

“And Sons Shall Return to Their Borders”

The Neo-Zionist (Re)turns of Rachel’s Sons

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A Multivalent Figure

In the tense weeks between June 12th and June 30th, 2014, the Israeli media and public frequently alluded to a biblical verse in relation to three Jewish teenagers who were abducted from a hitchhiking stop near their homes in Jewish settlements in the West Bank. As their destiny hung in the balance, (at least according to public perception)¹ they were imagined as Rachel’s sons, whom the Jeremianic oracle promises will be returned from enemy land (Jer 31: 15-17). The short phrase “and sons² shall return to their own borders” (31:17) became a common way to refer to the kidnapped teenagers—from YouTube clips, to Twitter hashtags, to mass prayer vigils at the Western Wall and throughout the country, to the IDF operation to search for the teenagers, which was code named “Operation Return Sons.”³ The prophetic oracle, though, in this case, failed to come true. By the time the media had announced the death of the teenagers at the end of June, the Israeli public had been whipped into a frenzy of grief and rage; a day after the funerals of Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrach, Muhammad Abu Khdeir was abducted from outside his home in East Jerusalem and burnt alive by a group of Jewish terrorists, rumored to be associated with La Familia, extreme-right fans of the Beitar Jerusalem soccer team (Tharoor 2014). The following week, “Operation Protective Edge” commenced in Gaza, killing over 2,200 people, primarily Palestinian civilians, in the course of fifty days.

How is one to read this flaring up of biblical language in political discourse, and what does it have to do with the causes and effects of the recent blood-soaked summer? What can biblical scholars contribute to this discussion of contemporary events, political machinations, nationalism, and violence? In *The Babylon Complex*,

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¹ The initial recording of Gilad Shaer’s cellphone call to the police, which suggested the teens had been murdered early on in the terrorists’ car, was put under a gag order, while in the weeks that followed the IDF carried through “Operation Brother’s Keeper,” (or in Hebrew “Operation return sons” cf n3) ostensibly in search of the missing teens, but also explicitly framed as an attempt to “smash” the Hamas (Horowitz, Adam, Roth, and Weiss 2014; Kubovich, Yaniv, and Haaretz 2014).

² In biblical Hebrew, *banim*, refers to unmarked “children” though it is grammatically male. However, in modern Hebrew it is marked as “sons,” and thus for simplicity, I will translate *banim* as “sons” throughout. All translations from Hebrew are mine unless noted.

³ See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wf3GAmy27Fk> and the Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/shavubanim?fref=ts>. The Twitter hashtag #BringBackOurBoys is an English adaptation of the phrase, while the IDF Operation *shuvu banim* (Return sons) was dubbed Operation Brothers’ Keeper in English; perhaps under the influence of the English version it was also sometimes called *shuvu ahim* (Return brothers).

Erin Runions provides an exciting and thought-provoking new model for analyzing the appearance of multifaceted biblical figures in contemporary culture, especially in the realm of national imaginations. As Runions argues, the composite figure of Babylon can express multiple “rhetorical needs” in contemporary US culture (Runions 2014a, 2); the analysis of the multivalent uses of this “surprisingly flexible symbol” (Runions 2014b) can expose the way biblical interpretation manages hidden tensions, contradictions, and disavowals of American culture in relation to its military adventures abroad, especially in modern day Iraq, and its anxiety about regulating sexuality at home. By analyzing the afterlife of a religious figure in the ostensibly secular nation-state, Runions is able to show the complexity of the symbolic language at work in the political and literary landscape. As opposed to a critique of explicit ideological positions, the analysis of the representation of national sentiments through biblical language and interpretation allows access to the political unconscious of the nation—its complex negotiations with its past, its aversions and repressed desires, and its hitherto hidden affinities; the vacillations and ambiguities in the representations of these figures can be read as symptomatic of national anxieties and unresolvable tensions (Runions 2014a,23).

In the following pages, I wish to use Runions’ work on Babylon as a model for my own exploration of the figure of Rachel in contemporary Israeli culture—analyzing the symptoms of an Israeli “Rachel Complex,” especially in the uses of biblical language in framing experiences of motherhood, land, and war.⁴ Like Runions, I wish to draw upon a “pastiche archive,” (Runions 2014a,9) juxtaposing contemporary political slogans, Facebook groups, and popular songs with older midrashic texts and Hebrew poetry. As I will show, the multiple appearances of Rachel in Hebrew literature and political rhetoric in the twentieth century are especially connected to themes of interruption and lack of fulfilment, as well as an anxiety about geographical boundaries and borders. The following article attempts to sketch some general parameters for a future project about the figure of Rachel in Jewish and Israeli culture, which will be comprised of detailed close readings of key texts and traditions, including an ethnographic study of contemporary pilgrimage practices at Rachel’s tomb in the shadow of political and military motivations and practices.

Throughout Jewish history, and especially in her latest Zionist iteration, Rachel figures the trauma of Jewish exile and diaspora, as a mother who has lost her own sons—but at the same time, she also holds the possibility of restoration, return, and redemption. In her multifarious appearances in midrash, mystical texts and practices, liturgy, modern poetry, and popular Hebrew music she is represented as both a passive, mournful figure, tearful and abject, a kind of damsel in distress, a Jewish *mater dolorosa*,⁵—and an active schemer and bargainer, a protective intercessor in the heavenly court or on earth, a tireless champion of her children. Like the figure of Babylon, the figure of Rachel exhibits a kind of “affective variance” (Runions 2014a, 10). In the Jewish tradition, Rachel embodies both

⁴ For readings of the Bible in Israeli/Zionist cultural history see Yael Feldman’s analysis of Israel’s “haunting love affair with its primal scene of sacrifice” (Feldman 2010, xiii). See also Havrelock (2011) and Pardes (2013).

⁵ See Sered (1986; 1998) for the connection between Rachel and Marianism.

female agency and female passivity, silence and voice, mourning and joy, rupture and wholeness. While classical Zionism has attempted to delineate and separate the categories of exile and redemption, by casting them, for example, as a two-part schema for history, the figure of Rachel personifies the inescapable mixing of these categories, a hybrid form repudiated by modernity.⁶ In attending to the language of Rachel's sons invoked in the summer of 2014, I wish to expose an anxiety, a fissure, an undecidability about these classical Zionist binaries, and demonstrate the irrepressible entanglement of exile and redemption.

Close reading of biblical figures in contemporary culture is also an opportunity for cultural intervention. Through suggesting new modes of interpretation, it may also be possible to unsettle and destabilize the way powerful institutions draw on the biblical text to construct and enforce their authority. After exposing and analysing the ways in which scripturalization works in contemporary US culture, Runions suggests new ways of reading the biblical text based on "an approach to scripture that values opacity, liminality, and undecidability; it looks for connections and disruptions, eschewing higher meanings" (Runions 2014a, 244). Runions calls for re-Babelizing the Bible, opening it to multiplicity and undecidability, rather than a unity of interpretation. As Runions refers to the possibilities of re-Babelizing the Bible, perhaps it may be possible to "Rachelize" the Zionist Bible, (as Rachel and Zion are both figures for the nation and the land) exposing its fissures and anxieties, its seam lines and disputed borders.⁷

My discussion of Rachel also has a metonymic connection to Runions' work, a way in which the American "Babylon Complex" and the Israeli "Rachel Complex" are intimately related. Rachel's weeping over her sons as they leave for Babylonian exile has a family relation to Psalm 137, which presents the voice of the exiles themselves weeping by the rivers of Babylon.⁸ In Chapter 4, Runions discusses the complex relation between the exilic grief and loss expressed by Psalm 137 and the violent fantasies of revenge in its final verses. The use of the 1970s pop band Boney M's version of the psalm as "torture-by-Bible soundscape at Abu Ghraib" (162) activates these occluded revenge fantasies, while acting as a biblical authorization for acts of torture. Though the Jeremianic passage I discuss does not explicitly contain revenge fantasies, its appearance in Israeli politic rhetoric also demonstrates a complex relation between grief, loss, and state-sanctioned violence.

Finally, while referring to "the U.S. messianism that aligns itself with Israel against Babylon" (Runions 2014a, 156) Runions does not discuss Zionist theopolitics. Her quick reference to "Israel" demonstrates the ambiguity of the term—is this a reference to the biblical Israel as an enemy and symbolic opposition to

⁶ Zionism is based on a separation between exile and redemption, between weak "Old Jews" and strong "New Jews"; its cultural work is often expressed as a "negation of the diaspora." In this sense, it enacts the "purification" work of modernity that Bruno Latour has formulated. "*The modern constitution allow the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies*" (Latour 1993, 34).

⁷ In a similar vein, Sidra Ezrahi discusses the "mortal consequences of eroticizing the land" through the centuries-long imagination of Jerusalem as a woman, and the ways that new metaphors can unsettle this stiffened allegory (Ezrahi 2007, 224).

⁸ The texts of Psalm 137, Lamentations, and Jeremiah 31:15-17 are intertextually linked in later Jewish mourning traditions; for example, the Kabbalistic liturgical service instituted by Isaac Luria in the 16th century, which I describe below, features all three sources.

ancient Babylon, or does she refer to the shared political and military interests of the U.S. and the modern State of Israel, or the symbolic language often shared by fundamentalist Christians and Jews? While in this paper I will not directly engage with the relation between the U.S. and Israel and the overlapping of their religious imagination, reading Israeli contemporary culture alongside Runions' "Babylon Complex" suggests many affinities and linkages in both themes and structure, specifically in the way contemporary events gain religious significance and authority through prophecy, what Runions calls a "literalist-allegorical interpretation" (ibid). As opposed to older modes of allegory, which focus on uncovering meaning in the biblical text, both neo-conservative Christian readings and neo-Zionist readings use contemporary events, whether it is the American war on Iraq/Babylon, or the kidnapping of "Rachel's sons" by Palestinian terrorists, to mark future cosmological truths; past, present, and future are collapsed (Runions 2014a, 159).

Symptoms of an Israeli Rachel Complex

It is a strange fact that while there are many kinds of religious and secular saints in contemporary Israeli culture, the lone figures of female sainthood who are, as Susan Sered puts it, "the foci of broad-based Jewish cults in Israel today" (Sered 1998, 5) all happen to be named Rachel. Sered describes the identification and ritual practices related to personalities and burial places of three figures called Rachel: the biblical matriarch Rachel, the devoted and self-sacrificing wife of the great tanaaitic sage, Rabbi Akiva, and Rachel Bluwstein, the Russian Zionist poet of the second Aliyah, known by the epitaph "Rachel the Poetess." Akiva's wife and Rachel the poetess are understood to be embodiments or reincarnations of the first Rachel: Bluwstein, for example, famously writes "Rachel, Mother of mothers...it is her blood that flows in my blood/ her voice that sings in me" (26). To Sered's triumvirate of Rachels we can add the nineteenth-century Italian Rachel Morpurgo (née Luzzatto), the first modern Hebrew female poet, who anticipated Bluwstein's deceptively modest aesthetic.⁹ In Morpurgo's sonnet "A Voice is Heard in Ramah," for example, she plays on the words of Jeremiah, closing with a desire for a new song which will make Rachel, as both Italian poet and biblical matriarch, rejoice (Morpurgo 1942, 28).

There is also a tradition of female identification with Rachel in relation to burial places: Lady Judith Montefiore, who identified with Rachel's infertility, urged her husband Moses Montefiore to rebuild Rachel's tomb on the outskirts of Bethlehem in 1841, and was finally buried in Ramsgate, England (alongside her husband) in an exact replica of the Palestinian structure (Kadish 2006, 58-62). In a kind of parallel identification, Naomi Shemer, one of the most popular Israeli song writers, was buried near the grave of Rachel "the poetess" in the cemetery of Kibbutz Kinneret in 2003. In fact, the site of the tomb itself has been the focus of complex boundary negotiations and conflicts regarding ownership, jurisdiction and economic control since the Ottoman era; it is currently enclosed by a heavily fortified building complex controlled by the Israeli Army in the midst of the Palestinian Authority (Bowman 2014).

⁹ For discussions of the importance of this overlooked poet, see Gluzman (1991) and Zierler (2004:23-29).

The name Rachel is also linked to a tradition of protest and activism. For example, the all female establishment of the settlement *Rachelim* in the West Bank 1991, in memory of the terror victims Rachel Druck and Rachel Weiss, was, as Michael Feige argues, “an embryonic feminist revolt” (Feige 2009, 214), which was also an attempt to suppress and overcome anxieties about the failure of the settlement project to secure the safety of the settlers’ families.¹⁰ On the other side of the political map, the organization of “Four Mothers,” which successfully campaigned for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon from 1997-2000, evoked the moral authority of the biblical matriarchs and was chaired by Rachel Ben-Dor (Sontag 2000). The most recent figure in this symbolic lineage is Rachelle Fraenkl, one of the kidnapped teenagers’ mothers, who became a highly visible media presence in 2014, appealing to the U.N. Security Council on June 24th, 2014, and revolutionizing state Orthodoxy by reciting the *kaddish* prayer out loud at her son’s funeral (Ettinger 2014).

Besides attesting to the fact of Rachel being a very popular Hebrew name, these examples attest to a kind of cultural stickiness; a way that the name Rachel is made to embody a distinctive palette of affects: identification with Rachel can express both a life of disappointment and unfulfilled desire for children, as well as the maternal care and grief which make protest permissible, in the name of the mother.

Various groups or individuals have also been identified with Rachel’s children. Second Aliyah pioneers, Holocaust survivors, Israeli soldiers, Ethiopian Jews, basketball coaches, and potential converts to Christianity have all been metaphorically cast as Rachel’s sons, lost and returned.¹¹ I would like to argue, though, that this Israeli cliché has undergone a further transformation in the past decade, and especially in the way that it has come to encapsulate a certain national mood in relation to the kidnapping of Jewish Israelis. The mythology of Rachel has been imbued with new vitality, as her figure is used to express anxieties about the promised Zionist fulfillment.¹²

Toward a Genealogy of Rachel in Jewish Tradition

In order to understand the contemporary symptoms of the Israeli “Rachel Complex,” and to better track the theological drama which surrounds the question of kidnapping and hostages in contemporary Israel, I would like to consider the

¹⁰ See also El-Or and Aran (1995).

¹¹ Many of these identifications are made in two guest books that survived from the tomb, from 1932-1936, 1942-1947, currently unpublished but described in Shragai (2005, 95-122) and Cohen-Hattab and Noy (2013). The former chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yosef, used the term in his 1973 ruling on Ethiopian Jews. See (Birnbaum, n.d.) Reuven Atar returned to coach Maccabi Haifa in 2012, and was imagined as Rachel’s son in this image: <http://www.hakafe.com/attachments/2804d1335619236-atar.jpg>. The identification of Jews who returned from Christianity is made by Yad L’Achim, an anti-Christian missionary group: <http://www.yadleachim.co.il/?CategoryID=340&ArticleID=1253>

¹² As Runions points out, the invocations of biblical authority through the figure of Babylon “smooth the way for the continual attempts to reassert U.S. power in a world where national sovereignty must bow before the transnational circuits of capital and power” (Runions 2014a, 1). In a parallel way, the re-vitalization of the figure of Rachel and the appeal to prophetic authority are attempts to reassert a national narrative on an increasingly fractured society and a sovereign nation with unclear borders.

representations of Rachel in biblical, rabbinic, and medieval traditions while acknowledging that this article cannot hope to do justice to a particularly rich textual tradition.¹³ The mythology of Rachel is anchored in two sets of biblical texts: the stories of Jacob and his family introduce Rachel in Genesis 29:6 and close with her death in childbirth in Genesis 35:21. Additionally, her figure is recast as part of a set of oracles of consolation in Jeremiah 31:15-17.

In Genesis, Rachel is depicted as a passionate, stormy figure with a tragic life. Her name indicated her symbolic connection to the gentle ewe or sheep and she is depicted as “beautiful and well favored” (29:17), yet her life is represented under the sign of difficulty and thwarted desire—from her father’s trickery which delays her marriage, to her infertility, which leads her to beseech Jacob, “give me children or I will die” (30:1), and the ruses and ploys she must employ to better her position. Her death in childbirth, as the family is travelling between Beth El and Efrata, underlines a lifelong struggle to become a mother. Many women have identified with Rachel’s fertility difficulties. Judith Montefiore and Rachel the poetess were both famously unable to have children: the speaker of Bluwstein’s poem “Barren,” says, “Still, like Rachel/ the Mother, I mourn...and wait, still wait/ for my child” (38). There is evidence for Rachel’s tomb functioning as the location of a fertility cult as early as the fifteenth century (Bowman 2014, 81), and the site has functioned as an active pilgrimage site for Muslim and Jewish women experiencing infertility throughout the past century.

While Rachel is referred to with the honorific “Our Mother”¹⁴ marking her status as mother of the nation, she is not strictly the mother of the Jewish nation according to biblical genealogy. Her only two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, are the mythical ancestors of Northern tribes, the tribes “lost” to Assyrian exile. In fact, Jews trace their lineage to Judah and Levi, the sons of Leah, the lesser loved, but more fertile wife of Jacob. Fantasies of consolation for Rachel’s lost sons which appear in Jeremiah may cover over the sense that Rachel is the mother of a thwarted, failed lineage, and may be repressing the unmourned trauma of the loss of the Northern Kingdom.¹⁵ A kind of slippage between categories continues to characterize the afterlife of Rachel; below I discuss a slippage between historical events in Jeremiah’s prophecy and between the notion of dead and exiled sons. The liminal positioning of Rachel’s tomb in the biblical text also has an uncanny echo in its contemporary legal and political status: the Oslo accords in 1995 established it as an enclave controlled by Israel (Area C) within the Palestinian Authority (Area A), though it was incorporated into Israeli territory in 2002 through the separation wall—a place betwixt and between.

The second biblical text to feature Rachel is Jeremiah 31:15-17, a prophetic oracle that imagines the figure of Rachel haunting her grave, hundreds of years after her death. While in the Genesis story-cycle Rachel’s sorrow originated in jealousy for her sister and sorrow over her infertility, in this oracle Rachel is

¹³ See Dresner (1994); Magid (1996); Hasan-Rokem (2000); Shragai (2005); Strickert (2007); Cox and Ackerman (2009); Bowman (2014)

¹⁴ This title first appears in rabbinic texts, but is still common today.

¹⁵ Aïm Deüelle Lüski claims that this unmourned trauma leaves traces in the literature that became incorporated into the cultural legacy of Judean survivors. For a discussion of this philosophic legacy, esp. in Amos, see Lüski (2011).

transformed into historical allegory, a mother crying over her nation-children, the victims of the terrible violence inflicted by a great empire.

Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her sons; she refuses to be comforted for her sons, because they are no more. (Jer 31:15)

The oracle begins with a prophetic formula and then imagines Rachel's ceaseless cry in *Ramah*, a high place, or a place name later associated with the path of the exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon.

There is some ambiguity in the text about the exact historical circumstances of the oracle. The lost children could be interpreted as the victims of the Assyrian occupation of the Northern Kingdom in the seventh century BCE,¹⁶ or as the Judean exiles to Babylon in the sixth century BCE, whose destiny is at the forefront of the book of Jeremiah. This slippage between historical events is typical of the poetry of the prophetic text, which as Robert Alter puts it, "tends to lift the utterances to a second power of signification, aligning statements that are addressed to a concrete historical situation with an archetypal horizon" (Alter 2011, 146). Furthermore, the collection of oracles to which this passage belongs seems to share more stylistic and ideological features with later prophetic texts, such as Deutero-Isaiah, and thus it is likely that this text was shaped during and even decades after the Babylonian exile, during the Persian period (Carroll 2006, 569). In fact, the restless figure of Rachel, wailing in Ramah, is one of the most powerfully resonant figures in prophetic literature in both Jewish and Christian traditions. In the Book of Matthew, for example, Herod's "slaughter of the innocents" is depicted as a terrible fulfilment of Rachel's wailing, while in rabbinic literature, Rachel's mourning functions as an archetype for the mourning over the destruction of the Second Temple by the Roman Empire.

In the scene depicted in the Book of Jeremiah, Rachel is consoled in her grief with the divine promise of restoration. In verses 16-17, the introduction to prophecy formula is repeated, seemingly restarting the oracle, and we hear the voice of God addressing Rachel:

Thus says the Lord: stop your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your sons shall return to their own borders.

In these two verses the oracle shifts from Rachel's melancholic mourning to God's miraculous intervention, restoring hope and "curing" the melancholic Rachel. In this prophecy of consolation, the return of Rachel's children becomes a figure for national revival and redemption, which could be predicting a reunion with the Northern kingdom or anticipating the return of Judeans from Babylon by Persian decree in the fifth century BCE, but also opening up more broadly to future longing and hope.

At first glance, the thematic and rhetorical jump between Rachel's lament (v.15) and God's promise (vv. 16-17) may not seem noteworthy. The beautiful verses seem to be smoothly joined, functioning as mirror images in the great prophetic

¹⁶ The chapter continues to figure the relationship between God and his people as a father chastising his misbehaving but beloved son, Ephraim, the eponymous ancestor of a Northern tribe, which may indicate the Northern origin of the myth.

meta-narrative of national catastrophe and redemption. However, the text contains a seam where these two utterances were joined, a kind of hairline fracture, between the despairing, bitter feminine lament of the mother to a hope-filled, prophecy regarding the sons. In fact, the multi-layered text of Jeremiah, which William McKane has characterized as a “rolling corpus” (McKane 1986, lxxxiii), seems to contain two different texts, which may have been composed at different historical periods, and can conceivably be traced back to two different traditions; certainly, they speak to two very different kind of genres and ideologies.

Starting with Bernard Duhm, many scholars have noted that the first part of the oracle could reflect an earlier, independent local tradition about Rachel's grave, what A.R. Diamond calls a “micro-myth” (Diamond 2008, 51). The weeping Rachel could reflect folk beliefs about women who die in labour, returning for their children. (Gaster 1969, 605 and 707 n1; Cox and Ackerman 2009, 148). Alternatively, the micro-myth may speak to the tragic circumstances of a mother whose children have died. The strange use of the singular negation to refer to Rachel's plural children may provide some evidence for the discrepancy between these two parts of the oracle.¹⁷ In verses 16-17, however, the children are to be returned (as the figures of Ephraim and Virgin Israel return to God later in the chapter) which implies an exile rather than death. For Carroll, this subtle disjunct in the metaphorical system points to a seam-line, a place where an older fragment was joined with a new one (Carroll 2006, 597).

The verses also seem to belong to different genres. Verse 15 is a lament, and in fact, lamenting was primarily a female role; there was a specific social and even economic role in ancient Israel and in the surrounding cultures for the female lamenter (Meyers 2013, 175). This female lament though, is now embedded in a prophetic oracle, which makes a prediction about the destiny of the nation. These later verses seem to integrate an earlier tradition, possibly connected to female ritual practice, to the themes of exile and return— and thus the local myth is incorporated into the allegorical narrative of the nation.

This kind of programmatic integration of earlier material is typical of the prophetic corpus. According to Ronald Clements, the symmetries of rebuke and consolation that often appear in classical prophetic texts are a result of the shaping of the prophecies by later redactors or scribes, who “sought to ensure that divine threats be followed and counterbalanced by divine promises” (Clements 1996, 102). The motivation for the “constant, and at times almost doctrinaire, rounding off of dire and fearsome threats with words of hope and assurance...must have originated as a literary device made necessary by the manner in which the prophetic texts were being read, possibly liturgically” (Clements 1996, 166). In other words, Clements posits an institutional motivation for the rounding off of prophecies, which may have been used in Exilic or Second Temple liturgical practice. Thus the female lament, which seems to be a wordless cry or shriek, is reshaped into the high language of a prophetic consolation speech in parallel lines, and prophetic speech interrupts or forecloses Rachel's melancholic mourning.

The interruption of mourning can be read as a manifestation of divine power in contrast to Rachel's helpless weeping. Just as divine power is manifested through

¹⁷ In fact, the Septuagint translation fixes this problem, probably working from a Hebrew text that read the plural form *`eynam*.

the closing and opening of wombs in the book of Genesis (Scarry 1985, 185-198), here the return of the children becomes a sign of a divine miracle, bestowed on a passive female figure. At the same time, the text seems to imply that the return of children is a kind of reward, or recompense (*sākār*) for Rachel's actions—representing her agency in the process of redemption.¹⁸ It is possible, then, that Rachel's weeping has *caused* God's forgiveness. In this vein, Tikva Frymer-Kensky reads Rachel as an intercessory figure, a role usually reserved for the prophets. Ancient Mesopotamian religion, according to Frymer-Kensky, acknowledged a personal, parent god who interceded on behalf of the individual for the great gods. Like a Mesopotamian parent-god, "Rachel's very relentless weeping brings the plight of the people continually before God, and finally moves God, in this vision, to remember and restore the people of Israel" (Frymer-Kensky 1993, 167).

The depiction of Rachel's lament as productive, as a powerful intercession with a jealous, angry God, is elaborated on in *Lamentations Rabbah*, a seventh-century midrashic anthology on the Book of Lamentations, which mourns the destruction of the Second Temple. The midrash (*Lamentations Rabbah*, #24) imagines Jeremiah attending the heavenly court, and bringing various biblical figures to cry before God and the angels to help "redirect the wheel of destruction and point it toward redemption," as Galit Hasan-Rokem puts it (Hasan-Rokem 2000, 126). While Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses fail to sway God, Rachel "leaps up" before him, begging for mercy for her children. Rather than speaking of national destiny, Rachel discusses her emotions and life, focusing on "the private sphere within the tent, the women's realm" (Hasan-Rokem 2000, 128). She recalls her self-sacrifice in overcoming her jealousy toward her sister, which gives God, "like a king exhausted by mourning...additional powers to recuperate and redeem Israel" (ibid). Frymer-Kensky's reading of the biblical text, as well as this later midrash, emphasizes Rachel's special agency, epitomized by her leap before God.

Lamentation Rabbah's depiction of Rachel's "erotic power of action," (ibid) is developed in later mystical traditions which associate Rachel with the *Shekinah*, the female aspect of the Godhead. As a brief example of this rich tradition I wish to point to the prayer service instituted by the sixteenth-century kabbalist, Isaac Luria, which became popular throughout the Near East and Mediterranean basin (Horowitz 1989; Magid 1996). Luria's service was a development of ancient traditions of reciting psalms in mourning for the destruction of the temple deep in the night, modelled on the nocturnal prayer of King David, as well as the allegorical interpretation of Leah and Rachel in the Book of Zohar. Luria's *Tikkun Hazot* (literally "midnight repair") set various prayers and biblical passages into a two part service: a sorrowful set of petitions, *Tikkun Rachel*, is followed by a more joyful set of prayers, *Tikkun Leah*, structuring a liturgy of destruction and redemption through the figures of the two sisters. The prayers are accompanied by study and ritual: the practitioner is to sit at the opposite to the entrance to a door, take off their shoes, put ashes on their forehead and bow to the ground. However, while the identification with Rachel (as the *Shekinah*) epitomized the sorrows and

¹⁸ The word choice here also echoes the Genesis stories of Rachel, Leah, and Jacob, where *sākār* functions as a *leitwort*, referring both to the hiring of Jacob for the night by Leah—resulting in their son Issachar, and Jacob's labor dispute with Laban, where the contested *sākār* is determined almost magically. In both cases, there is an attempt to fix affects of pleasure, envy, and fidelity through wages.

sufferings of exile, the prayer service emerged from a belief that the exile was coming to an end and emphasizes the productive work of mourning:

The act of study accompanied by the presence of burnt ashes on the forehead (the burnt Torah) reconstructs the Torah which subsequently allows the Shekhinah (Rachel) to rise from her place of exile culminating in the rebuilding of the physical Temple. *Mourning is thus seen as constructive in nature* (Magid 1996, xl; my emphasis).

Thus the reception of Rachel in Jewish tradition is a multivalent figure, moving between a passive melancholic position, a cry without language, and powerful, successful intercession, the ability to argue before the heavenly court for the quality of mercy. She lingers at the site of her tomb, but her voice can also reach the heights of heaven, and as the Shekhinah she follows her children into exile. On the one hand she embodies the suffering of exile, but on the other hand she holds the symbolic or mystical key to its ending.

Since the nineteenth century, the figure of Rachel, especially in its prophetic framework, was employed by Zionist thinkers, writers, and artists to mark both the sorrow of exile and the joy of return. The various uses of Rachel in political rhetoric, literature, and visual culture, as well as the religious practices and military arrangements surrounding her tomb expressed the sense that the prophetic oracle was being manifest through historical events. Yet now, strikingly, the return to the land, and to her tomb were cast as *fulfillments* of Jeremiah's prophecy. In some of these secular Zionist versions, the task of consoling Rachel was given to the nation-state, to the nation-children, rather than to God. As "New Jews," Rachel's children, especially her militarized sons, were now powerful enough to console their own mother.

The Rachel Complex as Soundtrack

In previous pages I analyzed biblical texts, midrash, and religious rituals; now I propose to shift the focus to the appearances and transformations of Jeremiah's Rachel in popular songs, as an expression of Zionist and Israeli ritual, a kind of secularized translation of the *piyyutim*, liturgy, and religious practices associated with Rachel. As Motti Regev and Edwin Saroussi argue, "popular music is the cultural form that most signifies Israeliness" (Regev and Saroussi 2004, 2). They view it as "a major cultural tool in construction of modern, national, ethnic, and other collectivities, and in the evocation of a sense of place" (Regev and Saroussi 2004, 6). Generally, they emphasize the global features of the power of popular music as a collective practice, in which "the configurations of meaning in music can be stabilized through ritual procedures and practices over time" (Regev and Saroussi 2004, 7). In addition, as Runions shows in her analysis of the use of Boney M's "Rivers of Babylon" in torture at Abu Ghraib, the uses of scripture in popular music can often go unnoticed, hiding in plain sight (Runions 2014a, 149). Runions shows, for example, how the seemingly positive associations of Boney M's identification with the struggles of the Babylonian exiles can also activate and authorize revenge fantasies, which are dormant in Psalm 137. Thus analysis of popular music may reveal a glimpse of a political unconscious outside of "active cultural memory."

In the nineteenth century, under the influence of a revival of European Marianism and the Romantic-sentimentalist bent of *Hibat Zion* (love of Zion)

poetry, Rachel was transformed into a gothic figure, haunting her ancient grave, embodying the sorrow of a land without a people. A section from a long poem by Abba Constantin Shapiro, a Russian Jewish *maskil* who converted to Russian Orthodoxy, was later adapted and set to music by Hanina Kartchevsky under the title *Beshadmot Beit-Lehem*, “In the Fields of Bethlehem” (Shapiro 1991, 85). The song became one of the most popular anthems of labour Zionism, as well as a well-known folk-dance, in the genre of “Songs of the Land of Israel”—songs that were canonized through practices such as public sing-alongs and various forms of state support. Rachel was imagined a beautiful female figure, nocturnally arising from her grave, who mournfully walks eastward from her grave near Bethlehem to the Jordan River. The poem/song emphasizes her silent and passive sorrow: as opposed to the biblical Rachel she does not sigh or weep aloud; rather, her copious tears flow silently, finally merging with the flow of the Jordan River.¹⁹ Here Rachel’s figure merges with the waterways of the land itself, creating a gothic elaboration of the classic Hebrew prophetic trope of the land-as-woman. However, the poem focuses on the first part of the biblical oracle and contains no divine promise; theological redemption is replaced here by geography, the material fecundity of the land itself.

Another popular recasting of the oracle was sung by the grand dame of Hebrew music, Shoshana Damari. Released in 1956, it was originally composed for a hit feature length movie, *B’Ein Moledet* (“Without a homeland,”) the first Israeli movie to be shot in colour, which stars Damari as a nightclub singer in 1920s Yemen, raised among Muslims who killed her Jewish parents and kidnapped her (Habib 1956). Damari as Naama-Naomi reconnects to her identity and joins a small group of Yemenite Jews who arduously make their way to the land of Israel, guided by an emissary of the Jewish Agency. At the happy end of the movie, Damari sings an arrangement of Jeremiah 31:17 together with triumphant phrases from Isaiah 51:11 and Amos 9:14, which describe the joyful return of the “ransomed” of Zion and the rebuilding of cities, in a booming celebratory alto. Here, the phrase “and sons/children shall return to their borders” describes Naama-Naomi’s return to her Jewish roots and the Jewish homeland as well as the waves of Zionist immigration (from Europe) to Yemen, and the building of the Jewish state. Immigration and statehood, especially the vision of the armed Jews the awestruck Yemenite immigrants encounter at the end of the movie, fulfil the prophecy, and the female dishonour and shame (including singing in Arabic) that is associated with exile is replaced with joyful, heroic song.

Yet another vision of prophetic fulfilment can be found in Shmulik Rosen’s song, “We will not go again,” sung by Arik Lavie, which became one of the most popular songs post war of 1967, and was often performed by Military Ensembles throughout the 60s and 70s. The song reflects the messianic excitement of the Jewish return to holy sites such as the Western Wall, the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and Rachel’s Tomb, and a more general post-’67 national euphoria. Rachel is

¹⁹ The original poem, “From the Songs of Jeshurun,” also contains a section in which Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons, led by Rachel, all rise from their graves and urge God to end the exile. Here Rachel “roars” and the holy community cries after her. In the extended poem cycle, a sad sentimentalism alternates with revenge fantasies. The last stanza, for example, begins, “Ah, if I had only inherited a “fist” instead of a harp/ instead of a song of Zion, a song of iron and stone” (Shapiro 1911, 89).

identified with the place of her grave; the Israeli military conquest of the grave, Jordanian territory for twenty years, is reimagined as a religious epiphany, a recasting of Jeremiah's vision. Rachel is required to witness the return of her sons as powerful soldiers, who fulfil the words of the prophecy: "we are all here Rachel, with our knapsacks on our shoulders/ we will not go again, and you will not go again." The soldier-children's return, perhaps even more than earlier images of Jewish immigrants, embodies the success of Zionism in negating the exile, in silencing the cry of melancholic Rachel, and stabilizing her wandering. Rachel's soldier-children address her using the words of God in Jeremiah 31:16: "stop your voice from crying." The song ends with an allusion to the fields of Bethlehem from Shapiro's poem; as opposed to the mournful melody of the song version of Shapiro's poem, the line "we will not walk again in the fields of Bethlehem," is sung by Lavie in a final, triumphant key, reversing the melancholia of *Hibat Zion* with a military-messianic fervour.

Considered together, these three popular songs speak to the way the Zionist imagination took up traditional Jewish motifs associated with Rachel and Jeremiah's prophecy, using them to imagine a new relation to exile, land, immigration, nation-building and military prowess. All three songs "solve" or "cure" Rachel's weeping, smoothing over the gap between the two parts of the oracle, as well as playing down her traditional role as active intercessor. In Shapiro's poem, Rachel's weeping is inaudible; her ghost figure has no voice in her nightly descent to the Jordan. In the arrangement sung by Damari, the figure of Rachel is effaced from the prophecy, though perhaps she is implicitly suggested by the transformation of Naama to Naomi, who may stand in for Rachel. The pain of exile is experienced as (feminized) shame, and the resolution of the plot of the movie emphasizes new (masculine) Jewish pride and independence. In Rosen's song, Rachel's "problem" is solved once and for all, shutting down the possibility of loss and longing. All three songs anchor Rachel to the land: she does not rise to the heavenly court, nor does she follow her children to the four corners of the earth; since statehood marks the end of exile, it also marks the resolution of Rachel's weeping. This reinvention of Rachel embodied a new historiography which took root in the first decades of statehood, in which "the theological couplet of expulsion-redemption received a secular historical manifestation" (Ram 2011, 24). As Exile was negated, the references to Rachel created a sense of closure in the narrative. The modern shift toward closure may also be mirrored by a shift in the verb tenses from biblical Hebrew to modern Hebrew: in biblical Hebrew the form of the verb is imperfect, but in modern Hebrew the verb form is more likely to be read in the past tense—"and sons *have returned* to their own borders."

Gilad Shalit and Other Kidnapped Sons

In the past decades the uses of the phrase "and sons shall return to their borders," indicated a re-opening up the Zionist narrative of exile and redemption that once provided closure. During "Operation Cast Lead," the Israeli attack on Gaza in 2009, a number of soldiers reported seeing visions of Mother Rachel in the battlefield, dressed as an old Palestinian woman, warning them away from booby

trapped buildings—as if Rachel’s restless power had returned.²⁰ The use of the phrase in reference to Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier held by the Hamas between 2006-2011, attempted to draw Shalit into the national meta-narrative, while at the same time marking a shift from a collective to an individual concern. Rachel’s allegorical sons were translated into one specific son, who was not portrayed as particularly heroic.

The phrase became a slogan of the mass campaign to free Shalit, which put pressure on the government to negotiate a prisoner-exchange with the Hamas. It was especially visible in numerous blue and white silk-screened images of Shalit’s photograph, where it appeared in a kind of biblical font together with medieval trope marks, as if cut and pasted from the Masoretic Text. These images were hung as banners from balconies and over traffic signs, as expressions of public identification and appeal. Like earlier Zionist usages, prophetic power was translated into secular terms. As opposed to a divine promise, the slogan suggested a promise made by the state to its citizens, who serve the state and in return expect to be rescued at any cost (Ya’ir 2011, 71-84). Yet while this usage continued to secularize religious language, it suggested that Rachel’s sons had not yet returned, unravelling the Zionist telos of redemption. The use of the phrase in a campaign which criticized the government, or at least hoped to sway its policies, echoed earlier protests against the government which drew on the figure of Rachel, discussed above.

At the same time, despite its seemingly secular agenda, the biblical phrase also opened up the possibility of a return to theology.²¹ The biblical quote under Shalit’s face was hung in public places as a sign of protest, but also as flag, and even an apotropaic object which might protect him through the appeals and petitions of the Israeli people. The desire to have Shalit return tapped into a deep messianic longing, and his ultimately mundane return through a prisoner-exchange was somewhat of a deflation. This shifting understanding of the phrase “and sons will return to their borders” mirrors the decline of a classical Zionism that understands the formation of the state as the end of Jewish longing, and reads the heroic death of its soldiers as the price that must be paid for statehood, marking the end of the diaspora.

The campaign of the Shalit family against the state paradoxically embodied a sense of belonging and familiarity with the state and its institutions. In 2012 Shalit’s father, Noam Shalit, even took part in the Labor Party primaries for the Knesset. Yet the campaign to free Shalit also spoke to new forces in the Israeli

²⁰ This urban myth seems to be a re-telling of the sixteenth century visionary experience of R. Abraham Ha-Levy Berukhim, who saw a vision of Rachel at the Western Wall (Magid 1996, xl n.76). For accounts in the popular media see Shimon Cohen’s May 24, 2009 description on *Arutz Sheva*: “I asked who are you. She said, Mother Rachel.”

<http://www.inn.co.il/Forum/Forum.aspx/t102818>

and “Rabbi Eliyahu: I sent Mother Rachel to save soldiers,” on *Ynet*, January 20, 2009. <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3659188,00.html>.

²¹ In recent decades, critique of classical Zionism’s skin-deep secularization has centered on the discovery and discussion of Gershom Scholem’s 1926 letter to Franz Rosenzweig, in which he warned that the revival of modern Hebrew could apocalyptically unleash religious violence (Derrida 2002, 191-227; Shahar 2008; Raz-Krakotzkin 2013).

right,²² for which “the pragmatic concept of a state for the Jews,” which is the goal of classical Zionism, was replaced “with the fundamentalist concept of a Jewish state; that is, a state committed to ethnic cultural symbols and historic destiny” (Ram 2011, 35). An example of a neo-Zionist identification with the Shalit campaign can be found in the 2009 song, “And Sons Shall Return to their Borders,” sung by Ben Snof, an ultra-orthodox wedding singer whose trademark is his bright all-white suit (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fFVt4wd7g0> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wf3GAmy27Fk>). The song, composed for Shalit in 2009, but quickly repurposed in the summer of 2014 to identify with the missing teenagers, returns the erotic charge to this mythological language, as well as the language of longing and petition. The song addresses the land of Israel, “land, my land,” as a female figure, whose holy boundaries, both as woman and as land, are enforced and defended by her soldier-sons. Defence of the land is put into an explicitly theological context: the sons of the land must also keep the Torah and land’s commandments. Throughout the song, the terms of a kind of eternal covenant are worked out between the land and her sons, a covenant which transforms the terms of traditional Judaism, in which the land is an object in the covenant between the nation and God, to be given conditionally. The musical crescendo of the song is a plea to the land itself to return her children home. The roles of Rachel and of God are collapsed into one figure who must be petitioned, for the sake of this invented covenant between the land and her sons, who promise to love her exclusively.

The re-appearance of the biblical phrase from Jeremiah in the summer of 2014 marked a return to the liminal years of waiting for Shalit, a speeded-up recreation of a familiar mood that is both conditioned by the state and its institutions, but also emergent through spontaneous popular culture. At the same time, this seeming repetition of national mood, down to the familiar phrase, also contained some key differences. Firstly, Shalit was a soldier, and though he was depicted in a somewhat unheroic manner, he still had symbolic connections to the string of Zionist soldier-sons who appear in popular songs. As teenagers not yet in the military, Naftali, Gilad, and Eyal were represented as unambiguous victims; the biblical phrase symbolically returned Rachel’s sons to their exilic position, fully unravelling the Zionist narrative. At the same time, the teenagers were not the victims of Eastern European pogroms, but rather part of a Jewish settlement project with complex ties to the power of the state; Michael Feige has talked about the use of diasporic imagery as settlers’ “exilic role playing” (Feige 2009, 52).

The “borders” that the sons were meant to return to, back from “enemy land,” also acquired a new valence in 2014, and were characterized by more ambiguous geographical borders and borders of national belonging. Shalit was held captive in Gaza, and was returned home to Mitzpe Hila in the western Galilee, firmly within the borders of the state of Israel. The three teenagers, in contrast, were hitchhiking in a conflict zone, a symbolic and legal liminal area. Thus, the use of the phrase from Jeremiah marked an anxiety about the firm distinction between “enemy land” and the “borders,” of the nation. In some cases, the phrase was changed to

²² Here we can draw another parallel to references to Babylon which “cut across secular, religious, and political lines revealing interdependencies of political positions, as well as the religious shaping of the entire political field” (Runions 2014a, 7).

“and *brothers* shall return to their borders,” as if to counter a charge that Jewish settlers did not represent national consensus.²³

Though the phrase had theological undertones even in the case of Shalit (and really arguably in *all* Zionist usages), it also evoked a secular protest against the state. Yet in the summer of 2014, the phrase lost its valence as protest: the desires of the supporters of the teenagers were almost completely aligned with state. In some ways, then, at this moment the once-secularized Zionist version of the phrase reverted entirely back to its theological meaning, expressing a traditional Jewish appeal to Rachel and God. At the same time, the neo-Zionist usage was not entirely a reversion to traditional religious language: it retained an echo of the pathos directed toward the state and its sovereign borders, an affect of protest without a clear signifier. In this sense, as the phrase “returned” to its usage as a religious petition, it was also marked by an excess of affect that motivated and authorized the military action that followed. While the Fraenkel family notably spoke out against retaliation, the excessive petitionary energy unleashed by the use of the prophecy may have provided an affective backdrop for fantasies and acts of revenge. In tracing the usages of the figure of Rachel in contemporary Israel, it is possible, then, to discern, how Rachel, like Babylon, and the biblical text is “used to authorize military action and policy in war,” to paraphrase Runions (Runions 2014a, 3).

I wish to close my discussion with one of the stranger slogans of the massive attack on Gaza that commenced in July 2014, a way in which the figure of Rachel was recast to authorize military action. In the midst of the attack on Gaza, the municipality of Or Yehudah, a town near Tel Aviv, posted a sign which read, “IDF soldiers/ the residents of Or Yehudah are with you!/Fuck their mothers²⁴ and come home safely to your mothers.”²⁵ In a sense, this is a vulgar reformulation of the Jeremianic oracle. The sons of the nation are encouraged to return home safely to their Jewish mothers, a collective body of concerned Mother Rachels on the home front. However, this time it is not Rachel’s weeping and intercession that brings home the boys, but the attack on Palestinians, especially their most vulnerable mothers, or mother-parts, which leads to a reward for the Jewish mothers. Here, the structure of slogan is used to repress the sorrow of Palestinian mothers in its attempt to assure and encourage Rachel’s sons, as well as giving authority to the war project. In my future research I hope to continue to develop tools to analyse further manifestations of the “Rachel Complex” in order to gain insight into the way land, motherhood, and war take shape in national mythology.

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²³ See also n3.

²⁴ Literally, “get into their mothers.”

²⁵ <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/local/1.238664>

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