

A. B. Yehoshua's Mar Mani: A Sephardic World with Jerusalem as a Focal Point

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I. Sephardic Time

A. B. Yehoshua says in his essay titled “*bechipus achar hazman hasfaradi ha'avud*” (In search of the Lost Sephardic Time),¹⁾ that the nucleus for his novel *Mar Mani*²⁾ was formed while the funeral of his father, Yaacov, was taking place in a deserted and destroyed Sephardic cemetery on the Mount of Olives. On the day of the funeral, Yehoshua hadn't known where his father would be buried and was just told to follow the undertaker's car. It was in the rundown graveyard where Yehoshua's grandfather had bought a burial plot for himself but had not actually been buried there due to the partition of Jerusalem and Jews not having had access to the eastern part of the city. Yehoshua's father learned that his own father had bought the plot in this cemetery on the Mount of Olives, and wrote in his will his wish to be buried in this grave. While the funeral was being conducted in this abandoned cemetery, A. B. Yehoshua had an epiphany, about which he said, “For the first time I understood the meaning of the expression that we hear all the time when we study the Bible. . . . the expression *shachav 'im 'abotav*, to lie with one's fathers. . . . you can see all of Jerusalem clear in front of you, and at that time nostalgia, the search into the past was not just a kind of intellectual thing, but something that ended physically”.³⁾ It was at that moment that the seed of *Mar Mani* was sown in his mind.

In the 1950s and 60s, when masses of Mizrahim (Non-European Jewish) immigrants arrived in Israel, Yehoshua kept on writing just like Ashkenazi writers about the human conditions in the State of Israel, particularly the failure of the Zionist dream of creating an exemplary country. It was in the essay, “*bechipus akhar hazman hasfaradi ha'avud*” which, in fact, was originally written as a foreword for his father's posthumous publication titled *Yerushalaim hayeshanah ba'ayin ubalev* (Old Jerusalem in the eye and the heart),⁴⁾ that Yehoshua for the first time publicly acknowledged himself as a Sephardi but he noted that he had not hidden his origin and it was because of his parents' principle of providing him an Ashkenazi education and cultural environment that had given the general public a mistaken impression that he was Ashkenazi. In effect, his parents' love of European culture had made Yehoshua seem a quasi Ashkenazi in the early part of his writing career. His father, incidentally, was the fourth generation of a Jerusalemite family of Salonika origin and

his mother was born in Morocco.

When in 1982 Yehoshua's father died, the time was ripe for him to write on a Sephardic theme as his central subject matter, partly because of his epiphany in the cemetery and partly because his father, an amateur local historian, had left Avraham ample material to work on. As a matter of fact, his father told him a few years before his death, "You are going to write the most important work in your career after I die," and indeed this prophesy became reality in the form of *Mar Mani*. A year after his father's death, Yehoshua wrote, in a very short period of time, a story of a Mani who is accused of being a Turkish spy and sentenced to banishment in Crete: it became the third conversation of *Mar Mani*. The story of how Yehoshua got inspiration for *Mar Mani* and how he started writing it may suggest that *Mar Mani* is Yehoshua's attempt to firmly identify himself with Sephardim and also to trace back a Sephardic family for several generations so as to show the other trail of modern Jewish history which had been overshadowed by the more prominent History (with a capital H) of the Jewish people, namely that of Ashkenazim.

II. Summary of the Novel

The novel consists of five conversations:

1. The first conversation takes place in Kibbutz Mash'abei Sade in the Negev in 1982, the year of the Lebanon War. A student, Hagar Shiloh, tells her mother about her strange three-day encounter in Jerusalem with the judge Gavri'el Mani, the father of her boy-friend, Efraim Mani, whose child she will bear at the end of the story.

2. The second conversation takes place in 1944 in Heraklion, Crete, occupied by the Germans. A German soldier's adopted mother has come all the way from Germany to visit him, and Egon Bruner tells her all his misadventures on the island and his experiences there with the Mani family. Egon, in the end, as ordered, hunts down the Jews on the island and the Mani family except for the child and the mother are thus sent to Auschwitz. The ship packed with Jews is bombed and sunk in the sea.

3. The third conversation takes place in Jerusalem in 1918 just as the British take over the city. Ivor Stephen Horowitz, a young Jewish lawyer serving in the British army, explains to his superior the case of a political agitator, Yosef Mani; in the resolution Mani is sentenced to banishment in Crete.

4. The fourth conversation takes place in Jelleny-Szad in southern Poland (near Oswiecim) in 1899. A young doctor, Efraim Shapiro, reports to his father his experiences at the Third Zionist

Congress in Basel and his subsequent trip to Jerusalem with his sister Linka. Efraim and Linka visit Jerusalem at the invitation of a Dr. Moshe Mani, who runs a maternity hospital there. Having fatally fallen in love with Linka, Moshe accompanies the brother and sister when they live Jerusalem and then travels with them up to Beirut where he commits suicide.

5. The fifth conversation takes place in 1848 in Athens. For the first time we have a Mani as interlocutor : Avraham Mani tells his elderly mentor, Rabbi Shabbetai Hananiah-Haddaya, the intricate tale of his trip to Jerusalem and the death there of his young son, Yosef Mani. After Yosef dies on the Temple Mount, Avraham sleeps with his daughter-in-law, his son Yosef's widow, to ensure the continuation of the Mani family.

The novel is a passionate Mediterranean epic, a chronicle of six generations of a Sephardic family, which consists of five conversations. The term "conversation", however, is incorrect because they are actually one-sided conversations with the responses of the other interlocutors elided. The author's intention is to compel the reader into active participation in the act of reading. Each narrative is supplemented, before and after it, with journalistic detailed factual information about the characters in the story, framing each conversation and allowing the reader a whole perspective of the story.

Each one of the Mani family whose story is told in this novel has something demoniac or obsessive: Gavriel Mani in the first story has a persistent tendency of trying to commit suicide; in the second piece Efraim Mani says he cancelled his Jewishness; Yosef Mani in the third story declared as a boy 'homo politicus' after witnessing a woman giving a birth by herself in his father's abandoned maternity hospital in Jerusalem and he ends up being a political agitator urging poor, ignorant shepherds in Palestine to firmly establish their own identity before the great powers colonize the whole area; Moshe Mani in the fourth story commits suicide out of infatuation; and Avraham Mani in the fifth conversation kills his son Yosef (who has a fixed idea that Arabs were actually Jews who didn't realize it and accordingly behaves strangely) and sleeps with his son's widow to ensure the continuation of the Mani lineage.

III. Reception of the Novel

The novel *Mar Mani* attracted considerable favorable attention even before it was completed, an unusual phenomenon. A section of the third conversation was published in the journal *Politika* (5–6, March 1986) and shortly after this, literary critic Dan Miron wrote a short piece on it in *Ha'olam Haze*. In 1987, Yehoshua, unable to continue writing *Mar Mani* which was growing into an

unexpectedly ambitious work, meanwhile wrote another novel which focuses on a single Sephardic character, *Molcho*.⁵⁾ In 1988, the third conversation was performed as a monologue in the Municipal Theatre of the City of Haifa. In 1988, a section of the fourth conversation was published in *Mo'znayim*. In the seven months after the publication of the completed novel *Mar Mani*, that is in 1990, some thirty articles were published on the novel, including Dan Miron's lengthy article, "*Meachorei kol machshavah mistateret machshavah acheret*" (Behind each thought there is another thought). In December 1991, Nitza Ben-Dov published a collection of some 43 items dealing with the novel.⁶⁾

IV. What is so unique about this novel?

The unusual speed and scale of interest in the novel suggests the enormity of its importance and literary value. What, then, are the characteristics of this monumental novel? I would hereby touch upon three elements very briefly.⁷⁾

(1) *Reverse Chronology*

The novel's five one-sided conversations start in the present-day Israel and goes backward to the past. This is a method used in psychoanalysis, detective stories and archaeology. Yehoshua says, "first of all, the purpose of this novel is to try to explore the unconscious material that comes from fathers to sons and from our grandfathers and great-grandfathers to ourselves. . . . [H]ere I wanted to examine the things that work inside us that come from an unknown. . . . We have to go backward in order to understand the present, individually as well as a nation."⁸⁾ Just as the present 'I' goes backward in his/her life in order to understand his/her present self in psychoanalysis, Yehoshua is exploring in this novel the psychoanalysis of Sephardic Jews, and at the same time Jewish people in general. We, however, have to bear in mind that the author's emphasis is on the present: "[T]he present is the key, the present is the target".⁹⁾

(2) *'Akedah Theme*¹⁰⁾

Although A. B. Yehoshua dealt with *'Akedah* (the binding of Isaac) theme in many of his works, he used this motif in *Mar Mani* in a most profound way. To be exact, he wanted to put a definite end to this myth. He writes,

. . . through this novel I wanted to liberate (such an awful presumption) our collective ego from this momentous, powerful, and terrible myth that hovers so portentously over our history and culture.¹¹⁾

Jewish people throughout their history have experienced the unfathomable fear that Isaac must

have felt when his father Abraham lifted a knife over him on the verge of killing him. The fundamental fear of annihilation is, indeed, embedded in the core of Jewish people's psyche because of the story in the Torah and liturgy based on the myth. Yehoshua thinks it absurd for Jewish people to be dictated to by a myth, and wants to free Jews from this fear by actually carrying out the 'Akedah on Mt. Moriah in his novel *Mar Mani*. "Why do I want to annul the Akedah through its fulfillment?"¹²⁾ To this question Yehoshua answers that since his early childhood he has had a problem with the story, because the story of 'Akedah is morally insupportable for anyone who believes in God. Trying to understand Abraham's psychology when told by God to sacrifice his only son, Yehoshua offers his own interpretation of this myth (bold by Murata):

Abraham conceived a new faith in a new unitary god, "the possessor of heaven and earth." To that end he broke the idols in the home of his father, Terah, and left his homeland to proceed to a new land where he would establish his offspring who would be his posterity and perpetuate his belief. But as his days drew to a close he was not certain that his son Isaac would maintain his faith. In certain circumstances Isaac might repeat what Abraham had done to his own father, abandoning the belief of his forefathers and leaving home. How could Abraham guarantee that Isaac would not only maintain the line but preserve his new belief? He **stages** an akedah, taking his son to "one of the mountains" (Genesis 22). He binds Isaac, brandishes a knife over his head and drops it at the last moment. He says to Isaac, behold the God I believe in forbade me to kill you. It was He who saved your life.

From that time on, Isaac knew that whether he believed in Him or not, he owed his life to his father's God. This is the meaning of the often repeated expression—Pakhad Yitzhak—Isaac's Dread. Out of Isaac's terror of the knife held over his head was born his existential affinity (far more potent than any intellectual link) to God who would always deliver him at the last moment.¹³⁾

This is Yehoshua's interpretation of the 'Akedah story and in the fifth conversation of *Mar Mani* the protagonist Avraham actually kills his half-dead son by giving a final finishing stab. Yehoshua, thus, carries out the 'Akedah with a rather audacious intention to emancipate Jews from this terrible myth.¹⁴⁾

As mentioned in his opening lecture at the CISMOR conference, liberating Jews from fetters of myths of ancient times and bringing them into the proper arena of history seems to be A. B. Yehoshua's mission as a novelist as well as a person.

(3) *Jerusalem as the main protagonist*

I mentioned at the beginning of this paper that the inspiration for *Mar Mani* came as an epiphany at Yehoshua's father's funeral and thanks to the material his father collected, Yehoshua was able to start writing the novel, although it later proved to be incredibly taxing work to carry on writing. It

can probably be called the most difficult novel Yehoshua has ever written.

Yehoshua was born in Jerusalem and his father was the fourth generation of Jerusalemites who loved this city and spoke Arabic fluently. Although Yehoshua was Sephardic, he never had the humiliating experiences as a second-class citizen as did Sami Michael or Eli Amir who immigrated to Israel from Islamic countries. On the contrary, Yehoshua was a 'sabra' born of well-to-do parents whose aspiration was to give their son the very best education the country could offer, namely an Ashkenazi education brought from Europe, because they were admirers of European intellectuals and tried to assimilate themselves to Ashkenazi culture. Yehoshua, consequently, was given the same education as Ashkenazi boys. One thing he did, though, as a Sephardic Jew was to attend a Sephardic synagogue to please his father. It is, therefore, no wonder that Yehoshua's early works never dealt with Sephardic themes or protagonists: this led the general public to believe that he was Ashkenazi.

Coming to dislike Jerusalem intensely, Yehoshua left to live in Haifa with his wife. His hatred of Jerusalem is expressed outrightly in one of his early novellas, "Three Days and a Child." The section in which he expresses his dislike of Jerusalem is even titled 'In Dispraise of Jerusalem.'

I claim that Jerusalem is a hard town. A harsh town, sometimes. Don't trust its modesty, its gentleness that isn't gentle. . . . Pass through it, any of its quarters, after nine in the evening and you will be walking through a city of the dead. . . . Jerusalem, its calm is feigned.

Its people are always tense, always anxious, as though they might be besieged at any moment, their houses shelled, their water despoiled. . . .¹⁵⁾

"As you know," Yehoshua says on another occasion, "I have had a strong ideological opposition to Jerusalem ever since 1967, and especially in the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s when the American Jews were coming and playing with the Old City, as if it all were a kind of sacred toy."¹⁶⁾

Jerusalem, Yehoshua's native city, became increasingly unlivable for him due to its political as well as religious positions. He detested it to the point that he could no longer live there—still his ambivalence is there. When the interviewer said, "In other words, you can take Bulli [Yehoshua's nickname] out of Jerusalem, but you can't take Jerusalem out of Bulli," he answered, "You are totally right to say that. Jerusalem is in my blood. And of course there is not one novel or one story in which Jerusalem is not present. Jerusalem is a kernel and a permanent component in my being. And this is the reason why here, in *Mar Mani*, I dealt with Jerusalem in a most complex way, and I think that now I am somewhat liberated and I can tell myself I have done all my duty to

Jerusalem.”¹⁷⁾

In fact, in *Mar Mani* Yehoshua paid homage to his father, who loved Jerusalem and was a pure Jerusalemite. As he himself said, Yehoshua depicted Jerusalem from every possible angle, by which the city’s complexity, intricateness and enigma are delved into in an utmost way.¹⁸⁾ One, therefore, is inclined to say that Jerusalem is the main protagonist of this novel and this assertion is not, I believe, too farfetched.

V. Diversity and Shadow History

In a sweeping generalization, I would like to point out the most striking characteristic of the city of Jerusalem: diversity. It is demonstrated in *Mar Mani* in a most fascinating way. Jerusalem depicted in *Mar Mani* is multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual. Diversity, in fact, is the key word for understanding not only Jerusalem, but also the Israeli society, though as *Mar Mani* shows, this area of the world has always been diverse in its past history. From this diversity, almost to the point of chaos, emerged the Manis whose immeasurable power, both creative and destructive; this diabolic power does not stem from a rational faculty of a European way of cognition. This aspect of the Manis is unequivocally antithetical to so-called western rationalism.

This, then, brings us back to the point mentioned at the beginning of this paper—of the other trail of modern Jewish history. A. B. Yehoshua said in an interview with Gershon Shaked that in *Mar Mani* he wanted to give “a different perspective on the Zionist option, . . . By this I mean that there is strength in the Mizrakhi perspective...”¹⁹⁾

Modern Jewish history is primarily that of Ashkenazi history. *Mar Mani* in effect offers an antithesis to this and the novel deals with the shadow history of Sephardim in opposition to the main Ashkenazi history.

Notes

- 1) In: A. B. Yehoshua, *Hakir vehahar* [The Wall and the Mountain: The Extra-Literary Reality of the Writer in Israel] [Heb.] (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1989), pp. 228–241.
- 2) Abraham B. Yehoshua, *Mar Mani* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1990).
- 3) Bernard Horn, *Facing the Fires—Conversations with A. B. Yehoshua* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p. 26.
- 4) Yaacov Yehoshua, *Yerushalayim hayeshnah ba'ayin uvalev* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1987).
- 5) A. B. Yehoshua, *Molcho*, [Heb.] (tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987).
- 6) Nitza Ben-Dov, (ed.), *Bakivum Hanegdi* (In the Opposite Direction: Articles on *Mr. Mani* by A. B.

A. B. Yehoshua's Mar Mani: A Sephardic World with Jerusalem as a Focal Point

Yehoshua) [Heb.] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995). See also: Arnold Band, "Mar Mani: The Archaeology of Self-Deception," *Prooftext* 12 (1992), pp. 231–244.

- 7) For the detailed argument see my paper "‘*bekhipus akhar hazman hasfaradi haavud*’—A. B. Yehoshua's *Mar Mani* (Part I), *Studies on Jewish Life and Culture* 22 (Tokyo: Japan Association for Jewish Life and Culture), pp. 29–39.
- 8) Horn, *Facing the Fires*, pp. 14–15.
- 9) *ibid.*, p. 13.
- 10) 'Akeda literally means "binding" and here it refers to the "binding of Isaac" (the story of the sacrifice of Isaac) in Genesis 22, where Abraham tries to kill his son Isaac following the order from God. The 'Akeda theme frequently appears in A. B. Yehoshua's works.
- 11) A. B. Yehoshua, "Mr. Mani and the Akedah," *Judaism: a quarterly journal of Jewish life and thought* (Winter 2001), p. 61.
- 12) *ibid.*, p. 61.
- 13) *ibid.*, p. 63.
- 14) For the detailed discussion, see my paper on *Mar Mani* (note 7 above). Part II, scheduled to be published soon, deals with this theme.
- 15) A. B. Yehoshua, *The Continuing Silence of a Poet*, Penguin Books, p. 45.
- 16) Horn, *Facing the Fire*, p. 29.
- 17) *ibid.*, p. 30.
- 18) Detailed discussion will be conducted in Part II of my paper on *Mar Mani*, as was mentioned in note 14 above.
- 19) See: *Modern Hebrew Literature*, no. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006 (Toby Press) p. 162.