



**Creator, Are You Listening? Israeli Poets on God and Prayer**, by C. David Jacobson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 243 pp. \$34.00.

The written (and spoken) Hebrew language of Nathan Alterman (1910–1970) and Avraham Shlonski (1900–1973), even the written Hebrew of Nathan Zach (1930–) and Dalia Rabikovitz (1936–2005) [“Return to your rest, my soul,” she wrote, “for the lord has dealt bountifully with you” (Psalms 116:7)], four of the most prominent modernist Hebrew-Israeli poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was deeply rooted in its ancient sources, but the traditional Jewish religious experience and concepts were alien and exotic to them. The language, we could say, was “religious,” but the poets and their readers, central instruments of national renaissance, tended to move, together with the main political and ideological Israeli forces, toward secularism. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, as observed by Hamutal Bar-Yosef and discussed by Jacobson in his knowledgeable Introduction, a significant number of religious writers began to publish “religious” poetry on religious themes, and for the first time in the modern Jewish experience, religious poetry is standing alongside secular poetry, equally important. Since the death of Yehudah Amichai and Dalia Rabikovitz at the beginning of the new millennium, two of the leading figures in contemporary Israeli poetry, Admiel Kosman (1957–) and Hava Pinhas-Cohen (1955–), are both deeply involved with the world of traditional Judaism. Admiel Kosman’s poetry stands out in its innovationist voice and structures (*Proscribed Prayers* is the title of his excellent last book, or literally translated: “Sidur Hadash”); Pinhas-Cohen is the founder-editor of the literature, arts, and culture journal *Dimui* (1989–), the first literary journal created and published in Jerusalem, edited with a religious sensibility and including a section of poetry and prose by religious authors.

Besides Kosman and Pinhas-Cohen, Jacobson chooses to focus on the works of Zelda Mishkovski (1914–1984) and Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000), canonical poets who enjoyed a large range of admiration of professional and non-professional readers (also an audience of readers in English), and Rivka

Miriam (1952–) and Asher Reich (1937–), marginal poets, whom Jacobson, as he explains, was personally drawn to, and who are a part of the “good basis” (p. 7) of his study (“Three men and three women . . . because I am convinced that gender differences influence religious perspective,” p. 7). I have to say that I do not fully understand Jacobson’s choice. The six poets represent six very different public fortunes, as well as six different religious points of view (from ultra-Orthodox to a loss of faith), and their lifetimes spread over different periods of poetical Israeli schools. Amichai’s case is probably the most questionable in the book. Dan Miron (Columbia University), Boaz Arpaly (Tel-Aviv University), and Nili Gold (University of Pennsylvania), as well as many others, had already done their very best for Amichai. The main justification for the inclusion of Israel’s favorite secular rabbi in this study (some of his poems are used as prayers inside and outside synagogues), is Jacobson’s isolation of the religious material in Amichai’s work.

The interesting phenomenon of religious poetry written recently by Jewish settlers such as Eliaz Cohen (Elkana), a leading figure in the renaissance of religious poetry and the founder of *Mashiv Haruach*, is yet to be addressed. But Jacobson’s contribution to our understanding of the roots of this poetry is creative and pioneering. There is no way to underestimate the importance of his endeavor to explore the nature of the religious phenomenon in Israeli poetry.

Poetry has always played a central role in the Israeli collective consciousness, and thus, the implications of the study go far beyond the scope of poetry, pointing out an existing need of “secular” Israeli readers, questing and searching a way back to their textual-cultural-religious past.

Jacobson’s translations and commentary should find their place in the fields of modern Hebrew literature and Jewish Studies, as well as in the hearts of readers, lovers of Hebrew poetry.

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