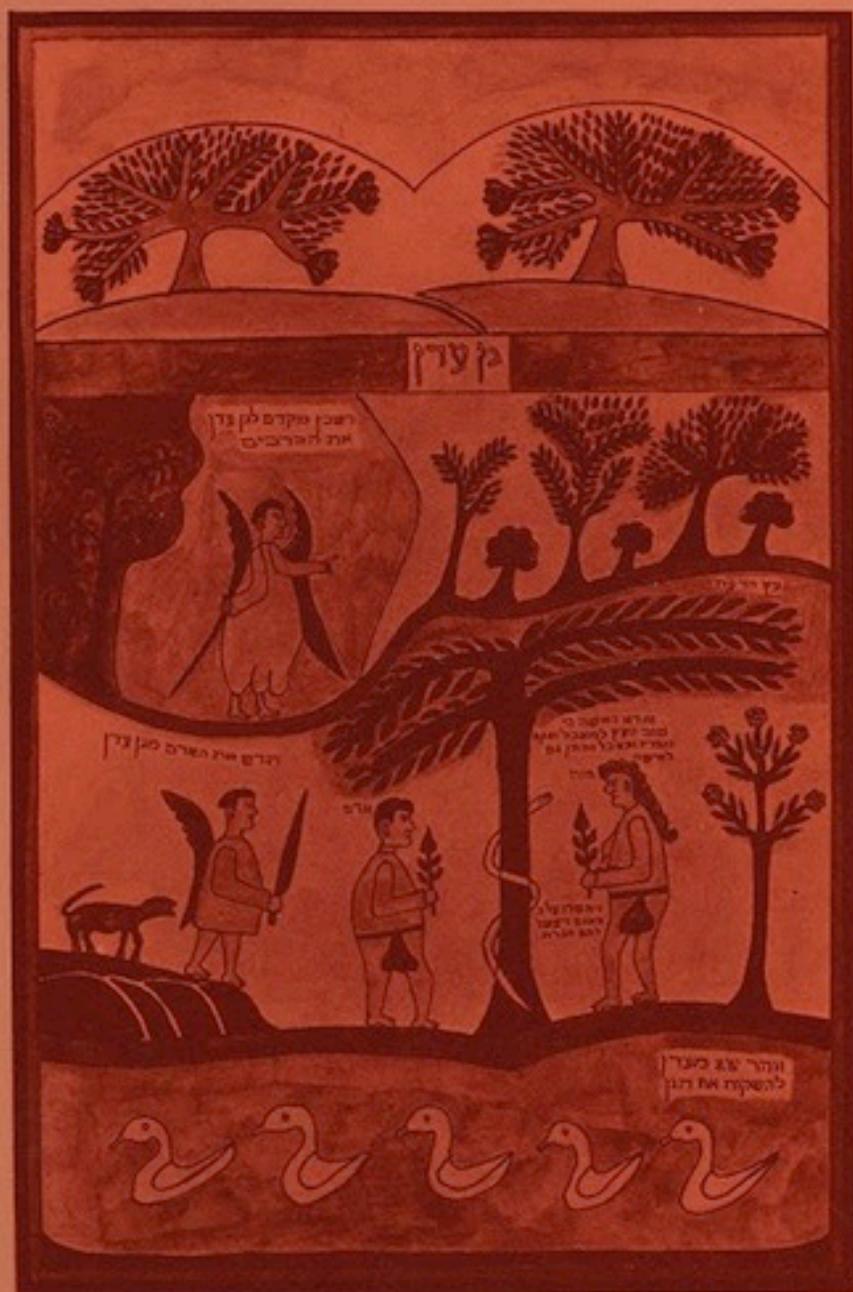


# AMEN



שלום בסקיפיץ רחוב ו' סט' 28 צפת

POEMS BY  
**YEHUDA AMICHAI**

With an Introduction by Ted Hughes

AMEN

**Other books by Yehuda Amichai**

**SONGS OF JERUSALEM AND MYSELF**

**POEMS**

**NOT OF THIS TIME, NOT OF THIS PLACE**

# AMEN



YEHUDA AMICHAI

Translated from the Hebrew by  
the author and Ted Hughes

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## Introduction

*by Ted Hughes*

In 1966, when the first issue of the magazine *Modern Poetry In Translation* was being prepared, Daniel Weissbort, the Editor, found some translations of the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai and showed them to me. We were both greatly intrigued and excited by them. They eventually appeared, in that first issue, in powerful company: Zbigniew Herbert, Miroslav Holub, Vasko Popa. These poets were the same generation as Amichai, early 1920s, and each one of them had some claim to being among the dozen most remarkable poets alive—a judgment that still holds good after eleven years. It seemed to us that Amichai shared their stature and something of their family likeness. Nevertheless, he stood a little apart, and with the passing of time it has become clearer just how radically different he is. In 1966, it was already noticeable that where the three poets from behind the Iron Curtain gripped one's imagination and held one's awe, somehow Amichai's verse attracted and held one's affection as well. It became involved with one's intimate daily experience in a curious way.

With this third volume of his translated poetry to be published in the U.S., I am more than ever convinced that here is one kind of poetry that satisfies, for me, just about every requirement.

To appreciate what he manages to do, one has to imagine him as the chief character in a drama—chief in the sense that he is the one on whom we see the drama registering all its pressures. In this case, his speeches have the added authority that the role is real, and the drama is that crucial hinge of modern history—particularly the history of the West—which is the dilemma of modern Israel.

The forces on the move in this drama are for anybody to name. Even to such an outsider as myself, it is a matter of wonder to see such temperamental energies and traditions, from all the diverse corners of the diaspora, drawn back with the suddenness and violence of collision into that tiny patch of bare land, and there forced to combine and fight against what has repeatedly threatened to be not just defeat but extinction.

Every aspect of the situation is relevant to Amichai's poetry. The simplest assessment of the plot of the drama, and the *dramatis personae*, has to take account of the unique intensity of Jewish religious feeling, and its meaning for all Western Peoples. It has to take account of the Prophets, Biblical history, the supernatural world of Jewish mystical tradition, and the symbolic role of Israel itself, and in particular

of Jerusalem. The accumulated inner strength and wealth of Jewish survival throughout the diaspora, and the peculiar election imposed on them by Hitler. The fact of the holocaust. The fact of the suddenly multiplying powers of the Arab world. A plot that enmeshes itself in a perpetual state of near-war, sudden wars, the threat of more and worse wars, endless future warfare while world powers shift the country this way and that like a pawn. It is clearly the drama of a war of survival on every level, the culmination of the long Jewish history of fighting for survival on every level, of a garrisoned last-stand people. At the same time, ironically, it is the story of a hectic modern Mediterranean holiday land, a tourist resort aswarm with nymphs and satyrs.

But this is only the start of the play. The plot now requires that this huge problem of spiritual inheritance and immediate physical challenge be solved, or at least dealt with in a practical way. And the character on whom this task has descended, the inheritor, the responsible man, the Prince Hamlet, is the modern Israeli citizen-soldier. But is he up to the job? This hero is not a full-time philosopher or general. The weird unmanageable fate has fallen on the shoulders of a man in the street, probably a

schoolteacher, a conscript in all the wars, an ordinary individual who also happens to be in love. And that is what concerns him most, that he is in love.

This character's love poems, as the drama lurches along all round him, have been written by Yehuda Amichai.

Born in Germany—in Würzburg—in 1924, he moved to Palestine, with his family, in 1936, which was late in the day. The double perspective of this doubling of both homeland and language—at that most critical moment for both Hebrew and German—is the subject of his haunting novel, *Not of This Time, Not of This Place*. It is something perhaps that sets him apart from the Israelis born in Israel. But it makes him one of that archetypal generation of Jewish immigrants to Israel who survived the war, and who brought with them the whole accumulated experience of the diaspora to be counted over again and reappraised.

The dramatic role which Amichai has had to perform obviously demands unusual linguistic resources, for any adequate expression. Luckily for us who cannot read the Hebrew, he did not rest content with purely verbal means. What he has in common with Herbert, Holub, and Popa, is a language beyond

verbal language, a language of images which operates with the complexity and richness of hieroglyphs. But the images are not drawn, in surrealist fashion, from the world of dreams. They are drawn, in Amichai's poetry, from the inner and outer history of Jewry. It is as if the whole ancient spiritual investment had been suddenly cashed, in a modern coinage, flooding his poetry with an inexhaustible currency of precise and weighty metaphors. Simultaneously, he has converted all the elements of modern Israeli circumstances to the same all-purpose coinage. And this is the language of his love poems. Nearly all his poems are love poems in one guise or another, many of them straightforwardly erotic—a modern Song of Songs, if one exists anywhere. But the particular nature of his bank of images introduces the complexity which is both just and true. Writing about his most private love pangs in terms of war, politics, and religion he is inevitably writing about war, politics, and religion in terms of his most private love pangs. And the large issues are in no wise diminished in this exchange. They are nowhere more real, more humanized and felt, than in these intimate, comical, sad poems—poems that become more and more life-size and warm and unforgettable the better we get to know them.

Each poem is like a telephone switchboard—the images operate lightning confrontations between waiting realities, a comic or terrible conversation between those heavy political or spiritual matters and the lovers.

This presence, within the actual texture of the writing, of the lived and deeply shared actuality of modern Israel, and of the human relationships determined by it, has steadily increased over the years in Amichai's poems. As they grow more open, simpler, and apparently more artless, they also grow more nakedly present, more close-up alive. They begin to impart the shock of actual events. No matter how mysterious or bizarre the mental leaps, the final effect is always one of a superior simplicity and directness. One is no longer so aware of the virtuosity of a dazzlingly gifted poet, but of a telling of real things he has lived and felt, without any literary self-consciousness, and in a poetry that seems once more the natural speech of people who speak about the psychological depth and density of such things candidly, humorously, generously. This is something so rare that I, for one, return to the poems again and again, and always find myself shaken, as by something truly genuine and alive.

The translations were made by the poet himself. All I did was correct the more intrusive oddities and errors of grammar and usage, and in some places shift about the phrasing and line endings. What I wanted to preserve above all was the tone and cadence of Amichai's own voice speaking in English, which seems to me marvelously true to the poetry, in these renderings. What Pound called the first of all poetic virtues—"the heart's tone." So as translations these are extremely literal. But they are also more, they are Yehuda Amichai's own English poems.



AMEN



# Seven Laments for the Fallen in the War

1

Mr. Beringer, whose son  
fell by the Canal, which  
was dug by strangers  
for ships to pass through the desert,  
is passing me at the Jaffa gate:

He has become very thin; has lost  
his son's weight.

Therefore he is floating lightly  
through the alleys,  
getting entangled in my heart  
like driftwood.

2

As a child he mashed potatoes  
into golden purée.  
After that one dies.

The living child has to be  
cleaned after it returns from play.  
But for the dead man  
earth and sand are clear water