

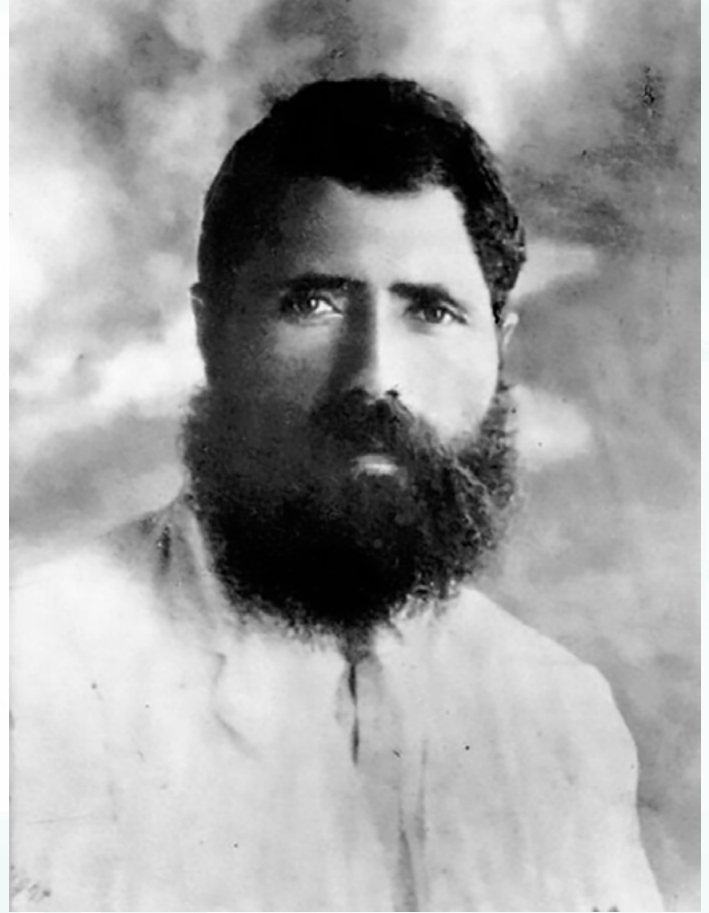
Rainbow Brenner

Hadar Aviram

Two friends, young, poor, bright, and full of promise, sit together in a shabby room in Warsaw. They are joyous, for not only do they have food and oil to light the furnace, but also a hot-off-the-press poem by Bialik, whom they both admire. They recite the poem to each other, squealing, frolicking, then leap into each other's embrace. One of them would later eulogize the other, writing: "Our bones shook, and in the furnace a fire burned, and on the table the candle."ⁱ

The writer was Yosef Haim Brenner, a literary giant of the Hebrew revival movement, and his friend was Uri-Nissan Gnessin, a master of the short story in Hebrew and Yiddish. Intimate friends since their yeshiva days in Pochep, Ukraine, the two dropped out and joined a circle of authors committed to the literary revival of Hebrew. Chased by military service, debt, and other poverty-related tribulations, Brenner ended up living in a shabby room in East London, working long hours as a typesetter to fund his passion: his literary journal *Ha-me'orer* (The awakener), a serial publication of Hebrew fiction, essays, and poetry. Gnessin edited *Nisyonot* (Attempts), a periodic collection of short stories. In 1907, after much deliberation, Gnessin joined Brenner in London, an encounter that Brenner hoped would mirror their harmony in Warsaw, but the friends' attempt at a shared life went sour within a few weeks and the two broke off all contact. In his eulogy for Gnessin, Brenner heart-wrenchingly wrote: "In the few good moments, of which there certainly were some then, hearts were joined and purified from the impurities of resentment. Then we both understood, that I am not at fault, that he is not at fault, that we are not at fault, only disaster lies upon us."

Brenner immigrated to Ottoman Palestine ('Erez Yisra'el) in 1909 and, after a short and unsuccessful attempt at agricultural labor, moved to Jaffa and resumed his intellectual and creative career, venerated by members of the Yishuv for his originality and creative genius despite frequent controversies stemming from his critical writing and strident personality. Gnessin returned to Pochep and in 1912 moved to Warsaw, already gravely ill with a



*Portrait of Yosef Hayim Brenner, 1910.
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congenital heart condition he kept to himself. Gnessin's death in 1913, at the age of thirty-three, left Brenner devastated.

Brenner married and fathered a child, whom he named Uri-Nissan and doted on, but divorced while his son was an infant. He then rented a room at a ranch in the outskirts of Jaffa, where he mentored an unknown young author, Yosef Luidor, and invited Luidor to live with him. During the 1921 Jaffa riots, Brenner, Luidor, and others were brutally murdered at their farmhouse lodging. The crime scene was so heinous, and reflected such atrocious slaughter and torture, that details were kept confidential even as the murder filled newspaper headlines, and many of the facts remain unknown to this day.

Brenner's books and essays, regarded as the pinnacle of Hebrew revival literature, are no longer widely read beyond a small circle of literature connoisseurs. But recent years have seen a surge of interest in, and controversy around, Brenner's personal, romantic, and sexual life. One such inquiry is literary critic Menahem Perry's nonfiction work *Sit on Me and Warm Up: The Homoerotic Dialogue of Brenner and Gnessin*.ⁱⁱ

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Virtually all Brenner biographers consider Gnessin to have been Brenner's first and deepest love interest, but Perry embarks on a microbiographic mission to reconstruct the minutiae of the two friends' relationship and subsequent fallout in London, following clues from their letters and memoirs, as well as a subversive interpretation of the Bialik poem that forged their intimacy. Gnessin, Perry believes, was always conflicted about his relationship with Brenner, fearful of him, and repelled by his exaggerated mannerisms and aggressive pursuit; moreover, Gnessin was already burdened by the secret knowledge of his heart condition and thus shy of deep commitments. Perry documents Brenner's repeated supplications that Gnessin, who was traveling throughout Europe, join him in London. After several evasions, Gnessin finally arrived in London in 1907, and during his stay there, for a few weeks shared close quarters with Brenner. Perry posits that the two shared not only a room, but a bed, and possibly also sexual intimacy. The experience was far from mutual, and it was short-lived. Gnessin fled Brenner, quickly found a female lover and moved in with her, and never spoke to Brenner again. Perry carefully analyzes one of Brenner's letters, in which he recalls walking to a public park and bitterly weeping there, and literally follows in Brenner's footsteps in London, concluding that Brenner walked across the entire city to see Gnessin, who at the time lodged as far away from him as possible.

Sit On Me and Warm Up became a lightning rod in the literary world. Perry was critiqued for inventing a "mystery that does not exist," because, "like any person," Brenner "had an assortment of desires and abhorrences, and like any person, his sexuality was mostly his own business."ⁱⁱⁱ Perry was also accused of kowtowing to "an especially aggressive academic fad" he had previously rejected, namely, of scouring an author's "work, or letters, or a note on the fridge of his former neighbor, there is a hint, vague as might be, that he considered flipping the table, or perhaps did not, but would have liked to."^{iv} This critique reflected a distaste for exploring the intimate life of canonical figures, but others might critique Perry's work from a postmodern "death of the author" stance.

Novelist Alon Hilu's speculative thriller *Murder at the Red House* also provoked controversy.^v In the book, Hilu offers a shocking, lurid narrative of the murders of Brenner and Luidor as the fallout of a doomed homoerotic triangle with a Palestinian youth, Abd'ul Wahab, told in Rashomon-like style by four protagonists: Luidor, who is deeply in

love with the youth but succumbs to Brenner's pestering; the aging Palestinian gardener, Murad, who sees Abd'ul Wahab's victimization at Luidor's hands as a microcosm of the land's conquest by the Zionist agricultural enterprise; and Raneen, Abd'ul Wahab's sister, who restores the benevolence of Brenner and the true love between Luidor and her brother, and exposes the cynical plot of the village police officer, Ali Arafath, to provoke a conflict between the Arab and Jewish citizens of Jaffa, stoke the pogrom flames, and bury the evidence.

Filmmaker Gal Ohovsky hailed the gentleness with which "Hilu manages to tell a painful historical tale, and also to describe interpersonal sensitivity in an insensitive place,"^{vi} but others were not so sanguine. An editorial in the newspaper *Israel ha-yom* problematized the ethics of those who "relate the fictional, or half-fictional, biographies of flesh-and-blood people and write in it whatever they fancy, tie to their characters any qualities, choices, deeds, and words that they wish."^{vii} Literary critic Maya Sela characterized the book as "a sexual assault on history—a rather homophobic sexual assault, including completely stripping his characters of any humanity, thought or idea in favor of them being homosexuals and nothing else," and from a literary standpoint, as gratuitously lurid entertainment eschewing obligations "to shaping, to language, to style, to history, to ethics, to good taste, and to the ancient, forgotten art of the storyteller."^{viii}

That Brenner was a psychologically complicated man, and that his deeply stigmatized romantic entanglements were complex and contributed to his emotional suffering, is well known;^{ix} why, then, this flurry of interest in exposing, as well as in hiding, his sexuality, and what, beyond prurience, can explain it? Does the speculation, investigation, and debate regarding Brenner's queerness contribute to our understanding of his work or his death, and if so, how?

*One's experience of being
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The question of “Brenner the fairy,” as literary critic Arik Glassner calls it, is not mere gossip. Erotic distress, he explains, “is at the heart of the Brennerian creation.”^x But the queer gaze, I believe, transcends the sexual quandaries and inadequacies of Brenner’s protagonists. One’s experience of being an outsider looking in, perennially feeling out of place in visible and invisible ways, code-switching, and sometimes furtively hiding in plain sight, in a heteronormative society where openness could sometimes result in serious life-threatening consequences, has the power of opening one’s eyes to many other displays of inequality, injustice, and exclusive assumptions—beyond those directly related to sexual identity or expression. The typical Brenner hero—usually a former yeshiva student turned secular, almost devoid of friendship and intimacy, and unmoored from his cultural-religious context—struggles to survive in an ugly, unjust, alienated world in need of urgent moral and spiritual repair.^{xi} He discovers that his new milieu—Odessa, New York, even the yearned-for Zionist model society in the Yishuv—is nothing more than a modern manifestation of the stifling, conformist ghetto he left behind. Brenner was an enthusiastic believer in the Zionist dream, devoted his life to the revival of the Hebrew language, and was even willing to walk away from his meteoric literary career and become a farm laborer—and yet, even upon attaining the dream, bravely and perceptively indicted his new environment for being as constrictive as all the other environments he previously occupied.

Is the Brennerian gaze a “queer gaze?” As a deeply closeted man who experienced profound, unrequited, traumatic love that truly could not say its name, whose devastating psychological effects he could hardly keep from wearing on his sleeve but could openly discuss with no one, Brenner would carry his anguish and emotional suffocation with him wherever he went, for the rest of his life. It would be so central to his human experience that a geographic change, even dramatic and supported by exuberant ideological hope, would not enable him to shed it. Or, perhaps, Brenner was one of those rare

people blessed with boundless sensitivity for the universal human condition, whose ability to identify invisible threads of human distress and suffering could transcend his personal experience. Given the artistry with which Brenner shaped his unhappy, stuck heroes, with both ridicule and empathy, I find both possibilities plausible, and perhaps more valuable than those offered by Perry, Hilu, and their critics.

Our desire to engage with this question of a man’s century-old personal world is also the product of the changing landscape of bereavement in Israel. The shifts in Holocaust commemoration from monolithic, abstract invocations of “the Six Million” to personal stories; the growing personalization and intimacy in military bereavement; and the flood of personal stories of the victims of the October 7 massacre reflect an interest in mourning the unique qualities of individuals, including attributes and relationships silenced or minimized in previous generations.^{xii}

Could it be that the passage of a century, in which the horror of his murder was silenced by the media and left unspoken, has enabled us to finally process and celebrate—in a personal, intimate way—Brenner as a private person, rather than a lionized national hero? It seems to have allowed us to look openheartedly into the lights and shadows of his psyche. But it is also important not to reduce Brenner—or any literary luminary—to a glossary of group identities. Brenner might have wrestled with silenced and unrequited desires, but he was also blessed with a rare, sparkling intellect, and with a heart open to identifying and protesting injustice and cruelty. A century late, we can reexamine these gifts and their bearer, in all his remarkable flaws and beautiful imperfections.

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- ii Menahem Perry, *Sit on Me and Warm Up: The Homoerotic Dialogue of Brenner and Gnessin* (Tel Aviv: The New Library, 2020).
- iii Orin Morris, "'Sit On Me and Be Warm': Menachem Perry's Abject Failure," *Haaretz*, February 9, 2017.
- iv Yehuda Vizan, "The Fall of a Giant," *Ha-shiloah*, 2017.
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- vi Gal Ohovsky, "Literature Eclipses Reality," *Mako*, July 18, 2018.
- vii Editorial, "'Murder at the Red House': Imagining the Truth," *Israel ha-yom*, June 28, 2018.
- viii Maya Sela, "'Murder at the Red House': Alon Hilu Turns Brenner's Murder into a Crass Oriental Tale," *Ha'aretz*, September 21, 2018.

- ix Anita Shapira, Brenner: A Life Story (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008); *Ha-me'orer: Brenner* (dir. Yair Kedar, 2016).
- x Arik Glassner, "'Sit on Me and Be Warm': The Issue of Homosexuality among Hebrew Literary Giants," *Ynet Books*, February 25, 2017.
- xi Yosef Haim Brenner, *In Winter* (1909); *Bereavement and Failure* (1914). Project Ben Yehuda.
- xii Dalia Ofer, "We Israelis Remember, But How? The Memory of the Holocaust and the Israeli Experience," *Israel Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013): 70–85; Liat Granek, "Mourning Sickness: The Politicizations of Grief," *Review of General Psychology* 18, no. 2 (2014): 61–68; Ilanit Hasson-Ohayon and Danny Horesh, "A Unique Combination of Horror and Longing: Traumatic Grief in Post-October 7, 2023, Israel," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 37, no. 2 (2024): 348–51.

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