Haviva Pedaya was born and raised in Jerusalem, within a religious environment. Her family descends from a line of Torah and Qabbala scholars who were central pillars of the Iraqi-Jewish community. The musical legacy of the family is also rich. Pedaya herself—who teaches at Ben Gurion University in Be’er Sheva and also serves as the musical director of the Yona Ensemble for Jewish Music of the East—has written extensively on Jewish mysticism. Her poetry is spun directly and powerfully out of that often-esoteric world, as well as out of the literary heritage of Jewish Spain: she speaks of a particular affinity for the poet Shelomo Ibn Gabirol, that tormented master and one of the four or five major poets of the Hebrew Golden Age. In part because of the matrix of her work, the surface of her poetry is unlike anyone else’s in Hebrew today, and it also resists translation more than most. No one in Hebrew more forcefully fuses the impulse within Judaism’s linguistic mysticism with the formal and emotional knowledge that poetry bestows. Nor is any other poet of note as clearly rooted in the Eastern religious tradition.

A recipient of the President’s Prize for Literature, Pedaya—who is religiously observant—is the author of two volumes of verse and several volumes of scholarly work treating the mystical Literature of the Palaces, the Spanish Qabbala, and eighteenth-century Hasidism. In what follows, Pedaya discusses the conjunction of several worlds in her work: poetry and religion, politics and faith, scholarship and art, East and West.

Is poetry for you a way of getting to the same places that mysticism seeks to reach?

There are poems in which that miracle happens, in which there are no boundaries between experience and language. I’ve been writing for as long as I can remember myself, and the first years of my writing life were passed under the stress of silence and a sense of strangeness in the world. When I got to the university I felt very palpably the tension between the place I was in and the path I wanted to follow—the tension between the reality I knew, as a forgetting, and the memory I hoped to reach, through the language, and only through the language. And I thought that I would never get there. At a certain point, things calmed down. Maybe because I went on learning. And by learning here I don’t mean academic writing and research. It was a matter of survival, of being nourished by what I was studying. The spiritual development I sought took place when, at a certain moment, that study gave birth to what I’d wanted from the language.

But I have a certain aversion to the word mysticism. [...] I don’t want it to sound as though I’m having mystical experiences. [...] Does the poem help you understand something that you hadn’t understood before?

Most of my poems, not all, were written in a state of tremendous despair, of—literally—fear and trembling, as though the poem were the last respite in the face of something desperate. The poem let me understand where I was. Sometimes the opposite happens and those insights accompany me into a new period [...] and yet it doesn’t come out in a poem. I try not to hurry anything. Not to control these moments. Not to interfere. [...] You’ve written that “not only is the concrete or literal level of textual interpretation nourished by the mystical level, but the mystical is also nourished
by the literal. " Do you try to maintain this back and forth in your poetry?

Yes, the movement between them is critical. From the moment that movement exists in life it also exists in the poem. There were stages at which I tried to shirk off that mystical level, and there were stages when I tried to accept it or reject it. At a certain point, I realized that the neutralization of the mystical dimension is. The understanding of the way in which that might destroy me or what it might bring me to, in every respect, stopped me, and I gradually began to work with the literal and the mystical in a new way. When I look at a poem, I'm prepared to see a considerable mystical dimension in it, so long as it doesn't depend on that alone. Because a poem can't be dependent on any extrapoetic esoteric code. Not a personal one, and not one that comes from certain texts that one has read. It has to stand on its own, but if it does, and can contain that other dimension—then that's a good thing. It doesn't take away from it.

What enables a poem to stand on its own? When does it do that?

It's like a kind of glazed pottery that's exposed to fire and then immersed in cold water. There's a certain agitation or raising of the temperature out of which the poem emerges. That's the immersion in fire. After that, sometimes right after that, and at other times only after several weeks, there develops an ability to see the poem coldly and from an utterly alien perspective. That's the immersion in water. And that's when you sense whether or not it can stand on its own. The poem comes wrapped in materials that may have been vital for its existence prior to separation, like the amniotic fluid and placenta, but later on it may well be that they're not necessary and may in fact get in the way. Sometimes it's extremely hard to arrive at that objective perspective within just a few days or weeks, and so it takes longer. Each poem is different. [...]

How do you relate to the image? To what extent is it fed by texts you're reading and working with as a scholar?

I don't try to invent things. The images of mine that are influenced by mysticism—it's simply a matter of religion, of these things being part of religiosity, and of having a long lifeline within the Hebrew language. [...] I'm not satisfied with metaphors and imagery. I'm also looking for a way to restore the story to poetry, and the sense of mystery. To make room for forms that derive from mythology and from allegory, to lessen the impact of the "I," so that there won't always be a dominant personal perspective in the picture, or not always the perspective of the moment of observation or the moment of occurrence. Sometimes that view is from afar, or distinctly belated, and subsumes other, more contemporary perspectives, or still earlier perspectives. I try to leave hints of memory's movement. That doesn't necessarily assume the form of an image, since there is much less simile in my work than there is reality, continuity, and the conjunction of distinct registers. But even when I do make use of "images," they're usually part of a broader story or perspective.
A poem that contains not a single "religious" image might be a deeply religious poem. Likewise, poetry that brings religious imagery into confrontation with the profane world isn't always religious, in the true sense.

Just as habit and the quotidian endanger the performance of the mitzvot, or commandments, so too religious language faces the danger of being taken for granted. Clichés. Dissipation. Kashi says of the mitzvot: "Don't let them be in your eyes like an old letter, but like a new letter." That is, don't read what's written as you would an old piece of correspondence that you already knew and had just taken out of a box; read it as though it were a new letter that has just reached you. Religious language passes repeatedly through a filter or the mediation of a certain socio-religious context, and that involves a narrowing and limiting, but it's also a source of considerable distress. The text should be read without any connection to the religiosity of the social or collective plane. Often one senses literary critics or editors of literary journals gathering a group of poems that seems to them "religious," when in fact the actual content of the poetry isn't religious at all; it's simply that they've been written by people who observe the commandments and are, at least outwardly, "religious."

You distinguish between religious poets and poets who "observe the commandments." Can you accept that poetry by a non-religious person, an apostate, can also be religious?

Religious poetry is not necessarily—and often one can say that it has little or nothing to do with—poetry written by those who observe the commandments. And that's because religious experience per se doesn't really concern them. A poem can be full of images based on the tallit (the prayer shawl) and tefillin (phylacteries), or even turn to address God, without being a religious poem. I'm not talking about those poems that intentionally profane or desecrate; I'm talking about poetry that contains the language of religion but not religious experience. On the contrary, a poem that contains not a single "religious" image might be a deeply religious poem. Likewise, poetry that brings religious imagery into confrontation with the profane world isn't always religious, in the true sense—and this without relating to its quality as poetry, to whether it's good poetry or not. The materials themselves do not establish the degree of religiosity so much as do the intention and impulse. Poetry in which the presence of God exists, a poetry whose trials and joys are linked to the thirst for the divine and a longing for metaphysical grace and consolation. It makes no difference whether the form of that metaphysical presence is transcendent or immanent. [...]

In many of your poems one feels that your aspiration is downwards rather than upwards.

That's interesting, because both of these axes exist in myth—the cults of the one god or the cults of the heavens and cults of the earth, which are usually external (that is, outside the temple or shrine). It's true that some sort of flickering, or shimmering, of external light causes me to drill inwards. That is true. I wouldn't have put it that way. But it reminds me of the mystics of the Heikhalot literature of late antiquity, the Poetry of the Palaces; to this day we don't know why they were called the "Descenders of the Chariot." [...]

Do you see yourself as continuing a given tradition in poetry?

I see myself as someone who lives in the poetic reality of the Hebrew poetry of medieval Spain...
and the Heikhalot poetry, and the Bible, and all the mystical texts I read. I would like to think that I'm bringing them forward into a contemporary place. I've also gotten a great deal from the new Hebrew poetry. That's the line I'm in.

Do you feel a particular affinity for any of the Israeli poets? Or any of the earlier Hebrew poets?

I'm extremely close to the Spanish-Hebrew poet Shelomo Ibn Gabirol. From childhood. I've identified with the exposed and vulnerable speaking voice in his poems. "My flesh is devoured from seeking wisdom"—that was mine. Almost everything in his poetry spoke to me, even his writing about the fact that illness has made his cheeks red and people think that he's flush with contentment. That exists in me too. Also the combination of shyness and arrogance, which is particularly conspicuous in his work. The desperate search for form—he's one of the great innovators. And you feel how he processes an inner reality in front of the mirror of the outside world. [...]

But I can't make do with only the Heikhalot poetry, or the poetry of the Zohar or the Middle Ages. I can't get by without them—that's my poetry—but whoever needs poetry, needs it in relation to the present reality as well. There's always a certain hope in contemporary poetry, but I prefer it when it opens onto broader depths. Not every dimension of Hebrew has to be present in every poem, but when that depth is missing, it's hard. [...] How do you hear contemporary Hebrew in relation to the Hebrew of earlier periods?

The language today is undergoing a process of extermination from every angle, and that goes beyond the imposition of the messianic-Zionist voice, and the cultic-military voice, which has stolen for itself a word like le-tahair (to cleanse, to purify). I'm not talking only about overdetermination, or overloading, but about determination that freezes, or paralyzes, meaning. Often the price is in the reduction of a word's area of subsistence through complex conceptual and religious concepts, which is to say, in an emptying out and cheapening of their meaning. As with the word ge'ula (redemption).

But the determination comes from another direction as well. The imposition of the language of the street also brings about an emptying. Every superfluous word that's invented destroys another word. The invention of superfluous words, words that lack all resonance, is sometimes brought about in order to blur our view of the injustice that's being perpetrated in a given reality; it constitutes a kind of violence against the language. People think that just because they understand the nature of Hebrew grammar, etymology, and morphology, they can make up words. And often that's done so as to distance one from what the word that should have been used would call for, if only it had been uttered. One says hisuf (barefication) instead of "cutting down trees and saplings" and "destroying homes" and "confiscating property." Why does one have to take the entirely normal and useful word hisuf (to make vulnerable, to expose, to lay bare) and turn it into the neologism hisuf? The word hisuf is empty; it lacks all connotation, it has no resonance, no depth; at most it has the aggressiveness of the intensifying form and declension of the verb. But if we say hisuf (to lay bare or expose), someone might start to think: Why should we be "exposing" land? Exposing it to what? What happens when roots are exposed? The neologism is designed to keep us from the real words, which will one day rise up and rebel. That's why God can remain silent: He has never uttered a word like hisuf. [...] Who is your ideal reader? And what should he or she be familiar with before starting to read?

He doesn't need to be familiar with anything. If he wants to make himself familiar with things, that's fine—but it isn't important. But he doesn't need to come equipped with a diving suit to lower himself into my poems. The more one knows, the more one gets from them. But the poem has to be able to stand on its own, on the surface.

I don't know if I want to make things easier or harder for the reader. A poem might initially repel a reader, but one shouldn't be afraid of that. The question is, How long will the interval be between that initial repulsion and the subsequent attraction? It's a matter of whether or not you're drawn back in to clarify for yourself and explore that depth, the surface of which had at first driven you off and been so hard to absorb. To the same degree, sometimes a poetry that you took in without any difficulty, and without any back-and-forth, stays with you for a while, then slides off you and is gone. [...]

Translation from the Hebrew
By Peter Cole