

Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000):
An Example of his Craft

[Yehuda Amichai](#) is thought by many to be the greatest Israeli poet the contested land he called his own has given us so far. The poem that follows, one of the most moving in all of literature, shows why. For those who know biblical but not modern Hebrew, do not despair. With the help of a dictionary, you can read this poem. My translation is indebted to earlier efforts, but goes its own way.

My father spent four years in their war.
He didn't hate his enemies, or love them.
But I know that already there
he formed me day after day
from quiet moments

אָבִי הָיָה אַרְבַּע שָׁנִים בְּמִלְחַמָּתָם,
וְלֹא שָׂנֵא אוֹיְבָיו וְלֹא אָהֵב.
אֲבָל אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ, כִּי כְּבָר שָׁם
בָּנָה אוֹתִי יוֹם-יוֹם מִשְׁלוֹתָיו

few as they were, which he gleaned
between explosions and smoke,
and he put them in his tattered pack
along with the remnant of his
mother's hardened cake.

הַמְעֻטוֹת כָּל-כָּדָּ, אֲשֶׁר לָקַט
אוֹתָן בֵּין פְּצָצוֹת וּבֵין עָשָׁן,
וְשָׁם אוֹתָן בְּתַרְמִילוֹ הַמְמַרְטָט
עִם-שְׂאֵרֵית עוֹגוֹת-אֵמוֹ הַמְתַקְשָׁה.

And in his eyes he gathered the nameless dead
a great many dead he gathered for my sake,
that I might recognize them in his gaze
and love them

וּבְעֵינָיו אָסַף מֵתִים בְּלִי שֵׁם,
מֵתִים רַבִּים אָסַף לְמַעֲנִי,
שְׂאֵפִירִם בְּמַבְטָיו וְאֵהֵבֵם

and not die, as they, in horror . . .
he filled his eyes with him, but he erred:
to all my wars I am going out.

וְלֹא אָמוֹת כְּמוֹהֶם בְּזוּעָה . . .
הוּא מִלֵּא עֵינָיו בָּהֶם וְהוּא טָעָה:
אֵל כָּל-מִלְחָמוֹתַי יוֹצֵא אֲנִי.

On the Hebrew: biblical diction is detectable in almost every line. The rhythm of the verse is freer than that of ancient Hebrew poetry, but nevertheless constrained within certain limits.