

## RHYMED LETTERS FROM THE AKEDA

כל עוד בלבב פנימה  
יש מכתב קטן מאמא

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Following his 1934 poem “The Third Mother,” included in his first collection of poems “Stars Outside,” Palestinian poet and lyricist Nathan Alterman composed two additional lyrics that focus on the Jewish mother from a Zionist point of view. The first, a cabaret song, “A Letter from Mother,” was originally performed in 1941, and was dedicated to the Jewish Palestinian soldiers who joined the British Brigades in the Second World War in Europe. The second, “Upon the Road,” was a political poem, published in Alterman’s op-ed column “The Seventh Column” in “Davar” daily, in 1947, in the post-Holocaust and early War of Independence times. All three lyrics, representing Alterman’s three poetic paths (poetry, songwriting, and political journalism in verse), evolve around the figure of the Jewish mother and the evolution that she goes through once a Zionist in Palestine, and a mother of a warrior. Both “A Letter from Mother” and “Upon the Road” are Alterman’s free but overt variations on two popular Yiddish lyrics, which also focus on the Jewish mother in the Diaspora (and from two Diasporic points of view). “A Letter to Momma” was a popular Yiddish song written in the United States in the early 1920’s (and was put subsequently in the center of a 1938 motion picture in Yiddish); it was one of the characteristic lyrics about the sentimental image of the Eastern European *Yiddishe Mamme*, developed in America. “Upon the Road Stands a Tree” was written by the poet Itzik Manger in 1938 in Europe (and shortly after that, set to music, became a popular song); while also focusing on the Jewish mother, it is composed in an utterly different tone, presenting the mother as an anxious, dominating and castrating figure. Alterman, by using those popular sources as the clear foundation for his own lyrics, portrayed an utterly different nature of the Jewish mother. While having the beloved originals remain in the background, his portrayal of the dramatic transformation of the Jewish mother, once en route to Palestine, was thus drastically reinforced.

The proposed paper will compare the Yiddish sources with Alterman’s derivatives, and will concentrate on his seemingly naïve, folkloristic (even parodic) exploitation of the Diasporic originals (lyrics, allusions and conventions) as a manipulative platform, upon which he erected the new powerful mother figure, who was bestowed the heroic mythic biblical duty (or privilege) to perform her son’s binding (*Akeda*), according to Alterman’s Zionist ethos.