

Grappling with Evil

Much of Michal Govrin's work has been devoted to unearthing her mother's experience of the Holocaust

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MICHAL GOVRIN'S early stories published in Hebrew in "Le'ehoz Bashemesh" (Siman Kriah/Kibbutz Hameuchad, 1984) and her essays, written since her first visit to Poland in 1975, have now been translated into English and collected in one volume. The essays and memoirs suggest the infrastructure for many of her later fictional works.

Govrin, a novelist, poet and theater director, is the academic chair of the Theater Department of Emunah College, Jerusalem, where she lives. She is also a lecturer at the Shechter Institute, and a pioneer in experimental Jewish theater. She was recently selected by the prestigious Salon du Livre in Paris as one of the most influential writers of the past 30 years. Here, she grapples with the recurrent theme of her mother's Holocaust experience, her mother's loss of a husband and a son who would have been a half brother to Govrin. This has imprinted itself like a genetic code on her life and work. In the poem which introduces the volume, she writes, "On my cheeks still lie the curls of the brother /In whose death I live/ His breath is the wind in my hair."

Govrin, born in Tel Aviv in 1950, embedded her mother's past in the dreamlike, surrealist 1995 novel, "Hashem." Translated into English as "The Name" in 1998, it is based on the kabbalistic concept of repairing fractures in the world, of which the evil of the Holocaust is the greatest in contemporary times. But in this volume of early stories and essays on the Holocaust, Govrin comes closer to the realistic surface of the situation. She feels that the personal memoirs and essays included in this volume "document the ongoing process of how I faced something that was denied, a trauma I couldn't cope with," the essays and memoirs providing a "behind the scenes" look at what underlies the stories,

the forces pushing her to write.

Govrin's mother had created a cover of silence over her Holocaust experience. She even went so far as to have an operation to remove the number from her arm.

With time, and especially after a trip to Poland which is recorded in this collection, Govrin realizes that not only had her mother suppressed her experiences of the war but that she herself suppressed the signs of trauma in her mother. As a child she didn't associate the screaming she heard at night with her mother, or articulate to herself that her mother had experienced that "awful thing they talk about in school assemblies with the 'six million.'"

Eventually, she came to know that her mother had been in the death camps. But it was only at the *shiva*, the week of mourning following her mother's death, that Govrin learned in a more detailed way what she went through, the group of women of which she was part, and how they supported each other in the camps. She read a memoir of one of the women who had been with her mother and learned, "how, ...in the liquidation of the children's home, against the horrifying background of lullabies, Mother burst into the Square toward the SS men... she shouted to them to take her with the child. And how her friends, the women of the *zenerschaft* [a group of ten] that held her with all their might, pulled her back..."

"I read about the sisterhood of the women in the group," writes Govrin, "about the pride, the unbelievable humor, how with astonishing freedom they maintained their humanity in the camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau. How they succeeded in putting on makeup to get through selections, how they sneaked the weak women out of the line of the condemned, how they secretly lit candles at Hanukka and held a Passover seder."



MICHAL GOVRIN

MUCH OF GOVRIN'S WORK has been devoted to unearthing this experience, attempting to know what it really felt like. This meant bridging the gap between public and private. She has many times expressed anger at the fact that the collective Zionist myth took ownership of the Holocaust narrative, crowded out the stories of the survivors and left no room for personal narratives.

In fact, she went to France in 1972 to work on her doctorate on theater and religious ritual to escape the dominant Israeli narrative. Once there, she found a way to get to Poland, then behind the Iron Curtain, for the first time. In this collection of stories and essays, there are memoirs about this visit at a time when few were traveling to these areas, as well as subsequent visits to Auschwitz and her mother's hometown of Krakow.

But the same problem of bridging the public and private haunts her on these visits too. At the Auschwitz Museum, which she calls a "Memorial to the Genius of Evil," she cries out against "the mighty process of erasing." She expresses the emptiness she feels: "the silence of millions of human beings who were murdered and tortured here." She fights the anonymity of numbers, now memorialized, in the same way she fought the collective Zionist narrative of the Holocaust. During the visit to Auschwitz she feels the individuals are once again swallowed up in the anonymity of mass numbers, in the facelessness of collective



ing against a Nazi leader who never showed up for the trial, confront the survivors most directly with what they are trying to forget. The groups of German tourists, enjoying life as if nothing ever happened, also enrage them.

Hirshel Feingold, the vulgar caricature of a survivor who became rich through shady deals after the war, must pitifully show off his wealth and attempt to drown the past in the "boisterous show of high life" while the main protagonists, Monyek Heller, a widower lingerie manufacturer, and Lusya Taft, a refined Israeli widow whom he courts while on vacation at the Dead Sea, are portrayed in all the discomfort of trying to forge a relationship at their age with their Holocaust backgrounds. Taft frequently points to the beauty of the place, the light and mists over the sea, while Heller insists that "we have a few more years to enjoy ourselves."

identity, in the deceptive glory of martyrdom..." She ponders "how to make the human voice heard in the pit of hell? ...How to recall the despair, the weakness, the strength, the cruelty, the brotherhood, the compassion, the heresy, the belief in God, in man?"

Yet in her passionate call for empathy with the individual victim, she does not oversimplify evil, but rather discusses "the grey zones of evil." In the final piece in the book, a most enlightening interview with her editor and friend Judith C. Miller, she says, "I know there are always grey zones, and that evil also has a human face. Because of that, it's even more frightening. It's always a human potential and until it erupts, you can think that a person is 'normal'... Going to Germany in the 1970s brought this back to me. Who knows how I would have reacted during World War II? I recognized that I might have ingredients of evil in myself... I was startled to discover that in the Kabbala, Evil is one of God's aspects: "The Other Side," its existence and the struggle to dominate it by God and Mankind are an ongoing dynamic process."

Many of Govrin's stories veer from the

actual concentration camp experience, but reflect this grappling with evil. In the story, "La Promenade," there are echoes of her mother's suppression of her Holocaust past, portraits of people who are trying desperately to live normally. But inevitably, the cracks appear where the memories, hidden in the everyday, force their way into the story.

In a way, "La Promenade" is a negative of Aharon Appelfeld's haunting novella, "Badenheim 1939," which takes place in a resort before the war and suggests the threats that are yet to come. Govrin's story about a group of survivors takes place in a resort in France decades after the war, when the survivors are older, their children grown. But it echoes the suffering that has already taken place. They are a motley group of survivor friends, some who met in Displaced Persons camps after the war, who now live in Germany, France and Israel, and have come to vacation at the resort town. All believe that they must forget the past and enjoy life now, but the past pursues them.

The Harraris, Israelis who have come to give testimony in a German government hear-

THE THEME OF LIGHT IS A thread that runs throughout Govrin's work. She has articulated this preoccupation in a Library of Congress webcast on "Hold Onto the Sun" where she explains, "Much before I could formulate it... I knew there was lifeless life and there were moments of existence. They would pierce through a thick lid of grayness, of closed on roughness. They were overwhelming moments of joy, all body and soul, like an explosion of lightning. They were rare revelations."

It is these epiphanies, often quietly observed, which Govrin depicts in the story "Elijah's Sabbath Days." This is an impressionistic work punctuated by radiant moments that emerge from the Sabbath, its sunsets and sunrises. It captures the sexual innuendo surrounding the relationship of the student protagonist, Elijah, and Hila, the young woman he hesitantly pursues. The name Hila suggests a halo of light. An outsider to the religious bourgeois Jerusalem society from which he emerged, Elijah lives the rich inner life, which Govrin herself has described.

BOOKS

In contrast to tales in both realistic and impressionistic veins, Govrin has also written abstract stories, tales of seeming human logic woven into absurd situations in the spirit of Kafka, Saramago, and perhaps, most of all, Agnon. In "Hold On To the Sun," the title story of this collection, she deals most directly with the striving to grasp the intense moments of existence, to hold onto the light.

Echoing Agnon, her protagonist wanders through the dark, narrow, labyrinthian streets of Jerusalem. A scholar, he seeks a prayer book with an alternative interpretation of the Evening Prayer about which he is writing. The alternative interpretation directs man to emphasize *lyla*, night. In notes on the work, Govrin has explained that this is similar to the Hebrew word *yahel*, which means "it shall shine" and sees the emphasis on *lyla* as the search for ultimate light. "He will illuminate darkness, the spiritual light shining through the darkness. Neither the sun nor the light of

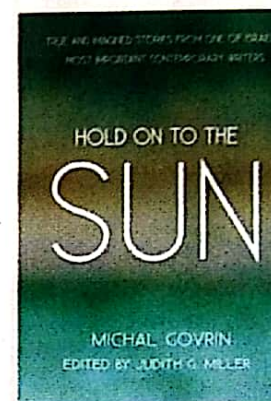
the moon. But the Lord Shall Be Thy Everlasting Light."

The scholar seeking this prayer book is drawn into what seems to be Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox enclave, Me'a She'arim. He finds a photographer's book with photographs of a deep red, radiant light, and in a story within a story, reads the photographer's tale of his pilgrimage to the place where the light will not stop, the sun will not set. He photographs scores of pictures, attempting to capture the longest day of the year, the continued light of the sun. He learns of a woman whose yearning to hold onto the sun has caused her to waste away, and finally die. The photographer himself travels to a South Seas tribe who have a ritual where they try to hold onto the sun, but die in their attempt to do so. The photographer realizes that "it's the insolent insistence on fixing with an iron eye, that which seeks to sink in secrecy."

In short, the artist's desire to capture the

fleeting and changing, to "fix" the light of the sun is the equivalent of the religious man's desire to grasp the meaning of the "Everlasting Light."

Govrin movingly confronts the reader with the deepest stirrings of man. In this context, it is all the more significant that she insists that survivors, too, must be perceived, not in the collective, but as individuals, as human beings who strove to "hold on to the sun" in the darkest, most evil of places. ●



Hold On To The Sun

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