

Dahlia Ravikovitch's "The Fruit of the Land"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/dahlia-ravikovitchs-fruit-land>.

Introduction

Considered to be one of the great modern Hebrew poets of the twentieth century, Dahlia Ravikovitch was born in Ramat Gan in 1936 and published her first collection of poetry, *The Love of An Orange*, in 1959. Long regarded as a feminist writer, she became an outspoken political activist beginning in the early 1980s, in the lead-up to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Both in her poems and in other forums, she spoke out against war in general and about the Israel-Palestine conflict in particular, and she was a dedicated supporter of the peace movement and Palestinian rights. In 1987, she was awarded the prestigious Bialik Prize, and in 1998 she was awarded the Israel Prize, generally considered the state's highest cultural honor.

This kit provides materials that will help teachers teach a wonderfully provocative Ravikovitch poem, "The Fruit of the Land," focusing in particular on the biblical allusions in the poem as well as on the questions it raises about the ethics of war.

Cover image: Photo of memorial plaque in Tel Aviv taken by Dr. Avishai Teicher.

Subjects

Hebrew, Israel-Palestine, Poetry, Social Commentary, Tanakh, Women Writers

Reading and Background:

- You can find "The Fruit of the Land," as well as many other of Ravikovitch's poems, in *Hovering at a Low Altitude: The Collected Poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch* (W.W. Norton, 2011).
- This [short biography](#) from the encyclopedia of the Jewish Women's Archive provides a good introduction to Ravikovitch's life and work.
- Hebrew-speakers may find [this interview](#) helpful (especially starting after three minutes.) In it, Ravikovitch discusses issues of gender, motherhood, and writing.
- For a deeper introduction to and excellent analysis of Ravikovitch's poetry by two translators of her work, see "[Dahlia Ravikovitch: An Introduction](#)," by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld in *Prooftexts* (this article is available for purchase).

Resources

1: Poem, Dahlia Ravikovitch's, "The Fruit of the Land," circa 2005.

Dahlia Ravikovitch died in 2005, and this was one of the last poems she wrote. It was published posthumously. By taking on the voice of the Israeli military, and weaving in biblical and national references, Ravikovitch points to what she sees as the irony and the futility of her country's military culture.

Suggested Activity: Read the poem aloud with students, and have them read it again silently, underlining phrases or lines that pop out at them. Ask them to share what they underlined, and think about why those pieces stood out? Then discuss: Who is speaking in this poem? Who is the "You" and the "They" and the "We"?

Ask students to make a list of all of the weapons or military objects mentioned in the poem. Have them add to the list any words that reference fighting, violence, or war. How much of the poem is taken up with such words? How does it feel to read all those words together? What is the poem's stance toward all this militarization?



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Finally, ask students to consider the poem's epigraph: "a farewell song to the good old days". In what ways is this a "farewell"? And when were "the good old days"?

Sources: "The Fruit of the Land", from **HOVERING AT A LOW ALTITUDE: THE COLLECTED POETRY OF DAHLIA RAVIKOVITCH** by Dahlia Ravikovitch, translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld. Copyright © 2009 by Chana Bloch, Chana Kronfeld, and Ido Kalir. English translation copyright (c) 2009 by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. This selection may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Dahlia Ravikovitch, "Mizimrat ha'aretz," in *Kol ha-shirim*, Dahlia Ravikovitch (Bney Brak, Israel: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010). Used by permission of Ido Kalir.

2: Excerpt from Genesis.

In this passage from Tanakh, Jacob is urging his sons to return to Egypt to procure more food and relieve the family from famine. The sons were told not to return without Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin, who Jacob is loathe to part with. The sons pledge to return Benjamin safely, and Jacob agrees to let him go. He tells his sons to take "from the choice products of the land" to bring gifts to the Egyptian ruler who controls their fate.

The Hebrew for "choice products of the land" here is תְּבִיאֹת אֶרֶץ הַיְדֵן, the same phrase Ravikovitch uses as the title of her poem.

Suggested Activity: Ask students: Why do you think Ravikovitch used this allusion as the title of her poem? What were the "choice products" (or fruit) of the land mentioned in the biblical passage? What, from the perspective of Ravikovitch, are the fruit of modern Israel? How do these products compare? Who is being given these products in the biblical passage and who in the poem? How do you imagine the products are received? Why do you think the translators of the poem chose to translate the title as "Fruit of the Land," instead of "Choice Products of the Land"? Does the translation change the meaning?

Source: Gen 43:11, found on www.sefaria.org.

3: Excerpt from the Song of Songs.

The imagery of the apple tree and its fruit is prevalent in the Song of Songs. The male lover is like an apple tree, and the woman delights to sit in the shade of the tree. Its fruit both arouses love and cures love-sickness.

In "The Fruit of the Land," Ravikovitch uses a variant of the same Hebrew phrase found in this verse "רַפְדֵנוּ בְּתַפּוּחַ יָמִים", meaning "refresh or comfort with apples." In the poem, however, God is in the role of the male lover comforting Israel (as represented by its army) with apples.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to consider the relationship between the lovers in the Song of Songs and the relationship between God and Israel in Ravikovitch's poem. How are they similar and how are they different? What meaning does that comparison evoke? What is the tone of the Song of Songs passage, and what is the tone of this part of the poem?

Source: Song of Songs 2:5, found at www.sefaria.org.

4: Excerpts from Exodus and Deuteronomy.

According to the Bible, the people of Israel were commanded to annihilate the tribe of Amalek, which attacked the Israelites during their Exodus from Egypt. Under the leadership of Saul, the people of Israel tried to wipe out the Amalekites.

The command to exterminate the tribe of Amalek is one of the most troubling ethical issues in the Bible, because it appears to give justification for indiscriminate killing of a tribe. Jewish scholars have interpreted the story in opposite ways. Martin Buber, for example, believed that Samuel must have misunderstood God, because Buber could not worship a God that demands total annihilation of a people, while Joseph Soloveitchik believed that Amalek was the epitome of evil, and that evil must be utterly destroyed.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the Biblical excerpts and discuss the possible interpretations of the commandment to annihilate the Amalekites. Then have them consider the reference to Amalek in "The Fruit of the Land." Ask students how they see

Ravikovitch's use of the reference. Is it serious, humorous, or both? What does she make of the Biblical command? Who is Amalek in the context of her poem set in contemporary Israel? How does the line following the reference—"if you can track him down,"—change the reference itself?

For an extended activity, ask students to identify additional Biblical references in "The Fruit of the Land"—references that are not mentioned in this resource kit. Have them track down the Biblical text and write a footnote for the poem, explaining what the reference is, and how it is being used by Ravikovitch.

Sources: Exodus 17:8-16 and Deuteronomy 25:19, found at www.sefaria.org.

5: Text excerpt, Michael Walzer's, "Just and Unjust Wars," 1977.

Michael Walzer's 1977 book *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* is a foundational text on the ethics of war. In this passage, Walzer introduces the distinction between *jus ad bellum* (the justice of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in war), two independent ways of considering whether military engagement in a particular instance is ethical.

(Note: It's possible that some review of Israel's military history, and its anti-war movement, might be useful for students before using this resource.)

Suggested Activity: Have students read the Walzer excerpt and ask them to summarize his main points. Then ask: Do you think "The Fruit of the Land" is a poem advocating for *jus ad bellum* or *jus in bello*? That is, is the poem concerned about the injustice of war itself, or about the injustice of the way the wars are fought? Or both? Ask students to show evidence from their answer by pointing to specific lines and phrases in the poem.

Source: Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (Basic Books: Philadelphia, 1977), 21.

6: Video clip, "President Harry S. Truman reads prepared speech after dropping of atomic bomb...", 1945.

In this video excerpt from 1945, President Harry S. Truman addresses the people of the United States and of the world, letting them know that an atomic bomb has just been dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.

Suggested Activity: Have students listen to the speech and share initial reactions. How is Truman's speech different from the way world leaders talk about war today? How is it similar? Do people today feel differently about nuclear weapons than they did when Truman's speech first aired?

Then read "The Fruit of the Land" together, focusing on the first ten lines. Note that these lines are made up of a list of weapons supposedly in the possession of the poet's country, Israel. The list, and the descriptors used, give a sense of abundance, plenty, and indulgence. She calls the stockpile a "feast" and "cornucopias," words usually used to describe an abundance of delicious food. At the end of the excerpt, Ravikovitch adds one last item onto the table: "that secret weapon, / the one we can't talk about." She seems to be referring here to Israel's nuclear capability.

Ask students to think about why Ravikovitch, writing this poem in the early 2000s, referred to nuclear weapons as a secret, as something that couldn't be talked about. Why might there be a sense of secrecy or silence around Israel's nuclear capability? What other connections can students make between Ravikovitch's poem and Truman's speech?

Sources: Critical Past, "President Harry S. Truman reads prepared speech after dropping of atomic bomb on Hiroshima Japan during World War 2" California, August 6, 1945. Posted April 8, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3Ib4wTq0jY>

7: Poem, Hannah Senesh's "Blessed Is the Match," 1944, and video, the Nigunim Chorus of Berkeley singing "Ashrei Hagafur," 2012.

Born in Hungary, Hannah Senesh immigrated to Palestine after finishing her schooling, and joined the Haganah, which was the precursor to the Israeli army. In March 1944, she and others were parachuted into Yugoslavia to assist with the rescue of Hungarian Jews who were being deported to concentration camps. Soon after landing, Senesh was captured and tortured by the Nazis, and eventually she was executed by firing squad at the age of twenty-three. Senesh was a poet and writer, and "Blessed Is

the Match"—written in Yugoslavia—is one of the last things she wrote.

Senesh is considered a national hero in Israel. "Blessed Is the Match" has been learned by generations of Israeli children, and performed as a **song** by many singers and choirs. Dahlia Ravikovitch ends her poem "The Fruit of the Land" with a reference to Senesh's poem.

Suggested Activity: Have the class recite the Senesh poem together and then read it silently. Then discuss: What does the match symbolize? Why is it to be "blessed"? Why do you think Senesh's poem has become a classic in Israel, a beloved verse that almost everyone knows? Why is Senesh seen as a hero?

Now focus on the last lines of Ravikovitch's poem. What effect does the match have in this poem? How is it different than the match in Senesh's poem? Is it something to be "blessed"? Why might Ravikovitch have wanted to connect her poem to Senesh's? Can you imagine Ravikovitch's poem as a national classic, memorized by school children? Why or why not?

Show students the video of the Nigunim Chorus of Berkeley performing "*Ashrei Hagafur*." Ask students their thoughts about this musical interpretation of Senesh's poem. What does the music and performance add to the words? Why might a chorus in Berkeley, California, in 2012 be interested in performing this piece? What meaning might it have for audiences today? What would Ravikovitch think of this performance?

Sources: David Patterson, *Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust Diary* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 158.

"*Ashrei Hagafur* אשרי הגפרור Blessed is the Match," arranged and directed by Achi Ben Shalom, sung by Nigunim Community Folk Chorus at the "Yes, We Sang!" Holocaust Memorial Choral Concert, Berkeley, California. April 22, 2012. YouTube video, 1:30. Published on May 9, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XszmMF4cSc>.