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# Roy Hasan Is the Hebrew Poet of Our Generation

Hip-hop and jazz are two major influences on Hasan, the first poet of Mizrahi origins to write canonical poetry from the very outset of his literary career.

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**Roy Hasan.** Credit: Oded Kirma

A few years ago, a well-known writer asked me whom I considered to be the leading Hebrew poet of our generation. Now I can answer that question. It's Roy Hasan. Born in Hadera in 1983, Hasan is the author of the pioneering poetry book "The Dogs that Barked in Our Childhood Were Muzzled" (Tangier Books, 2014) and a member of the defiantly Mizrahi (that is, of Middle Eastern or North African Jewish origin) Ars Poetica group, which recently was collectively awarded the prestigious Bernstein Prize for young writers.

Hasan is the Natan Alterman of our generation; the Yona Wallach of our generation; the Meir Wieseltier of our generation. But above all, he is the Roy Hasan of this generation, its outstanding poet. More than any other poet-of-a-generation, he has articulated wholly new, groundbreaking themes, and a new poetics, in Hebrew verse.

That assertion will not be self-evident to the conservative poets and readers of poetry among us – those who are still bogged down somewhere in the 1980s, when Yona Wallach departed this world, or those who still look back fondly on poet Hezy Leskly. Some of these people ridicule Hasan as a “scrivener.” They know Hasan’s work largely from poems he has published in Haaretz’s Culture and Literature supplement (in Hebrew), which primarily address the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi rift in Israeli society. But they have not read all the poems in his book, most of which concern his personal identity and family life. Moreover, they read his work by utilizing the poetic tools of the past and their traditions. They try to foist on this young poet the expressionist, symbolist and imagist traditions that the canonical practitioners of the new Hebrew poetry, including those mentioned above, imported into this country from early-20th-century Russian, French and Anglo-Saxon poetry.

After doing so, they go on to declare that Hasan is not Alterman and not Dahlia Ravikovitch, or come up with some other derogatory professional comment. Where is it written that only the elitist models they cite can represent great poetry? Poetry critics also read Hasan’s work through the prism of Mizrahi literary traditions that do not constitute its foundations. Although his canonical poem “Medinat Ashkenaz” (“The State of Ashkenaz”) constitutes a continuation of the struggle of generations of Mizrahi poets in the country, readers of his book in its entirety know that it represents a far more sweeping revolution, an entirely new poetical style.

To grasp what this means entails not only reading Hasan’s poetry differently but also revolutionizing the conventional reading of modern Hebrew poetry as such, which generally drew on the same literary arenas in which it itself operated. Similarly, an extensive knowledge of the contemporary Hebrew poetic tradition was crucial for a critical reading of the newer works.

The innovation in Hasan’s poetry lies in its potential to give rise to a new generation of critics who can understand his work in depth without having to possess such prior knowledge. Of course, it never hurts to bring an informed background to a perusal of new poetry, but the new critics will also need to have a grasp of music and musical traditions, and of cinema and cinematic traditions. The world is changing. The new poetry critics will have to be at least as familiar with Facebook and YouTube, for example, as they are with the verses of Vladimir Mayakovsky or Sergei Yesenin, or the liturgical poems of Rabbi Shalom Shabazi.

Haaretz’s Hebrew Culture and Literature supplement published a poem by Hasan on July 3, entitled “If There’ll be Peace, All the Arsim Will Come.” (Arsim, singular ar, is Arabic-derived Hebrew slang referring to declassé Mizrahim, with connotations similar to “white trash.”) The poem generated a Facebook furor and spawned thousands of “likes” and hundreds of “shares,” in addition to arguments between readers over the critical positions it took – notably in regard to those identified as Ashkenazi leftists, kibbutzniks and secular Tel Avivians, who “wish their Arab brothers / Ramadan Kareem / and sign petitions legalizing / the sale of hametz during Passover” (translation by Ron Makleff).

One of the poem's readers, a talented young poet in his own right, wrote me that the poem is based on a skit by the American standup comic Craig Anton. Although there are intimations of Hasan's poem in Anton's rant, his writing has a different pulse. In any event, the suggestion prompted me to ask Hasan himself about his influences.

The things he said in response had previously passed under the radar of the critics. They wrote about how his work is a link in the chain of Mizrahi poetry in Israel, but they failed to grasp the true spirit of this original writer. In this connection, Hasan had told the newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth in May 2014, "I write for my father, for my neighbors, for my home, not for the poetry aficionados and not for academia." In fact, among the direct influences on Hasan's writing are black American hip-hop music of the slum neighborhoods (Wu-Tang Clan, Mos Def, The Notorious B.I.G. and others); American jazz (John Coltrane); Israeli Mizrahi singer Ofer Levi; and also American and Italian cinema, notably directors Jim Jarmusch, Spike Lee and Pier Paolo Pasolini – as he wrote me in an Internet chat.

In November 2013, Hasan published a post on the website Café Gibraltar, edited by Mizrahi activist Ophir Toubul, to mark the 20th anniversary of Wu-Tang Clan's first album, "Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)." That experimental, revolutionary album is one of Hasan's favorites, as he notes in the post, but it also became one of the most influential in the history of that musical genre in the United States. Wu-Tang Clan, a hip-hop group that originated in Staten Island, New York, consists of eight members (there were nine, but Ol' Dirty Bastard, one of the three founders, died of a drug overdose in prison at the age of 35) who go by the names of kung fu fighters, and whose music has infiltrated America's black ghettos.

### **'Textual flood'**

Hasan describes that excellent album in the post as "[a] textual flood of uncompromising social criticism, about childhood and broken dreams, about friendship that binds fates together, about the racism of the white man and self-glorification, about impossible love for everything that doesn't exist – family, women, money – wrapped in Eastern philosophy, which began with the wave of kung fu movies from the Far East and American kung fu B movies that washed over the ghettos of New York and Brooklyn in the 1980s and continued with samurai philosophy and with ancient Chinese literature and poetry."

In his poetry, Hasan replaces the ghettos of New York with Hadera-like ghettos, both thematically and in terms of rhythm. Indeed, in his post about the Wu-Tang Clan album, Hasan also mentions its rhythmic aspects – a subject that is highly pertinent to a reading of his poetry: "living, jagged beats from a mosaic of fragments, beats bold in their minimalism, beats that thrust forward but give you a feeling that they are pulling backward and which create a dissonance between head and body," he wrote, adding, "audio segments from records of black music from the 1950s to the '90s, audio segments of kung fu movies and audio segments of sounds from the milieu in which they were born and grew up."

Hasan's book is rife with specific references to that music. In the poem "Ketsev Shahor" ("Black Rhythm"), he writes about an affair he had with a girl he met one night in a bar: "Wind instruments tickle my panties' / you said to me, I was drunk, wiped out / and you drank more than I did. / You took me to your place to listen to jazz / pulled off your shoes and put the needle / on the record. / I'll never forget / the solid white legs / pounding the floor / in a black African / rhythm." In another love poem in the book, "Wherever Your Lovely Legs Will Take You," Hasan writes: "We got drunk like two beautiful animals in front of the television / and listened to rap and to all the black music that exists."

In his breakthrough poem, "The State of Ashkenaz," he relates how he learned English from the well-known, Brooklyn-born hip-hop artist Jay Z, "because I needed to know what the kid from the ghetto had to say." The next mention of this musical genre effectively reveals that the right way to read Hasan's poetry is through the rhythm of black hip-hop, or any free accentuated beat based on a long chain of images, unfolding scenes and sequences that are cast hypnotically on the reader, on the one hand, and resistance (if you're on the side being attacked) or acceptance (if you're on the attacking side), on the other hand.

In the poem "Like a Beggar," he writes, "I went back / to listening to hip-hop, to praying to my God / the rhythm that will restore the groove to my life, which lately / has worn work clothes and lacked all lightning, or / thunder, I cut / grind / slice / cook / so much fish / fowl / beef a day / that it's dulling."

These lines perhaps encapsulate the whole story: the rhythm of the hip-hop groove juxtaposed with the world of work. Indeed, the idea of work is pervasive in the poems – work that is slavery, and in particular being employed as a cook, which was Hasan's job before he entered the army, during his military service and for a short time afterward. Here, too, we need to pause in order to understand. Haim Gouri, for example, the canonical poet of the so-called Palmach generation – those embodying the ethos of heroism and derring-do in the struggle to establish the state – was a combat soldier and an officer. But Roy Hasan was an army cook. Every Israeli knows that these are wholly disparate worlds of life and consciousness.

### **Dancing Nietzschean star**

Furthermore, when the young poets of Tel Aviv joined the social-protest demonstrations on Rothschild Boulevard in the summer of 2011, Roy Hasan, the cook from Hadera, found himself unable to identify with them. In his writing, Hasan, who grew up in a lower-class neighborhood in a nondescript city, portrays a street beggar with a direct immediacy – not with anthropological remoteness. For Hasan, smoking hashish is not a heroic journey of exploration, as it was for the late poet David Avidan; it is part of the day-to-day life experience that shaped the poems collected in the book.

Drawing also on welcome Eastern and Western influences – writers he is fond of, such as Yoel Hoffmann and Pinhas Sadeh, Raymond Carver and Balzac; contemporary Israeli popular culture

(personified by the singers Margol and Omer Adam, the late entertainer Dudu Topaz, the veteran journalist Yaron London, Channel 1 producer Aharon Goldfinger and others, who symbolize the life experiences of a generation and of different communities); salient scenes from cinema; and evocations of Jewish liturgy, albeit from a critical viewpoint insofar as religious beliefs are concerned – Hasan has produced a singular, rich, mature and fully formed book of verse.

The book resembles a musical album with closely interwoven tracks: The poems follow each other in a natural order and interconnect. The progression begins with the poem “On the Bed”: “On the bed / ahead of another day of / work / I whisper to myself / as a silent prayer / the words of Zarathustra: / A person who has no chaos within him / Will not be able to give birth to a dancing star. / There is chaos within you, there is chaos within you! / There is, is, is.”

In the book, Hasan gives birth to this dancing Nietzschean star, and his more canonical poems also succeed in accomplishing the following: They are the work of the first Mizrahi poet who was already canonical from the very outset of his literary career.

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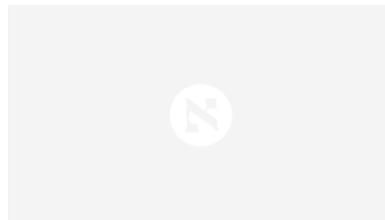
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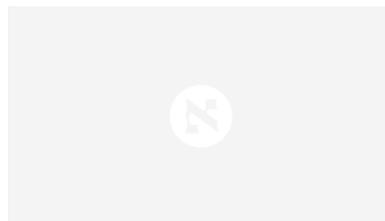
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