

## Nathan the Wise

By Tsur Ehrlich

Natan Alterman, poet of Zionism, offered a bold new vision of Jewish national identity.

**I**t is often said of Walt Whitman that all American poetry may be divided into two camps: That which flows from him, and that which strives to reject him. The same may be said of Natan Alterman, Israel's revered national poet. Whether through emulation or subversion, allusion or parody, rare is the writer of modern Hebrew verse who has not struggled with the legacy of Alterman in some way. Rarer still is the Jewish Israeli who has not at some point encountered Alterman's work—his lyrical, political, or nationalist poetry; his popular songs and theatrical sketches; or even his children's verse—and felt that it touched him on some level. Thus may Alterman claim victory on two fronts: Recognized by the Israeli literary community as one of the country's two or three most important poets, he is also the nation's most popular.<sup>1</sup>

There are several reasons for this double achievement. First among them, of course, is the quality of Alterman's work: Its style, content, and beauty, and its ability to arouse the senses, stir the imagination, and touch both one's emotions and intellect. Another reason is the varied modes of writing he employed to speak to different audiences—sophisticated readers of modern poetry, readers of newspapers, and consumers of popular culture. Many readers, for example, arrived at Alterman's more literary verse by way of their acquaintance with the poems he published in the newspaper *Haaretz*, and later, in his famous weekly column for the newspaper *Davar*—poems that, in the 1940s and 1950s, were known to capture the mood of the public, and sometimes even to help shape it.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in even his most complex and cryptic canonical work, he managed to retain a light, entertaining, and facetious tone that creates the illusion of comprehensibility.

To these two pillars of Alterman's success—his poetry's quality, and its appeal to a variety of audiences—may yet be added a third: His nationalist sentiment. For in many ways, Alterman's appeal to Israelis derives, perhaps unconsciously, from the centrality of the role of the nation—in particular the Jewish nation—in his poetry and thought.

Alterman's nationalism, like most other aspects of his craft, is multifaceted and many-layered. It manifests itself, *inter alia*, in his poetry's veneration of authentic popular culture; its overt affection for Sephardi Jews and Jews of other, non-Israeli cultures; its staunch opposition to the obliteration of diverse cultural traditions in a national "melting pot"; and, above all, in its identification with the Jewish collective, its use of Jewish values as political guides, and its tendency to judge current affairs within the context of Jewish history. In fact, it was this context to which Alterman referred repeatedly in articulating a vision for the new state, a vision that included its ethnic and political character, its relationship to diaspora Jewry and Israeli Arabs, its immigration policy, and, toward the end of his life, the idea of Greater Israel.

Today, more than three decades after Alterman's death in 1970, his poetry still reflects a rich ideological rubric with enduring relevance to the public life of the Jewish state. This rubric may be distilled into four distinct yet interconnected themes: First, a preference for enduring moral values and cultural continuity over revolutionary fervor and the desire to overthrow world orders; second, a profound appreciation for Judaism's religious legacy, and the belief that secular Jews can and should view Judaism as their cultural heritage; third,

a historical approach that sees the Jewish national collective as the subject of an unbroken and ongoing narrative; and fourth, the complete identification of the State of Israel with the Jewish people. Taken together, these themes amount to a worldview that is Zionist, secular, and conservative—a combination that is rarely, if ever, seen in today's intellectual debates in Israel. Yet the worldview of this poet, known as "Nathan the Wise" by his contemporaries,<sup>3</sup> holds out promise for a stronger and more unified Jewish nation than any of the ideological alternatives that dominate Israeli discourse today.

## II

Even a cursory glance at Alterman's biography brings into relief the apparent contradictions that define the man and his work. As a member of Israel's workers' movement, for example, Alterman supported the achievements of socialism in the fields of labor relations and employment conditions in industrialized countries. Indeed, he even supported the singing of the "Internationale" at Labor Party conventions. Yet he was a fierce critic of the Soviet Union, unlike many of his political brethren.<sup>4</sup> So, too, did Alterman—a lifelong bohemian—extol traditional family values, describing them as "among the holiest and most basic of human values,"<sup>5</sup> and although he rejected the continued Jewish presence in the diaspora, insisting that *aliya* was the duty of every Jew living in a free country, he was also vociferously opposed to the tendency common among many Zionists to repudiate, on moral grounds, the distinct Jewish ways of life that developed there.

The combination of these seemingly inconsistent views is the source of literary scholar Ziva Shamir's designation of Alterman as a "conservative revolutionary."<sup>6</sup> Revolutionary, because the Zionist in him sought to change the course of Jewish history; and conservative, because he believed that Zionism's goals would be achieved, as Shamir put it, "through evolutionary processes and a dialectic of generations"—that is, without the wholesale destruction of the old order. She continues:

In a certain sense, despite his modernity, Alterman continued the line that runs from Ahad Ha'am and Bialik to Chaim Weizmann: The line that was opposed to overnight revolutions the results of which are unpredictable, and sided with moderate, natural, and evolutionary action that flows according to the varied rhythms of life and does not march at the pace of a single political dictate. He believed that thousands of tiny and trivial matters from the world of deeds, some even "frivolous" and "silly," would ultimately become part of a real act destined to be etched in the annals of history.<sup>7</sup>

Alterman's vision of progress, then, could not have been farther from the school of revolutionary, utopian Marxism, with its proclivity for violence and dangerous historical "shortcuts." He rejected outright attempts to engineer a new society or forcibly drive history toward a desired end. Indeed, he fought valiantly against the radical ideologies of the twentieth century—against Fascism and Nazism, but also against the Soviet model, which had captivated the hearts and minds of many of his fellow writers and artists in Israel.

One of Alterman's last articles, for instance, "The Revolution that Snapped," deals with the fundamental distinction between revolutions aimed at righting wrongs and "Red revolutionism," which paved the way for totalitarian dictatorships.<sup>8</sup> Written against the background of the uprisings in Paris and Prague in 1968, Alterman argued against the natural tendency, as he put it, to view the two protest movements as manifestations of the single phenomenon of rebellion against an oppressive regime. In Prague, he argued, the

insurgents were trying to rid themselves of the Soviet revolution, whereas in Paris, the students were acting in the service of that very same oppressive power.

Alterman returned again and again to the ideological struggle against revolution. Two of his last plays, both unfinished, dealt with this theme: "Last Days of Ur" describes a failed attempt to institute a rational political regime contrary to the nature of men and the passage of history;<sup>9</sup> whereas "Jellyfish Coast" is a satire on the Soviet regime and its self-destructive culture, and, to a lesser extent, of the hypocrisy of the 1960s culture of the West.<sup>10</sup>

Alterman's main weapon in his battle against "Red revolutionism" was his journalistic poetry.<sup>11</sup> He used his weekly newspaper spot to criticize the Soviet regime bitterly for trampling on the lives and freedom of its subjects, and he upbraided Israelis who sided with the Soviet regime or, at best, remained silent in the face of its evils. He frequently debated Israeli politicians and intellectuals on the subject, and, in 1953, devoted two columns to such an exchange with Mordechai Bentov, one of the leaders of Mapam (the United Workers' Party). Bentov argued that revolution is cruel by nature, and therefore we must not rush to condemn events such as the infamous Doctors' Plot, in which nine Russian Jewish doctors were arrested on false charges of plotting to murder top government officials. To this, Alterman responded: "Admirable: For half a jubilee / They have been galloping, without delay, / With eyes so closed and covered—to the light; / To freedom—with their lips so strongly tight."<sup>12</sup>

Writing on Alterman's poetry, Tel Aviv University's Harai Golomb has shown that Alterman was unfailingly consistent in his treatment of revolutions and social movements that willingly sacrificed the happiness of individuals on the altar of the collective interest. "The good of the whole in such a case is based on a lie," writes Golomb, "and the suffering of the individual ends with his destruction."<sup>13</sup> This idea, that the fate of the individual can be used as the supreme test of an ideology's morality, as well as a poetic symbol of historical events, is a running theme of Alterman's political poetry.<sup>14</sup> The loathing for revolution that appeared in his lyrical verse, however, demonstrated that his was not a purely political outlook; rather, it was also a feeling, a profoundly spiritual stance. For proof, Golomb points to the poem "Voice and Echo," which proposes justice and mercy as supreme principles, and demands from ideologies the individual's soul: "Since despotism masquerades as piety, / The blood of the individual is the sword of the oppressor."<sup>15</sup>

Alterman also pointed his critical arrows at the historical determinism that underlies Marxism and other revolutionary ideologies. As literature professor Uzi Shavit shows in his book *Poetry and Totalitarianism*, one can read Alterman's cycle "Songs of the Ten Plagues," and in particular the concluding poem "Ayelet," in just such a fashion.<sup>16</sup> The heroes of these poems are a father and son in ancient Egypt who experience the ten biblical plagues visited upon their city. Each plague is portrayed as a prototype of one of the evils that afflict a culture in decline—or in the process of destruction—and the son is awed by their sheer magnificence. The father, in contrast, is far more restrained. He takes a longer view of events, fitting them into a general picture that emphasizes the cyclical nature of history. As he says to his son:

My son, my firstborn son, darkness shall not divide,  
For a father and his son are with bonds of darkness tied,  
With bonds of wrath, of tears, flowing warm and blind,

Which were not woven here, nor here their ending find.<sup>17</sup>

Even darkness, which according to the father is “what brings a curtain down on the history of nations,” is helpless to break the strongest bond of all—the parental one.

The archetypal character of the father is, according to Golomb and writer Eda Zoritte, one of the two thematic pillars of Alterman’s canon.<sup>18</sup> In “The Father,” from *Poem of the Ten Brothers*, for example, the character of the father is the embodiment of reason, responsibility, and all those values that may be described as eminently conservative: Continuity through the generations, respect for cultural heritage, and acknowledgment of the significance of those “small and trivial matters of the world of deeds,” in the words of Ziva Shamir.<sup>19</sup>

By contrast, Columbia University professor Dan Miron maintains that in the years following the establishment of the State of Israel, we can see in Alterman’s poetry, and in particular in his 1957 work *Songs of the City of the Dove*, an abandonment of the view that prefers “small and trivial matters” to the great days of revolutions, wars, and utopias. Miron claims that Alterman changed his opinion of history as static and cyclical; instead, he adopted a deterministic attitude and “eschatological faith, enveloped in the mist of religion,” concerning the effect of the establishment of the Jewish state on the history of the Jewish nation.<sup>20</sup> Miron’s observation, a rebuke of a secular humanist who was “corrupted” by nationalism, has since become axiomatic in scholarship on Alterman.

Yet what Miron regarded as opposites could just as easily be described as two aspects of the same ideological position—a kind of “conservative revolutionism,” to return to Shamir’s useful term. After all, Alterman’s spiritual and ideological aversion to utopianism and to those impatient individuals who would “reform” the world through revolution is but one aspect of this worldview; its other aspect, to which we will turn shortly, is his deep commitment to the Jewish people’s heritage, and his belief that the establishment of the State of Israel was a breakthrough for the Jewish people. By using Judaism’s treasury of concepts and symbols, Alterman reveals the importance he attached to this critical event in Jewish history.

### III

Alterman’s strong attachment to the Jewish religion is itself remarkable, considering the dominant Zionist secularism of his time. Even in Mapai, David Ben-Gurion’s relatively conservative Labor Zionist party with which Alterman identified, it was customary to ridicule the Jewish heritage of the diaspora; to relate to religion as a fossil; and to strive for the birth of a “new Jew” in the land of Israel, in whom no trace of the Old World’s religion and heritage would linger. Most members of the modernist literary school to which Alterman belonged, moreover, tended to identify with the more revolutionary ideology of Mapam, or with radical movements that sought to disassociate themselves from the Jewish past. A dyed-in-the-wool Zionist, Alterman nonetheless isolated himself from the political and cultural elite of his time through his positive approach to the multitude of Jewish traditions both within Israel and outside of it.

Growing up, Alterman had little contact with the traditional religious world. True, both his parents came from a long line of Lubavitcher Hasidim, and for a few years in his youth, while his family was living in Kishinev, he studied in a religious school. But like his parents, Alterman was secular in practice and in outlook.<sup>21</sup> Still,

there are many who point to a kind of masked religiosity in Alterman's poems, especially his early ones. These works, primarily from the collection *Joy of the Poor* (1941), extol the values of loyalty, friendship, family life, and freedom. By virtue of their lyrical beauty, their great sincerity, and the optimism they radiate, these poems met with immeasurable success, becoming a kind of secular Bible for a great many Israelis. It helped that God was mentioned numerous times—forty-seven, to be precise<sup>22</sup>—in the poems of *Joy of the Poor* and in his work of a few years earlier, *Stars Outside* (1938), providing a broad canvas for the religious interpretation of his poetry.<sup>23</sup> Such interpretations seem only natural for famous lines such as "My God commanded me to give almonds and raisins / to his children from my great poverty," and "When my day comes, O God Almighty, / Let me pass away on the threshold of your kingdom," or "Never, my God, shall the sadness of your huge playthings / be uprooted from me."<sup>24</sup>

Yet in every mention of God in these works, he is portrayed strictly as a rhetorical figure, an imaginary supreme authority to whom the speaker turns for judgment and justice, or as an object of vague yearning that does not require the acceptance of any specific theology. In this, Alterman's secular Israeli "Bible" is just as agnostic as it is faithful, although it is undoubtedly permeated with a feeling of religiosity.<sup>25</sup>

In Alterman's later works, however, faith becomes a more serious issue. Well versed in the new physics, and partially influenced by the religious strain of existential philosophy, Alterman describes a world that has been stripped of faith by the claims of science.<sup>26</sup> In his essay "Between a Digit and a Story," for example, he explains that modern science has left man without "any support or authority or supreme decree."<sup>27</sup> Yet science, according to Alterman, cannot solve the enigma of nature; it can merely demonstrate, in laboratory conditions, "the hand that reveals the face of the enigma."<sup>28</sup> As a result, science is also unable to *refute* the possibility of religious faith. In fact, writes Alterman, the religious experience, "for whomsoever achieves it," is the only domain "that the new science not only is unlikely to sweep away or rake up, but for which it even provides additional verification and validity, as this science delves further into the structure and wonders of the universe."<sup>29</sup>

Alterman's favorable approach to the religious experience, and his view of faith as a natural human tendency, is clearly demonstrated in his satirical poem "The Little Cleric," a favorite of religious Zionist schools in Israel. The hero of the poem is a boy who is indoctrinated in the ideology of Marxism, but insists on asking his parents "Who is it that sits in the light-filled heavens / Who causes the dew to fall? And other questions like these / Of the people of the black century," and finally wants to know "if there is a God." His parents seek advice on how to "protect our child from unwelcome influences," but "There was a friend, wise and logical / And he said without thinking twice: / To make sure of that you must first of all / Hide heaven and earth from his eyes."<sup>30</sup>

To Alterman's positive attitude toward the Jewish religion may also be added his frequent use of content and language taken directly from Jewish sources. This inclination is evident, for example, in his reaction to the military conduct of World War II. The poem "The Libyan Campaign," which ran in his weekly newspaper column, described the onset of hostilities in North Africa through the structure of the song "Had Gadya" in the Passover Haggada. The poem "Two Generals on the Krakow Front" tells the story of two senior Red Army commanders called Shapira and Schneurson; it uses religious passages and terms to talk about the war, and even rhymes the name of the Russian general, Denikin, with the talmudic set of tractates called Nezikin. Finally, the poem "The Classic Way," Alterman's first response to Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June

1941, lists the Jewish towns known from the world of Hasidism and from the stories of Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem, and ends with an expression of hope: "And perhaps thus was decreed against the pure of race, / Against Von Krupp / and Von Fritz and Von Frietsche, / That their fall should begin with full fury / From the town of Berdichev"—the home of the renowned Rabbi Levi Yitzhak. These are just a few of many examples.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, allusions to Jewish sources are not peculiar to Alterman. Yet unlike his contemporaries, he is remarkable for the broad and varied use he makes of such references, especially liturgical references. There is no clearer example of this than the *Joy of the Poor* cycle. In the penultimate poem "The City Falls," there are powerful references to the climactic moments of the Yom Kippur service. Echoes of the famous atonement liturgy delivered on Yom Kippur eve are placed in the mouths of the people in a besieged town that falls into enemy hands, who know, despite their imminent death, that "mighty salvation" still awaits them.<sup>32</sup>

For Alterman, Judaism was not only a useful source of imagery and associations, but also a social reality deserving of protection, respect, and care. For example, he defended the Haredim in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Mea Shearim who violently opposed the establishment in their neighborhood of a branch of an organization of working mothers, writing that even if their opposition is "pure madness," it should be taken into consideration that "For here there is that selfsame madness / Over which all the world's police could not prevail. // Not in vain do we bear their curses with a little restraint / And their execration... what's to be done, they are in part our kin... / Were not the people to live on by force of their madness / What use would be the madness of ourselves?"<sup>33</sup> In other words, the religious "madness" of Jews throughout the generations ensured the continuity of the Jewish people; without it, he believed, we would not be able to indulge in Zionist "madness," either. Similarly, Alterman was opposed to rearing pigs in Israel because "it seems that in every nation's heart—and all the more so in *this* nation and in this land which is its cradle / there is a memory of a certain loathing that is inscribed with the sword and the whip and is ingrained as an instinct."<sup>34</sup>

Thus Alterman revered and appreciated the observant Jew's belief in God and the commandments. However, it was the historical-national aspect of Judaism that attracted him most. In his opinion, it was Judaism that had ensured the survival of the Jewish people during two thousand years of exile, and for this reason alone—not for reasons of faith—did it demand loyalty and deference.

For Alterman, the Jewish religion, which had long coincided with Jewish identity, was essentially nationalistic.<sup>35</sup> In this regard it differed fundamentally from religions such as Christianity and Islam. Thus did Alterman take the halachic side in the "Who is a Jew?" question, in which Israelis debated how a Jew should be defined for purposes of citizenship under Israeli law. Jewish law, explained Alterman, determines a person's status as a Jew not according to his or her subjective feeling, but rather on account of his birth in "a decision of decree and fate"; yet, at the same time, this classical approach allows for an openness that does not exist in any other nationality. "The Jewish nation," he wrote, "is the one nation on earth in which anyone joining it, merging with it, by this act of conversion, total and complete integration, becomes Jewish and there is no difference between himself and other members of his new nation."<sup>36</sup>

Alterman's affinity for religion translated, then, into an ideological and cultural commitment that, in his opinion, non-believing Jews should also share. In a column entitled "There Will Be No Cultural War," he described the world of religious commandments as

a world full of memories and experiences and sights, an entire world living as history in the heart of the secular man and as faith in the heart of the believer, an entire world of deeds that were

and blood that was spilt, an entire world of which even the secular man bears the imprint, either consciously or unconsciously, as character traits or as conditioned reflexes he inherited.

He went on to declare: "The new Jew will not be allowed to forget / the debt he owes to the old Jew."<sup>37</sup> Clearly Alterman considered Judaism to be a historical genome, a kind of collective conditioning that could not and should not be eliminated. But Alterman's secular "religiosity," as it were, was not merely his way of paying homage to the past; he also conceived of religion as an instrument for instilling values, paramount among them a commitment to the national ethos embodied in Jewish history and the destiny of the Jewish people.

## IV

The subject of Jewish nationalism was not always foremost in Alterman's mind. As a young man, he focused mainly on the emotional world of the individual and on existential experiences from a universal perspective. In time, however, Alterman's poetry came to take on a more political, historical, and particularistic character.<sup>38</sup> He began to deal with questions concerning the unique character and destiny of the Jewish people.

As Dan Miron notes, a comparison between two relatively late Alterman poems may reveal something about this evolution in his ideas. In *Songs of the City of the Dove*, Alterman's canonical work of 1957 that deals with the establishment of the State of Israel, he acknowledges that he has deviated from his preferred poetic forms, dealing in "generalizations" instead of "specifics and their essence." Alterman explains that in exceptional times, "Names with no body" like "nation and generation and land and legacy" rise "to squeeze the essence of the life of stuff / And they topple the flesh and blood / From their chairs and take their inheritance without a word."<sup>39</sup> As Miron explains, Alterman here "casts doubt on the authentic existence of a collective 'experience,' the experience of a nation, a generation, a public," but nonetheless gives himself leave to believe in its existence on account of the greatness of the moment. Eight years later, however, in his cycle *Summer Celebration*, no such hesitancy is in evidence: All doubt has evaporated, and Alterman succeeds "in establishing [Jewish] collective existence as an ontological entity."<sup>40</sup> *Summer Celebration* emphasizes the identification of individuals with their nation, arguing that just as individuals exist within the nation, so, too, does the nation exist within them. "There is the light of a Jewish day and there is / Jewish darkness and things / Like time and place and suddenly this assumes / A Jewish image different from others. // So it is today more / Than ever it was. / There is the ephemeral as cover / But there is no moment that is not a judge."<sup>41</sup>

Unlike other Zionist poets of his time, who celebrated Jewish sovereignty as the utter repudiation of the pusillanimity they insisted defined the Jewish people while in exile, Alterman found little cause for shame in the Jews' experience in the diaspora. Indeed, he expressed great admiration for previous generations that had stubbornly clung to a "Jewish image different from others" while in exile, a view he articulates in his philosophical poem "Images of Faces," which concludes his work *Songs of the City of the Dove*.<sup>42</sup> The poem opens with a reference to the impression the Jewish exile has left on both the State of Israel and other nations: The image of the Jewish people, Alterman writes, is imprinted on those nations that adopted elements of the Hebrew language, the Jewish religion, and Jewish ethics; likewise are characteristics of the

nations among which the Jewish people dwelt now ingrained in the culture and worldview—indeed, even in the physical appearances—of these Jewish communities. Nevertheless, the Jewish people managed to retain its unique character throughout the generations, “Denied and concealed / Yet as always defined and significant” because of “The bond of exile and of law.” In particular, there is one remnant of Jewish life in the diaspora that he praises above all others, and whose survival he seeks to ensure: “The spark of refusal and rebellion.”<sup>43</sup>

The next part of “Images of Faces” is devoted to a description of this “spark,” which, he maintains, was unique to Jewish nationhood in exile. This was a humble, modest nationhood, devoid of kingly grandeur: “Only the basics: God, / Justice, death, joy, bread, / Writing, blood.” That is “A people new, astounding and unique / Beneath the sun. A nation rising / With a man’s face and a woman’s, / Not the mask of some kingdom with its masses. / The power that moves it—its nature and / Its vision—meaning something else: / Meaning to obliterate those masks / Of machines and demigods.” The Jewish people is purified by restrictions on the worship of “machine or an idol”; it is a people in which every man is a king; in which “the power of the individual was its power,” and whose continuity is not dependent on royal dynasties, but rather on “the continuing thread from father to son.” Finally, the speaker muses whether it was not actually in the diaspora, “by the contorting and ignominy of those twisted by the exile perishing in the emptiness,” that the concept of nationhood maintained for the Jews its basic cultural and moral character, free of “the spices of kingdom / that made it odious in the pulverizing tool.”<sup>44</sup>

Similar ideas appear in another poem from *Songs of the City of the Dove*, “Night of Change.” Here the speaker remarks on the miracle of Jewish survival in the diaspora: “The axioms / Of the laws of material and power / Were smashed and smoking / In a refutation of them that there had never been the likes of.”<sup>45</sup> As in “Images of Faces,” the hope is expressed that “When this nation will be established / On a firm basis and roots put down / Will be preserved in it also the pillory, / Its foreign nature that has no fellow.” The “foreign nature” of the Jewish people, Alterman explains at the close of the section, is revealed when the Jew stands before God with the yearning for liberty and justice in his heart: “In thrall to life he stood exposed / Before his Creator without guard or block, / His emblems not graven images / For the masses, he remembered his beginnings / In a passion for liberty / And the just decree that still / Exists to divide the waters.”<sup>46</sup>

In Alterman’s view of history, one can draw a continuous line from biblical times to the Zionist revolution; he does not seek to repress or dismiss the diaspora experience, nor does he see it as a long, regrettable digression from the main national narrative. For example, when, in 1960, the Israeli government decided to mark the discovery of the second-century Bar Kochba letters by issuing a commemorative coin, Alterman called for the reverse side of the coin to be dedicated to “memoirs and testimonials buried for safekeeping in the killing ground of concentration camps and in the courtyards of fallen ghettos and in the last bunkers of suicide rebels.”<sup>47</sup> The attempt to keep the memory of the Jewish people’s experience in exile alive is a recurring theme in Alterman’s weekly poetic columns, particularly those which concerned the Holocaust and the Jewish national revival in the land of Israel. One column, for example, published on Passover eve, 1943, portrayed the Passover eve of that year in Europe as but one link in a chain of Passover eves in the diaspora, all stained with persecution: “How much stillness, and how much fear and feasting / Has our history, O Night of Passover! poured upon your head!”<sup>48</sup> And shortly before Israel’s Declaration of Independence in 1948, on Passover eve of that year, Alterman’s column described Elijah the Prophet as a grandfatherly nation of Israel visiting a Jewish army camp on Passover eve and blessing the nation that was reborn there: “And then the

grandfather will whisper: Between CO and NCO / I will not distinguish... forgive this old man... / But may the rock of Israel, father supreme, / Bless your feast on the bread of affliction."<sup>49</sup>

The identification of the nation of Israel with the character of an aging grandfather—a recurring theme in Alterman's poetry<sup>50</sup>—is a good example of how he differed from other Zionist artists who depicted the "sabrah" as a child without roots, born again, as it were, on the soil of Israel, or "from the sea."<sup>51</sup> For Alterman—who retained his diaspora name, meaning "old man," despite Ben-Gurion's pleas for him to Hebraize it—the young Jew in the land of Israel was not the antithesis of previous generations that lived in the diaspora, but rather the bearer of their legacy. The establishment of the State of Israel, he believed, simply constituted the newest chapter in their history.<sup>52</sup>

## V

**F**rom Alterman's point of view, the State of Israel was founded with the clear purpose of serving the Jewish people and fulfilling its destiny. "In addition to the parties represented in the government," he once wrote, "it [the State of Israel] has yet another partner, and it is the Jewish people which, by virtue of its history, has power of attorney."<sup>53</sup>

Alterman takes for granted identification of the State of Israel with the entirety of the Jewish people. This is clearest in a number of his poems that deal with Israel's wars. At the end of World War II, for example, he announced in a column entitled "The Nation's War" that the national struggle for freedom from the British had begun, and described how his people went into battle "as if to an ancient Jewish festival" of martyrdom.<sup>54</sup> And on the eve of Israel's invasion by four Arab armies in May 1948, he likened the emerging state to a dove that would rip out the heart of the rapacious vulture, concluding: "Shall this old nation over which her shadow floats / See her drop all bloodied at its feet? / The sword of the Arab's daughter's hirelings at its throat / Let all Israel's generations now be unsheathed!"<sup>55</sup> Significantly, Alterman called this war "the War of the Jews," and not "the War of Independence," to make clear that this was, to his mind, a battle waged on behalf of the entire Jewish people, and not just those physically present in the Jewish state. Likewise, as Dan Miron pointed out in his book *Facing the Silent Brother*, Alterman did not dedicate entire poems in his epic work *Songs of the City of the Dove* to, say, the Palmah, or another "Israeli" unit that fought in the war, but to the Gahal units which brought volunteers and new immigrants from around the world into the battle lines—that is, to the sacrifice of the sons of the diaspora.<sup>56</sup>

Those sons of the diaspora, and in general the challenges of immigration and absorption that the fledgling state confronted, were the focus of a public debate in which Alterman played an active role. His position seems, at first glance, almost paradoxical: As great as the poet's appreciation for the legacy of the diaspora was, so, too, was the stridency of his opposition to Jews remaining there voluntarily. From the earliest days of the state until his death in 1970, he dedicated much of his writing to undermining the legitimacy of the life of convenience in the diaspora, and to the struggle against the view that considers Jewish life in Israel and abroad as equally viable.<sup>57</sup> "The very foundation of the revival," wrote Alterman in one of his newspaper poems, is "the unification of the state with the nation's dispersed."<sup>58</sup> He ends the poem with the demand to call upon "those who provide for the Jews" in the United States to "let my people go!" In a 1969 article, he criticized the ease with which had been created "a peaceful relationship between the State of Israel and the

diaspora, a peace between two separate entities, neither of which is to be preferred over the other and both of which are equally legitimate." Absent the rejection of the diaspora, maintained Alterman, "the substance of the period of national revival diminishes and fades."<sup>59</sup>

True, Alterman's demand for the immigration of all Jews to Israel arose from his maximalist-Zionist position, but no less important in forming this viewpoint was his fear, in the wake of the Holocaust and increasing rates of assimilation, that the survival of Jewry in the diaspora could not be assured.<sup>60</sup> For these reasons, the subject of *aliya* was at the top of Alterman's agenda, especially in the years after the Six Day War. The more his dream of massive immigration tarried, the more he became demoralized: His only book of prose, *The Last Mask*, is a satire on the failure of the State of Israel to increase immigration in the years following the Six Day War.<sup>61</sup> Of course, Alterman did not extend the requirement of immigration to Jews who lived in countries that forbade them from leaving. On the contrary, he recognized the hardships Jews suffered on account of the establishment of the state, writing of the Jews in the former Soviet Union, for example, who paid the price of Israel's renewal with their freedom, and of the Jews in Arab countries that theirs was "currently the most acute and truest moral problem of the State of Israel."<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, Alterman had a special affinity for Sephardi Jewry, whom he believed represented the values of family, tradition, and nationalism that he extolled. He therefore welcomed wholeheartedly the mass immigration of Jews from Arab lands in the first decade after independence. He also fought against the policy of selective immigration, which frequently caused the breakup of families, and denounced the custom of sending new immigrants to development towns to realize the "pioneering dream" that better-established, Ashkenazi Israelis tended to shirk.<sup>63</sup> In her article "The Insult of the Nation's Revival: Alterman and 'The Different Israel,'" Ruth Kartun-Blum stresses that Alterman was the only writer of the period to denounce the process of selective immigration.<sup>64</sup> She shows, among other things, that even in a lyrical-narrative poem such as *Summer Celebration*, Alterman advocated the ethical principle of strong relationships between fathers and sons in the context of the immigration from North Africa. The Sephardi immigrants, he writes ironically, are "people with positive mental attributes and blessed character traits, / like tolerance and integrity and respect for father and mother and strong feelings of friendship, but no values."<sup>65</sup>

Alterman's profound appreciation for the moral and cultural heritage brought to Israel by these immigrants was also at the root of his opposition to the government's "melting pot" policy, which aspired to create a "new Jew." Several poems in Alterman's book *City of the Dove*, for example, the most intense of which is the "Summer Quarrel" cycle, are dedicated to arguing with those who sought to undo the changes the Jewish people had undergone since the biblical period. The speaker calls for a meeting between "the nation's varieties," each represented by beautiful Jewish women from the various diasporas. In the concluding stanza, he writes: "How will be the cities between Sidon and Philistia? / Will storms bring them thunders and rain? Shush your dispute! / Tomorrow's Shulamit is dressing in her room / How dare you peep through that keyhole!"<sup>66</sup> Another poem in the book, "Michael's Page," written from the point of view of a young Israeli, similarly envisages the creation of a shared culture among all the different immigrant groups.<sup>67</sup>

Concern for this nation of ingathered exiles also influenced Alterman's position on territorial questions. For him, the value of the land stems primarily from its spiritual and practical importance to the people, not from any mystical quality inherent in it. His opinion that the people preceded the land was clearly expressed in the many articles he wrote after the Six Day War, and rested on three premises: First, that the Jewish people was

the only people to see the land of Israel as a distinct, and unique, geographic entity; second, that the needs of the people (autonomy and security) are both the reason and the justification for their having settled in the land, and for their sovereignty over it;<sup>68</sup> and third, that the mass ingathering of the people to its homeland is the condition for its Jewish governance, since without mass immigration, the state would be unable to maintain its hold on its historic territories.<sup>69</sup>

The theme of the dependence of the land on the people also appears in some of Alterman's earlier works. In *Songs of the City of the Dove*, he uses the metaphor of the sand in the towns along the coastal plain: "Yesterday it shone with the colors of the Ishmaelites / And today, its light undiminished, / It burns and glows illumined / Like the elders of the Jews of Ashkenaz. // We have already written and established / That they are strangers to this landscape / And it was not their faces that / Changed when they came to the shore, - / But, around them, as they stood on the hill, / The faces of bird and beast are changing."<sup>70</sup> The people, therefore, is what alters the appearance of the land, and not the reverse. However, he also believed that settling in the land has changed the fate of the people. In his poem "So Has Ended a Day of Battle and Its Evening," King Saul's mother says to the runner who has brought her the news of her son's death in battle on Mount Gilboa: "So she said to the courier: Blood / May cover the mothers' feet, / Yet again shall the people rise / If its own country hosts the defeat. / The dead king shall soon have an heir, / For when falling apart he leant / His sword, upon which he died, / *On his own, own and only, land.*"<sup>71</sup> The setback to the nation was only temporary; because the Jewish people is fighting on its own land, the poem insists, it will always manage to rise again.

These ideas formed the basis of Alterman's hawkish stance on the territorial question. After the Six Day War, he became the leading force behind the Greater Israel movement. In his opinion, the Jewish people was justified in keeping the territories it conquered in that war, not only for the sake of its security, but also on moral and historical grounds.<sup>72</sup> "There are substitutes for security measures. Only justice has no substitute," he wrote. "Only to the national, the human right, the right of the past and the right of the present, the right of the history of our time and of times past, the history of a nation, the history of a culture, of its language, the history of its relationship to those territories."<sup>73</sup> Moreover, he explained, the obligation to past and future generations of the Jewish people, and to the Jews of the diaspora, did not permit handing over the territories: "The owner of the land, and the one who can decide its fate is the entire Jewish people alone. And not only in the present, but also in the past and in the future."<sup>74</sup>

Alterman offered a similar answer to the "demographic problem," according to which keeping the territories would force the country to lose its Jewish character: "In order to retain the Jewish character of the state, they [the supporters of withdrawal] are in fact taking a stance that cedes in advance two basic identifying marks of this Jewish character: The principle of the ingathering of the diasporas and the identification of the State of Israel with the historic land of Israel."<sup>75</sup> Alterman therefore believed that in order to retain Israel's Jewish character, two basic conditions had to be met. One was a mass immigration of the sort, he wrote elsewhere, that was being delayed, among other reasons, because of Israel's flinching "from completing the great change in the map of the land of Israel."<sup>76</sup> The other was "remaining in these 'territories' that determined the identity of the Jewish people, just as the Jewish people determined their identity, and without which they are territories without a name and without a memory."<sup>77</sup>

Yet Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel alone did not, to Alterman's mind, fulfill the purpose for which the State of Israel was created. The state, he believed, was meant to further the spiritual, scientific, and moral advancement not only of the Jewish people, but of all other peoples as well. Thus, in 1961, Alterman praised the Israeli government for its denunciation of apartheid in South Africa, describing the act as one of loyalty to

the purpose of the Jewish state.<sup>78</sup> Yet, as the years passed, reality fell far short of Alterman's expectations, and much of his later writing registers a sense of deep disappointment. Against the background of the genocide in Biafra in 1967-1970 and the Israeli government's hesitant response, for example, Alterman wrote in the newspaper *Maariv*, "Here was an opportunity; here was an open door, to achieve something of the true destiny of the State of Israel, of the destiny determined by the history of this nation, by its heritage, by its recent past." Alterman also regretted that the Jewish state's preoccupation with its own security meant that, at least for the time being, it "was not able to give the Jewish individual and the Jewish people what they had hoped to get from it: A sense of new possibilities, possibilities born of freedom, to arouse the forces latent in the individual and the people to attain a full spiritual life, to fulfill the destiny of the national legacy and its founding principles, to integrate the Jewish people into the life of the family of nations, with all that it can contribute to the world through its experience and history."<sup>79</sup>

Despite his hawkish tendencies, then, Alterman's politics occasionally put him at loggerheads with the Israeli government and military. He continually criticized the state's policies toward its Arab citizens, for example, comparing their plight to that of the persecuted Jewish communities in the diaspora. He rebuked members of Knesset, "Delegate to the legislature, / Jew, faking crossings for generations, / Infiltrator, / Whose grandmother was an infiltrator," for tolerating "the matter of the blind man who was evicted with his child," referring to the treatment of Arabs who infiltrated into Israel from the territories just conquered by Jordan in 1948.<sup>80</sup> He also wrote about the Kafr Kassem incident in 1956, in which Israeli soldiers wrongfully killed 48 Arab citizens who violated curfew orders, insisting that the opinion that the soldiers in question should be treated with leniency "acquires a special tone and color when it is heard among the Jewish people, in light of the fact that, pleading attenuating circumstances like obeying orders and suchlike, the greatest of our enemies once tried to justify the most abominable of crimes [against us]."<sup>81</sup>

It should be clear from this and other similar statements that Alterman was never the "court poet" that some scholars have made him out to be.<sup>82</sup> The nationalist worldview he formulated in his weekly columns was based, first and foremost, on an uncompromising moral stance, that of a thinker who believed deeply in the exalted destiny of the Jewish people and in the mission of the Zionist enterprise. Alterman's unswerving identification with the Jewish collective must seem, in today post-national intellectual climate, like a quaint anachronism at best; yet perhaps for this very reason, it is worth rediscovering the unusual ideas in the works of this great Zionist poet.

## VI

**W**hat can Alterman teach us today? So much has changed in the nearly four decades since his death, both in the Israeli and Jewish public discourse, and in the circumstances that Israel and the Jewish people find themselves in. Yet, if anything, these changes have only made Alterman's conservative style of Zionism all the more urgent.

In recent years, "Jewishness" and "Israeliness" have become, for many Israelis, distinct and competing identities. In religious circles in Israel today, for example, the "Jewish" point of departure is seen as assuming a belief in God, adherence to the commandments, and loyalty to tradition; whereas the "Israeli" approach

subordinates any bond to the Jewish people to an identity that is secular and universalist, applying equally to Jewish and non-Jewish citizens.<sup>83</sup> Some secularists, as well, take a binary view using similar terms, dividing the Zionist ethos into a “Jewish” Right and an “Israeli” Left. This approach is embodied, for example, in the work of political sociologist Yoram Peri in his *Brothers at War: Rabin’s Assassination and the Cultural War in Israel*.<sup>84</sup> Peri pits the stance of secular democratic “political nationalism,” which he calls “metro,” against the “retro” approach held by those who view their identity through an ethno-nationalist lens, and identify with notions such as “the Jewish state,” “collectivism,” and a “belligerent stance” toward the Arabs.

These dichotomies reflect a process of increasing ideological schism, which has had the effect of creating an intellectual void in the space between particularistic nationalism on the one hand, and enlightened universalism on the other—between commitment to religion and tradition on the one hand, and secular humanism on the other. Under such conditions, the public discourse has deteriorated into an endless clash between two antithetical positions separated by a yawning gulf.

The conservative Zionist option that the poetry of Natan Alterman represented may well serve to fill this void. It offers a Jewish-Israeli identity, predicated on nationhood, for which religion has a crucial historic—but not necessarily current—role. Such an approach could fill the need, felt deeply by a great many Israelis today, for a more unifying political and cultural identity. Such an identity can bring together, as Alterman did in his poetry, an appreciation for the Jewish heritage and the belief in universal morals and human rights.

Indeed, a national outlook of the kind Alterman proposes can also provide a potent rejoinder to those ideological movements which dismiss the legitimacy of the Jewish collective that is the basis of Zionism. Alterman proposed a golden path between multi-culturalism on the one hand and the melting pot on the other; between an excessive focus on that which divides us on the one hand, and attempts to create uniformity by coercion on the other. This is a path on which both religious and secular Jews can walk together, without giving up their most cherished beliefs. This does not require that one accept Alterman’s views on every issue—neither his more socialistic economics nor his hawkish views on land are really intrinsic to this approach. Rather, Alterman enables us to recognize, once again, the common aims shared by all streams of Zionism: A profound commitment to the welfare of the Jewish people, and a belief in its unique role in history.

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## **Notes**

1. “First Place: Natan Alterman,” *Ynet*, June 24, 2005, [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3101988,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3101988,00.html).
2. See Aharon Komem, “The Poet and the Leader: Bialik and Ahad Ha’am, Alterman and Ben-Gurion,” in *A Chain of Poetry: On Poetry and Poets* (Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University, 2004), p. 229 [Hebrew].
3. See, for example, Dov Sadan, “At the Entrance to the City of the Dove,” in Ora Baumgarten, ed., *Natan Alterman: A Selection of Critical Essays on His Poetry* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1971), p. 76 [Hebrew].
4. Natan Alterman, “The Triangle’s Vertex,” in *The Triangular Thread: Articles* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1971), p. 180 [Hebrew].

5. Natan Alterman, "From the Letterbox," in *The Seventh Column*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1973), p. 62 [Hebrew]. Here Alterman attacks the policy of selective immigration of North African Jews, in which the old and infirm were denied entry to the State of Israel.
6. Ziva Shamir, "Introduction: 'National Poet,'" in Ziva Shamir, *Sites and Situations: Poetics and Politics in Alterman's Works* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1999), pp. 28, 34 [Hebrew].
7. Shamir, *Sites and Situations*, p. 28.
8. Alterman, "The Revolution That Snapped," in *The Triangular Thread*, pp. 266-271.
9. Natan Alterman, *Last Days of Ur: A Play*, ed. Dvora Gilula (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1990) [Hebrew]. The name was chosen posthumously, by the editor of his manuscripts.
10. Natan Alterman, *The Alterman Notebooks*, ed. Menahem Dorman (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1977), pp. 147-148 [Hebrew].
11. Some of these columns are collected in Natan Alterman, *The Seventh Column*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1972), pp. 323-354 [Hebrew]; Alterman, *Seventh Column*, vol. 2, pp. 308-352; Natan Alterman, *The Seventh Column*, vol. 5, ed. Dvora Gilula (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1995), pp. 268-276 [Hebrew].
12. Alterman, "To the Wedding March," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 1, p. 344.
13. Harai Golomb, "Two Major Themes in Natan Alterman's Poetry," *Keshet* 11 (Spring 1961), p. 48 [Hebrew].
14. See, for example, Dan Miron, *From the Worm a Butterfly Emerges: Young Natan Alterman—His Life and Work, Part One: 1910-1935* (Tel Aviv: The Open University, 2001), pp. 577-598 [Hebrew]. Many of Alterman's newspaper poems focus on the fate of an individual, usually a boy, as was recently shown by Reviel Netz, "When Poetry Meets the Daily Newspapers," *Haaretz*, book supplement, September 7, 2005, p. 8 [Hebrew].
15. Natan Alterman, "Voice and Echo," in *Songs of City of the Dove* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1972), pp. 340-346 [Hebrew].
16. Uzi Shavit, *Poetry and Totalitarianism: Alterman's 'Song of the Ten Plagues'* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 2003), pp. 171-173 [Hebrew]; Natan Alterman, "Poems of the Egyptian Plagues," in *Poems of Yore*, ed. Uzi Shavit (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1999), amended version, pp. 245-270 [Hebrew]; Shavit finds in this poem an attitude similar to the one presented in Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, published in 1945, several years after Alterman's poems appeared. See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 2002).
17. Natan Alterman, "The Ten Plagues of Egypt," *Ariel* 14 (Spring 1966), p. 54.
18. Golomb, "Two Major Themes in Natan Alterman's Poetry," and Eda Zoritte, "Tear of the Innocent of Sin: the Father, the Son and the Widow in 'Poems of the Egyptian Plagues,'" in Ziva Shamir, and Zvi Luz, eds., *The Modernistic Poem in Alterman's Works: On 'Simhat Aniyim' and 'Shirei Makot Mitzrayim'* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1991), p. 33.
19. Alterman, "The Father," in *City of the Dove*, pp. 306-309.

20. Dan Miron, "Between a Day of Trivia and the End of Days," in *Four Aspects of Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1975), p. 123 [Hebrew].
21. In the newspaper poetry collected in the sixth volume of *The Seventh Column* the expression "we 'the free'" appears twice; in the column "Slow For Us" and at the beginning of the column "Quarrel of the Document." Natan Alterman, *The Seventh Column*, vol. 6, ed. Dvora Gilula (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2005), pp. 50, 70 [Hebrew].
22. Yaakov Bentolila and Aharon Komem, *Concordance to Natan Alterman's 'Poems from Before'* (Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University, 1998), pp. 12, 15 [Hebrew].
23. Among others taking the same route were Mordechai Shalev, Shoshana Zimmerman, and Mira Kedar. Each of them pointed to religious (specifically Kabbalistic) motifs in Alterman's lyrical poetry, and both Zimmerman and Kedar also attribute to him some measure of religious faith. None of them, however, calls Alterman "religious," since there is no doubt on this point. See Mordechai Shalev, "Who's Afraid of *Joy of the Poor?*" in Natan Alterman, *Joy of the Poor*, eds. Yariv Ben-Aharon and Ali Alon, *Sdemot Notebook 7* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1997) [Hebrew]; Mira Kedar, "Stars Inside," in *To and Fro* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1999) [Hebrew].
24. Alterman, "Never-Ending Meeting," in *Poems of Yore*, p. 12; Alterman, "The Wind With All Her Sisters," in *Poems of Yore*, p. 15; Natan Alterman, "Moon," *Selected Poems*, bilingual edition, trans. Robert Friend (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1978), p. 15.
25. References to God and appeals to him either by name or as "Lord of the Universe" can be found in the works of other Hebrew poets of Alterman's poetic circle, among them Avraham Shlonsky and Leah Goldberg, avowed supporters of the Zionist-Marxist Mapam party.
26. See Shlomo Sadeh, *And the World Is Happening in the Midst* (Tel Aviv: Keren, 2000) [Hebrew].
27. The essay accompanies Alterman's play "The Trial of Pythagoras," from Natan Alterman, *Plays* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1973), p. 565.
28. Natan Alterman, "The Language of the Ruler," in *Summer Celebration: Cycle of Poems* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1977), p. 152 [Hebrew].
29. Alterman, "The New Moon," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 2, p. 334.
30. Alterman, "The Little Cleric," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 1, pp. 200-202.
31. Natan Alterman, *Moments*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1974), pp. 280-282, 271-273, 190-191 [Hebrew]. Some additional examples of columns like these are "Father Katz and His Son on the Stalingrad Front," "The Habad Telegraph," "General Haman," and "General Hasid," in Natan Alterman, *The Seventh Column*, vol. 3 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1973), pp. 21-23, 24-27, 36-38, 39-41 [Hebrew].
32. Alterman, "The City Falls," in *Poems of Yore*, pp. 231-232.
33. Alterman, "The Club and the Wall," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 5, p. 191.
34. Alterman, "Freedom of Religion and the Hooves," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 2, p. 238. Emphasis in original.

35. The author would like to thank Yair Sheleg, whose articles (particularly "David's Tower, or the Girl from Sede Boker," *Haaretz*, May 15, 2005 [Hebrew]) and discussions helped to clarify the topic.
36. Alterman, "An Item Called Nationality," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 610.
37. Alterman, "There Will Be No Cultural War," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 2, pp. 239-244.
38. On this subject, see the writings of Nissim Kalderon, who studied Alterman's journalistic poetry and noted that in his early years—from 1934 until the start of World War II—he was guided by "a man's need to insulate his internal and emotional world from historical and political events." This was followed by a transitional period, and then, finally, the shift to the "political" and the "historical" was complete. According to Kalderon, the transition "involved accepting the burden of the Jewish world." Nissim Kalderon, "From 'Moments' to 'The Seventh Column': Alterman's Path to Political Writing," in Pinhas Ginossar, ed., *Hebrew Literature and the Labor Movement* (Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University, 1989), pp. 277, 283 [Hebrew].
39. Alterman, "Night of Change," part 5, in *City of the Dove*, pp. 112-115.
40. Dan Miron, "Natan Alterman's Path to National Poetry," in *From the Particular to the Principle: Structure, Genre, and Philosophy in Natan Alterman's Poetry* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1971) [Hebrew].
41. Alterman, "The Fruit Market," in *Summer Celebration*, p. 76.
42. Alterman, "Images of Faces," in *City of the Dove*, pp. 136-150. Immediately following this poem is a sequel, "Appendix to the Poem Images of Faces" (pp. 151-157), which completes its narrative.
43. Alterman, "Images of Faces," in *City of the Dove*, pp. 139-143.
44. Alterman, "Images of Faces," in *City of the Dove*, pp. 144-147.
45. Alterman, "Night of Change," in *City of the Dove*, pp. 118-119.
46. Alterman, "Night of Change," in *City of the Dove*, p. 119.
47. Alterman, "Bar Kochba's Letters," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 2, p. 293.
48. Natan Alterman, "Passover of the Diasporas," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 4 (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1987), pp. 18-19 [Hebrew].
49. Alterman, "The Night of Elijah the Prophet," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 1, p. 138. To this series of Passover eve columns may be added the poem "Nun," published in 1949, in which the experience of the generation present during the establishment of the State of Israel is compared with that of the Israelites during the exodus from Egypt. Alterman, "Nun," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 1, pp. 419-421.
50. See Alterman, "Historical Time," "The Elders," and "Alpinism," in *Moments*, vol. 2, pp. 19, 71, 102; Alterman, "The Poem of the Elders," and "In That Winter," in *City of the Dove*, pp. 22-24, 85-88.
51. See Moshe Shamir's famous expression in the opening sentence of his book *With His Own Hands* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1998), p. 9 [Hebrew].

52. Ben-Gurion's remarks appear at the end of a letter to Alterman on August 23, 1940. The letter appears in Menahem Dorman, *Between the Poet and the Statesman* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1972), p. 46 [Hebrew]. Ziva Shamir discusses the subject in her comprehensive book *Sites and Situations*, which expands upon many of the topics under discussion here.

53. Alterman, "The Letter and the Address," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 549.

54. Alterman, *Seventh Column*, vol. 4, pp. 128-130.

55. Alterman, "In the Morning—Invasion," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 1, pp. 140-141. Less important military episodes were also described by Alterman as wars of the entire Jewish nation: During the pursuit of PLO terrorists in the Judean Desert in 1969, for example, he wrote about "this war in which the Jewish nation is involved" ("After the Pursuit," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 413). The War of Attrition of the same period in the Suez is also described by Alterman in an article as the continuation of the war of attrition that the Jewish nation has been engaged in for thousands of years ("How Will It End?" in *Triangular Thread*, pp. 498-500). Finally, the poet suggested looking at the pincer-movement tactic of Operation Dani during the War of Independence as the continuation of many other movements in Jewish history ("Pincer Movement," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 3, pp. 217-219).

56. Dan Miron, *Facing the Silent Brother: Perspectives on the Poetry of the War of Independence* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1992), pp. 63-119, and especially pp. 100-102.

57. In the first two volumes of *Seventh Column*, which were edited by Alterman personally, there are long series of columns dealing with this topic: The chapter "New Pumbedita" in volume 1 (pp. 237-262), for example, and the columns in pages 258-279 in volume 2. Of this last, three successive columns are devoted to an argument with Nahum Goldmann, president of the World Zionist Organization, one of the advocates of the approach that demanded granting Zionist legitimacy to the diaspora: "Two Memories and an Epistle," "Status and Reality," and "On Two Fables and a Moral" (pp. 261-272). The subject of abrogating the diaspora also pervades *Triangular Thread*, which includes Alterman's many articles from 1967 to 1970. See also, for example: "Welcome in Boston and One of the Jews," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 3, pp. 236-239; and "Parade of Allies and What's the Difference in Any Case," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 6, pp. 108-111.

58. Alterman, "Groundless Conjecture," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 1, pp. 242-244.

59. Alterman, "Two Chapters: 1. A Procession and Its Two Faces," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 457.

60. See, for example, the article "After the Silence": "This State, which again proves what a stout and final bastion it is for the Jewish nation." Alterman, *Triangular Thread*, p. 122.

61. Natan Alterman, *The Last Mask* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Maariv, 1969) [Hebrew].

62. Alterman, "The Gallows and Peace," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 393. On the subject of what Alterman had to say about the Jews of the Soviet Union, see Alterman, "A Censure That Is an Accolade," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 2, p. 288.

63. Columns on this subject are condensed in the chapter "The Law and the Return," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 2, pp. 51-95. The subject also dominates Alterman's book of narrative poetry *Summer Celebration*, and his book of satirical prose *The Last Mask*.

64. Ruth Kartun-Blum, "The Insult of the Nation's Revival: Alterman and 'the Other Israel,'" in Mordechai Bar-On, ed., *The Challenge of Sovereignty: Poetry and Philosophy in the State's First Decade* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1999), pp. 363-374 [Hebrew].
65. Alterman, "The New Faces," in *Summer Celebration*, p. 77.
66. Alterman, "Summer Quarrel," in *Summer Celebration*, pp. 203-207.
67. Extensive commentary on the poems mentioned here can be found in the sixth and seventh chapters of Ziva Shamir's book *Sites and Situations*, pp. 203-250, and in Shmuel Tartner's article "'Tomorrow's Shulamit Is Dressing in Her Room'—Alterman's Attitude to the 'Melting Pot' and the 'War of Culture,'" *Moznaim* 75 (January 2001), pp. 28-35.
68. This argument appears, among other places, in Alterman's article "Two Chapters: 2. The Map and the Exercise," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 602.
69. This is inferred at the end of the article "Aliya—When It's Arab": "Settlement and *aliya* are the two arms with which we will hold on to the land of Israel and the nation's future. Without these two arms, the nation has its land and future in front of it and is powerless to pick them up." Alterman, *Triangular Thread*, p. 76.
70. Alterman, "New City," in *City of the Dove*, pp. 127-128.
71. Alterman, "So Has Ended a Day of Battle and Its Evening," in *City of the Dove*, pp. 184-185.
72. See Dan Laor, "Ideology and Rhetoric in *The Triangular Thread*," in *The Trumpet and the Sword: Critical Essays on the Writings of Natan Alterman* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1983), pp. 102-128 [Hebrew]. Laor shows that there are two prominent motifs in Alterman's articles after the Six Day War, and they are, in his words, history and the battle for the nation of Israel (pp. 115-120). Menahem Dorman, a friend of Alterman's and his posthumous editor, concluded thus: "The root of Alterman's affinity with the idea of the land of Israel is to be found in the layer of *Jewish* historical consciousness; in his connection with the *Jewish heritage*, which is the very air that Zionism in its purest form breathes and without which Zionism cannot stand the tests of time. Our right to the land is an absolute human one not because our fathers dwelt here and created history here thousands of years ago... but because the Jews as a nation never abandoned it, they existed as a nation by virtue of their belief that they would return to it, and as a nation in exile they paid the full price in blood for their loyalty." Menahem Dorman, "The Lightning and the Dove," *To the Heart of the Song: Chapters of Alterman's Biography and Consideration of His Works* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1987), p. 136 [Hebrew].
73. Alterman, "A New Head for New Thoughts," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 420.
74. Natan Alterman, "Breaking the Circle," *This Is the Country*, November 5, 1969 [Hebrew]. So also at the beginning of his article "What Are We Holding On To?": "When we are discussing the future of these territories, we are in fact discussing the past and the future of Jewish continuity, that we are a link in a chain and we hold it in trust for those who preceded us and those who will come after us." Alterman, "What Are We Holding On To?" in *Triangular Thread*, p. 64. Following a letter from Zionist activists in Georgia in the Soviet Union to Golda Meir's government, in which they demanded that Israel help them in their struggle for the freedom to emigrate, Alterman wrote: "If there are any among us who argue day and night that no way should we create 'facts on the ground' in the territories, because we can't make calculations for the land of

Israel without Hussein and without Nasser, this letter comes from Georgia to remind us that we can't make these calculations without the Jewish nation because of which and for which his land has preserved its uniqueness in the world." Alterman, "The Letter and the Address," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 550.

75. Alterman, "Two Chapters: 1. The Error in a Basic Argument," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 127.

76. Alterman, "From Military Control to Complete Presence," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 84.

77. Alterman, "The Policy of Much Skipping," in *Triangular Thread*, p. 248.

78. Alterman, "A Censure that Is an Accolade," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 2, pp. 287-290.

79. Alterman, "A Protest that Misses Its Target," in *Triangular Thread*, pp. 274-275.

80. Alterman, "Security Needs," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 1, p. 279.

81. Alterman, "The Pardon," in *Seventh Column*, vol. 2, p. 365.

82. For example, Dan Miron in his essay "From Builders and Creators to Homeless Ones" in *If There Is No Jerusalem: Essays on Hebrew Writing in a Cultural-Political Context* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1987), p. 66 [Hebrew].

83. See, for example, Moshe Feiglin, "Jews and Israelis" in *The War of Dreams: From the Country of the Jews to the Jewish Country* (Jewish Leadership, 2006), pp. 127-143 [Hebrew]. Feiglin indicates an earlier source for this distinction: Shimon Peres, who was quoted after the 1996 elections as saying that "The Jews have beaten the Israelis" (p. 139). Dealing with a similar distinction is "Jews Facing Israelis," *Nekuda* 286 (December 2005) [Hebrew].

84. Yoram Peri, *Brothers at War: Rabin's Assassination and the Cultural War in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2005), pp. 69-108 [Hebrew].