

A Sense of No Ending, Part 2: Etgar Keret and the Changing Concept of Time in Contemporary Hebrew Literature

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ABSTRACT: In previous articles and lectures, Elana Gomel and I have discussed the refusal to write the future in contemporary politics and literature. This essay looks specifically at the case of Hebrew literature. With both the past and the future in Israel undergoing major conceptual shifts, and with a feeling that the situation is stuck, some major writers have turned their focus to narrating about the present. This “new present” is seen not as a short moment between past and future but as broad and continuous. Given the Jewish and Hebrew history of focusing on the past, and the future, this new presentness is especially noticeable. Furthermore, the focus on the present allows Hebrew writers to define the personal self, as well as the collective self, outside the established narrative. The literary oeuvre of the author Etgar Keret serves here as an example of this new sense of time in contemporary Hebrew literature.

Society or culture is a plurality looking for unity. . . . [I]t must form a unified time or a notion of a unified time, accompanied by action.

—Zali Gurevitch, “The Alphabet of Time”¹

Israeli time is a present-tense time.

—Anat Weisman, “Present Thoughts: The Culture of Time in Israel”²

¹ Zali Gurevitch, “Aleph bet shel zman” [The alphabet of time], in *Mishakei zikaron: Tfsot shel zman ve-zikaron ba-tarbut ha-yehudit* [Memory games: Concepts of time and memory in Jewish culture], ed. Yotam Benziman (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2008), 20.

² Anat Weisman, “Mahshavot bi-zman hove” [Present thoughts: The culture of time in Israel], *Zmanim: A Historical Quarterly* 68/69 (1999–2000): 122.

PAST AND FUTURE

In 1891 Ahad Ha'am, one of the ideologists of the Zionist movement, wrote an essay entitled "Past and Future." In the essay he argues that

the "self" of every individual is the result of the combination of his memory and his will—that is, the union of the past and the future. When a man says "I," he is not thinking of his hair and his nails, which are here today and tossed on the dust-heap tomorrow; nor of his hands and feet, or the other parts of his anatomy of flesh and blood, which is constantly changing. He is thinking of that inner spirit, or force, which in some hidden manner unites all the impressions and memories of the past with all his desires and hopes for the future, and makes of the whole one single, complete, organic entity.

After defining the self, Ahad Ha'am moves on to define the national "I," or the self of the nation:

The "national self," also, has been made the subject of subtle inquiry and profound reasoning. But here, too, some philosophers (John Stuart Mill and Renan) have come to recognize that in essence and principle this idea is nothing but a combination of past and future—a combination, that is, of memories and impressions with hopes and desires, all closely inter-woven, and common to all the individual members of the nation.³

In the same year that this essay was published, the term "Zionism" was coined by Nathan Birnbaum, a term that connects the past longing for Zion in Jewish tradition with concrete desires to create a home for the Jewish people in the land of Israel. The year 1891 was also the year in which Chaim Nachman Bialik wrote his first poem, "To the Bird," which expresses a longing for the land of Israel that marks for some the beginning of modern Hebrew literature. The attempt to create a national identity by connecting the past with the future and—as part of it—the biblical land with a future land was at the heart of the Zionist project. Needless to say, different movements within Zionism varied in the way they defined the collective memory, the desires for the future, and the direction and means necessary to achieve these national goals. But the focus on creating a narrative that connected the past of the people with a future was shared by many.

In an article written at the turn of this century, Anat Weisman argues that after the establishment of the State of Israel, the culture gradually shifted toward a focus on the present as a way to define the collective "self."⁴ In the eighteen years that have passed since her article was published, the focus on the present intensified and received new meanings. When new sources about the 1948 war became available for scholars working on the founding of the State of Israel, the common narrative about this critical moment was revised, and the questioning of the collective memory moved from the margins to center stage. As Eshel, Hever, and I described in an introduction to a collection of papers about the topic, this led to "a shibboleth," a redrawing of

³ Ahad Ha-'am, "Past and Future," in *Selected Essays by Ahad Ha'am*, trans. Leon Simon (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912), 82–83.

⁴ Weisman writes that "the lack of continuity (the gap between the biblical Jews and the Israeli Jews) was compensated for by taking the present time and place for granted.... Zionism as a modernist movement is based on the concept of time. The modern, by definition, sacrifices the old on the altar of the new. Modernism is a movement that has an epistemological agenda. In our time, the emphasis is on the local, on the now, in the sense of focusing on the ontological, on what is" (Weisman, "Mahshavot bi-zman hove," 127).

the lines of conflict and affiliation within intellectual circles and academic disciplines as well as in the national political arena. In literature too interest in this period has never been livelier: Yoram Kaniyuk, Amos Oz, Nurith Gertz, Meir Shalev, Eshkol Nevo, Michal Govrin (among others) have all published novels and memoirs in recent years that return to that fateful time and reflect on its consequences. In addition, a new anthology of poetry about the Nakba (*Tell It Not in Gath: The Palestinian Nakba in Hebrew Poetry, 1948–1958*, ed. Hannan Hever) was published in Israel in 2010.⁵

Many books—novels, poems, literary studies—were, and still are, devoted to retelling the recent past and to rereading old works in light of the new historical narratives and the new perspectives. The Zionist narrative about the history of the country has been attacked since the 1980s and 1990s also for focusing on Eastern European immigrants and for marginalizing—and even excluding—the voices and stories of Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East.

At the same time that Israel's past became a more conflicted and complicated topic in academic and literary circles, the hopes and desires for the future, and the space they occupied in the definition of the collective self, also shifted. The utopian future and the excitement about a new Jewish state were replaced in the literature of the time with a more doom-and-gloom perspective. The hopes for peace and normalization of the 1990s turned into a grim feeling that nothing was going to change and that there was no way out of the political mess. While this was not the first time in the short history of the country that the nation experienced dissolution and despair and expressed it in literature (the period after the 1973 war as described, for example, in A. B. Yehoshua's *The Lover* was another low point in the national mood),⁶ the failure of the peace negotiations and the Second Intifada created a much more notable and lasting effect that, to some extent, continues to this day. This feeling of despair was described and addressed by many authors. In an interview in my class at Stanford in 2009, David Grossman said: "this is the theme: the no way out, the feeling that we are doomed to this situation, and I think it is something that characterizes so profoundly the thought of people in Israel today, that there is no way out, that we are doomed to live this way, that this is the nature of life, the nature of the world, the nature of the Arabs to hate us, our nature or our destiny—to be victims of such a situation."

As Elana Gomel and I have shown elsewhere, there are many more examples of the feeling of "no way out" in contemporary Hebrew literature:

References to "the situation" can be found in many recent novels in Hebrew literature. In *Neuland*, Eshkol Nevo entertains the option of creating an alternative Israeli space in South America—not as a substitute for Israel but as an "ideal place," a space that, unlike Herzl's *Altneuland*, will allow for the existence of utopia. The exercise fails, and in Nevo's work Israel remains the place in which "Everyone has doubts, everyone feels a quiet, dark despair, everyone practices avoidance from the first, everyone lowers their heads from the start. . . . Everyone

⁵ Amir Eshel, Hannan Hever, and Vered Karti Shemtov, "Introduction: History and Responsibility: Hebrew Literature Facing 1948," *Jewish Social Studies* 18 (2012): 2.

⁶ A. B. Yehoshua, *The Lover*, trans. Philip Simpson (New York: Mariner Books, 1993). First published in Hebrew in 1977.

thinks that it's unnecessary to talk about the future because anyway everything moves in a closed circle, 'that's how it is,' there's no way out."⁷

In Maya Arad's *Short Story Master*, one of her characters, Meital, argues:

Israeli culture was always future-centric. With the gaze to the future. It was born out of a utopian book, *Altneuland* by Herzl. . . . This [Israeli] culture developed out of a search for a tomorrow: what would it look like when there were Jews in the land of Israel? Millions of them? What would the state look like? What would be the solution for the conflict? . . . However, in the last 15 or 20 years, ever since the Intifada and Oslo, or since a combination of these two, people have become hopeless about the future. They are not interested in the future, either of the country or of the culture.⁸

With both the past and the future undergoing major conceptual shifts, and with a feeling that the situation is stuck, some major writers turned their focus to narrating the present not as a short moment between past or future but as broad and continuous and—maybe more noticeably—as the moment in time that contains what it means to say “I.” The focus on the present allowed authors to try and define their personal selves, as well as the collective self, outside the established narrative.

I described above in very broad strokes only a few of the political and social changes within Israel that contributed to the new focus on the present in Hebrew literature. It is likely that more global movement also contributed to the changing concept of time. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht writes about the “chronotope of the broad present,”⁹ drawing on his work and on the writings of Eshel, Kermode, Fukuyama, and others and on Hebrew and Russian literary texts. Elana Gomel and I have argued that literature about the future should no longer be divided between utopia and dystopia but should include a new way of narrating the future. We suggested calling this third option “limbotopia,” a mode of describing a futuristic world that is almost identical to our own but where little or no change is anticipated.¹⁰ Although the refusal or, maybe, the impossibility of writing the future is not limited to Hebrew literature or culture, it is especially present and noticeable in works from Israel.

PRESENT

Etgar Keret, an acclaimed Israeli author, is one of the main voices in Hebrew literature today to describe the feeling of “no way out.” Keret is the author of a memoir, several collections of short stories, graphic novels, and scripts for films and television. Much like Amos Oz and David Grossman, Keret is known outside Israel also for the stories, essays, and opinion pieces about

⁷ Elana Gomel and Vered Karti Shemtov, “Limbotopia: The ‘New Present’ and the Literary Imagination,” *Comparative Literature* 70, no. 1 (2018): 64n.

⁸ Maya Arad, *Oman ha-sipur ha-katzar* [Short story master] (Tel Aviv: Xargol, 2009), 329.

⁹ “Different from the ever shrinking and therefore ‘imperceptibly short’ present of the historicist chronotope, the new present (that continues to be our present in the early twenty-first century) is one in which all paradigms and phenomena from the past are juxtaposed as being available and ready-to-hand. For this present, instead of leaving the past behind, is inundated with pastness, and at the same time it is facing a future which, instead of being an open horizon of possibilities, seems occupied by threats that are inevitably moving towards us (think of ‘global warming,’ as an example).” Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Philology and the Complex Present,” *Florilegium* 32 (2015): 274. Also quoted in Gomel and Shemtov, “Limbotopia,” 62.

¹⁰ Gomel and Shemtov, “Limbotopia.”

Israel that he has published in the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and other major publications and for giving public talks around the world about literature, culture, and current and local political and social issues.

In many of Keret's works from the late 1980s to today, with the exception of his 2018 collection of stories, there is a clear focus on the "here and now" of Israel. Keret does not write about historical events. The world in his stories is contemporary and full of names, places, and people that reflect the current time. The stories rarely include the common practice in Hebrew literature of alluding to older and especially to biblical texts. Instead, his language is saturated with slang, common expressions, and imitations of spoken language. The focus on details, on daily life, and on ordinary people and the occasional inclusion of biographical details also add to the sense that the stories are about the present. When Keret's stories diverge from "life as we know it," it is often to the realm of the fantastic, the absurd, or superrealism.

Stagnant reality is a repeated theme in some of Keret's later stories. The collection of stories *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door* includes a story that cannot progress beyond the words "suddenly, a knock on the door." The narrator of the short story is, much like Keret himself, an Israeli author. The story is structured as an anecdote: three men knock on a writer's door, each in turn: a bearded Swedish guy, an Israeli-Moroccan guy who conducts surveys, and a pizza delivery guy. The three demand that the narrator tell them a story: "'tell me a story,' the bearded man sitting on my living room sofa commands. The situation, I must say, is anything but pleasant," Keret writes.¹¹ The writer, threatened by the bearded guy—and later by the two other visitors—tries to comply with their demands. Several times in the story, the narrator begins to tell the same story, a story focusing on the present moment: two, three, and then four "people are sitting in the room," he says; "suddenly, there's a knock on the door." The writer's story stops here, as every time that he gets to this line someone actually knocks on the door. The three men protest, "no knock on the door," but the writer insists, "without a knock on the door there's no story," and with that the short piece ends.¹² The pizza guy agrees to "the knock on the door," but we—the readers—don't get to hear the end of the narrator's story.

It is not surprising then that Keret's memoir *The Seven Good Years*, which was published a few years after *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*, opens with a chapter entitled "Suddenly, the Same Thing."¹³ Here, too, we are stuck in the same situation. "Suddenly, the Same Thing" is a story about one of the most beautiful new beginnings one can experience: the birth of one's first child, a moment that is often presented as a major change in one's life. However, in this chapter the new beginning is juxtaposed with the stagnant political situation.

The birth takes place on the day of a terror attack in Israel. The story ends with the speaker promising the baby "that by the time he grows up, everything here in the Middle East will be settled: peace will come, there won't be any more terrorist attacks, and even if once in a blue moon there is one, there will always be someone original, someone with a little vision, around to describe it perfectly." But even the baby does not believe this promise: "he quiets down and then considers his next move. He's supposed to be naive—seeing as how he's a newborn—but

¹¹ Etgar Keret, *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*, trans. Sondra Silverston, Miriam Shlesinger, and Nathan Englander (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 3. First published in Hebrew in 2010.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³ Etgar Keret, *The Seven Good Years*, trans. Sondra Silverston, Jessica Cohen, and Miriam Shlesinger (New York: Riverhead, 2015).

even he doesn't buy it, and after a second's hesitation and a small hiccup, he goes back to crying."¹⁴ According to the story, then, to be born in Israel means to feel, from the very first breath, the despair of being stuck in the present situation for a long, long time.

When Keret was interviewed on NPR about his memoir and specifically about the story "Suddenly, the Same Thing," he said:

I think that before my son was born, I didn't have a strong sensation for future. I was living in this kind of never-ending present. But the moment that you have a child—that you know that when he'll turn 18, he'll join the Army and go there for three years of compulsory service—then you can't help yourself of thinking about the future—speculating about it, dreading it or even being—trying to be more active to change it and improve it. So I think that becoming a parent kind of made me try to be more responsible. And it made me much more stressful. . . . I think as a left-wing liberal living in Israel, I've written many op-eds about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And I think I've started writing about it about 25 years ago. And whenever there is another war or there is another violent interaction, you sit down, and you want to write something about it. And your instinct is basically to say, you know, what had changed since the last time I wrote it? You know, it remained futile.¹⁵

In an interview about the story "Surprise Egg," Keret explained that he sees his role as a writer to be similar to that of a pathologist.¹⁶ Keret does not define the author as a prophet or a scout (which are common tropes for the writer in Hebrew literature) but as someone who analyzes the drama that took place a moment ago. In the story "Surprise Egg," a pathologist operates on the dead body of a woman who died in a suicide bombing and discovers that even if the woman had not been a victim of an attack, she would have died from a cancer that had spread inside her body. The pathologist faces the dilemma of whether to share this news with the family. Sharing the news would present the woman's death as inevitable and as a personal drama rather than as a national and political incident.¹⁷ As in many of his stories, the human condition and the condition of a human as an Israeli intersect through a single event.

In "Bomb Away," we find an example of what happens when the characters decide to step away from focusing on the present and start believing Ahmadinejad's threats and Netanyahu's warning about the "Iranian Bomb." The narrator is convinced that Iran is about to bomb Israel any day and starts living life as if "there is no tomorrow." He takes on debt, calculating that since the world will end soon he will not need to pay it off; he postpones chores, assuming that he will

¹⁴ Ibid., 5–6 (my emphasis).

¹⁵ "What Etgar Keret Learned from His Father about Storytelling and Survival," August 5, 2016, 1:20 P.M. ET. Heard on NPR's *Fresh Air* and available online, <http://www.npr.org/2016/08/05/488370839/what-etgar-keret-learned-from-his-father-about-storytelling-and-survival>.

¹⁶ The interview was videotaped and can be seen at <http://web.stanford.edu/class/hebrew/videoclips/keretEtgarKeretInterview.html>.

¹⁷ "On the one hand, it was a revelation that could offer some comfort: there's no point in tormenting yourself with thoughts like, 'If only she hadn't gone to work that day,' or, 'If only I'd driven her,' when you know that your wife was about to die anyway. On the other hand, this news could make the grief even more distressing and turn her arbitrary and horrible death into something much more horrible: a death experienced twice over in a sense, making it inevitable, as if someone up there had wanted to make absolutely sure, and no what-ifs could have saved her, not even hypothetically. Then again, the pathologist thought to himself, what difference does it really make? The woman's dead, her husband's a widower, her children are orphans. That's what matters, that's what's sad, and all the rest is nonsense." Etgar Keret, "Surprise Egg," trans. Miriam Shlesinger, *Guilt and Pleasure* 1 (Winter 2006), http://www.guiltandpleasure.com/index.php?site=rebootgp&page=gp_article&id=119.

be able to avoid doing them because the bomb will fall in the next few days; and he stops fulfilling his obligations at work. Until, one day, he has a nightmare about the Iranians, and he shares it with his wife:

“That they annihilated us?” she asked, stroking my cheek. “I have one of those every night.” “Even worse,” I said. “I dreamed we were making peace with them.”

That hit her really hard. “Maybe S. was wrong,” she whispered in terror. “Maybe the Iranians won’t attack. And we’ll be stuck with this filthy, run-down apartment, with the debts and your students, whose papers you promised to give back by January and haven’t even started to mark. And with those nudnik relatives of yours in Eilat we promised to visit for Pesach because we were sure that by then—”

“It was just a dream,” I said, trying to cheer her up. “He’s a lunatic, you can see it in his eyes.” But that was too little, too late. I hugged her as hard as I could, letting her tears flow onto my neck, and whispered, “Don’t worry, honey. We’re both survivors. We’ve already survived quite a bit together—illnesses, wars, terrorist attacks, and, if peace is what fate has in store, we’ll survive it, too.”¹⁸

When both peace (utopia) and destruction (dystopia) are nightmares, the only way to survive is to prolong the present as much as possible.

While Keret and Grossman reflect in their stories the feeling of “no way out,” in their political writings they refuse to give up on hope. Therefore, one can read the focus on the present in Keret’s work as warning readers about the consequences of giving up on change. In a letter exchange with the Arab-Israeli author Sayed Kashua, Keret addressed this issue directly. Keret challenges Kashua’s sense that there is no hope and writes a long paragraph about the importance of hope:

[D]espair is a much more dangerous feeling than fear, because fear is an intense feeling and, even if it can be momentarily paralyzing, in the end it calls for action, and, surprisingly, it can also create solutions. But despair is a feeling that calls for passivity and acceptance of reality even if it is unbearable, and it sees every spark of hope, every desire for change as a cunning enemy. It’s easy for me to understand why so many Israelis have chosen despair. The history of this conflict is endlessly depressing. We’ve seen so many missed opportunities, shows of distrust, and lack of courage on both sides throughout the years, occurring almost as persistently as a force of nature. . . . Israel is the stronger side in this conflict, and, as such, it is the only side that can truly initiate change. And to do that it has to part company with that despair, which, like many other kinds of despair, is nothing but an ongoing self-fulfilling prophecy. And I believe that it will happen. I believe that this despair is temporary, and that even though there are quite a few political elements that would rather see us despairing, and even though it sometimes seems as if enormous forces are working to convince us that hope is just another word in our national anthem and not a powerful force that can lead to change, people feel deep down that the terrible situation we find ourselves in is not really the only dish on the regional menu.¹⁹

¹⁸ Keret, *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*, 75.

¹⁹ Sayed Kashua and Etgar Keret, “Tell Me a Story with a Happy Ending, Part II,” *New Yorker*, October 14, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/tell-story-happy-ending-exchange-etgar-keret-sayed-kashua-part-ii>.

Sayed Kashua, who initiated the letter exchange, ended his first letter to Keret with a reference to the story “Suddenly, a Knock on the Door.” Much like the three men who knock on the writer’s door, Kashua too asks (but—unlike them—he does not demand) Keret to tell him a story: “I want you to give me a little hope. You can lie, if you feel like. Please, Etgar,” Kashua writes, “tell me a short story with a happy ending, please.” Keret accepted the challenge and tells Kashua the following story:

2015 was a historic year in the Middle East, all because of a surprising, brilliant idea that an Arab-Israeli expatriate had. One evening, the writer was sitting on his front porch in Urbana, Illinois, looking at the endless cornfields that spread all the way to the horizon. Seeing that enormous expanse, he couldn’t escape the thought that maybe the troubles in the place he came from stemmed from the fact that there simply wasn’t enough room for everybody. “If I could just pack all those fields in my suitcase,” he said to himself, “fold them very, very neatly, very, very small, I could fly back to Israel with them. I’d pass through customs on the green line for people who have nothing to declare, because what would I really have? It wasn’t as if I’d be bringing some subversive ideology in my suitcase, or anything else that might interest a customs inspector. All I would have would be some huge cornfields that I’d folded up very, very small, and when I got home I’d open the suitcase, take them out, and *shazam!* All of a sudden, there would be enough land for everyone, the Palestinians and the Israelis, and even some left over for a giant amusement park where both peoples would take all the knowledge and technology that they apply to developing weapons and use it to build the most amazing roller-coaster in the world instead.”²⁰

As the story develops the writer decides that the “issue wasn’t territory but people,” and therefore, all they had to do in order to solve the conflict was to “update the ‘two-state solution’ to a three-state solution, so that the Palestinians would live in the first, the Israelis in the second, and the radical fundamentalists, the racists, and all those people who just got their kicks fighting would live in the third.” This solution comes true and the writer wins a Nobel Prize. “In less than a decade” after the writer brings the corn fields to Israel, three countries emerge “side by side in that tiny corner of the Middle East: the State of Israel, the State of Palestine, and the Republic of Force-Is-the-Only-Language-They-Understand, a place where civil war raged constantly and which arms dealers and news broadcasters supported.”

In a similar way to the author in “Suddenly, a Knock on the Door,” Keret here too writes a story about the immediate situation—a story about the person who asked him to write a story, about Sayed Kashua himself. Keret’s message is clear: the responsibility is on “us” (the Israeli citizens? the writers?) to change the situation. Keret entertains in this short story the possibility of a solution; he tries to present his addressee with a hopeful story and to create a happy ending. But the attempt fails. At the moment that possible solutions are presented, the realistic story turns into an absurd fantasy. The story Keret tells Kashua might strive to encourage the listener not to give up, but it ends up being a story mainly about despair and does not leave us hopeful. Through humor, surrealism, and fantasy, Keret provides us with relief—for a moment—from the feeling that there is no way out, but he does not provide us with a belief that there is actually a solution. If the present is a unified time or a notion of a unified time of the Israeli experience in Keret’s work, it is a unified time that cannot be accompanied by any unified action or movement. A

²⁰ Sayed Kashua and Etgar Keret, “Tell Me a Story with a Happy Ending, Part 1,” *New Yorker*, October 13, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/tell-story-happy-ending-exchange-etgar-keret-sayed-kashua>.