

A Refugee's Cry: Brenner's The Way Out

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This year a different thing happened. This year Brenner was not read in the same way. When I walked into the classroom it felt as if I was joining a mourning session, but without knowing if we were there to give or accept condolences. The class was like an inflamed wound, painfully shocked by every contact with the text (Hess 2002).

This was how Hess described her Hebrew University students' reaction to Brenner, at the opening of a session devoted to Brenner at a colloquium on Modern Hebrew Literature held at Brandeis University in the fall of 2002.¹ Her words were greeted with silence. The ensuing discussion on Brenner's works showed that these feelings were indeed real. In retrospect it would appear that Brenner had become very relevant in these times.

Yosef Haim Brenner, born in Ukraine in 1881, is one of the prominent voices and outstanding writers of the second Aliya. With pessimism, and often with despair, he described in his stories, novels and essays his doubts concerning the Zionist enterprise in the Land of Israel. As a child, Brenner received Eastern European Jewish education. As a young man, however, he became active in the Jewish labour movement, left Russia for London where he worked in a printing shop, founded a Hebrew language periodical and joined *Po'alei Zion*, a socialist-Zionist movement. Brenner settled in Palestine in 1909, worked as a simple labourer for a brief period, and then became an editor, writer and translator. He was murdered in the prime of his life by Arabs during the riots against the Jewish settlers in May 1921.

Brenner's works are characterized by a direct and "un-literary" style which reveals authenticity, psychological insights and satirical elements. Refraining from editorial and authorial comments, Brenner aspired to bring his sharp criticism and his troubled intensity by introducing only the facts—the people and their experiences (Alter 1975:141).

Much has been written about Brenner's contributions to Hebrew literature; his rich writing has constantly been a source of new insights. Yet the emotional impact and the relevance of his works to contemporary readers remained a mystery.

In what follows I shall analyze a single story by Brenner, *The Way Out*, focusing on the ethical issue it raises.² After a short introduction and review, necessary to recall a few themes and techniques of the story, I shall attempt to point to the special elements that make it relevant and meaningful to contemporary readers. The analysis of the story, and the presentation of these elements, may provide indications concerning the nature of Brenner's writing in general, and suggest an interesting way to understand it.

Background

The Way Out is a short story, first published in 1919, which describes a single event. It presents no panoramic view, nor are the lives of the characters depicted in any detail. It has just a single focus, and makes one specific point, so that it hits the reader with full force. However, in a complex way, which will be discussed later, the story raises a wide range of feelings and attitudes.

The story was apparently written during the second half of World War I (1917-1918) (Brenner 1978:1822). The British army was nearing the Land of Israel from the south, from Egypt, and in April 1917 the Turks evacuated the Jewish civilian population of Tel-Aviv and Jaffa, who became "displaced persons." Most of these people moved northward, to Petach-Tikva, Kefar-Sava, Hadera, and similar places. Following the so-called "Jaffa expulsion" a "committee" was set up for the purpose of taking care of the displaced. By December

1918 the entire southern part of the country, including Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, was already in British hands, whereas the Jewish settlements to the north of the front-line were still under Turkish rule. Many of the displaced were located not far from the front.

The Way Out takes place in a colony where a group of refugees arrives. The people of the colony are indifferent to the plight of the refugees and do not do anything to help them. Except, that is, for an elderly teacher, the protagonist of the story, who decides to do otherwise. He tries his best to help the newcomers, until he breaks his toe.

The story has a clear ethical dimension. It discusses the duty to help and save others; describes the reactions of the locals, those who do help and thus fulfil their duty, and those who do not and thus in fact repudiate it. It also presents the question of moral responsibility of the community's leaders.

The Refugees' Story

The story opens with a description of the refugees whose story is that of all refugees, people who have been forced to leave their homes and belongings and have become homeless. They wander through towns and villages, knock on doors, and try to find some food and a roof under which to sleep. Refugees are people who are not used to a life of wandering and need; they have been forced by circumstance to leave their homes. Their story is not usually heard because there is no-one strong enough to speak for them. However, in *The Way Out* the author has chosen to describe the refugees' plight at quite some length (relative to the entire story's rather limited length).

They would be arriving from back there, from that nightmare-ridden waste, where the soil lay desolate, the trees hewn down and the dwelling in ruins; from the dead region where the handful of farmers who were left paid the soldiers billeted in their houses to chop the remaining almond trees into firewood; from the place where the only food was unground millet...from the place where damp huts, infested with mice and vermin, soggy with filth and permeated with the

accumulated stench of months, gave sorry shelter to women and children who were chilled to the marrow and contorted with disease; from the place where out of surviving hundreds, half a dozen dead were carted away daily for burial; from the place where there was no longer any room to lay the scores of new victims that succumbed daily to the disease...from the place whose denizens did nothing to alleviate their plight... (1975:145-146).³

The refugees' story is told here using an anaphoric structure, which emphasizes their suffering. They have no heating, food or home in a place where people fall ill and die, and where no-one helps. The group of refugees standing at the entrance of the colony undermines the security of its people, who feel that their good life—their prosperity and their health—is threatened by the newcomers. They do not want to share what they have achieved or to have their routine lives disturbed, and therefore do not carry out the duty to help them.⁴

The plight of the refugees and the behaviour of the locals are shown to be fatal through the focus given to a single refugee. At the heart of the story sits a barefoot woman:

In her arms she rocked a naked child whose white body was covered with bites of mosquitoes, lice, fleas, and other vermin and with festering sores. Inert and silent, the child stared out of wide-open glassy eyes.
"If just... a drop of milk..." the mother articulated the barely heard syllables (1975:149).

The old teacher, the only one who tries to help, does not succeed in getting milk for the baby, and when medical help arrives it is too little, too late. The baby dies:

On the rise overlooking the colony, in among the trees, stood a knot of people looking down at an emaciated woman who sat barefoot on the ground, with her dead child at her side. The mother sat silent for some time. She looked just the same as she had looked two days ago. She wanted them to bury her dead baby (1975:154-155).

The old man takes it upon himself to bury the baby girl, with the help of a Turkish soldier who participated "with a strange devotion in...burial of this child of a faith alien to his" (1975:156).

The baby's death appears to be a *fatal act* that shows the terrible results of ignoring a moral obligation.⁵ Aesthetically, the incident of the baby's death is shocking. True, the refugees as a whole are described as a miserable, filthy lot, dying of hunger and disease, but nothing can stress the seriousness of the situation more powerfully than the description of one death. The baby's story brings about a concretization of the refugees, who were previously perceived as a group with no individual characteristics. The baby's death is integrated into the story and develops together with it. At the beginning the mother, unable to suckle her infant, is mentioned. After her daughter dies the mother asks for food for herself, so that she too may not die. Furthermore, the restrained, minimalist, even heartless narrative style, in which the awful scene is described in supposedly neutral language, creates an effect of dissonance, which increases the effectiveness of the story. Thus, the focus given to the mother and her daughter arouses empathy with the refugees and interest in their fate, and exposes the reader to a harsh, shocking sight.

Ethically, the story of the baby's death, the fatal act, intensifies the general need for a moral analysis, and the particular inquiry into the immoral behaviour of the locals, whose moral responsibility for the baby's death raises the issue of the duty to save life. Is there such a duty? Does refraining from saving someone imply responsibility for her death? The answer to the first question is clearly positive—there is a moral duty to help one's fellow man. The second question is more complex, as evident from the difficulty that the legal system has in establishing the responsibility for someone else's death through her refusal to help. Nevertheless, the realization that such a situation does involve responsibility has led legislators in Israel in 1998 (and in other countries as well) to pass a law: "Do not stand against the blood of thy neighbour."⁶ This is how Friedman (2000:119) explains the law:

It is one's duty to offer assistance to anyone in one's immediate presence who, due to a sudden event, is in

a state of imminent and serious danger to life, limb or health, if it is possible to provide such assistance without endangering oneself or others.

The many legal discussions concerning the duty to save the life of one's fellow man reflect the idea that people do have a certain responsibility for the lives of their fellows if they are able to help.⁷ In Brenner's story this responsibility is given an additional dimension. It is hinted at in the accusation which the old teacher levels against the members of the colony's committee, using a biblical quotation: "And we'll be able to say: 'Our hands have not shed this blood'?" (1975:151), taken from the following biblical text:

If one be found slain in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee to possess it, lying in the field, and it be not known who hath slain him: Then thy elders and thy judges shall come forth, and they shall measure unto the cities which are round about him that is slain: And it shall be, that the city which is next unto the slain man, even the elders of that city shall take an heifer, which hath not been wrought with, and which hath not drawn in the yoke; and shall strike off the heifers neck there in the valley. And all the elders of that city, that are next unto the slain man, shall wash their hands over the heifer that is beheaded in the valley: And they shall answer and say, Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it. And the blood shall be forgiven them (Deut. 21:1-8).

In the Bible the elders, who do not know the identity of the murderer, are commanded to perform a ceremony of sacrificing a heifer for atonement. The commentator Rashi has questions about the verse "Our hands have not shed this blood." He asks, would anyone really think that elders of the court were murderers? Why should they have to perform such a ceremony if it is clear that they are innocent? Abraham Ibn Ezra says explicitly what Rashi hints at: because they were wrong not to protect the dangerous roads. The elders of course did not shed blood, but some of the responsibility rests on them: as leaders they have the duty to see to it that no-one is killed in the vicinity of their city.

The death of the baby expresses not only the fact that people were derelict in their duty to save life, but also points to the moral responsibility of the leaders for the death. Not only do the people of the colony, but also their leaders, both village council and refugees committee, abjure their duty to save lives. The old teacher points to the main culprits by quoting a Biblical text according to which the city elders can atone for their sin, unlike the colony's leaders, whose responsibility and guilt cannot be washed away.

The Way Out: Current Relevance

Now that we have reviewed the story and the moral problem it deals with, we can address the question I posed at the beginning of this paper: What makes Brenner relevant today? What in this story resonates with contemporary readers? There are in fact two elements, which provide the story with powerful meaning even today. One is the possibility of giving the story a generalized meaning; the other is the flexibility in interpretation permitted by the story.

Between a Principle of Strict Realism and a Generalized Meaning

The Way Out has a strictly realistic structure. The narrator remains in the background, preferring to describe the events "as they happened," with very little commentary. As Alter pointed out, Brenner "wants the brutally depressing facts to speak for themselves" (1975:141). He neither judges nor criticizes, beyond having given the story an ironic title. He presents the readers with an injustice, as if asking them to perform a moral analysis of the story.

Brenner's story is based almost completely on his personal experience, as reported by Zigler (1938).⁸ Brenner came to Hadera during the last year of World War I, at the time of the expulsion from Tel-Aviv. A large group of refugees was staying in a camp near Kfar Sava, not far from the frontlines separating the British and Turkish forces. Only the more well-to-do were able to come to Hadera and arrange to stay in comfort, for the farmers there rented out rooms at the full market price. Brenner settled in a farmer's room with his family, but the great demand for housing in Hadera resulted in

Brenner's being ousted from his room when a richer person offered to pay more. There were those who tried to convince the farmer not to evict him, but Brenner himself claimed that he had planned to move anyway, and went on to Gan Shmuel. Brenner was something of a recluse in those days, and troubled as well, since it was not only housing that was so expensive; grain was also sold to the refugees at two or three times the normal market price. The situation became even more tense when rumours began circulating to the effect that the refugees who were staying in Kfar Sava, who had nearly died of starvation and some of whom were wounded by bombs, were about to move north. The town of Hadera prepared itself to reject these newcomers, using the fear of disease as an excuse. There was of course no answer to the question of where else these people should be sent. When Brenner came back from Gan Shmuel to Hadera he tried to help the refugees who camped near the train station. The younger refugees tried to build sheds but had to fight for the right to occupy the place and to cut branches for building the shacks. The town arranged for wagons, which of course were sold at the full market price, to take the refugees northward, to the Galilee (as if their diseases would not be harmful there). Brenner was ill that day. Zigler states that he brought Brenner a coat and some notebooks from Gan Shmuel. That same day Brenner gave the food he was allotted to others, and occupied himself with caring for a group of refugees who were sent to Hadera. The story of the baby is also mentioned in Zigler's memories. A woman had come from Ein Ganim with a sick infant. There was no milk, and she was put in the public bathhouse. On the following morning the infant had died. Brenner took the body with the help of a Sephardi labourer and buried it.

Zigler stresses the refugees' plight and views the town's behavior with disgust. He cannot accept the fear of disease as an excuse for its behaviour (since, as he explains, sending the refugees to the Galilee would then mean sending disease to the inhabitants of that region). Brenner's illness is analogous to the illness of the old teacher in the story. Recall that Brenner, despite his illness, gives up the food he is allotted and proceeds to help the refugees.

The Way Out, with its very clear moral criticism, can be understood as a realistic piece that describes an actual conflict,

which took place during the second decade of the twentieth century. It can also be analyzed as a statement in the context of a more general discussion on the issue of the way the farmers, the landowners in the Jewish colonies, treated other Jews. Ever since the first waves of immigration to the Land of Israel, the Jewish farmers treated newcomers, individuals, families, city dwellers, with contempt. The farmers felt no solidarity with their co-religionists and preferred to employ the cheaper non-Jewish labour. The war, which caused the Jews of Tel-Aviv and Jaffa to be expelled and to become refugees, did nothing to change this heartless and cruel attitude.

The factual autobiographical background of the story highlights the moral dilemma it relates. However, the story can be understood quite well without any appeal to historical facts about Brenner and his times.

Brenner's stories contain two contradictory elements (Ben-Nahum 1971:136). On the one hand, these are stories grounded in historical fact and stressing the helplessness of the individual in the face of an uncaring, corrupt bureaucracy. But on the other hand, they also have a generalized aspect. Anyone unfamiliar with the historical background is confronted with two human groups: "refugees" and the "people of the colony." The noun "refugee" is a general term, which says nothing about where these people came from or what happened to them. Thus it is unclear if they are Jews or not, if they are newly arrived immigrants or people who have been living in the country for some time, and what the reason for their situation was. Understanding the relationship between the "refugees" and the colony, in which they hope to find refuge, does not depend on knowing any of these facts. The injustice done to the refugees has a generalized meaning and expresses an overall, non-specific, social criticism.

The lack of background detail in the story itself expands its generalization meaning and gives structure to the problem: the situation is one where a refugee in need of assistance comes to a colony and does not get the help she needs.

Nuttall (1983:76) claims:

He who gazes with understanding at a Rembrandt self-portrait cannot be said verifiably, to have learned more facts about Rembrandt... [W]hat he learns is the strange twofold truth, a possible face from the seventeenth century and, at the same time, *Human faces*. (Italics added)

Nuttall states that reading a work of literature provides an "experimental knowledge."⁹ "Art and literature do not produce new knowledge," as Noël (2002:4) put it, "they recycle truisms that readers already know." However it is important to note:

Literature fictions then can afford knowledge of concepts...by stimulating the reader to an awareness, through reflective self-analysis, of the conditions, rules, and criteria for her application of said concepts (Noël 2002:14).

Therefore, those who gaze at a Rembrandt self-portrait find something that they already know but were not fully aware of. They acquire an experimental knowledge, by connecting the artwork to aspects of their own life.

When a composition has a structure that enables the reader to connect the story to her own life, social criticism can be expressed successfully, regardless of the specific time and place that form the context of the narrative. Just as Rembrandt's portrait says something about human faces (and not only about Rembrandt himself and his times), so *The Way Out* can say something about human society, about the social dynamics that can end in a refusal to help refugees and in callousness on the part of individuals and the establishment.

But in order to affirm the hypothesis concerning the *emotional* effect which the story arouses in the reader, another theoretical layer has to be added. Noël claims that emotions are part of the reflection process (Noël 2002:18). In his discussion of narrative explanation, Velleman (2002:25) claims that readers do not relate to works of literature through reconstructed events of their own lives, but rather through the structure of their emotions:

A story therefore enables its audience to assimilate events, not to familiar patterns of *how things happen*, but rather to familiar patterns of *how things feel*.¹⁰

Velleman's approach enables one to understand not only the relevance of the criticism expressed in the story, but also the text's current emotional effectiveness. In *The Way Out* the reader is led to reconstruct not only events, but also emotional patterns. In other words, it is not only the dynamics of turning one to the plight of the refugee that is evoked in the story, but also the attendant emotions.

It is because the story expresses this aspect so successfully that different readers who have been exposed to, or who have themselves experienced, a similar pattern of feelings, are able to relate, personally and emotionally, to Brenner's text.

Interpretative Flexibility: *The Way Out—Two Interpretations*

In the Gospel of Luke the parable of the Good Samaritan is related as follows:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee (Luke 10:30-35).

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the basic narratives defining the *duty to save life*. In legal writings the terms *Good Samaritan* and *Bad Samaritan* are frequently used when referring to

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this duty. *The Way Out* is written in a manner reminiscent of this parable. It opens with a description of the refugees and those around them who refuse to help. It then goes on to describe, relatively at length, the one just person who tries to help. Nevertheless, as can be seen in the story itself as well as the choice of title, the tale of the old teacher goes beyond this parable.

The old teacher is in a way the counterpart of the *Good Samaritan*. He cannot stand by and see the refugees suffer. At first he awaits them: it is as if he were preparing himself for his upcoming mission: "Every morning, day in, day out, when the tiny train was due to arrive from Tulkarem to fetch wood to stoke the engine, the old pioneer teacher would go out the balcony of his attic room on the farm. Shading his eyes, he would see whether they were coming" (Brenner 1975:145). He is concerned about their situation: "They were all broken in body and spirit, worn out, naked and starving... Who was going to feed them, give them a drink, tend to them?" (1975:147). He knows that his strength is limited, but tries to do his best. He brings them water and tries to collect food for them. After the decision to send them north he tries to find wagons for them, in which both they and their belongings can be carried. In addition, he buries the dead infant. The old teacher works alone. He manages to get some sorghum and shares his own bread with the refugees. He employs an Arab guide to help in showing them the way, and takes a Turkish soldier to help him bury the baby. In comparison to the behaviour of the other people of the colony, the old teacher stands out as morally superior.

However, both the story's ending and its title bring about a shift, to use Brinker's term (1990:44), toward the seemingly insignificant detail of the teacher's injury. When the old teacher went to bury the baby he hurt one of the toes of his left foot. Despite the wound he goes on to finish the burial, with the Turkish soldier's help. Afterward he goes into the grocery shop to buy some wine and cheese for the soldier, but then his swollen foot begins to hurt so badly that he barely manages to get home. There he discovers that all the food he had was some dry bread (since he gave everything else to the refugees). This makes him feel sad, but then this sadness turns out to be relatively unimportant when compared to the "great relief" he

feels: "Ten-minutes' walk away, the ruthless night spread over the third batch of refugees. They had arrived unexpectedly that afternoon...sixty-nine of them. But they were no longer *his* concern, he would not go to them, he was unable to go. He felt relieved" (1975:157; italics in the original).

The story focuses on the old teacher's injury through its title, *The Way Out*. When an additional 150 refugees arrived it was said that "There was no way out" (1975:154), so that this expression apparently concerned the refugees' situation. But in fact the *way out* does not involve a solution to their problem. Rather, it undergoes a shift from the refugees to the teacher, which gives the story a new meaning, according to Even (1970:139). The *way out* becomes the old teacher's own personal escape, for at the end he "felt strangely relieved, completely absolved of all his obligations towards others. Relief had come" (Brenner 1975:157). The *way out* thus turns out to be the old teacher's injury, an external occurrence which liberates him from his moral duty.

As mentioned above, the story relates an encounter between two groups of people. The old teacher stands in the middle, a member of the colony who also sympathizes with the refugees. However, although he apparently acts in accordance with the principles of the *Good Samaritan*, the story's title *The Way Out* expresses a contradiction in his character; between the desire to help and the desire to evade doing his duty, between the wish to help and the realization that any help he can give will not really make a difference. The expression *way out* in reference to the teacher can be understood as ironic or as absurd, and thus creates two possible interpretations for the text as a whole.

One possible interpretation presents the relief the teacher feels following his injury as a moral defect. According to this view, he did what he could, but the moment an obstacle appeared, he made no effort to overcome it, nor did he feel sorry for the refugees: he blotted them out of his mind too quickly.

A second interpretation presents the teacher's injury and relief as an expression of the absurd. According to this interpretation the

teacher's actions are impeccable, but like a drop in the ocean: all the refugees must rely on the help of a single person, and it is this person and no other who is injured and thus cannot help. The helplessness and the callousness of all the others lead to a feeling of the absurd. Below I develop further each of these two possible interpretations.

The ironic interpretation

According to this interpretation, the teacher's moral standards are defective. He is quick to shirk his duties. He acts as long as it is convenient for him, but refuses to make any special effort. In view of the story's ending and its ironic ties to the title, it is interesting to note that the old teacher prefers to evade doing his duty in other cases as well. First of all, he feels relief that the refugees have not yet arrived. He realizes their plight, but would prefer it if they never came at all. Second, instead of going to the council hall and crying out, the old teacher felt

...that the enthusiasm which had prompted him to run from the "station" near the farm into the colony, was now beginning to wane, sobered by the closed door of the office. Not so long ago he has seen himself pounding the council table with his puny fist, shouting at them, even plunging his nails into the council chairman's, fulminating: "Murderers! Why don't you do something!" (Brenner 1975:150).¹¹

He stammers in front of the council office and hesitates to put forth his arguments. When he learns of the plan to send the refugees to the north he feels relief: "Good, so they'll get the wagons today?" The teacher was pleased" (1975:150).

The old teacher's behavior is ambivalent: on the one hand he acts in a very positive way. Although he is a local inhabitant loyal to the colony and its regulations (such as those concerning matters of health), he is also prepared to criticize and protest: "in that case you'd better be careful of me...I've been there, and I haven't been disinfected. I'm carrying all the germs!" (1975:152). The old teacher is presented as antithetical to the council chairman: he is an old man without authority; he has been a teacher of labourers (recall the ill-

will between the Jewish farmer-landowners and the Jewish labourers because the former preferred employing Arabs; the teacher's ties with the labourers would thus appear to have made him sensitive to the suffering of others); he is sensitive and humane, and does not act out of self interest.

But there is another side to him as well. True, he stands up to those around him, but he lacks moral fibre. Even (1970:1) has claimed that Brenner's heroes are sensitive to the world around them, which is "an ugly, estranged, sometimes hostile place, infuriating and in need of reform;" but Brenner's hero is incapable of influencing this world and fixing it. The old teacher does not fulfil his moral duty completely, for in the end, his health causes him, like others, to refrain from continuing to help the refugees.¹² In fact Yehoshua (2000:62, 64) argues that the teacher's injury was unconsciously planned:

There is no relief, after all, or absolution for the poor refugees who are filling the settlement...thus, it is easy enough to understand the teacher's feeling of relief and respite after his foot injury, which, like all injuries of this kind, is not merely accidental. He hurts himself in order to get rid of the heavy responsibility that forces him to feel guilty.

In defence of the teacher's behaviour one could argue that his injury was not planned, and happens to be serious and thus made it impossible for him to walk. There are two ways to rebut such a claim. First of all, the story relates how after he is hurt the teacher still goes over to give the Turkish soldier his recompense and enters the shop with him, in order to drink wine and buy cheese. Secondly, he feels no sorrow when he realizes he will not be able to come to the refugees' help the next day. His relief takes the form of completely renouncing any feeling of duty.¹³ He goes back to his own private life, as if he did not realize, or did not care, about the many refugees at the colony's outskirts.

The way the old teacher's behaviour should be judged depends on the perspective from which it is observed: it can be judged as deserving praise if compared with the behaviour of others around him; but it can also be condemned when compared to a moral ideal.

In defence of the teacher, we could stress the fact that he, unlike others, does his duty. We may praise him for having acted in a way than others. But when we examine his actions in light of a pure moral duty, such praise becomes problematic. The relative position, that anyone whose actions are better than those of others praiseworthy, can make people who do not act out of pure duty, seem like virtual saints. Thus we may praise the narrator of story *Hirbet Hiz'a* because he feels discomfited when companions massacre Arabs, but do not criticize him for refraining from doing anything to stop it.

In fact the old teacher does not deserve our praise. The story itself appears to take a stand on this issue: the focus on the teacher's injury, as well as its title, which ironically connects to injury (and not to a resolution of the refugees' problem) emphasizes the nature of the teacher's actions—his moral weakness and the incompleteness of his actions.

The absurdist interpretation

The ending of the story can also be understood as sharp criticism, with a stress on the absurd aspects of the situation. In view, the old teacher is a positive figure whose actions stand in contrast to the unacceptable behaviour of the others. He has to wait all by himself, receiving help from the Turkish soldier, whose behavior emphasizes the humanity of the other and the cruelty of people of the colony. Despite his advanced age and his disability he does his best to help the refugees: he greets them on their arrival, arranges for food to be brought to them, and also buries the injured girl. He is not afraid to stand up to the council chairman, accusing members of criminal behaviour; nor does he fear for his health; he thinks about himself at all when treating the refugees (to whom he ends up giving most of his own food). In fact, he is presented as the saviour (Zimmerman-Be'eri 1978). However, there is an unbridgeable gap between the individual's ability to help and the constraints of the numerous refugees. The old teacher tries to cope with an unbearably difficult moral duty—the task he takes upon himself is very noble but impossible to perform, for no single individual

save so many people without the cooperation of others. Thus he is able to bury the infant, but was not able to save her life.

The story's ending and its title both emphasize the teacher's helplessness. He cannot walk and so finds it impossible to continue helping the refugees. His injury is not a way to evade his duty; it is a real handicap: the old man "could not walk" and his injury was a "serious wound" (Brenner 1975:157). In fact, he has to be helped by one of his laborer-students who brings him home on a donkey. He has difficulty eating, since "the pain in his toe was great." His injury has made him so helpless that the relief he feels seems very natural and human (since he is a moral *human being* and not an abstract moral example). He acted bravely but in the end he is defeated. The teacher's injury emphasizes the gap between what the refugees need and what he can give them. Moreover, the absurd arises not only from the old teacher's weakness, but also from the revelation that the only ones that help the refugees, the old teacher and the Turkish soldier, are themselves placed in the margins of society. While the weak and the foreigner hear the misery, the locals, the strong and the able, do not listen.

A Brilliant Combination of Specific Closures with Specific Openings¹⁴

I have proposed two interpretations for the text—an ironic interpretation that accuses the teacher, and an absurdist interpretation that shows the impossible situation of one weak helper faced with the refugees' enormous needs. The possibility to interpret a story in two different ways, with different moral judgments, creates interpretative flexibility, which plays a major role in giving the text relevant meaning.

This interpretative flexibility enhances the reader's ability to find emotional parallels to what it describes in her own world. It enables the reader to identify with the texts on the basis of her moral views or at least with the normative environment she is familiar with.

The two kinds of interpretation, ironical and absurdist, provide different ways for coping with (or running away from) the moral issue

in question. In the ironic interpretation the story's moral criticism is well focused, pinpointing the guilty party and therefore referring to a system of normative expectations. It has an instructive dimension. This type of interpretation is a bit rigid and unyielding, but is based on a strong normative system. This interpretation provides a solution to the moral problem and expresses a belief in a clear value system, which can be improved and assimilated. What the absurdist interpretation offers is of a more passive nature. Beyond protest and deep sorrow, later replaced by pathetic feelings, it provides no clear recipe for a solution. It describes injustice, helplessness, and despair that lead to resignation.

Readers will find themselves somewhere on the continuum between a clear system of values and moral protest for the purpose of making improvements, on the one hand, and a confusion of norms, despair and helplessness on the other. There will be those who prefer the ironic interpretation, which is demanding but also positive, particularly if they live in a time when society is sure of its own values. In other times, readers will tend to identify with the story's gloomier aspects, with the absurdist interpretation, and the inability to do the right thing. In times like that, despair, loss of direction, moral insecurity and confusion will be rife. In Hess' words, describing the reactions of her students:

The anguished voices that came out of *The Way Out* were heard by my students this year, because they were suffering from the same spirit of black, painful despair with no way out (Hess 2002).

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined a single story by Brenner in depth. I asked what made *The Way Out* morally and emotionally relevant to today's readers. The story's generalization structure and its interpretative flexibility provided an answer to this puzzle. The text's generalization dimension enables readers to transfer events in the story to their own world and thus to empathize emotionally with what it describes. The story's interpretative flexibility enables readers to create interpretations of their own which are consistent with their

values and their social and moral environment. In this way this 80 text has remained morally and emotionally relevant to this day.

Endnotes

- ¹ Junior Scholars Colloquium on Interpretation: Modern Hebrew Literature, Brandeis University, October 2002.
- ² I am grateful to Robert Alter and Tamar Hess for their useful comments on earlier drafts.
- ³ English quotations from the story are from Schechter's translation (1975).
- ⁴ The refusal to help the refugees is justified by an official order: the chairman of the village council wants to drive out the refugees and forbid anyone to approach them. The main reason given for this is medical: "We mustn't have anything to do with them ...[because of] doctor's orders" (Brenner 152). Since the refugees have diseases, any contact with them could endanger the colony. Before the refugees are disinfected they cannot be helped, since, as the village council chairman explains, health "is not a game."
- ⁵ The term *fatal act* usually refers to tragedy where it expresses the *tragic error*, an act that is beyond remedy (Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 14, 53b35). It derives from the Greek word *anekeston* (anhcestrwn) that literally translates as "incurable." The Greek word is built from *a-*, meaning "unable" and the verb *akeo*, meaning "to be healed." The Aristotelian *fatal act* is a turning point in the composition that draws the readers or spectators attention to the work's ethical content.
- ⁶ I chose to call the death of the baby a *fatal act* for two reasons: first, in order to emphasize the fact that the death of the baby was not something which had to happen or which would have happened in any case. The baby died because of the moral bankruptcy of the locals—this is the terrible deed that was done to the baby. Second, the deed here, just as in a tragedy, serves as an aesthetic and ethical turning point.
- ⁷ In other countries it is often called "the good Samaritan law."
- ⁸ See, for example, Stattman (1999).
- ⁹ The following description is a paraphrase of his account.
- ¹⁰ This use of the term "knowledge" to describe what is gained from reading literature is not new. Ryle, in his book *The Concept of Mind* (1949; reprint 1973), makes a distinction between "knowledge how"

and "knowledge what." "Knowing how" refers to actions: knowing how to tie a tie, or play an instrument, or how to behave on certain occasions. "Knowing what" refers to facts: to know where a Roman camp was located in a certain period, or how to say "knife" in German. "Knowing how" reflects competences or skills, and develops through training, stimuli, self-criticism and a constant striving to-improve oneself through action (Ryle 1973:41-42). Competence is acquired mainly on the basis of experience. Literature provides a kind of indirect experience, whereby the reader can observe others and improve his or her competence. See also: Nussbaum (1990:44); McCormick (1983); Swanger (1992) (In the latter article, Swanger introduced the term *knowledge from within*).

¹⁰ The theory developed by Velleman is heavily influenced by Brooks (1984).

¹¹ Sadan (1996:98) interprets the old teacher's behaviour as an expression of self-disparagement in the face of authority, which he believes to reflect the ambivalent attitude of Brenner toward the father figure: on the one hand he hates his authority but on the other he fears it.

¹² Even claims (Sadan 1996:6) that in Brenner's works disease, in addition to being an external occurrence, also answers an internal need of the characters to find a refuge from their distress. Brenner's characters are often physically weak and sickly. Zach (1962) claims that disease expresses whatever is faulty in human existence: "Illness is at one and the same time an expression of what is ugly in existence and a refuge from it."

¹³ Brenner creates a similar literary move in the story "Injustice" (*Works II*:1723-1729), which was written in the same period, based on the same historical events. This story deals with the moral dilemma involved in hiding a British officer. In the story the members of the group are unsure whether or not to give him refuge, and in the end decide to hand him in. In this story, too, the title is connected to the story's ending, which involves a shift. It turns out that the "injustice" is not what was done to the British officer, but what the latter did to the members of the group, whom he accused of having stolen his gold watch. For the group this injustice provided after-the-fact justification for their decision, which was also a kind of way out.

¹⁴ The title is a quotation from Booth (1988:63). Works of literature in which moral judgment is rapid and definitive may be dogmatic. A text should be open to a certain extent and contain questions without definitive answers. However, absolute openness is not possible.

(Eventually, every moral problem demands a solution). Booth suggests that we speak of a "brilliant combination of specific closures with specific openings."

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