

Am Olam: Between Jewish Eternity and Israeli Now

Zali Gurevitch

The broadest concept of time in the Bible is “*olam*,” which means eternity, forever, but in Modern Hebrew means simply “world.” In the last century, the notion of *olam* in both its ancient and modern senses was employed when the Jewish people was called “*Am olam*” – both “eternal people,” and the people of the entire world. Israeli time finds itself for the most part under the influence of this Jewish notion of *olam*, “big time,” but lives according to a different, at times conflicting, notion of “small time.” Small time itself is of two modes, one is a “present” which transcends a sense of a specific moment, or a problem waiting to be solved, and suggests a solid structure and tradition of a present that gives a sense of stability and continuity. This first type of “small time” is precisely what is missing and longed for in Israeli culture; in its place reigns a spirit of Now (*Akhshav*), an urgency at times near panic, a sense of the ephemeral. The craving to pass over from Now to a structured present, is largely what informs the long-awaited “peace” – being liberated from the imposition of either a venerated past or an idealized future.

Post-Zionism can be rendered as an idea of the present, which comes after the “historical moment” of Zionism. What is usually the epitome of a critical position, both political and cultural, is here depicted in terms of time, as the word “post” implies – it is the historical moment of the present. It joins the post-modernist intellectual trend in fostering the idea that past and future collapse in a present that is always already, after what was considered a beginning. In this sense, the post-modern and post-Zionist people is also the “eternal people,” but it is a notion of the eternal which is more expansive than linear, more scattered than having a projectile of progress that extends into the future as the time of realization.

Zali Gurevitch has published eight volumes of poetry as well as essays on place, on conversation, and on writing, which combine philosophy, anthropology, and poetics. His book *On Place* was published in 2007 by “Am Oved.” Gurevitch is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

David Avidan expresses this frenzy in a few lines (from *Cryptograms from a Telestar*, 1978, p. 125):

“... When the carpet-of-time rolls under our feet
at the highest speed
only the quality acrobats
can hold on forever and ever
to a scrap-of-time under their feet...”