The "Wandering Israeli" in Contemporary Israeli Literature

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Among recurring themes in contemporary Israeli fiction one can easily identify the theme of the "wandering Israeli." Israeli literature deals with Israelis who left the country and found a temporary or permanent home abroad, and those who live in Israel but constantly dream about life in a faraway country. It describes wandering Israelis' relationships with family and friends in Israel and abroad, and explores their inner world and social environment, motives, and views. Obviously, fiction does not claim to offer a sociological analysis of social facts. Nonetheless, these works portray an interesting and intricate picture and provide us with access to a level of meaning that is often missing from statistical and journalistic treatments of the subject.

This article focuses on several works of fiction written by Israelis in Hebrew and published in Israel during the last few years: Aharon Megged's *Journey in the Month of Av* (1980), Yotam Reuveni's "Mixed Tendency" (1982), Amos Oz's *A Perfect Peace* (1982), Yizhak Ben-Ner's *A Distant Land* (1982), Amnon Jackont's *Borrowed Time* (1982), A.B. Yehoshua's *Late Divorce* (1982), and Arie Semo's *Masquerade* (1983). Although the centrality of the issue of wandering to these works varies, they allow us to make some initial observations about the treatment of the wandering Israeli in contemporary Hebrew literature.

Even though the problem of emigration from Israel is by no means limited to Israeli-born Jews, it is quite revealing that Israeli literature deals primarily with Sabras who become wandering Israelis. Obviously, this focus reflects the Israeli preoccupation with the most painful aspect of yerida, namely, the emigration of Israeli-born. Indeed, within the framework of the Zionist ideology, the very combination of these two—"Sabra" and "wandering"—seems like a contradiction in terms. For the generation of the pioneers, the Sabra symbolized the hope to
create a new type of Jew in the land of Israel: young, energetic, resourceful, assertive, and self-reliant. Above all, the new Jew was to be rooted in his or her land, the Land of Israel, in contrast to the wandering Jew of the Diaspora. It was generally assumed that by reaching the "promised land," the old wandering Jew would finally arrive at the end of his historical journey, never to wander again in far and foreign lands.¹

The fundamental problem of the "wandering Israeli" is further accentuated by the writers' choice of Sabras who are usually considered as the "Sabra elite": they are Ashkenazi whose parents, who came to Palestine as pioneers, are prominent politicians or educators; the sons received a good Israeli education, volunteered to serve in combat units in the army, or excelled in their studies. In short, these Israelis appear as rooted in Israeli life as one could possibly be. Because they seem so accomplished in Israeli terms, their wish to get away and try a new life elsewhere reflects even more sharply the personal and ideological crisis that ignited their urge to leave.

The emergence of wandering Israelis becomes a painful evidence of the discrepancy between Israeli reality and the vision of the founding fathers. From this perspective, not only those who have actually left the country threaten to destroy early dreams about the Sabra and the Jewish society in Israel but those who obsessively fantasize about life in another place—even if they may never actually leave—are symbolically a part of the syndrome of the wandering Israeli and, likewise, challenge the basic premises of the Zionist dream. Whereas the early Zionists believed that the return to Zion would solve the problem of the wandering Jew, the wandering Israelis dream of their own salvation in faraway countries.

Within the context of the Israeli ideology and culture, it is the wish to leave rather than the actual departure or the specific destination that provides the basic dramatic and emotional tension in this literature. In A Distant Land, Shuvali is obsessed with the dream of taking his large extended family to New Zealand. Only there will he be able to see his family peacefully united and prosperous. In his fantasy, his family will live a utopian life on his farm, working the land together.² There is an obvious historical irony in his attempt to describe his vision in conventional Zionist terminology:

This is like old time halutzuit [pioneering], isn't it? he said passionately—like my father and mother who came from Russia. . . What I have in mind is more aliah [immigration to Israel] than yerida. Just that. That's really aliah. That's what carries on what we all believed in once.³

Yonathan Lifshitz of Amos Oz's Perfect Peace spends most of his time