



The Language of Love Through the Hebrew Language: Reading Amichai's 'Layla'

A linguagem do amor por intermédio da língua hebraica: lendo "Layla" de Amichai

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Abstract: This article is a reading of "Layla" by Yehuda Amichai, a deceptively simple poem, which is built upon a systematic part with morphological qualities and possibilities of grammar of the Hebrew language. I say that, playing with suffixes in Hebrew and number and gender markers, and lead to estrangement and subverting the expectations of the average Hebrew reader/speaker, Amichai works in the sense that it provides as a "language of love".

Keywords: Poem. Hebrew. Amichai.

Resumo: Este artigo faz uma leitura de "Layla", um poema aparentemente simples de Yehuda Amichai. Esse texto é construído como uma peça sistemática com as qualidades morfológicas e possibilidades gramaticais da língua hebraica. Jogando com os sufixos em hebraico e com os marcadores de número e gênero, o escritor provoca um estranhamento e subverte as expectativas do leitor/falante médio de hebraico. Amichai constrói, desse modo, o que poderíamos chamar aqui de uma "linguagem do amor".

Palavras-chave: Poema. Hebraico. Amichai.

What characterizes most of modern literature is the wish to abandon the traditional models of representation of reality. Even more radically, it is the desire to be not only a "representation," but instead, a "critique" of reality. Using one of Mallarmé's famous poems, I say that, that is when language knows that it must be more than the *cinéraire amphore*¹ of a fire exterior to language itself, and become the stage of discussion of the real. From then on, the dramas of exile and death, love and identity, gender and exclusion will be staged in language itself. It is language that says: *je est un autre*.

This short essay still in progress was originally part of a longer project where I discuss three different contemporary authors from diverse literary traditions, who



in their works think about the nature of language and use language and its functioning as means to discuss notions of identity: Israeli Yehuda Amichai, Moroccan Abdelkabir Khatibi, and Brazilian Clarice Lispector. In each piece analyzed, my goal was to observe how language is thematized, how it pushes the text, and how through language the three authors propose a certain “other” realm in which boundaries of any kind become blurred. Here I will be reading “Layla”, by Amichai, an apparently simple poem, which is built upon a systematic play with the morphological qualities and grammatical possibilities of the Hebrew language. I claim that by playing with Hebrew suffixes, and number and gender markers, and by provoking estrangement and subverting expectations of the average Hebrew reader/speaker, Amichai works towards what he envisages as a “language of love.”

Such language would encompass and erase traditional binary oppositions, creating a different reality. In the process of construction of this new language, issues of gender, religion and ethnicity are discussed in the poem, but always through the linguistic operations characteristic to Hebrew. Therefore, more than discuss “what” the poem talks about, my purpose here is to discuss “how” it talks, for, following Roman Jakobson’s view of the inseparability of *signans* and *signatum*, I believe that focusing on the poetic function will provide better ways of interpretation and therefore, access to the poeticity of the composition. My reading is deeply indebted to the device-oriented analytical work by Jakobson, as developed, specially, in “Structures linguistiques subliminales en poésie,” “Les Chats de Charles Baudelaire,” and “Une microscopie du dernier Spleen dans *Les Fleurs du mal*” (*Questions de poétique*, 1973).

This reading will also, in a way, be a reading of the poem’s translation, observing additions, changes and attempted equivalences to the Hebrew text. “Layla” – as it was called in the English translation – is the first poem in the thirteenth cycle of poems of Yehuda Amichai’s last book, *Open, Closed, Open*. The cycle is entitled “The Language of Love and Tea with Roasted Almonds.” The vocabulary is not particularly “sophisticated” or abstruse, as Amichai’s poetry typically privileges ordinary, everyday language. In Robert Alter’s words, Amichai is “a highly successful practitioner of the plain colloquial style that was a revolution in Hebrew verse in the 1950’s.”² He assumes a very un-heroic and un-idealized position regarding poets and their roles, and his poetics resists being framed within fixed and narrow notions of literary affiliation.



Amichai's apparent simplicity betrays an intense concern with language. If his poetry is not usually metapoetic, Amichai nevertheless actively reflects upon language by using regular and idiomatic expressions and playfully resorting to word etymologies and grammatical constructions, in a language that is numbered and heavily gendered ("Hebrew is sexmaniac," wrote female poet Yona Wollach). His puns are famous, for bad or for worse, but they reveal the poet's sensitivity to the sounds of Hebrew, and to the many registers and historical layers of the language. Commenting on them, again Robert Alter demystifies the colloquial character of Amichai's poetry, exaggerated by critics and translators alike:

If W.H. Auden was an important early influence, so was Dylan Thomas, whose poetry abounds with fractured idioms, puns, allusions, a flamboyant inventiveness of imagery, and a pervasive linguistic playfulness. Such a poetic program can be carried out only by exploiting the indigenous resources of the language in which you are working, and in Amichai's case that has involved not merely the sounds and idiomatic patterns and associations of the Hebrew words he uses but also a literary history that goes back three thousand years. [...] Perhaps the most subtle manifestation of the indigenous Hebrew character of Amichai's style is its frequent shifts in levels of diction.

Returning to the poem, "Layla" is an example of how Amichai develops his thoughts about love and about identity (and why not about language?) using Hebrew gender and number schemes not only as a point of departure, but as the means by which his reasoning unfolds. The word *layla* means "night" in Hebrew. Although its ending usually marks feminine nouns, *layla* is masculine. The speaker identifies "night" as the most "feminine of all things." Why? Perhaps because of romantic evocations associated with the night, perhaps because, as the poet says in "I Studied Love," another poem in the same book, the night has the moon, and the moon reminds him of "faces of women" who taught him love... For the speaker the reality, or referent, of *layla* is most definitely feminine, but its signifier is grammatically masculine. However, the fact that the ending would be feminine gives that masculine noun a certain "undercurrent" of femininity which the speaker will develop as he considers the related words *yom* and *ye'mama*.



Before that, however, *layla* does indeed become feminine when the speaker points out that “Layla” (which in the translation will be marked with a capital letter that doesn’t exist in Hebrew) is a woman’s proper name. What he does not tell us is that this is an Arab name. With the non-Hebrew speaker in mind, Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld’s translation specifies “*layla* is masculine in Hebrew,” while the text in Hebrew simply state *bilshon*, that is, “in the language,” meaning, “grammatically.” There is no explicit reference either to Hebrew or to Arabic, and yet the reader immediately perceives interplay between both languages. In a verse and a half language has been set as the stage up on which issues of gender, language and ethnicity will dynamically come into play.

From a noun that is somehow masculine and feminine, depending on the path one takes traveling between languages, the speaker then proceeds to consider the noun *yom*, “day”. “*Yom*” is masculine, and *ye’mama*, literally “a day and a night” is feminine (same ending as *layla*). *Ye’mama*, as a word, not only is directly connected to *yom* but it also encompasses it – the word *yom* is inscribed in the word *ye’mama*. Likewise, the reality of “a day and a night” is one that includes that of the day – a day is a part within the broader concept of *ye’mama*. The English translation opts for “sun” and “sunset” so as to maintain the paronomasic play between *yom* and *ye’mama*, as it makes “sun” appear graphically present in “sunset.”

Ye’mama bears in itself the memory of *yom*, that is, some of the masculine remains in the feminine, because when we hear or read the word *ye’mama*, we can also recognize the marks of another presence, hearing and reading in it the word *yom*. “The memory of the masculine in the feminine” is a thought prompted by the consideration of the gender relations between *yom* and *ye’mama*. This idea leads to another, that of the incompleteness of man without woman – “the yearning of a woman in a man.” Again, by playing with the letters and the etymologies, or false etymologies, of the words “man” and “woman” the speaker reaches the idea of “combination” of genders, or “interdependence for optimal existence.” Allow me to further explain: the third verse of the poem in Hebrew presents word plays and paronomasias. It is possible to see that the first two words are written exactly the same way. The difference is in the *nikud*, or punctuation, the diacritical marks that define the vowel sounds. While the first word reads *zecher*, with a stress on the first syllable, the second reads *zachar*, with stress on the second syllable. *Zecher* is “memory,” but *zachar* could grammatically be either “male” or “masculine” or the third person singular masculine form of the the verb *lizkor*, “to remember,” in the Past tense. If we only consider the first part of the verse, *Zecher zachar ba-nekevah*,



we can read it either as “Memory remembered in the feminine,” (in which “memory” is the active subject) or “Memory of the masculine in the feminine,” or even more sexually blunt, “Memory of the man, or the penis, in the woman.” I believe it is the reading of the second part of the verse, *Ukmihat isha ba-ish*, “the yearning of a woman in a man,” in which the subject is a noun and where there is no verb, that makes us search for some parallelism and reinforces our reading of the first half of the verse as a fragment. Between the two versions, we thus end up favoring the latter.

The contiguous presence of two *zain-kaf-resh*, even if they mean different things, just for their physical and phonic similarity, stresses the idea of masculinity. So when *nekevah*, “feminine,” follows, it produces a certain estrangement. (Although, to be true, the verse is more ambiguous than that, for while the form and root of *zecher/zachar* make it more masculine, the gradual opening of the vowel sound already present in *zachar* points to a gradual “feminization”). The verse itself fluctuates from the masculine to a gradual growth of the feminine only to return finally to the masculine: the sounds start somewhat closed (in *zecher*), then there is a series of words ending in “ah” (*zachAr*, *nekevAH*, *kmiHAt*, *isHAH*), which is the “regular” feminine ending, and it ends with *ish*, “man.” As the counterpart of the feminine word *ishah*, which in itself means “woman,” *ish* would be more identified with a masculine sound and/or ending.

According to the Even Shoshan, and to the *Hebrew Etymological Dictionary*, *ish* and *ishah* come from different languages and there is no direct etymological connection between them. But it would be difficult not to see *ishah* as a derivation of *ish*. Then linguistic myth only helps to ingrain the popular perception established by the second story of creation in the book of *Genesis* (Gen 2:21), which defines woman as derived from Adam’s side, or rib. When Amichai writes “and the yearning of a woman in a man,” he subverts this notion, because he inverts the pointers of the relationship, seeing *ish* not as the one from whom *ishah* will derive, but that who will become complete only when he adds the “-ah” ending to his name (Note the *ba-ish*, making the *kmihat isha*, “the yearning of a woman” as part of the man, thus giving him explicit feminine qualities). The yearning of a woman in a man is not only said, but also enacted textually, by use of the grammatical qualities of the words, which represent woman and man. The word *Ish* yearns for that letter *hey*.

In verse four the addressee of the speaker enters the realm of the poem. After the speaker mentions “the yearning of a woman”, the female addressee appears linked



to the speaker in two different ways: not only is she present in the number “two” that refers to them both, but the word used is [a *smichut*, that is,] a compound word (a construct) that integrates two concepts. The verse is divided into two absolutely parallel halves (in number of syllables and sounds), pointing to the balance in the presence of the two “participants” as well as to their “togetherness.” *Shneinu*, “both of us,” corresponds to *anachnu*, “us”.

After man and woman appear together, as a plural entity, it is time for God to join them. Amichai always finds a way of discussing God and, in a casual and unexpected intimacy, of arguing with him and bringing him into the realm of prosaic, ordinary life. In one movement, Amichai works towards deflating the sacred (as Chana Kronfeld points out, among other places, in her book *In the Margins of Modernism*) and sacralizing the ordinary. Here God enters the text in a moment when what is being called into question is number. One of the names of God in the Bible is *Elohim*, a name that bears the mark of a plural masculine noun (the ending “-im”), and that was probably inherited from Canaanite gods. It is not without irony that we read God in a grammatical plural name in a book that is supposed to reinforce a strong monotheistic religion. In Hebrew, *Elohim* sounds like all the weight of tradition carried across the centuries through books and religious practice, but it also sounds like a grammatical incongruity or, at least, a curiosity, to any child learning the rudiments of language agreement — a child, like Amichai, who “learned Hebrew in kindergarten and in [his] first years in Jewish school.” (“Reflections on Israel at 50, ‘My Nation Lives’).

It is this supposedly “innocent” stance that Amichai uses when the speaker asks: “Why is *Elohim* a plural noun?” It is implicit that in the background of such a question there are several other names and formulas for and about God that feed the daily life of a child born within an Orthodox Jewish family, as is Amichai’s case — *Hu Adonai, hu ha-Elohim*, He is the Lord, he is (the) God; *Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*, The Lord is Our God, the Lord is One. Considering that *Adonai* also bears the mark of the plural, literally meaning, *Adonim sheli*, or “My gods,” these formulas maintain the tension between singular and plural, monotheism and polytheism. Despite the accepted use, and from a strictly linguistic point of view, they can be very confusing and contradictory. However, they work very well in the poem, where the image of God transcending number, being one and many at the same time, will be introduced next.



Adonai echad, but grammatically speaking, God is still plural, and in the poem, the speaker will grasp this textual reality and play with it, trying to work with all the implications of this linguistic possibility. Since Elohim is a plural noun, the pronoun that refers to it, *hu* (he), is accompanied by a verb in the plural, making *hu ioshvim*, a grammatical aberration in basic agreement, akin to *il s'asseyant*, in French, or “ele se sentam,” in Portuguese. So God all sit under a canopy of vines and he is playing cards and he are playing cards. The image of God playing cards under a canopy brings God from the Holy Heavens back down to earth – to to the everyday life of perhaps an Israeli unemployed or senior citizen. However, a canopy of vines is still an image that connotes quiet and harmony, and it also alludes to the biblical prophecies of peace upon the coming of the Messiah – the *chazon acharit ha-iamim*. The fact that such a canopy is placed in Akko gives an ethnic hint that connects to the beginning of the poem, when it is stated that *layla* is the name of a woman. Akko is, in Israel, one city famous for its Arab population, for its mosques and hammans, and for its nights in the Old City, where “exotic Arabic music fills the air,” according to my Frommer’s travel guide. Islam is also a monotheistic religion, and the God who are and who is under the canopy is Elohim and is Allah, he is the one and the many. In the poem, God multiplies himself even as he remains one. He sits and he sit, he is in Akko playing cards, close to Arabs and Jews. (Peaceful Arabs and Jews, and this are Amichai’s wish and commentary, with subtlety, without pamphlet).

The speaker and his addressee sat at a nearby table. And they held each other’s hand, this act signing their union, their fusion, or the erasure of the borders of their different identities. In a way, they “overboard” gender, number and (why not?) ethnicity. Maybe this unnamed woman is “Layla.” Maybe they are together, in peace, in Akko, close to God. One has to observe, however, that at the moment when the couple sits, the verb tense used is the Past. Time of enunciation now becomes different from the time of the event. The speaker now speaks after the moment of union, from a different perspective. Maybe he was speaking from that perspective all along, but we could not really tell because there was no “narration” but only musings about words. The difference between using the Present tense to refer to God and the Past tense to “narrate” their transformative moment together might have to do with the fact that God is. *Tout simplement*. By himself he already transcends number, but in order for the speaker to transcend number, and gender, and reserve his seat on the same level as that of God, he and the woman have to be together. It is not an essence; on the contrary, it is a movement, a transformation, an event that demands agency and will from the participants. The two of them get



together and become man and woman, singular and plural, and it is this transformative moment that took place in time that the speaker is narrating.

The mixture of tea (explicitly Arab tea in the English translation) and roasted almonds is another instance of the *dépassement* of differences. Their tastes are said not to know each other and their encounter corresponds to the encounter of the two hands, structurally parallel: I held your hand and you held my hand. “Not to know each other” is expressed through a fixed Hebrew idiom, *lo lada’at zeh et zeh*, in which echo the sexual implications of the verb “to know” in the Bible. Here, though, it is used reciprocally: two tastes knowing each other at the same time, and in balance becoming one inside a mouth which is also one. Yes, because when the two lovers became one and plural, feminine and masculine, the separation of their mouths was suppressed. It is now one mouth in which may take place the union and communion of tea and almonds. The use of *be-finu* (in our mouth) instead of *be-fioteinu* (in our mouths) allows for this reading. Also, in a way, becoming one, and in their mouth, brings them closer to God – or at least establishes a strange ambiguity with God – who is one (Adonai Echad) in the mouths of those who recite the *Shema*.

If this last sentence seems somewhat far-fetched, the idea of approximation between lovers and God, and anything that breaks with rigid separations and God may be condoned by the surprise offered by the last two verses. At this point we get to know that the canopy of vines where God is/are is a café in Akko. Placing God playing cards in a canopy in Akko was a way of desacralizing God and bringing him to the more earthly or mundane terrain of daily life. Placing the door of the café “next to the sky” is reversing the direction: it is raising the café, that is, the simple and ordinary things of life, to the realm of the sacred. It is there, in this place, in the earth, in Akko, and yet close to the sky, that God, lovers, tea and roasted almonds get together and, even if for a moment, become indistinguishable.

The very last verse is still another instance of adding prosaism into the poem. Again Amichai uses real, quotidian language, as he inserts a “ready-made” sentence that can be easily found in any public place. The language of the *affiches*, signs and newspapers is also the language of the common man. Such device goes *de pair* with Amichai’s project of bringing together different worlds through the power of ordinary language.



Finally, I am drawn to the title of the cycle: “The Language of Love and Tea With Roasted Almonds.” It is possible to say that this poem is a poetic attempt to develop this language of love – a new language that, in order to exist, must encompass differences, blur borders, and transgress gender, number, and ethnicity.

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Notas

¹ MALLARMÉ, Stéphane. Sonnet en yx (Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur). In: _____. *Poems*. Transl. Carlyle Ferren MacIntyre. California: University of California Press, 1957. p. 84.

² ALTER, Robert. The Untranslatable Amichai. *Modern Hebrew Literature*, n. 13, 1994. p. 31.