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# THE Jewish Reader

A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL YIDDISH BOOK CENTER

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## Breakdown and Bereavement

by Yosef Haim Brenner

Translated by Hillel Halkin; Toby Press

A 100 GREAT JEWISH BOOKS SELECTION –  
now back in print

### ESSAY BY DARA HORN

In what the Hebrew novelist Yosef Haim Brenner (1881-1921) surely thought of as early in his career – his mid-thirties – he took a hiatus from fiction to translate Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* into Hebrew. The great Russian masterpiece is famous for its dense psychological study of character: it explores its criminal protagonist's compromised spirit for some four hundred pages of agonized monologues and debates until, about ten pages from the end, the hero finds Jesus. As a young Jewish man from Russia who had discarded the religious beliefs of his family in order to live a secular Jewish life as a pioneer in Ottoman Palestine, Brenner identified with the compromised spirits of Dostoevsky's characters. But Brenner had been born into a tradition where there was no possibility of finding Jesus ten pages from the end – that is, where the very idea of redemption from suffering, or even finding meaning in suffering, was suspect. So this young pioneer's Hebrew novels are like Dostoevsky's Russian ones, but with a twist. The agonized conversations about the fate and free will of humanity remain, but the endings are never that simple. And for Hebrew novels about Zionism, that fact alone has a lot to teach us.

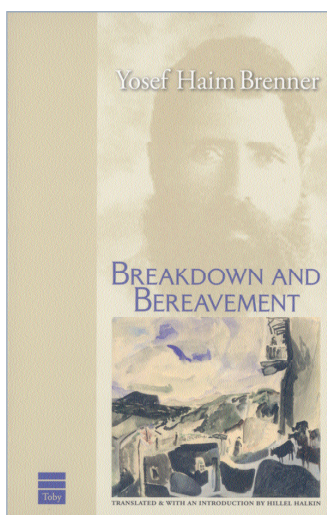
*Breakdown and Bereavement* (written in 1914, published in 1920) is a historically fascinating, artistically flawed, emotionally raw, and spiritually devastating work of fiction

about the lives of young Jewish pioneers in the Land of Israel under Ottoman rule. This was a time when the future of Zionism hung in the balance, and Jews around the world were divided as to whether a potential Jewish state was the last hope for redemption or a pathetic pipe dream. Brenner's protagonist is a twenty-nine-year-old immigrant pioneer named Yehezkel Hefetz (his first name refers to the biblical Ezekiel of dry-bones fame; his last name means "desire"), whose trials, hopes, and endless disappointments

in his new Zionist life are much like the author's – only a touch more horrifying. Brenner made the arduous journey to Palestine as a young man, only to discover that the backbreaking work of farming in malarial swamps was both physically and spiritually unfulfilling. But Hefetz has it worse. Within the first few pages of the book, his noble efforts to work the soil are rewarded with a hernia, along with a sexual impotence that is about one part physical to ten parts psychological. Despite the hopes of the Zionist movement to remake its followers into a new breed of Jew, Hefetz finds that his

Diaspora-fed neuroses are not so easily left behind.

Prior to Brenner's era, the physical arduousness of life for the pioneers in Palestine had been something that the Jewish ideology actually relished. It was an opportunity to reorient Jewish life toward the physical, real world, and away from the mental and intellectual world that had previously been the only outlet for Jewish communal energy. But in *Breakdown and Bereavement*, the harsh reality of life in an unforgiving land appears not as a romantic challenge, but as a hopeless and debilitating burden. And the myth-smashing of the novel doesn't end there. While Zionist rhetoric taught that a return to the land of Israel and the possibility of self-determination would heal the Jewish people of the weight of centuries



of sorrow and fear, Brenner's novel is peopled with characters who suffer endless mental traumas from feelings of inferiority so deeply entrenched that even their new homeland cannot cure them.

Hefetz wants little more out of life than most men his age would: a sustaining source of livelihood, a sense of purpose, a woman to love who will love him back. In another setting, Hefetz's overwhelming anxieties about his future – expressed in a narrative style of rambling monologues than can best be described as Dostoevsky on speed – might have been dismissed as typical post-adolescent angst, the sort of thing that one finds today on TV sitcoms. But in the fledgling Jewish homeland, where brooding over individual identity is a luxury that the collective utopian vision simply cannot afford, Hefetz's rather normal self-doubt escalates into a full-blown nervous breakdown. His failed relationships with women could have been the stuff of romantic comedy, but in Palestine, every "bad date" becomes a haunting reflection of larger questions of masculinity, power, and trust in Jewish culture, and even of what it means to be human at all. The minor accidents that befall his friends (an act of rebellion that leads one character to leave his family for an absurdly unsafe distant outpost; an act of frustration by another that leads her to injure herself in a way far more grave than she expected) could have been played for comic effect, but individual errors have devastating consequences in a land where there is no room for mistakes. In the Promised Land, the stakes are far too high.

Brenner's novel astonished its Jewish readers in the Diaspora – even those whom one would least expect to take offense at its despairing tone. Franz Kafka, one of its eager readers, expressed his consternation with the novel in a letter to a friend with a single phrase: "Sadness in Palestine?" But the sadness in Brenner's Palestine goes beyond shattering myths. In the end, Hefetz's mood changes in a way not unlike those of Dostoevsky's redeemed characters. The ending is stylistically awkward, and its disjointed nature is part of a larger artistic flaw in the novel – one best described as an authorial sense of urgency, in which what Brenner needs to say often overwhelms his eloquence in saying it. But the sense of hope at the novel's end comes from Hefetz's startling yet plausible conclusion about his situation: while the collective state of Israel may overpower the individuals within it, its survival still depends on true individuals who aren't afraid to doubt and challenge themselves,

their conditions, and even their God.

Brenner himself paid the ultimate price for meeting that challenge. Despite his deep doubts about the Zionist enterprise, he devoted his life and career to its vision. While defending an outpost that would later become Tel Aviv, he was killed by Arab rioters shortly before his fortieth birthday. His refusal to criticize without committing, or to commit without criticizing, should resonate today with any reader who brings his fears and doubts to the Zionist dream. Both Hefetz's and Brenner's motto, in the end, could be the rabbinic proverb: "You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." JR

## QUESTIONS

- 1) In the same year that he wrote *Breakdown and Bereavement*, Brenner wrote an essay entitled "Self-Criticism," in which he argued that the only route to Jewish redemption was through "self-criticism": "True self-realization and acceptance of even a harsh verdict will somehow help us transcend ourselves." Do you agree? How is this sentiment reflected in this book?
- 2) Brenner was strongly criticized for his novel's portrayal of Zionism. Do you think such criticism is justified? How might such a novel about Zionism be received today? Are any of the questions it raises the same today? What does it mean to criticize the Zionist enterprise from the inside?
- 3) When we imagine the pioneers who first began building the future Jewish state, we usually think of them as men. How are the women pioneers in this book depicted? Why does Hefetz refer to them as Palestine's "slaves"?
- 4) What is the role of sexual relationships in this fraught atmosphere? What is manhood, for Hefetz? What cultural burdens does a Jewish man take on regarding sexuality?
- 5) How is the physical land of Israel depicted in this novel? What is the role of the landscape's real or imagined beauty here?
- 6) This story is told mainly from Hefetz's point of view. How much of his suffering comes from his circumstances, and how much of it comes from his own head? Is it possible to tell?
- 7) Two deaths take place in this novel; one seems to be deliberately portrayed as completely meaningless, while

the other, which could have been given the same treatment, is imbued with deeper meaning. Why are these two alternatives presented? Do you agree with Hefetz's assessment of these characters' fates?

8) Do you find Hefetz's transformation at the book's end convincing? **JR**

## EXCERPTS

“A large city completely dependent on the whims of philanthropy! A city which if you deprived it of the handouts it gets from all over the world – would die of starvation! [...] Did you ever realize that this dole, which comes from the four corners of the earth, isn't all handled in one central place, but is divided up among various charities according to the country of its origin? Do you know that there are poor charities and rich charities, and that in Jerusalem it's the lucky man who gets born into a rich one? Did it ever occur to you, Menahem, that when these same Jews assemble on the Day of Rejoicing of the Law to dance and sing 'Happy art thou, O Israel,' what they really mean to say is: 'Happy art thou, O Israel, that thou hast the dole?'" (PAGE 30)

Just a few days before he had paced wildly about in the garret above him, and softly groaned “rocks, rocks, rocks,” without knowing why...knowing only when he did know that he would not be killed by the mob [...] And he knew then, too, knew he would prove that he wasn't Jewish at all...Gentile blood flowed through his veins...he had been born exactly nine months after the pogroms. [...] Onward to freedom then! Fresh air at last...and the rocks? He watched their outlines blend with the backs of the goats browsing down the hillside among them. The sunlight turned everything the same golden red...No, it was pointless to groan. The rocks were just rocks. (PAGES 97-98)

Once – or so Haim recollected – when Hanoch was in Jerusalem at the time of the divorce proceedings, Yosef had been holding forth as usual about how the Law and its wisdom taught that the single individual did not matter at all, but only the collective, Israel as a whole, and Hanoch, bless him, had stubbornly argued back: “S-s-say w-what you w-w-will...what m-matters to m-me is myself.” (PAGE 212) **JR**

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