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AHARON APPELFELD: BETWEEN OBLIVION AND AWAKENING

For Emanuel Feldman, with abiding friendship and esteem

“How does one build a bridge
across that abyss between
the wish to assimilate
and the yearning for roots?”

AHARON APPELFELD, *Beyond Despair*

In an interview with Aharon Appelfeld, the Israeli novelist, first published in the *New York Times Book Review* (February 28, 1988), Philip Roth comments that his good friend is a “dislocated writer, a deported writer, a dispossessed and uprooted writer, who has made of displacement and disorientation a subject uniquely his own.” Mr. Appelfeld’s voice, Roth contends further, “originates in a wounded consciousness pitched somewhere between amnesia and memory, and that situates the fiction it narrates between parable and history.”

That interview, interestingly, now serves as an afterword to the three *Radov* lectures Appelfeld delivered at Columbia University in 1991, and subsequently published in a thin volume, entitled *Beyond Despair* (New York: Fromm International, 1994). Some four years after its appearance, Appelfeld published his twelfth novel, *The Conversion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998). Both works were ably translated from the Hebrew by Jeffrey M. Green.

That Roth captured the essence of Appelfeld’s physical and emotional dislocation seems eminently clear when the reader peruses both these works in tandem. For, no sooner is that reading completed than

one realizes that Appelfeld's latest fiction reflects closely the views expressed in those lectures about the role of the wounded writer, who, wrestling with his conscience between "oblivion and awakening," or "amnesia and memory," seeks to achieve a life beyond despair.

A good measure of that despair, Appelfeld confesses, was the failure, during his early years, to learn much of anything of the world of his fathers, especially their Jewishness, thereafter sorely missing in his own life. So that when he discovered Kafka, in the early Fifties, Appelfeld found in that Czech writer not only the paradigm of the modern, emancipated Jew but, more specifically, of his own existence. For, behind the "mask of helplessness in Kafka's work," Appelfeld sees a "man, like me, from a half-assimilated family whose Jewish values had lost their content and whose inner space was barren and haunted."

Small wonder, then, that in the very first of those lectures—all of which, it need be noted, are far more intensely directed to the condition of his own alienation and accommodation than to any systematic or critical contribution to the nature of art, especially fiction—Appelfeld quotes from the famous letter Kafka sent to his father, bemoaning the fact that he received nothing more than "insignificant scrap of Judaism," a *Bar Mitzva* confirmation consisting entirely of "some ridiculous memorizing," resulting in nothing more than "some ridiculous passing of an examination." And each year, the family's Passover Seder night "somehow always developed into a farce, with fits of hysterical laughter."

That farcical upbringing, not unlike his own in Czernowitz, the small town of his birthplace in the Carpathian mountains, made of Appelfeld an alienated Jew, who built for himself a "structure of humanistic values and looked on the world from it." Certain that he, like so many of his co-religionists, was, in effect, no longer a Jew, what generally applied to Jews, therefore, did not apply to him. Raised in a home where everything Jewish was blemished, where Yiddish was forbidden, where his parents, when they spoke it at all, did so silently, and only after he was fast asleep, Appelfeld realized that he and his parents, like so many other "petit-bourgeois assimilated" Jews—his favorite description—became "blind or half-blind creatures, clownish figures of misfortune; never hearing the danger signals in time, getting mixed up, tangled up, and, finally, falling into the trap."

On the way to his own trap, Appelfeld became aware of *one* of those "danger signals." While growing up as an assimilated "petit-bourgeois Jew," he always adored the "beauty of non-Jews, especially their strangeness, their height, their aloofness, their liberated status without

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ancient beliefs or social obligations, their life on their own.” Until, that is, while driven together with his family into the ghettos, he noticed, shockingly, that “all the doors and windows of our non-Jewish neighbors were suddenly shut as we walked alone in the empty streets.” His parents were lost in the camps, while he wandered aimlessly through the streets, alleys, villages, and towns of Europe, forever internalizing in his memory the shattering sight of his neighbors’ “shut windows.”

Those “shut windows” forced him, among other things, to begin looking intensely at himself, and to a somewhat lesser degree, the faces of his parents. To be faithful to himself, he became a distant and contemplative person. “My contemplation,” he concluded, “brought me back to the region where I was born, and where my parents’ home stood. That is my spiritual history, and it is from there that I spin my threads.”

Out of one of the threads of that “spiritual history,” Appelfeld weaves a fascinating tapestry of how and why he rejected his earlier assimilationist thinking, displaying that tapestry proudly to his attentive audiences everywhere. In it, we are presented with an image of the early twentieth-century “petit-bourgeois Jew,” who, once denying the possible existence of evil in a world of reason, humanistic values and German culture, is cruelly awakened, one day, by the screeching sounds of “*Juden Raus! Juden Raus! Juden Raus!*” in a language which, only yesterday, was the source of his inspiration and enlightenment. At that moment, Appelfeld, like so many other assimilationist Jews, finding themselves in the twilight zone between “oblivion and awakening,” began sadly asking themselves: “how does one build a bridge across the abyss between assimilation and the yearning for roots?”

To help build that bridge, Appelfeld turned to the art of fiction, at which he excels. For art, he believes, challenges, among other things, the “process by which the individual is reduced to anonymity.” To avoid namelessness, or the oblivion of remaining a tattooed number—the nadir of all dehumanization—he concentrates, mainly, in his fiction, on the single individual struggling with oblivion. True art, he argues further, “restlessly teaches that the whole world rests upon the individual . . . the individual with his own face and proper name.” One such individual is Karl Hubner, the protagonist of his twelfth novel, *The Conversion*.

II

The Conversion is a story about conversions. Karl Hubner, a Jew in his mid-thirties, unmarried, bright, energetic, totally immersed in his work,

lives in Neufeld, Austria, in the early years of the twentieth century. After serving for some seventeen years as a typically serious, dedicated, though unheralded, town clerk, he dreams only of elevating himself to the venerated office of "municipal clerk." To achieve that objective, Karl, like so many of his coreligionists of that time, and even earlier, is required to convert to Christianity. Recalling the advice of his mother, who, when alone with him, would declare, without a moment's hesitation: "If your career requires you to convert, do it. I won't be angry with you. A person has to advance. Without advancement, there is no purpose or meaning to life"—Karl decides to advance.

Seeking, also, some meaning to his pedestrian life, Karl converts from immersion in his work to immersion in the holy waters of the church, under the determined supervision of the shrewd, ubiquitous Father Merser, who, like some pious Pied Piper, actively solicits Jews, of whatever age, stage in life, or religious orientation, to enter the true faith, while church bells ring, hailing loudly and triumphantly, the arrival of the latest convert, to the eternal joy of all the local townspeople. Tired of waiting seventeen years for that promotion, Karl heeds the call of the persuasive Piper, as well as his mother's counsel, and converts.

The ceremony, which Karl feels should have been "done secretly under cover of night," was followed, immediately, by a public reception, where all spoke mainly of city affairs, district transportation, church renovations, and its empty treasury. They also chatted about municipal changes, most notably of tearing down the old Jewish shops in the center of town, a neighborhood peopled largely by impoverished Jews. All business as usual.

The reader is quickly moved to recall the not entirely dissimilar scene prior to, and immediately after, the funeral service for Ivan, in Tolstoy's memorable novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, when the first thought of his closest friends, on hearing of his passing, was what "effect his death might have on the transfer or promotion of themselves and their friends." And, after the service, one of them comments that "it cannot possibly constitute a sufficient ground for recognizing the business of the session suspended—in other words, in no way can it hinder us from shuffling and cutting a pack of cards this evening." Apparently, both events, however formally religious, engendered only feelings of callousness, even coldness, like enjoying cards and cream puffs.

So callous, in fact, does all this seem that, no sooner did Karl's reception end, than he "suddenly felt different, as if his legs were weighed down." They weighed even more heavily when—together with

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his gymnasium classmates, Fred, the doctor, and Martin, the lawyer, both of whom also converted to advance their professional careers—Karl visits “Green Eye,” the local beer hall, where the upstairs, run by Victoria the gentile Madam, was reserved for ladies-of-the-night. On spotting Karl among the drinkers, so soon after his fateful ceremony, Victoria confronts him, asking bluntly why he converted:

“Didn’t I do the right thing?” Karl replies.

“Jews should stay Jewish. That’s the right thing for them.”

“Why?”

“Because a Jew is a Jew. He mustn’t change. He becomes ugly if he changes.”

“And if he wants to change?”

“He mustn’t.”

“Should I take back the conversion?”

“In my opinion, yes.”

“And what will be the good of that?”

“You’ll be Karl again.”

Unable to defend himself, Karl faces additional frustration during the very week of his conversion. He learns of the passing of his Aunt Franzi, the sole member of his family he truly has admired. She was a “woman of the world,” a *chanteuse*, who not only refused to convert in order to advance professionally, but always fearlessly declared herself Jewish. Her love of her “own people was fierce, solid, and unwavering, and among her many lovers, a natural by-product of her career, she never slept with an apostate.” At once, Karl decided to travel to Zudova, a small town in the Bukovina area of the Carpathian Mountains, where she lived in retirement, alone.

During the graveside service, conducted entirely by the *hevra kaddisha*, Karl felt totally lost, slightly ashamed, and decidedly uncomfortable. He understood none of the prayers, and was even unable to recite them, for, like Kafka in real life, his only knowledge of Hebrew consisted of his *Bar Mitsva* lessons, sadly learned by rote, and just as swiftly forgotten. Not only was the traditional *kaddish* prayer for the dead foreign to him, but also the simple formulaic blessing of consolation, offered by the gentlemen-in-charge at the railroad, as he was departing for home.

Once he was home, none of all that ritual, or even the momentary embarrassment, really mattered. After all, he was now a convert, and, even more, the proud occupant of the office of Municipal Secretary. Added to his euphoric state was the return, shortly thereafter, of Gloria,

the gentile maid, who, having served his household for some thirty years, left, only to return, fortuitously, at this juncture in Karl's life. For, he really needed someone who would, like his mother if she were alive, surely confirm his conversion, and rejoice in his promotion. But what Karl didn't realize, at first, was that because of her devotion to his parents, Gloria actually absorbed their lives fully, while he remained a "drifter in their world." For Karl, ever since his gymnasium days, "only raised the barrier between him and his parents. Later came his arrogance and disdain." So that, unlike Karl, Gloria, albeit without rabbinic tutoring and ritual conversion, actually became in deed, conviction, and character, if not formally, a convert to a faith *not* her own. "If there was any remnant of his parents in this world," Karl concluded, "it was embedded in her voice."

Karl's lingering "arrogance and disdain" suddenly changed, not only because Gloria returned unexpectedly, but also when Karl, accompanied by his friends Fred and Martin, routinely dropped in at Victoria's bar the night before Yom Kippur. Around midnight, Fred, inebriated, gathered himself onto the center of the floor to sing a Yiddish song. The mood among the other drinkers turned rowdy. One of them, drunk, shouted: "That's enough, Jew. If you don't shut your mouth, we'll shut it for you." Martin immediately jumped from his seat, arguing as would a humanist: "Let no man accuse his fellow. God created us in his image." To which Karl added, in an even tougher voice: "Shut your mouth, if you can't speak to others like a human being. Otherwise, I'll break your neck. Understand?" The drunk, without understanding, replied to Martin: "But not the Jews." And to Karl: "I'm not afraid of Jews."

So depressed did Karl become that he would, if he could, "break into the municipal building and set it on fire." That very same building, ironically, that housed his office of Municipal Secretary, for which he willingly relinquished his ageless faith. What Karl, apparently, ignored, or, worse, never knew, or never even contemplated until this encounter at the bar, is that the "smoldering impulse of relegation—the Jew must be banished, his voice gagged, and then annihilation—is embedded somewhere deeply in the mind of the non-Jew, of whatever stripe or station in life."

Shocked and bewildered, Karl returned home to Gloria, over whose face stretched a "hidden thread of his parents," and whose years of devotion to them made her "one with his parents' lives." So that on the arrival of Yom Kippur, the night after that barroom brawl, Gloria donned a "white dress, while preparing to light the memorial candles in

the synagogue much as Karl's mother had done annually." With every bite of the traditional meal before the oncoming 'White Fast,' Karl recognized that "his life was utterly destroyed."

All of which, however, does not prevent Karl from drinking his routine cup of coffee, the very next morning, as he heads for his office. There, among other frustrations, he hears Hochhuth, the wealthy apostate and town deputy, declare, obsessively, that "all these observances and rituals weary the soul . . . that he is not the least sentimental about the old tribal nest. It's crawling with bugs, and I hate bugs." Having heard that disdainful comment about his rejected faith, Karl chanced to recall, at that moment, his late father's reply, when asked once whether he might ever convert: "I would not object to someone else converting, but for me, Christianity is a clumsy faith which has always repelled me."

The clumsiness of his own conversion becomes increasingly bothersome to Karl, especially when, returning home from his office at the end of that Yom Kippur afternoon, he learns, to his surprise, that Gloria had actually fasted that entire day. And, as she tells him, "it went easily." It dawned on Karl that she was adhering—though as a gentile not at all obligated—to every act of religious observance "his mother had been accustomed to doing." Strongly impressed with her devotions, and, despite her being some fourteen years his senior, Karl converted his admiration of her to love. A love, Karl convinced himself, that resulted, also, from his comparing Gloria to the Jewish girls he met during his youthful gymnasium days. The latter were "bitter and mean," hence shunned, while Gloria, on the other hand, was "finer, kinder, friendlier, sweeter, and happier." And so they mated.

With the woman of his dreams and needs, and the civil position of his desires, one might expect Karl to be the model of contentment. That, alas, was not meant to be. Karl is deeply troubled. Gradually, he begins to feel that the "formalities of his office appeared pompous, the indirect euphemistic language of bureaucracy lost some of its charms." Life itself is tangled for him, especially when he reflects on the passing of Martin, his closest friend, neither of whose successive gentile wives thought it necessary to attend his funeral service. But what finally breaks his spirit is the sudden attack by a group of local hoodlums, who, crashing into his home, wound Gloria, causing her a two-week stay at the local hospital.

That devastating, unexpected attack finally convinces Karl that his lust for power and glory will no longer feed his heart's ultimate needs. Together with Gloria, he decides to leave all that behind him, and head for the provinces, where among the trees and mountains of the coun-

tryside, calmness will prevail. Freed at last from his “prison house” of Neufeld, he and Gloria escape, heading for Russow, his mother’s hometown, which she always urged him to visit. There, surely, they will fulfill their romantic quest for a world stripped of deceit, decline, and disillusion. There, too, they will rent a house on a hilltop, with a panoramic view of Russow below, and nature’s unending sky above. Shades of Wordsworth’s lines in the sonnet “The World is Too Much With Us”:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers,
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away a sordid boon.

Because the dizziness of that mountaintop strips him of memory after memory, Karl is at first reluctant, despite his mother’s enchanting plea, to visit the Jewish townspeople below. His is the contentment of amnesia. A natural curiosity, however, convinces him, eventually, to go down to visit with his people. He is, naturally, drawn to the merchants there, who, like his father, played chess regularly. Since the language and business interests of merchants were once his daily fare, he tends to drift toward them on every visit. One day, while sitting around with them at the chess table, Karl hears someone in the background suddenly exclaim: “All the evils of the world come only from the Jews; they had all the money; if not for the Jews, there wouldn’t be so many wretched people on this earth.” Informed by Karl of that outburst, Gloria begs him not continue his daily visits with his chess playing merchants, and remain, instead, on the mountaintop, a calmer and safer place.

Karl, however, refuses to be swayed. In fact, on one of his visits—a Rosh Hashanah day—noticing some gentile hoodlums breaking the stones of the local tavern, Karl beats and forces them to apologize for desecrating that sacred time. Returning home the next day, Karl hears Gloria lament that the cabbage patch she tended lovingly has been torn up, wildly. She pleads they leave this place immediately. Karl refuses, buys a gun, instead, while remaining defiant even as horsemen come riding into his courtyard every evening, laughing, screaming, and cursing. Possessing a gun, he believes that these monster enemies are not as powerful as they might appear. Till, that is, one of them wounds him mortally.

Trying desperately to recuperate, Karl now begins to speak deliriously of heading to Cracow, Poland, where he will attend the university, enjoy the library while living a life of culture. So enchanted does he become with that idea that he totally ignores, in his delirium, his land-

lord's warning that those monster peasants were planning to burn down his idyllic mountaintop home. But the wound, festering and bleeding, turns his body cold and helpless. Seeking warmth, he crawls into bed, joined by Gloria, herself terribly frightened and shivering.

"That night, the peasants poured kerosene on branches of trees, and within seconds, the house burst into flames."

III

The embers of that fire, an obvious symbolic reference to Auschwitz, served as the source of Appelfeld's wounded conscience as well as his "displaced fiction." Those furnaces of hell seem clearly to remind the Jew of whatever generation, living blissfully in a world of secular values, whose inner space is barren and haunted, and whose mind fluctuates between amnesia and memory, that he dare never again deny the existence of absolute evil lurking abroad. All of which becomes central to our understanding of *The Conversion*, by "situating it between parable and history."

A parable, we know, is a short narrative, told so as to stress the tacit analogy between its component parts and a thesis or lesson that the narrator is trying to bring home to his listeners or readers. In it, we have a sort of allegory of ideas in which literal characters represent abstract concepts as the plot incorporates or exemplifies a doctrine.

Which naturally moves the reader, at once, to realize that in Karl Hubner, Appelfeld is presenting a thesis, previously confirmed by historians, concerning the fate and destiny of the Jew in modern times, namely, that, in his attempt to acclimate fully to his surrounding society, the Jew had to acquire a secular education in, say, business, law, medicine, engineering, or, as in Karl's case, politics, the politics of a municipal secretaryship. And all to the exclusion, of course, of any acquaintance, even cursory, with his own traditional, historic, Jewish texts.

No surprise, then, that when Karl meets up with Mr. Zauber, his old, gentile, geography teacher, who, after taking a survey of Jewish life in the Carpathian mountains, suggests to his former student that he observe for himself the "true servants of God." The Hasidim living there, he argues, are part of a "great religious phenomenon that the world has not properly recognized." To which Karl can only reply: "Strange . . . it's hard for me to imagine Jews devoted to a faith."

Faithless, Karl wanders, lonely as a cloud, through a life of no consequence. Politics, either municipal or state, remains, even under the best of circumstances, tangled, twisted, and thwarted. Emptiness prevails.

Ennui follows. That long process of self-destruction, accompanied at times by self-hatred, leads inevitably for many to the font of conversion.

Not in vain, therefore, are we introduced to Karl's attendance at the graveside service for his favorite aunt. Appelfeld seems rightfully to wonder aloud whether a single, or even multiple, visits to a cemetery, private or public, could ever possibly substitute for the absolute need "to face up to one's lack of Jewishness." So that without the barest acquaintance with the fundamentals of one's faith one will find people, like Karl, gaping into an abyss of nothingness. Except, perhaps, for residual sentimentalism. For as Appelfeld avers, "a despoiled youth is a world that remains for many years."

Reflecting further on that graveside scene, one begins to question whether it, too, might be a "parable" on the creation of the widest, deepest, saddest cemetery in the history of mankind—Auschwitz. For, with the passing of over a half-century since its fiery ending, one notes, sadly, that it has resulted in some "arbitrariness" as to its ultimate meaning, which results, among other things, in the rush of Jews across many countries in the world, especially America, to build memorials of varying forms, sizes, and meanings to the Holocaust—all, or almost all, without managing "to turn the experience into a spiritual element in life." Despite the fact that the Bible forcefully demands that the Jew, in every generation, must vividly recall and never emotionally forget the actions of every *Amalek*, ancient and modern, as in Germany's willing executioners, one is forced to agree that the current memorials have, alas, led to some "distortions."

Among the resulting "distortions," Appelfeld further argues strongly, are the "people who published journals that split the suffering down to its minutest details, politicians passing judgment, pseudo-romantic religious writers indulged themselves in reproaches against the Supreme Being. . . . It seems permissible to say that they surrounded the bitter experience with misunderstandings and cheap, simplistic interpretations. . . . The pain and suffering called either for silence or for wild outcries. Any embellishment or sweetening was jarring." If there were to be an embellishment it would consist of the memorialists' answering the inevitable question: "How can we transform [that tragedy] into a spiritual vision?" That Karl might never be able to answer that question because of his lack of any spirituality, and the abnormality of his ceaseless disorientation, seems certain.

Nor could he, for that matter, answer another "disorientation" of his life: why would he, an intelligent, successful bachelor, agree to mate with

a woman some fourteen years his senior? Or is that possibly confirming what Freud long ago asserted: "A man married to a woman who unconsciously represents to him a new edition of the mother, who successfully inhibited his sexual activities during boyhood, could not possibly overcome this fear sufficiently to permit his body to act out his instinctive desire"? His first attempt at acting out his instinctive desire with Gloria may be Karl's way, a Freudian might argue, of mastering his Oedipus complex. Failing to do so might have made him a victim of neurosis.

But whatever else Karl's instinctive desire may have been, one is moved to conjecture that had he not been the victim of that raging fire, he might have had, after that crushing experience in Neufeld, Austria, especially the conversion, a different sort of awakening, however limited, from the amnesia that haunted his ancestral home. A *vita nuova*, of sorts. So that Karl then becomes a parable of the multitudes of "petit-bourgeois Jews," who, adapting consciously to the alien desires of their European environment, learned, all too late, of the tragic consequences besetting the amnesia of their lives.

Though the possibility of that *vita nuova* might appear as conjecture when applied to the fictional Karl Hubner, it becomes decidedly real when listening to his creator. Consider, for example, that most revealing passage in *Beyond Despair*, where Appelfeld tells his audience that one of the results of the Holocaust was a "sort of return, not *hazara bi-teshuva*" [literally, a return in repentance]—not as we know it halakhically—but rather "a contact with an atmosphere permeated by a kind of mythic depth, the stratum out of which, it seems, faith arises." If only "mythic," he adds, not surprisingly, that for most survivors, the "roots of institutional faith were damaged beyond repair even among those of us who recognized that faith is ultimately an institution as well. We just could not force our experience into narrow confines."

That Judaism could become, for a survivor with Appelfeld's experience, both personal and literary, a "myth" is deeply disturbing. For who better than he is aware that, in classical Greek, a "myth" signified any story or plot whether true or *invented*. And, in its modern significance, a "myth" is one story in a mythology; a system of hereditary stories believed to be true by any cultural group. If a three-thousand-year-old tradition of faith, learning, and practice which not only established the rationale for social customs and observances but also the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives, is only a "myth," then why would he, or anyone else, for that matter, not agree that World War II "dulled, distorted, and corrupted the soul." And for those who,

paradoxically, adopted, despite their suffering, torture, and anguish, a religious stance, carrying on sacredly that long tradition, Appelfeld can only say that it was all “a gesture toward their murdered parents.” And such gloating, he adds, is a “suffocating position, a kind of Jewish monasticism and indirect self-punishment.” No wonder, then, that he, like many others, couldn’t “turn the experience of the Holocaust into a spiritual element in life.” Unable to make that turn is an ongoing element, apparently, of Appelfeld’s own amnesia.

What, then, finally moved Appelfeld closer to the “Jew within him”? That, he announces proudly, was his romance with the Hebrew language. In his wandering over much of Europe during the Holocaust, he learned to speak, in order to survive, in addition to his native Yiddish and German, Ruthenian, Ukranian, and Russian, to a point where his head was full of tongues. But, the “truth of the matter is,” he recalls, “I had no language.” Until, that is, he arrived in Israel, in 1946, and began his intensive study of Hebrew. It had a startling effect on him, and his revised thinking. “If it were not for Hebrew,” he confessed to Roth at their meeting, “I doubt whether I would have found my way to Judaism. Hebrew to me is the heart of the Jewish *myth*, its way of thinking, and its beliefs, from the days of the Bible to Agnon. This is a thick strand of five thousand years of Jewish creativity, with all its rises and falls; the poetic language of the Bible, the juridical language of the Talmud, and the mystical language of the Kabbala. This richness is sometimes difficult to cope with. Sometimes one is stifled by too many associations, by the multitude of worlds hidden in the single word. But never mind, those are marvelous resources. Ultimately you find in them even more than you were looking for.”

But here, the reader is moved immediately to inquire: what is the “more” of classic Hebrew texts Appelfeld is looking for? What, indeed, is so marvelous about those alluring sources he admires? And, why are the associations in them so “stifling”? Is the “more” possibly the flowering of a language, once thought usable only for the study of biblical and post-biblical sources, but, in the last century or so, by absorbing foreign words, signs, and symbols, Hebrew was able to become a useful vehicle, also, for the advancement of the humanities, social sciences, and sciences? Or is the “more” the Hebrew language’s ability to create the slang used by so many people milling about the bars and discotheques of Israel’s cities? The majority of whom, recent statistics reveal, cannot, despite their fluency of the Hebrew language, recite the Ten Commandments of the very work Mr. Appelfeld admires so consciously?

If such be the case, is there no danger that even so resourceful a language as Hebrew might become a sort of consciousness confined to the present, to the factuality of the most tautological, truth functional register? For, as George Steiner, the eminent Cambridge don, hastily reminds us, “there inheres in language, as its generative foundations, an abdication from the manifold and self-contraries of the world. Be it surrealistic, be it elevated to the pitch of visionary ecstasy, verbal discourse remains linear, sequential in time. It is handcuffed to the avarice of logic, with its ordinance of causality, with its segmentation of time into past, present, and future.” How flat, indeed, is any language geared solely to the factuality of the present.

If it is still conceptually unclear as to what is the “more” in any language, other than words and their meanings, should no one begin to wonder whether what struck France between the Fifties and Sixties, and America in the late Seventies to the present day, might strike Hebrew as well, namely, deconstruction? Briefly defined, deconstructionism is a literary movement whose article of faith is that the “relation between words and their meaning is anything but constant; language as a system lacks a vital center. It is pointless, therefore, to speak about meaning, since the meaning of any verbal construct does not, and cannot, precede the words themselves.” Or, as David Lehman, in his *Signs of the Times*, would define it, the aim of deconstructionism is “demystification”: it is “determined to show that the ideals and values by which we live are not natural and inevitable, but are artificial constructions, or arbitrary choices, that ought to have no power to command it.” Founded on extreme skepticism and disbelief, deconstructionism argues that literature as the representation of experience is a futile anachronism. The deconstructive assault on meaning, we know, is best exemplified, in our time, in totalitarian lies and savagery, being conjoined to the corruption of language, and, in turn, fueled by such corruption.

All of which is not to imply that Mr. Appelfeld could or would approve of deconstructionism, as any reading of *Beyond Despair* would easily confirm. But had he taken the trouble to study, systematically, Bible, Talmud, and Kabbala, he would have discovered, that, unlike deconstructionism, those texts, despite the plethora of commentaries, which add meanings to meanings to meanings, have one primary canonical signification, a surface meaning that is not fragmented and never broken. Interpretations may vary, often widely and strongly, but all rest on a basic formulation that is immutable, because divine, and divinely inspired. Unless fundamentally understood that way, the text of

any classic or modern Hebrew work becomes subjected to an intolerable instability of knowledge, with its words twisting in the wind. And that would be historically implausible, and impeachable.

Each tongue, we know, generates and articulates a world view, a narrative of human destiny, a construct of futurities, for which there is no facsimile in any other. Part of the “more” of the Hebrew tongue is its very original appellation, *lashon ha-kodesh* [a holy tongue], which, despite its vast linguistic adjustments to modernity, remains, in its construct of futurities, the basis of a religious faith, that, as Appelfeld unerringly concludes, “began at creation and reverberated down to Agnon,” the very Agnon, who, best of all modern Hebrew writers, incorporated the “more” of religious tradition in his captivating fiction.

If it has taken years for Appelfeld “to draw close to the Jew within me,” it might not take much longer if, while researching the “multitude of worlds hidden in every single word of Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbala”—the storehouse of the Judaism he glowingly admires—he would reconsider the remark he glibly exchanged with Philip Roth, at the end of their conversation, namely, that he “won’t adopt a religious faith.” Then, while continuing simultaneously to write his haunting fiction, he might find himself awakened and living fully beyond despair.

And had the allegorical Karl Hubner, Appelfeld’s literary other, not been burned alive, but gone on to study at the University of Cracow—his academic dream place—he, together with Gloria, might have chanced to visit the famous local synagogue, where R. Moses Isserles, the talmudic giant of the sixteenth century, wrote his authoritative glosses and definitive rulings on all of Jewish law. Then, he too might also have found the “Jew within him,” after a faithful, meaningful conversion.