



TEXT:

The Jews, by Yehuda Amichai

This poem offers meditations on the nature of Jewish People, with many rich metaphors describing the People and their relationship to God.

Some time ago, I met a beautiful woman
Whose grandfather performed my “brit” (circumcision)
Long before she was born. I told her,
You don’t know me and I don’t know you
But we are the Jewish People,
Your dead grandfather and I the circumcised and you the beautiful
granddaughter
With golden hair. We are the Jewish People.

And what about God? Once we sang
“There is no God like ours”, now we sing “There is no God of ours”
But we sing. We still sing.

The full text of the poem is available at: <http://makomisrael.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/The-Jews-Amichai.pdf>



The Jews, by Yehuda Amichai

Explanation of Text

Yehuda Amichai (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yehuda_Amichai) (1924-2000) wrote – or at least published - the poem “The Jews” in his 1989 collection “Even a Fist was once an Open Palm and Fingers”. In many ways the poem constitutes a reflection on the subject of the Jewish People, their history, their identity, their commonality, their relationship with and without God and their future. So much of Amichai’s poetry, which he had been writing since the late 1940’s had dealt with aspects of these subjects from many different perspectives but it is fascinating that it took him forty years after beginning to write to pen a poem to which he gave the very imposing and obligating name, “The Jews”.

Amichai took names very seriously. He took his own name seriously. When he changed his name as a young man in pre-State Israel (he was born in Germany and he came on Aliyah in the early years of Hitler’s rule), he changed himself from Ludwig Pfeuffer to Yehuda Amichai – literally “Judah (Jew) my People lives”, a name of great power, resonance and obligation. Not all of his poems have names: many simply take the first

words as their name. Others are numbered. So when he called this poem “The Jews” (HaYehudim) one gets the feeling that he was not just calling it thus after the first word of the poem – HaYehudim – but he was making a very big statement on the subject that he had been examining and turning over for many years.

Thus it seems that a poem with this name, a statement on Jewish identity and fate made by one of the most important and singular voices in the modern Jewish story, should be a good text to examine and to consider, as we try and understand some of the major questions raised by the idea of the Jewish People and their existence – Jewish Peoplehood.

Introduction to the Featured Last Part of the Poem

The piece we bring here is from the last part of the poem. Having built up through a powerful series of images the idea of the collective and the relationship of the individual to the collective, in abstract and associative terms, Amichai brings

himself into the poem for the first time at this point. Up to now individuals mentioned have been distant, abstract, nameless. It is here that he gets personal.

He talks here of his meeting with a woman whom he discovers to be the granddaughter of the man who circumcised him more than sixty years ago, in a small town in Germany. He suggests to her that despite the fact that they have never met previously, nor known of the historical relationship between them, they constitute, in microcosm, the Jewish People. “*We are the Jewish People...*” They don’t have to know each other to have a connection. They share a common past: perhaps he is hinting that all Jews, whether they know it or not, share a common framework, a common history, a common relationship. What is the basis of that connection?

In the autobiographical fragment, they are connected by the fact that the girl’s grandfather was the boy’s mohel (circumciser). Is this a random connection? Presumably not: the connection, it might be suggested, is elevated to symbolic status by the fact that their autobiographical connection is formed by the act of circumcision – *Brit Milah*. *Brit Milah* is – ever since the story of Abraham – the ultimate symbol of the connection between a Jew and God. In addition, for males it is the key to membership of the Jewish collective. The text in chapter 17 of Genesis (*Bereishit*) tells of the importance of *Brit Milah* through the saga of Abraham.

And I will establish my covenant between
me and you and your offspring after

you throughout their generations for
an everlasting covenant, to be God to
you and to your offspring after you...
And God said to Abraham, “As for you,
you shall keep my covenant, you and
your offspring after you throughout
their generations. This is my covenant,
which you shall keep, between me and
you and your offspring after you: Every
male among you shall be circumcised.
You shall be circumcised in the flesh of
your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of
the covenant between me and you. He
who is eight days old among you shall be
circumcised. Every male throughout your
generations... shall surely be circumcised.
So shall my covenant be in your flesh an
everlasting covenant. (Bereishit Ch. 17 vv.
7-13)

This chance encounter between two Jews gains its special significance and special resonance from the fact that their connection is around the ultimate symbol of belonging to the Jewish people. The serendipity of their meeting is elevated to a symbolic height (“*We are the Jewish People...*”) by the fact that their connection derives from the ultimate act of connecting, of belonging. The woman’s grandfather was the agent of the man’s entrance into the historic community of Jews and into the whole Jewish story.

The last three lines of the poem - the end of the poem – are about God. The poem is about the Jews but God – or at least, the question about God – appears three times in the poem, each time

introduced with the words “ומה בדבר האלוהים?”, translated as “*And what about God?*” The first time the words appear we hear that the Jews sense God who appears in their memory “*like the scent of a beautiful woman*” but they do not really see her. The second time the words appear we hear that God only very occasionally sees the Jews “*only once a year, on Yom Kippur.*” In other words, in the first two mentions of the relationship between God and the Jewish People, it is clear that the relationship has, for thousands of years since “*the settlement of divorce from the Garden of Eden and from the Temple*”, been tenuous at best. Now, having elevated to symbolic status the circumcision – the symbol of the covenant between God and the Jewish People – as the ultimate act of inclusion in the Jewish People as manifested in the chance meeting of these two people, historically united by circumcision, Amichai finishes with his ultimate statement which raises a great and provocative question about the future of the Jewish People.

And what about God? Once we sang
 “There is no God like ours”, now we sing
 “There is no God of ours”
 But we sing. We still sing.

The language is playful but the idea is very serious. “*There is no God like ours*” is the opening to one of the most common and best loved of all Jewish “prayers”, the early medieval piyut (liturgical poem) *Ein Kelohaynu* אין כאלוהינו, said in many traditions on a daily basis both on weekdays and on Shabbat and holidays. Now, according to Amichai, this has been replaced (at least for many) by a phrase which

symbolizes atheism and nihilism, the very things that should undermine the idea of covenant, of Brit Milah, which he seems to have already identified as the key to Jewish belonging. The whole structure of Jewish peoplehood should clearly fall apart if this becomes the mantra of the Jews today. If the whole collective owes its existence and its internal connections to the idea of the covenant with God, then in the absence of God, there should be no future – perhaps even no present – for the Jews. Who can say “*We are the Jewish People...*” if there is no God and if the central symbol of belonging is circumcision – Brit – which demands God as a partner to that covenantal relationship?

But Amichai does not seem to despair. We have two reasons for suggesting that. Firstly the last line: the Jews go on singing. The song might be different, the words might have inverted themselves, but the song still exists – “*We still sing*”. Secondly, if the Jews’ relationship with God has been compared to the scent of a beautiful woman, the woman in the autobiographical piece is described precisely as that – “*a beautiful woman*”. The exact same words “אישה יפה” are used. Perhaps, for Amichai, God – always tenuous – sensed but not quite present, has got lost or become meaningless for much of the Jewish people. Some would see this as a tragedy and insist that this is the end of the Jewish People in any meaningful way. Perhaps Amichai (his name itself means ‘My People lives!’) – who himself came from a deeply religious background, is making a different suggestion, namely that human beings are now capable of maintaining that relationship, to which God was a partner.

Do you agree?

Some will agree with Amichai: others will be deeply opposed - even offended by what they see as his blasphemy. But we suggest that the discussion is one of the most important that needs to take place within the Jewish People today. That is why discussing this text of Amichai is so potentially rich as a framework for addressing this vital issue.

Educational Suggestions

1. “the Jews are ...” - Read the whole poem carefully. Ask your students to look carefully at the metaphors that Amichai uses to describe the Jewish People. What do we learn about (Amichai’s understanding of) the Jewish People? What kind of People are we, according to him? Do your students find these metaphors accurate and resonant for them? Ask your students to suggest other metaphors. You could then illustrate the metaphors or write about them more extensively. Create a large display around the phrase “The Jews are ...” and add your written pieces, Amichai’s poem and any artistic display you can make to go with it.
2. “the Jews are ...” Ask the group to suggest possible nouns to complete the phrase: “The Jews are a” Possible suggestions might include words like: religion, a people, a nation, a civilization, a culture. If People is not on their list, add it in.

Now divide the group into small groups: Give each group all of the words that have been suggested and ask them to think of three

essential actions needed for the collective to exist according to each definition.

[For example, for religion, suggestions might include: coming together regularly to pray, fasting on Yom Kippur, building a Sukkah, boys putting on tefillin, maintaining places where Jews can study traditional texts, training Rabbis etc. For nation, suggestions might include learning Hebrew as a Jewish language, supporting the State of Israel, defending rights for Jews in all countries, celebrating Jewish festivals etc.]

Explain that the question “what are the Jews?” has received many answers, especially since the Jews entered the modern world in the last two centuries or so. Explain that there is much difference of opinion and suggest that each person is entitled to come to their own conclusions. The oldest of all of these definitions and the one that appears most commonly in traditional Jewish sources is the word **אָמ** – *Am* – translated as People as in *Am Yisrael* – the Jewish People. Explain that this is the word that you are going to concentrate on: what does it mean to be part of the Jewish People?

List all of the actions that they have chosen for People. If they were asked to choose just one that they see as absolutely central for existing as the Jewish People, what would they choose? Why?

3. Covenant – Look carefully at the motif of the covenant in the poem. Consider the role of the circumcision as a key moment in becoming part of the Jewish People. What does it add to the poem that Amichai focused on this expression

of covenantal belonging? Discuss the notion of covenant with your students. What is a covenant? Look at the excerpt from Genesis in which God makes a covenant with Abraham. How do your students relate to this notion? Do they feel part of a covenant with the Jewish People, and if they do, how do they join?

For older students, you might want to raise the (controversial) issue of circumcision as a concept. There are some contemporary debates going on about circumcision, in several frameworks. Some countries or local authorities are considering outlawing it, and some parents are against it also.

You might want to bring the following statement from a conscious Jewish parent that decided with his wife to do a Brit ceremony for his son without a circumcision.

A famous philosopher once said: “An unexamined life is not worth living.” The same can be applied to the religions and cultures that we belong to. Judaism is a tremendously rich pro-survival religion that, through persistent mistreatment and misinformation, is still widely misunderstood. However, the mistakes that it carries within it, such as the ritual of circumcision, called brit milah, should not be considered any differently than in society in general, no matter how essentially important to the Jewish culture it is seen. Circumcision is child abuse. It is medically unnecessary. It is nothing short of a traumatic way to

introduce a newborn male into the world and into the Jewish community. The centuries of a covenant with God has produced great denial in viewing the very real pain of the newborn. From the start it relegates females as being less important than males as historically there has been no equivalent ceremony to welcome the newborn Jewish female baby. Too often the needs, wishes and cries of the young go unnoticed or unheeded. Often described as silly or immature in nature, none of us were assisted in great measure to feel as important as we really were or are as young people. Our minds from birth are described as tabula rasa. Make no mistake about it, young people do not ask for and react sharply to the imposition of adult values on them and on their bodies. Expecting nothing short of a complete and exuberant welcome into their world, the pain of the tools used by the mohel, or the doctor, is a rude shock not readily forgotten by the newborn with an already developed nervous system and a brilliant mind. (From the website of the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Centers (NOCIRC))

What does the parent argue about circumcision? In his opinion is it possible to live a life as a male Jew without it? What do you think that Amichai would say? What do your students themselves say? Why?