

his poetry were brought to light by a small publishing house in Tel Aviv. He translated his poetry into English himself.

Ben-Zion would have been one hundred years old in the year I came to know of him, 1997. He was born Ben-Tzion Weinman in Ukraine, the son of a chazzan who taught him Hebrew. His father was a third generation chazzan and a composer of liturgical music, and his mother was a storyteller.

Though he grew up in the Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewish world, he cultivated the literary language Hebrew, creating a poetry in Hebrew as did Bialik and others in the cultural elite, who were creating a house without a home, a language without a place. Ben-Zion was passionate for Hebrew as a young boy, playing with words as he played with pebbles that he collected his entire life.

The boy Ben-Zion was a collector. He taught himself to draw and he was given to gathering things, the kinds of things that he collected his entire life. He gathered pebbles, old iron tools and implements, driftwood; he dragged home the natural shapes and materials that fascinated him.

At the age of 16, he took a room at the outskirts of his town, supporting himself by giving Hebrew lessons. Here he would read, draw, and walk endlessly, as he did all his life, searching the places where he walked for the natural treasures that he found everywhere around him. He walked with his head down.

When asked who his teachers were, whether it was possible at all to learn art from a teacher, he said, "yes, go into the woods. Pick up a stone. Look at it. Turn it over. Look at it."⁴

Ben-Zion's father died in 1920, and soon thereafter Ben-Zion and his mother came to the United States. Ben-Zion came to America with a knapsack filled with Hebrew plays and poems and his father's musical manuscripts and little else. They settled in New York City and that's where Ben-Zion stayed. He dropped his last name and became known only as Ben-Zion (one name is enough for an artist, he said).

In the Thirties, Ben-Zion became a member of a circle of artists that called themselves "The Ten," though there were only nine of them. The tenth was expected but never appeared. "The Ten" included Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, Ilya Bolotowsky, Louis Schanker, John Graham, Earl Kerkam, and Joseph Solman. They exhibited together until 1942.⁵ What connected the Ten was a "rejection of the academic and regional painting in vogue at the time. Our paintings were marked by a drive toward individual expression."⁶ Alone among the ten, (nine actually), Ben-Zion stayed with traditional religious ideas and images.

His work reflects all his interests, obsessions, and inspirations: the arts of antiquity, the images and characters of the Hebrew Bible, and language. He never stopped composing poetry in Hebrew, and though he published only a small amount of poetry, the Hebrew letters and vowels preoccupy Ben-Zion's

work, as if frozen in a dream, the form, the shapes of Hebrew letters, words, points even, transformed into isolated icons of language and art through painting, sculpture, and a variety of other media.

His paintings reflect his vision of the dream-myth of the Jewish people, our heroes depicted with large, accepting hands, King David cuddling his harp, big feet on all of them, hands hiding the face of a woman making the shabbes licht, and his poetry.

The rope-maker image came from the poetry of Ben-Zion himself. It is his own description of his process.

The Rope Maker (trans. Ben-Zion)

My bag is filled with flax
 Walking backwards
 I feed you, my rope.
 And you keep growing
 longer and longer.
 Sometimes,
 while walking backwards,
 I feel as if I pull you
 Around the earth,
 step by step,
 Till ---
 We find ourselves
 At the point we started.⁷

In a poem he wrote in 1928:

Like a rope maker backward I move
 to the days of my beginning and twist
 the threads of my past
 till I reach
 the source whence I derived from
 -- to eternity.⁸

There is "a deep respect for pure and rooted gestures, ancient gestures repeated through time, and even richer still because of the unique perspective created by the walking backwards."⁹

When he died, Ben-Zion left instructions to be buried in Israel, in a cemetery not far from the sea in Haifa.

My friend Todd, Ben-Zion's photographer-chronicler, came to Israel to find Ben-Zion's grave, on a mission from his wife Lillian, to place some of Ben-

Zion's pebbles on his grave site, take pictures, pay respects, and to draw me into the circle. I was living in Jerusalem at the time.

Todd and I took to the road in my car and drove to Haifa. Todd had an address that turned out to be the burial society in Haifa and not the cemetery. We found the office in the central city in Haifa, a small bureaucratic nightmare of an office, at just about the time when all of Jewish Israel releases its great exhalation before Shabbat.

The men with black hats and tzitzit in the office weren't interested in our request to look up a grave site until I mentioned, in Hebrew, that my friend Todd was a devoted student of a great master who is buried in Haifa. His student has come to honor his teacher, I told the burial society men, by visiting his grave and leaving stones and saying prayers. The men in the office dropped what they were doing, booted up the computers, found Ben-Zion on the list, and offered to take us to the cemetery (we settled for a hand-drawn map). We didn't know it but we had passed by the cemetery on our way into Haifa.

Todd and I found the cemetery on a hill not far from the Sea just south of town. We found first a large military cemetery, a great sprawl of a cemetery just off the road as you approach Haifa, by the Sea, from the south. This was the place to which we had been directed. There were some soldiers walking in the cemetery; it looked as if there had been a large military funeral that day. But everyone was hurrying home, it was even later into the great exhalation than our visit to the burial society office. Here there seemed to be no one at work.

I saw a man who looked like a caretaker, it was Friday afternoon and he was clearly rushing to leave, but I guessed that he worked there. I asked him to help us find the grave. He was preoccupied, he didn't understand at first my rather formal Hebrew so I simplified the language. He, too, was going home. He couldn't help us. Then I told him the same thing I told the men in the burial society office, I introduced Todd as a student of the great artist Ben-Tzion Weinman who is buried somewhere in this cemetery. He has come to give honor to his teacher, I said. The caretaker asked me if I had a car, he told me to retrieve it and meet him at the entrance of the cemetery.

I got the car and drove to the entrance and there he was waiting for us, he jumped into the back seat, took us up the hill to another cemetery, and guided us through the grave sites to Ben-Zion's grave.

It was the holiness of the teacher student relation that opened up all doors that day. We found Ben-Zion's grave just as the sun began to make its way home in the West anticipating Shabbat. I asked the caretaker to help us. The sun was hot that day, he was wearing one of those faded kibbutz hats that resemble a sailor's hat with the flaps down. "For a hundred shekels, I'll take care of its repair," he used the word "tikkun." We gave him some cash not for repair but for Shabbat.

On his grave is written Ben-Zion's name, including his last name Weinman. On his grave stone is a quotation from one of his poems in Hebrew,

and the dates of his birth and his death in the traditional Jewish manner in Hebrew letters, corresponding to 1897 and 1987, the dates acronyms of each other.

Todd and I stood at the grave and cleaned it off, Todd placed some rocks on the head stone, he took pictures for Lillian, Ben-Zion's wife. On Ben-Zion's grave are the following words, in Hebrew only, from one of his poems:

Alah shiri vo kha-sha-char
Hei-ir bi et olami

My song rose up in me like the morning star (trans. Ben-Zion)¹⁰
Awoke in me my world

On Ben-Zion's grave we left the rocks, Todd took pictures, we stood in the hot sun and read the poem written on the stone. The caretaker with the kibbutz hat asked us, "are you family?" "No," I reminded him, I said in Hebrew, "he is a famous artist from America and we are his students." "Ah, good, good," he said, under the hot Levantine sun where gravediggers approved of the notion that students were forever connected to their teachers, that all teachers and students were bound up together like souls over the great divide.

I wanted to find Ben-Zion's grave for Todd, but by this time I felt as if Ben-Zion, his work, his life, had found me. We were connected somehow, if only by the invisible fibers of relations that grew the day Todd planted the picture of the rope maker, multiplied the day Todd and I spent looking at his grave, the meticulous detail of his grave site, the words on his headstone, the rocks that Todd brought with him to lay on the grave, the image of the rope maker that Todd had given me, the stone one of Ben-Zion's rock paintings, that I carry in my pocket.

All the details of his life, of his art, as they were revealing themselves to me, were familiar.

Some time later I found a black and white picture of one of Ben-Zion's paintings in a book about prayer. I photo-copied it, pasted it all around my room. It was a picture of King David, with big floppy hands, hugging his instrument.¹¹ It was the only piece of Ben-Zion's work that I could find.

In 1998, on a visit to New York, I asked Todd if he would introduce me to Ben-Zion's widow. Lillian Ben-Zion lives in the four story brownstone in Chelsea where Ben-Zion lived and worked since they bought the house in 1965. They have no children. It is a Ben-Zion museum, four floors up and down, and a small garden in the back where Ben-Zion hauled smooth prehistoric rock from New England. He loved rocks.

Everywhere in the house is Ben-Zion's work, collections, books.

His books. The same books I own. Traditional Jewish texts, the Jewish Encyclopedia from 1916, the Hebrew poet Bialik, the short story writers and playwrights, Peretz, An-sky, and texts on antiquities. The archaeology of

Palestine, Israel, the ancient Middle East, Central America, South America, books on primitive art, pre-Columbian, Mesopotamian art, and the art itself.

Cases of antiquities, oil lamps, pot shards, sculpted pieces, pre-Columbian figurines, Mesopotamian goddesses, antiquities from all over the world.

Rocks. Crystals, beautiful shapes and sizes and textures, all kinds of rocks, some painted, Ben-Zion like to draw on the rocks he found.

Iron. He worked in iron and he loved old iron tools from early America and Europe.

I felt like I knew Ben-Zion through his obsessions, and the primary obsession was language. He painted letters of the Hebrew alphabet, isolating a letter on a canvas, the shape of a shin bursting into flame without fire, the intimation of fire in shape, or a stately ayin, a plaque of vowels, diacritical points, arranged in formation on a burlap background. Words in iron, in paint, in books, in isolation, in relation to one another, words lifted off of paper setting into stunning solitude, floating letters, dancing letters, grieving letters. His was an obsession with language, in all its forms.

In whatever media he worked, Ben-Zion stayed rooted in language. In drawings and poems, in Hebrew and English, cards and sketches, drawn with pens and pencils and words, words. The sound of words and the shape of words. Language not only of meaning but of pure form. He placed a single shin on the wall, a board of vowels, dots, the ah ee eh sounds arranged on a burlap backing, observing the articulate vowel sounds, inarticulate as visual art, not spoken, shaped.

Lillian showed me around the house, to the studio where Ben-Zion painted, to the basement where Ben-Zion sculpted, everywhere there were cases full of artifacts, bookshelves full of books, walls of his work. I saw the original of the wonderful David clutching his harp on the wall along the way up the stairwell.

In one of Ben-Zion's books of poetry, published by a small press in Israel, I read this poem:

A friend said to me: You shall wilt and wither
 Don't you see that you are lost?
 Look, the earth is conquered by the valiant,
 The honeycombs have fallen into the hands of the diligent,
 And the units of fighters
 Continue to conquer, to conquer one another.
 And you have been left outside the camp.
 Outside the camp I remained.
 As a leper you considered me,
 And I remained outside the camp
 To be cleansed of your leprosy.
 And I feel good, good

In the colony of lepers,
 And beautiful, so beautiful is the land of exile.
 And her way leads to the gates of eternity.¹²

Lillian took us into the garden where Ben-Zion had arranged the rocks he had hauled from Maine. Downstairs were his sculpture studio, iron works, sculptures in iron in the basement. There are large smooth rocks on the exposed basement floor which Lillian had excavated, what looks like the remains of an ancient river that once flowed under what is now Manhattan island.

She took us to the second floor, where he painted. "This is Ben-Zion's painting studio," she said, always referring to him as "Ben-Zion," always in the present tense.

We sat at the old wooden table in the kitchen, utilitarian wood, not a heavy decadent dark wood but a golden country wood. Lillian offered us "something wicked" to drink -- an ice cream soda made with juice. It was delicious, in retro bulgy translucent tangerine glasses.

"Where did you meet Ben-Zion?" I asked. "Ben-Zion was teaching at a settlement house. I was the storyteller. Telling stories to children. I wandered into his class one day. That was it."

Lillian looked at me with steel blue-gray eyes and said, "you know Jimmy -- what you are trying to do is difficult. So hard to go against the crowd. The crowd is so strong, so set in its way. It's very difficult." I have hardly spoken about myself at all, but what she says is right to the heart of what I am struggling with in my work.

Lillian pushed an index card toward me that is lying on the kitchen table. Someone with a powerful handwriting had printed the following words on the index card:

"As the studies of secularization in the modern era clearly reveal, individuals and groups still search for transcendental meaning in their lives despite the loss of religious belief. In this sense, the desire of the transitional generation to find new bases for personal and collective Jewish identity while retaining the aura of tradition can be seen as not only a response to contemporaneous historical conditions but as a prescient insight into the deeply felt psychological needs that all men and women living in the modern era manifest. . ."¹³

"You know Jimmy," she said as I was leaving, "someone should teach here. It's a good place for teaching, don't you think Jimmy?"

It's a wonderful place for teaching, for learning all the deepest lessons of my own life that I find somehow given shape in Ben-Zion's work. The deep respect for pure and rooted gestures, the interpenetration of subject and object, of observer and observed, Ben-Zion spent a lifetime looking into things, subject and object transforming each other. Like Ben-Zion the rope maker, walking backwards, working out from the Source.

Like a rope maker backward I move
 to the days of my beginning and twist
 the threads of my past
 till I reach
 the source whence I derived from
 -- to eternity.¹⁴

I realize I have become a student of Ben-Zion, ten years after his death. I understand now the image of the rope maker as an organizing metaphor for my own work, given language and form by Ben-Zion, through my friend Todd, from visiting Ben-Zion's home and work place, from seeing his work, from knowing his wife, from accepting instruction in the manner of all students, all teachers, now as then.

I belong to the circle of all future students of Ben-Zion. We are all the expected last member of the "The Ten," we are anticipated because the master never stops attracting students, and because the faithful never stop expecting the redeemer. The nine yearns for the tenth and the tenth longs to be drawn into the circle.

Notes

¹ Tabitha Shalem, *Ben-Zion: In Search of Oneself*, pamphlet created for Centennial Exhibit of Ben-Zion's work at the National Jewish Museum, Washington D.C., 1997, 2.

² *Ben-Zion: In Search of Oneself*, 36.

³ Conversation with Lillian Ben-Zion, March 2, 2000.

⁴ *Ben-Zion: In Search of Oneself*, 30.

⁵ "Ben-Zion," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1972 ed., 574 – 575.

⁶ Joseph Solman in *Ben-Zion: In Search of Oneself*, 3 – 4.

⁷ From Lillian Ben-Zion's private collection.

⁸ *Ben-Zion: In Search of Oneself*, 29.

⁹ *Ben-Zion: In Search of Oneself*, 30.

¹⁰ Private collection of Lillian Ben-Zion.

¹¹ Raphael Posner, Uri Kaploun, Shalom Cohen, eds., *Jewish Liturgy* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 7.

¹² Private collection of Lillian Ben-Zion.

¹³ David H. Weinberg, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Haim Zhitlowski, Simon Dubnow, Ahad Ha-Am, and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Identity*, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1996), 301.

¹⁴ *Ben-Zion: In Search of Oneself*, 29.

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