

[Homepage](#)

Yosef Haim Brenner in Life and Death

[S.Y. Agnon](#) | [Jeffrey Saks](#)

A Hebrew literary giant's eulogy of another: An exclusive English translation of S.Y. Agnon's 'in memoriam' of Yosef Haim Brenner, upon the centenary of his murder.

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the murder of the renowned “secular saint” of Hebrew culture, Yosef Haim Brenner (1881-1921). Born in Russia to abject poverty, during his short, tormented, and tragic life he became one of the most prominent pioneers of Modern Hebrew literature, and made definitive contributions to the form as both an author of his own works and editor of the writings of others.

Deserting the Tsar’s Army, he made his way to London where he supported himself as a typesetter and established his reputation as a Hebrew editor and author at his *HaMeorer* (“The Awakener”) literary journal. Arriving in Ottoman Palestine in 1909 via a sojourn in Galicia, he initially sought to channel his socialist and Zionist ideologies into agricultural labor, but found he was far more suited to the pen than to the plow. Today, we view his arrival on the sleepy literary scene of Jaffa as the beginning of a shift in the center of gravity for Hebrew

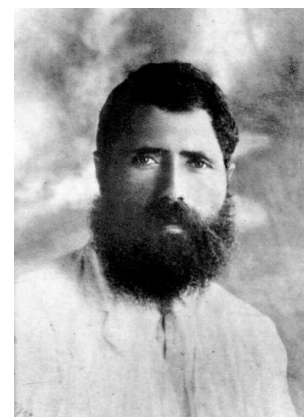
literature—from Europe to the Land of Israel. His copious prose, poetry, plays, literary criticism, and essays are marked by a profound realism, but also by a distinct pessimism, especially regarding the future prospects for Jewish life in the Diaspora (which is not to imply that Zionism and the Jewish society in Palestine escaped his withering criticism). Rejecting the religious background of his youth, art and literature became his faith.

One of the more profound personal and literary relationships Brenner developed in Jaffa during the heady days of the Second Aliyah (the decade prior to World War I) came through his connection with S.Y. Agnon. Agnon (1887-1970) would go on to earn Hebrew literature’s only Nobel Prize; but when he met Brenner, the tyro was still at the very earliest stages of his career. At the time, Agnon’s ambition was matched only by the promise of his talent. Brenner was among the earliest significant critics to recognize the younger writer’s potential. In reviewing Agnon’s debut, signature story, “Agunot,” Brenner marveled at its originality and powerful psychological realism, comparing it to the best works of Rebbe Nahman of Breslov and M.Y. Berdichevsky. Brenner became an early patron and booster of Agnon’s career (despite his own lack of material support), and published Agnon’s first book-length work, as described in the well-known and oft-told anecdote below.

In May 1921, during the wave of Arab violence that struck the Yishuv, as the Jewish settlement was then known, Brenner was brutally murdered at the age of 40, along with five others. His death became a symbol of the struggle and sacrifice of the Jewish revival in the Land of Israel. At the time, Agnon was residing in Germany; distance prevented Agnon from participating in the public mourning. Back in Jerusalem two decades later, Agnon placed Brenner as a character in his historical novel of the Second Aliyah, *Temol Shilshom* (in a somewhat problematic translation as *Only Yesterday*). Assessing the complex personality and legacy of his friend, Agnon’s narrator observes, “Our best critics are used to seeing Brenner as a pessimist, for they judge from his books and they don’t know his laughter.”

Forty years after the murder, late in life and firmly established as the undisputed towering figure of Hebrew letters, Agnon penned a memoiristic tribute to Brenner. (It was published in the *Molad* journal 19:156 [1961], and republished by Agnon’s daughter Emuna Yaron in the collection of his non-fiction writings, *MeAtzmi el Atzmi* [1976].) What follows is an abridged translation of that text.

The essay is populated with many other public intellectuals and men of letters who traveled in the orbits of Brenner and Agnon, especially during the Second Aliyah. So as not to weigh down the translation with parenthetical background information, we rely on the reader to make judicious use of the Google machine and Wikipedia, where biographical and



historical information is easily accessed.

Some of Brenner's writing is available in a number of [fine translations](#). For more on his life, Anita Shapira's [Yosef Haim Brenner: A Life](#) (Stanford University Press, 2014) is highly recommended. Shapira keenly observes: "[Brenner] is admired as a writer and cultural leader by religious and secular people alike – and even more so as a person who laid down norms for a society that had lost its moral compass. He was a man of contrasts: skeptical of Zionism and loyal to the Land of Israel [. . .]; he possessed the boundless pessimism of a realist who unblinkingly observes realists and also the latent optimism of a man who irrationally claims that 'despite everything' the Jews' will to live will prevail."

Jeffrey Saks

Yosef Haim Brenner sanctified his life through his death, as his death was sanctified through his life. His life was pure; no defect could be found in it. He sought no honor for himself nor chased after riches; neither did he hold himself to be above any fellow man. He was a friend to all downtrodden; a brother and companion to one and all [...].

Fifty-three years ago, on my ascent to the Land of Israel [in 1908], I passed through Lemberg in order to take leave of my friends there. First and foremost the scholar R. Eliezer Meir Lifshitz, of blessed memory. While there I encountered our great writer Gershon Shofman, who, wishing to bring me some pleasure, introduced me to Brenner.

We entered his room, where I saw an ungainly, hunched-over man, dressed in threadbare garments. I was surprised that this man and Shofman spoke with each other as two friends. Before I could recover from this shock, another surprise overtook me: this awkward man was none other than Brenner himself, who I had always envisioned as a writer. Even though I had already met many writers, including Sholem Aleichem, the limits of my imagination still only conjured what a writer might have imagined another writer ought to look like. I was forced to come to terms with the reality that *this* was Brenner, whose name shone forth from such Hebrew periodicals as the *Shiloach*, and the *Me'orer*, and others edited by his hand. That's how he appeared: a man with none of the external markers most people pursue, yet graced by things most men never achieve. Certainly, first by literary talent, even though in speech he was rather simple and straightforward; not unusually sharp, but speaking the whole truth. I had an unclear feeling that he could tell us who we were and what our needs were, foretelling the greatness to come. When I told him I was on my way to the Land of Israel, he remarked to Shofman, "Perhaps nothing remains for a Jewish lad but to go up to the Jewish land."

[Agnon arrived in Jaffa in Spring 1908; Brenner arrived about a year later, and their friendship deepened.]

On Friday afternoons, before the onset of the Sabbath, the local Jaffa teachers were off-duty, and the majority would gather in the bookshops. Since every teacher fancies himself as an author, and all authors were once teachers, the shops teemed with teachers and authors. When Brenner would enter, they would encircle him with debates which would go on until sunset. In Brenner's generation all the teachers and writers were fervent patriots and, it goes without saying, ardent Zionists – even disciples of *Ahad Ha-am* were attracted to Zionism, and certainly disagreed with Brenner, whose every article or story would anger them and cause some controversy. Brenner was very strong-minded, never backing down when others disagreed. If his view was criticized he would add arguments even more difficult than what he had initially said. Most contentious of all were debates concerning literature. [...]

Who were our important writers in Brenner's eyes? First and foremost was Bialik. Brenner was an expert in each and every line of Bialik's poetry. Often he would pile mounds upon mounds of interpretations and associations in the poetry. I remember, once, how a young girl was singing the poem "[Between the Tigris and Euphrates](#)," which we used to sing on the Jaffa dunes to a Yemenite tune. When the girl sang the line "Bind my love with a scarlet thread and bring him to me..." Brenner burst out in raucous laughter, tears filling his eyes, and asked, "With what can one bind a groom if not a scarlet thread?" [In the biblical *Song of Songs* (4:3), the "scarlet thread," compared to a woman's lips, is a metaphor of feminine beauty.] About Bialik's stories I don't recall what he said, but I remember one of our friends suggesting that he found a borrowed reference to Andersen in Bialik's story "Behind the Fence." Brenner looked at him in rage, and said, "Bialik only peeked in Andersen's drawers and we gain a new literary critic!" Based on the many interviews and summaries of public speeches by Bialik reported in the press, Brenner was unsatisfied with him. He would critique Bialik, who all the high and mighty lovers of Hebrew would take pride in, yet Bialik did nothing to mobilize those wealthy men to act on behalf of Hebrew literature, since our modern literature was not important in his eyes. When Bialik first settled in our land, I

accompanied him on a trip around the country and we got to talking about Brenner. Bialik told me, “I love Brenner because he is real.” Days later, I repeated this to Brenner while walking on the dunes of Neve Shalom. He stuck one foot in the sand and said, “That’s not what he said in his anonymous critique of my work!” (*HaShiloach* 19 (1909))

No less in Brenner’s eyes, and perhaps even greater, was Mendele Mocher Seforim. For Brenner, Mendele was like one whose every page encapsulated the deeds of the entirety of the Jewish people, throughout all generation and all places. This is an error made by many writers who only knew of the Jewish exile in Russia, or did not know the full expanse of our history. For Brenner, Mendele was a master whose descriptive power and use of language could not be reached by any disciple.

Berdichevsky was very close to Brenner’s heart. He was strongly connected to him, and viewed him as one who narrated the suffering of the young Jewish man’s loneliness. Out of his great affection for Berdichevsky, he longed to meet him in person, and on his journey to the Land of Israel, Brenner wrote to arrange a meeting. He recalled that Berdichevsky met him at the train station and sat with him outdoors for a few hours. Outdoors, not in his home. Before they parted, Berdichevsky ran to a nearby grocery and bought Brenner a herring for the road. The memory of Berdichevsky going to the shop, purchasing the fish, asking the shopkeeper to wrap it well, touched Brenner’s heart. Brenner never accepted a gift from any man, even the smallest item. Once we sat together in someone’s home and they served us tasty cakes, a type we were unaccustomed to in the Land of Israel. Brenner tasted them and praised them to the sky. When we were taking our leave, the hostess handed Brenner a small package with a few more slices of the cake. Once outside he threw it away and wiped his hands on his clothing. I grabbed the cake and asked him why he did such a thing? He answered angrily, “The bread I earn with my own hands is enough for me—I need no cakes!” But as for Berdichevsky’s gift of a herring he never tired of telling the tale. On the contrary, it was a source of pride.

Brenner felt special affection for Hillel Zeitlin even though they had long before chosen separate paths, each going his own way. Once someone delivered greetings to Brenner from Zeitlin. He replied warmly, “What is Hillel doing? Is he writing? Can he find his pen? If he can find his pen, can he find ink—and if he has found both of these what of paper to write on? If he’s found them all, certainly he’s already quit writing.”

Among his contemporaries Gnessin and Shofman were particularly beloved by Brenner—both they and their work. So much so that he claimed to know their collected writings by heart. If Brenner made such a claim it was absolutely true, certainly when he made a claim about himself—for he was very careful to never exaggerate his accomplishments. He also knew my own stories by heart, but at that time I had not published much, and my writings were minimal, in quantity and quality, compared to theirs. Brenner possessed a phenomenal memory, and even found a place in it for my stories. Whenever he would mention Gnessin or Shofman we could sense his longing for them. He would say that Gnessin had nobility about him; the hard knocks in life and the afflictions of poverty left no mark on him, not one iota of his soul was damaged by them. As for Shofman, Brenner was amazed at his sharpness and his self-confidence, to say nothing of his visionary style. [...]

Of all the poets that came after Tchernichovsky, Brenner most admired Shimonovitch [David Shimoni]. As much as he loved his poetry, he loved him and his company. For two months they shared a room at a hostel on the seashore, and at night, when they would go out walking, they would pass my room and invite me to join them. I walked in their footsteps, listening to their conversation. Shimonovitch loved to philosophize. Brenner enjoyed listening to him, but I did not, and I often interrupted and said, “Please don’t bore me.” Brenner laughed affectionately; Shimonovitch laughed the way the Russians laugh at we Galician Jews. While Esau cannot differentiate between different types of Jews, Jacob makes such divisions. I will say one more thing about Shimonovitch: He was beloved by A.D. Gordon on account of his integrity; by Yosef Aharonovitch because of his erudition; even S. Ben-Zion, who could be a harsh critic, said many of Shimonovitch’s poems were real poetry. Shimonovitch was the first of our poets to live in the Land of Israel, and many of his poems about the Land were written here. [...]

Brenner’s love for Rabbi Binyamin is well known, lasting from their time together in London, through their lives here in the Land of Israel. Rabbi Binyamin’s many transformations caused no change in Brenner’s opinion of him. Once he showed me an article by Rabbi Binyamin before it was published in the *Poel Hatzair* newspaper. He said, “You see this half-sentence? It gets reincarnated in passing from writer to writer and poet to poet until it appears in Rabbi Binyamin’s writing as a newborn creation.” When Brenner suffered a leg injury, Rabbi Binyamin brought him home and bathed the leg in Dead Sea salt water. Brenner was careful not to trouble a soul, yet dwelled in Rabbi Binyamin’s home until he regained use of the leg and began walking about with a cane. In Petah Tikva the whole town slandered him when he was seen strolling about on Shabbat with

that cane.

Let me also mention Alexander Ziskind Rabinovitz, known as Azar. Among our literary lights, there were no two opposites greater than Brenner and Azar. Azar was the head of a large family, he supported three generations: himself and his wife, his sons and daughters from his first marriage, his second wife's daughters from her first marriage, the children they had together, as well as his father and his father's wife. On account of this he struggled to make ends meet. Aside from his work as a librarian, and his work as a teacher in two schools, he tutored an elderly woman five times a week in the reading of Tzeina uReina for five francs a month. Brenner was unmarried; he had only his own needs to care for. In addition, Azar was an Orthodox Jew, who had to make time for morning and evening prayer. Brenner didn't even attend synagogue on Yom Kippur. Azar was deeply connected to our great teacher, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, of blessed memory, transcribing every word he heard and learned from his mouth. After Azar brought Brenner to meet Rabbi Kook the first time, Brenner never appeared before him again, even when they were neighbors. Nevertheless, the two writers were drawn to each other. Azar was drawn to Brenner's integrity; Brenner to Azar's simplicity, and because the first story written in our new Hebrew literature about socialism was penned by Azar. When I told Azar I was going to bring Brenner for a visit he laughed and said, "I'm afraid he'll write about me."

S. Ben-Zion was the greatest story-teller in Jaffa. Aside from Mendele and Y.L. Peretz I have never met his equal. We were very close and I frequently visited with him. When Brenner arrived in Jaffa I brought him to meet Ben-Zion, who welcomed him into his home with great honor. But he did not love Brenner. Once he told me, "That thick-jawed, strong-shouldered fellow likes to show off his own despair." Just as he didn't care for the man, he did not care for his writing—and, it goes without saying, not for his style. As an editor, he marked up Brenner's manuscripts with red ink, line by line, like a school teacher grading a paper by a pupil who doesn't know how to write. There are no secrets in the world, and certainly none from those days in Jaffa. When Brenner discovered this he was disconcerted, but he never held it against Ben-Zion. Only once did he comment, "He writes sentimental stories in a cruel tone." Another time he complained to me that S. Ben-Zion never included any of his stories in the anthologies Ben-Zion prepared for students, and prevented the schoolchildren from being introduced to his work. When Brenner had an opportunity to critique Ben-Zion's story "Yekutiel" he made a point of praising it. [...]

Regarding world authors which Brenner read I will not comment, but only mention that he remarked with sorrow, "The greatest among them hate us, and distort our image in the world. Only two of the greatest authors write kindly about us." This is a survey of what I heard from Brenner on authors and their books. [...]

With young writers, however, he toiled endlessly to promote their work—investing his own labor and meager resources. Often he scrimped from his own daily bread in order to publish a young writer's book. As an editor he would not make any revisions except when absolutely necessary. Rather crassly he said, "I do not enter the bed of another man's wife, neither do I violate another writer's style." He went to great lengths to publish my first book *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*. I was a very young writer and could not rely on my own opinion. Anxious to hear the opinions of my betters, I took a few coins, enough to purchase a half-loaf of bread and a bunch of olives, and instead bought a stamp in the post office and mailed my manuscript to Brenner who had moved to Jerusalem while I remained in Jaffa. Seven days later his reply arrived with comments on my manuscript, the likes of which no critic has ever written about my work. He also wrote that he wished to publish it as a book. A few days later Dov Kimhi told me how Brenner had gathered a group of authors and wise men and read my story to them with tears in his eyes.[...]

Brenner never had any money. If a bit of money made its way to his pocket he'd spend less than a third on his own basic needs and the remainder on the needs of others. If so, how did he manage to publish my book? He borrowed a bit from Rabbi Binyamin and a bit from the brothers Streit. As the printing was being completed he realized he'd miscalculated and did not have enough to cover the costs. Around that time I finished my work in Jaffa and ascended to Jerusalem. Brenner's room was small, but full of light. And I found something new there: I saw he had a small burner and a teapot and glasses and plates, things he never had on hand in Jaffa. Within moments, he invited me to dine with him. He pulled together a loaf of bread and some olives and tomatoes and a bit of hard kashkaval cheese, and put the kettle on to make us some cocoa, which had become his drink of choice. Before he poured me some he said, "You're an aristocrat, I'd better first wash your glass." After we ate and drank he stood and said, "Come, I'll show you Jerusalem." No sooner had we left then he returned to his room and secreted some object into his hand. I am not curious by nature and did not ask him what he held. We walked and talked until he entered a shop, the type of shop that used to be adjacent to the Old City at Jaffa Gate. I followed him inside and he placed

the object from his hand before the shopkeeper, saying, “Forgive me, sir, but I need its cost for my own purposes.” The man nodded and said, “A person should never change his custom,” and handed a sum of money to Brenner. What is the meaning of this exchange? Brenner had been accustomed to securing his pants with a leather belt. When his old belt wore out and he was in need of a new one, he was persuaded by someone to buy suspenders instead, which were then the fashion. Now that he was in need of a bit more money to finance the publication of a new Hebrew book, he returned the suspenders for a refund, and went back to his tattered leather belt. Tell me, please, have you ever found another man who foregoes his own needs on behalf of another man’s book?

[In 1912 Agnon departed for Germany, where he remained until returning to Jerusalem in 1924. Benner remained in the Land of Israel.]

Years later, a letter arrived from Shalom Streit along with some newspaper clippings bearing news of the riots in the Holy Land, and of Brenner’s murder. I will say no more of Brenner, except that when they found his body he was clutching a bundle of pages from the book he had just written, with pages strewn around his body drenched in his blood. Blood is the soul of man. He wrote his books with his soul; his blood sanctified his writing. It is said of Rabbi Haninah ben Teradyon that he expounded upon the Torah with his pupils gathered about him while clutching a scroll of the law to his bosom [despite the Roman decree; T.B. *Avodah Zarah* 18a]. They caught him and asked why he had taught Torah? He replied, “It is the command of the Lord my God.” They brought him to be sentenced, and wrapped him in his Torah scroll, and encircled him with bundles of branches, and they set fire to it. And they brought tufts of wool and soaked them in water, and placed them on his heart, so that his soul should not quickly depart his body, but that he would die slowly and painfully. His daughter said to him: “Father, must I see you like this?” He said to her: “If I alone were being burned, it would be difficult for me, but now that I am aflame along with a Torah scroll, He who will seek retribution for the disgrace accorded to the Torah will also seek retribution for the disgrace accorded to me.”

Heaven forbid that I compare our modern Hebrew literature to the Torah itself. Yet, a man sanctified his life through his death and his death through his life, and was slaughtered in the Land of Israel for being a Jew among the Jews of the Land. It is fitting to say of him, “He who will seek retribution for the disgrace accorded to us will also seek retribution for the disgrace accorded to him.” As it is written, “He will avenge the blood of His servants, inflict revenge upon His adversaries, and appease His land and His people” [Deut. 32:43], about which Rashi comments “He will appease His land and His people for the distresses that they experienced, and that the enemy perpetrated against them.”

Hebrew text appears in S.Y. Agnon, *MeAtzmi el Atzmi* (© 1976 Schocken Publishing House, Inc.).



We hope you have enjoyed this article! Unlike many other publications, we do not have a paywall. In order to continue this way, and to make sure that our writers are paid fairly for their work, we are totally reliant on those who can afford to do so, and who care about the Tel Aviv Review of Books, to help support our work. Please consider [making a donation](#). Many thanks!

Related Articles

The Manuscript

Yardenne Greenspan Ruby Namdar

An exclusive English translation of a new short story by Sapir Prize-winning novelist Ruby Namdar, set in 1970s Tel Aviv.

“Everyone is responsible for the explosion.”

Jonathan Fine

A conversation with artist Rutu Modan about her 2020 graphic novel 'Tunnels', storytelling in comics, and the relationship between truth and ideology.