

THE CASE OF DANNY 2004

By Haim Gouri Wednesday, Sept 2004, Haaretz

It was twenty-plus years ago, in June 1982, at the beginning of the Lebanon War. An Israeli column moving north toward Sidon mistakenly entered a refugee camp along the outskirts of Tyre. The column came under heavy fire from small arms and RPG launchers. The unit sustained casualties. The commander asked for an air strike to help him extricate his troops. The flight leader of a four-jet formation of Kfir hovering overhead, a squadron leader named Danny, asked the commander to give a specific target: "Give me the house from which they're shooting." The officer on the ground had a difficult time citing any specific targets along the firing zone. He repeated his request: "Drop it on them!" while the pilot repeated his: "Give me a target!" Danny was wary of using the full force of his ordnance in a densely populated built-up area, fearing it might cause many casualties among the civilian population.

Not long after, I met at an air force base with a group of squadron commanders discussing the case. I was there at the invitation of my young friend Zevik, Colonel Ze'ev Raz. Zevik loves the new Israeli poetry and his home is full of books. It did not prevent him, one year before the Lebanon War, from leading the formation that destroyed the nuclear reactor near Baghdad.

Several squadron commanders were sitting in the room. They included - as a civilian - Colonel Yiftah Spector, a base commander and a superb pilot. I would later read his book, "Dream in Blue and Black" with bated breath. One of the officers turned on a tape recorder, which replayed the radio conversation between the commander of the beleaguered column and Danny, the pilot. In the end, the Kfir did not drop their bombs.

No, it was not a simulation exercise. They were talking about a real case. I was told that after he landed, Danny put the tape recorder down on his base commander's desk and said, "Tell me if I was okay or not." He himself wasn't so certain. A hearing was held, at which he was given the full backing of his superiors. I remember one of the pilots in the room saying something like, "Who am I, the king who bestows death and bestows life? The guys in the green uniforms [ground troops] are asking for help, and are not getting it from me."

The conversation continued. One of the men asked: "How many civilians are we permitted to kill in order to help our own forces?" And there were some who said Danny should have responded immediately to the request of the commander under attack, and "not be a bleeding heart at the expense of our soldiers." Zevik reminded me of the orders given by Major General David Ivry when the fighting first broke out - under no circumstances was the IAF to attack area-wide targets, only pinpoint targets!

Zevik added that the air force had held itself back from the beginning of the war to its end, and had unleashed only an infinitesimal trace of its real strength, because "we have the ability to destroy the Middle East." I sat there and thought over the line: "How many civilians are we permitted to kill in order to help our own forces?" It wasn't just a quantitative matter. I recalled the line from a book by Andre Gide, "The Counterfeiters," about Cleopatra's nose. "If Cleopatra's nose had been longer, all of history would have been different." One of the heroes of the book asks, "Longer by how much?" In other words, which extra millimeter is it that generates the turning point in history?

What could I say to them that they themselves did not say? I added something along the lines of, "Even when you do what needs to be done, do everything you can to prevent the spilling of innocent blood." That is not how the English and

Americans acted when it was time to pay back for all that the Luftwaffe had done to Warsaw, Rotterdam, Belgrade, Coventry. When the Day of Judgment arrived, they did not spare the cities of Germany. Not only "military targets" were turned into piles of debris. Everyone remembers Dresden. And someone in that room said: "We can afford to be lily-white because the enemy is weak compared to us. But if Tel Aviv were seriously hit, we would be behaving differently."

I remembered that conversation, which took place 20 years ago, in those bad times. Israel has known worse times in its history. In 1948, during the siege on ravenous and wounded and shelled Jerusalem, among the living and the dead, things were worse. But difficulties can also toughen the individual, or the nation. They can expose strengths and bravery. The evil can be broken apart. A nation torn by ever-intensifying differences has a hard time deciding just how it will combat the despicable terror of the suicide bombers, who launch their premeditated strikes at the innocent. Arafat does us harm. He abandons the political history, calling for "a million shaheeds [martyrs] on the road to Jerusalem." And we do ourselves harm.

"Woe is to the evil man, and woe is to his neighbor." But what can be done when the neighbors of Shehadeh, the arch-murderer from Gaza, included too many women and children? Yes, it was a "pinpoint liquidation," not an "area-wide target," but no matter what it was, it failed. I read in the newspapers that "the defense minister appointed a major-general to investigate the killing of Palestinians in the past few days."

But it would also be wise to conduct a more widespread investigation of the sum total of this war: the operational, ethical, political and media components thereof. We must reformulate what is permissible and what is forbidden in this bitter struggle, in which public opinion, songs, photographs and demonstrations, like articles and newspaper columns and even letters to the editor and weekend interviews, can determine its significance.

I remember thanking Zevik for inviting me to that discussion, to the "soul searching" of the airmen. Part of the strength of those pilots was derived from their capacity to pose tough questions and expect true answers.

The author is a poet and writer.

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FROM HARD TIMES TO BAD TIMES 2006

By Shiri Lev-Ari haaretz 03 10 2006

"How are you doing, Gouri?" he was asked numerous times this past summer, and always hastened to reply: "Lousy." During the war in Lebanon, he barely slept. He was glued to the media reports, and lamented, agonized and got worked up over everything: the situation we were in, all the media prattle, the conduct of our leaders in the war. And now, too, he says we are still right in the midst of the storm. The story isn't over yet.

Haim Gouri takes the State of Israel personally. The man who wrote poems and songs that became part of the lifeblood of Israeli poetry - "Here Lie Our Bodies," "Bab al Wad" - treats Israel with a kind of seriousness that's hard to come by these days. Nothing passes him by casually. Including the last war. Or as his daughters like to say, "Dad works overtime in caring." The interview with him also came about after a series of conversations, questions, investigations, exchanges of views, exchanges of ideas. At first he didn't want to be interviewed at all; he ascribes such importance to words that he feels the need to be cautious with them - "These questions touch on places of pain, and you're judged on your answers."

When he does accede, he can speak at length about the War of Independence or about our relations with the Arabs, tell a story from the past, quote entire poems - Tchernikovsky, Alterman, Shlonsky - and refuel himself with a pipe and a cup of strong black coffee. An aroma of tobacco and mint pervades his small study next to the balcony. Gouri writes on a computer, but the old habits are still in evidence when he goes over a printed text of his with a pen, making corrections by hand.

Add me to the lepers

"One of the poems that has enthralled me my whole life," says Gouri, "is the poetess Rachel's 'Yom Besora' ('Day of Good News'), in which she alludes to the tidings of the lepers from the Second Book of Kings. She writes: 'But I will not want news of redemption/ If it comes from the mouth of a leper.' Twenty years later, in July 1946, the Irgun blows up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The next day Haaretz published a front-page article headlined 'The Horror,' and Rachel's poem appeared in it. This poem expresses the brutal collision between the absolute and the historic - between the moral imperative 'Thou shalt not kill' and the history that is soaked in blood and violence. Later on, in my poems I ask Rachel to add me to the four lepers from the Second Book of Kings. Because I, too, was among them, among the spillers of blood, among the fighters. I was a part of wars whose justness I believed in."

Gouri has lived his whole life amid a web of contradictions that continues to this day.

"I grew up in a real socialist Zionist home," he says. "Even back in Russia my parents spoke and wrote a wonderful Hebrew. They were vegetarians and naturalists, and they were pacifists. I attended the School For Workers' Children, two years behind my eldest sister and Yitzhak Rabin, who were in the same class. We were raised on zealous Zionism and Hebrew Labor on the one hand, and on the Brotherhood of Nations - with the Arab worker - on the other.

"I remember the protest watches in the orchards of Petah Tikva and Kfar Sava, in which Shlonsky and the greatest writers participated, on behalf of Hebrew Labor. Shlonsky derided employers of Arabs for caring more for their personal gain than for the homeland. This hurt the Arab worker. As a boy in Emek Hefer I witnessed the drying of the swamps, the planting of the orchards by my uncle and his comrades, but I also saw the Arabs who lived there - on the land that was purchased by the Jewish National Fund - uprooted from their land, sometimes violently. My mother cried for two weeks after she saw two fellows from the 'Association for Hebrew Production' scattering in the street crates of cucumbers and tomatoes that belonged to an Arab peddler who'd come into our neighborhood.

"On the front page of Al Hamishmar the slogan 'For Zionism, For Socialism, For the Brotherhood of Nations' appeared. This web of contradictions is still going on today, and I'm already an old man. Zionism, as is known, did not come to fulfillment via the Brotherhood of Nations. It is still at the height of the hundred years' war. And not much of Socialism is left in Israel. Israeli society, shamefully, is a society of intolerable class polarization."

Third floor, no elevator

Everyone who knows him calls him Gouri. He was born Haim Gurfinkel; when he was young, his friends took to calling him Jouri. In 1945, when he published his first poem in Al Hamishmar, Avraham Shlonsky dropped the apostrophe from the Hebrew gimmel, and he became known as Gouri.

In recent months, Gouri and his wife Aliza have been busy transferring his archival material to the Jewish National and University Library. They are sorting thousands of papers and documents, correspondences with writers and public figures, chapters of memoirs, newspaper clippings, reviews, interviews, manuscripts, drafts.

Sometimes Aliza reads him a poem or an essay he wrote 30 years ago and Guri listens in astonishment, as if encountering it for the first time.

He notes the inherent contradiction in his being both a poet and a journalist, quoting the midrashic saying, ehoz bazeh vegam mezeh, al tanach yadkha, about doing two things at once. "I wanted to be wherever things were happening. There was something dybbuk-like in this need."

A good number of new poems have also been accumulating on his desk. The new cycle is entitled Eival (after the mountain connected with the biblical curse). A publication date has not yet been set for it. "Sometimes I feel like that's it, I've finished writing, but afterward I feel the total opposite," he says. Currently, he is also working on a comprehensive collection of articles that he wrote about the relation between poetry and time, on the encounter between literature and history.

In another month, he'll be 83. He was born in Tel Aviv in 1923, and as an adolescent, studied at the Kadouri Agricultural School. In 1941, he enlisted in the Palmach, and served in it for eight years. In 1947, he was sent to Europe and commanded the Israel Defense Forces' first paratroop course in Czechoslovakia. Then the War of Independence began and Gouri returned to Israel and joined the 7th Battalion of the Negev Brigade. He took part in the conquest of Be'er Sheva and Abu-Agila in Sinai, and in the liberation of Eilat.

He and Aliza have three daughters and six grandchildren. They live in Jerusalem in a simple building, on the third floor with no elevator. He goes up and down the stairs with relative ease.

His first book of poetry, "Flowers of Fire," was published in 1949. Then came "Till Dawn," a book of poetry and a diary of the war. Throughout the 1950s he worked as a journalist for Lamerhav and Davar, published many books of poetry and prose, and also made three documentary films about the Holocaust and the founding of the state - "The 81st Blow," "The Last Sea" and "Flames in the Ashes." In 1962 he was awarded the Sokolov Prize for Journalism, and in 1988, the Israel Prize for Literature.

In the course of his life, his political views have changed. In 1967, he was active in the establishment of the Movement for Greater Israel. However, in the years after the Six-Day War, when he saw the wrongs of the occupation, he gradually parted with this vision. Still, in 1995, he was one of the founders of The Third Way movement, which opposed a withdrawal from the Golan Heights. He eventually abandoned that platform as well. In recent years, Gouri has taken part in struggles against administrative detentions, home demolitions and expulsions.

Then, this summer, came the second war in Lebanon. "I differentiate between hard times and bad times, and these are bad times," he says. "People often seek me out as if I'm one of the elders of the tribe, wanting to know what I think. We've been through harder times than these. The siege of Jerusalem in '48 was harder than this recent sitting in shelters. And also than the terrible terror attacks of recent years. In hard times, a nation often reveals its hidden strengths. It's toughening. But wickedness has a crumbling effect. We're living in a period of wickedness: score-settling, a war of general against general, minister against minister, inquiry committees, informing, leaks, alibis, 'He did it, not me.' This has no remedy."

Lost wars of attrition

You believe Israel was justified in going to war this summer. Yet how, in your view, was this war different from the rest of Israel's wars?

"The War of Independence won sweeping national consensus right from the start, after November 29. We were attacked and we had to fight or be annihilated. Not a single protest song was written in that period. There were a few songs of black humor - 'When we die they'll bury us on the hills of Bab al Wad/ There they have

snipers who shoot bullets/ Bullets that pierce armor.' Only toward the end of the war were there any cracks in this unity. S. Yizhar wrote 'The Captive' and 'Hirbat Hiz'a' and sparked an uproar. It's painful, but Hebrew literature would be lacking if these stories weren't written. For the first time, a crack formed in the culture of the besieged and the just.

"Mivtza Kadesh (The Sinai Campaign) was a war of choice, and aroused controversy - mainly regarding the collaboration with the British and French. The glorious Six-Day War earned total agreement. The debate about its implications only began on the seventh day. This was a war that unified the country between the sea and the Jordan River, but critically divided the people, and the same dispute has continued to be exacerbated until today, 40 years later - we and the Arabs, the borders of the state.

"Then came the Yom Kippur War. This was a war for survival and I took part in it as an education officer in an armored division in Sinai. I was 50 then. In December 1977, I visited Egypt for the first time in my life. I went there with a delegation of Israeli journalists that traveled to Cairo after Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. There I met a leading Egyptian intellectual, Dr. Hussein Fawzi, and we talked about the Israel-Egypt wars. He said the Egyptian assault on Israel in May 1948 was a historic crime. And then he said something else that I'll never forget: 'In the Six-Day War you humiliated us. Our wives were ashamed of us, our children scorned us. Had Israeli intelligence read the Egyptian poetry that was written after 1967, it would have known that 1973 was inevitable. Every good intelligence officer must read poetry.'

"And we hadn't read it. And we're not reading it today, either. If we were reading it today, we'd understand the Arabs have changed. In 1947, Gandhi (Rehavam Ze'evi) hung a picture of the Jerusalem Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini in the cultural room at Kibbutz Maoz and wrote underneath: 'Our Motto: Ishmael is a fool.' No, Ishmael is not a fool."

As for the first Lebanon War, Gouri agrees in retrospect that it was "diplomatically foolish and morally criminal," as Yossi Sarid said at the time, noting that the Israeli intelligentsia opposed the war from the beginning. "I was serving as a reservist then and I wasn't among the people who warned against it. I'm not proud of my position then. Maybe it happened because of my deep connection to the IDF.

"The last war earned national agreement right at the start, including among the Zionist left. Without going into the details of the military moves, I thought that an Israeli response was necessary, that we must not surrender to a provocation and to self-perpetuating blackmail. It's an unbearable moral dilemma, but the release of prisoners - as in the Jibril deal that will go down in infamy - is interpreted as capitulation to terror. There's a vast difference between releasing enemy prisoners every so often as a political gesture, and giving in to blackmail. Had we consented to Abu Mazen's requests before the Palestinian Authority elections, and freed prisoners, it would have been interpreted as a gesture of goodwill toward him, and maybe it would have had an effect on the outcome of the elections."

In retrospect, does this war now seem to you to have been a failure?

"Time will tell. Our forces have come under fire in every war. Screw-ups and shortages of supplies have always occurred. But if it turns out that the UN force really does separate us from them, and the Siniora government gains strength and becomes sovereign, and if Hezbollah's power is weakened - then this war will look different. But we're still beset by the feeling that there has been a weakening of the IDF's power as a deterrent force."

During the war you were upset by the revelation of so much information in the media.

"The press I was raised on was loyal to the point of concealing the truth. It was a media that didn't publish things, out of a sense of patriotic responsibility. The media today is immeasurably better. Today everything is revealed in a second. At the same time, during the war there were more than a few instances when military and state secrets were revealed. Secrets from the 'Holy of Holies' - the security cabinet - were leaked by its members even before the forum had convened. These are things that should not be done.

"I'm not a historian," he adds. "But I've noticed something: In all the moving battles, we've won, while in all the wars of attrition we've been defeated. It's hard for us to withstand this type of battle. It's hard for us to develop the IDF's skills against guerilla warfare, or against mass demonstrations and against women who shout in the alleyways of poverty and despair, and against children who say - as happened to me when I was in Gaza during the first intifada - 'Soldier, kill me but don't beat me with a stick, I'm not a dog.' Since the Six-Day War, we've been beset by the difficult disagreement that derives from our ruling over another people. And this disagreement is a decisive part of our whole experience, to this day."

If we don't act like idiots

A big part of his national reckoning now has to do with Israel's Arab citizens. "This should be said, as the High Holy Days are upon us: We did not grant them true partnership. We maintained a intolerable discrepancy in living standards, in education, in human dignity. An Arab friend once said to me, 'Don't put us in Sayeret Matkal or in the reactor in Dimona - but do put us in Mekorot (the national water company). Do put us in Israel Electric. Give our youth a way out."

He recalls something else that an Arab acquaintance from the Galilee once told him: "'When you Jews ought to be generous, you're stingy, and when you ought to be determined, you're irresolute.' How right he was. I always hoped that an Arab-Israeli identity would be formed. But I think that we didn't genuinely and courageously formulate the array of duties and privileges that derives from this identity. At the same time, many Israelis have a hard time taking in declarations like that of Sheikh Raed Saleh about an Islamic caliphate whose capital is Jerusalem, or the secular vision of MK Azmi Bishara of a pan-Arab Nasserism of which Israel is a part."

To Gouri, the essential thing is the justness of the path. "If people want to attack me as a member of 'that' generation, and to tell me the State of Israel was born in sin, I refuse to accept that. I belong to the most persecuted and oppressed nation of all. Yes, injustices were committed in the course of the war. Yes, great destruction was visited upon our neighbor. Hebrew literature did not ignore horrible acts. But you cannot say our foundation lies in injustice and that we have no sovereign right to exist here.

"The return to Zion is one of the most extraordinary and surprising historic phenomena that has ever occurred. Let another nation come and prove that it was more decent than we were toward its enemies. The majority of Israeli public opinion is still outraged by injustices, the media deals with it, the Supreme Court demands redress, the society judges. But to deny a nation its sovereign right because its neighbor doesn't accept it? Where in the world does any nation make its existence contingent upon its neighbors' agreement? Nations fight one another, and then comes a moment when they've emptied the last dregs of the cup of poison, when they've exhausted the bloodshed. There is no logical reason for this not to happen in this region, too, which is the cradle of civilizations.

"I believe that we have the power to defend ourselves, as long as we're not idiots and don't fall asleep on the watch. And at the same time, we should strive for a compromise, for a brotherhood of nations. I know how important the recognition of

the justness of the path is, because this process is a tortuous one. But it's impossible to live without faith in man's ability to rise above, in the brotherhood of nations and in a more just society."

TESTAMENT OF OLD AGE 2007
By Nir Baram haaretz 05 01 2007

"This happened many years ago, on the Memorial Day for Israel Defense Forces soldiers. I'm listening to Army Radio and also hearing some of my own songs, predictably, 'Here Lie Our Bodies' and others. Suddenly another poem that I'd written slipped in and I'm thinking, 'That's odd - I don't understand its connection to Memorial Day.' The first line of the poem was, 'If you pass through those narrowing straits,' and the last was, 'You will be measured by the beats of the other pulse.' They'd probably said to themselves: Haim Gouri, stocking cap, khaki, Palmach, no doubt he meant the Straits of Tiran. But the truth is that I had written a love poem." The misunderstanding that Haim Gouri describes is not surprising. Gouri (born in Tel Aviv in 1923), is one of Israel's veteran poets today and is among the outstanding poets of what has become known as "the 1948 generation." He began to publish his poems in the 1940s. Some of his poems have become essential building blocks of Israeli culture, and perhaps more than any other poet, he is identified with the "national poetry" that was written during the first years after the founding of the state. In this conversation he returned to that period and those poems, but also spoke about his most recent, more personal and less familiar poems and the fine seam between the personal and the national, in life and in poetry.

It is easy to understand why they didn't understand your straits correctly, if they read your first collection of poetry, "Flowers of Fire" (1949), or your second collection, "Till Dawn" (1950), in which you describe your experiences in Hungary with the Jews who had remained alive after the world war, or your poems that symbolize the 1948 generation's great war.

Gouri: "In the 1960s one critic wrote: 'The 1948 generation is the we and the state generation is the I.' This is a sweeping generalization. Even my first book, 'Flowers of Fire,' was definitely personal poetry. They just didn't read it right. There were poems of the individual and poems of the 'together,' but the poems of battle and sacrifice took center stage, because wars aren't made by an individual.

"But there was a kind of cataloging, and you always got to the 'Palmach generation,' even though there were poets in it who were entirely different from one another. There is a wonderful expression that I heard from a young poet: 'sober intoxication.' In writing there is a combination of an ecstatic, passionate side that impels you to write and another side that accompanies it and says: Stop, don't go too far, erase what is superfluous. This is that sober element that intervenes in the act of writing. I have no doubt that in that period I was less aware of this side. Sometimes in the blindness of youth you write things that later make you smile. But let there be no mistake - even today I'm proud to belong to the 1948 generation."

Do you feel that literary research, in which there is sometimes criticism of the exaltation of the fighters or about how the dead are addressed as though they were alive in "Here Lie Our Bodies," has done you justice, or perhaps this cataloging of your poems in "the 1948 generation" has missed out on many of the things in them?

"This poem deals with fighters who were killed. They aren't here as 'the living dead' and there is no non-recognition here of 'the finality of death.' The line 'We will come back as red flowers' is reference to the flower 'Maccabis' blood' [Helychrysum

sanguinem - common name in English: red everlasting] that blooms in the spring on the battlefields of our country. This is a common motif in world poetry. This elegy for the Lamed Heh [a convoy of 35 Palmach reinforcements murdered in January, 1949] will continue to live. But it has been a long time since and great changes have taken place in me and my poetry.

"I've written poetry connected to messianic and liturgical levels and I've written in spoken, slangy language, but still, now and then, I'm cataloged in the 'serious' section. I'll give you an example. There's a poem that I wrote in the volume 'Late Poems' called 'The Father of All Living Things,' which uses the highest language - but paradoxically, as the poem in fact deals with the erection of the male member. And then they say, Gouri, the knight of the image of grief, has written a poem about Ben-Gurion or Moses again: 'And upon his emergence and rising / Welcome cried I in greeting / until his majesty suffused me / ... Blessed be he and blessed be his name the father of all living things / who has known no rest in my rejoicing two together,' and so on."

'Marvelous Hebrew'

You are a poet whose Hebrew combines many levels, including a close connection to the Bible. How do you deal with the many changes that have occurred in the Hebrew language?

"The formal, elevated Hebrew of [Zalman] Shazar, the third president, used to seem ridiculous to us, the youngsters, but this was marvelous Hebrew that had accumulated from all the generations of Israel: the Bible and the Midrash and the Psalmody and the Liturgy. The transition to spoken, sabra Hebrew added to it new beauty and realms of expression, but also caused it to dwindle over the years and led to associative alienation among generations of young readers. And this is something very dangerous in a culture. Once when I finished a lecture I said to the high-school students: "Well, it's been nice knowing you. With you, Hebrew poetry has died."

Perhaps this sense of alienation from the students is also alienation from the Israel of today. You write about a walk around Tel Aviv: "So many of those in whose company I drank have vanished and are no longer here. Sometimes out of habit I look for them in [the cafes] Cassit and Kankan ... I go around the city of my birth like a peripatetic ambassador of times past."

"Here you're touching on a sore point. After all, a person doesn't control his memories. It's impossible to decide that today between seven o'clock and eight o'clock I'm going to remember. This piece describes a person's strangeness in the city of his birth. A whole world of belonging that doesn't exist any more. In the poem 'Odysseus,' which appears in my book 'Compass Rose' [1960], I write about Odysseus, sated with wanderings, who returns to his city and finds people 'who speak a different Greek.' At the end of my poem the man doesn't return to his home, but rather remains alone and a stranger at the end of the day: "Dew came down on his head, / wind came kissing his lips. / Water came bathing his feet like aged Eurycleia, / and didn't see the scar / and continued down the slope as water does." [Translation: Stanley Chyet].

Elsewhere you describe another world that no longer exists: "Many of us loved the villages we blew up, that same world that is destroyed and gone." That is, in a certain sense both the world you blew up and the world that you built in its stead isn't here any more.

"Yes, there was a whole world of streets and people where I was at home. And there was also the Arab world that was destroyed. And it's impossible to answer this question without scars. The Arab world has accompanied me since my childhood, it's a world I grew up with. Tel Aviv and Jaffa were two close cities, and since then I

haven't stopped writing about this duality: Most of my literary work and personal experience is of this seamline between us and them.

"I've always written about living people. In my work the Arabs weren't metaphors but rather living and breathing neighbors. I've never stopped writing about Jaffa. The ancient, oriental, multi-generational Jaffa of the prophet Jonah. The Jaffa that lures with its voices, its flavors and its scents. The Jaffa of Nahum Guttman. And there was also a frightening, threatening Jaffa of the imams' incendiary sermons, the green flags of Al-Juma'a al-Islamiyya and the hands brandishing swords. A remembrance of the blood incidents.

"I say: 'Don't leave out a single component of identity.' Arrive at a war of contradictions. And there was a contradiction between the socialist, universal component of 'all the world is one people,' and the national Hebrew component. But you have to know how to live within a system of contradictions. If people aren't prepared to accept you as a person of many contradictions, that's a problem. As an adolescent I believed in the greater land of Israel and I hoped for the day when the country would be unified, and I fought for that. This encounter with Israel after 1967 was amazing, it was like the resurrection of the dead. And also after that I was at Sebastia, but the same thing that happened to Hebrew poetry happened to me: The agonized friction with the 'other' crushed this dream. The wall passes through Abu Dis."

You talk about the multitude of contradictions in your identity and you once wrote: "So who am I, damn it?" The answer is: "You are ours and we won't let you go." "Ours" refers to the Jewish identity that is thousands of years old that doesn't give you the possibility of a different definition.

"I've always wondered what territory and language do to my identity. I saw Holocaust survivors, I fought in the Palmach and I covered the Eichmann trial, and I'm not prepared to lose any component of my identity. When I'm asked nowadays how I define my identity I say that I am an Israeli. Up until 1948 I had defined myself as a Hebrew, but in 1948 Hebrewness became Israeliness, and this state of being includes all the generations of the Jewish people in all their incarnations and all the incarnations of the land that has changed owners.

"I see a great deal of damage in the solidification of religion as an established and coercive force. The separate of religion and state could have saved Hebrew culture. It hurts me that the Bible, which had been the flagship of secular Israel, has become in the minds of many of our children a text that belongs to 'the dossim (religious Jews).' This is serious damage. In my opinion it is necessary to establish an overarching Israeli identity that will suit both a child from Colombia who was born and has grown up here and speaks Hebrew and is connected to us, and a Jew from Russia about whose Jewishness there are doubts. A people that was persecuted because of its identity and language should not be taking a crushing approach toward others in its country. We have to strengthen Israeli identity and it can't be that people who live here and want to become part of us are simply distanced by the religious or national mechanisms. Israel needs to examine how to transform the concept of Israeli into something that is also a place of cooperation among people who are different."

I have heard you say of the Israeli bohemia that it was a bohemia different from that in other places in the world, because it was connected to a national project and a war for existence.

"I wonder a lot about the bohemians - Avraham Shlonsky, Natan Alterman, Alexander Penn and more and more famous actors, writers and journalists, sculptors and painters and literary and art critics, who filled others with dread and also felt its sting. There were the cliques, the guru and his disciples, fans and

groupies, priests in training and the people of the other clans who added to bohemia the sharp spice of 'us and them.' But in contrast to the uninvolved and uncommitted bohemia, most of them were seized up to their necks in the Israeli condition, took part in the political disputes and felt responsibility for what was happening in this stormy country.

"When the illegal immigrant ship Knesset Yisrael arrived here battered and scarred, its commander, Yossi Harel, reported on the voyage of suffering to the habitués of Cassit. Fighters and afterward people from the army would sit there until the break of day. Poets like Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine would not have felt at home among people who asked why there wasn't an X-ray facility in Beit She'an, or in the company of Ze'ev Yoskovich, who took the trouble of taking theater to the immigrant transit camps to make the children of the poor happy at Purim. They were in the heart of history."

In a speech that you gave in 1998 on "Zionist Ideology and National Strength," you said: "The main thing is the sense of the rightness of the way ... Without a sense of the rightness of the way there is also no military strength." In the context of the things that you are describing, it's a bit hard to sense the rightness of the way.

"There is a problem in the matter of the rightness of the way in the prolonged rule over another people. The Six-Day War that united the country has mortally torn the nation apart. The disagreement is getting harsher and is also affecting the situation of the army. Of course I also have very difficult days. I am a witness to an Israeli reality that is devoid of compassion and human kindness, a terrifying gap between the poor and the rich. Crudeness and violence. Ever since [Yitzhak] Rabin's assassination no government in Israel has completed its term. The terror is continuing and on the eastern horizon Iran is looming. But I do believe that Israel is strong enough to defend itself."

'A life's work'

Your last book to have been published was "I Am a Civil War" (2004), which collected poems and pieces that you had written during the previous 60 years. Are you writing something new?

"I hope that this year my book 'Poetry and Time' will appear: articles, essays and personal memoirs that appeared during the course of the past 50 years, as well as chapters that will be published there for the first time. A life's work. In the two volumes, which deal with the connections between poetry and time, there are also encounters with people who played a significant role in my life. I'm also continuing to write the 'Eival' poems and 'Additions to Eival,' some of which have been published recently in the daily press and various journals."

You are now engaged in organizing your archive. What kinds of feelings are you having at a time like this?

"My mate Alika [Gouri's wife Aliza] is busy with this, and for years she has been doing the big job of sorting the archive. There are thousands of documents, literally thousands of all kinds, that are connected to my work as a poet, writer, journalist, citizen and former military reservist. This is an extraordinarily disturbing experience. It's clear that there are letters that make me feel happy and perhaps proud, and there are those that are like reminders of iniquity. I am reliving a life that I had forgotten.

"I admit and confess that the number of people whom I can telephone and meet with is getting smaller. But I am in contact with writers who are younger than I am. The generations aren't dwindling. No. And when I try to draw a conclusion from all those documents, it is that a significant part of the culture I grew up in from childhood till now is a culture of guilt feeling: If you have to do something and don't fulfill the mission, terrible things happen and you haven't done anything. All the

time you're persecuted for some sin that you have committed. We didn't save the Jews of the Holocaust, we have been cruel to the Arabs and to the immigrants from the Arab countries. If you examine Hebrew poetry you will see many manifestations of guilt. Today too I'm living with a heavy sense of guilt."

Poems like "Bidding Farewell" ("He is bidding farewell. And knows until he bids farewell. And no longer knows how it could be otherwise. And keeps on bidding farewell to himself and somehow keeps on saying to himself that this, apparently, is the farewell he was told about, that this is how it looks") or the poem "Preparation for Farewell," courageously, with humor and beautifully depict a person who isn't repressing the farewell, but rather is preparing for it. I'm reminded of a line by Yisrael Pinkas: "And the years were more compacted and compressed and agile than we were."

"I share that feeling. The most significant poem that I have written about time is called '1923-1958': 'And I didn't have time / Now it's clear that I didn't have time / I'm the man who didn't have time.' This whole cycle of 'Late Poems' is made of poems of a person who is bidding farewell. A poem like 'Changing,' for example, which talks about old age: 'Strange and varied troubles are coming to live in me / opening legations of evil.'

"I grew up in a generation that celebrated the culture of youth. Everything was done by young people, especially revolutions, and we refused to grow old and at the same time the test was in our growing old. And suddenly I'm writing about sickness and growing old and bidding farewell, suddenly I'm engaged in reckoning of conscience and summation. During the writing of this cycle I realized that many everyday things - a sunset, a couple embracing in a park - have become very dear to me and look like some wish that has been stolen from you, something of which you are worthy, but isn't going to be any more because you are already a bit outside. After all, there is always something left in our lives that we wanted to do and didn't manage to do, or something that had we seen it in time, everything would have happened differently. 'And the face-scratching alternative followed in our footsteps, / persisting, insisting that everything might have been different / on that mountain / had we only listened to its voice.'"