Chapter 2: Multiple Identity Politics: Dahn Ben-Amotz and Biased Readings of Hebrew Literature

*Lizkor veliskoakh*, published in 1968, is the one novel by Dahn Ben-Amotz that does not receive the literary establishment’s cold shoulder.¹ It is a Holocaust novel that deals with memory, trauma, surviving, victimhood, and many other hot topics that have intrigued both the readership and the theorists for generations. Moreover, as a Holocaust novel, *Lizkor veliskoakh* resonates with popular Israeli narratives and politics, especially, Israeli identity and the dreaded negation of the diaspora. Nurit Gertz situates this book alongside seminal works of Hebrew literature, in which the “oscillation between preserving and shattering the Zionist narrative is a major motif.”² Efraim Sicher reads the novel as a “return to repressed memory… a reliving of the trauma of surviving the Holocaust through the realization of fantasies.”³ These commentaries are of immense importance, reasserting Ben-Amotz’s role as an integral part of the Hebrew literary canon. Ben-Amotz, they argue, writes as a part of a lively literary tradition. As an author, he is perceptive to the nuances of Israeli Holocaust literature. He challenges traditions and identities—especially according to Gertz’s analysis of the novel—shattering the image of Zionism and the New-Hebrew, with a Romantic yearning for a return to diasporic Jewishness. I too believe that Ben-Amotz deserves our attention, and that he is a voice we must reckon with and confront. Yet, I also believe that a nonconventional author calls for a nonconventional reading. A reading that instead of adhering to, diverges and challenges prior understandings and approaches to trauma, testimony and identity in Hebrew literature and specifically, Israeli fiction.

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¹ It is also the one book by Ben-Amotz to be translated, with editions available in English (*To Remember, To Forget*, 1973) and German (*Masken in Frankfurt*, 1999).
Born in Rivne, Poland of 1923 as Musia Tehilimzogger, Ben-Amotz is sent to Palestine in 1938, as a part of Aliyat hano’ar. In his teens and early twenties, he fails to fit in as an immigrant, and so he begins his passing, shedding the skin of a meek Diaspora Jew to become the ultimate representation of the New-Hebrew; reborn in Tel-Aviv, Ben-Amotz erases all connections to the past. Modern Hebrew literary criticism deals with these two polarities of the Jew—the old vs. the new/the diasporic vs. the Hebrew. But this negotiation, I argue, also has an adverse effect on our study and understanding of Israeli fiction. To support my reading of Ben-Amotz’s novel, I will follow Seyla Benhabib’s critique regarding the prevalence of identity/difference in modern societies, claiming that:

What is disturbing in these developments is not the inevitable dialectic of identity/difference … but rather the atavistic belief that identities can be maintained and secured only by eliminating difference and otherness. The negotiation of identity/difference, to use William Connolly’s felicitous phrase, is the political problem facing democracies on a global scale.4

We can easily apply Benhabib’s warnings to the current political doctrine in Israel, and the belief that Israeli identity can be achieved only through the eradication of other identities. This is best exemplified by recent controversial legislations in Israel, especially the adoption of the Nation-State Law by the Israeli Knesset.5

The literature, in retrospect, helps us trace and recognize the cultural shifts and social conditions that now emerge as extreme political realities. At the same time, I would like to stress

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5 “Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People” (adopted 19 July 2018) bases the nature of Israel as a as the Nation-State of the Jewish People. It carries a number of troubling statements, such as “Jewish settlement as a national value” among others, and demotes the status of Arabic, no longer an official language.
that paradoxically, readings of Israeli literature also work overtime to emphasize the negotiation of identity/difference between different groups. This negotiation, which aspires to locate a space for multiple identities, ends up creating and reinforcing segregated ones. My reading of Ben-Amotz’s novel will show that other tangible possibilities exist in the search for individual coherency outside these binaries, possibilities that previous negotiations seem to dismiss. The main question that leads me in this essay is a concern shared with other disciplines, specifically, whether our current understanding of identity, our discipline’s own negotiation of identity/difference, poses a problem?

In Covering: The Hidden Assault on our Civil Rights, Kenji Yoshino, a Professor of Constitutional Law at New York University’s School of Law, reintroduces the term covering as a signifier for individuals downplaying certain identity traits in order to fit into a fictitious, mythical mainstream culture. Yoshino, working in legal theory, and Benhabib, working in political science, both maintain the centrality of identity within one’s search for personal definition and affiliation, but also question the effectiveness of identity politics as the basis of such struggles:

I, too, worry about our current practice of fracturing into groups, each clamoring for state and social solitude. For this reason, I do not think we can move forward by focusing on old-fashioned group-based identity politics. We must instead build a new civil rights paradigm on what draws us together rather than on what drives us apart. Because covering applies to us all, it provides an issue around which we can make common cause. This is the desire for authenticity, our common human wish to express ourselves without being impeded by unreasoning demands for conformity.7

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7 Kenji Yoshino, Covering: The Hidden Assault on our Civil Rights. (New York: Random House, 2006), xii
In the frame of Hebrew literature, I question whether the continuous differentiation of groups within the Israeli narrative—similar to Yoshino’s argument—obstructs a larger common cause. What is that common cause? The model of the New-Hebrew—the creation of a strong, unified body of Jews—fails Dahn Ben-Amotz and his narrative, but Lizkor veliskoakh latches on to something other than group identity struggles. While indebted to his historical, ethnic and cultural past, in his novel, Ben-Amotz creates a character who is no longer tied to the Jewish Diaspora or Zionism directly. In this sense, Ben-Amotz’s novel is an exceptional piece of work. Within a literary tradition that is obsessed with the dichotomy between Old Jews/New Hebrews, Lizkor veliskoakh calls for a complete reshuffling of Israeli identity politics.

**General Cargo**

In the first section of this paper, I will analyze the introductory chapter of Ben-Amotz’s novel. I will show that this particular narrative moves away from other fictional and biographical Holocaust literature. Lizkor veliskoakh deals with trauma, memory, and testimony, but it is not a typical survivor story. It is not delivered with the usual sacred awe that accompanies Hebrew Holocaust literature, but works to shatter these sanctified taboos, skillfully playing with our “received wisdom” of Hebrew literature. The narrative itself begins with a confessional statement by its protagonist Uri Lam, concerning the events and occurrences to follow. The narrator is a Diaspora Jew, a Holocaust survivor who immigrated to Israel after spending years as a refugee in a small Italian village. Like Ben-Amotz himself, the hero of the novel assumes a new Sabra identity. Consequently, biography mixes with fiction, and similar to Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi’s readings of Jewish narratives of exile and return, the result is a “homodiegetic” mode in

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8 In Ziyunim ze lo ha’kol Ben-Amotz mentions that he wanted the novel to be titled “ישכח” (“to be forgotten”) which is a play on the Hebrew verb “יזכור” (Yzkor), translated as “remembrance” or “to be remembered” - a charged Jewish prayer of mourning (285).
which “the author manifests ‘himself’ at the end as a narrator, receptor and transmitter of the story.”

The opening sentence of the novel is a treat: “In September of 1959 I set out for Germany to settle the claim of my reparations.” The statement is at once gripping, enticing, suggestive, and risky. It is a highly provocative declaration. First, Ben-Amotz is rewriting the great epics of yore, channeling and challenging classic tales of journeys and immigration (of Jews and Gentiles) from Europe to the Holy Land. Here, the epic proportions remain, but the voyage is reversed. Ben-Amotz flips the Zionist narrative, and sends his hero not to just any old foreign country, but to Germany, the heart of darkness. Historically speaking, no Israeli Jew in his/her right mind decides so suddenly to travel to Germany in the fall of 1959. Charged as it already is, we also discover that the purpose of this trip is not a hop-on-hop-off-double-decker tour of Frankfurt, but the controversial claiming of reparations. Then there are many other little

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10 Writing about his first wife in *Ziyunim ze lo ha’kol*, Ben-Amotz brings up *Lizkor velishkoakh* as a point of reference: “Her name was Ellen and all the best and greatest things I had to tell about our acquaintance, love and first years of marriage, I told in regards to one called Barbara, whom I made German for the sake of the narrative, and about one called Uri who met her in Frankfurt, arriving there to forget and reconcile once and for all with a past he is running away from.”

11 Dahn Ben-Amotz. *Lizkor Velishkoach.* (Tel-Aviv: Amikam, 1968), 7

12 The epic tone of the opening chapter summons Shay Agnon’s 1934 novella, *Bilvav Yamim* [In the Heart of Seas]. The chapter titled “Avak Drakhim” or “Dust of Roads” is reincarnated in Ben-Amotz’s narrative as “Mit’an Klali” or “General Cargo”—a continuous journey, For Agnon, a dust of roads is a journey for journey’s sake, a history of vagabonding with no foreseeable completion. Ben-Amotz’s general cargo is equally open ended, like luggage that is infinitely spinning on a conveyor belt.

13 My father, first generation to Holocaust survivors, refuses to this day to set foot in Germany.

14 David Rodman explains the problematic relationship between Israel and German pre-1960s: “Germany and Israel failed to establish formal diplomatic ties throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. At first, the Jewish state balked at taking this step. Later it is was Germany that displayed a reluctance to recognize Israel formally…The shared historical experience of the Holocaust….had a significant impact on the course of German-Israeli relationship in its early years. German guilt and Israeli anger over the destruction of European Jewry certainly affected every sphere of the relationship, from political negotiations to cultural contacts.” (86)

15 The reparation agreement between Israel and Germany—drafted and signed during the early 1950’s—became one of the most controversial decisions made by any Israeli government. Titled the Luxembourg Agreement, the deal was led by the Israeli Prime-Minister, David Ben-Gurion, who with a lucid, pragmatic world view was seeking to establish Israel’s economy and global stance, and faced with massive resistance. Many believed that accepting reparations from Germany also meant forgiving the Nazis for their horrid crimes.
details that poke and make fun of foundational elements of convention and tradition. Even
beginning the journey in September is a snarky comment: it is a month that serves as a historical
marker for the beginning and end of World War II, and the Gregorian calendar’s counterpart to
*Tishrei*, the Jewish month of High Holidays. The Jewish New-Year and *Yom-Kippur* are
indicators of rebirth and renewal in Jewish/Israeli culture, and as markers of new beginnings and
reconciling of old atonements, they pose a most questionable time to undertake pilgrimages in
foreign lands.

While the opening statement is of global proportion, Uri’s existence, his worries and
motives seem exceptionally localized, revolving mainly around his basic need for personal
fulfilment and well-being as a citizen of the Israeli state:

Though at first I had been reluctant to claim reparations, even though I had a few very
good reasons to do so, reasons that I still wish to refrain from elaborating upon, sudden
life events—the opportunity to acquire an abandoned house in Jerusalem near the border,
the need for a car of my own, the approaching deadline for submitting claims and the
influence of friends, among them a childhood friend who returned to Germany—all
created a change of mind, that was absolute and final.\(^{16}\)

This mundane list is followed by a strange and peculiar statement—a change of mind that was
“absolute and final” or "sofi umukhat." In the context of the Holocaust, this choice of words is
shocking, especially coming from a survivor, but it is also a perfect example of the narrative’s
self-assurance and unapologetically confident tone—one that sets off Ben-Amotz as a unique
voice in Holocaust literature.\(^{17}\) Not to say that the grand narrative we see in the opening

\(^{16}\) Ben-Amotz, *Lizkor Velishkoach*, 7
\(^{17}\) Aharon Appelfeld is mainly the contrasting figure I am relating to in this analysis, with his detached, lost group of
characters who inhabit a limbo of space and language. Uprooted from their home, and unable to find new
statement is fully liberated from the traumas of surviving the Holocaust, but the clash between the hard Sabra shell and fragile Jewish memory carries with it an explosive action potential.

**A Simple Answer**

After the introduction, the novel moves on to portray the trials and tribulations of its hero and his journey to Europe. The first stop on the itinerary is Genoa, Italy, where the narrator was a refugee during the war. The Italian terminal brings back memories of the original voyage to Palestine: “We boarded the boat and set off for a warm, distant land, a land of golden beaches and palm trees, orange groves and whitewashed houses—far from the black pitch roofs of home”.18 During the first years in Palestine, the enchanted eastern delights fail to win over Uri’s past. He finds it impossible to let go, endlessly obsessed with old family photos:

In one faded snapshot [father] was lying in a couch in flowery silk pajamas, his small eyes smiling. Mother sat beside him, an ample woman with a high forehead and large gray eyes. His hand rested on her arm; he wore a wide ring. The repose of a Sabbath afternoon. There was another photo—of the small garden that surrounded our house in Frankfurt, with Mother standing near a table, pouring something into thin china cups. Miri, my sister, is near her (Miri's bangs are cut in straight line across her forehead), and my big, handsome brother is lifting a cup to his lips. The small boy off to one side—a child of five or six—is me.19

The parents, the couch, all appear in a posed, classical-European-painting style-like photograph.20 The mentioning of the Sabbath as a marker of time stopped, of an iconic, almost

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid. Pg 58
20 And it seems like every Israeli-Ashkenazi family has one of those pictures hanged.
holy family afternoon, with lush, posh tea cups, and the little German-Jewish offspring—these scenes are as diaspora as you can get. Eventually, Uri decides to make a drastic change. We learn that Uri’s birth name, Hirsch, which in the German/Yiddish means "deer" or "stag," is first translated into the Hebrew “Zvi” and then, "Zvi, wishing to escape even further from himself, became Uri."21 22 Coerced to remember, he chooses to forget: “I burned all this stuff on my fifteenth birthday,” Uri recalls, “the six photographs and four letters I had taken with me to Palestine. I made a small bonfire in the empty lot behind the Youth Center and burned it all—including the diary I kept from the time I was ten.”23 Finally, he decides to become a native of Israel: "when anybody asked where I was born I’d answer, defiantly, 'Tel Aviv.' A simple answer that avoided unpleasant issues. 'Frankfurt? Then where are your parents? What do you mean, you don't know? How did you get here? You have no one here? Really, no one? Poor thing.'”24

Nurit Gertz argues that these events are channeling “the hero’s split identity.” Gertz follows a narrative of friction between diasporic and Israeli identities, and describes the narrators’ own identity as set within a “fissured space in which [he] has no real home. Every location in which he finds himself is threatened by other places, his confidence in each particular time is challenged by other times, and the identity that he carries at any given moment is repeatedly fissured by other identities.”25 26 Gertz then claims that the plot progresses to reveal Uri’s old diasporic identity, the one which he had to conceal and repress. This identity is hidden behind Uri’s new self, a self which is defined by the national narrative: an Israeli identity that is

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21 Ibid. 58
22 This corresponds with Ben-Amotz’s biography. From Musia, his name was changed into Moshe upon arrival to the Israeli youth village, before it was finally changed to Dahn.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Gertz. “Who is a Jew,” 363
26 Narratives of otherness and of clashing identities are abundant in Israeli fiction: literally the entire oeuvre of Aharon Appelfeld, Hanoch Bartov’s Pitzei Bagrut (1965), Yehudit Hendel’s Anashim Aherim Hem (1950), among many many others.
ultimately exposed as “fictional,” according to Gertz.27 Gershon Shaked, in book V of his massive critical anthology *Ha’siporet ha’Ivrit*, argues that the legitimization of the diasporic identity is enabled due to “crisis of the Zionist arch-narrative:”

The awakening of the collective historical memory in the Israeli society, following the Eichmann trial, changed the self-identification of the “new-Hebrew” and created a different approach towards *sh’erit ha-pletah* [“the surviving remnant”] and the diasporic experience. In contrast with secular Zionism, based on the negation of the diaspora and the negation of the Diaspora-Jew, the Eichmann trial legitimized the “old-Jew.” Now, identifying with the victim is just as worthy as identifying with the warrior.28

As a result, Shaked argues, the heroes of the Zionist effort are no longer the fighters, the soldiers, the people of the land, but also the Jewish victims, the anti-heroes, the heroes of a much larger Jewish arch-narrative. Following Gertz and Shaked, we can see that Uri truly belongs to the new brand of old Jewish heroes or anti-heroes, challenging the limits of “Zionist identity that was generated by the propaganda texts of the early Zionist era.”29

But aligning Uri with these theories leave much to be desired. Uri is interested in dropping his Jewish victim status. He is not preoccupied by arch-narratives, Zionist propaganda, or is he trying to challenge fissured identities as much as we would like him to. He is content with his own little personal resolution. Uri finds asylum in the answer “Tel-Aviv,” which he describes as a “magic word” that ends all questions, and chooses to use this strategy in his favor. His identity as presented, is pretty much intact, and the process he is going through corresponds less with national narratives, and more with Carl Jung’s definition of “individuation:”

27 Ibid. 364
29 Gertz, 367
The process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated; in particular, it is the development of the psychological *individual* as a being distinct from the general, collective psychology. Individuation, therefore, is a process of differentiation, having for its goal the development of the individual personality . . . Since individuality is prior and physiological datum, it also expresses itself in psychological ways. Any serious check to individuality, therefore, is an artificial stunting.30

Ironically, Uri’s individuality is lost in readings of identity, of collective psychology or in our case, when positioning him among literary trends or arch-narratives. Arguing that Uri’s identity is fissured, or trying to position Uri as either Diaspora-Jew or New-Hebrew, is going against the narrator’s own wishes, forcefully rendering him impotent, unable to control his own destiny or establish his own genuine identity.

A simple answer, Tel Aviv, is the answer that helps the narrator undermine a different story, an unwanted story—the memories of his past—and find refuge inside a protective shell. And it works. While the literary survivor, this novel’s Jew is expected to silence his diasporic identity in lieu of the overbearing and “proud Israeli,”31 here is the narrator, telling us that the silencing is done for logical, practical reasons, and not because of other, more Romantic-sounding attributions. Likewise, Uri is not negating his diasporic self or de-legitimizing the “old-Jew.” Simply put, the narrator adopts his own version of the New-Hebrew model, not because of an identity crisis or ideological following of Zionism, but as a private act of coping with the past.

Ben-Amotz is proposing a different, less critical way of looking at silence or “shtika,” in Hebrew a powerful word: the act of not speaking or stopping speech. In *Testimony: Crisis of*

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30 Carl Jung, in *Individuation and Narcissism: The psychology of self in Jung and Kohut*, by Mario Jacoby (New Jersey: Routledge, 2016)

31 “An identity that he attempts to silence and repress” writes Gertz in “Who is a Jew,” pg. 362
Witnessing, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman examine the relationship between memory, witnessing the Holocaust as a crisis, and the power of the testimonial process. Following hundreds of interviews with survivors, Laub stresses the importance of spoken testimony:

“The survivors did not only need to survive in so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative to tell and thus to come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past in which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life.”

Instead, Ben-Amotz is offering an alternative way of coping with the traumatic aftermaths of surviving and witnessing. For Uri, surviving does not involve telling his story, or the hopeful belief that the Zionist arch-narratives will vanquish or overwrite the trauma. Here, the narrator wishes to forget with a very straightforward motto: “Who was that bleeding-heart Christian who said, ‘Forgive? Yes. Forget? Never.’ I spit on his face. Forgive? Never. But one must forget. That is the only answer. One must forget!”

Whether Uri succeeds in forgetting is a whole different question, but even if we challenge Uri’s choice and identity, and claim that his forgetting is unrealistic or fabricated, his identity remains authentic in its fabrication. Here is Ben-Amotz discussing the erasure of his past in Ziyunim ze lo ha’kol, his autobiographical memoir:

My father’s name was Tehilim-Zogger [the Speaker of Psalms], if anyone still cares. It was only natural that I decided to bury his name in the same Nazi killing pits in which he found his death. I can’t find any justification in carrying this ancestral weight on my

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32 Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History (New Jersey: Routledge 1991), 78
33 Laub, 63
shoulders. There is nothing between me and the *Speakers of Psalms*. The Hebrew language in which they sermon is the only thing we have in common … Besides, I thought I was in very good company—along with Pinchas Kozlowski, Golda Meirson, Mordechai Nemirovsky, David Green, Moshe Sahrtok, and many, many others—when at the age of fourteen I took a new name and began a new chapter in my new book of life.”

When positioning Ben-Amotz’s biography alongside Uri’s narrative, we see a certain individual that is free of lofty principles and mostly interested in the search of better prospects for himself. Simply put, this is one man’s effort to find a personal, apolitical way to carry-on. By forcing a narrative of repressed memory and identity into this novel we risk repressing the hero’s own identity. Instead, seeing Uri as actively choosing to *pass* rather than passively being played by preconditioned roles reveals a new survivor identity which operates on its own terms. It is an identity that does not control the individual, but an individual who chooses to pass between identities with “the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency.”

**True Self/False Self**

Kenji Yoshino, thinking about identities, turns to psychoanalysis, and brings up the object-relations theorist D.W. Winnicott. Winnicott talks about the True Self (“finding a way to exist as oneself, and to relate to objects as oneself, and to have a self into which to retreat for relaxation”) and the False Self (“sense of being unreal, a sense of futility. It mediates the relationship between the True Self and the world”):

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35 Became Pinchas Sapir, an Israeli politician.
36 Later Golda Meir, the fourth prime minister of Israel.
37 AKA Mordechai Nemir, mayor of Tel-Aviv.
38 David Ben-Gurion, founder of the Israeli state.
39 Moshe Sharet, second prime minister of Israel.
40 Dahn Ben-Amotz, *Ziyunim ze lo ha’kol* (Tel-Aviv: Metziuth, 1979), 119-120
What I love about Winnicott is that he does not demonize the False Self. To the contrary, Winnicott believes the False Self protects the True Self, which it does by “compliance with environmental demands.” Like a king castling behind a rook in chess, the more valuable piece retreats behind the less valuable one. Because the relationship between the True Self and the False Self is symbiotic, Winnicott believes both selves will exist even in the healthy individual. Nonetheless, Winnicott defines health according to the degree of ascendancy the True Self gains over the False Self.\textsuperscript{42}

Since Uri’s previous self is the diasporic self, one might assume that it is also his True Self. But chronology is misleading: original identities are not necessarily true identities. So how can the narrator’s True Self and False Self be identified? Ben-Amotz had personal struggles with this question throughout his life, and in \textit{Ziyunim ze lo ha’kol}, he states that his identity is not static, an approach, he writes, that challenges “readers, critics, viewers and clerks:”

[And] their trials of sorting, classifying and categorizing my different ‘I’s … If I wanted to stay true to myself I would probably have had to change my name each day, five times a day, once a month and four times a year. There are times, days, in which I am Alexander, Moussa, Miguel, Uri Lam,\textsuperscript{43} human, Havazelet\textsuperscript{44}, Papa, Raffi Levin,\textsuperscript{45} Peter, Sasha and even Moishe Tehilim-Zogger.\textsuperscript{46} Yes, yes.\textsuperscript{47}  

As with the author, it also becomes harder and harder to differentiate between Uri’s True and False identities. Could the blunt Israeli be the False shell that protects the more vulnerable True diasporic self? Or is it the victimized, traumatized Jewish Hirschel that is the False one,

\textsuperscript{42} Yoshino. \textit{Covering}, 185  
\textsuperscript{43} The narrator of \textit{Lizkor veliskoakh}.  
\textsuperscript{44} A female name in Hebrew, literally a lily .  
\textsuperscript{45} The narrator of Ben-Amotz’s war novel \textit{Lo Sam Za’yin}  
\textsuperscript{46} Ben-Amotz’s birth name [sic].  
\textsuperscript{47} Ben-Amotz. \textit{Zyiunim}, 118
preventing the new Uri from truly coming forward? Uri’s passing—like passing at large—problematizes the conceptualization of identity and identity politics, as argued by Elaine K. Ginsberg, in her book *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*:

> For both the process and the discourse of passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics, a challenge that may be seen as either threatening or liberating but in either instance discloses the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent.\(^{48}\)

Not only are Uri’s identities multiple and contingent, but they constantly feed and mingle with each other, up to the point where the F and T identities become inseparable, and sometimes even create new, lower case f and t identities. Uri is just not looking to find one true identity, and this is a theme that is common with passing narratives in literature, as Martha J. Cutter points out in her reading of Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*:

> Clare is interested not in a fixed and stable identity; rather she wants one that is most ‘having.’ … Larsen’s characterization shows a brilliant nexus between Clare’s racial and class concerns: Clare initially passes from the black to the white race to transcend her class position, but to flaunt this new class position, she must pass back from a white racial identity to a black one. To have all she wants, Clare must maintain multiple identities—multiple subject positions—and pass back and forth between them.\(^{49}\)

Likewise, Uri insists on destabilizing his identity in order to achieve stability. He passes from Diaspora-Jew to a New-Hebrew, and once in Europe he passes back. Like Clare, I will argue next, Uri flaunts his new position of power over Gentile Europe.

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\(^{48}\) Ginsberg, *Passing*, 4

Inspection

To illustrate my statement, I would like to focus on a key scene in the novel. Upon his arrival in Italy, his first time in Europe since the war, Uri is accused of smuggling goods and singled out for an intrusive customs inspection. Ben-Amotz creates this encounter—like other incidents in the book—as a reenactment of Holocaust trauma: after a selection process, the Jew is apprehended by the authorities, his possessions seized, his privacy is violated, and his personal freedom taken. “Why is he making me wait? Do I look suspicious? … What’s he thinking that pig of an inspector,”50 Uri wonders, and when the inspector asks: “what do you have to declare,”51 it almost seems like he is looking for Uri to admit his Jewishness. The narrator naturally connects the event to his past: “These Fascists, cooperators, lowly boot-lickers! They expect you to kiss their ass, beg, implore, degrade yourself just as they did for so many years.”52

In Testimony, Dori Laub describes occurrences such as these, as “second holocausts.” A testimony to the history of repetition: “through its uncanny reoccurrence, the trauma of the second holocaust bears witness not to just a history that has not ended, but specifically, to the historical occurrence of an event that, in effect, does not end.”53 Laub believes that the not telling plays a crucial part in the burden that survivors carry. The trauma becomes a load one can never take off, except through testimony. Laub then argues that testimony is the answer for a survivor who lives in a perpetual traumatic reality of reenactments:

To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process—a process of constructing narrative, or reconstructing history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event—has to be set in motion. This re-

50 Ben-Amotz. Lizkor, 6.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Laub. Testimony, 65
externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside self oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim.\textsuperscript{54}

Nurit Gertz goes further, adding to the narrator’s second holocaust a third burden, the sudden return to diasporic Jewishness and feminized identity: “Now that he has been identified as a smuggler, his masculinity withers,” Gertz argues. This reading relies on the inspector’s demands that Uri take off his clothes for a bodily search. According to Gertz this act carries “a homosexual allusion of sorts.”\textsuperscript{55} This intimate scene does indeed include male nudity and a re-externalizing of the event, of sorts.

Facing a “second holocaust” and asked to undress, Uri decides to “articulate and transmit the story,” along with his deconstructed male identity, but only through a slightly different, unorthodox channel. With a burst of proud, pure and distilled nationalism, Uri, a modern-day Braveheart, looks at the inspector and delivers his innermost truth: “‘What about the rectum? You forgot to check my rectum. So sorry to disappoint you, but it happens to be empty,’ and as luck would have it, I let out a splendid fart—rich and mellow with sentiments of national pride and independence. ‘Perfectly empty,’” I repeated.”\textsuperscript{56} A true redemption, and a great release, pun intended: “I laughed until there were tears in my eyes. I laughed while I pulled on my pants, I laughed while I put on my sweater and jacket. I couldn’t stop. What luck to have produced a resounding blast at such a precise moment!”\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{54} Laub. Pg. 69
\textsuperscript{55} Gertz, “Who is a Jew”, 362
\textsuperscript{56} Ben-Amotz, Lizkor, 14
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid
This is an exceptional scene. Literary critic Ran Yagil, comments on this utterly precious moment and on the Ben-Amotzian humor that runs throughout this novel: “that wonderful, child-like-cynical humor which made Ben-Amotz’s satires and skits so famous. In spite of the novel’s pretentiousness, it manages to make the reader laugh, in multiple occasions. Humor in Israeli literature is quite rare.” 58 59 Indeed, the macabre humor is unprecedented, as Holocaust and humor is a big taboo in Israeli culture, forever residing in the “too soon” territory. But more importantly, in this scene, Ben-Amotz ruptures a literary tradition that is obsessively looking to differentiate diasporic identity and Israeli identity.

**Multiple Identity Politics**

While readings of diasporic and Zionist identities in Modern Hebrew literature seem inevitable, this method also constructs a certain template of expectations, or a system of binary categorization and division. Approaching this narrative with a set of check-boxes fails to do justice with the complex identity that Uri exemplifies as a character, an identity that is not split or fissured, but is “multiple and contingent,” moving and passing from one end of our preexisting spectrum to the other. 60 I must admit that there is something inherently familiar and recognizable about Uri’s exercise of his individuality and character. At the customs checkpoint, it is surely tempting to see Uri’s Israeli masculinity being threatened—as he is detained, ordered to remove his clothes and prepare for an invasive inspection—which in turn works perfectly with the theme of reasserting the identity of the feminized Diaspora Jew. 61 On the other hand, Uri’s

58 (Ha’aretz 12.02.2018)  
59 In my defense, I would argue that humor is also quite lacking in academic papers.  
60 Ginsberg, *Passing*, 4  
61 This “loss of masculinity” is a widely-used trope Hebrew literary criticism. Gertz reads Ben-Amotz’s hero in this novel through this lens. In previous papers, I have argued for similar discourse in Ben-Amotz writing, particularly his 1948 short story “Piccolina,” where I reference Michael Gluzman’s theory of the feminized Diaspora-Jew in his readings of Herzl. This reading has been applied to film studies as well, See Raz Yosef’s “Homonational Desires: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Trauma in the Cinema of Eytan Fox.”
obscene bodily response is not quite in line with this theoretical direction. It is not a response of a feminized anti-hero, and hardly a homosexual allusion. Quite the opposite, especially when considering Ben-Amotz’s elaborate and explicit homoerotic language and descriptions of his own homosexual encounters in *Ziyunim ze lo ha’kol*. No, here we have an uber-nationalist response, and one that is plainly spelled out as such to the reader: “a great fart, a splendid fart—rich and mellow with sentiments of national pride and independence.”

Not to say that these sentiments function as the novel’s Zionist manifesto. While it bears a certain significance in Uri’s narrative, this moment is acted out as comic relief. How much weight can really be given to arguing for Zionism as the savior of the Jewish people when it originates from a character’s overactive digestive system? And if this is indeed the case, would a reversed post-structuralist reading make sense at all? Nonetheless, this occurrence complicates the stakes behind Uri’s identity and I would suggest we resist the urge to read Uri himself as oscillating between breaking and preserving the Zionist/Diaspora narrative, and examine these narratives as they oscillate within Uri.

Consider Seyla Benhabib’s argument, in which she claims that “the observer’s perspective must not only explain the historical and sociological contingency of these movements but also show how and why they are plausible, desirable for their members. There has to be a level of the motivational explanation of action.”⁶² Thus, as observers of literature, a more challenging approach would be to inquire why Ben-Amotz—himself giving up one identity for the sake of another, nationalized and streamlined identity—chooses to uphold rather than criticize this move. While it is expected that such a narrative may offer a critique of the somewhat coerced group-identity pushed through the Zionist agenda, could it be possible, as

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⁶² Benhabib, “Strange Multiplicities,” 46
Benhabib asks, that there is a “motivational explanation” and that some individuals “find in group-based identity forms more than simply a convenient formula for getting privileges and benefits from the welfare state”?63

I believe so, especially if we look at Uri’s ability to protect himself through performative Israeliness—putting up a wall to avoid a potential reawakening of the trauma. Using blueprint Zionism—from destruction to resurrection—he collects his fragmented identity and rises with a new narrative full of personal meaning. After the inspection is over, Uri leaves the dressing booth to find his bags neatly packed for him with everything back in its original place. The inspector signs some paperwork and issues an official apology for the wrongdoings Uri had suffered. The inspector also offers a check to cover the damaged goods. Uri refuses to take the money, and tears the check to pieces. “Thanks,” Says Uri, “I’d like to keep this suitcase as a memento of Italy. Sorry I caused you so much frustration. And I do understand your position—an alert civil servant wishing to apprehend one more Jewish smuggler and report it to the media. I am very sorry, really very sorry.”64

Instead of the Jew that was expected to show up at the foreign check-point, here instead is a proud Israeli backed up by his strong sense of empowering identity. His revenge is primal, unapologetic, unsophisticated and crude, exactly the kind we would expect Ben-Amotz to deliver. From this position of power, Uri has the ability to reenact the story of the Jews in Europe, thereby rejecting their previous characterization as silent and obedient victims of the gentiles. He owns his fate and stands up to injustice, the Sabra way. With a final punch aimed

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63 Ibid.
64 Ben-Amotz. *Lizkor* 16
directly at Europe’s collective gut, Uri tells the inspector: “your performance is consistent with the highest traditions of your people.”

This is, one could argue, a basic reading of the scene and must I admit that the conclusion sounds a bit limited, at least in light of usual academic expectations. But can we be sure that a deeper analysis or a closer reading will be inherently less limiting?

While narrativity stresses otherness and the fluidity of the boundaries between the self and others, authoritarian and repressive movements respond to the search for certainty, for rigid definitions, for boundaries and markers. Theories of fragmentary and dispersed subjectivity, which were so fashionable at the height of postmodernism, ignored demands for stability, control, and understanding. Yet the search for coherence in an increasingly fragmentary material and cultural world; the attempt to generate meaning out of the complexities of life stories; the demand that our governments do something to save those of us who are most vulnerable, weak, and sick … these searches and demands are neither wrong nor unjust nor meaningless.

Following Benhabib’s theory, while parsing the text for identity-bending narratives, we risk forgetting about what is right in front of us: Uri’s most basic needs, desires and associations that are fulfilled by his reliance on something bigger than dealing with his fragmented identity, something which helps him respond to and overcome (certain) post-traumatic occurrences. As the customs saga shows, sometimes there is a straightforward explanation, an explanation that cannot be achieved by using our handy toolbox that often provides no answers, or even misleading answers. Uri shows that there are other channels that help an individual cope with trauma—in his case, testimony turns out useless—and that however unpopular a statement such

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65 Ibid. 14 (emphasis mine)
66 Benhabib, “Strange Multiplicities,” 52-53
as this might be, Uri generates meaning, stability and control through his citizenship, through his affiliation with the state of Israel.

I do not think that Ben-Amotz is an avid supporter of nationalism, or that he argues for Israel’s existence as an exclusive ethno-state. Instead, we need to find the narrator’s identity in between fluent narrativity and rigid definitions. The novel shows that Uri is critical of classic performative Israeliness as well. His distaste reaches its peak when he discovers that a group of fellow travelers, obnoxious Israelis, were the ones to blame for the inspection:

“Say, what did they want from you in customs” Uzi asked. “Nothing,” I said. “They searched my luggage.” … “Did they make you strip?” Uzi asked and they all burst into laughter. “We played a trick like that in Haifa once, pretending to know someone was smuggling diamonds in his ass. The guy sure was pale when he came out of customs.”

“But happy” laughed Danni. “He enjoyed every minute of it, that faggot.67

Uri is ashamed of the group, of their cheap thrills and juvenile pranks, but what he finds particularly disturbing is the way they engage in and externalize an over-the-top type of Israeliness: “I stared at them, unable to believe we had anything in common. Are they incapable of quiet, civilized conversation? Must they tell the world they are from Israel?”68 While again it seems that this moment exemplifies the hero’s return to diasporic identity, differentiating himself from the group’s toxic Israeli masculinity, there is no evidence in the text to support such a reading. Uri is critical of the group’s behavior, he has difficulties internalizing the idea that they share a homeland, but not once does he question his identity as a result of this discovery. His identity can be maintained securely, with no reevaluation, even in the face of difference and otherness.

67 Ben-Amotz, Ziyunim, 42
68 Ibid.
Ben-Amotz himself rejects any forced readings that see his identity as unstable. The self he constructs around the Israeli narrative is the self that he is, so much so that this identity becomes engrained in his literary production: “I (like other children who arrived from abroad) was among the first to abandon high literary Hebrew, a language that was heavy in European imagery (diasporic that is). When I began writing I turned to a spoken, sub-standard Hebrew which became an integral part of my new I.D.”69 To argue that Uri is a New-Hebrew returning to a diasporic identity is to repeat an identity bias which Ben-Amotz had to experience in his real life when his True-self was questioned by a critical public:

A few years ago, when I was asked by a TV host to share my original last name, I answered, without hesitation, that it was none of his business. Following this, a number of op-eds—reporters who see themselves in charge on steering public opinion and mass education—attacked my hypocrisy and my desperate trails of escaping my past.70 The Zionist melting pot fails. At once forcing immigrants to change their identity, while pushing them away because of their innate difference. This aligns with a phenomenon that Benhabib sees in modern nations, when “the attempt to eliminate ethnic otherness results in the creation of more ethnic bastardization or hybridization.”71 My issue here, is our own paradoxical attempt of making spaces for identities by following a similar error: dividing into further identity groups, reinforcing the elimination of difference. Just as Ben-Amotz is required once again to align his narrative and identity to that of the mainstream, once diasporic Jewishness regains a respectable status in Israeli society, we demand of Uri to align his identity with our own readings of narratives of Hebrew literature.

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69 Ben-Amotz. Ziyunim, 116
70 Ibid.,117
71 Benhabib, “Strange Multiplicities,” 52
Here we can return to Yoshino, who challenges mainstream demands of individuals to cover, but he argues that change will not happen through group-based identity politics:

My ultimate commitment is to autonomy as a means of achieving authenticity, rather than to a fixed conception of what authenticity might be… I expect the liberty paradigm to protect the authentic self better than the equality paradigm. While it need not do so, the equality paradigm is prone to essentializing the identities it protects. 72

This view reiterates the problems we encounter when searching for familiarized identities within Uri’s narrative, which often essentializes, or leads to misguided understandings of Uri’s own authenticity. I suggest that instead of differentiating between the Zionist and Jewish-diasporic arches, Uri (like Ben-Amotz) manages to produce a personal third arch in his process of individuation, one that involves a culmination of the two polarities rather than their struggle. The customs inspection exemplifies this accomplishment. Uri manages to confront his diasporic “second holocaust” (belonging to the Jewish narrative) with a triumphant, nationalist accord (the Zionist narrative), but the resolution, refusing the money, consists in Uri siding with humanist morality over group ethics. This exchange also functions as a premonition of the novel’s ultimate resolution regarding the reparations from Germany. Uri decides to accept the severance, but gives a significant chunk of the money to the Italian family who rescued him and sheltered him as a refugee during the war.

Since I work closely with Ben-Amotz’s literature, and since Ben-Amotz is already such a problematic figure, I would love to finish the paper with this touching resolution, and to conclude that this novel’s ending reinforces the work’s respectable status in a proud tradition of critical Hebrew literature. But this is not the case. In a tour-de-force moment, and probably way

72 Yoshino, Covering, 191
ahead of its time, Uri criticizes the echo chamber in which resolutions like these take place, and the false assertions that arise as a result:

You are clinging to illusion … You gaze into your own little mirrors every morning and are pleased with what you see. You read the good newspapers that express your opinions, you listen to commentators who share your views, you mingle with people you like. It’s natural—that’s how everybody is. It seems to me, and I hope this is a mistake, that you are completely out of touch with the man on the street.\textsuperscript{73}

Similarly, claiming that Ben-Amotz finds the perfect formula for upstanding moral citizenship is as unrealistic as claiming that he shatters the Zionist narrative. The book fails to uphold its humanist values and settles for existential neoliberalist dread. Uri leaves Germany convinced in his right to take over “an abandoned house in Jerusalem near the border,” and the reparations, partly compensating for Jewish property seized by the Nazis, will now ironically pay for a Palestinian house seized by the Jews.\textsuperscript{74} This realization occurs after visiting his own childhood home in Frankfurt, now occupied by a German family, refugees of East Germany, whose own house was similarly repossessed by the state.\textsuperscript{75} Uri is infuriated when he discovers this, but his German wife, Barbara, offers the following theory:

No one would compare the Nazi crimes to policies of the Israeli government, she said, (“Thanks a lot,” I retorted). But still, the Arab refugee, his condition is very similar to yours … “You live in an Arab house,” she said distantly. “The man you bought it from acquired the house legally from the Custodian of Absentee Property, just as your father’s

\textsuperscript{73} Ben-Amotz, \textit{Lizkor}, 250
\textsuperscript{74} Ben-Amotz was no stranger to such a predicament in his own life. The author himself occupied an abandoned Arab house in the ancient port city of Jaffa.
\textsuperscript{75} Ben-Amotz, \textit{Lizkor}, 249
house was acquired legally by its present occupants. You can’t expect them to be evicted, just as no Arab refugee could demand that you’d be evicted from his house.”

So while the novel is so very close to portraying a truly magnificent human utopia, ending in Jerusalem with the birth of a baby boy to a Jewish father and a German mother, and on the day of Eichmann’s arrest—it nevertheless ends in an occupied house, failing to answer Benhabib’s critical question regarding the challenge in this new constellation:

Can there be coherent accounts of individual and collective identity that do not fall into xenophobia, intolerance, paranoia, and aggression toward others? … And, finally, can we establish justice and solidarity at home without turning in upon ourselves, without closing our borders to the needs and cries of others?”

Both Benhabib and Yoshino agree that there must be a way to “protect difference that does not balkanize the country into separate fiefdoms of competing identity groups.” But while Benhabib ends with an open question, Yoshino is certain that the “impulse should press us toward thinking of civil rights less in terms of groups than in terms of our common humanity.”

It might sound unrealistic to hope that through common humanity each refugee in this story would get his own childhood home back, but as Yoshino claims, the alternative approach leaves the rights of the people to be determined by the “Courts picking favorites among groups.” We must make sure our discipline does not do the same.

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76 Ibid. pg 380
77 According to his biography, Ben-Amotz was the first to “happily throw [himself] into the prolonged and problematic public debate regarding the fate of the conquered territories, the approach to the Palestinians and the changes that the [Six-Day] War caused within the collective Israeli consciousness.” The biography then mentions that Ben-Amotz had to delay political struggles in order to finish writing this novel. Yehuda Amichai’s 1963 novel, Lo me-akshev Lo mi-kan, is similarly anchored in a return to Germany, and also begins in an old Arab house as well.
78 Benhabib, “Strange Multiplicities,” 53
79 Yoshino, Covering, 183
80 Ibid. 187
81 Ibid.
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