

When something comes to me, it comes like a river

By Alit Karp

Sha'ar International Poetry Festival celebrates its 10th anniversary as a festival of "Sex, Lies and God – After the 10 Commandments". Among the poets from Israel and abroad participating are Ban'ya Natsuishi from Japan, Casimiro De Brito from Portugal and Rita Odeh from Israel.

Haiku is a poetic genre that developed in Japan, and according to Western interpretation it contains 17 syllables, often deals with nature, and uses two images that are usually thematically interconnected. Since the beginning of the 20th century in the Western world Haiku poems were a subject to poetic focus, both through translations and through original poetry of the genre written in many languages.

Natsuishi, De Brito and Ode interpret Haiku in very different ways, some more traditional and some less. The debate on the subject is held in a friendly and yet rather stormy atmosphere, and when it comes to its conclusion it becomes clear that those who support modernism actually draw many themes from tradition whereas the one that declared she sympathize with tradition integrates political, psychological and social contents in here poetry.

Poetry broke many style barriers in the last 200 years. How much Haiku poetry with all its restrictions is still relevant in the 21 century?

Rita Odeh: "I love the classical Haiku that usually deals with nature. Whereas in Western poetry I have to create the image, in Haiku the image rises on its own from the natural phenomena surrounding us. This image always tells something on human nature".

De Brito: "For 40 years I've love classical Haiku and translated Haiku poetry from Japanese into Portuguese. After meeting Ban'ya Natsuishi I learned from him a lot about modern Haiku and found out this genre draw from the history of poetry at large. Nowadays it actually engages in every theme: there's surrealistic Haiku, political Haiku like the poems written after Hiroshima, and there's social Haiku. Haiku is very small but it contains a great deal, and the genre include even ars-poetic poems.

I developed a method that I think is an innovation in the field of Haiku, based on my seeing nature in the whole world, also in humans and what they've created. In my philosophy, by which many were influenced, man isn't more important than a grain of sand, and there's equality between all natural phenomena. Modern Haiku is but a way to say things within a single breath, and it's always an elegant saying because brevity is its essence"

Natuishi: "In the numerous countries I visited, and perhaps in Japan as well, there are prejudices about Haiku, the first of which is the idea that Haiku deals with nature and restricts itself to two images per poem. The earlier genre that preceded Haiku, the Tanka (that contains 14 additional syllables) uses a smaller vocabulary and selects its words meticulously, whereas Haiku uses a larger and simpler vocabulary, and even sexual expressions. These differences reflect the fact that in the beginning Tanka was the poetry of the higher classes whereas Haiku belonged to the lower classes. But these differences have been blurred over the years. At the outset of his career Basho uses a vocabulary that deals with nature and creates rich and unexpected images, but his poetry lacked depth at that stage, and only later his style changed, along with his way of living: he went out to wild nature. Upon encountering things that are hardly expressible, he was forced to innovate, and this way turned his vocabulary into a revolutionary and avant-gard one. This is the essence of modern Haiku: engaging in any subject with a revolutionary use of words." In the first poem in the "Haiku with the 10 Commandments" cycle he writes:
'Sandstorm / I'm carrying / a thinking god.'

When trying to connect each of the poems in this cycle to the respective commandment I failed. Are you aware of the tension between the themes you deal with in your poetry and the the Biblical themes of the Ten Commandments?

My Haiku poetry is exceptional in both Japan and other countries: I am a Japanese poet, but I was born in Cuba and studied in a Catholic school. Therefore I'm acquainted with Christian culture, doctrine and dogma, and I always think on both the monotheistic god and the Japanese gods. The gap between them nourishes me. Believers of the monotheistic god quarrel with each other, especially in this part of the world, but when I write about the Ten Commandments I think of Him, the monotheistic god, also because I have deep personal sympathy for Jesus.

Casimiro de Brito, a Haiku poet from Portugal, discovered the poetry of the East when he was 18 years old. He tells about that moment, that this poetry shook his world and he felt it expressed the deepest feeling man has towards nature. But his Haiku poems herald a totally different thing. In one of them he writes:
'After crossing / the desert — a mouse! / It sings? Me too'

Death, the decaying body and the search after serenity are themes that preoccupy you in your poetry. And suddenly in Haiku one finds out you have a sense of humor. Does the strict form free you?

I don't think my Haiku poetry is humoristic, but rather philosophic. I write out of compassion to all creatures, and therefore compare man with mouse in my poem. In my view, life exist only here now, but into this brief moment I have to put everything. That's exactly the experience I try to reflect in my poetry. In my poem about the butterfly I say: 'Run butterfly! / Men are coming, / their armies.' This is another example for a subject about which one can write thousands of words, but here it is summarized. The brevity and economizing of Haiku makes me gradually silent, because words cannot express what silence contains. More and more I focus on the small and simple".

Despite her declared love for nature, Rita Odeh of Nazareth usually writes about political and social themes: women's condition in the Arabic society in Israel, and the condition of Arabs in Israeli society in general. Her Haiku poetry too is imbued with her political-social-psychological message. Her love for the classical Haiku is expressed in her poetry along with personal insights on the human soul. She writes:
'Cloudy morning – / a kite flies higher / than its string

I which format you prefer to write your poems?

"My writing was born the same time I was. Even when I tried to stop writing, after years of abstaining, it called me back. I experienced all forms of writing: I wrote poetry, I published three novels and short stories, and there's no genre I prefer over the others. I see myself as a world camera, sensitive to everything that happens in it: the condition of women, of Arabs, of nature, and other themes. But I never see myself as an advisor to anybody in anything. I'm not an expert on any subject; I only write, illuminating things for my readers, that may decide on the matter whatever they like. When something comes to me, it comes like a river, and I never know how fast and how deep the current will be. It's the river that decides its own course, not me.

English translation by Amir Or