

The Bible and the avant-garde: the search for a classical tradition in the Israeli theatre

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The Israeli theatre has frequently employed the Hebrew Bible as a source for theatrical performances. Analysing three such performances, this article shows that the Bible, with its charged ideological implications for the establishment of the state of Israel, has perhaps somewhat unexpectedly inspired avant-garde productions that have frequently criticized the accepted ideological and aesthetic norms. The first of the three performances analysed is Hanoch Levin's play based on the book of Job called 'The Torments of Job' (Yisorei Iov), which Levin directed at the Cameri theatre in 1981. The second is the play 'Jehu' by Gilead Evron, directed by Hanan Snir at the Habima National Theatre in 1992, and the third is the 'Bible Project' directed by Rina Yerushalmi, which consists of two independent, but interrelated productions: 'And He Said And He Was Walking' (Va Yomer Va Yelech), which premiered in 1996, and 'And They Bowed. And He Feared' (Va Yishtachu. Va Yerra) which premiered in 1998.

Introduction

There are certain features that distinguish Israeli theatre from most other national theatre traditions. The first is that the Israeli theatre has a very young tradition. The Habima Theatre, the first Hebrew theatre that could be seen as a professional theatre in a more general sense – meaning that the people who founded it considered the theatre to be their major profession as well as a spiritual vocation – was founded in 1917. Only in the mid-1930s, however, did the Hebrew theatre, which became the Israeli theatre with the declaration of the independence of the state of Israel in 1948, begin to form itself around a number of theatre institutions. Today, the Israeli theatre is a complex theatre system of established theatres as well as fringe groups. The Habima theatre, which was founded as an avant-garde theatre collective in Moscow, is now the national theatre, situated in Tel Aviv.

Another issue with which the Israeli theatre has always been struggling is the lack of an

indigenous tradition of classical plays to include in the repertoire on a regular basis. Theatre traditions with a longer history usually have such a reservoir of classical plays. Although many plays had been written in Hebrew, before the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language at the beginning of the 20th century, they were unfit for staging. They were 'literary' plays, written in a literary language. In the Israeli theatre, the Classics have therefore by nature been foreign, belonging to other dramatic and theatrical traditions. 'Foreign' classics are, of course, performed in all countries, but usually in combination with the production of 'local', native ones. A tradition of 'modern' classics, of plays produced more than once, has only begun to form during the last 15 years. But examples of plays that have become canonized in this way are still quite few. This anomalous situation has deeply affected both Israeli playwriting and theatre. The issue I wish to address here is how, by turning to the Bible as a source of inspiration and a reservoir of narrative materials, the Israeli theatre has tried to make up for its lack of an indigenous classical tradition.

It is, of course, possible to ask why such a classical tradition is at all necessary. Is it not more productive for a new theatre tradition to develop without the burden of a classical heritage? One of the reasons for the extraordinarily creative development of the Israeli theatre is no doubt due to the lack of such a tradition. An existing theatrical tradition, however, serves as a kind of mental or cultural space, a horizon of expectations or a system of norms on the basis of which innovations can take place. For Israeli theatregoers, as well as for the theatrical establishment itself, these norms were, for a long time – and to some extent still are – the London West End theatres. With the gradual emergence of an indigenous tradition, the system of norms has been moved closer to home.

Forming a classical canon on the basis of the Bible, which the Israeli theatre has frequently done, may seem to stand in stark opposition to the basic notion of creating innovative, avant-garde work in the theatre. But the various ways in which the Israeli theatre has integrated texts from the Hebrew Bible, by adopting, confronting and even subverting these texts, have instead, perhaps paradoxically, created possibilities for renewal and innovation. Many performances based on biblical materials have, for different reasons, been avant-garde and have been strongly contested and criticized by different parts of the hegemonic cultural and even political establishment. I will examine here three such performances from the last two decades of the 20th century, but some background information is first necessary.

The Bible, with its traditional, mainly religious institutions for interpretation, has been a major source of inspiration for the ideology of the Zionist movement. These ancient texts (written in a Hebrew that could still be easily understood by contemporary speakers and readers) were even in a sense seen as the proof for the ancient biblical land having been promised to the Jewish people. For the emerging Israeli theatre the Bible not only provided a classical source that was strongly charged ideologically, but also a huge reservoir of literary narratives that could be told on the stage more or less directly.

From its very beginnings, the Hebrew, and later the Israeli, theatre adopted the Bible as a source of inspiration, on the basis of which it was possible to integrate certain aspects of these texts in the pursuit for new and creative forms of theatrical expression. During the first years of its existence, the Habima theatre was officially called the Biblical Studio and its members even viewed themselves as contemporary prophets in the ancient biblical tradition. Their first major production, *The Dybbuk* (*Ha-Dybbuk*), directed by Vakhtangov in 1922, although it was

based on a story about more or less contemporary life in a Jewish village, used short quotations from the Bible as banners over the stage in all three acts. In the first act, taking place in a synagogue, the visual focal point of the stage set was a Torah shrine where the scrolls of the five books of Moses are kept. For the members of the Habima-collective the integration of the Bible in a theatrical context was very much in line with the Zionist ideology, expressing a secular Zionist yearning for the ancient homeland based on the holy texts, rather than a religious one. The use the Habima actors made of the holy texts in the theatrical context was a revolt against the way in which their parents, who were mostly orthodox Jews, had interpreted these texts. In 1925, the Habima theatre produced Richard Beer-Hoffman's *Jacob's Dream* (*Halom Ya'akov*), based directly on the Biblical narrative. This performance did not have the same impact as *The Dybbuk*. Throughout the short history of the Hebrew and the Israeli theatre there have been more than 35 productions that have been based on biblical themes or on texts from the Bible. This is no doubt a category of plays that has been much more frequent in the Israeli theatre than in most other national theatre traditions.

The traditional, religious canonical nature of the biblical texts makes their dramatization on the theatrical stage potentially subversive. According to the Orthodox Jewish faith, theatre as an art form was actually forbidden. But the transformation of biblical materials to performances paradoxically also relied on an already existing tradition in Jewish religious practice. On the Purim holiday, the miraculous rescue of the Jews from the Persian ruler Ahasver in ancient Persia, commemorated in the short biblical novella *Esther*, is celebrated. During this holiday, it is the custom (probably since the Middle Ages) to dramatize different stories from the Bible in a humorous or even subversive manner. Since Purim was a carnivalesque holiday, it was the only day during the whole year when, according to the Jewish religious laws, it was allowed to play theatre. The Israeli theatre has, in a way, adopted this carnival spirit as a yearlong phenomenon, at the same time it frequently engages in ideological debates over the significance of these canonical texts.

During its initial stages of development, Israeli playwriting and theatre basically stood in the service of the national Zionist ideology, sometimes raising problematic moral issues connected with the Zionist enterprise, but mainly in agreement with its hegemonic ideology. The aesthetic needs were somehow always subordinated to the ideological ones. This situation gradually started to change following the 1967 war. This was a grand victory in military terms, but the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip – with a population of 2 million Palestinians who, at that time, lived without any prospects for political independence, as well as of Egyptian and Syrian territories – brought about a process of ideological discord and growing critique within the Israeli society. This process was further reinforced by the 1973 war, after which it became clear that Israeli culture in general (and the Israeli theatre in particular) was becoming an important form for expressing the breakdown of the ideological consensus. In what follows, I will connect this ideological shift with the adaptation of biblical sources for the stage that challenge the traditional ideological and religious basis of these texts.

Hanoch Levin and the Bible

A production that stands as a milestone in the short history of the Israeli theatre is Hanoch Levin's satirical review called *The Queen of the Tub* (*Malkat Ambatia*) from 1970, three years

after the 1967 war. It created an unprecedented reaction from right-wing and religious critics and spectators, who sometimes reacted quite violently during the performances, even physically endangering the actors. After 19 performances, the Cameri theatre – the municipal theatre of Tel Aviv, where it was performed – succumbed to the public criticism and withdrew the production. A central theme of *The Queen of the Tub* was the outright criticism of the glorification of the 1967 war and, in particular, of its young soldier victims. The passage based on the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac from Genesis (Chapter 22) was a central reason for the protest. According to Levin's version, Abraham tells his son what he will do with him on their way to the mountain and asks his son to forgive him, because, as he says, he is only doing what God has asked him to do. Isaac, however, tells his father not to have a bad conscience because he understands that this is God's will, and therefore he should not feel bad about what he is about to do. As they approach the mountain where the sacrifice will take place, the angel of God calls out to save the young boy. But since Abraham is hard of hearing he is not able to hear this voice. Had it not been for Isaac's ability to convince his father that God really wants him to save his son, this incident, the short dialogue between the father and the son concludes, may have ended badly. Finally, it asks what will happen if the other fathers who are about to sacrifice their sons will not be able to hear the voice of the angel. Immediately following this version of Isaac's sacrifice a song was sung by a young boy lying dead in his grave. He addresses his father who is burying him.

Hanoch Levin has been central for the avant-garde in the Israeli theatre. During his more than 30-year long artistic career, which ended with his death from cancer at the age of 56 in 1999, more than 30 of his 56 published plays were performed on the Israeli stage, most of them directed by Levin himself.¹ Here, I will only briefly analyse his play based on the book of *Job*, called *The Torments of Job (Yisorei Iov)*, which Levin directed at the Cameri theatre in 1981. It seems to me that this performance demonstrates many of the characteristics of his work both as a playwright and as a director. Even if there have been many innovative productions based on the Bible after Levin's *The Torments of Job*, looking back at it now from a perspective of almost 20 years, none of these, at least to my understanding, have achieved the same aesthetic and ideological sophistication.

Instead of the bet between God and Satan to test Job, Levin's play begins when Job is seated together with his friends after having had a festive meal, praising the riches of God. There is even enough food on the table to satisfy the Beggars who eat from the leftovers, as well as the Beggars of the Beggars who eat from what is left of these leftovers. Only the Beggarly Beggar, the poorest of all, gets nothing to eat this time. But, he says:

Be patient, my friend,
And someone will surely puke in your hand.
Well, somehow we manage to live.
There's a God in the sky.²

This is an unorthodox way of introducing the theological arguments at the heart of this biblical text. At this point in Levin's play, the Messengers of poverty announcing the loss of Job's wealth begin to arrive. But also here Levin elaborates on the original. Job's belongings are confiscated because a new Emperor has seized power in Rome, placing the narrative within an historical time frame, which is not given in the biblical original.

After the Bailiffs have emptied the banquet hall and stripped Job to his underwear, he cynically remarks:

You forgot my gold teeth.
I've got some gold teeth in my mouth. (Ref. 2, p. 23)

To this, the leader of the Bailiffs answers, in the style typical of Levin, mixing the 'mythical' story with seemingly trivial everyday realities:

Don't be ridiculous.
Don't try to make us into monsters.
We're all just human, part of the group,
We all go home to our wives at night,
To our slippers and a hot bowl of soup. (Ref. 2, p. 23)

This exchange introduces an allegorical dimension in the play. The scene triggers associations with the Nazi period when Jewish belongings were confiscated and even gold teeth got removed from victims. The Bailiffs, however, since they enjoy the pleasures of everyday life, claim they will not commit such atrocities.

Job's answer shows how Levin has re-written the despair of the biblical Job. His words express a more modern, existential and almost nihilistic, Beckettian view of life:

Naked came I from my mother's womb and naked came my mother
From her mother too.
Shuddering, we emerge, one from another,
A long line, naked and new.
'What shall I wear?' asked my mother in the morning
But when the day was done,
Naked was she borne to the pit.
Now I too stand naked, her son. (Ref. 2, p. 23)

At this point the Bailiffs, who had already left the scene, suddenly return, grabbing Job by the throat, violently taking out his gold teeth with a pair of pliers. Their previous compassion suddenly becomes transformed into a spectacle of cruelty. What happens to Job, as to most of the Levin heroes, is that he becomes a victim without knowing what is the reason for his victimization and without being warned. Catastrophes just happen, and when, as in the case of the gold teeth, the possibility of something terrible has been announced, it is usually alleviated for a short moment, in order to become realized with a vengeance when the victim believes he is safe.

Levin's use of such a narrative structure is not just based on introducing a single misfortune or catastrophe, but on a pattern that holds a very strong potential of repeating itself in the continuum of the text, constantly bringing new misfortunes. This is also the basic pattern of the biblical book of Job. It is also possible to see how the Jewish 'experience', in particular during the 20th century, which has been seminal for the creation of a collective Israeli cultural consciousness, gives additional force to the narrative pattern used by Levin. Jews have, one could claim, internalized the experience of irrational misfortunes initiated by others, not just natural catastrophes for which there has been no apparent cause and for which there had been no prior warning. In his performances, Levin succeeded in transforming this experience into an effective theatrical narrative structure.

After Job is left toothless on the stage the Messengers of death appear, announcing the deaths of all of his children, first his first-born son, then his two daughters, and finally his youngest son. And after each of the Messengers makes their announcement the children are brought in on stretchers, finally leaving Job with his dead children alone on the stage, scratching his naked, convulsing body. At this point Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar come to comfort him. The only thing that can ease the torments of Job is the fantasy that his dead father will comfort him and that this world of suffering is a dream. At this point, an Officer sent by the new Emperor comes and announces, that:

The god of the Jews is null and void, wiped out.
 All who believe in him are heretics and rebels.
 To reinforce the new belief and make it crystal clear:
 All those who believe in the god of the Jews will have
 A spit stuck up their rear. (Ref. 2, p. 50)

Job's friends are now facing a terrible dilemma, but after considering the fact that their fields have to be harvested and their children are still young, they somewhat unwillingly compromise their convictions. It is possible to give up the belief in God for the sake of well-being. But Job himself, who has nothing to lose, and who in a vision has seen his dead father, whom he believes is God, is immediately punished with the pole on which he hangs for the rest of the performance as if he had been crucified.

At this point a Ringmaster, the owner of a circus, appears, saying that it is too bad:

For such a performance as this to go to waste.
 All those potential tickets mutely crying out
 Like the souls of unborn children dying out.
 Not to mention the educational worth
 For those who still think god exists on earth.
 I've run musical circuses in all the most
 Important capitals of Europe.
 I can even say that I've run Europe.
 / ... /
 Five hundred dinars to the royal treasury
 For the right to put this man
 In my circus. (Ref. 2, p. 65)

After tough bargaining with the Officer, the 'torments' of Job finally become the main attraction of the circus. In the performance itself, the moment the deal is struck, a huge circus tent came down over the whole stage like a parachute. Rut Dar, who designed the set and the clothes for the production, had created a stunning theatrical moment of transformation where Job hanging on the pole becomes a part of the circus. The theatre, and art in general, Levin seems to imply, is cynically exploiting human suffering. The Ringmaster, who has 'run Europe', as he expresses it, is now finding new ways to transform human suffering into art.

But there is one problem. Job is actually dying before the Ringmaster has been able to return his investment. The moment Job dies, the Ringmaster curses him, the circus abruptly disperses and Job vomits. At this point the Beggarly Beggar returns and licks the vomit:

Just like I said: a little patience
 And somebody finally pukes. Yes,

Somehow we manage to live.
There's a god in the sky. (Ref. 2, p. 77)

This is a form of divine benevolence Levin implies, although his ending is very different from the biblical narrative where Job's possessions are returned and he has new children. In Levin's production, only the dead can be heard, paraphrasing Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*: 'But there is mercy in the world /And we are laid to rest' (Ref. 2, p. 77).

The politics of the Bible

The second example I want to present here is the play *Jehu* by Gilead Evron directed by Hanan Snir at the Habima National Theatre in 1992, almost ten years after the Levin-production. Roni Toren designed the scenery for *Jehu* and Buki Schiff the clothes. Evron's play is a free elaboration of the story in *2 Kings*; Chapter 9, of how a captain called Jehu was anointed king over Israel on the advice of Elisha, the prophet. According to the command of the prophet, as formulated in the Bible, Jehu is to:

smite the house of Ahab thy master, that I may avenge the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the Lord, and the hand of Jezebel. For the whole house of Ahab shall perish: and I will cut off from Ahab him that pisseth against the wall, and him that is shut up and left in Israel: / ... /And the dogs shall eat Jezebel in the portion of Jezreel, and there shall be none to bury her. / ... /Then Jehu came forth to the servants of his lord: and one said unto him, Is all well? Wherefore came this mad fellow to thee? And he said unto them, Ye know the man and his communication. (2 Kings 9, 7–11)

In his play, Evron has transformed Jehu into an army general who has ordered the killing of Aramaic villagers in the mountains of Gilead, which the Israelites have conquered. Instead of being sentenced for this he is pardoned by Zif, the mayor of Shomron, whom Evron has quite freely invented. After taking power through Zif, Jehu orders the killing of 70 of the relatives of Ahab and, when the heads are brought in, Jehu forces Zif to take responsibility for the killing. When Zif finally understands how evil Jehu in fact is, instead of trying to change the situation, he becomes completely mad, loses his memory and finally hangs himself.

Evron's version is a very free elaboration of its biblical antecedent. Most spectators who saw the production in 1992 interpreted it as a political allegory about the war in Lebanon, which Israel initiated in June 1982, supposedly to alleviate what the right-wing government at the time considered to be a threat from the Palestinians in Lebanon. Jehu, the general, represents Ariel Sharon who was the minister of defence in 1982. Menahem Begin, the Prime Minister and the head of the right-wing Likud party, was not aware of all the initiatives taken by the Israeli army, of which the massacre in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila was the most violent. Even if the Israeli army itself was not directly involved in this massacre – Christian militia actually carried it out – it was clear that Ariel Sharon had encouraged it. One of the results of the war in Lebanon and the crisis of confidence between Begin and Sharon was that Begin entered a state of permanent depression, from which he suffered for the rest of his life. He eventually resigned as Prime Minister and was succeeded by Itzhak Shamir who held the post of Prime Minister until 1992. The production of *Jehu* premiered just before the 1992 elections, when Itzhak Rabin beat Shamir.

These political developments are relevant for several reasons. *Jehu* was no doubt a political play, making a statement about the dangers of power and the evil it brings about at a time when the upcoming elections would decide if the hard-line politics of the right were to be continued or not. Because of its controversial political contents, which were never spelled out directly on the stage, even if they could quite easily be deduced, a TV-report about the production of *Jehu* scheduled for the popular Friday night news programme on the state-controlled TV channel was cancelled at the last minute. The performance was considered to take sides in the ongoing election campaign, and could therefore, according to the formal regulations of the broadcasting corporation, not be discussed on the air. At the same time, however, the more or less direct political concerns of the production also limited its scope, focusing almost solely on the effects of an almost essential political evil expressed by the harsh cynicism of Jehu and the helpless madness of Zif.

An interesting aspect of the production was the way it presented the effects of political evil on three women. Zilpha, the widow of the previous king Jehoram, whose massacred body Jehu has forbidden to bury, is forced to become Jehu's mistress after being threatened by his sword, with which he slowly and deliberately lifts her skirt with from behind.³ Zif's daughter, Ketora, also becomes the victim of Jehu's ruthless power. The performance is actually constructed as a flashback and it starts with Zif, who has a total loss of memory, trying to recall the words for 'chair' and 'table'. In this scene, Ketora tries without any success to bring back her father's memories of the games he used to play with her when she was a child. After having told the background for Zif's loss of memory, the performance tells how it came about, returning to Zif's helplessness and suicide in the last scene. But now we also see that Ketora has become the mistress of Jehu, understanding that it is useless trying to resist his ruthlessness. In the last scene she and Zilpha, as well as Jehu are wearing shields in the form of their naked torsos. This makes them look like human dolls acting and reacting automatically. When the women leave, Jehu remains alone with his two faithful soldiers on the stage with whom he plays a board game. Only the sounds of the dice can be heard as the lights go out.

The third female figure in the performance is Maakhah, the wife of the general Azgad. He is the only character in the play that clearly grasps the implications of Jehu's kingship. Since, according to the play, Maakhah is a relative of Ahab, she will also be killed in the massacres that Jehu has ordered. However, Azgad decides to take his own life as well as that of his wife by cutting their wrists while their hands are submerged in a bowl of water, which slowly begins to overflow on the stage. The slow ritual suicide of the despairing general, who in his compassion for his wife, decides to kill her as well, was very effective on the stage. It was a moment of insight that stood in stark contrast to the violent, uncontrolled and senseless killings that Jehu has ordered. The results of these killings were also shown on the stage, when three barrels filled with bloody heads were brought in for the heads to be counted. It was in the scenes of the ritual suicide or in the opening scene where Zif is trying to identify the chair and the table, which was also a moment of helpless despair, that the performance reached its heights.

In a public debate at the Habima theatre about biblical heroes in literature and on the stage, a way of dealing with controversial issues taken up by the theatre, which is quite common in Israel, the director Hanan Snir also participated in the discussion. Snir argued that:

the Israeli theatre has a problem. We lack the basis for a memory of the classics. When we want to produce a play, which takes place in ancient times we lack a theatrical culture, which we can lean back on. We do not really know in which direction we are going. In *Jehu* we tried to create a sense that we have a memory to which we can go back.⁴

One way to create such a memory, relying on a form of recognition is, of course, by reinforcing the political references. Another is to create moments of heightened ritual, which have an immediate influence on the spectators.

As a whole though, Evron's play and Snir's production of *Jehu* did not have the same aesthetic and existential substance that Levin's *The Torments of Job* did. Instead, it was primarily a political allegory, the like of which has also not, at least as far as I can tell, been repeated on the Israeli stage to the same degree in plays based on biblical materials. *Jehu* had apparently reached the limits of the politicization of the biblical genre. There have been a number of precedents of political interpretations of the Bible, such as Nissim Aloni's *Most Cruel, the King* (*Achzar Mi-kol ha-Melekh*), which premiered in 1953 at the Habima theatre, which had been less extreme in their political message. Aloni's biblical play, which has become a veritable modern classic, has been produced four times on the stage, clearly an exception to the norm in the Israeli theatre.⁵ On the whole, the Israeli theatre became less directly political during the 1990s, dealing more with domestic and psychological issues instead of political ones, except in performances that were more or less one-to-one documentaries. The more serious Israeli theatre of the 1990s, however, focused more on exploring its aesthetic and artistic means of expression, what I would term an 'aesthetic turn', even if it did not abandon the ideological implications of the theatre. The contribution of the Gesher theatre, established in the 1990s by new immigrant artists from Russia, has mainly been aesthetic, based on a very creative exploration of the languages of the stage. In addition, the development of the Bat-Sheva dance company is an example of this aesthetic turn.

Rina Yerushalmi's 'Bible Project'

My third example of a performance based on biblical materials is Rina Yerushalmi's 'Bible Project'. While this project explores the classical, biblical tradition, it can also be seen as a highly original expression of this aesthetic turn of the Israeli theatre, examining its own means of expression. The Bible Project actually consists of two independent, but interrelated, productions: *And He Said And He Was Walking* (*Va Yomer Va Yelech*) was premiered in 1996 at the Wiener Festwochen and has also been shown at several festivals outside Israel; and *And They Bowed. And He Feared* (*Va Yishtachu. Va Yerra*) premiered in 1998 at the Summer Theatre Festival in Hamburg, Germany. Both of these productions were based on the original texts from the Hebrew Bible, and they were adapted and directed by Rina Yerushalmi at the Itim Ensemble, which Yerushalmi founded, in 1989, and is still the artistic director of. The Itim Ensemble consists of a group of young actors that have been working as a fringe theatre, but in affiliation with the Cameri theatre in Tel Aviv, taking more or less a year to prepare each of its productions. The group began its work with a production of *Hamlet* (1989) followed by an adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck*, called *Woyzeck '91* (1991), both of which became an immediate success. After another production of a classic, *Romeo and Juliet* (1994), the company decided to explore the Hebrew classics and myths that can be found in the Bible,

thus gradually developing the two productions of the 'Bible Project. The main difference between these two Itim productions and the two previous productions based on biblical narratives examined here is that Yerushalmi and her group do not try to create a consistent fictional world on the stage. Nor are they presenting a narrative with a beginning, middle and end in the traditional Aristotelian sense, something that both *The Torments of Job* and *Jehu* clearly did. Instead, the 12 actors in the first production of the Bible Project and the 11 actors in the second are presenting short passages selected from the Bible, or rather quoting the Bible, but without the actors attempting to play the roles of the biblical characters. I will only present the first of the two productions briefly here, which is even more fragmentary than the second. The second production does, however, not completely abandon the basic fragmentary structure of presenting selected passages that have been brought together by the directorial editing process. But it focuses on one specific, more extensive, biblical narrative – the story of King David and his son Solomon. In this production, several actors have also been assigned specific roles, which is not the case in the first part of the Bible Project.

Looking more closely at *And He Said And He Was Walking* we see that its first section, *And He Said*, consisting of 22 Bible passages, focuses on the mythical narratives of creation, the patriarchs and matriarchs, and on the laws God gave his people. The second section, *And He was Walking*, focuses on passages connected with the unification of the Israelites into a people and the conquest of the Promised Land, and it consists of 23 passages. Some of the passages are narratives – such as the story of the sacrifice of Isaac or the story of the creation from *Genesis* – but others are genealogical lists of people or the enumeration of different laws, such as, for example, the list of animals that according to *Leviticus* (Chapter 11) are forbidden to be eaten. There has been no attempt to present the passages 'chronologically', according to their appearance in the Bible. Indeed, the creation of the world is one of the last passages in the first section.

Each passage is presented, or rather recited, by one or two of the actors or actresses who are dressed in a black neutral costume or dress throughout the performance, except for a smaller number of scenes, such as the enumeration of the ten commandments, when they 'dress up'. The formal clothes give the performance a solemn character and the presentations are, as a rule, accompanied by abstract movement patterns, which prevents the performance from becoming an illustration of these well-known texts. The aesthetic effect is based on the familiarity of the texts. Passages that concern male figures, and in this performance God is also male, are recited by actors, while the stories that focus on women are, as a rule, recited by the actresses. The actors who are not participating in a certain passage usually remain visible for the spectators, sitting on chairs on the stage, waiting for their turn to recite a passage.

There are not very many passages where the whole ensemble participates, but they stand out as high points in the performance. One such example is Eve's temptation of Adam in the Garden of Eden. After a few introductory words, the music of Villa Lobos completely takes over while all the actors, impersonating Adam, with a knife and a fork in their hands, approach the different Eves, who seduce them with apples. The eating of the apples becomes directly connected with an erotic conquest. Other examples of such collective scenes are the enumeration of the Ten Commandments, which closes the first half of this performance (*And He Said*) or the scene depicting the exodus from Egypt, with all the actors standing in a row

at the back of the stage, very slowly moving forward, which opens the second part (*And He Was Walking*).

Towards the end of the second part of the performance, the actors symmetrically place cards with different verbs on the stage. All these verbs, printed in big letters, are in the traditional biblical form of the past tense, grammatically consisting of the so-called *waw-ha-hipuh* (also known as: ‘*waw* marking the past’ or the ‘*waw* consecutive’). This verb form actually consists of the future tense of the verb, but by being prefixed by the conjunction ‘and’ it gets the meaning of the past tense. *Va Yomer* – the exact translation of which is ‘and he will say’ – actually means ‘he said’, while it is usually translated as ‘and he said’. Modern Hebrew has dropped this verb form, but Israelis can still easily understand its meaning. This form can sometimes carry a sense of the continuous tense. But its most interesting feature today, and this is also the case in the Bible Project, as it is included four times in the titles of the two performances, is that it can relate ambiguously both to the past and to the future. The past actually is in a sense the future and vice versa. This grammatical form carries the same semantic ambiguity as the Hebrew root *kedem*, which constructs the collocation *yemei kedem* in Hebrew, which means the ancient, distant past – like, for example, the biblical period. But *kedem* is also the root for the Hebrew word *kadima*, which means ‘forward’, a word that has been of seminal importance for Zionist ideology.⁶

The actors put the cards with different verbs in this grammatical form in an exact grid on the stage, thus defining the space in which the whole performance has been taking place and in which they have been moving. They carefully place the verbs on the stage, the things that simultaneously have been and can be done, the ‘doing’ – the original meaning of the word ‘drama’ in Greek – which are the minimal units of action. They are showing the prescriptions as well as the restrictions the biblical text offers as the basis, or the deep structure, for a work of art. When this action is completed, with one of the actors reciting from *Jeremiah*, Chapter 4, 19, ‘I am pained at my very heart; my heart maketh a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace, because thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war,’ one of the actresses slowly enters the grid. She removes a few of the cards, creating her own space within the pattern of verbs and begins to recite the 12 last verses of *Judges*; Chapter 11, describing the sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah. These verses tell about Jephthah’s vow, that if he will win the battle against Ammon he is about to engage in:

Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering. (*Judges* 11, 31)

But after winning the battle:

Jephthah came to Mitzpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and though art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back. And she said unto him, My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth; forasmuch as the Lord hath taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies, even of the children of Ammon. And she said unto her father, Let this thing be done for me: let me alone

two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows. (Judges 11, 34–37)

After returning to her father from the mountains after two months, the text laconically states, he 'did with her according to his vow that he had vowed: and she knew no man' (Judges 11, 39). The short narrative ends by saying that since that time it has become a yearly custom in Israel (which does not exist anymore) for the daughters of Israel to lament the daughter of Jephthah.

The actress begins by slowly reciting the biblical verses. With small hand movements she indicates what Jephthah's daughter looked like when she came dancing innocently out of the tent with timbrels in her hands to greet her father when he returned from the battle field. But the actress never completely takes on the role of this young girl whose story she is telling. Her body movements rather look as if she is running or swimming through this text, showing how the narrative is inevitably moving forward towards its tragic ending. And when she is finished telling the story, she immediately begins reciting the text again, a second time, in a somewhat accelerated tempo, exactly repeating her body movements. The recital, which is gradually taking on the character of a lamentation, is accompanied by a contemporary, rhythmic pop-song, which assists in enhancing its suggestiveness as it is repeated, in a constantly accelerating speed, a third, a fourth and even a fifth time. There seems to be nothing that can stop the gradual growth of the despair that this story transmits. What we are seeing is gradually becoming the ritual that one of the daughters of Israel is performing, commemorating the tragic fate of Jephthah's anonymous daughter, who does not even have a private name, unlike her Greek sister-character, Ifigenia. She, too, is a victim of war and uncontrolled ambitions, sacrificed for the sake of winning a battle.

Conclusion

It is impossible to foresee what the aesthetic and ideological possibilities for transforming the Bible into theatre will be in the future. I have only examined some of the paradigms that have already been employed by the Israeli theatre here. What they have in common though, is the fact that, in all three examples, the Bible has served as a source for avant-garde productions, confronting the limits of what the Israeli theatre at different points of time is willing, and able, to do on its stages.

References and notes

1. The *Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad* publishing company has published his 56 plays in 11 volumes, plus one volume of satirical reviews as well as his prose fiction, poetry and children's poetry. The last volume of plays, containing six new, hitherto not performed plays was published posthumously. This is the largest body of work of any Israeli playwright that has been published so far. Stanford University Press is going to publish ten of his plays in English translation. So far, translations of individual plays can only be found in different anthologies.
2. H. Levin (book not published at point of writing) *The Torments of Job*; in: *The Labour of Life — Ten Plays by Hanoch Levin*; translated from the Hebrew by B. Harshav (Stanford: Stanford University Press) p. 7.

3. Jehu's courting of Zilpha is very similar to *Richard III* (II, 2) where Richard courts the newly widowed Lady Anne
4. Quoted in an article by L. Ron (1992) Two thousand years of search for power. *Ma'ariv*, 26 June. Translated by Freddie Rokem.
5. A discussion of plays that have been produced more than once has been carried out by Y. Zarhy-Levo and F. Rokem: *Criteria for Canonization in Israeli Theatre: Re/evaluating the Identity of Hebrew Drama* (unpublished MS).
6. For an insightful analysis of the contemporary cultural implications of the words *kedem* and *kadima* see A. Hirshfeld (1998) 'Kadima' — On the notion of the Orient in Israeliculture; in: *To the East: Orientalism in the Arts in Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum) pp. 11–32.

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