

# Eight Poems from Dov Ben-Zamir's Yayin Hadash, Keilim Atikim (New Wine, Old Bottles)

Translated from the Hebrew  
by [David Solway](#) (May 2022)



*Sunset*, Fritz Ascher, 1960

## ***A Sad Day in Heaven***

The Lord said  
*let there be night*  
and there was night;  
*let there be darkness over the face of the earth*  
*without stars or moon to illumine the pathways,*  
and it was so;  
*let the waters of the Heavens remain undivided*  
*and descend in curtains and shrouds over all My creatures,*  
and it happened as the Lord commanded.  
But then the Lord said  
*I was only joking.*  
Alas, it was too late,  
the earth had already been obliterated,  
the dead remained stubbornly dead,  
there was no one left to appreciate the joke  
or to forgive the Ultimate Prankster His wayward humours,  
His Jewish sense of mischief,  
except a family and a few animals.  
Many species were lost forever.  
It was a sad day in Heaven.  
Never mind the waterlogged bodies of men,  
the animals and plants sunk in the bogs,  
never mind the angels who were envious to begin with  
and who are always high and dry,  
never mind the Fiend whose fires cannot be extinguished  
and whose inventory is replete with souls.  
None of this matters.  
It was a sad day in Heaven.

## ***Love***

I can't see my way out of it.

I can't see my way through it.  
I can't see my way in this thicket of desolation.  
I can't see my way for the lusterless fog of doubt and  
indecision.  
I can't see my way toward a plausible conclusion, acceptable  
to all.  
I can't see my way past the gatekeeper.  
I can't see my way to the conjugal light.  
I can't see my way beyond the imminent horizon.  
I can't see my way across the no man's land of woman.  
I can't see my way though not from lack of trying.  
I can't see my way between one and the other.  
I can't see my way among the tabloids of false consolation.  
I can't see my way after the beginning.  
I can't see my way before the end.  
I can't see my way during.  
I can't see my way along the edge of the precipice.  
I can't see my way under this cloud of prepositions.  
I can't see my way behind this pillar of bad weather.  
I can't see my way at the dawn of dementia.  
I can't see my way over the mountain of night.  
I can't see my way around it.  
I can't see my way.

### ***An Open Letter to God***

Dear God

I can't be sure that You're there  
to receive this letter  
but I'm writing anyway,  
just in case.  
I'm writing to forgive You  
for the distance You keep  
from the toiling multitudes  
like some reclusive billionaire

in a castle in remotest Scotland,  
and to forgive You  
for the cruelty of Your indifference  
and also the great anger  
You have been reputed to indulge—  
notice that I capitalize my pronouns,  
just in case.  
And yet I have always admired You,  
indeed, regarded You with awe and trepidation.  
More than that,  
I have always loved You,  
not as I have loved my friends,  
few and far between,

and not as I have loved my women,  
many and close-packed,  
for neither my friends nor my women  
might have saved me  
from the inevitable disaster  
of my flawed, desiring self,  
subject to the ruthless dominatrix of Time  
and the drug lords of the Underworld,  
from my excesses and addictions  
which are legion.

No, God,  
I have loved You as the only One  
Who might forgive me  
the minor devastations I have wrought  
as I forgive You  
the major devastations you have permitted.  
Let bygones be bygones.

What's done is done.  
Let us be mutual in tautology.  
But between You and me,  
if You are not there  
to receive this letter,

or even to dismiss it as a trivial irritation,  
know this for a fact.  
If You do not exist  
I will never,  
and I mean never,  
forgive You.

### ***Shevira***

Giving up's the only blunder.  
When the world was created  
and everything rushed asunder  
into flickering sparks instead

of fit coherence in the scheme,  
the first conception, or the stuff  
of thought and fire, of fact and dream,  
the Lord observed and cried, *Enough!*

before this flaming-out should fly  
too distant from the radical.  
Though most imperfect, why destroy  
what we can partially recall?

There is a point at which we cry  
*Enough*, if we could once discern  
pride of self-destruction, defy  
the urge to see the world burn.

### ***The Cabinet of Curiosities***

Here is a Numidian drum:  
boom boom.

Here is a gem-encrusted seashell:  
whoosh, whoosh.

Here is a Persian ceramic:  
whoops, my bad.

Here is a stuffed merman:  
notice the...

Here is a King James bible:  
damn those firebrats.

Here is a perpetual pendulum:  
well, I don't know why.

Here is a shrunken head:  
good God!

Here is a Greek amphora:  
whoops, my bad.

Here are some Mamluk coins:  
hey you, come back!

Here is a Saracen dagger:  
no, no...

### ***Song for the Negev***

And now, after the silence  
of the desert,  
the dry ascetic wind  
and the parching lexicons of dust,

and after the austere  
eloquence  
of the bramble bush,  
the yellow sere of its flower

and after, too,  
the wintry reticence  
of stars,

and night like an empty well,

you are the language  
I have begun to speak,  
the word that sings in my throat,  
slaking every thirst.

***And behold, there came a voice***

Was it the still small voice I heard?  
More likely highway hum  
or radio static from the neighbor's house  
or the faint buzz of the wire after the transformer blew  
or the tiny wail of an eft escaping the predator  
or the creak of a swing's chain in the park  
or maybe it was the zephyrous snoring of my lady love  
enjoying her afternoon nap.  
But whatever its source  
it was not in the great roar of Jumbos taking off from Ben  
Gurion  
and not in the Kassam exploding in Sderot  
and not in the blast of lies resounding in *Haaretz*  
nor in the horns and clarions of the Gay Parade  
sounding in the streets of Tel Aviv,  
not even in the bluster of the Prophets,  
moody, rhapsodic, threatening and loud.  
The voice of the Lord was not there,  
of that I am sure,  
the voice of the Lord was  
never in the thunder and the reverberations.  
Upon reflection, more likely in the hum and the static,  
the buzz and the wail and the creak,  
or even in the zephyrous snoring of my beloved.

***When It Dies***

the tannin leaves the wine  
the rennet deserts the cheese  
the salt walks out on the bread  
and the savor exits the meal  
the soot, turpentine and walnut oil vacate the ink  
which powders off the edges of the page  
and relinquishes its message to the void  
the cellulose withers from the paper  
and the fibers and ribbons disintegrate like flesh  
the glue departeth the bookbinding  
the air goes out of the balloon  
the zing marches from the versicle  
the lamp is emptied of its kerosene  
the wick dries up like a witch's tongue  
the attar ditches the incense stick  
and the room darkens with bitter mutterings  
the kevlar grows brittle or porous  
the rose migrates into the desert  
where it expires of profound depression  
despite the best irrigation techniques  
Ahasuerus strangles Queen Esther  
and dumps her body in the river  
Haman rejoices and Mordecai takes to the hills  
the kids race from the soccer field for the nearest shelter  
the sand sifts from the glass  
the missile sensor falls from the fuselage  
the blessing falls from the prayer  
the bounce abandons the bed  
which sags like a Russian cigarette and begins to crumble  
the resins pack up for parts unknown  
and all the videocassettes and margarine tubs melt and  
collapse

when it dies  
the light goes out of the world  
like the Lord



**Dov Ben-Zamir** was born in Tel Aviv in 1961 and currently lives in Jerusalem. A graduate of Ben Gurion University, he works in the Information Ministry of the Israeli Defense Forces. He is the author of two previous volumes of poetry, *Shel Rosh* (*Phylacteries*) and *Sof Ta'ava* (*The End of Desire*), and of a collection of political essays, *Ha'esh Vehavered* (*The Fire and the Rose*). *Yayin Hadash, Keilim Atikim*, literally *New Wine, Old Vessels*, which I have translated as *New Wine, Old Bottles*, is essentially a *New and Collected*. It was released in 2015 with Shomron Press, Ganon.

*Shevira*: the Hebrew word *shevira* alludes to the breaking of the vessels in the Kabbalistic myth of creation.

*The Cabinet of Curiosities*: this poem revisits a theme addressed by the poet in a short essay, "Civilization and Its Endless Discontents: Abolishing History," printed in the literary magazine *Balagan*, in which Ben-Zamir facetiously suggests burning the *Collected Works* of Sigmund Freud.

*And behold, there came a voice*: The title derives from *I Kings*, 19:12-13. Ben Gurion is Israel's international airport, named after the country's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion. The poet uses the Hebrew acronym *Natbag*, for *Namal HaTe'ufa Ben Guryon*, which I have rendered in its more familiar form. *Haaretz* is Israel's leading left-wing newspaper.

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**David Solway's** latest book is [Notes from a Derelict Culture](#), Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, [Partial to Cain](#), appeared in 2019.

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