

## *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.

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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...”