

# The Wounds and Pain of the Holocaust in Haim Gouri's Filmmaking, Poetry and Fiction

## Dvir Abramovich

### Introduction

Commenting on the publication of *Milim be-dami holeh ahavah (Words in My Lovesick Blood)*,<sup>1</sup> Yair Mazor accurately avers that, "Haim Gouri's role and status in modern Hebrew poetry as well as in the short history of the state of Israel have made him something of a monument."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Gouri is the quintessential member of the Palmach<sup>3</sup> generation, that group of authors that came of age with the establishment of the Jewish state and who wrote about the treacherous shoals it had to cross.

This article sheds light on the Holocaust-centred oeuvre of the prolific poet, novelist, documentary filmmaker and journalist, who over a rich span of seven decades documented Jewish history's and Israel's most painful and tumultuous moments. I offer a reading of several of Gouri's poems, documentary films, his coverage of the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, and focus primarily on his novella *The Chocolate Deal*, which still today remains one of the most powerful expressions and forays into the damaged psyche of the survivor.

### Haim Gouri

Feted as one of the pillars of modern Hebrew literature, Haim Gouri (Gurfinkel), the 1988 recipient of the Israel Prize for Poetry, was born on 9 October 9 1923, in Tel Aviv, Palestine. After the 1948 War of

---

Dvir Abramovich is Director of the Program in Jewish Culture & Society at The University of Melbourne.

<sup>1</sup> Haim Gouri, *Words in My Lovesick Blood*, ed. and trans. Stanley F. Chyet (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Yair Mazor, 'Review of *Words in My Lovesick Blood*', *World Literature Today*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1997), pp. 449-450.

<sup>3</sup> The fighting force of Jewish settlements during the British Mandate period in Palestine.

Independence Gouri studied Hebrew literature and philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He completed his graduate studies in French literature at the University of Paris after winning a French government scholarship. Upon his return to Israel in 1954 he began writing for *Lamerchav*, the Labor Party's official magazine.

In addition to his poetry and prose, Gouri has translated French plays and other works from the French into Hebrew. His output has been recognized with a slew of awards, including The Oshiskin Prize for Poetry (1961), The Sokolov Prize (1962), The Bialik Prize (1974), The Uri Zvi Greenberg Award (1998), and The ACUM Prize for his life's work (2005). A longtime resident of Jerusalem and the father of three daughters, he was married to Aliza for more than sixty years until his death on 31 January 2018. So revered was Gouri that Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat were among the pallbearers last week at his funeral.

Haim Gouri first came into contact with the Holocaust universe in 1947, when he was sent by the Haganah,<sup>4</sup> the precursor to the Israeli Defense Forces, to a displaced persons camp in war-torn Europe. Dispatched to Hungary and Austria to help the victims reach Israel, the young *Sabra* (native-born Israeli) became part of the 'Culture of Remembrance'. Memory thus became a recurring theme underpinning a principal segment of Gouri's chronicles, so much so that in the obituary published in Haaretz newspaper, Rogel Alpher noted that the, "Israeli poet bequeathed to this people an obsession with memory."<sup>5</sup> It was inevitable that this harrowing encounter with the remnant of the Holocaust would have a striking and enduring effect on the young man. Upon returning to Israel to fight in the 1948 War of Independence, Gouri became determined to keep the flame of memory alive through his *ars poetica*. In a 1996 interview Gouri remarked, "I see myself as an Israeli and a poet of all generations influenced by so much of our past. Meeting the survivors of the Holocaust changed my life. There is hardly a work of mine without images

---

<sup>4</sup> The Haganah was the Jewish settlement's paramilitary organization during the British Mandate of Palestine. See Yigal Allon, *The Making of Israel's Army* (New York: Universe Books, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> Rogel Alpher, 'Poet Haim Gouri, Founder of Israel's Religion of Bereavement', *Haaretz*, 4 February 2018, at <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-poet-haim-gouri-founder-of-israel-s-religion-of-bereavement-1.5787044>. Accessed 15/01/2019.

of the Shoah.”<sup>6</sup> He once told an interviewer in 1992, “Never forget. Israel was not born because of the Holocaust but in spite of it.”<sup>7</sup> As Idith Zertal astutely observes, the Holocaust still today plays a cardinal role in the way in which Israeli citizens perceive their lives, as well as the Arab-Israeli conflict. She argues that the Holocaust permeates, both literally and figuratively, every facet of life in the Jewish state, and that it encases within its midst a transcendental power that is linked to Jewish history, to anti-Semitism, and of course, to the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> In that connection, Zertal references Gouri’s words to young Israelis, imploring them to remember the persecution and suffering, in passage worth quoting at length:

“Whence did this nation derive its strength” asked the poet Haim Guri rhetorically after the 1967 war, which transformed the link between Israeli power and the Holocaust into a fateful motion. “From there,” was his answer, a “there” that is introduced time and again into Israeli existence and is always defined as “here... Take note of this lesson,” wrote Guri to his native-born Israeli audience, young soldiers destined to carry forever the burden of war: Those who were liquidated there had no homeland and nobody cared about their lives... Take note of this lesson! *All of the past is but the present*, and between you and your annihilation lies only your sword. Do not despise your battered and dead forebears... You, who have a country, do not pass judgement on those damned people! If you have the strength to read the history books without being stupefied by fury and pity, go to the books and learn whence this nation gained its strength... You too come from the ashes, you who have a land beneath your feet.<sup>9</sup>

## Filmmaking

Energised and inspired by his mission to Europe, Gouri embarked on a journey of documenting the Holocaust in what would become a film trilogy. In that connection, he noted, “I am not a scholar or historian, but I accept totally the culture of remembrance. It will always be associated with

---

<sup>6</sup> Mike Scheidemann, ‘A Sense of Irony’, *Jerusalem Post*, 26 December (1996), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Liat Collins. ‘Poles apart on the Holocaust’, *Jerusalem Post*, 1 February (2018), at <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/My-Word-Poles-apart-on-the-Holocaust-540472>. Accessed 15/01/2019.

<sup>8</sup> Idith Zertal. *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> Haim Guri. ‘You Who Have a Country’, *Zot Ha’aretz*, 18 April (1969), pp. 4-5, as quoted in Zertal, *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, p. 169.

## *Wounds and Pain of the Holocaust*

knowing the acts and collecting every scrap of paper, every forgotten voice... time is on the side of the murderers.”<sup>10</sup>

From 1972 to 1985, at the request of members of Kibbutz Beit Lohamei Haghetat, <sup>11</sup> Gouri collaborated with eminent documentary filmmakers David Bergman and Jacques Erlich to produce an epic trilogy of historical films that were leavened with film footage of photographs from the Shoah, undergirded by sound-overs of survivor testimony drawn from interviews that Gouri conducted with the film’s subjects.

The first, *Ha-maka hashmonim ve-achat (The 81<sup>st</sup> Blow)*, was nominated for an Academy Award in 1975, and charts the rise of the Third Reich, the German invasion of Poland, and the subsequent attempted destruction of the Jews. The title was taken from a testimony given during the Eichmann trial by Michael Goldman-Gilad, who was whipped eighty times by the Nazis. *The 81<sup>st</sup> Blow* refers to the doubt and indifference shown by Israelis to Michael Goldman-Gilad’s heartbreaking story and other survivor accounts.

Nobel Prize laureate, author, and survivor Elie Wiesel was so touched by the film, that in an article entitled, ‘Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory’, in which he lamented the vulgarity and the cheap and simplistic melodramas that came to characterise films portraying the unspeakability of the Shoah and the suffering of the victims, he lauded the work. Towards the end of his essay, Wiesel discusses the pathways available to those who wish to properly and respectfully transmit the message and keep the memory of the Holocaust alive. He urges readers to watch several documentaries, such as Alain Resnais’ *Night and Fog*, Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, and Gouri’s *81st Blow*.<sup>12</sup>

The second film, the 1979 epic *Hayam ha-acharon (The Last Sea)*, winner of the French Silver Eagle Award, traces the treacherous journey of the liberated remnant of the death camps to Palestine on illegal boats, the confrontations with the British navy, detention at camps on Cyprus, and the survivors’ arrival in Palestine. Knotted throughout is rare footage from private film collections, tape-recorded recollections of anonymous voices, newsreels that explore the final stages of World War II to sequences showing the illegal

---

<sup>10</sup> Haim Gouri, ‘Facing the glass booth’, in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> A kibbutz-based organization of Holocaust survivors whose primary mission is to preserve the history of Jewish resistance and the memory of the victims.

<sup>12</sup> Elie Wiesel, ‘Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory’, *The New York Times*, 11 June (1989), p. B1.

Jewish immigrants arriving in Palestine. The final film, *Pnei Hamered (Flames in the Ashes)*<sup>13</sup> documents the various forms of Jewish resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe. As Hartman posits, Gouri, in *Flames in the Ashes* shrewdly and compellingly deals with the question of why European Jews did not fight more by showcasing, “footage of defeated Russian soldiers, columns of them stretching to the horizon in an endless line, utterly dejected, guarded by very few Germans, and screaming abjectly, like animals, for cigarette butts.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Poetry**

Certainly, Gouri was one of the first Israeli artists to treat the barbaric events of the Holocaust and their aftermath, adopting as his primary concern the psychological trauma inflicted on the survivors by the Nazi inferno. His secondary concern was the influence his fieldwork in Europe had on his initial literary forays. In large part his early verse – ‘Pirhei esh’ (‘Flowers of Fire’, 1949), ‘Ad alot ha-shahar’ (‘Till Dawn’, 1950), and ‘Shoshanat ruhot’ (‘Compass Rose’, 1960) – is pervaded by images of young anti-heroes plunged into the abyss of postwar Europe who, while trekking through the detritus of the European landscape, are disoriented by the ethical bankruptcy of the perpetrators and the devastating fate of their people. The protagonist represents a collective, rather than a fully fleshed individual, a wandering mythical observer for the Jewish people, whose parabolic objective is to collect testimonies about the deracination of Jewish life. Gouri’s work reveals a naturalistic/realist template that studs the poems with references to the historical streets, palaces, bridges, and churches of cities such as Vienna, Budapest, and Prague. The effect is to overlay the text with a mimetic historical patina that anchors it to the specific apocalypse. Furthermore, by melding into the armory of depiction accurate detail in settings and names, the writer ensures a quality of realism that intermingles finely with the figurative surrealist ingredients.

Leavened by fury, distress, and lamentation for his vanquished brothers and sisters, Gouri’s personal geysers of protestations continually explode with the visceral and tragic dimension, lodging the reader in the shocking frame of history.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, his vast panorama of meditations evokes the horror the *Sabra* senses upon his exploration of the terrain of genocide. In different ways, Gouri marshals the aesthetic and poetic devices to excavate the traces of the

---

<sup>13</sup> The direct translation is *The Faces of Rebellion*.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> Hana Yazo, *Ha-Shoah Beshirat Dor Hamedina* (Tel Aviv: Ekad, 1984), p. 105.

vanished dead, deftly showing how their echoes still resonate in the cities, towns, rivers, monuments, and bridges of Europe. Again and again, the poet employs the imagery of nature as a metaphor for darkness, strangeness, and collaboration with the Nazi beast. Walking alone at night among the ruins, the speaker senses a foreign landscape oozing cruelty as the deathly snow entombs the corpses and simultaneously masks the footprints of the merciless killers and the flowing blood of the departed.

The pilgrimage taken in Gouri's poems is indeed a somber, ordeal-laden affair, as the speaker, groping for a nexus with a cultural history from which he is removed by time, is shocked by the menacing quietness of the streets that are saturated with indifference. Above and beyond that, the Israeli visitor, roaming along the barren roads that once transported his brethren, yearns to establish a sense of identification and empathy that his own generation back in the homeland does not feel. The young man, the alter ego of Gouri, whose immediate kin did not perish in the camps, attempts concomitantly to wrestle with the atrocities and also to incorporate their cultural identity into his being. The motif of engagement between the naïf Israeli and the survivors finds fertile ground in 'Koti Haktana' ('Little Koti', 1960), an overtly allegorical opus. In this poem, the peripatetic hero is approached by a young girl, a phantasmagorical figure who is an archivist of all the survivors' sense of loss and pain. In the course of their encounter, the girl, who may be a virgin or a saint, transmits to the speaker details of the gruesome murder of Jews that are later recreated as nightmares. "One day, in the lamplight, in the dark December streets / Little Koti told me about the unnatural deaths... Her story darkened the western sky, over the snowy streets."<sup>16</sup> Likewise, in 'Yoman Leili' ('Night Diary', 1949) the narrator is steered by an anonymous figure through a kaleidoscopic exploration of the horrible sites of killing, unleashing within him an anguished cry.

What is evident to readers of Gouri's canon is that the remembrance of the victims never strikes a moralizing or condemnatory tone. The speaker never views the slain as passive weaklings who were led to their death like "sheep to the slaughter". Rather, as he howls into the night Jobian questions, especially in his volume *Till Dawn*, the poet is engulfed by a wounding sense of guilt, not only merely for being alive but also

---

<sup>16</sup> Gouri, *Words in My Lovesick Blood*, p. 29.

because of the intimidating helplessness he feels in the face of such nameless inhumanity. Given that realization, the young man is gripped by an overpowering desire to remember, to keep the memory alive, in order to ensure that the voices of the dead never become silent or forgotten, “And there is no peace for the forgetter, the betrayer /of the memory.”

A thematic index of Gouri’s arc of the Holocaust can be found in the poem ‘Yerusha’ (‘Inheritance’, 1996). Unarguably one of the writer’s most noted compositions, ‘Yerusha’ adapts the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to draw a link with the European terror, which Gouri asserts is the stock element in Jewish history. In the poem’s final two stanzas, we read the following:

Isaac we are told, was not offered up in sacrifice  
He lived long/enjoyed his life  
until the light of his eyes grew dim  
But he bequeathed that hour to his progeny  
They are born  
with a knife in their heart.<sup>17</sup>

In its compression, the mythical iconography of the poem encourages us to view the national narrative of Isaac’s descendants as one of endless victimization and persecution, opening up inevitable parallels with the wartime suffering of the modern generation. Additionally, one finds anger leveled against God for preventing the knife from being lodged so severely during the Holocaust. Indeed, the writing betrays a current of defiance and doubt about God’s mercy toward His people. Leon Yudkin rightly notes that, “Isaac, the apparently minor figure of the biblical story, is the key. The poem has it that he lived for many days and prospered. But the crucial moment of what was apparently to be the imminent sacrifice, suddenly thwarted, was transmitted to the descendants: “They are born with a knife in their hearts.” The Jewish fate, recognized in the Holocaust and in the struggle for Israeli state, is a perpetual presence.”<sup>18</sup> Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi has examined how the mythological theme of the Binding of Isaac underwent a symbolic transformation into the motif of ‘Shehitah’ (ritual slaughter) to embody the irrational extermination of the Holocaust. She further explains that:

---

<sup>17</sup> Gouri, *Words in My Lovesick Blood*, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Leon Yudkin, ‘Haim Guri’, in Sorrel Kerbel (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), p. 214.

## *Wounds and Pain of the Holocaust*

For centuries the Akedah – the aborted sacrifice – was adequate as a correlative image of the suffering of Jews whose execution had not been stayed, whose sacrifice had been carried out on countless pyres. Still the myth of Divine intervention had prevailed over the reality. When “Shehitah” begins to replace “Akedah” as paradigm of martyrdom, the rupture with the received theodicy is finally acknowledged at the symbolic level.<sup>19</sup>

Gouri traversed similar ground in his semiautobiographical novel, *Hachakira: Sipuro shel reuel (The Interrogation: The Story of Reuel, 1980)*, a barely fictionalized collage of vignettes that mirrors Gouri’s previously mentioned encounters with survivors during his mission to Europe. Unsurprisingly, the author himself is incarnated on the page as an Israeli adolescent trudging through Prague and Budapest as part of his assignment to rescue Jews. Everything is essayed from the standpoint of the envoy Reuel, who foregrounds his multiple interactions with the Jewish survivors who outlived the carnage.

### ***The Chocolate Deal***

Gouri’s continuing fixation with the Holocaust was fully embodied in the 1965 novella *Iskat hashokolad (The Chocolate Deal)*,<sup>20</sup> the poet’s first prose effort. In one of the first reviews to appear after the book’s publication in English, Arthur Cohen contended that, “*The Chocolate Deal* is the most fully realised and moving novel of the Holocaust written by a non-survivor that this reviewer has read”,<sup>21</sup> while Abraham Avni lauded the book’s emotional impact and labeled it, “a commendable work”.<sup>22</sup>

Reuven Shoham explains that what differentiated Gouri’s approach to the Holocaust from his contemporaries was that he related to the catastrophe, “from without, albeit with sympathy and guilt feelings regarding the survivors”.<sup>23</sup> Shoham then adds that *The Chocolate Deal* is, “the first real attempt to overcome this limitation in order to express the horror as seen by the victims themselves, to shed his autobiographical and

---

<sup>19</sup> Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, ‘Revisioning the Past: The Changing Legacy of the Holocaust in Hebrew Literature’, *Salmagundi*, no. 68/69 (1985-1986), p. 263, note 43.

<sup>20</sup> Haim Gouri, *Iskat hashokolad* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad: 1965).

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Cohen, ‘The Metaphysics of Survival’, *Midstream* (November 1968), p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> Abraham Avni, ‘Review of *Iskat hashokolad* by Guri Haim’, *Books Abroad*, vol. 40 (1966), p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> Reuven Shoham, ‘Haim Gouri and ‘The Jewish People Who Have Been Seriously Injured’’, *AJS Review*, vol. 24 (1999), p. 99.

lyric 'I'".<sup>24</sup> Notably, *The Chocolate Deal* appeared immediately after the Eichmann trial, which Gouri covered as a reporter for the newspaper *Lamerchav* and wrote about in *Facing the Glass Booth: The Jerusalem Trial of Adolf Eichmann*.<sup>25</sup> Hearing the survivors narrate their own tales of hell, made a dramatic impact on the author who recalled forty years later that, "It was only during this trial that I understood what happened to the Jews and what happened to other peoples. These witnesses exposed with endless power the story that otherwise would have been impossible to tell."<sup>26</sup>

Gouri understood that the Israeli tendency to blame the victims of the Shoah was in fact the result of a refusal by the public to come to terms with the terrors of the annihilation. *Facing the Glass Booth* revealed the guilt carried by native Israelis who felt helpless since they could save those who were slaughtered.

Bilski contends that Gouri was critical of Gideon Hausner's interrogation of the survivors, believing that, "more attention should have been given in the trial to the Yishuv's reaction to the reports of the Holocaust during the war".<sup>27</sup> She later quotes from Gouri, who in the following passage ascribes some blame to the Jewish settlement in Mandatory Palestine:

In May 1943 we knew that Jewish Warsaw no longer existed. We heard the broadcast on London radio. Even before that we knew that the Jewish tribe in Europe was dying out day by day. We went to fight the Nazis. Thousands joined up. They marched on the battle fields. But at the same time life continued here... How are we to make this personal reckoning today? I don't know. But at the same time I realize that such a reckoning cannot be avoided... The more I reflect the greater the fear that wells within me. These questions are too cruel to be run away from and too dangerous to be talked about today. But they will always beset us.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Shoham, 'Haim Gouri', p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Haim Gouri, *Facing the Glass Booth: The Jerusalem Trial of Adolf Eichmann*. Trans. Michael Swirsky with a foreword by Alan Mintz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004 [1962]).

<sup>26</sup> Isabel Kershner, 'A notorious Nazi's plea for his life; In newly released letter, Eichmann denies guilt in overseeing Holocaust', *The International New York Times*, 29 January (2016), p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Leora Bilsky, 'Social Criticism in the Shadow of a Transformative Trial', in Leora Bilsky, *Transformative Justice: Israeli Identity on Trial* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> Haim Gouri, quoted in Bilsky, *Transformative Justice*, p. 152.

Gouri's riveting account of the testimonies and trial entailed a personal transformation for the journalist, reflecting a collective awaking by Israeli society and the embracing of a new approach towards the remnant. In the following passage, Gouri acknowledges the attitudinal shift toward the catastrophe and its victims which he and his fellow countrymen experienced:

If a new leaf has been turned over, it is inside us. We now see things differently. We have set aside a Memorial Day for the Holocaust and Heroism, and in doing so we have drawn a subtle distinction between the two, as if we had juxtaposed them as complementary but different. The Holocaust was a source of shame for us, like some awful blemish, visible to all. But the heroism we embraced as a shred of pride, has given us the right to hold our heads high... But we must ask the forgiveness of the multitudes whom we have judged in our hearts, we who were outside the circle. And we often judged them without asking ourselves what right we had to do so.<sup>29</sup>

Casting his narrative net outside the recognizable social reality of the Palmach generation, Gouri's *The Chocolate Deal* focuses on the damaged personhood of the survivors and, in the process creates a psychologically and symbolically driven work. Underpinning this angst-freighted tale is a first-person narration that positions the spectator to observe events and emotions from the survivors' stance, pulling us tightly into their interior consciousness. It is also of significance that in this gaunt, minimalist, and highly elliptical narrative, any overt referent to the Holocaust is absent, underscoring its naked allegorical and abstract quality as well as eschewing the convention of dramatizing the senseless monstrosity. It is difficult not to be swept up by the power of Gouri's adroit and trenchant observations about the excruciating emotional fissures that torment the central characters and their disparate roads to recovery.

As the story opens, Mordechai Neuberg (Mordi) and Reuven Krauss (Rubi), who were friends before the war, chance upon each other at the train station in an unnamed European capital after Hitler's devastating onslaught. Both have lost their families and friends. The reader immediately feels the spectral bareness haunting the book's tableaux, reinforced by the elusive, diffuse nature of the narrative. The unidentified city, broken and fragmented, stands for the lingering, bloody field of chaos that polluted Europe and the mental crippling of the survivors. Explicitly mapping on this geographical canvas several of the different phases of the

---

<sup>29</sup> Gouri, *Facing the Glass Booth*, p. 274.

journey taken by the survivors, Gouri yokes the material and spiritual to enunciate and set the tone for the rest of storyline.

Following their meeting, Rubi accepts Mordi's offer to share his room. It is an empty period in which civilization has been displaced by hell. In one heartbreaking segment, we see the two heroes devote endless hours on searching the missing-persons section of the newspaper for remaining family members, only to fail repeatedly in their efforts. More than anything else, Gouri's strategy is to stress the differences between the two men who represent contrasting approaches to how one can come to terms with inhumanity, and how one can go on living in a world shorn of compassion and justice. It soon becomes clear that Mordi is the embodiment of the impotent survivor, imprisoned by scorching memories, who is unable to break away from the pangs of guilt and shame. In the early stages his appearance is telling:

A tall man. Bent a bit. Gray suited. He remains behind... he drifts slowly after those who are rushing, like a solitary rear guard... Unless he's decided to become a statue, a monument, some sort of action, of movement is expected... He exploits up to the permissible limit his privilege to stand there, keep silent and make up his mind.<sup>30</sup>

Once a promising journalist and doctoral candidate on troubadour poetry, Mordi was saved, we learn, by the kindness of his professor who arranged for his student to be hidden in a convent cellar. As a consequence, the teacher was captured and tortured, an event that contributed greatly to Mordi's own disintegration. In a sense, the emotionally paralyzed Mordi wishes for death, for he has seen the evil that men do, and has quietly decided to remain lost in his existential alienation. Given such characterization, it is worth noting that Mordi's name alludes to death in French or any other Romance language.

Afflicted with self-abnegation, the erstwhile journalist is so emasculated that he settles within the limited comfort of the Sisters of Mercy warehouse – a lodging that is a corollary to his monastic subsistence. Eventually, Mordi's emotional disrepair builds to a crescendo when Rubi disappears for two weeks without notice to be with his lover. Without his friend to prod him toward accepting and rejoining life, dystopian as it is, the defeated hero collapses into suicide under the enormity of his broodings and spiritual stasis. Mordi's hurtling toward

---

<sup>30</sup> Haim Gouri, *The Chocolate Deal*, trans. Seymour Simckes (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), pp. 1-3.

doom is a memorable image that defines the core of the novel, revealing the path of quiet resignation that some opted to embrace.

Unlike the forlorn Mordi, Rubi is unwaveringly committed to reengaging with life. Despite his intense woundedness, the one-time math genius has not been diminished by the catastrophe in Europe, channeling his remaining reservoirs of energy (perhaps also rage and hunger for revenge) to go on living. It is a minor weakness that precious little is furnished in the form of a backstory to explain how Rubi endured. Still, from the outset, it is clear that hunger and action mark his every move, whether it is with women or whether it is in a new enterprise populating his fantasy.

Hoping to exploit distant family connections, Rubi at first actively searches for the affluent Salomons, even though Mordi, who knows they were slain, warns him against such a course. Congruent with his sensitive personality, Mordi counsels Rubi to send his uncle, a rich lawyer before the war, a letter, instead of unexpectedly appearing at his residence. Meanwhile, Rubi takes up with a former lover, Gerti, whom he meets in the streets working as a prostitute. Later he learns that her own claim to moral rectitude is questionable as she is the secretary to a former Gestapo camp doctor named Hoffman. Even so, this revelation does not prevent Rubi from seeking pleasure in this tainted woman's body, further compounding the move away from the shackling eclipse of the past.

Midway through the novel, Rubi discovers that his wealthy relatives have been murdered. Alone again, after Mordi's sudden death, Rubi searches for new ways to actualize his dreams of wealth. He fabricates a scam concerning chocolate, planning to buy enormous amounts of the excess military chocolate left by the departing American troops. He then intends to blackmail the same Dr Hoffman for whom Gerti works and whose young daughter he saved from a burning building – whether this episode is a hallucination or fact can be debated – in order to procure a medical opinion that the eating of chocolate weakens the sexual performance of men. Once the price of the chocolate is lowered, Rubi counts on buying it cheaply and then inflating the price so that he can sell it at a profit.

The specific fraud aside, it is revealed that Dr Hoffman is not only guilty of horrendous crimes during the reign of the Nazi administration but also of seizing ownership of the dwelling and possessions of Rubi's uncle's house. Nonetheless, Rubi does not have qualms about taking advantage of

the doctor's guilt, and the physician ultimately consents to Rubi's offer of silence and the opportunity to disappear. This gesture of authorial enunciation has Gouri making an obvious allusion to the Israeli acceptance of German reparations as well as the issue of collaboration with the murderers and their accomplices.

### **Conclusion**

Should the survivors forgive the agents of the 'Final Solution' in their quest to escape the disorienting graveyard of the past and rebuild a fractured existence, even though it may involve an obscene divesting of loyalty to and betrayal of the victims? Or should one maintain one's fidelity to the sacrificed ones? It is of salience that this late sub-plot is only interposed near the end and never reaches fruition, strongly implying that it is either a product of Rubi's delirious reveries or that he has decided not to go ahead with the deal. On the whole, the shorthand message hammered home is that the survivors have the dilemma of either returning to life, albeit with all its insuperable weight, or retreating from its unfathomable cruelty into oblivion.

The novel underlines the sharp polarities between Rubi and Mordif who epitomize antithetical philosophical inflections about how to live in a post-Holocaust world. Hence, thematically, the work provides a cornucopia of observations generated from having two sides of the survivor coin interlocking. Alan Mintz, however, notes of the writer's, "investment of narrative sympathy", that, "It is so evenly distributed that it is impossible to say that one is favored over the other. There is little sense of an Israeli writer making an assessment of survivors relative to the values of his own generation".<sup>31</sup>

*The Chocolate Deal* has many virtues, most notably, in the words of Gershon Shaked, its ability to understand that, "even among the survivors there existed differentiation". Shaked then adds, "Gouri has given... a crushing answer to the question whether, and to what extent, can the Israeli-born comprehend and tackle the world of the 'other'... He does try and observe him from the outside as a narrator or temporary guest but tries to look at him from the inside. He understood from the inside how his

---

<sup>31</sup> Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York, Columbia University Press: 1984), p. 257.

‘dead brother’ lived the reality of survivorship, the fear, the renewal and the burden of the past.’<sup>32</sup>

Often described as Israel’s national poet, Haim Gouri served as the moral and critical voice of the Jewish state’s founding generation, narrating through his verses, books, articles, and films the wrenching pain of the European genocide against the Jews, the aftermath of the unprecedented human tragedy, its dilemmas and complexities, the tortured fate of the survivors and the role of memory in the life of the young nation. Although he bore no direct personal nexus to the Holocaust, it assumed a pervading presence in his canon and in his life as he became one of the first Israeli artists to articulate the experience of the Shoah. Indeed, after working in 1947 with Jewish youth in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, assisting them to reach Israel, he recalled that this formative encounter with the inexpressible misery not only shocked him, but changed his outlook forever. The relationship that he formed with the survivors, about which he wrote in second published collection of poems, *Till Dawn*, remained fixed in his psyche. Later he admitted that not a day had passed that he could not think about the catastrophe, and as this article demonstrated, this subject loomed large over his art. The only journalist who followed the proceedings of the 1961 Eichmann Trial from start to finish, this historic episode led to his authoring of *Facing the Glass Booth: The Jerusalem Trial of Adolf Eichmann* and to the documentary *The 81st Blow*.

The Holocaust profoundly overhanged Gouri’s corpus, and only deepened through such works as *The Chocolate Deal* which forms the backbone of this article. It is not too much to say that, 54 years after its initial publication, there are fewer novels that better dramatise the mental disintegration of the survivor in post-war Europe than *The Chocolate Deal*.

---

<sup>32</sup> Gershon Shaked, ‘Ben ha’aretz vechavayat haShoah (The Israeli-born and the Holocaust Experience)’, *Iton* 77, vol. 197 (June 1996), pp. 20-21.