

Govrin, Michal. *Love on the Shore*, A Novel. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2013. [Hebrew].

Reviewed by Nitza Keren, Rehovot, Israel

Recovery and Revival upon the Ruins of Destruction

Ashkelon, the historical Mediterranean port city once ruled by the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Phoenicians, and other ancient nations is the site of Michal Govrin's latest novel, *Love on the Shore*. The image of the conquerors arriving in the city in surges, destroying and rebuilding it from its ruins (as described by the author) combines with Govrin's poetical pursuit of the traditional Jewish theme of uprooting and wandering, at the center of her previous novel, *Snapshots* (2002). Among refugees and nomads – Holocaust survivors, Jewish refugees from Arab countries, Arabs in refugee camps, Govrin places the love story she tells. *Love on the Shore* describes a casual and yet fateful love story between an Israeli girl and an immigrant boy – both children of Holocaust survivors, who meet on Ashkelon's sea shore, looking over Gaza, one summer evening.

Michal Govrin, one of Israel's prominent writers, has an agenda. She does not merely tell a story, but anchors her works in a wide historical, cultural, and sometimes philosophical context. Accordingly, this review will present *Love on the shore*, the tenth in a wide range of poetical works – novels, poems, short stories, memoirs – in the rich context of Govrin's writing, and focus on dominant themes. Set in the 1960s, *Love on the Shore* is a coming of age novel aimed at a young audience. Dedicated to the author's two daughters, it seems to offer a light version of the heavy themes which usually characterize Govrin's work: exile and rehabilitation, redemption, salvation and restoration.

The sea as a pre-historical mythological power, which serves in Govrin's reflective-poetical diary, *The Making of the Sea, a Chronicle of Exegesis* (2000) as a site of contemplation, functions in this realistic novel as a memorial site, as testimony to other periods and other times, which echo in the novel and enrich its plot. The rural countryside of southern Israel replaces the walls of the holy city of Jerusalem at the center of Govrin's confessional novel, *The Name* (1995), and the hills surrounding

Jerusalem in *Snapshots*, thus presenting the story of the nation from its peripheral sites. The restored city of Ashkelon becomes a symbol for the revival of Israel and especially for the survival of its people, who respond to the decree of life explicitly expressed in the Haggada of Passover – an issue discussed in depth in *The Name*. Yet hidden under the Zionistic narrative dominating *Love on the Shore* is the untold story of Ashkelon's former residents, who inhabited the city of Majdal (present-day Migdal – one of Ashkelon's neighborhoods), challenging the harmonious story Govrin tells, a story of overcoming and renewal.

The dramatic events take place in a dance club located in the hotel-strip of Ashkelon's seashore, and involve three people: Esther Weis is a graduate of a religious high school about to enlist to the Israeli army, who is attending a dance club for the first time. Alejandro (Alex) Morgenstern is a boy from Argentina (whose mother's life story echoes the biographical story of the author's mother). Alejandro, who joined a youth group on its way to Israel, works at the dance club as the manager's assistant. The third party of the love triangle (a repeating theme in the novel) is Moise Dran (Deri), a Jewish man from Paris, originally from Rabat, who comes to part with his ailing mother on her deathbed. Sitting on the bar in the club, watching Esther's ecstatic dance, Moise reevaluates his life. The man who refused to join his family on their way to Israel finds it hard to go back to his luxurious and empty life in Paris.

Apparently in a different time and place (Europe in the late 1930s) Alejandro's father fell in love with Esther's mother and lost her to his best friend, who was murdered shortly after by the Nazi groups who invaded the Karpathos. Esther and Alejandro's chance meeting (with the help of stray dog named Mercury – God's messenger) seems to be preordained, echoing a well-known Agnonian motif and reflecting a course of restoration and repair explicit in the Kabbalah and dominant in Govrin's novel, *The Name*.

By presenting the life stories of the various characters in the novel, Govrin outlines the Zionist narratives common in Israeli society: the story of Esther's parents, who survived the concentration camps and came to Israel in order to rebuild their lives; the parallel story of Alejandro's parents, who chose South America instead; the

story of Moise's family who left Morocco and settled in a small village in the agricultural region of Israel; as well as the story of the young Israeli men who fought in the 1948 war, such as Asher, who runs the dance club, and his friend, Jerry (Gershon), the singer. Together they present a human collage of Israel and its people, telling a story of rehabilitation and restoration. Yet these versions to the Zionist story are juxtaposed to the story of the Arabs who were evacuated during the 1948 war and moved behind the border to Gaza's refugees camps.

Bialik's "Scroll of Fire: from the Legends of Destruction," with its three characters: a fair young man who searches the sky for his star (Esther means star), an angry young man who looks down, searching for his life's loss, and a pure young girl with sad eyes who bears the image of the morning star, accompanies Govrin's novel as an infrastructural text, alongside verses from Jewish prayers and lines from popular hits from the 1960s. Bialik's doomed characters' road to perdition serves as a poetic and philosophical context for the novel, and yet Govrin, who keeps quoting from the "Scroll of Fire," supplies an (albeit partial) answer to the national poet's apocalyptic poem, in a love story which offers recovery after a disaster, restoration and revival.