion of mother and child, subject and object. Paradoxically, on the other hand, the organization of this “semiotic” dimension (rhythm and sound) shapes both the poetic speech that aids the differentiation between mother and child and the written form that enables the lullaby’s layered transmission to the reader/listener.

Exploring the roles of this duality in the cradlesong, I will first discuss the shaping of mother tongues in an ancient chant in which magic poetry is woven into written speech. Then I will exemplify the hybrid form’s soundings in (post)modern Hebrew poetry. Although the historical span is beyond the scope of this essay, my contention is not only that the lullaby may be read as a poem on the very possibility of poetry but that the role of this minor form in Hebrew (specifically Israeli) poetry deserves special attention.

So how does an oral-aural song, clearly dominated by bodily asemantic rhythmic patterns, enter into verbal form? A striking instance is an early Akkadian baby-incantation (*septum*), claimed by Walter Farber to be the first “little lullaby”:

Little one, who dwelt in the house of darkness,  
Well, you are outside now, have seen the light of the sun.  
Why are you crying, why are you yelling?  
Why didn’t you cry in there?  
You have roused the god of the house, the kusarikkum has woken up:  
“Who roused me? Who startled me?”  
The little one has roused you,  
The little one has startled you!  
As onto drinkers of wine, as onto tipplers,  
May sleep fall on him! . . .<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Revolution in Poetic Language,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 94.

<sup>17</sup> Translation by Walter Farber, “Magic at the Cradle: Babylonian and Assyrian Lullabies,” *Anthropos* 85 (1990): 139–48. Farber’s transcription of this text reads as follows (although no one knows for sure how it was pronounced):

sehrum wāSib bit ekletim lú tattasām tātamar nūr èamèim  
ammin tabakki ammin tuggag  
ullikia ammin lā tabki

This poem, transmitted on a clay tablet and dating to the Babylonian period, ca. 1950–1530 BCE, is an extraordinary example of the infiltration of an oral magic ritual into written poetry. Its address to the “little one” to hush and to sleep is presented as a domestic polyphony in which the baby, in turn, is invoked as having called the mother singer, who half-chides (“why are you yelling?”) and then appeals to the god of the house (line 5), who in turn awakes (“Who roused me?”), until the mother finally bestows her blessing as a prayer (“May sleep fall,” line 10), which reflexively recalls the incantation genre itself. During the extended moment in which this vocal drama is enacted, the baby is supposedly hushed and the fearsome awakened phallic animal placated (lines 9–10). Whether the incantation is an actual chant, previously addressed to the house’s guardian and repeated from the magic literature, as Farber suggests, or whether it follows ritual conventions in line with a lyrical poem, its syntactic-accentual parallelism, with brief questions opposed by responsive exclamations, inscribes it in memory.

By lending a voice to the invocation and amplifying it between its various addressees, this poem dramatizes the clash between the mother tongue as a magic chant and the lullaby’s enactment of speech. The allusions to the “house of darkness” (the mother’s womb; line 1), to the baby’s “crying” (lines 2–3), to the *kusarikkum* (the half-man, half-bison spirit who guards the house; line 5), and to “drinkers of wine” and “tipplers” (line 9) all invoke preverbal forces that menace the baby but entice him to sleep. The ritual, which may well be rehearsed each time the infant yells and the god of the house is awakened, displays the rhythm of a charm. Together with the directness of the mother’s speech, we hear in it the pulsing body rhythm evoked by repeated strong verbs denoting preverbal movements. Along with its ruling sound patterns, the incantation works as what Northrop Frye calls “the radical of melos”: “the hypnotic incantation that, through its pulsing dance rhythm, appeals to involuntary physical response.”<sup>18</sup>

Though uncertain of the exact Akkadian pronunciation, we may note the effect of the repeated sibilants *seh si sa sa seh sa sa* that are reenforced by elongated open vowels. This pattern interacts with at least two other perceptible sound chains, both of which intersect in the word *kusarikkum*, which refers to the hybrid house spirit whose metamorphic presence is projected in the poem in relation to both noise and silence.<sup>19</sup> All this builds up the lullaby’s dramatic double plot: the rhythm, which is abstracted from the human, activates the unknown object of fear and approximates the moment of sleep when the “little one” will fall into the state of oblivion in which the poem began; at the same time, countering the mother’s fear that her baby could disappear into “the house of darkness,” the singer is driven to invoke the god and thereby to make both herself

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ili bitim tedki kusarikkum iggeltêm  
 mannum idkianni mannum ugallitanni  
 sehrum idkika sehrum ugallitka  
 kima Sātu  
 karānim kima mār sābitim limqutaāaum èittum.

Farber claims that a “baby-incantation” from Akkad was the first lullaby. For a purported lullaby in Sumerian, see N. Kramer, “U5-a a-ù-a: A Sumerian Lullaby,” in *Studi in onore di Edoardo Volterra*, vol. 6 (Milan: Giuffrè, 1971), 191–205.

<sup>18</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 278.

<sup>19</sup> Here and throughout this article, my sound pattern analyses are informed by Harshav’s interactive sound theory. See Benjamin Hrushovsky (Harshav), “The Meaning of Sound Patterns in Poetry: An Interaction Theory,” *Poetics Today* 2 (Autumn 1980): 39–56. For the contextual conditioning of a sound’s emotive coloring, see also Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive? The Poetic Mode of Speech Perception* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 1–9.

and her baby heard and seen. This dynamic is rhythmically enacted in the oscillation between the poem's allusions to sleep and wakefulness as presence and absence.

Especially powerful is the process by which the unbounded night is humanized. The poem not only calms the baby, as well as the disturbed household god, but also gives human shape both to the "house of darkness" and to the god that guards the house. By differentiating "the light of the sun" from "darkness" and "me" from "you," this shape giving is grounded in the transformation of the baby's inarticulate bodily gestures ("crying" and "yelling") into speech.

Can this *incantation* be read as a form of prepoetry? Indeed, first, the poem presents itself as an event in time that will be repeated by vocal transmission. Its promise of recurrence (the sun's light will return, the *kusarikkum* will go back to sleep, Mom will continue to sing) stands at the heart of the lullaby. Second, this transmission involves what Jonathan Culler describes as "triangulated address," which pretends to "address someone or something else" while actually "proffering discourse for an audience."<sup>20</sup> The I-thou relationship is germane: by addressing the child, the chanter is giving him a name, then a voice, and a life of his own. But though foregrounding its direct address, the incantation has an eye on an audience that is not an immediate participant. Hence, its voice is perhaps an exhausted mother who not only wards off danger but communicates a female drama in which the protagonist desires to awaken the phallic eros from whom she departed when giving birth or, quite the opposite, seeks to cast a spell on that power to calm it. Third, the ritual address—of the singer to her echo, both in the crying child and in the form of the anthropomorphized bison god—acts as what the psychoanalyst Kaja Silverman calls an "acoustic mirror."<sup>21</sup> In relation to Jacques Lacan's mirror phase, in which infants learn their separateness from their mothers by seeing their difference in the mirror, Silverman proposes that the hearing of another voice and its echoing sounds prompts the formation of subjectivity. The exchange of voices initiating new sounds, endemic to the lullaby, offers such an acoustic mirror, the role of which is to give a face to the object of fear. This supposedly first lullaby implements, therefore, what Susan Stewart views as the "form-giving work of poetry to counter the oblivion of darkness."<sup>22</sup>

Before jumping from the Babylonian chant to the speech rhythms of modern Hebrew, let me briefly recall how the cradlesong's double perspective serves multiple purposes in the transition from Yiddish (the *mame loshen*) to Hebrew (the father's language). Dvora Ben Yehuda's address to the "elder Hebrew child," translated from Russian and composed in the 1880s in Ottoman Jerusalem, is accompanied by a notorious legend about the power of the lullaby in the enforcement of Hebrew speech.<sup>23</sup> Not long after, the lullaby, as it is reflected in *Hazamir* (1903), the first known collection of Hebrew children's songs, offered a new generation of children a model

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 186–87.

<sup>21</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 76–78.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1–2.

<sup>23</sup> Itamar Ben-Avi (the son of Ben Yehuda, the founder of modern Hebrew) records that he was mute and deaf until the age of four, when he uttered his first word (the Hebrew word for "father") only after his mother was caught singing to him in Russian. See Itamar Ben-Avi, *Im shahar atsmautenu: Zikhronot hayav shel hayeled haivri harishon* [With the dawn of our homeland: Memoirs of the first Hebrew child] (Jerusalem: Organization for the Publication of the Writings of Itamar Ben-Avi, 1961). This anecdote has been described by Neomi Seidman as the "primal scene" of the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language. Neomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 105–9.

of speech, behavior, and identity.<sup>24</sup> For the adult pioneer, the *shir eres* (cradlesong; literally, “a song pertaining to one’s bed”), the folk song, evoking childhood rhythms, was also recruited to demarcate a new home-space, “marking out a wall of sound”<sup>25</sup> in that controversial territory called the “homeland.”<sup>26</sup> From a broader poetic perspective, the passage from the ear to the page, endemic to this forced shift into spoken Hebrew, comprised two stages: first, discarding the syllabic system in favor of the tono-syllabic or accentual system; second, the change from the Ashkenazi pronunciation, current in Europe, to the Sephardic patterns of stress, which became standard in Palestine. The first change, which was effected mainly by H. N. Bialik (1873–1934) and Rachel Blumstein (1890–1931), renewed Hebrew poetry’s link not only to European modernism but also to the patterns of stress that had marked biblical verse and ancient Mesopotamian poetry. The second, which was imposed by the change in dialect with the transition to Palestine, was far more traumatic.<sup>27</sup> Given such crucial changes in the music of poetry and countering the fundamental lack of folk songs in Hebrew, the lullaby allowed for experimentation in canonical Hebrew and facilitated the search for musical and tonal equivalents that were prevalent in mother tongues but lacking in the new language. The cradlesong was used by the adult poet to reframe the mother rhythms she or he had heard as a child, thereby alleviating the immigrant poet’s “pain of hovering between two homelands.”<sup>28</sup>

To posit the radical reframing of the cradlesong in Israeli poetry late in the twentieth century, let me mention a few historical events that proved relevant to the appropriation of lullabies in those decades. The 1982 Lebanon invasion, the Sabra and Shatila Massacre (1982), and the Four Hundred Thousand Protest (at Tel Aviv in 1982)<sup>29</sup> are all reflected in a brutal severance between the “child” and the “lullaby,” parodied by Amichai’s 1983 “Shir-eres” (“Give the child lullaby. Sing that he’d sleep / The house collapses, the world’s on fire / But sleep”).<sup>30</sup> Hence, adaptations of the cradlesong from the 1980s to the present hardly represent lulling, nor do they intend to address the child. The interplay with the cradlesong has largely been deployed to reexamine identity borders, to awaken the reader to resistance, and to address the “other.”

I would like to look at two hybrid cradlesongs: Dahlia Ravikovitch’s (1936–2005) keening “Lullaby,” written at the time of the first Intifada (Palestinian uprising, 1987) in response to a

<sup>24</sup> Noah Pines, ed., *Hazamir: Shirim* [The nightingale: Songs] (Odessa: Moria, 1903).

<sup>25</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Of the Refrain,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1988), 311.

<sup>26</sup> Hannan Hever accounts for the double, but mostly nationalizing, aim in adapting folk songs in canonical poetry in the 1920s and 1930s. Hannan Hever, *To Inherit the Land, to Conquer the Space: The Beginning of Hebrew Poetry in Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2015). See also Miryam Segal, *A New Sound in Hebrew Poetry: Poetics, Politics, Accent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 131–32, 153–66; Vered Karti Shemtov, *Miktsavim mishtanim* [Changing rhythms] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan Press, 2012); and Segal, *A New Sound in Hebrew Poetry*.

<sup>28</sup> Leah Goldberg’s much-quoted line “the pain of two homelands” (ha-ke’ev shel shtei ha-moladot) appears in “Pine” (“Oren” in Hebrew), in the 1955 collection *Barak ba-boker* [Lightning in the morning] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1955).

<sup>29</sup> For the impact that the First Lebanon War had on Ravikovitch’s late work, see Chana Kronfeld and Chana Bloch, introduction to *Hovering at a Low Altitude: The Collected Poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch*, trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 27–28, 32–33; and Ilana Szobel, *A Poetics of Trauma: The Work of Dahlia Ravikovitch* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 95–115.

<sup>30</sup> Yehuda Amichai, “Shir eres” [Lullaby], in *Sh-at ha-hesed* [Hour of mercy] (Tel Aviv: Shoken, 1983), 82. The quotation has been freely translated by me (L.L.).

Palestinian father's death by beating in his son's presence, and Avot Yeshurun's (1904–91) “Thy face to my face,” an entombment poem written just before his death. Ravikovitch, a leading poetic voice of the post-1948 statehood generation, burst into Israeli consciousness with *The Love of an Orange* (1959)—poems of love and loss written in response to her father's traumatic death, poems unheard of in Hebrew poetry. Modeling her poem on the Yiddish lullaby, she lends voice to the Palestinian mothers in the Jabalia refugee camp in the Gaza Strip:

### Lullaby

Mama and Grandma  
 will sing you a song,  
 your shining white mothers  
 will sing you a song,  
 Mama's shawl brushes  
 your bed with its wing.  
 Mama and Grandma  
 a mournful old tune  
 will sing in Jabalia's cordon of gloom.  
 There they sat, clinging together as one:  
 Papa wrecked, coughing up  
 blood from his lung,  
 his son of fifteen embracing his frame  
 like a steel hoop girding  
 his father's crushed form  
 —what little remained.  
*True loves,*  
*sweet doves,*  
 thus did their captors make mock of them.

Mama and Grandma  
 will sing you a song  
 so you, sweet child,  
 may sleep without harm.  
 Rachel is weeping aloud for her sons.  
 A lamentation. A keening of pain.  
 When thou art grown and become a man,  
 the grief of Jabalia thou shalt not forget  
 the torment of Shati thou shalt not forget,  
 Hawara and Beita,  
 Jelazoun, Balata,  
 their cry still rises night after night.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Lullaby” was included in *Ima im yeled* [Mother with a child] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1992). The beautiful translation here is from Kronfeld and Bloch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*, 219. However, in order to emphasize the syntax of the Hebrew original, in my analysis I occasionally use my own free translation. An early version of the poem appeared in the journal *Politica* (1989). For discussion of the early version, see Ofra Yeglin, in *Sparks of Light: Essays on Dahlia Ravikovitch's Oeuvre*, ed. Hamutal Tsamir and Tamar Hess

Here is a quasi-phonetic transcript of the Hebrew original, which demonstrates the sound patterns of the original text:

## shir-éres

## שיר ערש

Yashiru ima ve-savta  
imahot tzkhorot shelkha,  
knaf mitpakhta shel ima  
nogaat kimat ba-smikha.  
yashiru ima ve-savta  
zemer atik ve-nugué  
ba-mitkham ha-afel be-Gibalia  
yashvu akhoozim zé ba-zé  
aba shavoor ve-yorek dam réa  
u-vno ben khamesh ésré  
korekh et gufo ké-khishuk saviv  
la-guf ha-maookh – she'erit aviv.  
zug ohavim  
tzemed yonim,  
la'agu lahem shoveyhem.

ישירו אַמא וְסַבְתָּא  
אמחות צְחֹרוֹת שְׁלָךְ,  
כְּנַף מִטְפָּחְתָּה שֶׁל אַמָּא  
נוגַעַת כְּמַעֵט בְּשִׁמְכָה.  
ישירו אַמָּא וְסַבְתָּא  
זְמֵר אֶתִּיק וְנוּגָה  
בְּמִתְכָּחַם הָאֶפֶל בְּגִיבְלִיָּה  
יִשְׁבוּ אַחֲוִימִים זֶה בָּזֶה  
אָבָא שְׁבוּר וְיֹרֵק דָּם רֵאָה  
וּבְנוּ בֶן חֲמֵשׁ-עֶשְׂרֵה,  
כּוֹרֵךְ אֶת גּוּפוֹ כְּחִשּׁוּק סַבִּיב  
לְגוּף הַמְעוּדָה – שְׁאֲרִית אָבִיו.  
זוג אוֹהָבִים  
צָמֵד יוֹנִים,  
לְעֹגוּ לָהֶם שׁוֹבְיָהֶם.

ima ve-savta sharot lekha shir  
she-tishan bli pegua, yeled naeem  
Rakhel mevaka al baneyha be-kol  
bkhee tamroorim. kol nekhaeem.  
ve-ata tigidal ve- tihiyé le-ish  
ve-et tza'ar Gibalia lo tishkakh  
ve-et o'ni Shat'i lo tishkakh  
ve-et Kfar Beita u-Khfar Khavara  
ve-et Balata ve-Gelazoon,  
kee alta shava'atam leilot rabim.

אַמָּא וְסַבְתָּא שְׂרוֹת לְךָ שִׁיר  
שֶׁתִּישָׁן בְּלִי פְּגוּעַ, יֶלֶד נְעִים  
רַחֵל מְבַכָּה עַל בְּנֵיהָ בְּקוֹל  
בְּכִי תִמְרוּרִים. קוֹל נְכָאִים.  
וְאַתָּה תִּגְדַּל וְתִהְיֶה לְאִישׁ  
וְאֶת צַעַר גִּיבְלִיָּה לֹא תִשְׁכַּח  
וְאֶת עֲנֵי שְׂאֲטֵי לֹא תִשְׁכַּח  
וְאֶת כְּפַר בֵּיתָא וּכְפַר חַוָּאֲרָה  
וְאֶת בְּלֹאטָה וְגַ' לְזוּן,  
כִּי עֲלֵתָה שׁוֹעֲתָם לִילוֹת רַבִּים.

The lullaby's capacity to soothe and calm could not be more acutely questioned than by its restaging of this affliction scene, in a dark corner in Jabalia, as a reversed pietà: the man and child, "clinging together as one"; the father "wrecked," dying and dehumanized into a "crushed form"; the son, frozen in place, his head bowed over his father (replacing the mother's traditional bending over the crib) (lines 7–12). Whether "Mama and Grandma" are to be transplanted from the Yiddish lullaby to sing in Jabalia, or whether the affliction scene is the proposed content of the invoked "lullaby," the "song" itself is no longer a vocal presence attributed to a persona as in the ancient incantation but has been reframed as a dense rhythmic phonic pattern that consists of dispersed languages. Note the bodily gestures such as touching, clinging, spitting, shrouding, and mocking. Along with its allusions to songs and to elegies, reinforced by the double-edged sibilants

(Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010), 161–72. For a comparison of the versions and an illuminating analysis of Ravikovitch's stylistic laboratory, see Bloch and Kronfeld, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*, 514–43.

(sha-sh-s-tz), the scene is both sonorously evoked and powerfully hushed, treated as taboo. This muzzled, semistified quality culminates in the encircling close-up of the son and father; not only are they both speechless, but the startling image לגוף המעוך / סביב (like a steel hoop girding / his father's crushed form) conveys the intense restraint that accompanies this scene, where the son, as in a triadic spell, almost becomes a shroud wrapped around the father. Hence, despite the lulling thread ("Mama and Grandma / will sing you a song / so you, sweet child, may sleep without harm" (lines 20–24) that is enhanced by the repeated refrain (lines 1–2, 7–8), the ruling sensation is an aftershock. By orchestrating these muted rhythms, the poet connects us with her own traumatized dumbness in the face of terror that, in turn, mirrors the son's paralysis.

With her eye on the brutal (self-)abuse that accompanies Israeli occupation, recalling Jewish exile mediated by Palestinian plight and by the Babylonian curse ("Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones"; Psalm 137) and sharing the recognition that "hearing" is imperative in conditioning the poet's song ("How shall we sing Zion-song / And we haven't yet begun hearing?"),<sup>32</sup> Ravikovitch rejects those didactic modernist songs that initiated the child into national values and heroism and overlooked the individual.<sup>33</sup> Replacing the collective songs that praise the "homeland," Ravikovitch prefers the muted "lullaby." Her poetic and ethical choice to resist "singing" accords with her particular form of address. Against a series of modernist pre-texts,<sup>34</sup> Ravikovitch intimately invokes the אמא וסבתא (Mama and Grandma) from the Yiddish cradlesong. The aural tradition is likewise recalled by the metrical allusion to the folk song, by the loose ballad stanzas embedded in free verse, by the refrain, and by the echoes of Hebrew songs/poems. The expected "song" gives way to a multilingual pattern that is gradually processed as a hyperlayered memory site—a collage of body gestures, documentary residues, speech traces, song echoes (Zionist and Israeli modernist), genre frames (Yiddish lullaby, Jewish and Arab keening), and biblical allusions. The "song" itself, exchanging "Jabalia" for homeland, addressing the "sweet son" as other, has become the poem's enigma rather than a vehicle to calm a child.

Replacing the abstracted *moledet* (homeland) that has commonly populated Israeli folk songs, Ravikovitch invokes an earlier lullaby model that allows intimacy and enables the concrete

<sup>32</sup> Lea Goldberg, "Shirey-Tsion" [Songs of Zion], in *Shirim II* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1986), 119–222.

<sup>33</sup> My generation grew up on such songs, like Alterman's "We love you, home country" ("Shir boker" [Morning song]; 1934) and the lullaby "Ba-a Me-nu-cha La-Ya-gea" ("Shir-ha-emek"; 1934), songs that eulogized the beauty of Israel as the "home country" and/or expressed the daily struggle for survival. These two pioneer songs are among his *pizmonim* commissioned and written for a Zionist film produced by Keren Hayesod. Ravikovitch's "Lullaby" should be read against the heated modernist debate on the relation between the poet, the poem/song, and the place. Uri Zvi Grinberg, Natan Alterman, Avraham Shlonsky, Rachel Blubstein, and Lea Goldberg have all figured in this debate. Ofra Yeglin (in Tsamir and Hess, *Sparks of Light*) contextualizes Ravikovitch's (intertextual) dialogue with Lea Goldberg on the question of "Zion." For Alterman's ambivalence about Eretz Israel songs, see Ziva Shamir, "Be-sod ha-merkhaot ha-kfulot" [In the secret of inverted commas: Alterman's ambivalence to Israeli songs], in *Perspectives on Modern Hebrew Literature in Honour of Professor Nurit Govrin*, ed. Avner Holtzman (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2005), 338–61.

<sup>34</sup> For the rich intertextuality embedded in the poem, and for Ravikovitch's dialogue with the Yiddish lullaby, see Chana Kronfeld's compelling reading in Bloch and Kronfeld, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*. To the modernist Hebrew poems listed by Kronfeld as intertexts, I would add Alterman's "The Fourth Mother" (in *Kokhavim bachutz* [Stars outside] [1938; Tel Aviv: Yachdav, 1972]); and Uri Zvi Grinberg's "Misod hamenuz zachim" (From the secret council of the conquered) (in *Kol ktavav I* [All his works I], vol. 1 [Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1990], 118). While Kronfeld attributes the song "Lullaby" to the Palestinian mothers, I emphasize the attribution of the poem's conditional performativity to its Jewish speaker.

address to the child (“you”) and the reader (“thou”). The reader not only overhears “Mama and Grandma” but is called upon to conjure them and to transmit their song. This transmission replaces the lulling situation and becomes the poem’s event. Note, for example, the lengthy wait between the refrain’s first and second occurrences (lines 1–2, 5–6) and its third one (lines 16–17). Mark also how the omission of the pronoun “your” (line 5) appropriates the mothers from their restrictive Jewish kinship, alters from future to present, and inserts a direct “you” in the refrain’s third occurrence: “Mama and Grandma / sing **you** a song” (lines 16–17). The reader is required to experience, as a single segment, everything that happens between the invocation of the “white mothers” of the Yiddish lullaby (lines 5–6), through the devastating scene in Jabalia, to the grieving (semisardonic) direct address, which is located “now” (“so you, sweet child, / may sleep without harm”). The mothers’ song is transmitted to the reader via the Palestinian cry, imprinted with recalled Jewish cries; this works in a loop, returning at the end to the request of the beginning *ישירו אמא וסבתא* (“Mama and Grandma / will sing you a song”). Likewise, the catalog of Palestinian villages and refugee camps encodes *akh* (brother), *beita* (home); repeated phonemes re-echo *ata ve-at* (Hebrew second-person feminine and masculine pronouns), so that the Jewish addressee is incorporated as a stressed phoneme, italicized, so to speak, in that which he objectified and repressed, whereas the alien is mirrored as akin.

Hence, the “enemy”—a figure of terror in the micronarratives that cradlesongs tell—is unexpectedly not the “other” but a brother (*sh’er*, *akh*) or, rather, ourselves, seen through the averted eyes of the reflected-other. The face-to-face situation germane to the cradlesong is displaced from mother and infant to the torture-mirror that takes place between the reader and the son. Its depth, echoing the hovering image of “Mama and Grandma” (lines 1–2, 5–6), partly stems from its literalization of Alterman’s figure of the “living dead,” perhaps throwing unexpected light on the traumatic, unrepresentable image of the poet’s own father’s death.<sup>35</sup> Particularly startling is the double-edged process we undergo, moving between self-revulsion and humanizing the unrepresentable—both poles confronting us with the lullaby’s alien object of fear. The humanizing process is achieved by the language of love, tenderness (lines 10–19), and rage injected into the sardonic nightmare that is the heart of Ravikovitch’s “Lullaby.” Perhaps most of all, this process is achieved by our own performance of “lullaby,” experiencing it in our mouths as song broken by the unspoken. Hence, the acute rhythmical and tonal shifts from the initial three-beat distancing prism (lines 1–2) to a four-beat close-up (9); from compassion and agony (8–16) through love and sarcasm (17–19) to elegiac rage and prophetic command (25–32). This tonal escalation is reinforced by the impact of rich expressive and focal sound patterning. Especially remarkable is the gradual weight shift from the s-sh-ts phonemes associated with the song to the long open vowels and the guttural consonants that amplify the keening. Syntax, too, figures in this breaking of song into silent speech. Likewise, the stretched segments of utterance play against the four-line pull of the song’s semiquatrains and force us into an elongated ethical engagement that cannot be resolved within the lullaby’s refrain. Overall, the restrained grief is expressed in a

<sup>35</sup> I am referring to the figure of the “living dead” prevalent in the poetry of Alterman and Haim Guri, against which Ravikovitch posits an altogether-different poetics. For a historicization of the figure, see Hanan Hever, “Hai ha-hai vemet ha-met” [The living is alive and the dead is dead], *Siman kri’a!* [Exclamation mark] 19 (1986): 188–92. Meir Wieseltir attributes the force of Ravikovitch’s early poetry, specifically in the poems confronting her father’s traumatic death, to both her rejection and her deployment of this figure. Meir Wieseltir, “Ha-ahava ha-amitit eina kefi she-hee niret,” in Tsamir and Hess, *Sparks of Light*, 143–51.

painful form of utterance that is the wrecked song itself. To read this poem is to listen to sound turn from lulling to keening.

Finally, I want to turn to Yeshurun's re-framing of the lullaby in "Pa-ne-cha el pa-nay" (Your face to my face; 1991).<sup>36</sup> I cannot imagine any other lyric that so intimately duets with the lullaby's potentials of listening, mirroring, and addressing. Given that Avot Yeshurun's language, as well as themes, challenged Israeli poetry in his refusal to participate in the Israeli rejection of the Diaspora and Yiddish, and in his regard for the plight of the Palestinian other,<sup>37</sup> this poem encapsulates the possibility of address, a question that is the core of his work. Contrary to Zionist and Israeli modernist resistance to fusing canonical Hebrew poetry with foreign voices, Yeshurun envisages a symbiotic relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish, one modeled on his mother's tongue. Here, as in many of his poems, his mother lends him the voice that is both language and ethos:

Your Face to My Face	Panékha el panaay	פָּנִיךָ אֶל פָּנַי
Be to me your face fair to my face.	hé-yoo lee panékha yafeem el panaay.	הֵי לִי פָּנִיךָ יָפִים אֶל פָּנַי.
Be to me face to face me.	Héyoo lee panim el panim lee.	הֵי לִי פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים לִי.
Mouth to mouth. Sigh to sigh.	pé el pé. hégué. el hégué.	פֶּה אֶל פֶּה. הֶגְהָה אֶל הֶגְהָה.

How can this *salte mortale*, which welds together biblical Hebrew and Jewish prayer, mediated by the mother's body language, into modern Hebrew, invoking God or Death, be read in reverse, as a mother's address over her son's cradle? And how can one talk about a command uttered on one's deathbed that uses first and last syllables to cross over from "here" to "there"? The poem is a hinge in a performative cycle in which images of crucifixion and pietà enable the poet's transition from life to death. The cycle's aural presence is marked by quatrains that recall the Yiddish lullaby, fragmented dialogues abundant with body gestures, intervals, and breaks. Also notable are slippages into semireferential language and the interchange between the voices of mother and son that underlines the intercross between Yiddish and Hebrew. Entombment, lament, and prayer are embedded in the lullaby, which serves a ritual purpose.

<sup>36</sup> This appears as part of Yeshurun's last sequence "אי שם שם הוא" (Somewhere, there where he is). The poem was written on July 4, 1991, a few months before his death and was included in his *Ein lee akhshav* [I have not now] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1992). The translation is by Gabriel Levin and Lilach Lachman. Shai Tsabari's riveting performance of the poem emphasizes both its prayer aspect and its aural dimension. See "Pe el pe," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xEF\\_1fnVmk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xEF_1fnVmk), *Tov Shehaolam Gadol: Avot Yeshurun* (2014), <http://music.nanadisc.co.il/album/--45>.

<sup>37</sup> Lilach Lachman, "I Manured the Land with My Mother's Letters': Avot Yeshurun and the Question of Avant-Garde," *Poetics Today* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 61–93; and Michael Gluzman, "The Return of the Politically Repressed: Avot Yeshurun's 'Passover on Caves,'" in *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 141–72.

Unlike Ravikovitch, who deployed the cradle conventions to reveal history and to engage her reader politically, Yeshurun radicalizes the lullaby's potential by distilling its face-to-face gesture. Austerely written, the poem is in fact reduced to a repeated phrase, duplicated and divided ("be to me / face"). The lulling proximity is perceived from a distance so that in memory the face appears veiled. The plea "be to me / your face fair / to my face" is accordingly understood as a denial of the "natural" relation between one's identity and one's face.

The memory traces that materialize into signs and intervals that punctuate this process of recalling by mirroring elongate the utterance as an infinite distance or darkness that has opened up between "I" and "You." The attempt to record this address and the speech it has produced, as if for the first time, does not answer the simple question of who the speaker is and who is being addressed. Whether the poet summons Death to conjure its fearful absence as a "face," whether he appeals to God, or whether, on the threshold, close to dying faceless, his will to us readers is mediated through the mother's voice ("be to me / your face . . . / to my face")—in any case, what may have been the lullaby's asemantic refrain is read as *pasuk*, the visionary speech unit, which according to Levinas leads from death-awe to love,<sup>38</sup> as "with him do I speak mouth to mouth clearly and not in riddles" (*Bamidbar* 12.7–8). This leap from the law of the world to the visionary is articulated in a prayer that is anchored in body language.

Hence, Yeshurun's plea to unveil the face of the other endows the very possibility of address with a metaphysical aspect. This inverted invocation is mediated through a kaleidoscope of perspectives in an attempt to reach us here and now—"Mouth to / mouth. Sigh / to sigh." Its immediate, breathing address, however prolonged, is grounded in a forceful dynamic between the ear and the page, and vice versa. The poem's accumulated bilabials (p ph, associated with earliest sound production), elongated by repeated open vowels (u-ee-ah-eh), come as close as poetry can to the condition of the nonreferential and still maintain its sense as poetry. Its hovering song-like aurality is reinforced by other aural traces of the mother's idiom: reiterated trochaic words (*pa-ne-cha he-yue*) and trochaic patterns (*hé-yoo-lee // pa-nim-el // pa-nim-li*) lend the address a particular *nigun*.

Not only is the mother tongue reframed as prepoetry, but, as in a paradigmatic lullaby, it becomes meta- (or super-)poetry. The poem's voice, though extremely tangible, is not the property of a person. Dispersing into sounds and syllables, it captures the stops, the intervals, and the suspension that precede the voice. The visual and auditory presence of its individual words, its stanza schemes, and its syntax and line breaks foreground the song's break into speech: "mouth to / mouth. Sigh / to sigh." The frontality of the face-to-face situation that was implicit in the sound structure of the Akkadian poem and was historicized in Ravikovitch's "Lullaby" here alludes to a concept of the past as behind, beyond, and between, existing as spheres of expectation and anticipation. Against the invocation that embeds the close past and the near future as an elongated night, stretched between the "I" and the "thou," the listener's expectation of mutuality, symmetry, and dialogue between "thy face" and "my face," between one's past and one's future, is counterpointed by liminal forms, inarticulate time beats, and asymmetries. So short are the line units parted by caesuras, so brief are the words (one and two syllables), and so minimal is the vocabulary of repeated, almost-identical words (mostly nouns, pronouns, and prepositions) that each morpheme receives its own stress and aura. Orally composed by the blind and deaf poet on his deathbed, the poem radicalizes the lyric's call for attention and its equal demand to

<sup>38</sup> Emanuel Levinas, *Death and Time*, trans. Eli George Shitrit (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007).

be learnt by heart and transmitted by mouth. This is precisely what allows us not only to overhear the movement toward as the most intimate address to oneself but also to sense that we are witnessing the emergence of speech.

The poem is obviously not addressed to a child. Nevertheless, I propose to read it as a radical lullaby. This hybrid creation of Avot Yeshurun (born Yechiel Perlmutter) is an entombment poem that reflexively encodes the first cradlesong. Its relational mode radicalizes the lyric's tension between the drive to approximate the earliest syllable preceding speech and its verbal transmission to a historicized reader. Hence its life-form is strangely imprinted with the poet's private name, as a trace of the mother's song. The call "Avot" (a translation of the Yiddish *tatalach*) is the first name the poet chose for himself. Avot Yeshurun literally means "the fathers will see," but the poet paraphrased it as "for the fathers are mirrored in us."<sup>39</sup> This tension between the mother tongue's untranslatable orality and its transmission via the written father's tongue is at the core of the lullaby. A

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<sup>39</sup> "Tatalach" is the word with which his mother used to end her lullaby each night. Yeshurun's name change has acquired the status of a myth and is recorded in his poetry; see *Kol Shiriv II*, ed. Helit Yeshurun (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996), 124. The link between the poet's name and his mother's Yiddish lullaby is mentioned in an interview Yeshurun gave to Haim Nagid (published in *Yediot achronot*, 1974) and is recorded by Eda Zorite, *Shirat ha-pere he-atzil* [The song of the noble savage] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 16. Among the many glosses on his name change, see Menakem Perry, "Sa sa ha-hefech ha-hege," in *Eich nikra Avot Yeshurun* [How does it read? Avot Yeshurun], ed. Lilach Lachman (Tel Aviv: Kav Adom, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2011), 21–46; and Seidman, *Marriage Made in Heaven*, 119.