Walking down a road, looking at the landscape, at a flowing stream, a tree, the breaking dawn, or perhaps at the cemetery on the outskirts of town—this is an image that recurs in the literature of the Talmudic sages. When two people walk together, they not only engage in an outing and a dialogical learning of some important tenet away from their regular place of study; to them, space itself becomes a textbook. The landscape, the stream, the tree, the dawn, or the cemetery acquire metaphorical meanings. They are the primer, the text, and they signify something beyond themselves. In the story before us, looking at the cemetery describes the encounter between life and death or their necessary proximity. Life does not point to the potential for death in this story; rather, death points to the potential for living.

I want to begin, however, with the “real situation” that opens the midrash, a father and a son walking through an uninhabited, unfamiliar space, searching for signs of life. I want to do this by looking at another walk, through another landscape, in another time, a walk that is in many ways the reconstruction of the same midrashic figure.

Emuna Elon’s story “Ben ha’ama” (The Handmaid’s Son) was published in an issue of the journal Dimuy that appeared in the wake of the Oslo Accords. The story is a retelling of the biblical tale of Hagar and Ishmael, transported to a newly built settlement in the West Bank. The biblical Sarah becomes Ronit, a young settler wife and mother. Since she and her husband have built themselves a big home in the settlement, a two-story house with Italian marble, three bathrooms, an open-space kitchen, and other trimmings of bourgeois domesticity, Ronit succumbs to the urging of her friends and hires a maid from the nearby Palestinian village, Jizoun.

Relations between employer and maid, between master and slave, are complex in
themselves; Elon surveys them simultaneously through the perspective of an ethnic hierarchy and as the reconstruction of a biblical story laden with theological meaning. The danger of a dialogue with the Palestinians, even a hierarchical one, is one of the questions the story explores. But my goal, as stated above, is to return to the walk down the road and the representation of space.

“Once,” Elon writes in the second paragraph, after describing the entrance of the maid into Ronit’s home, “Wednesdays had been Ronit’s favorite days, since Wednesday was her day off from her job at an office in Jerusalem, and she could walk her young son to preschool. Together they would admire the size of the settlement and its beauty, and Ronit would tell her son of how only recently there had been only rocky hills here, hills that had been desolate since the time of Abraham. Passing down the paths, the child would call out the names of flowers blooming in the gardens, and when they arrived at the center of the settlement, he would point to the synagogue being built and proudly show his mother how the construction had progressed since the previous Wednesday. Ronit would smile, thinking of the Muslim workers who occasionally interrupted their work building the synagogue in order to kneel down, facing Mecca.”

Walking down the road makes it possible for mother and son to study space together. The son can see only what exists on the surface, only the space of the present. The present, seen through his eyes, is a growing settlement, blooming gardens, and a synagogue being that is being built, step by step, as the weeks unfold. Ronit is also able to point out what is not seen: the hills of the area, as she tells it, have been desolate since the time of Abraham. The signs of life within the settlement point not only to the way in which the settlers have “filled” an emptied-out landscape, but also to their status as the extension of a Biblical narrative. Space is narrated as a vacuum, a void. This emptying out, this temporary death, turns the settlement into the signifier of a life that once existed here, of the “death” of another story, a death for which the Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza offers the chance of salvation and revival.

Pointing to the Zionist story, or to the story of settlement in the West Bank and Gaza, as the signifiers of another city, which existed here during the mythological past of the Jewish people and which has since fallen into the desolation of exile, makes it possible to put life in proximity to death, destruction alongside salvation.

But the story of salvation, as Elon tells it, requires selecting and privileging the ethnic, Jewish narrative over other possible ways of life. In telling the story of Jewish settlement as a variation on the tale of Isaac and Ishmael, Elon says that choosing one requires the exclusion of the other.

Therefore, when Ronit notices that the synagogue is being built by “Ishamels,” the kind who pray with their faces turned towards Mecca, she also notes the dangerous potential of this act of building. Her smile attests, perhaps, to the enormity of the repression involved in ignoring the danger. Looking at the landscape, then, once again becomes metaphorical, and the observer of the landscape cannot always note the real option that the metaphor blurs and beautifies.

But as reading the story closely reveals, the mother and son’s walk, which enables them to learn together and to form a growing connection to the landscape, abruptly ends when the Palestinian maid arrives. Once the maid has been allowed into her home, Ronit no longer has time to look at the view; she is busy with preparations, offering hospitality to the maid and accommodating her every
demand. Allowing Ishmael’s mother into her home, to put it bluntly, causes Ronit to give up not only what matters, but her very existence. Without going into all the details of the encounter between the maid and her employer, I’d like to look for another minute at the way in which Ronit observes the space around her, an observation that becomes increasingly complex after the maid arrives.

At the height of the dialogue between the two women, Ronit asks the maid about her home, the village of Jizoun. The maid answers in irregular Hebrew, “There’s nobody who has his home in Jizoun, Jizoun is not even a village, just a place to wait until we return to our land.” The maid’s meager, stereotypical language, presented in Orientalist fashion, is similar to what Toni Morrison has described as the “Africanism” of American literature. This language is part of what marks the speaker as dangerous, inferior, other. But Ronit does not notice the potential danger in the maid’s speech; nor does she note the dangerous content of her words. Even the maid’s declaration of her own nationalist perspective, which threatens to destroy Ronit’s own home, does not prompt Ronit to recognize the great danger of conducting a dialogue with this Palestinian woman. Unlike the biblical Sarah, who “dealt hardly” with Hagar, drove her out, and later expelled both her and her son, Ronit wants to right the wrong that has been done to the Ishmaelites, whether in the Bible or in the present.

The text’s main claim, however, involves not only the impossibility of acting morally toward those who are not moral, but especially the impossibility of offering the “other” any kind of existence without endangering the existence of nationalism itself. When the Arab woman declares that Jizoun is not her home, only a stop on the way home, Ronit answers her silently, in her heart: “How can you return to your land, Ronit thought, two generations after we built a kibbutz or a university on it.” Giving back the territory of the West Bank, Elon says, is not a solution, because the West Bank is not Palestinian territory. Palestinian land, the Palestinian utopia, is the land on which Tel-Aviv University was built.

What Ronit tells the maid in her heart is a different story from the one she told her son. The Jewish settlement not only signifies an ancient past and thus revives it; it is not only a sign of that past life that existed before exile and death; it is also a “cemetery” for other possibilities. Tel Aviv University, Elon says, is not a headstone for the Palestinian village buried beneath it, but a final, concrete burial, which obliterates not only the village but any possibility of “redeeming” it, “returning” to it, reviving it. The role of Zionism, then, according to Elon, is not only to revive the desolate wilderness, to re-create a past life and the narratives of the Bible, but also, through that revival, to turn other possibilities of existence into a desolate wilderness. Elon proposes a return to the biblical story of choice and an exiling of those who are not the territory’s biblical heirs — even if this is their home, even if they are the sons of the same father.

But the choice, Elon says, is not a simple one to cope with or to confront squarely, nor is it easy to embrace an unwavering sense of identity that is not tempted by stories of the “other.” Ronit, unlike her husband, is incapable of doing that. Therefore, to cope with the hills of the West Bank, which are also “filled” with the signs of another life, Ronit plants fast-growing cypress trees outside her kitchen window, to hide what she calls “the embarrassing view.” This concealment, Emuna Elon tells us, allows Ronit to forget what she still remembers at the beginning of the story, before the maid’s appearance, thanks to the landscape itself: that the settlement can be seen as a direct continuation of Abraham’s life, which is
rescued from the desolation and oblivion into which it has been pushed.

Elon’s story as a whole, like the midrashic text, is the story of observing a real landscape. But the real landscape, as in some of the readings of the midrash, becomes in Elon’s story a metaphor for something else, something greater. Death, the midrash says, is close to life, and at the same time signifies life. The cemetery in the midrash is not necessarily a Jewish one, and yet it signifies the existence of a city, a city that has Jews in it, too. Elon offers a vulgar metaphor, seemingly similar but ultimately different. The Jewish settlement is not only built as the signifier of an ancient Jewish past that has supposedly died, but also, simultaneously, it is constructed over the death of the Palestinian past. The proximity of death and life, of the Jewish narrative and another narrative, seems to Elon a source of danger. That is why the metaphor she proposes is one that substitutes one story for another, unlike the midrashic story, which is the story of an encounter, a complex proximity, of existence and nonexistence, Jews and non-Jews, of a city and a desolate wilderness.

\[1\] In Hebrew:

"אין איש מה הבית של בינוון.
נינוון לא כפר כלכל. רק מקובב בשיול
ליזךוד ענד אטיף הםירם לאמדים שלום."