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Zeruya Shalev – récits de femmes

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## Death: How to Speak About the Unspeakable

“The Remains of Love” by Zeruya Shalev

*Comment parler de la mort ? Une autre lecture de « Ce qui reste de nos vies » de Zeruya Shalev*

כיצד ניתן לדבר על המוות ? עיון ב"שארית החיים" לצרויה שלו

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## Death: How to Speak About the Unspeakable

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*Comment parler de la mort ? Une autre lecture de*

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כיצד ניתן לדבר על המוות ? עיון ב"שארית החיים" לצרויה שלו

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*This article is dedicated to the memory of my cousin, Hagay Gilboa.*

In his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy confronts the fear of life's end:

They all saw he was feeling bad and said to him, "We can stop if you are tired. You must rest." Rest? No, he wasn't tired at all, and they finished the rubber. They were all gloomy and silent. Ivan Ilyich felt he had brought down this gloom upon them and he couldn't dispel it. They had supper and went their ways, and Ivan Ilyich was left alone with the knowledge that his life had been poisoned for him, that it was poisoning the lives of others, and that this poison wasn't losing its power but was penetrating his whole being more and more.<sup>1</sup>

The "poison" within Ivan Ilyich, which spreads to those around him, is the scandal that is taking over our lives, the scandal with which he is unable to come to terms – that one day we will no longer exist. It is unconscionable that the

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1. Leo TOLSTOY, 2014, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich & Confession*, p. 70.

normal functioning of the organism ultimately ends its life. The disintegration apparent in Ivan Ilyich's body threatens his guests and exposes the way in which we are always attempting to go against the grain of life. Thus, people are dragged into denial, deception, and sublimation in order to avoid contact with this scandal of their lives.

In *The Remains of Love*, (a literal translation of the Hebrew title would be "The Remains of Life"), Zeruya Shalev attempts to touch the remainder of life, its last moments, in order to speak about death itself. The novel traces the thoughts of Hemda, daughter of kibbutz founders, as well as those of her children, Dina and Avni, both in their forties. The book opens with the dying Hemda speaking of her life as the first child born on the kibbutz, growing up in the shadow of a threatening and domineering father, against the background of the story of how the Hula valley swamp was drained. The plot shifts between the minds of the various characters; Dina and Avni's stories are interwoven with Hemda's. Dina, a middle-aged woman, wants to revive her maternal love and adopt a child. Avni meets and is attracted to Talia in the hospital where she is nursing her beloved Raphael, who is dying of cancer.

Most scholars who have written about Shalev's work stress the author's feminine, maternal mode of expression, which is set against a masculine power system. Shira Stav argues that Shalev's books portray different sides of the same woman in various life situations. In *Love Life*, it is a young married woman without children, in *Husband and Wife*, it is a mother facing separation from her husband, while *Thera* follows a family's breakup and attempt to turn over a new leaf. Stav claims that in *The Remains of Love*, Shalev penetrates the power mechanisms of interpersonal relations, describing in the finest detail how marital turmoil can become hellish, how the irreparable hostility builds up over the years, the strong passion of the stormy marital quarrels, the moments of utter alienation and estrangement embodied precisely in the comforting warmth.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I wish to explore the couple relationship in Shalev's work from a different angle: how speaking about the remainder of life and the preoccupation with death and the disintegration of the body exist within male systems of identity as opposed to female ones. I want to address the question of how one may speak about the finality of life. I will articulate two, separate, though inter-related, notions: "masculine language of disintegration" and "feminine language of disintegration." I wish to investigate the ways in which the masculine language of disintegration functions differently in the realm of death from the feminine

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2. Shira STAV, 2011, "The Remains of Life by Zeruya Shalev".

language of disintegration. I hope to show how these two power systems struggle with and overcome one another.

The dying mother recalling her childhood in the shadow of a threatening father appears to be a burden that her children have no choice but to bear, a disturbance in the apparently normal course of their lives, lives that are narrated by a mother in the language of her dead father, which she carries within her. Even the author herself is unable to remain in the discourse of the end of life. The leaps of consciousness between the various characters and between different time periods seem to be attempts on the part of the author to escape this discourse. Shalev's failure to remain within the language of disintegration renders the book a collection of fragments that only momentarily manage to linger in the remains of life, only to quickly flee the infinite dissolution to be found there. In the first part of the book, the father's language dominates the mother's speech and the characters are unable to remain in a language that makes death present. But the mother dying in her bed then reinstates a maternal, semiotic, language. Only then does she manage, as though from within death, to give her children, who have also begun to be touched by decay and disintegration, a vital force. It seems as though the end of the book, where Dina adopts a child and calls him Hemdat, is meant to redeem Dina from the infinite disintegration spreading through her body and consciousness. This, however, is a contrived attempt to evade the harsh reality of bodily decay. Human consciousness remains a place that cannot tolerate the language of death.

### **A Feminine Version of the "Binding of Isaac"**

In her article "The Pioneer Victim, The Holy Land and the Emergence of Women's Poetry in the Nineteen Twenties," Hamutal Tsamir argues that the ethos of sacrifice adopted by pioneer men in Eretz Israel was not merely an ideological response to a conflict between the Zionist vision and reality or between groups or classes within the Yishuv. It was also a ritual through which men organized themselves into a new collective identity and social structure, thereby giving birth to the new nation, by establishing control over their shared property: women and territory.<sup>3</sup> Following Tsamir, I would argue that in the scene by the lake in *The Remains of Love* (which I will describe shortly) the father speaks a masculine language of disintegration that aspires to appropriate the female sacrifice for the benefit of

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3. Hamutal TSAMIR, 2007, "The Pioneer Victim, The Holy Land and the Emergence of Women's Poetry in the Nineteen Twenties", p. 658.

the Zionist ethos, and thus also to subjugate both the female sacrifice and the maternal language of disintegration to the kibbutz collective.

Hemda reviews her entire life during her final moments as her body crumbles and collapses. She recalls her childhood with a loving but threatening father who sought to prepare her for adulthood in the kibbutz. In the middle of the night, in the cold of winter, this father takes the twelve-year-old Hemda from the children's house to go fishing on the Hula Lake with four other men. Their walk to the boat on the lake (earmarked for drainage) appears to be a rite of initiation, a kind of Bat Mitzvah<sup>4</sup> test, to prepare Hemda for life on the kibbutz. But the Bat Mitzvah test is abruptly transformed into a moment in which the father sacrifices Hemda and her femininity.

That night the bell rang out loudly, telling Yosef of the birth of his first-born son, and Yosef pleaded to be allowed to return to the jetty to see his wife, but her father refused categorically. We can't stop fishing in mid-shift, he rebuked him, you'll see her in the morning. Yosef obeyed him, clenching his lips, restrained and disciplined man that he was, one of the founder-members of the kibbutz, and that night of all nights the fish outwitted them, and the nets came up as empty as they had been when they were cast. Fishing is a riddle, said her father as the bell rang again and again, as if again and again the baby were being born, and when they landed in the morning, the empty nets in their hands, they were met on the shore by a group of comrades, bare-headed, who took Yosef by the arm and led him to his tragedy, to his son who lost his mother a few hours after leaving her womb.<sup>5</sup>

The scene on the lake is revealed as a feminine version of the binding of Isaac. The ringing of the bell serves as a sign from God, like the angel through whom God redeems Isaac, commanding Abraham not to sacrifice his son. This use of the story of the Binding of Isaac stands in contrast to its use in the Zionist ethos, where it describes a heroic act of sacrifice in the name of national communal continuity. In *The Remains of Love*, the father ignores the bell, which goes on ringing to

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4. The Bat Mitzvah is a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony for twelve-year-old girls, in which they assume the obligations of adults in terms of Jewish ritual law, tradition, and ethics. From this point on, they are able to participate in all realms of Jewish community life as adults.

5. Zeruya SHALEV, 2013, *The Remains of Love*, pp. 97–98.

convey the news of the son's birth, thus challenging the divine command to stop the sacrifice and sanctify life in the figure of the newborn baby.

Instead, the father, who is devoted to the pioneering ethos of sacrifice, continues with the work of fishing: "you can't stop fishing in mid-shift, he rebuked him." The father's language becomes the language of death when he decides to go on fishing rather than acknowledge the new life that has just burst forth into the world. The language of death substitutes the sanctification of death for dedication to labor, evoking the slogan that hung over the gates of Auschwitz: "*Arbeit Macht Frei*." The father's language of death frequently shifts, exchanging the signifiers "labor" and "dedication" with the signifier "death" until it is difficult to distinguish between them. The fish are, it seems, meant to replace the ram that was sacrificed instead of Isaac, but "that night of all nights the fish outwitted them" and their nets remain empty. Rather than the fish, the replacement sacrifice is not the elected son, but the mother giving birth and motherhood itself.

The father also seeks to impose the language of death on his daughter. His draining of the swamp is a metaphor for the drying up of the womb. The way in which her father forces Hemda to drain the lake by drinking water by the spoonful is a metaphor for the way in which he dries up her womb, as though seeking to control and acquire her maternal power. It seems that the attempt to conquer motherhood does not create renewed growth, but rather becomes a narrative that destroys itself from within. The draining of the swamp is revealed as a failure. Dedication to the Zionist narrative and the ethos of sacrifice for the country has lost its way.

Thus, in the absence of a dominant mother and under the guidance of her father, Hemda has no option but to absorb his language of death and disintegration. Since childhood, she has wanted to tell stories, but has been scolded by her father and the kibbutz and told that her story-writing is unsuitable and contributes nothing to the kibbutz enterprise. The father's language kills Hemda's words and stories. Her silenced stories are woven from words of death: paralyzed, silent, empty, the language of the dead. Gideon Ofrat writes that the name of the father is the name of death, while the mother symbolizes life. The mother and father are the dual signifiers of language: the father represents "langue" – a system of rules and regulations, while the mother represents "parole," or living speech.<sup>6</sup> The mother is a metaphor for all that is not metaphorical in language. But the Binding of Isaac binds up both Hemda's feminine language and her motherhood,

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6. Gideon OFRAT, 1999, "The Jewish Derrida", p. 59.

to the point where towards the end of her life she leaves blank the notebook of stories she wanted to tell:

All that would remain from her decades on the face of the earth, an empty notebook, since she never dared write one word in it, as this word, the first one, would need to be single and unique, a princess of words the like of which had never been written; this word must embrace all the sounds she heard and the sights she saw and the smells surrounding her.<sup>7</sup>

But the empty notebook embodies her objections to the father's language and upbringing. Hemda returns to her childhood in order to erase the lines of the notebook that were seemingly written by the father and engraved on her body. But the father's language of disintegration invades Hemda's small body and spreads rampantly through it, until even at the end of her life she cannot evade his destructive language and the notebook remains empty.

### **Dina and the Grandfather: The Struggle between Masculine and Feminine Language**

When Hemda gives birth to her first child, she is already in her father's sway:

The birth of her first-born daughter, the death of her father, the capitulation of the lake, all these together were congealed in her consciousness into a complex and suppurating knot. The motherhood and orphanhood which were bound together with a fateful and cyclical bond left her so confused that it seemed to her in those days that her dead father needed her more than her living daughter . . . and she would sit for hours beside his freshly dug grave, her breasts leaking milk that quickly dried.<sup>8</sup>

The breasts dripping milk onto the grave seem to want to feed the dead father. In her article "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva argues that milk and tears are explicit signs of the *mater dolorosa*. This is a maternal semiotics, with linguistic metaphors that rehabilitate non-verbal language.<sup>9</sup> The father's destructive language invades the motherly semiotic signifiers and persists in drying up her vital forces.

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7. Zeruya SHALEV, 2013, *The Remains of Love*, pp. 95–96.

8. Zeruya SHALEV, 2013, *The Remains of Love*, p. 62.

9. Julia KRISTEVA, 1985, "Stabat Mater", p. 143.

Nevertheless, perhaps Hemda does want to nurse her father one last time from her breasts leaking milk onto the grave, in a final attempt to appease him and to free herself from his language of destruction: “her throat is filled by her father and her mother and until she can manage to open her gullet and accommodate her offspring, she lays her eggs and gets as far away as she can.” Hemda must completely surrender to the grave in order to remove from herself the curse of “the sacrifice of motherhood” that haunts her. When Avni is born, Hemda manages to recover the ability to love her son, and to revive her semiotic maternal language, although Avni largely exists as a metonymy of the dead father, so that Hemda remains caught up in a cycle of death.

The “sacrifice of motherhood” that Hemda endures is transferred to her daughter Dina as well. The subsequent aging of her body is experienced as an irreversible, terminal process. Thus, Dina perpetuates the sacrifice of motherhood that began with Hemda at the lake. In her poetry collection from 1988, *An Easy Target for Snipers*, Shalev depicts a loaded relationship between a grandfather and his granddaughter. The poem seems to be speaking Dina’s lines in a dialogue that never took place about her experience of her grandfather (this translation is by Rebecca Gillis):

In bed in the afternoon  
 I and my big grandfather  
 Whose hair is as white  
 as mine is black  
 Whose wisdom is as fierce  
 as my joy is broken.  
 My grandfather did great things but  
 failed in the small ones.  
 Wherever I walk his smell will be in my hair  
 And I will braid him into plaits  
 And my grandfather will not die  
 And from his seed will I bear white children  
 Who will never laugh.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Hemda’s breasts, which seem to be feeding the father as they leak milk onto his grave instead of her hungry daughter waiting in her cradle, bind the fates of Dina and her grandfather together: “in bed in the afternoon.” The bed, perhaps a grave, perhaps a cradle, binds together the fate of the dead grandfather’s

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10. Zeruya SHALEV, 1998, *An Easy Target for Snipers*, p. 7.

spirit and the newborn baby girl. But when Hemda takes the baby in her arms for the first time, “it seemed to her that her dead father needed her more than her living daughter.” The bed harbors the massive grandfather and his granddaughter “I and my big grandfather.” The grandfather’s great size, apparently substituting for the voice of God, resonates across generations and smashes the baby’s small body to bits: “one baby, born prematurely, hungrily sucking her thumb” as though consuming herself from within, while her grandfather receives fatty, nourishing milk. This moment brands her body with the “death curse” of the new mother and Hemda’s sacrifice of motherhood as she becomes alienated from the new baby. The newborn baby girl carries on her body the expulsion of motherhood.

The curse of the grandfather smashes Dina’s body to bits, and also renders her sterile: “From his seed / I will bear white children / Who will never laugh.” Dina fails to deliver Nitzan’s twin brother and lacks the courage to have another child, a brother for Nitzan. The ghost of Dina’s dead baby is, in a sense, the grandfather’s “white” offspring, swaddled in a shroud, dying from within. These “white children” perpetuate the grandfather’s curse of the sacrifice of motherhood.

Perhaps by giving birth to “white children,” however, Dina is able to free her body of the grandfather’s curse. The twins growing inside her evoke the contradictions within her: one represents a vital force and birth, the other disintegration and death. Destruction and the vital force of childbirth exist side by side in Dina. Vomiting when she was an adolescent becoming aware of her new womanhood is a prelude to the miscarriage she will suffer later. Dina vomits, miscarries, and empties her body of the grandfather’s white seed, thus freeing herself from the grandfather’s curse, which sacrifices motherhood and womanhood. Thus, Dina purifies her body and frees herself from the sacrifice of motherhood and the language of disintegration and death that the grandfather imposed on Hemda as well as on Dina.

### **The Remains of Life: Hemda-Hemdat**

On her deathbed, as her body fails, Hemda manages to break out of her father’s withering, destructive language. In an intimate moment, Dina climbs into her dying mother’s bed and seeks her bodily warmth and her love. For the first time, a maternal language emerges:

But the body pressing against her now is hot and bony, and it seems all it wants from her is to be swallowed up in her and to swallow her, to be born in her and give birth to her, oy, Dini, she sighs, don’t cry, why are you crying? And her daughter clings to her as if

digging into her skin, help me, Mum, he doesn't want the child... How crowded is her grave tonight, she sighs, it seems to her that for years she's been laid out in the dark covered with clods of earth and now the grave is opening, shafts of light pierce her eyes, and a violent blast of air invades her nostril, they're throwing in another corpse alongside her and covering it and now it will be crowded forever, until eternity her daughter will be whispering feverishly in her ear, don't run away from me, give yourself to me one last time, don't go running again to your father and your mother and that lake of yours, and she hold out a hand to her daughter; the ground wallows between them heavy and muddy and she must dig a hole to reach her, very gradually she digs, of course the two of them are buried her forever and of course they thought she too was mad in those years, that's how I met you, my girl, but they were wrong, it wasn't madness, it was the complete opposite. And if he leaves me, she asks, do you think he's going to leave me? And Hemda sighs again, they all leave in the end, the child leaves too, but it makes no difference, you're a mother – you need a child, it's a simple story.<sup>11</sup>

The semiotic language, the intimate voices of bodies curled up together, Dina's tears and her wish to be swallowed back into her mother, the mother comforting her daughter and wrapping her arms around her evoke a kind of Pietà in reverse, with the dying mother bearing her adult daughter in her arms. But, unlike the Virgin Mary, who serves as a messenger of God, bringing the savior into the world, mother Hemda succeeds in redeeming her adult daughter from her aging body for the first time. This feminine Pietà is a brief moment of delight (the English translation of the name Hemda), of pleasure, happiness. Rather than succumbing to the father's destructive language, a vital force is created out of the mother's final moments: "you're a mother, you need a child," and elsewhere, "you will find the child."

These words are heard against a background of sounds, whispers, and maternal touches that inject meaning, substance, and sustenance into Dina's disintegrating life and aging body. It seems as though this moment of *hemda*, of delight, is the remains of life, of love, a moment in which maternal language succeeds in overcoming the destructive language of the father and restores maternal power to itself.

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11. Zeruya SHALEV, 2013, *The Remains of Love*, pp. 185–186.

But Hemda is doomed to pay the price and accept the punishment for the original sin committed at the lake. She dies during Dina's meeting with her newly adopted son. In "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva notes that Eastern and Taoist faiths hold that human bodies cross over from one place to another in an eternal stream, which itself constitutes a copy of the motherly receptacle.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in *The Remains of Love*, the Pietà is reversed and Mary becomes a child in the arms of her son who henceforth becomes the father. This is the moment of Hemda's death and her name is rewritten as "Hemdat," the name given to Dina's adopted son. In Hebrew, *hemdat* is the construct state of *hemda*, so that the newly adopted baby becomes a metonymy of the dead mother, her "remains." A remainder, a supplement in Derrida's terms, is a marginal entity that displaces the "real thing," mimics it, and becomes its sign and representative, accommodates itself to it, displaces it, and even threatens to render it superfluous altogether. The transition from the mother's name "Hemda" to the boy's name "Hemdat" carries within it the possibility of repairing the original sin committed at the lake. This rewriting of the name fractures the language of the father and perpetuates the semiotic language of the mother and hence the power of maternal delight.

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12. Julia KRISTEVA, 1985, "Stabat Mater", p. 139.

TsAMIR Hamutal, 2007, "The Pioneer Victim, The Holy Land and the Emergence of Women's Poetry in the Nineteen Twenties" in Hannan HEVER (ed.), *A Moment of Birth, Studies in Hebrew and Literature in Honor of Dan Miron*, Jerusalem: Bialik Institute.

Abstract: In her book *The Remains of Love*, Zeruya Shalev seeks to touch the language of the "remainder of life" – the moments at the end of life and the final disintegration of the body. The book traces the consciousness of Hemda, the daughter of kibbutz settlers, and the consciousnesses of her children, Dina and Avner, who are in their forties. The book opens with the process of Hemda's dying. She tells of her life as the first child of the kibbutz, in the shadow of a dominant and threatening father and against the background of the story of the draining of the Hula Lake. In my article, I explore how it is possible to speak of death as something about which it is impossible to speak. I argue that the preoccupation with the issue of death and the disintegration of the body exists within a masculine system of identity as opposed to a feminine one. I employ two intertwined concepts: "the masculine language of disintegration" and "the feminine language of disintegration." I examine how the masculine language of disintegration functions differently than the feminine language of disintegration in the province of death. I explore how these power systems occupy one another and struggle with one another, and how successful female characters succeed in liberating themselves from the masculine language of disintegration and reformulate feminine language that contains within it the disintegration of the body, but also the hope of the continuation of life.

Keywords: Shalev Zeruya (1959-), Feminine language of disintegration, Masculine language of disintegration, Death, Consciousness, *The Remains of Love*

Résumé : Ce roman de Shalev traite du langage de la mort, celui des derniers moments de la vie, de l'effritement du corps. Il suit la conscience de Hemda et celle de ses deux enfants adultes, Dina et Avner. Le roman s'ouvre sur l'agonie de Hemda, premier enfant né dans son kibboutz, qui raconte son enfance à l'ombre d'un père autoritaire à l'époque de l'assèchement du lac Houlé. L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner le langage de la mort, de distinguer entre un « langage masculin d'anéantissement » et un « langage féminin d'anéantissement », d'analyser ce qui les distingue pour enfin, reformuler le langage féminin comme une structure qui comporte, certes, l'anéantissement du corps mais aussi l'espoir de la continuation de la vie.

*Mots-clés : Shalev Zeruya (1959-), Ce qui reste de nos vies, langage de la mort, langage masculin, langage féminin, conscience*

תקציר: בספרה מבקשת צרויה שלו לגעת בשפת "שארית החיים", ברגעי הסוף של החיים והתפוררות הגוף. הספר מתחקה אחר תודעתה של חמדה, בת למתיישבי קיבוץ, ואחר תודעתם של ילדיה: דינה ואבנר, הנמצאים בשנות הארבעים לחייהם. הספר נפתח בתיאור תהליך גסיסתה של חמדה, המספרת על חייה כילדה ראשונה בקיבוץ, בצל אב מאיים ודומיננטי ובצל סיפור יבוש אגם החולה. המאמר בוחן כיצד ניתן לדבר על המוות כבלתי ניתן לדיבור וטוען כי העיסוק בסוגיית המוות וכיליון הגוף מתקיים בתוך מערכת של זהות גברית לעומת נשית. אנסח פה שני מושגים השזורים זה בזה: "שפת הכליון הגברית" ו"שפת הכליון הנשית". אבקש לבחון כיצד שפת הכליון הגברית מתפקדת במחוזות המוות באופן שונה משפת הכליון הנשית וכיצד מערכות הכוח הללו כובשות זו את זו ונאבקות זו בזו. אטען שהדמויות הנשיות מצליחות להשתחרר מ"שפת הכליון הגברית" ולנסח מחדש שפה נשית שמכילה בתוכה את התפוררות הגוף אבל גם את תקוות המשך החיים.

מילות מפתח: צרויה שלו, "שארית החיים", תודעה, מוות, שפת כליון גברית, שפת כליון נשית