

Writing Sample

by Roy Horovitz

Preface

This book explores **Yaakov Shabtai's (1934-1981)** Biblical plays, and revolves around the groundbreaking discovery of three plays, which are discussed here for the very first time: **“Business”, “Kinghood” and “Love”**. These three plays are explored alongside with **“Crowned Head” and “Eating”**, two plays that were staged during Shabtai's lifetime. These last two plays received both critical and popular acclaim, and have long become “Israeli classics”. The discovery of the “new” plays, which I found hidden away among the thousands of notes and pages kept at Yaakov Shabtai's archive at Tel Aviv University's Kipp Center for Hebrew Literature and Culture, sheds light on Shabtai's continued interest in Biblical drama. The plays reveal how Shabtai, a secular Israeli modern playwright, never ceased to search for ways to explore the Bible. Moreover, unlike the many other theatrical works in which he was involved as a writer or translator, Shabtai's Biblical plays were never commissioned in advance. They were always a product of his own initiative and creative interest.

Five plays, then, composed in a span of a single decade (1969-1979) stand at the center of this book. The following work offers a close interdisciplinary analysis of these plays, drawing on various methodologies and fields (literary criticism, historiography of theatre, Jewish studies, hermeneutics, and performance analysis).

Shabtai, who passed away four decades ago, was famously “polychromatic”¹; he was a novelist, songwriter, playwright, screenwriter, and translator. His two novels *Past Continuous*

¹ Dov Sadan coined this term in reference to Lea Goldberg, who was active in many diverse fields. I believe this term also fits Shabtai. Kartun-Blum, R., Weisman, A. (ed.) *Meetings with Poets – On Lea Goldberg*, Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim and Hebrew University, 2000, 12.

(Zikhron Devarim) and *Past Perfect (Sof Davar)* have long ago joined the cannon of the new Hebrew Literature (and some critics have even crowned them as its apex). The following pages offer another fresh finding: Shabtai is also the most successful Biblical playwright in Israel's theatrical scene.

This is a notable achievement due to the fact that in the history of Hebrew theatre (and, to a great extent, international as well) Biblical plays have almost never been able to attract audiences. Looking at the productions of most Biblical plays in Israel and the duration of their run, one may discover that most of them did not have a long run, with only a single staging, and were marked as box office flops. Only three Biblical plays were staged in Israel more than once, in different periods, and at the hands of changing directors on different stages: Nissim Aloni "**Most Cruel the King**" (four productions so far), Shabtai's "**Eating**" (three productions) and Shabtai's "**Crowned Head**" (three productions: two on stage and one televised adaptation ²).

Repeated staging of an Israeli play (and especially a Biblical one) is not a trivial matter. In the theatre world, decision makers do not usually tend to restage a Hebrew play (let alone a Biblical one), so these cases are not trivial. The top three Biblical plays share significant thematic and stylistic similarities: they were directed and performed by secular artists and two of them ("**Eating**" and "**Crowned Head**") were even written by the same author – Yaakov Shabtai.

² I am of course referring to strictly original dramatic plays, not musicals, such as "King Solomon and the Cobbler" or "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat", which also had repeating productions. "King Solomon and the Cobbler" also draws from post-Biblical texts rather than the actual Bible. Furthermore, I am referring to institutionalized repertoire productions alone, and not to student, amateur, or fringe productions, and so forth.

Thus, as different artistic managements uniquely continued to place their trust with him and audiences continued to embrace his work, Shabtai became the most successful Israeli playwright to use the bible; we may even say that he probably “cracked the code” of how to make the Bible accessible to Israeli theatregoers.³

This work strives to trace Shabtai's success by analyzing his dramaturgical model. It explores the manner in which the playwright treats the Biblical material so as to capture the hearts of the audience. The book is founded on the premise that Shabtai's continuous success, both in “**Eating**” and in “**Crowned Head**”, cannot be seen as accidental. Exploring Shabtai's Biblical plays, I argue, has immense value, since they hold the key to other writers. Thus, this work also has didactic-instrumental purpose and practical implications.

Shabtai's immense body of work, indeed, has received ample critical interest in the form of copious articles and books (Miron, Shaked, Soker-Schwager, Calderon are only a few of the prominent writers). Still, most of the research so far has focused on Shabtai's prose, with only a fraction dedicated to his drama, and even less so to his Biblical drama. Shabtai's dramatic work was given some attention in articles by a few critics (Nurit Yaari, Gideon Ofrat, Rina Ben Shahar and Ben-Ami Feingold⁴) and was mentioned a few times in Hana Soker-Schwager's, Matityahu Shafriri's and Dalia Cohen-Knohl's extensive research

³ Audience reception was always the main distinguishing factor between Aloni's and Shabtai's work. They both usually won critical acclaim, but Aloni lost the battle of popular opinion in almost every instance. Shabtai may have occasionally encountered pockets of resistance (as we shall see, for instance, in our discussion of the televised production of “Crowned Head”), yet this resistance was always left on the margins, a deviation from the general positive popular opinion.

⁴ N. Yaari. “Yaakov Shabtai- Wandering on the Paths of Theatre”, *Theatre*: 33 (2012), 45-56, In Hebrew. Efrat, G. “The Author as Playwright”, *Moznaim*, issue 4, (October 1985) In Hebrew. Ben-Shahar, R. “Yaakov Shabtai as Storyteller and Playwright: Characteristics of Style”, *An Overcoat for Benjamin* (Editor: Ziva Ben Porat), Hakibbutz Hameuchad and The Porter Israeli Institute for Poetics & Semiotics, Tel Aviv University, 1999, 205-242, In Hebrew. Feingold, B. “The Naboth Vineyard Narrative in Israeli Theatre”, *Bama*: 86 (1981), 24-40, In Hebrew.

projects⁵. Most scholars focused their attention on “**The Spotted Tiger**”, Shabtai’s most canonical play.⁶ This book aims at filling the gap in Shabtai’s professional biography and thereby paving the way to fashion a more complete historical picture of his artistic *oeuvre* and his immense contribution as an Israeli-Hebrew-Jewish playwright.

To do so, we must examine the following questions –what can we learn from Shabtai’s success and the general acclaim he received? And how may we apply it to the potential contained in contemporary Biblical theatre? In search of answers, the book will follow the way Shabtai treated the Biblical material at his disposal (in the case of “**Crowned Head**”-- I Books of Kings I-II, Books of Chronicles I, XXIII, XXVIII, In the case of “**Eating**” – I Books of Kings, XXI, in the case of “**Business**”—II Book of Samuel IV, in the case of “**Love**” -- II Book of Samuel XI-XII, and in the case of “**Kinghood**”—I Books of Kings XVI). The analysis of these plays will strive to locate and identify common patterns in these plays while also attempting to extrapolate the playwright's ideal, conceptual and aesthetic motives which constituted the foundation for these patterns, either explicitly or tacitly. Finally, I wish to place these artistic patterns within a wider socio-historical context. The questions that will be addressed in this context are: what parts of the original ancient text are carried over to the modern play? Which Biblical “gaps” does Shabtai trace and how does he try to “fill” them? How does Shabtai manipulate his Biblical material? And what, finally, is the ideology that underlies his manipulations? These questions derive, of course, from the general outlines of the discourse on the Bible’s reception in Israeli culture. The comparison

⁵ Soker-Schwager, H. *The Conjuror of the Tribe from the Worker's Quarters – Yaakov Shabtai in Israeli Culture*, The Porter Institute of Tel Aviv University (in their series “Sifrut/ Mashmaut/ Tarbut”), with Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House, (389 pages), 2007. [In Hebrew]. Shafirri, M. *Biblical Plays on The Hebrew*. Thesis submitted towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Tel Aviv University, 199 [In Hebrew]. Cohen-Knohl, D. *Secularism and Religiosity in Modern Israeli Theatre: Invention and Representation*. Ramat Gan, 2008, 43-50 [In Hebrew].

⁶ The play has so far been staged in three repertoire theatre productions (Haifa – 1974 - Direction: Oded Kotler, Habima – 1985, 2006 – Hana Snir) and other productions at The Theatre Department of Tel Aviv University, Kibbutzim College (Direction: Revital Eitan), Tmu-na Theatre (Direction: Elit Weber)

between the modern and Biblical texts does not address the question of the “originality” of the Biblical text itself or the manner in which it draws its material from other primary texts (such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*), which are in the realm of historical criticism. The focus here is on the comparison between the Biblical text and the modern play. In this respect, the later can be conceptualized in terms of a “palimpsest”: a unique piece of writing on a parchment meant to be re-used. In each instance of inscription, the previous text is erased by the new. “*Of course, under the new text, we can still find the marks of the old erased text*” (Pollack: 358, my translation).

Having completed the discussion of the dramatic texts, the book turns to the six different productions of the two canonical plays so as to examine the transition from the written text to the on-stage performance (“From Page to Stage”). A written play is always, in the words of Eli Rozik, an “incomplete text”, since it can only be fully realized when performed and until that very moment it is a mere partitura and nothing more (Rozik, 1992).⁷ Thus, Milhouse and Hume suggest to analyze dramatic written texts by examining their performative potential (manifested, for instance, in the stage directions) alongside actual productions of the play (Milhouse and Hume: 10, 33). Hence, my methodological framework for this exploration draws on performance analysis, socio-semiotics, the historiography of theatre, especially from the perspective of post-positivistic school. According to this approach, we cannot detach the theatrical piece from its specific socio-political context. The post-positivists underscore the subjective quality of each composer of a historical document and view the different dramatical texts as social products through which the viewer can define himself anew both as an individual and a collective. Thus, the theatrical event is always examined

⁷ Iser was the first to develop the comparison between a text (not necessarily a theatrical one) and a sheet of music.

within the socio-cultural space in which it took place, 'a text within context'. Post positivism recognizes the existence of hidden objects, such as thoughts and emotions side by side with tangible objects, and views the individual as an active participant in the creation of the experience, since he provides subjective meanings to himself and to the world. Therefore, the following research looks at the different productions of **"Eating"** and **"Crowned Head"** through the prism of the specific context of time and place in which the plays were composed: Israel of the 70s and 80s (after the return to the Biblical landscape in 1967). Yet at the same time, the examination takes into consideration the subjectivity of their author and directors.⁸ Thus, the central questions of this part include: when and under which political circumstances were **"Crowned Head"** and **"Eating"** re-staged (while paying close attention to the fact that both plays are highly critical of leaders, political manipulations, and the pervasive hypocrisy that is typical of the religious and political discourse in Israel)? What transpired in the transition from the written (discursive) text to the (performative) theatrical execution? What is the essence of the directional approach in each one of the productions, and how did it complete, contribute or even oppose the written play (Shabtai himself was involved only in the first production of each of the two plays; he passed away in 1981, and the later productions were staged posthumously)? What are the principles of the stage realization of the material? what are the main characteristics of the design and performance in each production and to what extent did they reference one another? Special consideration is given, in this context, to the issue of casting the plays and the significance of giving the lead parts to famous personas such as Yossi Banai, Avner Hizkiyahu and Evgenia Dodina. The book goes on also to discuss the reception of each one of the productions. Applying the "Critique de la Critique", the following research sheds light on the manner in which the

⁸ The other plays discussed in this book ("Business", "Love" and "Kinghood") were also written in the decade following the Six Day war.

theatrical reviews “read” and mediated Shabtai’s work to their readership, and the way in which they contributed to the relative popularity of these specific Biblical plays.

As stated, following the discussion of the “old” familiar plays, the three “new” plays will be printed here for the very first time (in an edited version picked from the myriad of drafts and versions that Shabtai left behind). The plays will be presented alongside a comparative literature close reading that will shed light on their performative potential. The book will then also point to the reasons why the three plays, which revolved around government corruption and secret execution by the people in power, were never published or staged.

The ensuing research also makes use of Shabtai’s biography, since “the acts of man are dictated by his heritage, education and life experience” (Weiss, 1987: 2, my translation), alongside an examination of his notes and statements about the different plays. The biographical context makes it possible for me to clarify the playwright’s sensibility to certain aspects of his dramatical material and his own writings, but nevertheless, these are secondary to the main literary analysis. Biography is not seen here as a continuous model, but as selective episodes, which I make conscious use of so as to substantiate critical observations. My somewhat minor reliance on the biographical dimension receives further confirmation from Shabtai’s own words in an interview with Shraga Har-Gil for “Maariv” newspaper (September 4th 1969):

“I believe that writing stories is much more autobiographical, it is much more personal than a play that is constructed upon a certain situation” (my translation),

I make central use of tools and terms from the field of hermeneutics, and turn to scholars who consider plays such as the ones in question as a kind of “modern exegesis” or “*Midrash*”

for the ancient text, which can then shed further light on the origin and bridge its “informational gaps”. Hartman, for instance, argues that the category of *Midrash* as “*exegesis*” is on the one hand rooted in the ancient text yet on the other hand is not satisfied by the limits of the text and wishes to produce “more of the same”: more stories, more words. More of the same, and not necessarily something else (Hartman: 201). I also make use of the terminology articulated by scholars such as Daniel Boyarin, Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, Ari Elon (who distinguishes between a “rabbinical” exegesis of the ancient text and a “sovereign” exegesis given to it by poets, authors and artists, Elon: 36) and Soker-Schwager . The final tool I make use of is interviews with individuals who knew Shabtai, such as: artistic partners, family members, friends and people who have worked with him throughout the years. Among them are: Aharon Shabtai, Edna Shabtai, Oded Kotler, Ilan Ronen, Barke and Naomi Harpaz, Hanan Snir, Michael Gurevitch, and Shlomo Bar-Shavit (RIP).

It should be noted that the book is an essay? in the field of drama and theatre and not in the field of Biblical scholarship. It is based on the supposition that the stories of the bible and their interpretations are well known (especially the stories related to King David, a central character in Shabtai’s world). Therefore, the following book rarely analyses or interprets the Biblical text. In the spirit of the claim which views the Bible as “literature”, this research treats the Biblical text as a holistic unit, without having to answer the distinction between the various versions and traditions that shaped it. The focus is placed on the theatrical-dramatic adaptation of the material. This approach makes sense since Shabtai and his partners were not Biblical scholars, and their work reflected more their creative imagination than Biblical studies. This topic also recured in the conversations I had with many of them.

The work, then, is a product of a complex and comprehensive research conducted through a contextual and interdisciplinary approach (Meir Weiss calls it the “method of total interpretation”, which examines the uniform and comprehensive character of a work of art (Weiss, 1987). Further support for the book’s eclectic approach can be found in Auerbach’s honest testimony in *Mimesis*:

I could have never written anything in the nature of a history of European realism; the material would have swamped me... I should have had to deal with some things of which I am casually informed, and hence become acquainted with them *ad hoc* by reading up on them (which in my opinion, is a poor way of acquainting and using knowledge); and the motifs which direct my investigation, and for the sake of which it is written, would have been completely buried under a mass of factual information which has long been known and can easily be looked up in reference books. As opposed to this, I see the possibility of success and profit in a method which consists in letting myself be guided by a few motifs which I have worked out gradually and without specific purpose, and in **trying them out on a series of texts which have become familiar and vital to me in the course of my philological activity** (Auerbach, 1953, 2013: 548, my emphasis).

My formal studies and professional experience are in the field of theatre as a director, actor and dramaturg. Like Auerbach, I also believe that these experiences left their mark on me and gradually formed the “few motifs” that I made use of in my present work.⁹

⁹ Pollack also believes that “The role of the interpreter is to make use of his personal involvement, his creativity and his imagination so as to expose the foundational outlines of the narrative. At the end of the day, the value of the interpretation will be determined by the interpreter’s attentive listening, sound reason, and his willingness to

The book includes five chapters, alongside a summary and conclusions. The first chapter **“Yaakov Shabtai – the Man and his Work”**, surveys the (unfortunately short) biography of the man behind the texts, his endeavors in the different fields of creative writing, the various manifestations of his love of the Biblical text (both in his works and in his life), and his social, professional and ideological circles. The chapter then surveys the field of Biblical theatre in general as well as relating it to the dramatic arts’ constant engagement with the different myths. The chapter concludes by introducing some initial observations regarding the nature of Shabtai’s Biblical plays.

The book moves from the private case to the more general principles: the **second and third chapters** are dedicated to an examination of **“Crowned Head”** and **“Eating”**, and to a first extensive analysis of their six professional productions. The **fourth chapter** centers on the publication and analysis of the three **“new” plays**. The **fifth chapter** inductively summarizes the findings of this research, examines them in relation to Shabtai’s canonical prose, and **sketches the contours of Shabtai’s Biblical drama**. These contours, I argue, bring together past, present and future into a single timeless reality by touching on modern European theatre, especially the Theatre of the absurd). Shabtai, in these plays, never ceases to strive towards the “simple depth of the Biblical text”, without putting to the test the limits of what the original text can bear. He, so it seems, follows the Biblical text’s own internal criticism towards its heroes, and shows himself to be “more Biblical than the Bible itself”. Many of the protagonists in his plays are murderers. These protagonists’ wash their hands off their crimes, and posit a **“World of Innocents”**, while the viewer is the one who has to decide on their

examine his own conceptual patterns and make use of them in his mental and conceptual encounter with the work” (Pollack, 1994: 403, my translation).

guilt. The book closes with a **Summary and Conclusions Chapter**, which shows that the meta-theatrical analysis of Shabtai's writing reveals an oxymoronic duality that oscillates between diametrically opposed poles: deconstruction and unification, knowledge and experience, classical and modern, rebellion and tradition, text and context, private and public, sublime and banal, tragic and comic, present and absent, religious ritual and secular culture, sacred and profane. I would like to claim that Shabtai's Biblical plays fashion an important part of the apex of his *oeuvre*. When compared with his canonical and local prose, they hold an invaluable universal "appeal". These plays successfully combine liberal theatre and modern thinking with religious and conservative topics. They are not confined to the local Israeli context, but are relevant also to other places that consider the bible a central text for the definition of divinity, for the different images of God and for their religious sentiment. Moreover, Shabtai's work is fascinating not only in and for itself, but also because it constitutes a case study for a much broader sociological phenomenon. Shabtai was secular, a second-generation child to be born in Israel, and was also a part of a very distinct socio-cultural milieu. Thus, we cannot explain his use of the Biblical text as an attempt to cater to populism. Rather, I propose to view it as a testimony of a desperate attempt to lend a clear and accurate voice to his generation, a voice that encapsulates past, present, and future, the historical Jew and the modern Israeli. In other words, it is possible that like other secular artists, Shabtai attempted not only to "secularize" the Bible, but also (and perhaps mainly) to "sanctify" theatre.¹⁰ Shabtai's archive contains a handwritten note with a dialogue in this spirit:

X: Where are you from?

¹⁰ "secular" and "religious" can be seen as to be in dialogue (within which they change and form anew) and not necessarily as separate categories (that operate in relation to one another) or binary opposites. Kurzweil states that 'secularism' does not necessarily mean "anti-spirituality and even not always anti-religion" (Kurzweil, 1971: 42). And we can find similar arguments with Baruch Kimmerling, Hannan Hever, Yigal Elam, Hizky Shoham and David Martin.

Y: I am from the bible

Never forget that he is from the bible, and the bible is sacred (Archive, file 3:18)

As stated above, 40 years have already passed since the death of Shabti, who passed away at the all too early age of 47. The first publication of these three plays is a joyous and moving event within the overwhelming sadness occasioned by his early loss. I plan also to direct and stage, soon and for the first time, “**Business**”, “**Love**” and “**Kinghood**”. The book, then, will also have a practical significance, which touches on the very core of the theatrical work.

Roy Horovitz

Introduction

The Bible is the Jewish people's founding text. It is the canonical "book of books", and its centrality for the Jewish culture, and Western culture as a whole, is irrefutable and well known. Literature, the plastic arts, music, dance and theatre, and later also the opera, cinema and television have turned to it over and over again throughout history as a main source of enteral inspiration.

Jewish theatre, a relatively new phenomenon that has been gaining significant ground only in the last 150 years, has also turned to the Bible as a major source of dramatic materials in the form of protagonists, complete plotlines, conflicts, and central motifs. Herzl and many other Zionists of his generation considered the Bible as testimony to the existence of a virile and male Biblical Judaism, do different than its modern European passive and weak counterpart. They called for a return to this ancient Judaism. Theater artists answered this call and took part in the effort to return the Bible to its former glory. Thus, for instance, Habima Theatre, which was founded in Moscow in 1917 and would later become Israel's national theatre, was first meant to be a "Biblical studio", which would deal exclusively with these kinds of material, given that "the performative potential of Biblical material is harbored already in the original texts themselves" (Hanoch: 24, Ivanov: 27-47, my translation). Israeli theatre would later follow the same path, and staged quite a few Biblical plays, in different degrees of closeness to the source.¹¹ Michael Ohad commented on the continuous failure of most of these productions (mostly with audiences and sometimes critics):

"Every man of theatre knows that if one were to choose the book of books as grounds for a play, they risk their soul and their pocket. A Biblical play spells

¹¹ The percentage of the Biblical plays within the canon of Hebrew theatre, as it was formalized by Levi and Shoef, stands at 12%!(Levi and Shoef, 2002: 16). Levi reads this data in light of Judaism's ongoing denial of theatre, and asks: "Is theatre, after two thousand years of almost complete absence of Jewish religious culture, finally taking vengeance against its oppressors?" (Levi, Fall 2002-Winter 2003: 216, my translation).

great failure and the fact that the greatest theatre masters stayed away from it... Shakespeare never touched the bible... the bible inspired many great painters and composers – and many small dramaturgs” (Ohad, 1969)¹²

Under these circumstances, Shabtai, as stated above, stands out in “**Crowned Head**” and “**Eating**” as a unique case. The two plays had multiple productions and won the hearts of both audience and critics.

“**Crowned Head**” follows King David at the twilight of his reign and the struggles over the accession, before the anointment of Solomon. The play had its world premiere at the Cameri Theatre in 1969 (Direction: Shmuel Bunim), was adapted into a television film in 1989 (direction: Ram Levi), and staged for a third time at Habima National Theatre in 2004 (direction: Ilan Ronen).¹³

“**Eating**” was first staged at the Khan Theatre in Jerusalem in 1979 (under the direction of Ilan Ronen), in 1999 (direction: Michael Gurevich, the production has been running for over a decade).¹⁴ Its plot follows the story of how Ahab, the King of Israel, and his wife, Queen Jezebel, annex Naboth's vineyard.

The successes of the plays and their subsequent staged productions lie, of course, not only in their thematic material but also in the artistic manner in which Shabtai treated it, and in their dramatic, linguistic, and theatrical merits. This complex array will be discussed here in detail,

¹² The assertion that “Shakespeare never touched the bible” is somewhat general. His plays and sonnets are filled with Biblical allusions. The meaning here is similar to Shofman's warning that “it is forbidden to touch the bible” (Shapira, 2006: 16, my translation).

¹³ “Crowned Head” was also staged in Milano, Italy in October 2010, as part of a conference about the “Bible on Stage”. Its Italian translation (“*Una corona in testa*”) was published by Salomone Belforte publishing.

¹⁴ The two plays were not only staged in the repertoire theatre. They were also staged at acting school, drama classes and local theatrical groups. Thus, for instance, Kfar-Saba Theatre Workshop staged both “Crowned Head” under the direction of Yigal Zacks (2017) and “Eating” under the direction of Yehudit Kuris (2013 and again in 2018). These semi-professional productions testify to the immense popularity of the two plays, but will not be a part of our discussion.

and the two proven “success stories” will then be joined by three “new” plays, which center on acts of murder committed by kings - the murder of Ish-bosheth in “**Business**”, the murder of Uriah the Hittite on the battlefield in “**Love**”, and the assassination of Elah, King of Israel, by Zimri in “Kinghood”.

Theatre was born in religious societies (to different degrees). However, since Nietzsche proclaimed the “death of God” and the expansion of the popular secular view, theatre has been caught in a constant palpitating tension between belief and heresy. Under these circumstances, the appeal to the Bible as a source of material and inspiration can be interpreted as a way to fashion a bridge between these two worlds. It adds a vertical motion to the horizontal one, which takes place in the social sphere where individuals live and breathe. Biblical theatre makes it possible to sustain a relation to metaphysical energies within a secular society. It transposes a “religious” experience to an “artistic” experience (and under the assumption that the same “metaphysical” energy can also be interpreted in a non-religious and even atheistic sense). According to Roland Barthes, re-reading and re-using the classical texts can salvage them from oblivion and stagnation (Barthes: 15-16). Thus, I would like to show that this bargain benefits both sides, as the new text gains meaning, value, and more validation. Artists constantly return to the Bible because they see it as a source of endless discourse and as a moral referent. In the words of Uriel Simon, “we see ourselves not only as readers of the text, but also as being read by it” (Simon, 2002: 12, my translation). For Hebrew artists in particular, the “book of books” constitutes a unique compass, with mythological power, in their own language moreover!

In an interview he gave on the occasion of the world premiere of “**Crowned Head**” (which was also quoted in Habima’s play program, 2004), Shabtai spoke about himself as someone

who is attracted to the vast, historical-philosophical-metaphysical, dimension. He stated that he searches for “extra-large” plays. His return to the Biblical material as an inspirational source is therefore natural, and the fact that the audience responded to it is not a trivial matter. As we will see, unlike various “box office hits”, his plays are not in any shape or form light entertainment, but rather a thoughtful, complex, rhetorical, witty, and often amusing dramaturgy. It is not “entertainment”.¹⁵

A dramatic and theatrical work such as Shabtai’s plays, which makes ample use of the treasures of the Jewish culture, was prevalent in Israel in the past, but is slowly disappearing from the main stages. Several scholars have already commented on the Bible’s diminishing influence in Israeli culture. Zakovitch claims that we are witnessing “the end of the century of the Bible” (Zakovitch, 2002: 110-120, my translation), while in the paragraph closing her essay “The Bible and Israeli Identity”, Shapira comments on this decline:

“The convergence of the national-religious and Canaanite-secular extremes sheds light on the long road that Israeli identity has traveled since the start of the twentieth century. The commandeering of the Bible by both extremes demoted it in Israeli culture among center groups. To a large extent, the Bible's role in Israeli identity was supplanted by the Holocaust as a source of identification with the Jewish people, contemporary Jewry, and the lessons of Jewish martyrology. Instead of going on archeological digs, Israeli youth now go on school trips to Poland in search of roots. This development can be seen as a sign of the consolidation of a local identity that the younger generation accepts as given and natural. In a society where a considerable portion of the young are native Israelis

¹⁵ In an interview Michael Gurevitch gave the night of the premiere of “Eating” under his direction, he states that: “when I was young, I could go see plays by Nissim Aloni, Hanoach Levin, Yosef Milo. The great hall of Habima had the best theatrical repertoire from Israel and also the world. Cameri and Haifa as well. The younger generation who visits the theatre sometimes sees things that are simply aberrant. It is problematic and it is concerning mainly when we think about the development of artists and about sources of their inspiration and growth. I am not speaking about this or that play, but about the general spirit in which the theatre is seen as a source of entertainment” (Meloban, July 4th 2011, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/theater/1.3305952>)

or even the offspring of native Israelis, there is no longer any need to prop up the attachment to the land with genealogical charts or a "book memory." The attachment to contemporary Jewry, however, does need bolstering. Be that as it may, among secular elements for whom the Bible had been one of the basic pillars of the new Hebrew culture, there is a sense of loss and privation: Is there a way to restore the Bible to the focus of Hebrew culture?" (41)

I believe that Shabtai's plays offer a certain answer to Shapira's question. Reading them can spark the sense of longing to long forgotten qualities, which Israeli theatre and dramaturgs should return to.