

Leah Goldberg's "Tel Aviv 1935"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/leah-goldbergs-tel-aviv-1935>.

Introduction

Leah Goldberg's poem "Tel Aviv 1935" offers a vivid and complicated account of Jewish immigration in the early twentieth century. Goldberg immigrated to Mandatory Palestine in 1935, the same year her first book of Hebrew poetry was published. In this poem, which was published in the early 1960s, the poet looks back on this period and on the relationship that Jewish immigrants from Europe had—and continue to have—with the places and languages of the diaspora. This resource kit offers historical and biographical materials that will help contextualize this poem and also provides guidelines for teaching the poem in English translation.

Subjects

Hebrew, Immigration, Israel/Palestine, Poetry, Women Writers

Reading and Background:

- A short biography of Leah Goldberg is available in the *Jewish Women's Archive Encyclopedia*.
- Goldberg's poetry has been translated many times into English. Recommended translations include Rachel Tzvia Back's *Lea Goldberg: Selected Poetry and Drama* (Toby Press, 2005) and Annie Kantar's *With This Night* (University of Texas Press, 2011). Both include translations of "Tel Aviv 1935" into English.
- Yair Qedar's documentary "The Five Houses of Leah Goldberg" offers an innovative visual biography of the poet, interspersed with readings of her poems. The film is [available online](#) with English subtitles.
- Goldberg's poem addresses the multilingualism of Jewish immigrants in Mandatory Palestine and also hints at relations between Hebrew and Arabic. The poem also addresses how memories of and nostalgia for the past can complicate the desire to create a territorial Jewish national culture. Two recent and highly recommended studies on Jewish nation-building and language politics include Liora Halperin's *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920-1948* (Yale University Press, 2014) and Arieh B. Saposnik's *Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of Jewish National Culture in Ottoman Palestine* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
- For some guidelines on how to approach teaching poetry in translation, see my short essay on [teaching Goldberg's poem "Pine" \(Oren\)](#) in multiple English translations.
- A. D. Coleman's "[No Pictures: Some Thoughts on Jews in Photography](#)" may be helpful for working with the photograph in resource #6. The essay addresses the participation of Jews in the history of photography and the role of photography in shaping Jewish history and memory in the twentieth century. Also recommended is Sara Blair's essay "[Jewish American Through the Lens](#)," which considers the question of what makes a photograph "Jewish."

Resources

1: Poem, "Tel Aviv 1935" by Leah Goldberg, 1964.

This poem is written in quatrains, a classic form for Hebrew poetry. The rhyme structure is irregular, which calls attention to the places where there *is* rhyme, for example, in lines 6 and 8. The poem appeared in Goldberg's 1964 collection *With This Night* (*Im ha-layla ha-ze*) and is the second poem of a six-poem cycle titled "The Shortest Journey" (*Ha-m'asa ha-katsar be-yoter*).

Suggested Activities: Ask students to imagine that they have moved to a new place or to draw on their personal experiences with moving and/or immigration. In what specific ways would/did their life change under those circumstances? Ask them to make a list of all of the things that would be/were different, and how well they think they could/did adapt to these changes. What part of their old life would/did they want to hold on to? How would this be/was this possible?



Or: Ask students to imagine that they have to leave their home for an indefinite period of time and can pack only one small carry-on bag. What would they take with them? Ask them to consider how current technologies of communication have changed the way we move in the world. Do these technologies suffice to make us feel at home anywhere in the world, and if not, what are their limits?

Sources: Leah Goldberg, "Tel Aviv 1935," in *With This Night ('Im ha-layla ha-ze)*, (Israel: Sifriat Poalim, 1964). Translation by Adriana X. Jacobs, 2017.

2: Etching, "Christopher Columbus Discovers the Island of Hispaniola" (El Almirante Christoval Colon Descubre la Isla Española, ij haze poner una Cruz, etc.) by Pieter Balthazar Bouttats, 1728.

The first stanza of Goldberg's poem compares Tel Aviv's rooftops with "the masts on Columbus' ships." Through this simile, Goldberg draws a powerful relation between Jewish immigration to Palestine and the European discovery of the Americas. While she challenges the idea of a monolingual and monolithic national culture, rather highlighting Tel Aviv's plurality of languages and cultures, Goldberg's simile also opens itself to a consideration of how the inhabitants of Mandatory Palestine may have perceived and experienced the arrival of these new immigrants.

Suggested activities: Ask students to consider this simile in light of the current legacy of Christopher Columbus and ongoing debates on immigration. Examine Pieter Balthazar Bouttats' etching, paying close attention to the reaction of the island's inhabitants. Ask the students to describe the different receptions to the arrival of the European explorers. Then turn to Goldberg's poem and reread the first two stanzas. Have students discuss the challenges that immigration presents for those who arrive to a new place and for those who are already living there. What kind of portrayal (e.g., positive, negative, ambivalent) of Jewish immigration does the poem offer? Ask students to cite specific language and imagery from the poem in their answers.

Source: Pieter Balthazar Bouttats, *Christopher Columbus Discovers the Island of Hispaniola (El almirante Christoval Colon descubre la Isla Española, ij haze poner una Cruz, etc.)* 1728. Etching. Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006683686>

3: Tanakh excerpt, Genesis 8.

The raven in Goldberg's first stanza suggests two possible allusions: the biblical story of Noah's Ark and Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven." In Genesis 8, we are told that once the rains stopped, Noah first sent out a raven, which circled around (or back and forth) until the waters cleared. Then Noah sent out a dove, which brought back a sign of land. (We'll discuss the Poe poem in resource #4 of this kit.)

Suggested activity: Ask students to think about the significance of the raven in this poem. Have them think about the relation to the biblical story and why Goldberg highlights the raven and not the dove, the bird that ultimately finds a place for the Ark to settle. Why choose the raven, a bird that circles around without finding a destination? Ask them to think about the implications of turning the raven into a herald of "different continents." Does the raven make us think differently about immigration and settlement?

Sources: Genesis 8, The Hebrew Bible, <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0108.htm>.

4: Poem, "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe, 1845.

In Edgar Allan Poe's famous narrative poem, the raven visits a young man who is mourning the loss of his love. According to Poe, the raven was a symbol of "mournful and never-ending remembrance."

Suggested activity: Ask students to compare the raven in Edgar Allen Poe's famous poem "The Raven," a poem of mourning a lost love, with the biblical raven from resource #3. Goldberg would have been familiar with this poem both in the original English and in Hebrew translation. If the raven represents the inability to forget what one has lost, what is Goldberg saying about memory and its relation to immigration? Ask students to consider the role of memory in this poem, and to think about how memory complicates the ability to start a new life in a new place. Ask them to think about this in the context of Jewish immigration to Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine (and later Israel). How does diasporic memory challenge the project of Jewish nation building?

Source: Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven," originally published 1845, republished by The Poetry Foundation, accessed September 19, 2017, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48860/the-raven>.

5: Painting, "The Beginnings of Tel-Aviv" (Reshita shel Tel-Aviv) by Reuven Rubin, 1912.

In Hebrew literature of the early twentieth century, crossing the sea, from the diaspora to Palestine, is often narrated as a passage of conversion or of revival into a new national life. This painting of Tel Aviv by Reuven Rubin (1893-1974) offers a portrait of the city a few years after it was founded. By 1935, and certainly by 1964, when Goldberg's poem was published, the city had undergone rapid urbanization and expansion, unrecognizable today from the city on sand in Rubin's painting.

Suggested activities: Ask the students to draw comparisons between Rubin's painting and the visual imagery in Goldberg's poem. Have them consider the choices each artist makes in rendering Tel Aviv: what is included and what is left out? Have them look up information about Tel Aviv and its early history. In light of their research, have them discuss why it is significant that the poem is set in Tel Aviv and not in Jerusalem, for instance. Ask them to describe the connection between the three boats in Rubin's painting and Goldberg's reference to Columbus's ships.

Source: Reuven Rubin, "The Beginnings of Tel-Aviv," 1912. Oil painting. Published in *Art in Israel*, eds. Benjamin Tammuz and Max Wykes-Joyce. Philadelphia, New York & London: Chilton Book Company, 1967. Accessed September 19, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Reuven_Rubin-The_Beginnings_of_Tel-Av...

6: Photograph, self-portrait by Leah Goldberg, circa 1935.

This photograph is reportedly a self-portrait of the poet, taken in her room in the city of Kovno (today Kaunas, Lithuania) shortly before Goldberg emigrated to Palestine. Goldberg had an interest in photography and posed for many portraits in her lifetime.

Suggested activities: Have the students analyze the photograph. What elements make up this scene? How many of them appear to be staged? If this is indeed a self-portrait, what image of herself is Goldberg trying to convey here? How does Goldberg in 1935 wish for us to see her? Discuss this photograph in relation to the fourth stanza of Goldberg's poem. Ask the students to consider the limits of the photograph and to discuss how photographs help us remember. Do photographs give us an accurate or distorted image of the past, of ourselves? To what extent does Goldberg's poem reflect on those limits?

Source: Leah Goldberg, self-portrait, circa 1935. This photograph is republished here with the permission of Gnazim, the Archive of Hebrew Writers, Israel.

7: Two translations of Leah Goldberg's "Tel Aviv, 1935" by Annie Kantar, 2011, and by Robert Friend, 1976.

Goldberg's poem has been translated several times into English. These translations overlap in some respects, but in many others, they reflect each translator's distinct understanding of the poem as well as different approaches to translating poetry.

Suggested activities: Ask the students to read the translations by Annie Kantar and Robert Friend. Have them create two lists, the first indicating areas where the translations overlap (imagery, language, form) and the second where they differ. What kind of logic or pattern can they discern from these similarities and differences? Have them consider if the date of each translation is meaningful. Does the background of the translators shape these translations in any visible way? (Kantar was born in the U.S. Midwest and now lives in Israel; Friend [1913-1998] was born in New York and emigrated to Israel in 1950.)

Have the students reflect on the fact that both Kantar and Friend are published poets. Does being a poet appear to influence their translations, and in what ways? Why would a poet invest in translating another poet? Ask students to create their own translations of the poem, either translating from the Hebrew if they are able, translating the English translation into a third language, or experimenting with other forms of translation such as visual or performative. Encourage them to be creative and to take risks. If students are able to read the original Hebrew, ask them to compare the translations with the original, but to focus on what is *gained* in translation.

Source: Leah Goldberg, *With This Night*, trans. Annie Kantar (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 4.

Leah Goldberg, "Tel Aviv 1935," trans. Robert Friend in *Found in Translation: Modern Hebrew Poets, a Bilingual Edition*, selected and with an introduction by Gabriel Levin, The Toby Press, 2006; translation copyright © Jean Shapiro Cantu.