“Take off Your Other Shoe” – A Buberian Reading of Leah Goldberg’s
Nissim Ve’Niflaot

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Abstract

Sixty years ago, in Nissim and Niflaot, Leah Goldberg called for a social and personal renewal, one that would materialize only after humans learn to relate to others as a “thou” rather than an “it.” Nobody’s Aunt, the lonely and toothless female, is the one who inspired her fellow characters to realize that the world could become a better place once humans become attentive to their neighbors’ needs. She starts by creating change in her own neighborhood and city. Her story reflects the Israeli social environment and educates her readers to become more relevant in their respective communities.

Sixty years have passed since the first publication of Leah Goldberg’s novel Nissim Ve’Niflaot (Miracles and Wonders), an Israeli classic for children and young adults. The adventure story of Nissim and the monkey Niflaot still captivates children’s imagination and one wonders why. The answer lies in the novel’s linguistic and thematic elements. Goldberg remains truthful to her poetic style, does not lower literacy level with “baby-talk” but invents funny linguistic expressions. She carefully weaves a realistic plot, maintains the reader’s suspense, enhances the story with dramatic and emotional climaxes, and provides a specific urban social experience. Perhaps most importantly, Goldberg does not patronize her readers. She writes at their “eye level,” respects them and positions herself, as the narrator, among them and not as an external neutral observer.

Children and young adults are drawn to Nissim and Niflaot’s adventures as if by magic strings, yet literary critics do not share this experience. Some criticized Goldberg for promoting an elitist and missionary approach towards her Mizrahi characters. Others, who perceived children’s literature to be a tool to promote the Zionist narrative, found fault in Goldberg’s focus on the individual rather than the communal realm. Contemporary critics such as Gideon Tikotzky read the novel from a post-colonial point of view emphasizing patronal and oriental meanings. This article offers a new reading of the novel, arguing that in Nissim Ve’Niflaot Goldberg calls for a social and individual renaissance.

Bridging the Gaps
In his children's poem “Atzitz Prachim” (“A Flowerpot”), Haim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934) describes an existential dilemma of an indecisive individual. The flowerpot as a symbol to an individual who lives on the boundary between two worlds appears also in Goldberg’s Nissim Ve’Niflaot. However, whereas in Bialik’s poem, the flowerpot remains on the windowsill and the dilemma remains unsolved, in Goldberg’s novel the individual is called into action.

Nissim Ve’Niflaot begins as the narrator, Nobody's Aunt, waters her flowerpots. A sudden sneezing attack shakes the windowsill and Nobody’s Aunt favorite cactus - Queen of the Night - tumbles over, falls down into the yard, and shatters. Devastated, the narrator goes downstairs, looks behind the garbage bins, and collects the shattered pot. There, to her surprise, she finds Nissim, a poor and hungry ten-year-old child who is hiding from the leader of a local gang. Going down to where the garbage bins are stored, is the narrator’s symbolic descent from the rich and affluent world to the poor and dilapidated one, a descent that forces the narrator to see the "injustice among the thorns" and take action.

Nobody’s Aunt invites Nissim up to her apartment, offers him and his brother, Eliyahu, food and shelter and then climbs to the rooftop of her apartment building where she positions her "observation tower." Between the clotheslines and the radio antenna, she looks at her beloved city, Tel-Aviv, and observes the widening gap between its neighborhoods. In a monologue addressed to the monkey, Niflaot, she ponders: “why people's lives are so different in this city? (...) Here are Miriam, Uzi, and Yaakova'le who have everything, (...) while Nissim (...) runs in the streets selling shoelaces. His food is meager, his mother is sick and his little brother is left alone (...) do you think that is a good thing, Niflaot?” Only after she meets Nissim and Eliyahu does the narrator notice the social gap dividing Tel-Aviv. To remedy the situation, she invites the neighborhood’s children, Miriam, Uzi and Yaakova'le, to her apartment to meet her guests. Her objective is to educate the privileged children that though poor and hungry, Nissim and Eliyahu are good and honest kids and “the ‘well-fed’ are not the only good people in the world.”

The kids from both strata of society get acquainted and form a cross-cultural friendship, she embarks on another mission — bridging a generational gap. Nobody’s Aunt understands the children’s craving for entertainment, humor and adventure, and thus creates
a buffer between them and the adults who are indifferent to their needs. To the kids who wish to set up a circus in the neighborhood, Nobody’s Aunt says, "With this, I declare that my apartment will be made available to you for rehearsals and I am ready to offer you advice anytime you wish.” (Ibid, 52). Nobody’s Aunt enjoys the children who fill her home with laughter and activity. However, in contrast to the other adults in the story, she knows how to balance between offering comfort and setting boundaries: "you may use my apartment for rehearsals (...) but on one condition: you tidy up the room after every rehearsal." (Ibid, 16, 52) In her role as a liberal educator, the narrator sets an example to other adult characters in the novel, demonstrating what “compassionate parenting” means.

In her book, Sofrot Kotvot Le’Yeladim (Women Authors Write for Children) Dina Keren-Yaar argues that for Nissim and Eliyahu the narrator’s apartment is a transition point on their way from destitution to sophistication and enlightenment, offered by an affluent professor. (Keren-Yaar, 2007, 107-8) The professor, Dr. KlumBa’Rosh, encourages Nissim to replace his harmonica with a piano and offers his mother a position, not as a “cleaner” but rather as his “housekeeper.” At the same time and with the narrator’s help, Yechiyeh, the neighborhood bully, leaves his mischief behind, moves into a youth village and studies mechanics. Nissim, Eliyahu and Yechiyeh are not the only kids who get access to the “enlightened world;” Yaakova'le replaces boredom with creativity, and Miriam, the brash young woman, learns what respect is, following a quiet but determined sermon by the professor.

**Looking for the Roots of Human Needs**

Examining the narrator’s attempts to bridge social, generational, and cultural gaps in Tel-Aviv’s neighborhoods is not sufficient in order to understand the essence of the story. *Nissim Ve’Niflaot* is not merely a story that seeks to raise the readers’ awareness, and allowing a glimpse into people's hardships, but a story that seeks to comprehend the roots of human needs. *Nissim Ve’Niflaot* does not call for the establishment of an "alternative society" (Ibid, 108), but rather advocates for a more advanced society where people engaged in the mutual act of reacting to each other’s adversity: “A writer knows how to (...) show you those sides in life that you might not notice without his help,” writes Leah Goldberg, “to teach you to better observe and understand all that is happening around you.” (Goldberg, 1970, 145)
True to her own words, Goldberg’s main goal in *Nissim Ve’Niflaot* is to teach her readers, both young and old, to leave their own comfort zone and be aware of other people’s needs.

In *Nissim Ve’Niflaot*, Nobody’s Aunt takes the readers on a journey through Tel-Aviv’s neighborhoods. The first character they meet is Nissim who sells shoelaces to support his family. Nissim's name means “miracles,” but there are none in his life. While other kids attend school, play and eat “until they're full” (Goldberg, 2010, *Nissim*, 23), Nissim has to fight for his and his four-year-old brother’s daily survival. Via Nissim's tales of hardship and misfortune, the readers hear about Yechiyeh. Yechiyeh is the neighborhood’s bully; he smokes cigarettes, spits, beats anyone who criticizes his behavior and organizes street-fights.

To ensure that the reader does not label Yechiyeh as the “bad kid,” the narrator intervenes and introduces Yechiyeh not as a “bad kid,” but rather as a deprived child:“ He has no parents,” emphasis Nobody’s Aunt, “he ran away from an orphanage in Jerusalem, where conditions had been unbearable (...) no one had ever looked for him (...) (he) rented a room in the neighborhood (...) a sleeping cot in a very poor Yemenite family's half-ruined house.” (Ibid, 69)

In comparison to Nissim, Eliyahu, and Yechiyeh, it seems incorrectly to assume that Miriam, Yaakova’le, and Uzi are "granted everything they wish.” (Ibid, 32) Though living in comfortable white homes and having plenty to eat, their life is not entirely rosy. Uzi has no father and being the “sandwich child” among the kids in the neighborhood, he is prone to teasing and mockery. Miriam and Yaakova'le have a mother and father, but Aunt Yocheved is the one taking care of them. Is she a biological aunt living with the family, or perhaps a neighbor who takes care of them? The narrator does not specify. “Yaakova'le spends all the money I give him on paints and paper, paper and paints. He is wasting money!” complains Aunt Yocheved, (Ibid, 55-6) and Yaakova’le, to breakout from her suffocating grip, escapes to Nobody’s Aunt. Even Niflaot’s past was inopportune. Orphaned in the forests of a southern country, he scouts the characters looking for some love and attention. He is lonely and so is his owner, Dr. KlumBa’Rosh, a bereaved father who lives on his own, gripped by sorrow. Nobody’s Aunt herself struggles with physical and emotional troubles: “I'm the woman whose two front teeth are missing,” tells the narrator to her readers, “if you see a woman in the yard who's missing two teeth (...) you'll know that that's me. The children (...) don't know my name, but they call me ‘Nobody's Aunt’ (...) even my adult neighbors (...) know me (...) because I always have the
sniffles.” (Ibid, 10) The narrator's "old witch" (Ibid, 9) physique is overcome by to her loneliness: "I have nobody (...) I have an empty room in my apartment. My girlfriend lived there once, but she left (...) and her room has been empty and quiet ever since (...) I have nobody in the entire world. Soon I'll be very old and I won't have anyone to take care of me." (Ibid, 32-3, 40)

In her book, Ben Sopher Yeldaim Le’Korav (Between the Author and His Readers) Leah Goldberg argues that the main objective of a children’s realistic story is to educate readers about the world around them. (Goldberg, 1970, 104, 146) Following this claim, the narrator in Nissim Ve’Niflaot encourages the readers to see society's evils and notice the roots of human needs. In the Forward to Nissim Ve’Niflaot, she declares that although Tel-Aviv grew to become a beautiful modern city, something did not change: “there are people and children whose lives are easy and privileged, and people and children whose lives are difficult and their suffering great." (Goldberg, 2010, Nissim, 6) The narrator’s critique is not biased or naïve. She believes that reality is not painted in black and white, but rather comprises of shades of grey. In the wealthy and affluent parts of Tel-Aviv, there are hungry little children who deliver heavy baskets for pennies, but also a friendly florist and a social worker who love children and care for their wellbeing. Furthermore, the material wealth is merely a façade for the desire for human interaction. Dr. KlumBa’Rosh owns a "very charming white house" (Ibid, 92), albeit empty and sad. Aunt Yocheved has a respectable profession and the company of two children, but she is irritable, impatient, and angry. Uzi’s mother, Mrs. MaBe’Kach dotes on her precious son, but frustration and resentment rule her world. Yaakova'le, Miriam, and Uzi wear laundered and ironed clothes, sleep in a warm bed, and are well fed, but idleness and maternal protectiveness translate into profane language, contempt and disrespect towards others.

Though hungry and barefoot, the kids from underprivileged Tel-Aviv receive higher ranking from the narrator. She showers them with compliments and superlatives that balance the unattractiveness of poverty. Nissim is a talented actor and musician who fills the emptiness in the narrator's world with music and laughter. He is "an excellent child, as industrious and honest as can be." (Goldberg, 2010, Nissim, 35) Nobody’s Aunt is not the only adult in the story that recognizes Nissim’s loyalty and hard work. Dr. KlumBa’Rosh opens his home and heart to Nissim’s family.
Nissim and Eliyahu’s mother is a unadorned and unlucky. Her eldest son supports the family and the younger wanders the streets, hungry and abused by Yechiyeh. Towards the end of the story, when Nobody’s Aunt visits Nissim and Eliyahu at Dr. KlumBa’Rosh’s home, the mother - a "young and beautiful woman" (Ibid, 92) greets her. The narrator emphasizes her good manners and keenness; distinguishing her from Aunt Yocheved and Mrs. MaBe’Kach. The emphasis on the mother’s good qualities supports the narrator's belief that the residents of poverty-stricken Tel-Aviv may have a harsh life, but they are decent and honorable people, even in Yechiyeh’s case.

The reader meets Yechiyeh via two incidents recounted in the novel: the first, when he tempts little Eliyahu and steals his apple, and the second when he steals the monkey, Niflaot, before the children's show. In these two incidents, Nissim, the “good boy,” and Yechiyeh, the “bad boy,” are contrasted. Nevertheless, the narrator does not accept the perception that Yechiyeh is all-evil. She stresses that Yechiyeh, too, has positive traits; he pays his rent on time and helps his landlord’s family. The narrator aims her criticism not towards the orphaned boy, but rather towards society. Thinking about Yechiyeh, the narrator wonders: “who knows what the reasons were that brought him to commit the evil acts he commits? (...) Perhaps nobody in the world ever tried to guide him with patience and wisdom? Maybe nobody ever spoke to him with love and patience. It is easy to label a ‘bad boy,’ but did anyone ever try to make a good boy out of him?” (Ibid, 80) Yechiyeh proves to both the narrator and the reader that when his situation improves, he can be a "good boy.” Eventually, Yechiyeh reforms and finds his passion in studying auto mechanics.

Embracing the “I-and-Thou” Dialogue

A modern Indian fable tells of a traveler who loses one of his sandals while climbing to the roof of a crowded passenger train. The sandal falls and lands next to the train track. The man removes his other sandal and throws it down as well. Another man sitting beside him asks why he did that, and the traveler replies: "I have no use for only one sandal, and if someone finds it, it will be of no use to him either. It's better that he finds a pair of sandals.” (Piquemal, 2006, 64) Not a shoe but rather a shattered cactus was Nobody’s Aunt wake-up call to empathize with other people’s hardships. She rejects the conventional tendency to revere a specific generation, social class, or culture. The narrator acknowledges the fact that a paradigm shift is necessary to bridge gaps in human existence. In the twentieth century,
modernization dominates. Scientific progress, new technologies, and new inventions changed value-systems and lifestyles. The developing of Capitalism contributed to the moral collapse of the individual and the community. Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber (1878-1965) called for a personal and social renaissance. (Buber, 1967, 237-8) In his writings, Buber argues that the correct way to build a new society is through individuals who are willing to generate a change in their lives and view others as a “thou” rather than an “it”. (Ibid, 154-155) In his book, Ani Ve’Ata (I-and-Thou) (Buber, 1970), Buber compares two basic modes of human interaction: "I-and-It" and "I-and-Thou.” While the "I-and-It" relations identify the “other” as an object, the "I-and-Thou" interaction expresses a position of self vs. self - a translation of God’s love towards the universe, nature, and humanity. (Ibid, 157) The “I-and-Thou” dialogue is the destination the narrator in Nissim Ve’Niflaot is trying to reach, a dialogue between two individuals who relate and respond to each other. She notices life's setbacks, acknowledges that individuals are ruled by their need for pleasure and satisfaction, and thus seeks “the crumbs of love that would illuminate one's life.” (Elinav, 2012, 341) According to the narrator, if people live in a reality of constant physical and emotional deprivations, at least they should try to be happy. This happiness, she argues implicitly, would emerge when people embrace the "I-and-Thou" relations.

The narrator in Nissim Ve’Niflaot presents two ways to appease human’s yearning for happiness and love; the first is by peeling off the layer of resentment hiding one’s strengths. The second is a type of “human bartering” - the "I" and the “Thou” fulfill each other’s needs. Dr. KlumBa’Rosh offers Nissim and Eliyahu economic security, education, and love. They in return replace his loneliness and grief with laughter and joy. Nobody’s Aunt would embrace all kids and fulfill their needs for shelter, attention, and adult guidance. Hence, they would fill her life with adventure, mischief, laughter, and humor. Nobody’s Aunt desperately clings to the spark of life the children have brought to her world and is unwilling to forego even a crumb of happiness she finds in their presence. When she discovers that they have neither included her in their plans nor asked for her advice, she protests: “you should know that if you are planning to operate a wandering circus and run away from home, I will be the one to pester you any way I can (…) I want a moment of silence (…) I would like to speak.” (Goldberg, 2010, Nissim, 50) Nobody’s Aunt is offended by the children's betrayal. They have removed her from the circle she worked so hard to be part of, and the fear of emptiness
returning to her world re-emerges. However, her anger subsides as she realizes that she needs the kids as much as they need her. Addressing Nissim she says: “soon I'll be very old and I won't have anyone to take care of me (...) you will be a grown man by then. Perhaps you and Eliyahu might return a favor for a favor. I will be your aunt.” (Ibid, 40)

The “I-and-Thou” relations between a lonely woman and other individuals are the focus of another of Goldberg’s children story - “Shedah” (“A Dog Named Demon”). (Goldberg, 2010, Arnon) The story begins with the unexpected arrival of Yu, the narrator's cousin, and his dog, Shedah. Both Yu and Shedah are great comfort for the narrator, even if only for a few days: "my mother went to the market, and I am here, and other than the two of us, there's nobody." (Ibid, 52) Yu and his dog break the narrator’s daily routine and fill her apartment with sounds of singing, adventures, tricks, and laughter. When Yu and Shedah return to their moshav (an agricultural settlement), an oppressive silence envelopes the narrator's world: "Everyone left at once (...) now that they are gone, my life suddenly seems empty, and I don't know what I will do without them." (Ibid, 107) The life of both the narrator in “Shedah,” and Nobody's Aunt changes when the adventures end and people continue with their lives; Nissim and Eliyahu find a new home with Dr. KlumBa’Rosh, along with their mother and the monkey, Niflaot. Yechiyeh enrolls in a youth village and Uzi, Yaakova’le, and Miriam return to Aunt Yocheved and Mrs. MaBe’Kach. The narrator is happy that all ended well, but she cannot deny her sadness: “My apartment never looked so empty, my potted Sabras never looked so forlorn and superfluous, and I never before felt so much like 'Nobody's Aunt.'” (Goldberg, 2010, Nissim, 93) She, as the narrator of “Shedah,” finds her comfort and happiness in retelling the adventures to her young readers: “I should tell lots and lots of children about my two friends, Nissim and Niflaot; because when I tell children stories, they know and I know that I am their aunt. No, how did Nissim put it? – Not an aunt, but everyone's friend.” (Ibid, 93) In the little empty apartment, Nobody's Aunt is engaged in soul searching. She examines at her life and arrives at harsh conclusions. As other female narrators in Goldberg’s literary work, she sees her life as wasted on unfulfilled promises, feelings of betray, emptiness and hopelessness. (Shacham, 1996, 179) For her as for her female “literary twins” art and human kindness make the world a better place and life tolerable.xii
In her book, *Ben Sopher Yeldaim Le’Korav (Between an Author and His Readers)*, Leah Goldberg writes to her young readers, “As long as a person is small, his world is small, and there are few things he can love. When he grows older, his world grows with him, as do the number of things he loves. (...) When a person reaches this stage, in life, (...) his world becomes very broad and he begins to find interest in (...) things he does not notice on a daily basis. (...) In this world (...) live many interesting people who are deserving of love and respect (...) we are all humans; therefore, we should respect each other, even throughout our childhood. We should love and respect everyone.” (Goldberg, 1970, 147-9)

**Conclusion**

In the summer of 2011, 150,000 Israelis gathered in Tel-Aviv to protest against the government’s social policy calling for the basic right of every Israeli to food, shelter, and medical care. This demonstration revealed the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor of the country. A gap reflecting Israel’s high ranking among leading countries in inequality and poverty. In 2014, little has evolved and the social schism is nonetheless growing.

Sixty years ago, in *Nissim and Niflaot*, Leah Goldberg called for a social and personal renewal, one that would materialize only after humans learn to relate to others as a “thou” rather than an “it”. Nobody’s Aunt, the lonely and toothless female, is the one who inspired her fellow characters to realize that the world could become a better place once humans become attentive to their neighbors’ needs. She starts by creating change in her own neighborhood and city. Her story reflects the Israeli social environment and educates her readers to become more relevant in their respective communities.

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The novel was first published in 1954.

Literally meaning Miracles.

Literally meaning Wonder.

Mizrahi are Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab countries. They differ from Sephardi Jews who trace their roots back to the Spanish Expulsion in 1492 and the Ashkenazi who immigrated to Israel from Eastern Europe.

For more on the post-colonial reading, see Gideon Tikotzky, Ha’Or Be’Suley E’Anan (Tel-Aviv: Ha’Kibutz Ha’Meuchad, 2010), 122-128.

From the window / Flower in a flowerpot / Towards the garden will peek. // All his friends – / There in the garden, / He is alone / Standing here. Haim Nachman Bialik, “Atzitz Prachim,” in Shirim Ve’Pizmonim Le’Yeladim (Poems and Songs for Children) (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1971), 25.


For more on the educational-moral aspects of the story, see Leah Hovav, Be’Tzlil Va’Tzeva (Yerushalaim: Akademon Hovav, 1997), 19-45.

Literally meaning ‘nothing in his head.’

Leah Goldberg distinguishes between a "bad boy" and a boy who is having a bad time of it, in her famous children's poem “Ha’Yeled Ha’Ra” (“The Bad Boy”) Leah Goldberg, Ha’yeled Ha’ra (Tel-Aviv: Ha’Kibbutz Ha’Meuchad, 2005).

On the change in Yechiyeh’s character between the first and the second version of the story see, Leah Hovav, Be’Tzlil Va’Tzeva (Yerushalaim: Akademon Hovav, 1997), 211-213.

See the lonely poet in Leah Goldberg's poem “Chalon Muar” (“A Lighted Window”) Our car travels straight / Along the road, at night, in the dark. / And all the while, from the / top of the mountain / An eye of light watches it. (...) / It's a small house with a window / that is lit / In the night like an eye of fire (...) / Who lives there, who lives at the top of the mountain / In an isolated little house? (...) / Perhaps a wizard is standing at the window? / Perhaps a poet lives there? / And perhaps it's only a lonely person / Looking out from the top of a mountain? Leah Goldberg, “Halon Muar,” in Shirim Gimel (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Ha’Poelim, 1975), 44.