

The Elusive Land of Milk and Honey

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And I came down to deliver
them out of the hands of the Egyptians,
and to bring them up out of
that land unto a good land and a
large, unto a land flowing with
milk and honey...¹

Serge Liberman, born in Russia in 1942, emigrated to Australia with his parents in 1951. He is a successful physician as well as an eminent writer of short stories, for which he has won the Alan Marshall Award. There are many personal experiences and memories in his stories. One of the leitmotifs or thematic preoccupations in his narrative is that of the Promised Land.

The subject of the exiled Jew in search of a Promised Land is nothing new. Since biblical times it is a constant in Jewish life and Jewish literature. A distinguished contemporary Canadian writer, for instance, A.M. Klein has created a character in his novel, *The Second Scroll*, that has been aptly described by M.W. Steinberg, in the introduction to that novel, as the representative of all the exiled Jews; "his eternal quest for truth and justice, and his final ascendance to the Promised Land" is common to all Jewry. (Steinberg.1969:x) Klein sees the new Israel as this Promised Land but this is not always the case with Jewish authors, who reflect in their fiction the hopes of real people, immigrants to the new promised lands where they expect to find real lands of promise. Unfortunately, the promised lands they arrive at do not always fulfill their expectations.

Serge Liberman, dwelling mostly on his own pungent memories, has expressed in his work the hopes of contemporary Jewish immigrants to a new land of promise; their struggles, successes or, as is often the case, their feelings of loneliness and isolation; their bitter recognition of a harsh land, unwilling to yield the milk and honey expected of her and their subsequent self-questioning about their choice.

Liberman's first collection of stories has a suggestive title, *On Firmer Shores*² a clear

¹ Exodus. 3, viii.

² The abbreviation OFS will be used throughout the text to refer to Serge Liberman, *On Firmer Shores*. Page references to this edition will be supplied

reference to the security that the Australian land offered to those Jewish families escaping poverty, pogroms and finally war. The first of the stories, clearly autobiographic, is "Two Years in Exile", where an adult narrator reminisces about his days as a ten-year-old boy in Melbourne's suburbia while both parents "pound out a life in this newer distant home"(OFS 3). The term "exile" in the title qualifies the firmness of the shores where the immigrants have anchored; firm shores, admittedly, but unattractive, particularly in the mother's eyes:

Mother cannot forgive Melbourne, upon which, she says, she has merely stumbled. Nor Europe, now left behind. And even while her feet tread the dry dusty earth of this firm quiet shore, the ship of her existence floats, homelessly, on an ocean of regret and dejection, of reproach and tears"(OFS 3).

The geometrical disposition of Melbourne's new laid suburbia, their soullessness, are seen through the boy's eyes: "... we walk between two rows of red-brick cubes, set behind ordered squares of green, each fringed by delphinium and rosebush in a flush of conformity"(OFS 3). This description, a negative vision of Melbourne that the narrator seems to share with his mother in his adult days--but that he was unlikely to have shared in his young days-- brings to mind Peter Skrzynecki's recollection of the squalor in which he first lived on his arrival in Australia:

Climbing over a barbed-wire fence
I discover the remains
of the migrant centre where we lived
on first coming to Australia --
where the lives of three thousand refugees
were started all over again
in row upon row of converted Air Force huts.

Broken slabs of concrete
lie baking in the sun --
pieces of brick, steel and fibro
that burrs and thistles have failed to overgrow
even after thirty years.
Several unbroken front-door steps
still stand upright and lead nowhere. (1985:151)

The Jewish family of "Two Years in Exile" and the gentile family who live next door mistrust one another. There exists a latent antagonism that reveals itself in a futile incident. The narrator's mother feels disgusted and again we hear her thoughts:

in the text following the quote.

Of all misfortunes available to the children of this earth, she bemoans, Melbourne was the one she had to choose. Melbourne, a tail torn from the rump of the world, where she is lost, amongst neighbours, generations, continents, galaxies, apart from herself, a foreigner Jew in an Australian marsh. Like satin in tweed, perfume in tar, crystal in clay. (OFS 5).

Clearly the mother considers herself superior to Australians, whom she sees as coarse and vulgar. She insists: "A wilderness we have come to. What a wilderness this is" (OFS 5).³

Afraid of incurring in their neighbours disapproval, the narrator's parents are subdued. In contrast with the loud vulgar singing coming from next door:

Father reads the 'Jewish News' [...] singing, if he is moved to sing, in a muted hum, something private, something mellow, not giving his neighbours cause for even the slightest moment to remind themselves of him. While Mother would throttle every sound between iron and collar as she presses tomorrow's shirt, the moisture under the metal hissing, like herself:

'Why this wilderness, this curse, this Gehenna?' (OFS 5).

Later on, the silence of the night, "the wind rattling the window-frames and tree-tops brushing against the tiles" [...] convey to the woman "wisps of memory, memories of crowded courtyards and homely faces, of a Yiddish word and a rebbe's touch, in a cosier world now swept away" (OFS 5-6). Evidently what the woman recalls is an idealized vision of her home country, before the pogroms began. The loss of it makes her hate this new town: "Sleeping city. Dumb city lying drunk ..." (OFS 6), a disapproval that is doubly caustic because, in its bitterness, it distils so much that is true. It condemns the dumbness of a provincial town and the drinking habits of its inhabitants that account for their coarseness.

When the silence is finally broken, in the early hours of the morning, by the milk-horse and the rattling of his bottles, the woman's resentfulness re-asserts itself:

Mother hates both the noise and the silence, a silence that is yet not a true silence.

'A wilderness, a wasteland,' she mutters [as she] casts her sight upon the empty lots beyond the crossing (OFS 6).

This "wilderness" that the mother hates so much could be tempered if they were to

³ This is undoubtedly autobiographic. See W.D. Rubinstein, *The Jews in Australia*. (1986:96). Rubinstein says of Liberman that he and his parents "first lived in Northcote, a northern Melbourne suburb. This experience he later described as "two years in exile", recalling his parents muttering things like 'A wilderness we have come to --what a wilderness this is'. (They soon moved to St Kilda)".

move, because even in the Melbourne she dislikes so much there are less desolate places where other Jews live:

A wilderness. Five miles from the city's heart, Mother feels as if she were in a country town, a Siberian sovchoz or a displaced persons' camp again. Far away is High Street with its sprawl of shops, offices, arcades and picture-theatres. Further still, a Jewish world, a Jewish melody. But at our end, her very existence is enshrouded in a pall of silence and of loneliness, while beyond, past the next crossing, along the dry, cracked and dusty unmade road stretches an empty nakedness that, for Mother, is worse even than the silence and the loneliness. And more threatening (OFS 6).

The woman does not want to see the new houses that are being built. There will soon be no empty space around them and, in any case, the absence of Jewish faces, of a Jewish environment would still constitute a "wilderness" for her. Through the narrator's account, however, we go back in time and experience his youthful enjoyment at the building. His exhilaration, his imagination are constructive and are helping to construct, although the outcome is negative. "With my help [he says], the perimeter where we live is pushed back and the city swells, enveloping us more rigidly within the carbon solidity of conformity" (OFS 7). The word "conformity" is precise here. The young boy is willing to conform, but not so his mother who "detests the perimeter" (OFS 7). Unlike her and like his son, the father tries to conform too: "Father, with his tomatoes and lemon-tree, tries to adapt" (OFS 7). The young boy thrives in the wilderness that his mother detests; he loves its melody; he cherishes silence and emptiness: "More than Mother could know" (OFS 7), because he is young and adaptable and is being assimilated into Australia. The boy has begun to learn how to love Australia at school. The teacher, Mr. Cook teaches him about a "deeper more remote Australia [...] The Australia of open spaces, red deserts, towering gums, shearers, swagmen, jumbucks and wheat" (OFS 7). Mr. Cook's mission is to make the boy "one of his Aussie kids" (OFS 7). However, when the boy comes to love Australia "with the fervour of a proselyte" (OFS 8), his assimilation is arrested by the cruelty of his schoolmates that make him "weep [...] for the loss of a treasure that might have remained mine" (OFS 8). He has been given a first hard lesson of what it means to belong to a people that does not belong with the rest.

The mother's aversion to the particular patch of the promised land she has landed in, is rekindled when her son begins to show symptoms of assimilation as seen in his willingness to take part in singing Christmas carols. An alarmed mother urges her husband: "We must

move,' she says. [...] 'Out of this wilderness,' she adds" (OFS 12). She is bitter about her son's breach of loyalty: "'Your son is no longer a Jew'" (OFS 14), she complains to her husband and once again she voices her resentment towards Australia, blaming her for her son's treachery: "'What a country this is. There is no God here'" (OFS 14). While the boy thinks his mother unjust, the mother again blames Australia, more particularly the area where they live, because of their isolation from other Jews: "'We must move from here. See what this wilderness, this wasteland is doing to your son'" (OFS 15). The lament that follows throws light on what seems to have often been the Jewish fate in the past and, with particular pungency, of late. Referring to all her brothers and sisters the mother reflects bitterly that they are all "'leaves, feathers, scattered and dispersed, while we, silly, blind, pitiful yiddelech sink to the bottom of a barren trough, in exile, without a Yiddish book, a Yiddish word, a Yiddish geist'" (OFS 15).

The family will finally move from the hated wasteland, from exile, into an environment that offers Jewish company and so, although "mother complains still, [...] her cup is drained of its former bitterness" (OFS 17).

Another very revealing story, closely related to "Two Years in Exile", is the last story collected in *On Firmer Shores*, significantly entitled "Home", written again out of personal experience. It dwells once more on the narrator's mother's inability to adapt to the new "Promised Land", as opposed to his own ability to conform to it. The narrator recalls:

Myself a boy avidly laying an ear to the new terra firma of Terra Australis,
I came to learn that home was where the feet ran most freely; home, for
Mother [...] was where *she* had been at her fleetest. (OFS 198)

She takes refuge in her memory, which to her "proffered securer anchorage than the firmest foothold to be had on the Australian shore" (OFS 199). Unable to settle in the new land she bemoans "the barren wilderness into which [...] she [has] been tossed" (OFS 199), and the subdued, timid, almost shameful way the family has to live their Jewishness on a "remote shore" (OFS 200).

A clue to the mother's negative attitude is given by the narrator when he speaks of all the cherished dreams and hopes of her young days which have been destroyed by the horror of the war. This is why she has nothing to offer to Australia on her arrival, only "a near-empty package -- little of matter, less of spirit, nothing of faith" (OFS 301). Her first glimpse of Australia is equally devoid of promise or hope for:

(...) before her, past the afternoon haze that smudged the nearby warehouses, pylons, cottages and lanes sprawled greyly the mute unknown, secretive, concealed, inert, promising nothing, neither particular welcome, nor expectation, nor hope. From the beginning then, Mother and the new alien lukewarm country offered nothing willing to each other; or, where they offered, and gave, the exchange was coldly equal -- the country providing Mother with work in a drab airless factory in Flinders Lane. Mother in turn giving up her labour, eight, ten, twelve hours a day of her energy, without love, enthusiasm or cheerfulness (OFS 201-202).

Devoid of love and enthusiasm the mother only sees greyness around her; everything is grey, from the first light of the morning, through the greyness of the factory where she works for hours without end, to the "grey evening light in which, leg-weary and numbed, she trudged home to eat, to feed, to iron, to darn, to read the paper fitfully and to lapse into sleep before the next grey day confronted her once more" (OFS 202). However, if greyness is to be her legacy, the Australian sun will be the narrator's wealth: "To me [...] this was home. But for Mother, home it could never be" (OFS 202).

In another tale from the same collection, "The Kitchen", the narrator tells of the struggles and difficulties of several Jewish families, poor immigrants, refugees from Europe, survivors some of them from the holocaust. These people share a house and a kitchen where they all participate in each other's personal dramas. It is in the kitchen, for instance, where "Slawa Kopecnik, a refugee from Warsaw [bemoans] the emptiness of her life in Australia" (OFS 22), or where Morris Nussbaum goes on dreaming the dreams he had already voiced during the voyage to Australia. His dream to "be a poet in the new land [...], in the distant wilderness of Australia ..." (OFS 24) will never be realized. One day he gets bullied about by his mates at work; the bruise he brings home to the communal kitchen, and that will eventually result in his death, starts Slawa chanting: "What do you expect in Australia?" (OFS 28).

In another story, "Plaques", again in the same collection, a wealthy Jewish character, describing the early theatrical performances of the Jewish community during his first years in Australia; the mediocre acting, the stale jokes, says that they were "very popular if only because it was music to many ears to hear the mother-tongue on alien soil. It was all sublimely amateurish, but in a desert, even water is the sweetest of wines" (OFS 36). In a single sentence we have a vision of Australia as alien soil and a desert. This is what the immigrants portrayed in Liberman's stories often think of their country of adoption once they have had a first taste of the honey offered by it. This runs contrary to the expectations of the

"breast-thumping new immigrant ready to meet all challenges in this new paradise" (OFS 36). The new paradise soon turns into a disappointing desert, an alien soil where he/she will end up living in a ghetto, a "local Jerusalem" (OFS 37).

"Tinsel and Dust", also part of *On Firmer Shores*, is a sad tale because it reveals how unforgivingness leads to a renewal of racial hatred between German and Jewish immigrants in Australia and destroys the innocent friendship of two young boys. The narrator appears to be the same as in other stories, somebody who recalls his youth and throws light on the difficulties of immigrants by speaking of the "ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day of labour" his parents had to do in "this however begrudgingly adopted home of Australia" (OFS 183), thus revealing the harshness of the new land. To this is added a feeling of isolation. If there were other Jewish families in the neighbourhood "would Mother, my mother, so bemoan repeatedly the wilderness that is Northcote, the exile where she rarely sees a Jewish face or hears a Yiddish word?" (OFS 187)

A sense of isolation and distance is seen again in "Envy's Fire", a tale that forms part of another collection of stories entitled *A Universe of Clowns*⁴ Here the narrator describes his father's arrival from other shores "at the remoter, quieter, more mysterious shores of Australia." (AUC 59). Another story in the same collection "Greetings, Australia, To You Have I Come" offers the reader the vision of the mixed feelings of several immigrants to Australia. When the voyage is about to end and land is sighted, there is excitement and fear. "We have done the right thing, haven't we?" (AUC 66) is the narrator's mother's insistent question. When Australia finally emerges, the sun is symbolically setting behind the ship; therefore it is not a sunny and glorious land that is revealed. We picture it in our mind's eye through the narrator's recollection: "To the west, now behind us, the sun is drowning beneath a crown of flame. Inland, harder, sharper edges emerge, chiselled out of stone, not blue, not grey, yet both..." (AUC 66). It is a bad omen but the voyagers still cling to their expectations: "'Australia', somebody murmurs. 'May we find better fortunes here than over there', prays somebody else" (AUC 66). The narrator brings to memory the feeling of security after the sea voyage. "How close now that solidity, that firmness" (AUC 67) after the rolling of the sea and the sharing of dreams during the voyage. He insists: "How close

⁴ The abbreviation AUC will be used throughout the text to refer to Serge Liberman, *A Universe of Clowns*. Page references to this edition will be supplied in the text following the quote.

that solidity, that firmness"(AUC 67). His father tries to be reassuring:

'It's not Poland,' [...], 'it's not Paris, but it's soil under our feet. It's home'.
'Home,' Mother huffs
'Home,' I murmur... (AUC 67)

If the father is trying to be optimistic, and the mother is sceptical and unsympathetic, the young boy is gulping it all down, fascinated by what he sees and hears, by his "first touch with Australia. Steel against timber..." (AUC 68) not realizing that steel conveys the idea of the country's hardness and that its provisionality, the fact that it is still very much in the making and nothing is permanent, is symbolised by the perishable timber. Further on, another trait of Australia, its avidity, is emphasized when the boy is described as "new blood, young blood, a gift to the land" (AUC 69) by the former immigrant who welcomes the family and has to admit that Australia is not the golden land that some say: "'No, it's not gold. But opportunity, yes, and work, if you are willing to accept'" (AUC 70). He will reiterate his warning: "'No, it's not Paradise'" (AUC 70). It is, nonetheless, a free land, hence full of hope for the future. The young boy feels the buoyancy around him and begins to explore his surroundings in "an evening that is alien but moist, cool, redolent with the neighbour's flowers ..." (AUC 73). Yet his hopes and those of his parents are shattered when a gang of anti-semitic youngsters bully and attack him. Thus, the narrator's first day in Australia ends on a negative note and with his mother voicing her bitterness; "'Even here?! For this have we come?! For this have we bled?! For this?! Everything for this!'" (AUC 76).

In "Passage", another title in *A Universe of Clowns*, the image we get of Australia is more positive, coming as it does, from a man who has achieved success. Remembering the past, on the occasion of his grandson's "Bar Mitzvah", this man recalls his voyage "over vast waters to a distant, safer, quieter unmolested haven that was Australia" (AUC 93). This positive vision immediately acquires a more subdued tone as the old man further recollects that, back in 1950, "the new country did not appear instantly hospitable" but he admits that nevertheless "it permitted the newcomers at least to draw deep unhurried breaths as, tentatively, they sank fresh roots into mercifully unresisting soil." (AUC 93). At the end of the man's recollection, it is the positive vision that prevails. From the point of view of this successful immigrant his grandson's burden will not be as bad as his and his wife's: "...A better world ... yes ... a better world than ours waits for him..." (AUC 97)

A dark picture of Australia emerges again in the story entitled "Bone of My Bone, Flesh of My Flesh". In this case we find a husband bringing back memories of an ever

complaining wife who hates the land they have emigrated to, from the very beginning: "To what, to what have you brought me?" (AUC 168). She finds fault with everything: "This house, this street, the people! It's a wilderness, a desolation, a desert, a calamity! Everything is falling apart. Everything is so [...] so ugly, so cold" (AUC 168). Although the wife's words primarily reveal her own inner desolation, they nevertheless disclose a desolate image of the new country, as she challenges her husband:

Go outside for a moment and see this paradise, this Australia, that you've chosen. There are cats everywhere. And rubbish. And a stench, a catastrophe, worse, far worse than the pig-market in Lodz. (AUC 169).

Clearly the idea of paradise, the new land of promise, latent in the immigrants' minds, serves as a yardstick against which Australia is measured to its detriment. The husband, however, less negative than his wife, is willing to accept the reality of the land. "If, in Palestine [where he had lived previously], he had blessed with his sweat, this newer land, albeit greyer and manifestly unsanctified, offered the means to bless with the no-lesser virtue of diligence and application..." (AUC 170). Therefore, he had "accepted, acquiesced to the early meagre offerings of Australia ..." (AUC 171) from the beginning. His wife, by contrast, only after having lived in the country for almost twenty years had "established a semblance of truce with country, home and self ...". It was actually only after the country and the family she had left behind had been annihilated, that she "had learnt to accept the wilderness, as she called it, as her home" (AUC 176).

"Seeds", the first story in the collection *The Life That I Have Led*³, depicts, through an immigrant's eyes "the spectre of the new land [...] becoming form". The land is "far-flung Australia" (TL 3). Years later this immigrant will tell his grandson of the hardships he had to suffer "even in this paradise that in your atlas is called Australia" (TL 5). If Australia is evidently not considered a paradise in this story, in another tale in the same collection, "Survivors", it does not emerge with flying colours either. A day-dreaming narrator, envisaging other promised lands from the parapet at St Kilda, in Melbourne, imagines what awaits him beyond:

"(...) colours brighter, melodies more melodious, scents more fragrant than

³ The abbreviation TL will be used throughout the text to refer to Serge Liberman, *The Life That I Have Led*. Page references to this edition will be supplied in the text following the quote.

the dreary second-third, fourth-rate fare of the Antipodean backwater washed by Indian and Pacific Oceans and chosen by my parents --chosen for my parents --as if called to do penance for the sin of survival ..." (TL 67).

In the same story Melbourne is alluded to as "the terrain provincial of *Melbournia parochiale*" (TL 69) where people are only interested in football, cricket and horses, as if this was their religion. The meaning conveyed is that of immigrants inhabiting a land of wasted talents instead of a land of promise.

Liberman's idea of a promised land is approached from an altogether different angle in the story "On the Isle of Curaçao", also contained in the collection *The Life that I Have Led*. In this story Curaçao is described as a "Caribbean Eden" (TL 91) where the topography, the climate, the fragrances are just right. When compared with Melbourne, the latter stands to lose by the comparison, the Caribbean eden being "so far a cry from the bumptious self-satisfied insularity and plebeian backwardness of antipodean Melbourne..." (TL 93). A Jewish settler in Curaçao sings in praise of the place. Playing host to the narrator, a young Jewish traveller from Australia, he extols the virtues of the island, "a place where for a long long time there has been peace and safety and freedom" (TL 96). He repeatedly insists on this idea; for him Curaçao is the only haven for his nation, therefore the land of promise, since in "Israel, Jerusalem --God above!, who knows what awaits the children of Zion gathered there? [...] while [...] here, here, at least [...] even in the flow of history, here there is safety, freedom, peace ..." (TL 99). The narrator notices that his host has used the same formula for a second time when he hears him maintaining again that Curaçao is "the last and quietest haven in the world" (TL 100). The formula will be repeated a third time yet, together with a plea to his young guest to stay: "here is freedom, safety, peace. Here is history, continuity, tradition: the last secure physical haven for the Jew, as Torah is his last abiding spiritual haven" (TL 104). Elsewhere in the world, on the other hand, there is "strife, [...] bitterness, turmoil, wars, ugliness, dangers, and for the Jew [...] uncertainty, [...] risk,...." (TL 104). The idyllic picture, however, is disrupted by the older man's daughter, Rachel, for whom her father's eden is simply a cage. "What for him is a haven [she confides to the young traveller] is for me a cage" (TL 107). For Rachel not to accept the risks of the world is "...to yield to stagnation, and by stagnating, to disown life" (TL 108). In the end the traveller will leave the shores of the enchanting island for more hazardous if less enchanting-shores.

Liberman's perspective of a promised land changes again dramatically when he

presents Palestine as the one and only Land of Promise. In "Bone of my Bone, Flesh of my Flesh", mentioned before as one of the stories in *A Universe of Clowns*, Palestine is referred to as "The Land, God's temple in Zion" (AUC 165). This land is seen as a substitute for God, as if (coinciding with Klein's ideas) the land was the Messiah itself. In the past experience of the main character in the story:

(...) in that Land, the land alone had sufficed, sustaining the soul through the mere practical worship of turning soil, from which worthier fruit than enforced sophistry would some day flower. He had blessed with sweat where words had lost their meaning --and come closer to fulfilment than he had ever come to God (AUC 166-167).

In a story from *On Firmer Shores*, "The Ghetto of T -", the reader finds, in the words of the rabbi of an old synagogue in a forgotten place, confirmation that for many Jews the Promised Land is and always will be Jerusalem. This brings to mind the ancestral wish of meeting in Jerusalem the following year, faithfully repeated by generation after generation of Jews.⁶ "And now that our people have a home again, in Jerusalem [the rabbi says], our hope has been strengthened --not weakened-- but strengthened beyond measure" (OFS 137). "The day will come [the rabbi will further add], and when we make the pilgrimage to the Land of the Covenant⁷, then we shall know that the Messiah has arrived" (OFS 138). This seems to imply that the Messiah (Redeemer) may not necessarily be a person but the fulfilment of the Jewish dream of ascending to the Land of Promise, the land of the Covenant, there to build a new, more equitable nation. Norman Linzer explains the modern Jewish concept of redemption when he writes that "Redemption from the Diaspora means the

⁶ See David Hartman's foreword to Norman Linzer's *The Jewish Family*. (1984: 11-12) Hartman writes that "the holiday of Passover [...] is celebrated within the context of the family. In a symbolic sense, parents feed their children the bread of slavery and the longing for freedom. They recite together the Passover *haggadah*, the story of how the Hebrew slaves were led out of Egypt. They create a living drama in which the present is saturated with the pilgrimage of a people on their way to attaining full national political existence.[...] The Passover night of storytelling ends with the proclamation of the centrality of Jerusalem --"Next year in Jerusalem."

⁷ See David Hartman (1984: 10) "Peoplehood, community, land, covenant are all social and political categories. From a biblical perspective, Judaism is inconceivable outside the life of the community. The Promised Land is essential to covenantal consciousness because it was only within the geographical context of the land that the Jewish community could fully realize its spiritual aspirations."

ascension to a more spiritual plane of existence, and the cleansing of the taint of assimilation even for the imperfect purity of a heterogeneous Jewish society." (1984:25-26) Expanding on this further, he explains that redemption demands the contribution of each Jew in the building of a nation where poverty is eradicated, education promoted, creativity encouraged. "In the experience of redemption [he concludes], one is transplanted to a more spiritual level of existence. One's soul is inflamed with love for all Jews, love for the land, love for the Torah, and love for God". (1984: 26) The equation Messiah - modern Israel, means that the Messiah (redemption) must be brought about by the realization of the state of Israel. As Linzer points out:

Israel requires the development of a mature religious attitude to life where Jews do not passively await God's unilateral intervention in history but, rather, experience God's presence in their own efforts on behalf of the total community. (1984:44)

With the exception of the stories where Curaçao or Palestine are presented as the lands of promise, the rest of Liberman's stories, dealing with the topic of immigration to Australia, offer a rather sombre picture of the country. However he is not the only Australian writer to reflect a negative vision of Australia. The poet A.D. Hope writes of the land:

The river of her immense stupidity
Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth.

And, in bitter, scornful words he accuses Australia of being;

a vast parasite robber - state
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores. (Hope.1966:13)⁸

If it is evident that Liberman is not the only writer to label Australian shores as alien and to offer a dismal picture of the immigrants that trod and struggled on them, his comparison of Australia with the veritable Promised Land, Palestine, is not unique either. Other writers have pointed out the differences between the two lands. David Martin's voice⁹, for instance, in the poem "Letter to a Friend in Israel" compares the two worlds in lines that sing the luminosity, beauty, sense of history of Israel as compared to the ugliness, banal news, the triviality and drabness of Melbourne:

You write the *khamsin* blows from Sinai

⁸ This quotation is taken from John Rickard. *Australia, A Cultural History* ("The Present and the Past" series), 141

⁹ David Martin, born in Hungary, settled in Australia in 1949, after living in Holland, Palestine, Britain and India.

Fierce as a storm at sea. The land is brown;
You long to leave the desert for a day
To see again the hills of Galilee,
Green fields and settled country.
Yes, I recall the Negev after drought,
The loneliness, shirt sticking to the shoulder,
The water tower glaring at the sky,
The Arab sand that drifts under the door
Like the eighth plague of Egypt.
[...]

What news
Of Melbourne, Sam? Well, Essendon's on top,
Carlton lies second, and a lad's been jailed
Who broke a bottle on the umpire's head.
The wattle's coming out at Ferntree Gully,
The pubs are coming down in Wanston Street,
And on a fine day, from the Trades Hall roof,
The class struggle can still be clearly seen
Beyond the university where, lately,
The dogs of Patrick White made love off stage. (1985:123)

If Liberman's perspective cannot be said to be unique it is certainly very enlightening in its insistence as it is vivid in its portrayal. From this perspective it seems clear that Australia, and more specifically Melbourne, the point of arrival of most Jewish immigrants, proved a disappointment to them. They had reached firmer, safer shores, admittedly, but these shores were a far cry from the Promised Land expected. Here there was no milk and honey for the asking, and whatever fruits the harsh, grey land yielded were obtained with great effort. Unlike their ancestors, they could not burst out singing in joy:

And they told him, and said,
We came unto the land whither
thou sentest us, and surely it flow-
eth with milk and honey; and this
is the fruit of it.¹⁰

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