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Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

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YAIR LIPSHITZ*

Nocturnal Histories: Nighttime and the Jewish Temporal Imagination in Modern Hebrew Drama

Abstract

The paper examines the utilization of night as dramatic time in modern Hebrew plays as a device to explore the meaning of Jewish history. A long Jewish religious tradition links nighttime to questions of exile and redemption and constructs it, through texts and ritual performance, as a time to reflect upon time. Modern Hebrew theatre, although often considered a secular enterprise, follows this tradition either through direct allusions or more implicitly, while also critiquing or deconstructing its premises. The plays analyzed here, ranging from the 1930s to the 2010s and varying in political stance, stage nocturnal debates regarding the meaning of time and history, but also participate in broader such debates within Israeli society. Most prominent in these plays is the tension between religiosity and secularity in the understanding of time, as they interrogate the complex relations between Zionism and traditional concepts of redemption. As such, Hebrew and Israeli theatre takes part in shaping the temporal imagination of its surrounding culture and investigating its theological undercurrents and political ramifications. The paper suggests reconsidering Israeli theatre's relation to Jewish religious performative traditions, as the case-study of nighttime exemplifies.

KEYWORDS: Israeli theatre; theatre and time; theatre and history; theatre and ritual; *On This Night*; *Tashmad*; *Tikkun khatsot*; *Night of the Twentieth*

In her book *Theatre & History*, Rebecca Schneider observes that “theatre, like history, is an art of time. Even, we could say, *the art of time*” (Schneider 2014, 7). Theatre takes time – the couple of hours through which the performance unfolds – but it also condenses time, molds it into a temporal experience, and often presents other fictional times to its audience. Indeed, scholarship in recent years has been particularly attuned to the multilayered ways in which theatre shapes temporalities, and especially how it addresses and stages history.¹ As such, theatre participates in the temporal imagination of the culture

¹ Prominent contributions regarding theatre and time include Limon 2010 and 2015; and Wiles 2014, while Rokem 2000 alongside Schneider 2011 and 2014 all address performances of history.

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in which it takes place – that is, in the various ways in which a given society understands time; its shape and movement; the interconnections between pasts, presents and futures; and the events that society wishes to remember and to forget. Theatre contributes to the charting of what sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (2003) calls the “time-maps” of society, and at times undermines or challenges such maps.

In this paper, I would like to consider how Hebrew (and later Israeli²) theatre in the twentieth and early twenty first centuries achieved this through the prevalent usage of nighttime as dramatic time³ in many of its plots. By reviewing several key plays, I will argue that they continue a longer Jewish tradition that links night to broad questions regarding history. As dramatic time, night functions in these plays as a mechanism to address a larger time – Jewish history. This interplay between the “small time” of night and the “large time” of history is charged by Jewish rituals and myths, and is reemployed in the theatre. It is possible that in many cases the dramatic time of night is also echoed in the stage time of actual performance which, in modern theatre, is often conducted in the evening and in darkened auditoriums.

Such theatrical reactivations of a Jewish tradition, which as we will soon see has always been both textual and performative, allow us to reconsider the broader question of Hebrew theatre’s relation to the Jewish religious legacy. Israeli theatre is often presented as a prominently secular endeavor, and one that could have only stemmed from the secularization of Jewish society in modern times (see for example Rozik 2013). Furthermore, due to the relative dearth of theatrical activity in Jewish societies prior to modernity, it is also presented as lacking dramatic, theatrical and performative traditions of its own (see, for example, Yaari 2018, 3-8). There is no debate that Jewish religion continues to concern Hebrew and Israeli theatre thematically throughout its existence (Levy 1998; Abramson 1998, 118-45). However, when it comes to the performative mechanisms of Jewish religion and of Hebrew theatre, scholarship often frames the relations between the two mainly in terms of the breach marked by secularization. While the importance of this breach should not be underestimated, the utilization of nighttime in

² “Hebrew theatre/drama” will be used here to relate to drama written and performed in Hebrew mainly in Palestine from the late nineteenth century until the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, while “Israeli theatre/drama” will refer to its continuation after that. Throughout the paper, I will use “Israel” to refer to the State of Israel, and “Palestine” to relate to the territory prior to 1948 (“Palestinian”, however, will also refer to the Arab population of Palestine). The term “The Land of Israel” will refer to the Jewish conception of the same territory across the ages.

³ In “dramatic time”, I refer to the fictional time in which the events represented on-stage take place, as opposed to “stage time”, the concrete duration of an actual theatrical performance (see Pavis 1998, 409-12).

Hebrew drama can serve as a case-study that illuminates a more complex picture, in which Israeli theatre continues Jewish religious performative traditions even as it critiques and transforms them. The plays discussed below grapple with religious and secular interpretations of Jewish history from a contemporary perspective, but they also participate, as theatrical events, in a longer performative practice of considering history at night. It is therefore not only the *theme* of these plays that addresses the entanglements of religiosity, secularity, and time – but also their apparatus that participates in the very same entanglements.

A Time to Consider Time: Jewish History through Nightly Imagery and Practices

In order to further explore these dynamics, one needs to take into account modern Hebrew drama's profound connection to the project of Jewish national revival known as Zionism. While not all the plays reviewed here necessarily take a Zionist stance, and even those who do might disagree about what such stance might entail, it is important to note that the original emergence of Hebrew theatre went hand in hand with the Zionist project, as part of a construction of a modern Hebrew national culture (see Rokem 1996). Zionism itself, as Eyal Chowers (2012, 72-114) shows in detail, was deeply concerned with questions of temporality and history. It had to posit itself vis-à-vis the Jewish past, and even more so against traditional Jewish notions of time and history, in order to articulate the meaning of its own moment in time.

Three terms that frame the traditional Jewish understanding of history will serve as key to our discussion: destruction, exile, and redemption. The *destruction* referred to here is of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 CE. In the traditional Jewish narrative, *exile* ensued from this destruction as the Jewish population of Judaea dispersed among the nations.⁴ According to religious Jewish faith, at least in its more conservative forms, Jews are to remain in this state until the future divine *redemption*, through the arrival of the Messiah who will lead the Jews back to the Land of Israel. In other words, while destruction was an event in the past, and with redemption relegated to the future, exile was considered to be the state of affairs in the present.

While there were other exiles of the Jews from the Land of Israel prior to the destruction of the Second Temple (such as the exile to Egypt depicted at the end of the book of Genesis and the exile to Babylonia following the

⁴ In reality, the situation was far more complex, as many Jews were living in Diaspora even prior to the destruction of the Second Temple.

destruction of the First Temple), this exile became the paradigm for Jewish self-understanding and a cornerstone for their temporal imagination. As a term, “exile” (*galut*) came to encompass more than territorial displacement. First and foremost, it also connoted political subjugation, even for Jews who remained on their land (Milikowsky 1997). Furthermore, according to Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (2013), exile also gradually referred to a cosmic state: the world itself was in exile while Jews were in exile, and so was the divine presence (*shekhinah*) itself.

However, as Raz-Krakotzkin further demonstrates, in the modern period, and especially in Zionist thought, this paradigm gave way to another in which the Jews were exiled *from* the world, rather than the world being in exile *with* the Jews. This image’s theological roots, according to Raz-Krakotzkin, are in the Christian understanding of Jewish exile, and it foregrounds a notion that, in their state of exile, the Jews were banished from (or at least to the margins of) world history. Jews in exile also lived “outside history”. Consequently, Zionism aimed at returning the Jews not only to the Land of Israel and to political sovereignty, but also back to history. In this sense, the destruction brought about a crisis in time inasmuch as in space, and exile was a temporal as well as geographical disjointedness – one that Zionism sought to put an end to. In its desire to bring an end to exile, Zionism also came close to the orbit of Jewish messianism. Indeed, the question whether Zionism was a messianic movement in secular garb was hotly debated between the defenders and detractors of Zionism as well as within scholarship (Ohana 2010). Through its complex relations with Jewish messianism, Zionism functioned as an intervention in the modern Jewish experience of time.

Due to this context, Hebrew theatre’s own engagements with time became an extremely vital endeavor. Theatre as a temporal art-form participated, whether affirmingly or critically, in a broader national project of reshaping the Jewish temporal imagination. Whatever stance the plays discussed below take regarding Zionism, they were all created during a century in which the Jewish temporal imagination was in flux – and they took part in it through images of night.

The connections between night and Jewish history can be traced back to several key biblical images that link redemption with the break of dawn. Isaiah promises Israel that if they will act justly their light shall “burst through like the dawn” (Isaiah 58:8) and begins one of his prophecies of consolation with the words: “Arise, shine, for your light has dawned; The Presence of the Lord has shone upon you” (Isaiah 60:1). The imagery of a future dawn clearly implies that the current moment is nightlike. In Late Antiquity, Rabbinic exegeses on various biblical verses continued to elaborate this imagery. For example, the midrash reads the words in Song of Songs 3:1 – “On my bed at night, I sought him whom my soul loves” – in an allegorical manner, in which

the beloved people of Israel seek out God in times of exile, with nighttime serving as a direct symbol of the various subjugations in Jewish history.⁵ In other places, dawn is similarly presented as an explicit analogy for redemption, as is the case in the following story from the Talmud Yerushalmi (also known as the Palestinian Talmud, assumed to be compiled around 400 CE):

רבי חייא רבא ורבי שמעון בן חלפתא הוו מהלכין בהדא בקעת ארבל בקריצתה וראו איילת
השחר שבקע אורה. אמר רבי חייא רבה לר' שמעון בן חלפתא בי רבי כך היא גאולתן של
ישראל בתחילה קימאה קימאה כל מה שהיא הולכת היא רבה והולכת.

[Rabbi Khiyya the Great and Rabbi Shimon ben Khalafta were walking together in the Arbel Valley in the early hours of the morning, and they saw the very first rays of dawn. Said Rabbi Khiyya the Great to Rabbi Shimon ben Khalafta: “Rabbi, such is Israel’s redemption: at first it appears little by little, and the longer it continues the brighter it shines”.]⁶

In such rabbinic texts, the temporal frame of the daily cycle, with dawn succeeding night, becomes the model for a longer time: that of Jewish history in its entirety.

Night, however, is not just a time that metaphorically resembles another time – the time of exile – but also a time in which such times can be reflected upon. In the Talmud Bavli (also known as the Babylonian Talmud, assumed to be compiled around 600 CE), God is described as sitting at night and lamenting the exile of his people:

ר' אליעזר אומר שלש משמרות הוי הלילה ועל כל משמר ומשמר יושב הקדוש ברוך הוא
ושואג כארי [...] וסימן לדבר משמרה ראשונה חמור נוער שניה כלבים צועקים שלישי
תינוק יונק משדי אמו ואשה מספרת עם בעלה. [...] אמר רב יצחק בר שמואל משמיה דרב
ג' משמרות הוי הלילה ועל כל משמר ומשמר יושב הקדוש ברוך הוא ושואג כארי ואומר אוי
לבנים שבעונותיהם החרבתי את ביתי ושרפתי את היכלי והגליתים לבין אומות העולם:

[Rabbi Eliezer says: there are three watches during the night, and on each and every watch the Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion . . . And a sign for this is: on the first watch – the donkey brays; on the second watch – the dogs bark; and on the third watch – an infant suckles on his mother’s breasts, and a woman converses with her husband. . . . Rabbi Isaac son of Shmuel said in the name of Rav: there are three watches during the night, and on each and every watch the Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion and says: “Woe to the children, that due to their sins I destroyed my house, burned my Temple and exiled them among the nations of the world”.]⁷

⁵ Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah 3:1.

⁶ Talmud Yerushalmi, tractate *Berachot* 1:1 (my translation).

⁷ Talmud Bavli, tractate *Berachot* 3a (my translation).

This passage begins with depicting nocturnal voices: both concrete physical voices that can be heard during the night and God's unheard roar, later elaborated to be a lament over the exile of his children. It seems that the Talmud hints at a connection between these voices, as if one could recall exile through the auditory experience of nighttime. Night here is not just a symbolic image of exile but also a concrete time with actual voices, in which God remembers exile and experiences its pain (and the text possibly prompts those reading it to do so as well).

This double role has been further expanded through Jewish ritual praxis. Most influentially, kabbalists in sixteenth century Safed developed an intricate nocturnal ritual deeply related to questions of exile and redemption. This ritual is known as *tikkun khatsot*, the midnight *tikkun* (a charged term in kabbalistic parlance, which generally means mending, healing, or repairing a broken cosmos). *Tikkun khatsot* is an ordered ceremony of prayers and Psalms recital, and it employed a clearly messianic tone (Scholem 1969, 146-50; Magid 1996). The ritual is composed of two parts: *Tikkun Rachel*, which includes lamentations over the exile, and *Tikkun Leah*, which relates to consolation and messianic redemption. *Tikkun khatsot* is therefore a nocturnal ritual that directly touches upon issues of Jewish history. Nighttime emerges through ritual performance as a time in which one considers time.

As opposed to these religious ritual performances, modern Hebrew theatre has been all in all mostly a secular enterprise (Urian 2000). However, I wish to argue here that it also offered a performative practice through which night became once again a time for considering time. Hebrew drama returns time and again to the night in order to debate questions regarding history, exile, and redemption. In this sense, it offers theatre as a shared space of nocturnal practice for thinking time, following a longer Jewish tradition. Simultaneously, it enables a critique or reevaluation of the very same notions that serve as the basis of the Jewish temporal imagination.

Destruction as Nightmare: *On This Night*

My first case study is one of the earliest original Hebrew plays to be performed in Palestine, Nathan Bistrizky's *On This Night* (first performed in a shortened version by Habimah in 1936). The play is an adaptation of a legend that appears in multiple sources throughout rabbinic literature, detailing events supposedly leading to the destruction of the Temple.⁸ The tale

⁸ Since there is no historical evidence that this story actually occurred, I will therefore consider it an historical legend which nevertheless had deep impact on Jewish self-understanding for ages. On the tale itself, with its many versions, see: Tropper 2005.

depicts how Yohanan ben Zakkai, the leader of the Rabbis, fled the besieged Jerusalem smuggled inside a coffin and struck a deal with the captain of the Roman army. Ben Zakkai asked to receive the intellectual center of Yavneh while surrendering Jerusalem, prioritizing cultural-religious continuity over political sovereignty. Despite several possible reservations, the rabbinic story in its various versions all in all portrays ben Zakkai favorably, as a hero who enabled the continuance of Jewish religion and scholastic culture. However, during the twentieth century, and especially with the rise of Zionism, it became a challenging story, as it undermined notions of national military self-defense in favour as what might seem as defeatist pandering to imperial forces. Zionism at its inception was mainly a secular movement, and perceived itself as a break from traditional religious Jewish existence in the diaspora. Seen in this light, ben Zakkai might be portrayed as a dangerously pro-diasporic defector, who set in motion (or at least was complicit in) the start of Jewish exile – the very same exile that Zionism was set to put an end to (Boyarin 1997; Marx 2010).

Clearly, by choosing such a pivotal moment in Jewish history and dramatizing it during another pivotal moment, the ascent of Zionism, *On This Night* is very much concerned with questions regarding the Jewish past and its relation to the present. Given the complexities of this story's reception in modern Hebrew culture, Bistrizky's treatment of it is remarkably nuanced and balanced, presenting the case and the pitfalls for both sides of an ideological debate. The play constructs the Talmudic story as a conflict between two sects within Jerusalem: on the one hand, ben Zakkai and his students, who are inclined towards spirituality, scholarship, and various degrees of detachment from the earthly and the political; on the other, the militant zealots who are determined to defend Jerusalem's political independence, even at the risk of destroying their own people and at times turning violently against them. Each camp includes stereotypical characters who accentuate the weaknesses of their respective position, alongside more rounded characters that foreground their dilemmas and genuine motivations. As opposed to the original story, the play offers an open end, with ben Zakkai leaving Jerusalem inside the coffin – but without seeing him actually arriving to the Roman military camp and striking the deal.

The night in the play's title refers to the one preceding the final scene, during which ben Zakkai decides to leave Jerusalem for good. Bistrizky explicitly joins the long symbolic tradition that equates nighttime with exile when he has ben Zakkai state: "when this night will end for ben Zakkai, immediately the night for Israel will begin, a night that I do not know its measure and cannot guess its end" (Bistrizky 1935, 149).⁹

⁹ Translations from all plays are my own.

The peak of the play is a lengthy dream sequence that has no roots in the rabbinic source material and was omitted from the shortened 1936 version. Ben Zakkai, after falling asleep inside the coffin while still at home inside the besieged Jerusalem, dreams about the consequences of his future actions. He walks in the alleys of Jerusalem after it had been destroyed by the Romans, facing the effects of destruction and exile on the city and on the Jews, who become a diasporic, rootless, shapeless people. In one remarkable moment, ben Zakkai encounters several Jewish students of the Talmud who read the story *about* him and dispute his motivations:

לומד אחד: מדוע וותרו חכמינו על ירושלים, לא כדי להשליך הקליפה ולשמור על התוך למה החליף ר' יוחנן בן-זכאי –
 ר' יוחנן בן-זכאי: (קופץ ונכנס בין המתווכחים ומניע בשפתיו בחזקה, כאילו הוא צורח באזניהם, ואילו קולו אינו נשמע כלל והללו אינם נותנים דעתם עליו כל-עיקר.)
 לומד אחד: נר ישראל, עמוד הימני, הפטיש החזק, זיו החכמה, למה, אומר אני, החליף הוא את ירושלים בכרם שביבנה? משום שבקש להשליך הקליפה ולשמור על התוך...
 ר' יוחנן בן-זכאי: (הוא נותן להם סימנים נמרצים ונרגשים בידיו, כמבקש למשוך לבם אליו, והם אינם שמים על לב, כאילו אינם רואים אותו כלל.)

[ONE STUDENT. Why did our Sages forsake Jerusalem if not to throw away the exterior peel and keep the interior? Why did Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai swap – BEN ZAKKAI. (*Jumps in between the debaters, moving his lips forcefully, as if he is shouting into their ears and his voice is not heard at all. They do not notice him whatsoever.*)

ONE STUDENT. The Lamp of Israel, the Right-Hand Pillar, the Mighty Hammer, the Radiance of Wisdom¹⁰, why, say I, did he swap Jerusalem with the vineyard of Yavneh? Because he wished to throw away the exterior and keep the interior . . .

BEN ZAKKAI. (*He gestures vigorously and emotionally at them with his hands, trying to catch their attention, but they do not notice, as if they do not see him at all.*)

(119-20)

This dreamlike moment allows for an elaborate time-travel: a character from the Jewish (pseudo-)historical past confronts the future implications of his actions on the entire people and the way his decisions are to be interpreted by generations to come. Through such nocturnal time-travel, Bistrizky constructs a multi-layered temporality that serves as a prism for the investigation of both the past and the present. It straightforwardly confronts the rabbinic story's role as a legacy that shaped future Jewish understandings of history.

¹⁰ All these are epithets associated with Yohanan ben Zakkai in rabbinic literature.

As the dream sequence progresses, ben Zakkai (or an elderly man who is his double) engages in a lengthy debate with a young man who sides with the zealot rebels in Jerusalem and puts forth a clearly proto-Zionist worldview that celebrates political sovereignty, armed action, and physical territory – all contrasted with ben Zakkai’s diasporic stress on a spiritual-intellectual Jewish existence. The young man demands to put an end to destruction, to cure the Jews from their exilic addiction to their state of ruin, and offer them a rebuilt homeland instead. He speaks of himself as a representative of a generation “who is not afraid of profaning the sacred, because it sanctifies the profane” (130). As opposed to him, the elderly man speaks with religious awe about the exalted mystery of the ruined Jerusalem, as a space in which “every voice . . . is like a moaning echo of the Divine Presence (*shekhinah*) who is in exile” (128). The moaning of the *shekhinah* in exile during this nightly scene evokes the nocturnal laments of God about the destruction described in the Talmudic passage quoted above. The old man cherishes the destructed space in which such divine laments can be heard, and dreads the moment when these voices will be subdued by rebuilding Jerusalem. Indeed, for him, the end of exile and the reconstruction of a homeland come with a steep spiritual price:

ואילו מכיון שירושלים נבנית, מיד ירושלים נשכחת. כל זמן שהוטל על בן-אדם לזכור, הרי לבו ער תמיד ונפשו דולקת כנר-תמיד. ניטל ממנו הכרח הזכרון, מיד אש נפשו שוקעת כנר זה שנפטר. (מקונן והולך) וי לי, בשביל הכל אני רואה מקום בירושלים הבנויה, רק לא בשבילה! רק לא בשביל זו, שהיתה מטלטלת ירושלים החרבה בחיקה, כאם זו את יונקה החולה... רק לא בשביל השכינה! רק לא בשביל השכינה! (גועה בבכיה) בני, בכו לגורל השכינה בירושלים הבנויה! בכו, שאין מקום לשכינה בירושלים הבנויה!

[Once Jerusalem is built, immediately Jerusalem is forgotten. As long as one is tasked to remember, one’s heart is always awake and one’s soul burns like an eternal candle. Take from one the necessity to remember, and immediately his soul’s fire is extinguished like a dying candle. (*laments*) Woe is me, for I see a place for everything in the built Jerusalem, except for Her! Except for She, that carried the ruined Jerusalem in Her bosom, like this mother who carries her sick infant . . . Except for the *shekhinah*!¹¹ Except for the *shekhinah*! (*wails in tears*) My children, cry about the fate of the *shekhinah* in the built Jerusalem! Cry, for there is no place for the *shekhinah* in the built Jerusalem! (129-30)]

The old man’s stance can be read in a twofold manner. It can be a Zionist critique from the playwright’s part about how religious diasporic Judaism grew to find spiritual meaning only in the current state of destruction, and

¹¹ As Jewish tradition evolved, the *shekhinah* became a more distinctly feminine entity, at times representing the female aspect of the divine.

is therefore resistant to any welcome change towards national sovereignty. This is definitely in line with several caricatures of traditional Judaism in the dream sequence and throughout the play. At the same time, however, it can be also be read and performed as a genuine concern regarding the potential spiritual risks entailed in modern secular nationalism, and an insight into the ways in which exile shaped Jewish sensitivities in ways that are not merely negative.

On This Night, then, utilizes the nightly scene in order to probe into the shift from traditional religious Jewish existence in exile to the emergence of secular nationalism in modernity, by returning to an event in the past that sketches a move in the opposite direction: from sovereignty to exile. While the original rabbinic story about ben Zakkai's departure from Jerusalem does not put any particular emphasis on nighttime, Bistrizky's adaptation clearly uses night as a dramatic time in which the deep questions of Jewish history can and should be addressed. By subtly evoking other rabbinic sources that connect nighttime to exile, through the lamentations of the *shekhnah*, the particular night at the play's center becomes a liminal time situated between sovereignty and exile, serving as a mirror image to another liminal time: that of early Zionism.

Intriguingly, in the play's final scene, once ben Zakkai has been smuggled out of Jerusalem through the city gate, Bistrizky adds another moment that does not appear in the original story. The leader of the zealots (and ben Zakkai's nephew) calls his compatriots to join him in a suicide mission and burn down the Roman camp – thus possibly undoing ben Zakkai's endeavors and changing the course of history (180-1). The play ends at the break of dawn. The audience does not get to know which side had succeeded in its efforts, and the gatekeeper of the city orders ben Zakkai's daughter to go away, to which she responds with a question that is the final words of the play: "Where to?" (184). Situated at the threshold of Jerusalem, it is unclear whether the daughter should (and can) go back into the city, or outside to exile. With its ambiguous and open ending, *On This Night* does not present exile as a sealed historical fact, but rather as a malleable option that can still be changed and perhaps is changing in the present, through Zionism's own temporal intervention.

Night between Destruction and Redemption: *Tashmad* and *Tikkun khatsot*

While Bistrizky's play pitted old, traditional, diasporic religion against new, young, secular Zionism, as the twentieth century progressed, a religious strand of Zionism emerged as an influential force in Israeli politics and soci-

ety. This became most prominent after the 1967 war and the Israeli conquest of the Temple Mount, East Jerusalem, and the Palestinian territories of Judea and Samaria, which were under Jordanian rule at the time. The victory of 1967 and the renewed access to holy Jewish sites were considered almost miraculous by many Israelis. Religious Zionist circles further developed the ideas of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacoen Kook (1865-1935) and his son Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook (1891-1982), according to which the Zionist movement, even though originally mainly a secular one, was in fact part of a divine plan of messianic redemption. In the 1970s, the religious-Zionist *Gush Emunim* movement began settling in the Occupied Territories, as part of a right-wing vision of a whole, Jewish, Land of Israel and a denial of a potential Palestinian statehood (Ravitzky 1996). The messianic undertones of this strand of Zionism alarmed many in the left-wing of Israeli society, and the religious Zionist interpretation of Jewish history and of the current moment became the focus of attention of the left-leaning secular theatre of the 1980s, in plays such as Joshua Sobol's *Jerusalem Syndrome* (1987) and Motti Lerner's *Pangs of the Messiah* (also 1987).

Shmuel Hasfari's *Tashmad*, first performed in 1982 at the Acco Festival for Alternative Theatre, is a relatively early example of this trend. The name of the play refers to the Jewish year 5744, roughly corresponding to September 1983-September 1984¹², as it is traditionally written in Hebrew letters according to their numerical value. However, since such a spelling of the year includes the Hebrew word *shmad*, which means destruction or annihilation, some traditional and religious Jews at the time considered it a bad omen and re-sequenced the letters in order to form *Tashdam* or *Shadmat*. Hasfari's use of the name *Tashmad* is therefore ominous, and directs the audience already in the play's title to questions of history and the potential metaphysical meaning of time.

The play takes place during the night of Tisha B'Av – the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av, in which according to tradition both the First and Second Temple were destroyed. Consequently, Tisha B'Av is a major fasting day in the Jewish calendar, devoted to lamentations and self-afflictions. According to Jewish tradition, however, Tisha B'Av is also the time in which the Messiah was born, so that the seed of future redemption is already present in past destructions. Hasfari's play utilizes this charged time in order to probe into contemporary theological-political conflicts within Israeli society.

The play's plot centers around a group of right-wing ideologues who entrench themselves in an underground bunker in one of the settlements in Samaria, in order to resist the evacuation plans of the Israeli government. The

¹² Jewish years are counted from the Creation of the World, as depicted in the book of Genesis.

group consists of four adults – representing various groups in Jewish-Israeli society, from the entirely secular to the fanatically religious – and a baby. During the course of the night, one of the inhabitants of the bunker, Jacob, experiences a manic episode in which he is convinced that he is the Messiah, and manages to sway the others along with him. The messianic ecstasy culminates with the murder of one of the members and a possible joint suicide of the rest of the group.¹³ *Tashmad* is clearly an apocalyptic warning against the latent violence in the messianic strands of right-wing (mainly religious) Zionism.

Tashmad's dialogue with Jewish temporal traditions is not restricted to the play's name and the connotations of Tisha B'Av as a time of both destruction and messianic redemption, but is maintained also with those of nighttime. This begins with one of the character's demand that the media will come to interview them at midnight, followed by his statement that it is the group's duty to mend the state of exile (Hasfari 1982, 23-4). The Hebrew word used for "mending" here is from the same root of *tikkun*, and taken together with the demand of the press to arrive at midnight (*khatso*), both words evoke *tikkun khatso* with its occupation with questions of exile and redemption.

Indeed, much of the play's dialogue is devoted to the interpretation of Jewish history and of Zionism in messianic terms. Alma, a religious Zionist young woman, explains to the secular Leibo that Zionism is "the beginning of redemption", an important stage in God's ever-progressing plan, as detailed in the Bible (25). According to this view, even though Zionism was promoted by mainly secular Jews, it in fact fully realized a religious program in which secular Zionists are but a phase (26). Another character, Nachman, maintains that the secular Zionists are "Messiah, son of Joseph", an early messianic figure who according to tradition is destined to die but paves the way to the ultimate Messiah, son of David. It is religious Zionism that takes the role of the latter, ultimate, Messiah (28).

The nightly interpretation of time takes a more theatrical manifestation as the play progresses, when characters do not only discuss the Messiah and redemption, but actually aim at embodying them. This begins with an overtly theatrical performance that Alma devises for the media once the press arrives to cover their protest:

¹³ As Zahava Caspi (2013, 143) notes, the first production of the play concluded with an open ending as to whether the group blew itself up or not. However, by the time the play was revived in 2005, the catastrophic conclusion was clear: the play ended with a huge explosion.

רגע, אני יודעת, חשבתי על מה שנגיד. [...] חכו – נעשה כמו הצגה. בבת אחת יראו את זה. הנה, אני אעמוד כאן ואדבר, לא בטוחה בדיוק על מה. כן, על זה שהגאולה באה וכל זה כי אני אישה, לא בדיוק אישה, בחורה, אני עלמה, עלמה. זהו, כמו השכינה. ואני אגיד את כל העניין הזה עם הגאולה שמבצבצת ובאה כמו אור השחר והשכינה קמה מעפרה. ככה אני אקום עם פנים יפות ועצובות. אתם תעמדו כאן ותסתכלו עלי כאילו לא מאמינים.

[Wait a minute, I know, I thought what we would say . . . Wait, we'll make a show. They will see it at once. Here, I will stand here and talk, not sure exactly about what. Yes, about redemption arriving and all that, because I am a woman, not exactly a woman, a girl, I am a maiden (*alma*), a maiden. Exactly, like the *shekhinah*. I will speak this whole thing about redemption gradually emerging like the light of dawn, and the *shekhinah* arising from the dust. I will arise like that, with a sad and pretty face. You will stand here and look at me as if you cannot believe. (37)]

In her role as the feminine *shekhinah*, Alma will perform her redemption as the break of dawn, echoing the image cited above from the Talmud Yerushalmi. However, in the remaining paragraph, not quoted here, Alma continues to stage a rape scene of the *shekhinah* to represent the State's assault on the process of messianic redemption through the attempted evacuation, in order to dissuade the authorities from proceeding with it. This meta-theatrical moment is planned as a performance of dawn that is to take place at midnight: an embodiment of the anticipated redemption at the midst of exile, at the brink of a possible another destruction.

An even more radical embodiment in the play is that of Jacob, once he believes himself to be the Messiah. For him, this is not a theatrical performance, but the real thing. His understanding of time is that redemption is indeed not a future event but actually takes place in the present:

עכשיו לשמוח, להגיד ברוך השם. נגמר אלפיים שנה, נגמרה הגלות היום. תשעה באב ואין אבל מעכשיו. זה שנת תשמ"ד – במקום להשמיד אותנו – אנחנו השמדנו אותו. זה בדיוק השנה בדיוק הרגע – צריך לעשות מעשה.

[And now be happy, praise the Lord, the two millennia of exile are over today. It is Tisha B'Av and there is no mourning from now on. This is the year *tashmad* – instead of destroying us, we destroyed it. This is precisely the second, precisely the moment, it is time to do a deed. (46)]

Jacob's words seek to reinterpret time: he reframes the meaning of the day in the Jewish calendar (Tisha B'Av) as well as of the year itself (*tashmad*). Beyond that, he aims at reframing the present: "the two millennia of exile are over today . . . This is precisely the second, precisely the moment". It is the present-time of the nightly drama that become laden with the task "to do a deed" rather than wait for redemption to come.

Jacob's image of the Messiah that he should become is deeply nihilistic, power-crazed, anti-moral and ruthlessly violent, as a "kind of Satan" that burns everything after God had forsaken the Jews (49). Jacob indeed proceeds to facilitate the murder of Nachman, the religious Jew who is most uneasy with the night's events. Indeed, Jacob's messianic vision goes not only against basic humanistic values, but even against traditional Jewish religion, by claiming that Jewish religious law is annulled and that all that was prohibited is now permitted (40).¹⁴ At the play's climax, Jacob burns the Talmud and forces Nachman to worship the rifle rather than the book, hailing a new era in which Jews revere power instead of knowledge (45-7). Note that the bookish, intellectual Jewish culture that in Bistrizky's play was associated with traditional religion is here annihilated not by secularism but by a new brand of nationalistic religiosity. The play's violent ending serves as a somber warning of the dangerous messianic undercurrents of religious Zionism, and an outcry against its interpretation of time.

Written several decades later and from the exact opposite pole of the political spectrum, Amichai Hazan and Oshri Maimon's *Tikkun khatsot*¹⁵, which directly alludes in its name to the nocturnal kabbalistic ritual, curiously dramatizes a situation rather similar to *Tashmad*'s. The play, depicting a dramatic night in one of the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories, was first performed by a theatre group of Jewish Orthodox male actors in the 2017 Acco Festival for Alternative Theatre. The play and the group are part of a broader process in Israel in recent years, in which Jewish Orthodox people engage in theatre and the performing arts, after decades of mutual detachment. However, in the circumstances of its production, *Tikkun khatsot* happened to participate in another shift within Israeli cultural politics. Premiering exactly thirty five years after *Tashmad* had, in the very same festival, *Tikkun khatsot* exemplifies the profound changes that took place during these years in Israeli society. While the festival has long been an important mainstay in the Israeli theatre scene (Shem-Tov 2016), during that year it became a battleground within the wider culture wars that raged in the country. Following the lead of then-Minister of Culture, the right-wing Miri Regev, the festival's steering committee decided to reject a play about Pales-

¹⁴ This in itself is not foreign to the history of Jewish messianism which, as Scholem (1971, 19-24, 78-141) observed, often contained an antinomian strand which called for the suspension, annulment or subversion of Jewish religious law. Hasfari utilizes this strand in order to startlingly portray religious Zionism as a lethal enemy to traditional religiosity.

¹⁵ Not to be confused with another Israeli play by the same name, written by Amnon Levy and Rami Danon, that was very successful when first staged in 1996. That play does not deal directly with questions of Jewish history, but rather with the place of Mizrahi Jews in contemporary Israeli society.

tinian prisoners from participating, leading to the resignation of the artistic director and the withdrawal of all other artists from the festival (see Ashkenazi 2017). A new artistic director was required to quickly establish another program, and with many left-wing artists refusing to take part in the festival as protest, the final program included several works by right-wing or settler theatre artists. For some, this was understood as pandering to the Minister and the regime. For others, it was a sign of a welcome diversification of the festival, which was hitherto often seen as predominantly leftist, elitist, and Tel-Avivian (on this longstanding view of the festival, see Shem-Tov 2016, 153-6). This way or that, in terms of the theatrical event, the premiere of *Tikkun khatsot* was part and parcel of a greater struggle within Israeli society over cultural hegemony. As we will see, it also offers an alternative view on history and time, from a religious right-wing perspective.

Like Hasfari's play, *Tikkun khatsot* also portrays a nightly scene in which right-wing ideologues entrench themselves against being evacuated by the Israeli army. However, while Hasfari is vehemently critical of the disastrous messianic tendencies he recognizes in the Jewish religious right, Hazan and Maimon are far more empathic to this social group (of which they are part). They display its inner conflicts and uncertainties regarding the meaning of the moment in which the characters live in the context of the wider historical arc of promised divine redemption in which they believe. In this play, during the night of the expected evacuation, the settlers assemble in the local synagogue in order to pray and perform the ritual of *tikkun khatsot*. The settlement's rabbi makes a direct linkage between the night and exile, and through direct allusions to several texts we have seen above, interprets the upcoming evacuation as an exilic phase on the longer journey towards redemption:

לא מצאתי תפילה ראויה יותר בשעה זו מאשר תיקון חצות. הרב קוק מדבר על הלילה כמשל לגלות. הלילה הוא חשוך, ומפחיד.
 כך היא הגלות. איילת השחר היא הגאולה, כשהאור מפציע ושוטף את כל העולם ואז אנחנו מבינים שהלילה היה רק אבן דרך במסלול אל הגאולה. האור הכי גדול הוא זה שבא מתוך החושך.

[I couldn't find a more appropriate prayer for this moment than *tikkun khatsot*. Rabbi Kook speaks about the night as an allegory for exile. The night is dark, and scary.

So is exile. The break of dawn is redemption, when the light emerges and bathes the whole world, and then we realize that the night was only a milestone in the way towards redemption. The greatest light is the one which comes out of darkness. (Hazan and Maimon 2017)]¹⁶

¹⁶ The play has not yet been published. I thank Amichai Hazan for providing me with a copy of the text. All quotations are from this copy.

When one of his students asks the rabbi why a prayer about exile and the disasters of Jewish history (such as pogroms and the Shoah) is relevant to the night's events, he replies: "It is exactly the same thing. Tonight's evacuation joins a long list of calamities that the Jewish people had suffered, but it is all part of the process of redemption". The play is also structured by the Talmudic "three watches" of the night, cited above, and their respective signs – a braying donkey, barking dogs, a suckling infant and a conversing couple – are all interpreted by the rabbi as symbolizing the various stages in the process of redemption. Nightly rituals and texts therefore serve as a prism through which history is both analyzed and experienced.

The younger generation in the settlement is more oppositional and anarchistic in nature than the rabbi. They are not satisfied with merely praying in the synagogue, but demand physical action against the Israeli army. Shuvel, the rabbi's rebellious son, says: "we are not in exile anymore, and therefore it is time to stand up and stop the evacuation". To which the rabbi retorts: "We are not going to stop the evacuation. We pray so that we may get enough strength to understand how the evacuation is part of redemption". For the rabbi, night is not only the time in which the characters gather to discuss Jewish history and the place of the present in it. Rather, it is the main image of said history, and one that is activated through ritual. However, Shuvel refuses to interpret the current historical moment as night. For him, as the inheritor of the religious-messianic interpretation of Zionism, the current historical moment in which a sovereign State of Israel exists, is already after the break of dawn. Therefore, the nocturnal practice itself must change: "I am done with talking. It is time for action. You can continue with your *tikkun*. I am going to do the real *tikkun*". Shuvel therefore maintains that changes in the understanding of history also entail changes in the actions at nighttime: a shift from ritual performance to a guerilla one. In fact, by calling his guerilla acts *tikkun*, Shuvel imbues his actions with theological meaning – turning them into a new kind of militant ritual. The secular sphere of politics and military action is fully sacralized.

As opposed to *Tashmad*, *Tikkun khatsot* does not end with catastrophe but with resolution. After a series of revelations about the various characters, the play turns introspective and examines the inner dynamics within the community that brought about such crisis. The rabbi understands his own mistakes that alienated his son and others, and admits to them. At the same time, the play does not end with the violent confrontation with the Israeli army urged on by Shuvel, but rather with prayer and the recital of Psalms with hopes that the evacuation will stop. In this sense, the rabbi's more moderate approach and appeal to traditional ritual rather than military action seem to prevail. While *Tashmad* sees the messianic undercurrent in the religious Zionist interpretation of time as a looming threat, a ticking

bomb literally waiting to explode, *Tikkun khatsot* sees this undercurrent as a given and adheres to it, while also insisting on its non-violent strands and internal mechanisms of containment. The debate takes place within a shared understanding of history, rather than against it. Yet both plays, however diametrically opposed they are in terms of political stance, realize the theological potential bestowed upon nighttime by religious traditions to serve as vehicle for the modern theatrical analysis of time.

Secular Nocturnal Ritual: *Night of the Twentieth*

My final example was written and staged prior to *Tashmad* and *Tikkun khatsot* but I discuss it after them since the nightly rituals depicted in it in order to tackle Jewish history are not explicitly religious at all. Nevertheless, I wish to argue that it serves as a subtler case-study of the ways in which nighttime permeates Israeli drama as a time to think about time. This example is Joshua Sobol's highly canonical 1976 play, *Night of the Twentieth*. The play was part of a new wave of playwriting in the 1970s and 1980s, a period in which fractures within Israeli society were deepened and doubts regarding the righteousness of the Zionist project surfaced.¹⁷ It is in this context that *Night of the Twentieth* utilized nocturnal performance in order to probe into the roots of Zionism and analyze its fundamental tensions and anxieties.

The play follows a small group of young, secular Socialist-Zionist pioneers in the 1920s. It takes place during the titular night of the twentieth of October, which is the group's last night in their settlement upon a small hill in Palestine before leaving in the morning in order to fight the local Arab population. They spend the night in long and heated debates in which they try to figure out what is the meaning of their presence in Palestine, what motivates them, and what kind of new society they wish to establish there. The play is based on *Kehilyatenu* ("Our Community"), a collection of texts by the pioneers of the Bitaniya group published in 1922. The Bitaniya group was a small group of young adults (the eldest was 23 years old) who settled for Zionist pioneer work for around six months, between the summer of 1920 and the winter of 1921, not far from the Sea of Galilee. It was a highly intellectual and ideological group who worked in agriculture during the days. At nights, they were engaged in folk-dancing and in communal confessional discussions. These conversations had a strong ritualized air to them, and aimed at creating a new utopian society, without barriers between people. Texts written by and about the group tell of an intense ideological and spiritual atmosphere and a taxing demand for self-reflection, exposure,

¹⁷ For further discussions of the play, see Abramson 1998, 84-92; Katriel 2004, 113-22.

and improvement that took its toll on the individuals' emotional welfare, with the nightly confessions including many moments of breakdown and tears (Katriel 2004, 29-71). Even though the Bitaniya group stayed together only for a short while, they have quickly achieved a mythic-like status in the Zionist imagination and in Hebrew culture (Keshet 2009). For the current discussion, it is important to note that although the Bitaniya group, like other early Zionist Socialists, was composed of secular Jews, they have devised their own modern nightly rituals, aimed at a new kind of *tikkun*.

In *Night of the Twentieth*, these nightly rituals revolve around issues of Jewish history, myth, and the emerging modern nation. As part of the characters' self-examination, and the dissection of their own motivation at the pivotal historical moment of which they are part, they question the role of messianic myths in the new national culture, and the possibility of both personal and collective redemption within the framework of the Zionist enterprise. Throughout the nightly debates, the characters lay themselves bare, both physically and emotionally, and expose their doubts and insecurities, as well as the possibility that Zionist ideology might have served them as an escape route from their own personal problems. Consequently, the very meaning and structure of Jewish history are undermined.

The place of religious myth in the interpretation of historical time is at the center of one of the play's main conflicts, between Ephraim and Moshe, two potential leaders of the group. Ephraim conceives the entire Zionist endeavor in clearly redemptive terms. According to him, the pioneers "hold in their hands the messianic yearnings of an entire nation, of an entire humankind" (15), their joint meals are rituals "at the communal altar", and they have the power to redeem themselves and the land (16).

Moshe, on the other hand, is vehemently opposed to Ephraim's messianic-ritualistic language. He despises the role of mythical symbols, and of religion at large, in the lives of societies and individuals. He describes himself as a person who has "no Holy of Holies" in his life, which is "entirely profane from beginning to end" (48). Similarly, he rejects any mythical notion of Jewish nationalism and history or any spiritual or theological conception of the Land of Israel (50-1). Writing in the 1970s, when the *Gush Emunim* movement was beginning to flourish, Sobol notes that the theological-spiritual image of the land was at the roots of secular Zionism as well, and offers its denouncement through Moshe's stricter sense of secularism. Through his eyes, Ephraim's Zionism is revealed as a religious drive in secular garb. It is noteworthy that Moshe is the only one of the group that comes from a religious Hasidic background. The rest of the group grew in liberal, assimilated Central-European families, and are fascinated by the mythical allure that their upbringing failed to provide them. Moshe, on the other hand, unequivocally left religion behind and is therefore wary of its return through the

seemingly secular Zionist imagination. For him, the mythical understanding of Jewish history stems from existential weakness. The pioneers' loneliness and fear lead them to re-embrace religious symbolism, now disguised in national-secular garb, in a desperate search of meaning (52-3). Moshe's counterargument is that life's meaninglessness can only be remedied through extremely honest interpersonal relationships, and he considers the inability to form such relationships to be the true "exile" that is inside each and every one of the group (34). Exile here is not a territorial condition, nor a political lack of sovereignty or metaphysical state of the cosmos, but first and foremost a psychological hindrance that shuts one person away from the other. If Zionism is to rectify exile in any way, Moshe seems to imply, it is not by returning the Jews to their homeland but by establishing a utopian collective of individuals within humankind. The nightly confessions for Moshe, then, are another variation on nocturnal rituals that aim at dealing with exile and redemption, but these have little to do with Jewish national history, but rather with a human openness to the vulnerability of living together.

In the play's epilogue, Moshe addresses the audience:

עוד מעט יאיר השחר. נעמים את עצמנו על האוטומובילים, ונרד מההר. ובשם כל מיני מלים גדולות שאין להן שום קשר למה שקורה אותנו, דחופים, בהולים, מכוח כל מה שנשאר מעורבב וחסר-צורה בנפש, נצא להילחם עם בני-אדם אחרים, נבוכים ומדמדמים כמונו. להרוג וליהרג. ומי שלא היה פה הלילה, ליל העשרים באוקטובר, יוכל אחר-כך לספר אגדות לילדים על הדברים שהאמנו בהם, ובשם יצאנו לרשת בני-אדם אחרים. לרשת ארץ. והזמן, כמו ילד קטן שאינו יודע מה הוא עושה, הוא כבר ישחק בנו את משחקיו.

[Soon dawn will break. We will load ourselves on the automobiles and get down from the hilltop. And in the name of many grand words that have nothing to do with what happens with us, urgent, rushing, compelled by the force of all that was left messy and shapeless in the soul, we will leave to fight other people, who are perplexed and confused as we are. To kill and to be killed. And whoever was not here tonight, the night of the Twentieth of October, can later tell tales to children about the things we believed in, and in the name of which we left to inherit other people, to inherit a land. And Time, like a small child who has no idea what he's doing, It will play Its games with us. (68)]

With the transition from night to day, with the arrival of dawn, the perception of time and history shifts as well. If night is the time for relentless internal and interpersonal probing into the soul, the day of light covers all these and creates a coherent ideological narrative, giving the historical moment a meaning far removed from the one that was actually experienced by the pioneers. Time is presented here as a small child, playing games with the people living and acting in its confines – but also as being equally lost as they are. While the traditional *tikkun khatsot* is a nightly ritual that turns time into a

meaningful narrative, with an arc from exile to redemption, here the structure is subverted. The nightly rituals of *Night of the Twentieth* reveal that the very narrative of exile-to-redemption is itself the narrative of daylight. It is the story told by those who don't know (or wish to conceal) the messiness of nighttime. Daylight tells a story that denies the truth of historical time, the "large" time, while the night, the "small" time, reveals it. This truth is the very fact that time itself is a random game rather than a well-designed narrative of redemption. If night is still a time in which one thinks time, then its outcome is the nocturnal undermining of time's imagined structure.

Conclusion

The plays discussed here vary from each other in many meaningful ways. Some of them, like *Night of the Twentieth*, are central in the Israeli dramatic canon, while others, such as *Tikkun khatsot*, operate at the periphery of the Israeli theatrical field. They were composed at different historical moments in Israeli history, and offer divergent interpretations of Jewish history and of the present. In all of these plays, conflicts between religion and secularity take place within particular historical periods, but they also dramatize and participate in the debate between religious and secular interpretations of these periods, and of time in general.

On This Night, written during Zionism's early moments in Palestine, dramatizes a pivotal historical moment of the legendary past through the lens of the contemporaneous conflict between religious tradition and Zionist revolutionary secularism. By the 1970s, however, Sobol interrogates the implicit theological undercurrents of the seemingly secular Zionist mainstream. In *Tashmad* and *Tikkun khatsot* these undercurrents are made explicit through religious Zionism – either to be harshly critiqued by Hasfari or embraced by Hazan and Maimon. The latter play (and the most recent of the four) is the only one that does not maintain a secular stance in its analysis of Jewish history and the Israeli present. To be sure, at the moment religious-Zionist theatre operates at the fringes of the Israeli theatrical scene, which is still mostly secular. Time will tell whether *Tikkun khatsot* signals a new phase in religious Zionism's place in Israeli theatre and culture, and of its voice in the processes of shaping the Israeli temporal imagination.

However, all of these plays, despite their considerable differences, share the dramatic utilization of nighttime as a time to reflect upon Jewish history, the present and the future. As such, they all continue – each in its own way – a longer Jewish tradition of nocturnal performance. They might also shed light on other Hebrew and Israeli plays with nocturnal plots, such as Leah Goldberg's *Lady of the Palace* (first performed 1955) and Hanoch Levin's

The Child Dreams (first performed 1992), which also engage with questions of Jewish history and temporality even without explicitly evoking Jewish nightly traditions.

Beyond that, a focus on the function of nighttime as a dramatic time in Hebrew theatre reveals a wider phenomenon: the participation of a modern, mostly secular, theatre in longer performative traditions that originally took place in synagogues and other spaces of worship. Despite its prominent secularism, Hebrew and Israeli theatre nonetheless continues to offer its audience a performance space that echoes, preserves and transforms earlier religious practices. The endurance of performance practices, from religious rituals to the theatre – such as the nightly performances discussed above – is surely not without fundamental shifts in their tone, ideology, meaning and function. Nevertheless, tracing such dynamics might enable us to fully rearticulate Hebrew theatre's internal performative traditions not only in terms of breach and innovation, but also of continuity and cohesion.

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