

Almog Behar's "Ana min al-yahud"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/almog-behar-ana-min-al-yahud>.

Introduction

Almog Behar, a Jewish Israeli-born writer of Iraqi, Turkish, and German descent, is one of the leading voices in contemporary Mizrahi culture in Israel. (For an explanation of the terms "Sephardi," "Mizrahi," and "Arab-Jew(ish)," please see note below.)* Behar's lyrical, surreal, and politically groundbreaking story "*Ana min al-yahud*" ("I am one of the Jews") sets the issue of contemporary Arab-Jewish identity against Zionism's rejection of diasporic identities and diasporic languages such as the Jewish dialects of Arabic once spoken by many Mizrahi Jews from Arabic-speaking countries. In so doing, it also touches on the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Written in Hebrew but bearing an Arabic title, the story is narrated by the first victim of a mysterious "language plague" that causes young, native, Hebrew-speaking Israeli Jews to revert to their grandparents' diasporic accents: the Yiddish-inflected accents of many Ashkenazic Jews, the Arabic accents of those who hailed from Arabic-speaking countries such as Iraq and Yemen, and the Ladino-tinged accents of those with roots in places like Salonica and Istanbul. For the narrator, this predicament serves as a powerful indictment of his parents' generation, which, in seeking full assimilation into mainstream Israeli society, had rejected its Arabic (or otherwise non-Israeli) heritage. It also represents the rehabilitation of his Iraqi-Jewish grandfather, who was one of the generation of Arabic Jewish immigrants considered unassimilable by the nascent Israeli state.

The winner of *Haaretz's* annual short story contest in 2005, when Behar was an unknown student, "*Ana min al-yahud*" launched the author's literary career. It was reprinted in 2008 in his first short story collection, where it appeared bilingually in Hebrew and in Arabic translation. The story dramatizes issues related to the reappearance of the past in the present, as well as issues related to cultural memory and the possibility of there being more than one modern Hebrew. It particularly explores the at-times politically fraught relationship between Jews, Mizrahi identity, and Arabic. This kit offers resources to help students contextualize and interpret this stylistically challenging, conceptually complex, and politically provocative text.

*"Mizrahi," Hebrew for "eastern" (plural "Mizrahim") refers to those Jews whose family roots are in Asia and Africa, including India, Iran, Central Asia, and the Arabic-speaking regions of North Africa, the Levant, and the Arabian Gulf. There is some overlap between the terms "Mizrahi," a category of identity created in 20th century Israel, and the more traditional term "Sephardi," but nowadays "Sephardi" (plural "Sephardim") is typically used to denote Jews who can trace their ancestry back to Spain and whose ancestors spoke the Judeo-Spanish language of Ladino. Today, of course, many Mizrahi Jews, like Behar himself, may be of mixed heritage, with a combination of Mizrahi, Ashkenazic, and/or Sephardi ancestry. "Arab Jew" (sometimes hyphenated as "Arab-Jew") is a term that has become more widespread since the 1990s following efforts by Israeli intellectuals such as Behar to reclaim and affirm the cultural and linguistic affinities of Jews from Arab countries (and their descendants) and to contest the idea that "Arab" and "Jew" are mutually exclusive identity categories.

Cover image: A piece of embroidery reading, in Arabic, "*Ana yahudi*" ("I am Jewish"), created by Israeli artist Haim Maor, 1990.

Subjects

Fiction, Hebrew, Immigration, Mizrahi, Sephardi, Israel-Palestine

Reading and Background

- The English translation of the story, followed by the contest jury's comments, can be found [here](#).



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- Information about Almog Behar can be found at the [Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature](#) and in this 2017 [conversation with the author](#), published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. For more on the author's political views, read [this interview](#) from Words without Borders (2011).
- Background on the role of Arabic in Israeli culture and the relationship between Mizrahim and Arabic can be found in Chapter One of Lital Levy's *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (2017). Chapter Six of the same book offers a critical study of "Ana min al-yahud."
- A free collection of much of Behar's work – both poetry and short stories, in Hebrew with English translation – is available [here](#). This digital volume, published in 2017, is titled *Kakh et hashir haze vehetek oto (Take This Poem and Copy It)*.
- Some classes with an interest in the Hebrew Bible may wish to have a look at the Biblical story of the "shibboleth" ([Judges 12:5-6](#)). There, the victorious army of the Gileadites put to death those defeated people of the Israelite tribe Ephraim who are unable to say the word *shibolet* (a stalk of grain, or a stream) as *shibolet*, and instead use the Ephraimite pronunciation of *sibolet*. This may be used to demonstrate a very early instance of accents and dialects uniting and dividing us, and serving as in-group and out-group markers.

Resources

1: Short story excerpt, Almog Behar's "Ana min al-yahud," 2005, Hebrew with English translation.

Prior to this excerpt, the narrator in Behar's story has for a while been speaking in the Iraqi Arabic-tinged accent of his immigrant grandfather, with its "glottal 'ayyin" and "glottal Iraqi quf" and the tsaddi that sounds like an "s" – non-standard pronunciations of modern Israeli Hebrew letters, which the narrator was not raised using. In this passage, the deceased grandfather begins to speak to the narrator, wondering "why is this history of mine mixed up with yours."

Suggested activity: Tease apart this dense passage with students. The grandfather calls himself "the generation of the desert." This term has been used to refer to the generation of Israelis that immigrated from Arab countries in the middle of the twentieth century. The term can be pejorative, implying that the immigrants had nothing to contribute to society, and were stuck in their diasporic past. Why would the grandfather use this term here to describe himself? What other meanings might the desert take on here? The grandfather also talks of making sacrifices for the narrator's generation and about a painful past. What kind of struggle do you think he is alluding to? How does he seem to feel about the narrator's new accent? How does he feel about the narrator having "arisen to renew" him?

For a more creative activity, ask each student to imagine what a departed ancestor of their own, whether a grandparent or someone from further back, might say to them about the way they speak, or about the language or dialect they use. Ask each student to create a monologue in the voice of their ancestor, reflecting on the similarities and differences between the ancestor's speech and the student's. Perhaps the differences between their speech might connect to the differences between their lives and personal histories. The student may write down this monologue, or speak it impromptu to the class. Share these monologues and then discuss: are there any common threads between the various monologues that students have constructed, and between their monologues and the grandfather's in the story?

Source: Almog Behar, "Ana min al-yahud" ("I Am One of the Jews"), in *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv: April 28, 2005), trans. Vivian Eden, <<https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1528732>> (Hebrew) and <<https://www.haaretz.com/1.4852446>> (English), accessed March 20, 2018.

2: Excerpt of a literary jury's statement, Sami Bardugo, Orna Coussin, and Ehud Ein-Gil, "Haaretz" short story contest, 2005.

Almog Behar's "Ana min al-yahud" won *Haaretz*'s short story contest in 2005. The statement of the jury that selected it, comprised of other Israeli authors, appears in full alongside the story on the *Haaretz* [website](#). The judges first discuss the merits of Behar's story, which they commend for "the richness and quality of the writing, a light whiff of humor and unexpected changes of direction [that] make it clear that this is indeed a story and not a protest article in disguise," and then discuss the general traits of all the stories submitted for the prize – around 2,000 in total. This excerpt comes from that portion of the statement.

Suggested activity: Read over the excerpt with your students. Discuss: in what way does Behar's story match the description of the general crop of submissions, and in what ways does it differ? Is Behar's story local or universal? Is it specific or anonymous? How does Behar's story work against the namelessness and anonymity that the judges are attributing to the other submissions? How does it perhaps work against strains of anonymity in the Modern Hebrew language itself? And why is it that the narrator's grandfather, Anwar, is named right at the top of the story, while the narrator (like others the judges describe in this quotation) never is?

Source: Sami Bardugo, Orna Coussin, and Ehud Ein-Gil, statement on the submissions for *Haaretz's* Short Story Competition (Tel Aviv: *Haaretz*, April 28, 2005), <<https://www.haaretz.com/1.4852446>>, accessed March 20, 2018.

3: Poem, Almog Behar's "My Arabic is Mute," 2017, Hebrew with English translation; videos of the poem being read aloud by Behar, in Hebrew, and Behar and Ramzi Salti, in Hebrew and Arabic.

This poem by Almog Behar is an excellent companion to his story. "*Ha'aravit sheli 'ilemet*" ("My Arabic is Mute") and its two translations into English appear in a free online collection of Behar's work [here](#) (pages 8-13). In the poem, Behar reiterates the main themes and ideas of the story and even repeats some of its most salient lines. The poem personifies the speaker's own mute, hidden, fearful Arabic as a woman who says "*Ahlan, ahlan*," an Arabic greeting that has entered Israeli Hebrew slang, and who strives to prove to passing policemen that she is not a security threat (i.e., not an Arab). Note: the translator Dimi Reider translates "*Ana min al-yahud*" in the poem as "I am a Jew," unlike the translation of the phrase in Behar's story, where it is rendered as "I'm one of the Jews."

Suggested activity: Read the poem aloud in class. How are its themes similar to or different from those in the story? How is the Hebrew of the poem's speaker somehow not enough, or false, and how does this relate to the way the main character in the story sees the language of his country? How about the speaker of the poem's latent Arabic, in the context of his Israeli surroundings? Why does the speaker consider his Arabic "mute" and his Hebrew "deaf"?

Next, [watch and listen](#) to Behar read the poem both in Hebrew and in Arabic at a poetry reading in Tel Aviv in 2014. Or [listen to it read bilingually](#), and quite touchingly, by Behar and Ramzi Salti, alternating line-by-line between Hebrew (read by Behar) and Arabic (read by Salti), in a Stanford University classroom in 2017. (Salti is a Lebanese-born lecturer in Arabic at Stanford, and himself a writer of short stories. He comes from a Palestinian Christian family originating in Jerusalem and Haifa.)

Ask students about their experiences hearing the poem in different languages. Did they gain different perspectives on the poem with each reading? Have the students consider the sounds of the languages. Did Salti's Arabic sound different from Behar's, and did Behar's Hebrew sound different from Hebrew speech they may have heard before? (Note, for example, that he pronounces the 'ayin gutturally, in the manner of Arab Jews and the narrator of "*Ana min al-yahud*," and not as a silent letter, which is the Modern Hebrew standard.) Ask students if they have ever heard a literary work read in Hebrew or Arabic before, and what, if any, associations they bring to the sound of either of those languages. How might the students' own perceptions of the sounds of these languages, and accents, relate to various persons' reactions to the main character's speech in Behar's story?

Source: Almog Behar, trans. Dimi Reider, "*Ha'aravit sheli 'ilemet*" ("My Arabic is mute"), in *Kakh et hashir haze vehetek oto* (*Take This Poem and Copy It: Selected poems and stories in Hebrew and in English translation*) (Self-published by the author online, 2017), <<https://almogbehar.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/almog-behar-collected-poe...>>, accessed March 12, 2018.

Ars Poetika (YouTube handle "ArsPoetika"), "Ars poetika 14 / almog behar" (March 30, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJE1ef4hCus&list=PLWL6Bfgo1AZZpG_bYjWI-hUKKeyK4ownJk&index=1>, accessed March 23, 2018), Almog Behar performing "*Ha'aravit sheli 'ilemet*" at an event sponsored by Radio EPGB in Tel Aviv, March 25, 2014, web video.

Ramzi Salti (YouTube handle "Ramzi Salti"), "Ramzi Salti + Almog Behar Reciting Poem in Arabic + Hebrew" (March 7, 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6NT5JFliz0>>, accessed March 23, 2018), filmed at Stanford University, web video.

4: Embroidery with appliqué of satin and velvet, Haim Maor's "Ana yahudi," 1990.

This is an image of a tapestry bearing the Arabic words "*Ana yahudi*" ("I am a Jew"). Produced by artist Haim Maor, the Israeli-born son of Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivors, the work was originally exhibited in a Tel Aviv gallery in 1990. It later appeared on the

back cover of *Hakivun mizrah* (*Eastward Bound*), a journal of Mizrahi culture and literature, for a special bilingual Hebrew-Arabic issue.

This embrace of the Arabic language by an Ashkenazi Jewish Israeli might be seen as a statement on Jewish/Palestinian relations in Israel, as an example of a Jew embracing the language of the “enemy.” At the same time, Maor’s tapestry seems to distill the themes of Behar’s short story—and the complexity of Mizrahi identity—into a single image. In its very construction, it disproves the ideas—prevalent in the Middle East and elsewhere—that an Arab cannot be a Jew, and that a Jew does not speak Arabic. Since most Jewish viewers would not be able to read the Arabic, this piece reminds them (once they read the title in English or Hebrew) of the loss of Arabic as a common and publicly spoken Jewish language.

From yet another perspective, the word “Jew” sewn on a cloth patch may evoke memories of the Holocaust, when Jews and others were forced to wear such badges proclaiming their inferior status under Nazi rule. And yet, Maor’s tapestry seems to upend the Nazis intentions; by adding “I am a” (“*Ana*” in Arabic), the “Jew” becomes an affirmatively claimed identity rather than a pejorative label. (For further interpretation of this image, see Lital Levy’s *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (2017), page 267.)

Suggested activity: Look closely at the image with students. Together, describe the design, shapes, colors, and content of the tapestry. Ask students what the image makes them think of. A Holocaust-era identity badge? A statement of ethnic pride? An “Oriental” rug? An Arab flag? A *parochet* (the curtain in a synagogue that covers the ark which holds the Torah scrolls)? How do their different associations fit together or contradict one another?

Discuss: why might Maor—an Ashkenazi Jew—have created this artwork? How might it resonate with Mizrahi Israelis? With Ashkenazi Israelis? With Palestinian or other non-Jewish Arab viewers?

Ask students to come up with their own visual representation of the relationship between Arabness and Jewishness, or between Jewishness and some other ethnic or national identity they might claim (e.g., Jewishness and Americanness). What might it look like? Ask students to sketch out a plan for it on paper or, if you have more time, to create a complete work of art.

Source: Haim Maor, “*Ana yahudi*,” embroidery with appliqué of satin and velvet, 140 x 190 cm, 1990. From the artist’s collection.

5: Comic, Asaf Hanuka's "Jew + Arab = Mizrahi," ca. 2010-2012.

Beginning in 2010, the comic strips created by Israeli artist Asaf Hanuka have been appearing in the Tel Aviv daily *Calcalist*. Described by *Haaretz* as “[The Man Who Churns Israeli Anxiety Into Comic Art](#),” his comics probe into his own identity as a Mizrahi Jew of Iraqi heritage and issues in Israeli society at large. The same 2016 article in *Haaretz* presented this quotation from him, alluding to a life experience comparable to the situation in Behar’s story: “My secret identity was an Arab, or Mizrahi... I grew up in a house in which my mother spoke Arabic to her mother but never to her children. The entire issue of our origins was vague; it wasn’t clear to me where my family had come from. I think my mother, who came from Iraq when she was four, preferred that we, my sister, brother and I, would grow up in a neutral environment with no reference to Ashkenazi or Sephardi origins, so that we would simply be Israelis.”

In this comic, he presents a simple equation of what is a Mizrahi Jew — or how the world, or Israeli society, sees such a person. The bottom image is a self-portrait of the artist. (Note that the bottom caption reads in Hebrew, “Mizrahi,” but is somewhat imprecisely translated underneath as “Sephardi.” Though these identities often intersect — with many Arab Jews ultimately descending from Jews who were exiled from Spain — they are not the same.)

Suggested activity: Discuss the comic with students: what are the characteristics of his “Arab” and his “Jew”? Are the representations unexpected or stereotypical? What kind of Jew does the “Jew” seem to be, and why has Hanuka drawn him thus? And seeing as these characters add up to a portrait of himself, the “Mizrahi,” what does he seem to be saying about how he himself, and Mizrahim generally, are seen by society? How might this “equation” relate to the way the narrator of Behar’s story is perceived when he begins expressing his Arab-ness through his speech?

Consider asking each student to create an “equation” of their own identity. These may be done strictly in words, or with pictures added. First they should choose which identity of theirs they may wish to be the final product of the equation. Then they can consider: which elements, divided or multiplied by each other, added or subtracted, culminate in that identity, whether in their own view or in the perceptions of others.

Source: Asaf Hanuka, "Arab + Jew = Mizrahi," comic, in Josh Lambert, "Tel Aviv's Comics Knock-out" (*Tablet*: June 18, 2012), <<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/102688/tel-avivs-comics-knock-out#>>, accessed April 10, 2018.

6: Poem reading, Adi Keissar's "A Poem For Those," 2014.

Adi Keissar is the original artist behind *Ars Poetika*, a grassroots movement of new Israeli poets, and especially, Mizrahi poets, which Keissar founded in 2013. It takes its name from the word "ars" (Arabic for "pimp," and an Israeli pejorative term for Mizrahi men) and Horace's ancient poem on "the art of poetry," "*Ars Poetica*." In a *Forward* article by fellow Yemeni-Israeli writer Ayelet Tsabari, Keissar says that "In Israel, like in the world, there's one narrative that erases and defines other narratives." But, in reference to her *Ars Poetika* poetry-reading/party series also providing a space for Ashkenazic writers, she insists, "The idea of *Ars Poetica* is that it doesn't exclude."

Israeli literary scholar Dror Mishani writes of an issue of the periodical *Hakivun mizrakh* (*Eastward Bound*) focusing on such art as Behar's and Keissar's, which seeks to reclaim an Arabic Jewish past by the creation of a Mizrahi idiom in Hebrew literature, "It reminds [Israeli] Hebrew of all the opportunities it missed, of all the possible Hebrews that it put to sleep inside itself, that it forgot, and that resurface now to speak."

In this work, "A Poem For Those" ("*Shir le-mi*"), Keissar responds to such tensions in Israeli society and high art, with an assertive message, and a prophecy, for those "who speak the right language / with the right accent."

(For another relevant poem by Keissar, which comments on the language rupture between a Yemeni-Jewish woman and her Israeli-born granddaughter, see this video of the poet reading her work "*Shakhor 'al gabei shakhor*" ("Black on Black"), at an event sponsored by the University of Texas at Austin's Institute for Israel Studies in 2017. Her recitation is followed by a translation of the poem into English.)

Suggested activity: Watch the video with your students and get their immediate impressions. How did it affect them, and did they like it? Did it make them feel powerful, uncomfortable, confused, excited, or something else? Why? Then try to puzzle out Keissar's meaning. Who does the speaker of the poem seem to be addressing? Who "will ask / to rip the door from its place / and tear down the house"? What might "tearing down the house" mean? Is anyone in Behar's story trying to "tear down the house"? Is Behar himself, and Keissar also? In what ways?

Source: *Ars Poetika* (YouTube handle "ArsPoetika"), "Ars poetika 13 / Adi Keissar" (May 11, 2014), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRajmKL-cHU>>, accessed April 12, 2018), Adi Keissar performing "*Shir lemi*" at a reading in Tel Aviv, January 26, 2014, web video.

7: Essay excerpt, Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue," 1989.

In 1989, upon learning that her fellow panelists at a symposium on the state of English would include scholars who studied the English language, Tan wrote this defense of her own range of "different Englishes." It was later published as an essay in the literary magazine *The Threepenny Review*, leading her to wonder, she humorously claimed, "whether all my essays should be written at two in the morning in a state of panic." This excerpt from the essay describes Tan's Chinese-born mother's non-native English, how it sometimes seems to others, and how it seems to the author herself.

Suggested activity: Have students read the entire essay, available [here](#), or read this representative excerpt with them. Ask them to discuss their own experiences of accents and speech styles, whether foreign accents, regional and ethnic accents, or class-based accents. Can they think of an example from their own lives, history, or a piece of fiction, in which someone's accent has been a source of pride or pleasure to themselves or others? Can they think of an example when someone's accent or way of speaking led them or others to make stereotypical or damaging assumptions? Ask students to imagine what their world would be like if everyone in it was suddenly struck by the language plague that afflicts the narrator in Behar's story. What would that look and sound like in their own hometown, as opposed to in Behar's Jerusalem? What would the implications of such a plague be?

For additional and more extensive essays that complement the Tan essay and the Behar story, you can assign Julia Alvarez's "My English" from *Something to Declare* (2014) or Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" from the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (2015).

Source: Amy Tan, "Mother Tongue" in *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2003).

