

The Death of Blessed Memory: A Crisis in Secular Israeli Identity in Yaakov Shabtai's "Departure"

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Yaakov Shabtai's "Departure" seems, at first glance, only to chronicle the illness and death of an unnamed grandmother living in Tel Aviv, as witnessed through the eyes of her grandson. The grandmother, an observant Jewish woman with socialist politics, liberal social views, and many friends, differs strikingly from her Israeli family. They are wholly secular Jews who disavow belief in religion. They observe *yahrzeits*, Jewish religious festivals, and holy days only as long as grandmother lives. They discontinue all Jewish observance the moment the grandmother dies, thus allegorizing a complete intergenerational break in Jewish identity. The story ends with the melancholic narrator realizing that he has no memory of the date of his grandmother's death. This article contends that this seemingly simple narrative has profound historical and referential meanings. The story functions as an allegorical critique of escalating social and religious divisions in Israel, as well as the implications of the loss of Jewish religion on Jewish identity. "Departure" reveals that the process of dis-identification and post-Zionism begins with the family: symbolically with the figure of the grandmother, whose peaceful, sociable identity stands in peril of becoming removed from the possibilities of her mode of Jewish being influencing future generations.

Keywords: Shabtai Yaakov, secular Jewishness, religious Judaism, Tel Aviv, post-Zionism, Israel, melancholia, Jewish grandmother

Introduction: Secular and Religious Jewish Identities in Israel

Theodor Herzl, the preeminent architect of Zionism, conceived of Israel, in *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State) as a secular nation in which religion would play no role in the public sphere whatsoever. Indeed, the vast majority of the Ashkenazi Jews who first settled *Eretz Yisrael* were *hilonim* or atheists whose identities centered around experiences with anti-Semitism, occupation of the historical homeland of the Jewish people, war with Arab neighbors, and, eventually, the Holocaust. However, David Ben-Gurion, who founded the State of Israel in 1948 after the bitterly fought War of Independence, included secular and devout Jews in his government, in order to encourage the immigration of the latter to Israel. Hence, these two men not only created the Jewish state, but also a chasm-like conflict between Orthodoxy and Secularism that, over 60 years later, has resulted in a continued failure to write a national constitution that would spell out the legal relationship between religion and the state. As Ari Rath (2007), the former editor and publisher of the *Jerusalem Post* notes, "Israel is still suffering from this birth defect, this lack of separation between state and

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religion".

Israelis are, in brief, at war over what defines a "good Jew". Is this someone who observes *Halachah* scrupulously, adheres to traditional customs, and consults Orthodox rabbis over family matters of marriage and divorce, or, in contrast, serves the State of Israel faithfully, but who almost never sets foot inside a synagogue or wears a kippa? The intense controversies and contention surrounding these issues have results in misapprehension and stereotyping on both sides. Irreligious Jewishness purports to offer an Israeli identity based almost entirely on the Hebrew language and military service, but conflict not only results in failure to perceive a traditionally religious Jew—including a family member—as an unique individual, but also learn from and even adopt their ritualistic and, far more important, ethical behaviors to keep memory of them, and the values and history they represent alive.

The Grandmother: Between Religion and Secularism

In this melancholic and evocative short story, such inattention to unique real individuals results only in tragic and irremediable loss, as whole life worlds depart without the least conscious sense of the value of what has been misplaced. In "Departure", the destruction of an entire cultural repertoire belonging to the grandmother symbolizes an abyss between the generations, and for the adults who perform the rites of destruction after the death of the grandmother, a diminution of their historical identities as Jews and as Israelis. If the *cri de coeur* of Judaism is *yizhor* or memory then the secular Jewish adults in this story become complicit in their own *schihah* or forgetting and loss of ancestral inheritance.

"Departure" is related from the point of view of a watchful, contemplative grandson, whose distance from his parents and his sense of identification with his ailing grandmother grows as the narrative progresses, particularly after her death, when his parents erase her identity altogether. Yaakov Shabtai (2004) described her gradual dying as being like the loss of part of an entire continent—in this case, the country of Poland—which resembles "a strip of brown land, receding from the eyes of the travelers on a ship until it merges into the horizon and disappears into it"¹ (p. 217). The eyes of the travelers symbolize the grandmother, who has taken the great voyage from Poland to Israel, but also, more important the grandson and the parents, her children, except that the latter keep their eyes averted as they depart from the land—and the existence—of the grandmother. During her period of decline into death, however, they continue, "to keep kosher and separate the milk from the meat" (p. 217), meaning that they keep her traditional observances only for as long as she lives.

Initially, we see events from the point of view of the grandson who, influenced by his secular parents, views his grandmother's beliefs and observances as old-fashioned, trivial, and even meaningless. As the grandson becomes aware of the complicit role he plays in shutting off the lights for Shabbat if the clock-timer fails to work, he notes complaisantly that:

The Shabbat prohibitions were of no consequence to me, as they were of none in the eyes of my parents. Nevertheless, I was taken aback by her behavior, and I would wait curiously, with some anxiety and more than a little animosity, to see what God would do. It was clear to me that he did not exist, but at the same time, I was still somewhat in awe of him, in the guise of my step-grandfather, my German grandfather who had died in the meantime, who was brown and irascible, who when he was alive had sat on his pharaonic throne, mumbling his prayers... keeping an eye on everything that went on in the house, and aware of the slightest transgression committed in each and every corner of its rooms. (pp. 218-219)

1 Shabtai, Y. (2004). "Departure", in *Uncle Peretz takes off*. (B. Dalya, Trans.). New York: Overlook Duckworth. Subsequent references are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically.

The grandson stands "in awe" of his unpleasant, surly, and punctilious German grandfather, who is the kind of Jewish man who excites both guilt and hatred, because of the exhausting and exacting ritualistic rules he imposes on his family. The grandchild cannot believe in his grandfather's punitive God of surveillance, but as of yet he has no acquaintance with the very different God of the grandmother. Eventually we learn, however, along with the grandson, that they represent an integral part of an entire tapestry of ritualistic, but also ethical observances that keep Jewish memory, identity, and continuity alive. The tragic outcome of tampering with time, memory, and history, however, become evident at the conclusion of the story.

In the beginning, the grandmother, who has begun her slow decline into death, seems as helpless and unimportant as older people from a "different world" are often conceived to be by younger generations. Her departure seems sad, unimportant, and anticipated—even eagerly so. The grandmother has "fits of weakness" and a cough that "day by day grew deeper, more stubborn and troublesome until in the end it conquered her entirely" (p. 218). Despite her debilities, she "still pursued her daily round without bitterness, punctiliously and serenely" (p. 218). She has a pillow, quilt, and mattress that she had brought from Poland and that have "gone on serving her here as they had served her there, at the end of that distant century" (p. 218). So, the grandmother retained personal belongings that she had in Poland and has arrived during the Third Aliyah, when Jewish emigration to Eretz Yisrael was stimulated by various factors: the October Revolution in Russia, the Balfour Declaration, anti-Semitic pogroms in Eastern Europe, and British occupation of Palestine. That the grandmother and her husband decided to immigrate to Palestine, as opposed to the United States (or someplace else) denotes their unusually strong determination struggle against adversity for a noble purpose.

Her determination to retain customary objects evinces itself in her relationship to a comical, quasi-pathetic tin Shabbat clock that her son Aaron had given her years earlier.

It was a tin clock with thin little legs, a ridiculous bell hat and long hands with ornamental tips, like the tufted letters of an old Bible. It was always slow and sometimes it stopped, and grandmother would shake it like a bottle of medicine to bring it back to life. In addition, it was fitted with gadget that was supposed to switch off the light on in her room on Friday nights. (p. 218)

The Shabbat clock, like a "ridiculous" elderly person, works sporadically, and must be shaken to come alive like one gives medicine to an older person to "get them ticking again". Her room remains the only room in the house that practices traditional Shabbat and, when the clock fails to operate, the grandmother seems not adverse to complicity with her grandchild in the act of turning off the lights.

His grandmother has elaborate if simple daily rituals. She takes out the chamber pot, and then washes and prays before going out to do her meager shopping. She does her accounts scrupulously, for "life had taught her to calculate carefully" and "to try not to be dependent on people's favors" (p. 219). The grandmother has lived in Poland, and in Eretz Yisrael, where she had learned to be hard working, self-sufficient, and to live with poverty and hardship. She cannot depend on the fickle generosity of other people, who might demand that she compromise her integrity—or simply refuse her requests for help. She abides by her own lights, neither attempting to influence others or have them assist her except when positively necessary. If she at some level hopes that her life will serve as a noble example to emulate, then her family, who might associate Judaism with the unforgiving rigor and authoritarianism of the grandfather, squashes that hope.

In the evenings, she mends garments, exchanges views on socialist politics, gives advice, and settles disputes in the household with discretion and diplomacy. At one time, she had fought for the narrator's brother

who was going out with a divorced woman in the house, "where divorcees were regarded as distant relatives of whores, grandmother saw nothing wrong with it. In her own way, she was a free woman in her world" (p. 220). This state of affairs is trenchantly ironic given that this is a secular Israeli household with presumably liberal and "modern" views². But the family appears to have become so morally rigid, and disaffiliated from Judaism, that they do not even know that the laws of *gittin* divorce allow for and do not regard divorce as a disgrace. Even though, traditionally, a man must initiate a divorce to make it binding under Jewish law, the grandmother might well be accepting of the divorced woman (assuming that she initiated her divorce) because of her own experiences as a pioneering woman. Judaism emerges as more open-minded here than secularism. In addition, we discover that the grandmother reads the liberal Labour Party newspaper, *Davar*, whose socialist policies had dominated Israeli politics until the advent of the Likud Party, and the Yiddish weekly, the *Amerikaner*.³

The grandmother continues her descent into her end, and "like a chick inside an egg, death grew inside her, while she herself shrank" (p. 220). However, she continues to go about her business, and it "seemed that in spite of everything, she was glad to be alive" (p. 221). Her friends—the wealthy Mrs. Abeles, the talkative Leibshu Knipp and the financial wizard Shmuel Zilberbaum, whose promises of instantaneous riches she rejects, regarding "such feats of financial wizardry" (p. 221) as bordering on fraud, as the narrator notes in approbation. Visited also by the synagogue treasurer, the gardener, the grocer, and neighbors and members of the family, the grandmother keeps company most often with Mrs. Chernibroda, with whom she conducted "long, peaceful conversations" (p. 222). The grandmother is a balanced, perceptive, and insightful person who has a rich social life and identity, nourished and maintained lovingly, despite the advent of death. However, eventually she cannot go out, even to the synagogue, but despite that she continues to observe "the calendar of significant days and the deeds appropriate to them—holy days, birthdays, anniversaries of the deaths of brothers and parents and grandparents" (p. 222). The grandmother has kept the blessed memory of in-laws alive and, everything, quite naturally and quietly, has its sacred time and place in remembrance as this description of her Shabbat observance reveals:

And on Fridays, after setting the table in her room with the two glass candlesticks, which were decorated with colored crystals, and after covering the plaited challah loaf with its pink silk cloth, she would get dressed in her Sabbath dress and sit down to put on her wig. She did this with silent concentration and a ceremonious air, repeatedly examining her face in the mirror. When she had finished, she would wind the clock, put it in place, and bless the candles. And then it was Sabbath. (p. 222)

The descriptions of these loving ritualistic preparations, ending with the statement "And then it was Shabbat", makes this final statement sound reverent and biblical, as in "And there was light".

Thereafter, sacred time becomes secular, and the grandmother transforms into a terminally ill frail woman. The family takes her to the hospital, then the sanatorium and, finally, the mother comes home carrying the grandmother's immediate belongings, among which remains "a picture of the family" (p. 222). The grandmother keeps a remembrance and "pictures" her family when away, but the family has no "picture" or discernible "view" of the grandmother, as the remainder of "Departure" shows with disturbing power and precision. In the

² In another of Shabtai's short stories, "Model", the moralistic denunciations of secular Israelis against a nude artist's model causes her to commit suicide, and serves as a commentary against egregious hypocrisy and social cruelty.

³ In doing research on the *Amerikaner*, the author discovered that an inquiry had been made through YIVO as to whether or not anyone possessed microfilm or hard copies of this journal, for the man in question wanted to write a book on the pro-Zionist activities of his grandfather. None has been found.

meantime, there is no sense of her children mourning her or being upset at the grandmother's death.

As the family returns home from the cemetery, with a sense of "weariness and emptiness", but also of relief. It seemed as if we had all come back from the docks, after seeing off a departing member of the family. It was all over (pp. 222-223). They think of the grandmother not as a once living mortal who is now dead, but "as if she were someone who had set off on a long voyage from which she would return" (p. 223), because she has left her belongings with the family. If they are in mourning, it is certainly disavowed mourning, as their sense of "emptiness" and "relief" indicate. These feelings are particularly over-determined given the fact that grandmother was not an onerously burdensome invalid at all. But even as the secular family rejects customs, so, too, do they, and with them, reject or disavow the need for transitions from one recognized state of being into another—particularly from life to death (except for the funeral) and, most pertinently, from Judaism, whether through birth or conversion to non-affiliation or the erosion of observant Jewish identity. Everything merges into a less developed state of un-differentiation, as time itself, once so sumptuously marked, collapses into an enervated sameness whose origins in passive dis-affiliation from religious Jewish identity the family disavows.⁴ The family observes no rites of mourning for the grandmother, and all her belongings remain where she left them. Of course, the family uses nothing that belongs to the grandmother, but gradually her belongings are parceled out, first to her friends, then to the poor, and finally to merchants. At last, a small number of her unsold or un-distributed belongings sit upon a heavy oval table with two "austere" wooden chairs that symbolize her life in Poland, her foreignness, her determination to bring all of herself into Eretz Yisrael, and, perhaps, the reality that her new country was a poor place:

There was something strange and foreign about them that belonged to another century, to the remote country towns whose peculiar names fell so naturally from grandmother's lips, together with the names of vanished relatives and kinsmen, of rabbis, emperors and lords. There she had been a child, and there she had married her first, beloved husband, and her second husband, too. There she had lifted heavy bolts of cloth, measured with a tape-measure, felt with her fingers, traveled days and nights in carts and steaming trains, bargained humiliateingly at fairs to save a few zlotys, given birth to children, concealed baked bread from potato skins under her clothes when pogroms broke out against the Jews and wars raged about her unsuspecting head. (p. 224)

The grandchild suddenly opens up, and conveys a flood of historical information about her—now becoming aware, unlike the rest of the family, that grandmother exists no more, and that no one shall take responsibility for the continuation of her memory other than, possibly, him. The mother sells the table to a Mr. Singer and, after that, takes the uncouth opportunity to get rid of "all the worthless objects" (p. 224). In the final resort, three remembrances of the grandmother remain: a portrait, a prayer book, and a red chocolate box.

That year, the family observes no Pesach Seder, "which involved some doubts and a certain feeling of uneasiness, but the nuisance of making the house kosher and all the other preparations tipped the scales against it" (p. 225), and, before that "no time of mourning took place and the days passed without being counted off from the day of her death" (p. 224). All of the special Pesach dishes are stored in a storage space above the ceiling and, eventually, most of them are sold, but some added to the common household stock, such as Prophet Elijah's goblet, which is en route to becoming a cultural object whose meaning for existence is a mystery, a puzzle and, with it, the basin for ritual hand-washing, which becomes repurposed as a soaking bowl for small laundry. The grandmother's room is whitewashed—literally and figuratively—and then the meat and milk

⁴The term disavowal is used here as it appears in the work of Sigmund Freud, to denote denial, or a mental act that consists of rejecting the reality of a perception or state of affairs on accounts of its potentially traumatic contents or associations.

dishes intermixed. This is yet another sign of un-differentiation, as "convenience overcame the old customs, which no longer seemed to have any point" (p. 226). The family eventually replaces the old kosher dishes with new ones that are neither milk nor meat—and are as "light, handsome and elegant as bridegrooms" (p. 226). The grandchild still comes across old dishes and utensils in the house, and, when he does so feels guilt and sorrow: "They put me in mind of rejected poor relations and gave me an uneasy feeling, as if we had tricked grandmother in her absence" (p. 226). Even her grandchild participates in the peculiar conceit that the grandmother is absent rather than dead—as if the identity she represents must be "kept alive" through a place marker that in fact no longer exists. If people do not perform rituals, they disappear rather than simply being displaced.

Just as the times of mourning rites had remained unobserved, so does the grandmother's Yahrzeit pass "unmarked" (p. 226); like "all the anniversaries of the deaths of vanished grandmothers and grandfathers, and uncles whose names we bore and who, ever since grandmother's death, had been torn from the calendar too and wiped out completely" (p. 226). In addition, all the people that the grandmother had known and taken care of tenderly through remembrance and through keeping in contact with them become severed from the family and thrown away; almost as if her memory and her entire social life must be deleted. Becoming an uncompromisingly secular Jew is, in this short story, a melancholic, serious, yet wholly mindless affair, accompanied by disavowed emotional violence and unconscious dis-affection. One must conduct a mini-destruction of the past and the people who inhabited it, because, inconveniently, they happened to be one's Jewish grandmother.

A few years after the death of the grandmother, the narrator, her grandchild, while rummaging through the bookcase, comes upon a thick brown book that turns out to be the old prayer book, which reminds him of the "smell" of his grandmother, and "the brown woolen shawl around her shoulders and the faintest of smiles on her face" (p. 540). As he prepares to close the old prayer book, he sees some writing in Yiddish on the white page preceding the title page in the handwriting of his grandmother:

Yahrzeit fun Tate z"l—zekhtsn tug in Tummuz
 Yahrzeit fun die Mamme z"l—tsen tog in Elul
 Yahrzeit fun Aaron z"l—yon D" ba Hanukka. (p. 227)

The grandchild "strains" his memory to recollect the date that his grandmother died, but "all I could remember was that it was a cold, cloudy day" (p. 227).

Intergenerational Discontinuity and Melancholia

The problem of intergenerational discontinuity—as a global phenomenon—affects both Diasporic and Israeli Jews, and poses the signal question as to why the generations do not learn from or show interest in remembering or following the ethical customs of their forebears. Perhaps this has to do, particularly in "Departure," with generally negative views of the religiously observant among secular Israelis, which, ironically in this case, literally fails to see the beautiful character of the grandmother, which has been produced by her rich historical experiences, about which only the grandson appears to care, in addition to her ritualistic but also ethical observance of traditional Judaism. Nonetheless, "Departure", like the other short stories and novels of Shabtai, which are principally set in Tel Aviv and have secular subject matter, could conceivably be read as a nostalgic memorial to a past generation that expresses the melancholic belief that such intergenerational discontinuity is inevitable and perhaps even salutary. But such an interpretation would involve

a mistaken apprehension of Shabtai's fictional intentions and values, which repeatedly shows people lost if lacking in purpose and direction, and in missing opportunities to learn, to transform, and to inquire out of the refusal to challenge stereotypical views of the world, as well as existential fears of transformation, commitment, and the future.

In his short story "Past Continuous", for instance, Gabriel Slep, a grocery store owner, knows a young man named Meir Breuer who had been killed while in the IDF. While satisfied that he attended the funeral, he feels "nothing, not even a stirring of sadness or a twinge of pain" (p. 72). He also perpetually postpones needed repairs to his grocery store, telling himself "that it would involve him in a lot of trouble, and unnecessary expense, and that his life was passing anyway and in the end he would die" (p. 74). Throughout the story, he continues to attempt to remember something that is eluding him, and causing his amnesia and emotional deadness. He seems to recollect the memory as the fact that it is his wife Zipporah's 50th birthday and he feels "obliged" on this occasion to buy her a present, even though he has let all her other birthdays pass by uncelebrated. Finally, after additional strain, he remembers a woman named Sarah Krauze, and that he bought her a scarf, but had "never given her the present, because he was afraid of declaring his love and committing himself to her" (p. 79). He feels despair but, in the end, even this emotion fades into oblivion. He has become a man who has spurned the gift of love, even as the family in "Departure" spurns the gift of the grandmother.

While his longer fiction might focus on secular Israeli culture, Shabtai remorselessly criticizes most of his characters, nearly all of who are disagreeable, flawed, and problematic to a marked degree. Seen in this light, "Departure" constitutes one of his relatively rare homages to a character. These laudatory portraits almost always concern grandmothers, who maintain and uplift an otherwise terminally broken, depressive social order. Significantly, most of his secular male characters are self-involved narcissists who can find no meaning in life except for indulgence in his appetites, and who justifies the most appalling cruelties to others, while others—usually Zionist or observant men from the preceding generation—are bullies who, in rage and spite, force people to bend to their wills, and thereby pervert the causes for which they stand. Most important, what is lacking in most of his characters is a sense of balance, motivated in part from the fashion in which they reject everything associated with their parent's generation for the sake of independence, freedom, and convenience, only to find the void and vacancy of disconnection and disaffiliation. While Shabtai, in his novels, empathizes with his characters' disaffiliation with the preceding generation because he represents that generation as lacking in praiseworthy values and loving family life, he also perceives the search for valuable relational meaning in life as indispensable and as the responsibility of all individuals.

For instance, his famed stream of consciousness novel *Past Continuous* (*Sof Davar*, 1984) concerns the interrelated stories of three secular Israeli men from Tel Aviv: Caesar, Israel, and Goldman, who lead tragic, frivolous, or frustrated lives. Caesar is a compulsive womanizer who betrays, victimizes and even, at times, rapes women. Israel, a pianist who is financially dependent on Caesar, rejects the woman who loves him because of violent, paranoid—and unfounded—jealousy. And Goldman is the son of an enraged Socialist Zionist who bludgeons a dog to death, because he "believed in plain living, hard work, morality and progress. . . and hated right-wing nationalists, people who got rich or wasted money on luxuries, and people who told lies about Eretz Yisrael" (Shabtai, 1985, p. 19).⁵ Goldman's father, filled with hatred and bile, compulsively ends relations with people he loves because of political and ideological disputes, and his son commits suicide in the

⁵Shabtai, Y. (1985). *Past continuous*. (B. Dalya, Trans.). Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.

end, unable to follow through on returning to the Moshav (which he claims to love) or remaining an attorney, a "respectable" occupation he detests and chooses out of deference to his family. Family life in *Past Continuous* is, largely speaking, a matter of deceit, mutual hatred, adultery, and the imposition or avoidance of detested familial obligations. One notable exception is the grandmother in the narrative—a woman of wisdom, loving kindness and, above all, balance, and a couple named Audrey and Zvinoam who live on a Moshav, where they must work hard and lead structured, purposive lives. Zipporah, the final instance of an exemplary, sturdy, commendable character in the novel, cannot tolerate "idleness or self-indulgence" and, despite illness, hangs "onto her vitality and optimism, not because she had any illusions about her condition, but because she believed that it was forbidden to lose the will to live and the affirmation of life" (p. 313). In her insistence on affirming the value and meaning of life, Zipporah is closely related to the grandmother in "Departure".

Conclusion: The Jewish "Pasts"

In *The Zionist Paradox: Hebrew Literature and Israeli Identity*, Yigal Schwartz begins his study by asking questions frequently framed by "typical" Israelis: why do we complain that this is not the state we dreamed about; why do we feel disappointed in our Israeliness; what is the source of our gnawing doubt about the future of our national home—which contradicts the phenomenal actual success of the Zionist project; and why are we at times seized by the thought that we as Jews are a wandering people not made to live in a state of our own? Schwartz proposes a distinction between "place" as an actual physical location and "Place" as a "world of meanings, of language, memory, and faith" (Schwartz, 2014).⁶ Schwartz contends that "the Zionist endeavor down the generations" has been "accompanied with a sense of a missed opportunity, an experience of a broken dream, which is slowly turning into a kind of general agreement that there is, probably, an unbridgeable gap between our Place and our place" (p. 3). For a people whose sense of place can be traced back mythologically to the Garden of Eden, followed by expulsion into a place of thorns and hard agricultural labor, this sense of dissatisfaction does not surprise. But the grandmothers, and characters like Zipporah and others do not suffer this disjunction between Place and place, and are at home not only in their Jewish identities, but also in the Land of Israel.

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⁶Schwartz, Y. (2014). *The Zionist paradox: Hebrew literature and Israeli identity*. Lebanon NH: Brandeis University Press. Subsequent references are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically.