

Z W A R S Z T A T U H U M A N I S T Ó W

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TEFILLIN: TRANSGRESSION OF A JEWISH RELIGIOUS
RITUAL ARTICLE: CONTEMPORARY HEBREW POETRY
AS A MODERN MIDRASH¹

Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000)² and Yona Wallach³ (1944–1985) belonged to different generations in modern Hebrew literature, had a different poetical temperament, and wrote rather different poetry. Amichai's poetry may be defined as a delicate rivulet, which although subtle and fragile, does not take the same path as the vast river, and while it flows, it slowly smoothens and changes pebbles. Wallach's poetry is like catching fire, like lava eruption with no thematic and linguistic restraints. Although their poetry was different in style and temperament, I grasp in both poets the courage for thought experiment, and crossing borders of the dominant discourses at the given time in the Israeli society. Both did not hesitate to challenge conventional perceptions of spheres like love, religion, faith, gender, culture, society, and politics. In both I see the refusal to accept the ready-made beliefs and opinions on these topics.

Yehuda Amichai was born in 1924 in Würzburg, Germany to a Jewish Orthodox family, and when he was twelve years old his family immigrated to Palestine. He is considered one of the greatest poets of modern Hebrew literature in the second half of the twentieth century. He introduced an alternative to the dominant poetry before him, and instead of pathos and ornamental language, he suggested simple and moderate one, full of metaphors and irony which deals

¹ “The term Midrash derives from the root *drsh* which in the Hebrew Bible means mainly ‘to search,’ ‘to seek,’ ‘to examine,’ and ‘to investigate’.” Midrash is an interpretation of the scriptures, biblical exegesis and homilies usually forming a running commentary on specific books of the Bible. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 14, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2006, p. 180.

² Many books and hundreds of articles were written about Amichai. Here are the details of some of the most important books: G. Abramson, ed., *The experienced soul: studies in Amichai*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997; B. Arpali, *Ha-prahin ve-ha-agartal: shirat Amichai 1948–1968*, Tel-Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1986; D. Miron, *Od*, Ramat Gan: Afik, 2013; N. Sharf Gold, *Lo Ka-brosh*, Jerusalem: Schoken, 1994.

³ The journalist Igal Sarna wrote the only biography of Wallach, see: I. Sarna, *Yona Wallach: Biografya*, Jerusalem: Keter, 1993. Some other books about Wallach's poetry: Z. Lidovsky Cohen, “Loosen the Fetters of Thy Tongue Woman”: *The Poetry and Poetics of Yona Wallach*, Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 2003; L. Ratok, *Mal'akh ha-esh: al shirat Yona Wallach*, Tel-Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1997; D. Zilberman, *Ha-ivrit hi isha mitrahetsset: 6 prakim al shirat Yona Wallach*, Tel Aviv: Y. Golan, 1993.

with everyday life, and he brought back Hebrew poetry to autobiography⁴. In more than fifty years of creativity he published about twenty books which are considered as one of the keystones of modern Hebrew literature. Boaz Arpali claimed that Amichai's poetry has two layers, one is visible and clear and the second invisible and concealed. It is very personal poetry yet, its world is wide, the world of people whoever and wherever they are, but especially Israelis. Through the lightness of his poetry one can feel its depth, through the concrete and the personal one can perceive a comprehensive *weltanschauung*⁵. Nili Sharf Gold suggested that he should be seen as the Israeli national poet⁶. However, in my opinion, he might be considered national only if the word "anti" would be added to it as in the case of hero and antihero.

In Amichai's poetry the constitutive myth of the Jewish people, the foundation of the Jewish nationhood and its founding father Moses, which are portrayed in the Torah become, in a delicate poetical turn, a private issue. In his poem "Jewish Travel" (Tiyul Yehudi) the long Jewish voyage which began with Moses was, in fact, the personal biography of Moses. When Moses stood on Mount Nebo and longed for the land of Canaan, he would never see he laid the foundation to the long Jewish history, which was, in fact, the private history of Moses who: "wrote the Torah as a travel book, / a memoir, every chapter with something very personal / that was his alone – like Pharaoh's daughter, like his sister Miriam, / his brother Aaron, his black wife, the Ten Commandments"⁷. In other words, if a national bard is understood as a poet who gives expression to the inspirations, the calamities and hopes, the past history, the expectation for the future, and the identity of a socio-ethnic group, then Amichai is the total opposite of such a poet. Amichai in his poetry gave a testimony of his own life, his love, his experiences as a soldier during World War II and the 1948 war, his city Jerusalem, his everyday life, his reluctance to use any pathos in expression, his search for simplicity, and serenity. Dan Miron wrote that already in his early writing, and this was Amichai's innovation in Hebrew poetry, he presented a consciousness of a private person who is not capable of integrating into any kind of "we," into any collective⁸. Nevertheless, at the same time many Israelis, not necessary from his generation, found in his poetry their own experiences, emotions, beliefs, and esthetical preferences. His popularity among different generations and different social backgrounds, and the feeling of numerous Israelis that he gives an expression to their state of mind, made him the central poetic figure in modern Hebrew literature in Israel.

Yona Wallach was born in Kiryat Ono and lived almost all her life there; moreover, she never left the borders of Israel. In contrast to Amichai's long years of writing, Wallach, due to her death at a young age, had only about twenty years of creativity, and published about six poetry books during her life. Her

⁴ D. Miron, *Yehuda Amichai*, in: *Lexicon Heksherim*, Beer Sheva: Heksherim Institute, 2014, p. 698.

⁵ B. Arpali, *Shirat ha-mordim*, Jerusalem: Karmel, 2009, p. 311.

⁶ N. Sharf Gold, *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet*, Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2008.

⁷ Y. Amichai, *Jewish Travel: Change is God and Death is His Prophet*, in: *Open Closed Open*, trans. Ch. Bloch and Ch. Kronfeld, New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2000, p. 118.

⁸ D. Miron, *Hashira ha-ivrit ba-me'a ha-esrim*, Jerusalem: Akademon, 1997, p. 33.

poetry is a mixture of colloquial and poetic language. In her earlier poetry there are mystical and abstract elements combined with realistic and concrete components, fragility with sexual daring. In the 1980s her poems became more theatrical, performative, associative, a kind of automatic and ecstatic chaining of words, ideas, and emotions. During her life her poetry was accepted with difficulty, but after her death the interest in her poetry was growing and it was perceived as revolutionary in Hebrew literature⁹. In her poems she expressed a cognitive existence which was amorphous, primordial, and irrational. She descended to the hidden layers, semi-conscious of consciousness¹⁰. One can find a blur of sex/gender divisions, mystical elements of different traditions, poetry as psychoanalysis, and an illustration of the statement that “The Personal is Political.” In her poetry Wallach deals with love and sexuality, sexuality in language, in thinking, and in questions of power, control, and dominance¹¹.

In this article I would like to present an encounter point between the two poets, in which both made an attempt to transgress Judaism, and to cross borders of religion, ethnic, and gender difference.

TEFILLIN

Tefillin (phylacteries) is a Jewish ritual article which is used for the observance of a Jewish commandment (mitzvah). This ritual article is made of “two black leather boxes containing scriptural passages which are bound by black leather straps on the left hand and on the head and worn for the morning services on all days of the year except Sabbaths and scriptural holy days”¹². The demand of a Jew for this mitzvah appears four times in the Bible (Ex. 13:1–10 and 11–16; Deut. 6:4–9 and 11:13–21) and the purpose of the duty of laying the tefillin is to remind the Jew of his obligation to worship God and not to follow his idle desires. Today the costume is to wear them during the morning services. “The wearing of tefillin induces a serious frame of mind, preventing levity”¹³. However, although tefillin is an essential commandment for Jews, women are exempt from this mitzvah. In the fundamental book of Judaism *Shulhan Arukh*¹⁴, according to which Jewish way of living is determined for hundreds of years, one can read that women and slaves are exempt from this commandment. The fact that women and slaves are put together might suggest that among the Jews women are perceived as an enslaved, dependent, not free, and not sovereign entity. In *Shulhan Arukh* one also reads that the act of laying tefillin is connected to the purity of the body and the mind, men who have intestinal disease, leprosy, or are

⁹ A. Weismann, *Yona Wallach*, in: *Lexicon Heksherim*, pp. 377–379.

¹⁰ D. Miron, *Hashira ha-ivrit...*, p. 44.

¹¹ D. Gurevich, *Feminism ve-postmodernism*, in: *Alpayim* 7 (1993), p. 53.

¹² See: *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 19, p. 577.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 579.

¹⁴ *Shulhan Arukh* (Set Table) is the code of Jewish Law written by Yosef Karo in 1563. It contains all the rules and the mitzvot of Jews' daily life. The book with its commentary of Moses Isserles – Mappah (tablecloth) are accepted as the codex of obligatory Jewish Law.

excommunicated are not allowed to lay tefillin. Therefore, the prohibition on women to lay tefillin implies that they are perceived as impure and impaired creatures, as not totally a part of the religious group. Moreover, a woman may become an obstacle of keeping that mitzvah because the requirement of purity of the mind forbids the man who lays tefillin to think of women and having sexual desire, and if he does have such inappropriate thoughts, he should not lay tefillin¹⁵. Hence, tefillin is one of the most important commandments which differentiates a Jew from a non-Jew, and also in the realm of Judaism differentiates a man from a woman. Hence, it combines both religious and gender exclusion inside the heart of Judaism. Moreover, tefillin is identified with the male body in the moments of his communion with God, it is a clear gendered signifier which has an erotic-metaphoric potential for the amalgamation of religiosity and sexuality, above all, male sexuality, and male religious and bodily superiority¹⁶. Some verses of the pray during laying tefillin are taken from Hosea “I will espouse you with faithfulness; Then you should be devoted to the Lord” (2:22). The Hebrew original “ve-yada’ta et adonai” means: and you shall know the Lord. Yada – “know” in biblical Hebrew often has also a sexual sense like in Gen. 4:1 “and Adam knew his wife Eve.” These words have a clear erotic meaning and are connected to the ritual of betrothal but between man and God¹⁷.

In this article I would like to present two poems by the two prominent Hebrew poets and the way in which they transgressed the usage of tefillin¹⁸ to cross the borders between Jew/non-Jew, and male/female. In their poems tefillin were bestowed with a new meaning. According to the interpretation of Wallach’s poem closely to its publication, and this kind of interpretation might be related also to Amichai’s poem, she desecrated the Jewish ritual article, and therefore the poem is a profanation of Judaism. However, in another possible way of reading, Wallach and Amichai re-defined the Jewish ritual, re-interpreted it, and therefore, created a new midrash which re-sanctifies the ritual in an inclusive way. Since in both poems there is a mixture of religion and sexuality, the religious act is interwoven with the act of love, I would like to suggest reading the poems as a sanctification of the act of love and sexuality. Wallach’s poem can be read as a gender subversion, while in Amichai’s poem there is an attempt to cross the borders of religion/ethnic belonging. Both poems create a realm in which religious and gendered inclusion replaces the traditional Jewish exclusionary approach. Both poems transgress, or even elevate, the religious act beyond its clear and defined limiting boundaries, and in doing that sublimate its traditional role. Tefillin as a masculine ritual article, in the heart of traditional Judaism, might be a simile of activating male power and superiority. But tefillin can be also a means to undermine male dominance, and the deep linkage between Judaism and

¹⁵ S. Arukh, *Orah Hayim*, 38: 1–13.

¹⁶ Y. Gil’et, *Ve-erastikh li: tashmishey kedusha ke-dimuyim gufa’ni’yim ve-erotim bi-yetsiroteyhem shel omanim yehudim isra’elim ve-amerika’im*, accessed August 6, 2015, <http://info.oranim.ac.il/home/home.exe/16737/16760>.

¹⁷ Z. Lidovsky Cohen, *Shah’reri et hartsuvot leshonekh isha*, Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009, p. 131.

¹⁸ For an artistic usage of ritual articles like tefillin or tallit (a prayer shawl) as an erotic simile see: Y. Gil’et, *Ve-erastikh li...*

masculinity. Tefillin might become an object for a feminine desire, and inversion of the male-female roles, a feminist upheaval in the core of Judaism.

Amichai's poem "Straight from Prejudice" (Yashar min ha-deot ha-kedumot) was published in 1980 in his book *Great Calm: Questions and Answers* (Shalva Gdola: She'elot U-Tshuvot), and Wallach's poem "Tefillin" was published in 1982, first in the periodical *Iton 77*, and then in her book *Wild Light* (Or Pere), 1983.

A STORY OF FAILURE

Amichai's poem is a love poem of a Jew to his non-Jewish lover who came to him "straight from prejudice." Whose prejudice is it? His, hers, or both of them? All the versions are possible. What is essential is that from the very beginning of their encounter they had to overcome a huge obstacle, which is not an easy task when prejudices are involved. In the poem the narrator writes what he would like to do to his woman, the non-Jewish lover becomes in his hands/mind a Jewish ritual article, a sacred object for worshipping. During the act of love the narrator does similar deeds to those which a Jew does during different religious rituals. In this way Amichai suggests that the Jewish mitzvot are very sensual (the male touches, kisses, ties), as the deeds he performs with his beloved. Therefore, in "Straight from Prejudice," not only religion and religious behaviour are portrayed as very sensual, but the act of love is hallowed. Moreover, in Amichai's poetry religion and religious rituals belong to the private sphere. They are not practiced in a community but, at the most, between two people. Amichai lowers religious rituals and practices down to earth. For example, in the poem "Jerusalem 1967" he reveals how on Yom Kippur 1967¹⁹ he went to the Old City in Jerusalem instead of going to the synagogue. A simple store of an Arab, where he stayed in front for long, replaces the Western Wall – the traditional place for praying and having self-examination required on Yom Kippur. The little store reminds him of an open Ark (Aron Kodesh), and what he tells in his heart is a very private and original pray. It is an introspection and an examination of history, of his conscience, of guilt, all what a Jew should do on Yom Kippur in the synagogue and in fixed liturgical texts. Amichai's narrator, however, replaces the house of praying and the group's rituals with a normal everyday scenery – a store, the target of his private pray is not God, but an Arab in Jerusalem, and the regular prayers of Yom Kippur he replaces with his own text:

In my heart I told him that my father too
Had such a store of threads and buttons.
In my heart I explained to him about all the dozens of years

¹⁹ After the Six-Day War (June, 1967) when Israel conquered East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

And causes and accidents, that I am here now
and my father's store was burned there and he is buried here²⁰.

It is not my intention to discuss here this poem at length, although it deserves a long analysing, but only to illustrate what we can observe also in "Straight from Prejudice" and in many others of Amichai's poems, how he uses religious elements in order to say something very simple, unpretentious, down-to-earth, personal and intimate, distanced from any religious establishment and religious communities.

In "Straight from Prejudice" during the process of "Judaizing" his beloved or "Jewifying" her, which, in fact, has the goal of sanctifying her, she becomes an object, an article, perhaps holy, but not a person, or a subject. The woman replaces the ritual articles, but in this process she becomes an article herself.

STRAIGHT FROM PREJUDICE

Straight from prejudice you leaped to me,
Hardly had any time to get dressed.

I want to Jewify you with my circumcised body,
I want to wrap you in tefillin straps from head to foot.

I want to dress you in gold and velvet,
Like a Torah scroll, and hang a Magen David on your neck

And kiss your thighs
Like a mezuzah on the doorpost.

I shall teach you the old custom of washing
Feet with love:

I washed my own memories (the original Hebrew says: wash me my memories – Sh.R.)²¹:

I wore them a lot and grew tired.

And my eyes grew tired of the square letters of my language,
I want letters flowing like your body.

With you, I don't want to feel like a prophet of rage
Or prophet of consolation.

I almost
Succeeded:

But when you cried, the tears in your eyes gleamed
Like snow and Christmas ornaments²².

²⁰ Y. Amichai, *A Life of Poetry 1948–1994*, trans. B. and B. Harshav, New York: Harper Perennial, 1995, p. 81.

²¹ Rahatsi li et zikhronotay.

²² Y. Amichai, *A Life of Poetry...*, p. 335.

The narrator wants to possess his beloved, to shape her in his own Jewish image. Perhaps he would love to overcome his prejudices, but, in fact, he does not accept her as she is, he is not fascinated by the differences, but he wants to make her familiar, a part of his religious horizon, to domesticate her into his world. In that approach the traditional Jewish male-female relations are maintained, the active male is shaping the passive woman according to his desires, he turns her into a Jewish ritual object, he sanctifies her body with his circumcised body. Circumcision is the symbol of the male covenant with God, therefore, in presenting all his body as circumcised the narrator declares that he is a Jew who is totally and entirely attached to his Jewishness and to God. Jewifying the beloved is an attempt to bring her to the covenant, to make her a part of his Jewishness. Hence, the act of love is in the realm of sacrum, it is a religious worship of sexuality, or as Abramson suggests: "making the act of worship analogous with acts of love"²³.

Nevertheless, being a male Jew is not only the privilege of being in a constant and intimate contact with God, in a permanent covenant with the divine, but it is also a burden. The burden of history does not allow for peace of mind, this burden is harsh and uncomfortable, perhaps also painful. Like the square letters of Hebrew, it is angular, strict, and rough to be a Jew. It carries with it too heavy obligation, one has to become a prophet, either of rage or of consolation, because not the message is the most important, but the function. A prophet is a person who has a mission to deliver, who has to be engaged publicly, to work with and for the people. A prophet cannot be an individual who lives his own life for himself. Therefore, according to Amichai, a Jew cannot be a private person who lives his own single life, he is asked to sacrifice his privacy for the community. A Jew should bear in mind the collective, also of the past and of the future, the whole chain of generations. So, although the narrator sticks to his Jewishness and clings to its religious rituals, he is at the same time tired of his Jewishness, he yearns for the other. However, the chance to become different, to be attached to a different option, presented in the poem as Christmas and snow, namely, a different religion and a different climate, which is not Jewish and Israeli, is too frightening for him, thus, he crawls back to his Jewish identity.

There is one point in the poem in which the narrator could reach a common tradition, a link between the two religions (Judaism and Christianity). "I shall teach you the old custom of washing feet with love." This line reminds both Jews and Christians of an important element in their tradition. In the Hebrew Bible giving a guest water to wash his feet is an act of respect to the other, and of hospitality (Gen. 18:4 and 43:24, Jud. 19:21). In Christian tradition washing feet is even more essential than in Judaism, not only the act is done by the host to his guest, but it appears in two essential episodes in the Gospel of John. The first is when Mary anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair (12:3) as a generous gesture of unconditional love. The second is after the Last Supper. When Jesus realised that his time has come, he washed the feet of his disciples (13:5) as a gesture of service done by the Master to his followers. With this gesture he let them in the secret of his message, which might be interpreted

²³ G. Abramson, *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai: A Thematic Approach*, New York: State University of New York, 1989, p. 118.

differently, for example, as the right way to conduct one's life without selfishness in the service of others, or as a metaphor for spiritual cleanness. "Washing feet" is the crucial moment in the poem in which a new, common and equal religion could have been born. The narrator declares that he is tired of his own history, memories, identity, and obligations as a member of the Jewish people. It seems that he is ready and willing to start from the beginning, and he needs her help in erasing his memories – "wash me my memories," then he will have a place in his mind for new memories, a new tradition, a new way of life, a new language which will be flowing and will not be rough. However, his beloved's cry makes it clear that they did not overcome the obstacle of prejudice. Is her cry a result of a typical disagreement, or misunderstanding as it happens with lovers? Or perhaps it symbolises her helplessness, or disappointment, or even objection to his obsessive need to Jewify her? One way or another, the woman's cry, which reminds him of her otherness, beautiful but foreign, points out that he was too immersed in his Jewishness, too attached to his tradition and therefore, he was incapable of developing the shared element of grace and care into a foundation of a new common religion or tradition of love.

THEATRE AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR LIFE

The first publication of "Tefillin" by Yona Wallach in *Itun 77* aroused a stormy debate in the Israeli public sphere, when politicians and public figures referred to the poem as the worst act of profanation which should not be published, because it is not a piece of art, but a pornographic provocation and an offensive attack on Judaism²⁴. In the eyes of even not religious Israelis the using of tefillin to present a sexual simile was perceived as a transgression of any aesthetical and moral boundaries, a contamination of what was left sacred in the Israeli society²⁵.

In contrast to Amichai's poem, in which crossing borders ends with defeat, in Wallach's poem the question of success or failure in crossing the sacred boundaries is not relevant since the whole action is taking place on a theatre stage. This location makes the narrator and her sexual partner into actors in front of an audience. The actors are not equal in their roles, because the female narrator is also the director and the playwright of the drama²⁶, she gives the instructions, she has the control on the happening. This double role of, on the one hand, an actress who is weak and relatively passive, and on the other hand, a director who controls the situation, allows her to evade the dichotomy of male/female, active/passive, executioner/victim²⁷. That fact not only deprives the sexual-sanctified act of its privacy and intimacy, but also makes it public,

²⁴ For a detailed description of the affair see: R. Tsoffar, *Staging Sexuality, Reading Wallach's Poetry*, in: *Hebrew Studies*, 43 (2002), pp. 87–93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁷ S. Stav, *Aba ani koveshet: avot u-vanot ba-shira ha-ivrit ha-hadasha*, Beer Sheva: Heksherim Institute, 2014, pp. 287–288.

namely, a political and socio-cultural act, in which the amazed audience may become a judge of the theatrical production. The last two lines of the poem make it clear that it is a socio-political challenge for the Jewish male hegemony in the sphere of both religion and sexuality. The poem is an invitation to look at it from a different perspective of role inversion. Ruth Tsoffar claims that “it is possible that Wallach kept the stage hidden until the last moment, explicitly introducing it only in the last two lines of the poem in order to culminate the shocking drama by the man’s death, a climax heightened by the presence of a voyeuristic audience”²⁸. However, the fact that it is “only” a performance might be a relief to the shocked reader/spectator, it diminishes the reality of the event. The relief may lie in the suggestion that it was only a fictitious game, but in the real world a man was not murdered, and women would not lay tefillin, would not control sexual encounters and give instructions to men, and would not direct them according to their female desires and imagination. And above all, in the real world tefillin has no relation whatsoever to sexuality. It is evidently denied linkage in the Jewish imagination, because as we have seen, in the Jewish textual foundations such a relation is implied, of course, only as an allusion to what is forbidden.

TEFILLIN

Come to me
 don't let me do a thing
 you do it for me
 do everything for me
 what I even start doing
 you do instead of me
 I'll put on tefillin
 I'll pray
 you put on the tefillin for me too
 bind them on my hands
 play them in me
 move them gently over my body
 rub them hard against me
 stimulate me everywhere
 make me swoon with sensations
 move them over my clitoris
 tie my hips with them
 so I'll come quickly
 play them in me
 tie my hands and feet
 do things to me
 against my will
 turn me over on my belly
 and put the tefillin in my mouth bridle reins
 ride me I'm a mare
 pull my head back
 till I scream with pain
 and you're pleased

²⁸ R. Tsoffar, *Staging Sexuality...*, p. 103.

then I'll move them onto your body
 with unconcealed intention
 oh how cruel my face will be
 I'll move them slowly over your body
 slowly slowly slowly
 around your neck I'll move them
 I'll wind them several times around your neck, on one side
 and on the other I'll tie them to something steady
 especially very heavy maybe twisting
 I'll pull and I'll pull
 till your soul leaves you
 till I chock you
 completely with the tefillin
 that stretch the length of the stage
 and among the stunned crowd²⁹.

In this poem Wallach presents a new construction of sexual and feminine identity, with a radical usage of Jewish ritual article. She challenges the boundaries between theatre and life, everydayness and cult, private and public³⁰. However, it might be suggested that in the last two lines of the poem Wallach says with tongue in cheek to the readers/audience that she, in fact, mocked them, she succeeded in shocking them, but now by the end of the poem, when it appeared that it was only a performance, they can return safely and calm to their homes because it was only a theatre and not a real life. Is it the strength of the poem or its weakness that even the "scandalous" poet dares to present an alternative to the dominant religious-masculine discourse only as a legerdemain and a fantasy, but not as a real option? However, literature itself is a fiction, but this poem is a fiction within a fiction, therefore, was the doubled fantasy necessary in order to distance the transgression further from the audience? In the 1980s Wallach was ahead of her time. The Israeli society was not ready yet for her defiant suggestion for re-evaluation of the socio-sexual and religio-cultural value system which prevailed then. By the 1990s, only after her death, the time was ripe to accept her poetry and to turn her into an Israeli cult figure³¹.

In "Tefillin" Wallach plays with gendered balance of power and roles, with religious rituals and with sex and violence. Is the narrator passive, as the traditional woman should be, or is she active? At first glance it looks as if she is passive – "don't let me do a thing, you do it for me," but she is the one who gives the orders, who decides upon the rules and the scenery. And she also decides to break the roles of a strict religious system, "I'll put on tefillin," a ritual mitzvah which women are not allowed to do. As a result, we have a feminine disobedience which threatens the existing order. The narrator with her double role as an actress – a passive woman, and as a director – the dominant figure, has a powerful revolutionary potential. She is no more a woman in the service of a man, but on the contrary, the man is there for her service, to fulfill her desires

²⁹ Y. Wallach, *Let the Words: Selected Poems*, trans. L. Stern Zisquit, New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 2006, p. 92.

³⁰ Y. Gil'et, *Ve-erastikh li...*

³¹ Y.S. Feldman, *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation in Israeli Women's Fiction*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 9–10.

and commands. Her speech is full of verbs in the imperative, she does not ask him politely, but gives a series of orders and instructions (put!, bind!, play!, move!, rub!, stimulate!, tie!). The violence, cruelty, and sadomasochism of the religio-sexual-theatrical act combines a mixture of pleasure and pain that might exist in inter-human relations, but also in God-human relations. God at times is full of mercy, but in other cases “is vengeful and fierce in wrath” (Nahum 1:2), and the pious Jew should love God, but also fear him. Therefore, the love/fear or pleasure/pain complexity exist in both realms, all-human and human-divine. Extreme emotions and deeds are immersed in the poem. “Tefillin” not only permits the female narrator to have a sexual pleasure and the position of power and control, but tefillin serves also as a lethal weapon with which she strangles the man. She uses the article which for generations symbolised the inferiority of women, their invisibility, their irrelevance for the religious rituals, and their non-existence in the relationship with the divine in the public sphere. In that respect tefillin in the poem is a metaphor for the traditional patriarchal Judaism, which, in the new interpretation of Wallach, in her midrash, should be used also for the empowerment and the pleasure of women, and not only for the service of privileged men. The synecdoche for the female pleasure is clitoris (“move them over my clitoris”), the only female sexual organ which is connected to a pure pleasure without any role in the reproduction process.

The poem is not divided into stanzas and it lacks almost entirely punctuation marks, with a dot only at its end. It is contrasted to “Straight from Prejudice,” which is much shorter, but is full of punctuation marks and is constructed of ten stanzas, and therefore is read unhurriedly, reflectively as an afterwards contemplation. In “Tefillin” one cannot stop or reflect because the reader is in the heart of action, it is read with growing tension, breathlessly. However, by its end the tension is fading, at least to some extent, when it appears that it was only a show. Nevertheless, Wallach created in the poem an alternative language for the male hegemonic language of Judaism. In that respect, it might be read as a new midrash for the Jewish mitzvah of tefillin, which implies also a possible new *midrashim* – interpretations to other religious rituals in Judaism. In this kind of Judaism there would be not only a central place for women, in which they will have full rights to any of the religious rituals and worships, but also it will speak in the language of women, with their metaphors, associations, expectations and life experience. Wallach did in this poem what Alicia Ostriker defined as “revision of myths” and “stealing the language,” namely she stole and applied the male language of culture to portray more accurately women’s experiences. In Wallach’s poem “Tefillin” there is a use of the same weapon of men that was used for years to oppress women in order “to put him to death” in the poem. The voice of the oppressed for generations is like a volcano. Wallach knows that one cannot defeat oppression gently³².

Gender issues are presented in other poems of Wallach. She was playing with crossing gender roles and stereotypes, and offered an opposite option to the dichotomy of male/female, man/woman. The problem, wrote Wallach, lies already in Hebrew language. In English there are no gender differences, “you” refers both to male and female, so each male is also female and vice versa. In Hebrew

³² Z. Lidovsky Cohen, *Shah'leri et hartsuvot leshonekh isha*, pp. 131–132.

language the discrimination is built-in, a simple talk compels the speaker to think in categories of gender. “You” referring to a male would be “ata” and to a female “at” and there is no way in Hebrew to erase the gender difference.

English has all the possibilities for gender [...]
 and every I is sexless [...]
 and all things are it – not a man not a woman
 you don’t have to think before referring to sex
 Hebrew is a sex maniac
 Hebrew discriminates against or in favor [...]
 she wants to know who’s speaking
 almost a vision almost a picture
 what’s forbidden in the whole Torah
 or at least to see the sex
 Hebrew peeks through the keyhole...³³

Thus, according to Wallach, Hebrew, the holy language desecrates the Torah, it acts against the command of not making a sculpture and image (Ex. 20:4). Hebrew demands to know the exact sex, and in that she (Hebrew) is a voyeur. Wallach wanted to overcome the gender differences, to be both male and female, or not to be a man or a woman. In an interview with her the journalist Dani Dotan declared: “as a woman, you are unique,” and she replied “I believe that as a man, I am extremely unique”³⁴. She wanted the sex distinctions to be blurred, to be both or none, to change roles, and to abolish the gender dichotomy which is so dominant in culture. The preferred option for her was androgynous.

A man not man
 a woman not woman
 make love
 bare breasts
 faceless
 sex and face (in the Hebrew original it can be understood as sexless and faceless Sh.R.)
 Like in Kabbalah³⁵.

In Kabbalah in particular and in the Jewish tradition in general, God is both a man and a woman, an androgyne, and the source for this perception is the story of the creation of humanity in the Bible “And God created man (Adam in Hebrew means not only man but also human) in His image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Gen. 1:27). A whole person is the unification of the male and the female in the original form of the image of God. Wallach wanted to restore this primordial situation. A similar approach is in Plato’s Symposium, when people look for their other half in order to recover their primal androgynous state, the difference is that in the Jewish tradition the interpretation of Genesis 1:27 is only heterosexual. Wallach thought that a whole person is when a woman or a man have in themselves both options, and should not be obliged to choose once and for all, but could play with them. In such a state in which a woman is sometimes a woman, sometimes a man,

³³ Wallach, *Hebrew*, 112.

³⁴ I. Sarna, *Yona Wallach...*, p. 285.

³⁵ Wallach, *A Man not Man a Woman not Woman*, 115.

sometimes both, when there is no strict border between the sexes, a woman putting on tefillin would not be a profanation.

Although they were different in their poetical temperament and style, Amichai and Wallach used the same simile – tefillin – in order to cross the boundaries of Judaism and to overcome the limits it posits between a Jew/non-Jew and a woman/man. Nevertheless, due to lingual and poetic style differences, Amichai's poem was never considered as a profanation, while Wallach provoked a stormy public debate. The difference in the theological message of both poems is minimal, so one can conclude that not only in Jewish religion, but also in Hebrew poetry what is allowed for men is not allowed for women.

TEFILIN: TRANSGRESJA ŻYDOWSKIEGO PRZEDMIOTU MODLITEWNEGO.
WSPÓŁCZESNA POEZJA HEBRAJSKA JAKO NOWOCZESNY MIDRASZ

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia poetycką reinterpretację przedmiotu używanego w czasie żydowskich rytuałów religijnych – tefilin w poezji dwóch głównych poetów hebrajskich: Yehudy Amichaiego i Yony Wallach. Analizując wiersz *Straight from Prejudice* Amichaiego i *Tefillin* autorstwa Wallach, zauważyć można transgresję tradycyjnej religijnej funkcji tefilin. Poza religijnymi, oboje sugerują zastosowanie tego rytualnego przedmiotu w innych kontekstach, jednakże zgodnych z tradycją. Dzięki temu wiersze te można zinterpretować jako nowy midrasz w judaizmie.

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