"Yehuda Amichai and Suspicion"
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Battlefield soldiers and incarcerated people are both groups who may find suspicion and watchfulness of their surroundings help them to survive in a fast-changing and dangerous world. I observed a similarity between these two groups after reading Yehuda Amichai's poetry for the first time in this class, "Literary Analysis of Islamic and Jewish Texts." Amichai is a celebrated modern Israeli poet and a former soldier. As a professional jail Chaplain with the Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy (CIC) since 2015, I recognized in some of Amichai's poems similar characteristics of strong watchfulness that I often see in prisoners. Chronic or systemic trauma in the daily life of both prisoners and soldiers may explain the origins of characteristics they share.[1] I am not a therapist but I receive regular training in trauma informed pastoral care so I can support prisoners who have mental illness.

In this paper I engage with four of Amichai's poems and argue in support of using the *hermeneutic of suspicion* as a particularly appropriate lens for interpreting Amichai. Using the hermeneutic of suspicion is a good fit in a jail-based class because it translates the inmates's lived experience into interpretive reading practices. I will compare my understanding of Amichai's perceptions as a former soldier with the experiences of inmates in my "Transforming Literature of the Bible" (TLB) jail class. TLB uses the hermeneutic of suspicion to engage with scripture and theology more deeply rather than as a tool of literary criticism. To use this lens, TLB offers the inmates five questions that allows them to interact with the text more fully. In this paper, I use those questions so that I can more deeply understand both Amichai and his poems.

[1] Roberta Churchill, "Trauma Informed Pastoral Care – Part 1," Unpublished workbook developed for the Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy by Advocates for Human Potential (2022), 12.

I recently added Amichai's poem "The Real Hero" into the regular TLB reading in our consideration of the story of Abraham in Genesis. Pairing literature with scripture has proven to be an effective way for inmates to engage their faith more deeply. To understand how well TLB is working, each term I measure effectiveness through a series of surveys of inmates and seminar observers. In 2023–2024, 99% rated TLB as Excellent and overall satisfaction and 98% of inmates said that they would recommend the class. Detailed information about these responses is in my Doctor of Ministry dissertation, *Transforming Literature of the Bible in Jail*.[2]

Part of my work is to listen to the experiences and concerns of inmates, many of whom are military veterans living with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or related trauma. There are about 2,000 inmates in Santa Clara County now,[3] the majority of whom experience mental illnesses and / or substance abuse disorders.[4] To give context on the scope of mental illness among jail inmates, according to Matt Mahan, San Jose's Mayor since 2023, about half of the inmates in Santa Clara County have a mental illness.[5] The jail environment makes these challenges even more difficult.

Katie Rose Quandt and Alexi Jones wrote, "Prisons and jails are extremely violent places. People often experience traumatic verbal or physical assaults and dehumanization at the hands of correctional officers. And the various stressors in a carceral environment also increase the chances of violence between incarcerated people." They continue, "Exposure to violence in

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[2] Katy Dickinson, "Transforming Literature of the Bible in Jail," Doctoral diss., Berkeley School of Theology, March 2025, submitted to Proquest for publication, 11 March 2025.
[3] Office of the Sheriff, "Custody Bureau," Santa Clara County, accessed 3 May 2025, https://sheriff.santaclaracounty.gov/bureaus/custody-bureau#:~:text=Our%20jail%20is%20among%20the,stay%20of%20about%20292%20days.
[4] Robert Eliason and Eli Wolfe, "Lawmakers say Santa Clara County is in a mental health crisis," *San José Spotlight*, 11 January 2022, https://sanjosespotlight.com/lawmakers-say-santa-clara-county-is-in-a-mental-health-crisis/.
[5] Matt Mahan, "Fixing Santa Clara County's Mental Health System Would Save Lives and Money," *San Jose Mercury News*, 25 October 2022, https://mahanforsanjose.com/fixing-santa-clara-countys-mental-health-system/.

prisons and jails can exacerbate existing mental health disorders or even lead to the development of post-traumatic stress symptoms like anxiety, depression, avoidance, hypersensitivity, hypervigilance, suicidality, flashbacks, and difficulty with emotional regulation."[6]

The hypervigilance that is associated with trauma and mental illness in prisoners may be similar in some ways to the sought-after "elevated situational awareness" in the military. Enders, Gordon, Roy, Rohaly et alia write, "U.S. service members complete missions in dynamic and complex environments for sustained periods of time and must rapidly adapt to changes in tasking and mission priorities. For mission success, a keen sense of situational awareness (SA) is an invaluable skill."[7] That is, the suspicion and watchfulness of their surroundings that can help both groups to survive is considered a positive trait for soldiers. Although it may help prisoners to get through incarceration alive it may also be a symptom of mental illness.

I come from a military family and began studying military history as an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley in parallel with my honors study of English Literature with a focus on Shakespeare. One of my Cal classmates was a newly-retired Marine Master Sergeant whose honors thesis was on the battle tactics of King Henry V, as seen in Shakespeare's play of that name. My own honors thesis was on *King Lear*.[8] I became interested in military history because while many texts gave the results of a war, few gave specifics on why the conflict was lost or won. Discussing battlefield experiences, strategy, and tactics with my father's classmates from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, taking U.C. Berkeley history classes

[6] Katie Rose Quandt and Alexi Jones, "Research Roundup: Incarceration can cause lasting damage to mental health," *Prison Policy Initiative*, 13 May 2021, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/05/13/mentalhealthimpacts/.
[7] Leah R. Enders, Stephen M. Gordon, Heather Roy, Thomas Rohaly, et al., "Evidence of elevated situational awareness for active duty soldiers during navigation of a virtual environment," *PLoS One*, 10 May 2024, 19(5), https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11086823/.
[8] Katy Dickinson, "Goneril as a Complete and Motivated Character in King Lear," undergraduate honors thesis (unpublished), U.C. Berkeley English, 1979.

on the evolution of warfare, and reading military history books in the decades since has made me more aware of a soldier's life and point of view that I see in many of Amichai's poems.

The four works I selected from *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*[9] reflect Amichai's experience as a soldier, or present what I see as his elevated situational awareness or suspicion. Keeping to only four poems was hard because the more Amichai I read, the more interested I became in his work and context. Renowned Amichai translator Chana Bloch[10] writes about Amichai's origins in her Foreword 1996, "Amichai made his living as a teacher while studying war—as a soldier with the British army in World War II, with the Palmach in the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, and with the Israeli army in 1956 and 1973. He was formed half by the ethics of his father and half by the cruelties of war."[11] Eleanor Ehrenkranz wrote in a review of Amichai's biography, "Amichai knew what it felt like to be both a victim and a justified retaliator. He 'refused to worship heroism, even though he identified with the national struggle,' and he 'challenged the sacrifices it demands.' The articulation of his feelings and irreverant tone of voice resonated then and now with the Israeli public."[12] Like many prisoners, as a soldier Amichai was simultaneously a perpetrator and a victim of violence. In the criminal justice world, this is called the "victim-offender overlap." Caitlin Delong and Jessica Reichert wrote, "While crime victims do not always become offenders, most offenders have been victims."[13]

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[9] Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Steven Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
[10] Robert Hirschfield, "Poet Chana Bloch, Amichai's Translator, Dead at 77," *Tablet*, 25 May 2017, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/poet-chana-bloch-amichais-translator-dead-at-77.
[11] Amichai, *xvi*.
[12] Eleanor Ehrenkranz, "Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet / Nili Sharf Gold," *Jewish Book Council*, 3 January 2012, https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/yehuda-amichai-the-making-of-israels-national-poet.
[13] Caitlin Delong and Jessica Reichert, "The Victim-Offender Overlap: Examining the Relationship Between Victimization and Offending," *Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority*, 9 January 2019, https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/the-victim-offender-overlap-examining-the-relationship-between-victimization-and-offending.

The first of the four focus poems is Amichai's "The Real Hero"[14] that interprets the Sacrifice of Abraham (Genesis 22) in a way that resonates with how we discuss that story in my TLB class in jail. The second poem, "The Diameter of the Bomb,"[15] explores the expanding circles of pain and time resulting from a wartime incident, reaching even to God. A third, "God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children,"[16] considers victims of war that gives context to my grief reading daily news of the ongoing Gaza War, remembering pain and tears for friends and colleagues on both sides who are killing each other. Finally, reading "What Kind of Man,"[17] gives me a sense of Amichai's own awareness of his identity and how he sees the world.

In every four-month-long TLB class, we discuss the hermeneutic of suspicion on the first day. Some background follows on how this hermaneutic works. University of the South Professor of New Testament, Christopher Bryan writes about this lens, "The expression 'hermeneutic of suspicion' is a tautological way of saying what thoughtful people have always known, that words may not always mean what they seem to mean. All 'hermeneutic' ('interpretation') by its nature involves such 'suspicion.'" Bryan describes different ways of using this lens, describing as the most beneficial, "when we suspect that texts, either with intention on the part of their authors or not, are not telling us the truth, or at least not the whole truth."[18] He continues, "Such a hermeneutic of suspicion as I have described is deconstructive, but that does not mean that it is destructive. It does not demolish the text, but rather explores what is going on in and around it. When the hermeneutic is complete, the text still stands, and

[14] Amichai, 156.
[15] Amichai, 118.
[16] Amichai, 1.
[17] Amichai, 171-172.
[18] Christopher Bryan, *Listening to the Bible: The Art of Faithful Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23.

stands more clearly."[19] Using the hermeneutic of suspicion questions has given me a new understanding of Amichai's poems without feeling that I have ripped them apart in the analysis.

An alternate way of understanding the hermeneutic of suspicion is presented by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950-2009) who served as a lecturer and/or English Professor at U.C. Berkeley, Duke University, the City University of New York, and Dartmouth College. As part of developing this paper, I read her well-known essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You." Her essay considers, among other questions, the value of the hermeneutic of suspicion in literary criticism.[20]

When I started seminary in 2018, my first two books on hermeneutics were in the "New Approaches in Biblical Studies" series by Fortress Press. In *Mark & Method*[21] and *Judges & Method*,[22] the featured critical lenses are, narrative, reader-response, deconstructive, feminist, social (or social-scientific), cultural studies (or cultural), postcolonial, structuralist, ideological, and gender. While *suspicion* is probably discussed in the two books, it is not a chapter topic or in the index. I offer this detail because I was surprised that Sedgwick wrote,

> In particular, it is possible that the very productive critical habits embodied in what Paul Ricoeur memorably called the ''hermeneutics of suspicion''—wide-spread critical habits indeed, perhaps by now nearly synonymous with criticism itself—may have had an unintentionally stultifying side effect: they may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller.[23]

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[19] Bryan, 25.
[20] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling / Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). https://www.ias.edu/sites/default/files/sss/pdfs/Critique/sedgwick-paranoid-reading.pdf.
[21] Gale Yee, ed. *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: MN: Fortress Press, 2007).
[22] Janice Capel Anderson, Stephen D. Moore, eds. *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).
[23] Sedgwick, 124.

It seems that in Sedgwick's literary criticism world, the hermeneutics of suspicion is an old standard lens, while in my context of theology, scripture study, and pastoral care, the lens was seemingly not important enough to rate its own chapter in our introductory texts.

Among other topics, Sedgwick's essay discusses the hermeneutics of suspicion using vocabulary like paranoia, delusions, pathology, and other mental health terms. She writes, "the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice has involved a concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia."[24] Sedgwick continues, "I myself have no wish to return to the use of 'paranoid' as a pathologizing diagnosis, but it seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds."[25] I was interested in the wide variety of uses to which one lens can apply, and I agree with Sedgewick that using more than one lens during inquiry is likely to yield a greater understanding. However, as a jail Chaplain, I am both trained and required to leave mental health diagnoses and vocabulary to the county's medical professionals, with whom I work closely. CIC's "Trauma Informed Pastoral Care"[26] staff and volunteer training workbook uses almost no psychiatric diagnosis language. While I use the hermeneutic of suspicion in my jail classes, it is not in a medicalized sense but as a way of breaking open complex texts for greater understanding. Our discussions also use deconstructive, feminist, post-colonial and other interpretive lenses as needed but the hermeneutics of suspicion is usually the initial approach.

Suspicion is inherent to an inmate's life whether or not they experience mental illness. Inmates are rightly suspicious of the prison and justice system, while that system and our larger society suspect and fear them. As Stanford University Assistant Professor of Sociology Matthew

[24] Sedgwick, 125.
[25] Sedgwick, 126.
[26] Churchill, 2022.

Clair writes about his research on injustices in the criminal courts, "Among the people in this study, it was quite common for them to recount trusting their first lawyer the very first time they were arrested. But after repeated involvement with court, they slowly came to develop many reasons to distrust the legal system and to mistrust future lawyers."[27] This environment of mistrust aligns with the lived experience of the inmates and makes the hermaneutic of suspicion a good fit for TLB's interpretive reading of scripture and discussion of theology.

My TLB students in jail have for many years seemed very comfortable using the hermeneutic of suspicion to interpret scripture and literature. Once they are familiar with it, I encourage the inmates to use this lens for their court documents as well to empower them in the complex, adversarial, and confusing justice system. They can use all five questions or just a few to gain clarity on a complex story or situation, depending on what helps most. Here is the TLB text with which I introduce this lens,

> **A Lens for Interpreting Scripture: Hermeneutic of Suspicion[28]**
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> In this seminar, we interpret scripture using the lens, or hermeneutic, of suspicion. That is, when reading any text, especially scripture, we suspect that the words may represent a point of view. We do not assume that written text is perfectly objective, so we ask questions. This method of interpretation can be used for any written text, not just scripture.
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> **Questions to Ask of Any Text**
> 1. Who wrote this?
> 2. When was it written?
>   a. What did they know?
>   b. What did they not know?
> 3. Why was it written?
> 4. Who speaks?
>   a. Who is active, named, important?

[27] Matthew Clair, *Privilege and Punishment: How Race and Class Matter in Criminal Court* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 76.
[28] Katy Dickinson, "Transforming Literature of the Bible in Jail," Doctoral diss., Berkeley School of Theology, March 2025, submitted to Proquest for publication, 11 March 2025.

b. Who presented as being worthy of speech?

5. Who is silent?
    a. Who is passive, not named, less important?
    b. Who is presented as being less worthy of speech?

In "The Real Hero," Abraham, Isaac, and the angel are presented as colluding against the ram, whose body is only there to serve their need for death, battle cries, and obscene joy. This poem was first published in *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry 1948-1994*. There is speculation that the poem was written in 1967 after the Six Day War.[29] Amichai's intimate examination makes the ram seem the most real and colorful of them all. The poet turns the great story of Abraham's faithfulness to God on its head to celebrate the mute creature whose death turned an act of faith away from tragedy. Here, Amichai presents what he has observed to be going on, not from the point of view of who has authority and is externally important but rather seeing who is actually present, who is doing what.

In Genesis 22, everyone (God, Isaac, and an angel) speaks to Abraham, indicating his primary importance and worthiness. Isaac, who is presumably a boy or young man at the time of his near-death at the hands of his father, is nearly silent. Isaac speaks to Abraham in Genesis 22:7 before the sacrifice but is not quoted in scripture again until he is a grown man. Many authors have read the story of Isaac with sympathy for his experience and written on the evidence of his near-muteness afterwards that he was traumatized by his experience,[30] mentally challenged,[31] or even on the autism spectrum.[32] It seems that only Amichai has focused on the innocent animal,

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[29] Kees van Hage, "4.45. Yehuda Amichai, poem 'The Real Hero' (1983)," *A Tool of Remembrance: The Shofar in Modern Music, Literature and Art*, accessed 4 May 2025, https://keesvanhage.wordpress.com/4-45/.
[30] Marci Bellows, "Isaac, Trauma, and Healing - Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 2018," *Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek*, 12 September 2018, https://www.cbsrz.org/isaac-trauma-and-healing/.
[31] Steve Law, "Was Isaac Mentally Challenged?," *Finance for Churches*, 25 August 2015, https://financeforchurches.org/was-isaac-mentally-challenged/.
[32] Kerry Lee, "May Your Children Be Like Isaac: Reading Isaac on the Autism Spectrum," *Bite-Sized Exegesis*, 11 March 2028, https://bitesizedexegesis.com/2018/03/19/may-your-children-be-like-isaac-reading-isaac-on-the-autistic-spectrum/.

giving his sympathy for the ram who was actually sacrificed. Here is how I visualize my analysis.

"The Real Hero"	
The real hero of The Binding of Isaac was the ram, who didn't know about the collusion between the others.	*Who wrote this?* Yehuda Amichai as the singer (trans. Bloch & Mitchell, 1986).[33] Seems to be a first person perspective - in the poet's own voice?
He was volunteered to die instead of Isaac.	*When was it written?* Perhaps in 1967 - after the Six Day War?
I want to sing a memorial song about him— about his curly wool and his human eyes, about the horns that were so silent on his living head, and how they made those horns into shofars when he was slaughtered to sound their battle cries or to blare out their obscene joy.	*Why was it written?* Maybe he wrote this story of an innocent harmed by violence to engage the reader in noticing and celebrating the blameless whose bodies are slaughtered in battle.
I want to remember the last frame like a photo in an elegant fashion magazine: the young man tanned and pampered in his jazzy suit and beside him the angel, dressed for a formal reception in a long silk gown, both of them looking with empty eyes at two empty places, and behind them, like a colored backdrop, the ram, caught in the thicket before the slaughter, the thicket his last friend.	*Who speaks and who is silent?* The primary actors are God, the angel, Isaac, and the ram. Readers who know the scripture story may hear the voices of all but the ram from Genesis 22. There, the ram is silent.
The angel went home. Isaac went home. Abraham and God had gone long before. But the real hero of the Binding of Isaac was the ram.	

Jail Chaplains rarely know the details of inmates's court cases, including whether they are guilty or innocent of the charges against them. Our focus is on the future and supporting

[33] Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Steven Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

incarcerated people to grow in a positive direction, particularly in terms of their faith and spirituality. They may be going to prison, or home to their community among the free people but either way, we focus on their future. Every week, most of the incarcerated people I visit are legally innocent (that is, not convicted), yet they are treated as if they were guilty. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, GTU Professor of Theological and Social Ethics, writes that one of the defining features of structural injustice is it continues regardless of the virtue or vice of the people involved.[34] I believe that America's system of mass incarceration is an example not only of structural injustice but also of systemic evil. Inmates, like soldiers, and Abraham's ram, are often caught in dreadful circumstances regardless of their guilt, innocence, or whether their actions deserved punishment.

In Amichai's poem "The Diameter of the Bomb" there is a detailed observation of both a weapon of war and the ripples of destruction and human suffering that extend from it. Each successive line enlarges the scope of that physical analysis of size and violent consequences to include the pain caused by this bomb, including hospitals, a graveyard, and a man mourning across the sea, until the whole world and even the throne of God are included in the circle.

"The Diameter of the Bomb"	
The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters, with four dead and eleven wounded.	*Who wrote this?* Yehuda Amichai (trans. Bloch & Mitchell, 1986). Seems to be a first person perspective - in the poet's own voice?
And around these, in a larger circle of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered and one graveyard.	*When was it written?* Published in Amichai's 1979 collection, *Time.* The poem seems to be based on his memories of military experiences, 1948-1973.

[34] Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 60.

But the young woman who was buried in the city she came from, at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers, enlarges the circle considerably, and the solitary man mourning her death at the distant shores of a country far across the sea includes the entire world in the circle.	*Why was it written?* Amichai may want the reader to consider the wider destruction of one bomb by starting with a weapon specification and expanding to include the entire world and universe it impacts.
And I won't even mention the howl of orphans that reaches up to the throne of God and beyond, making a circle with no end and no God.	*Who speaks and who is silent?* The poet speaks, the man mourns, the orphans howl. The dead are silent.

Gila Reinstein wrote of Amichai in Yale University's announcement of a memorial event and celebration for acquiring his papers and manuscripts, "Amichai traced his vocation as a writer to his time stationed in Egypt with the British army."[35] That is, Amichai's poetry and his war experiences seem to have been entangled from the start. The opening of "The Diameter of the Bomb" could be a soldier's report on an observed incident, with minimal human compassion but accurate for record keeping purposes. It seems coldly based on a soldier's knowledge of the size, range, and destructive effect of the explosive. Amichai's genius is in contrasting measurements of war in the first sentence (a description that seems to resonate with his personal experiences and memories) with the howl of orphans in the last (acknowledging with compassion the horrific consequences of war).

"God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children" was read by Yitzhak Rabin in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1994 and is the opening work in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai.* It opens with another soldier's observation of an incident in war.

[35] Gila Reinstein, "Event Celebrates the life of Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai," *Yale Bulletin & Calendar*, 20 October 2000, v29 no 7, http://archives.news.yale.edu/v29.n7/story11.html.

“God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children”	
God has pity on kindergarten children. He has less pity on school children.	*Who wrote this?* Yehuda Amichai (trans. Bloch & Mitchell, 1986) Seems to be a first person perspective - in the poet’s own voice?
And on grownups he has no pity at all, he leaves them alone, and sometimes they must crawl on all fours in the burning sand to reach the first-aid station covered with blood.	*When was it written?* The poem was published in 1955 in Amichai’s first poetry collection, *Now and In Other Days*.
But perhaps he will watch over true lovers and have mercy on them and shelter them like a tree over the old man sleeping on a public bench.	*Why was it written?* Amichai uses this poem’s contrast of innocence and compassion with violence to engage readers in considering war, perhaps from a new perspective.
Perhaps we too will give them the last rare coins of compassion that Mother handed down to us, so that their happiness will protect us now and in other days.	*Who speaks and who is silent?* The poet speaks but may include the reader by using “we” in the final stanza. God acts but is silent.

The all-too-real opening image of war is balanced against the hope for God’s potential mercy and compassion expressed in more gentle images. Grownups crawling on all fours through burning sand covered in blood seem more real, powerful, and memorable than the old man sleeping on a public bench or children being handed a coin by Mother. By 1955, Amichai had already survived being a soldier in World War II as well as several wars in Palestine and Israel. Asking in the hermeneutic of suspicion why this poem was written, “God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children” feels something like a plea for peace after too many wars, asking that the happiness of children will provide protection even if God has no pity on grownups. Hillel Halkin writes that Amichai

was both “a deeply Jewish poet” and “a non-observant Jew in secular Israeli society,”[36] so this poem may be as close to a prayer as felt comfortable. Benjamin Harshav, Amichai’s translator and friend, is quoted, “[Amichai] saw the role of the poet as the one who raises direct experience against the stereotypes of official discourse. He combined straight-forward talk with sudden shifts to analogical situations, comparing the high and the low, the sacred and the mundane, the personal and collective destiny.”[37]

The fourth poem I consider is “What Kind of Man.” This seems like a kind of autobiographical meditation, or perhaps represents Amichai interacting with how people see him.

“What Kind of Man”	
“What kind of man are you?” people ask me. I am a man with a complex network of pipes in my soul, sophisticated machineries of emotion and a precisely-monitored memory system of the late twentieth century, but with an old body from ancient days and a God more obsolete even than my body.	*Who wrote this?* Yehuda Amichai (trans. Bloch & Mitchell, 1986) Seems to be a first person perspective - in the poet’s own voice?
I am a man for the surface of the earth. Deep places, pits and holes in the ground make me nervous. Tall buildings and mountaintops terrify me.	*When was it written?* Published in an English translation by Chana Block in 1986. I could not find an earlier date.
I am not like a piercing fork nor a cutting knife nor a scooping spoon nor a flat, wily spatula that sneaks in from underneath. At most I’m a heavy and clumsy pestle that mashes good and evil together for the sake of a little flavor, a little fragrance.	*Why was it written?* If it was written in 1986, Amichai had lived for decades as a literary celebrity - and perhaps felt in need of some candid self perspective.
Guideposts don’t tell me where to go.	*Who speaks and who is silent?*

[36] Hillel Halkin, “A Complex Network of Pipes,” *Jewish Review of Books*, Winter 2018, https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/2866/complex-network-pipes/#.
[37] Gila Reinstein, 2000.

I conduct my business quietly, diligently, as if carrying out a long will that began to be written the moment I was born.	Seems to be in the voice of the poet - or a version of the poet created for this occasion?
Now I am standing on the sidewalk, weary, leaning on a parking meter. I can stand here for free, my own man.	
I'm not a car, I'm a human being, a man-god, a god-man whose days are numbered. Hallelujah.	

In this poem Amichai is someone "with a complex network of pipes in my soul." After so many years as a jail Chaplain visiting and praying with inmates who exhibit greater or lesser amounts of mental illness, Amichai's poems feel refreshingly grounded in lived experience. The poem's acknowledgment of complex spiritual plumbing seems both humble and robust. This may indicate that Amichai's violent military experiences had less traumatic effect on him than does the daily life of most prisoners, or perhaps that his writing helped Amichai to process his experiences in a positive way.

Amichai acknowledges his fears when he writes frankly, "Deep places, pits and holes in the ground make me nervous. Tall buildings and mountain tops terrify me." These particular fears may be left over from his many years as a soldier or may be normal anxieties common to those living in a complex modern world. In considering when the poem was written, the content seems in accord with having been written by an old man (it mentions "the late twentieth century" and "an old body from ancient days") looking back on his adventurous and productive life. Halkin writes of Amichai's poem, "he heightens our awareness of the potential interconnectedness of all things. Not clumsily like a pestle, but with the precision of a needle, a

good metaphor stitches together fragments of the world that have never been joined before."[38] The hermeneutic of suspicion similarly supports me as an appreciative reader of Yehuda Amichai in understanding this text more clearly.

In our "Literary Analysis of Islamic and Jewish Texts" class on 2 May 2025, we had a presentation and discussion of proposed paper topics. Some class questions were on how jail inmates feel about poetry and the use of poetry in our weekly TLB class. Since then, I contacted two former jail inmates who have graduated from our TLB class and are now in reentry, rebuilding their lives after incarceration. I also discussed the question with the inmates in my current class. Two of the men quoted below are Christian, middle aged, Latino, and bilingual in English and Spanish. The other is Chrisian, white, and speaks mostly English. I asked them to reflect on their TLB experience and thoughts about poetry supporting their walk in faith (or not!). Here are is what they said,

> "Poetry has helped me to express myself in a unique way. When I try to do poetry by sitting down and thinking about it, I think it is not as authentic as a spontaneous one. For example if I'm laying in bed and I'm thinking about something I jump out of bed and just start writing. Those are the best poems I have written."
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> "I read lots of poetry in the class. Every poetry that I read had positive stories that taught me to be a better person even when I was in jail. It taught me to be strong in my faith and that everything is possible when you have faith to follow. No matter what we go through, everything is going to be OK."
>
> "The Brilliant poetry that is introduced to us in relation to the topics of study, are everything from heart felt amazement, shockingly heroic, Educationally sound, & a way to give multiple perspectives & ways of understanding. Artist & Poets…Bring understanding and awe, I've called home at times in excitement."

[38] Halkin, 2018.

The prisoner who wrote that last paragraph gave it to me as part of a long letter written in pencil. He also told me that every Wednesday night, he sits by the dorm door looking through the glass to see the chaplains arrive. The TLB class is the highlight of his week.

The enthusiasm for poetry and literature that I hear from jail inmates is consistent with the experiences presented by Indiana State University English Professor Laura Bates. She has been teaching Shakespeare to male prison inmates as a volunteer in the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility in Carlisle, Indiana, working with thousands of prisoners since 1983. Bates argues that empowering prisoners to study Shakespeare can be life-changing, both for the students and the teacher. Bates writes, "I had come to prison to teach prisoners about Shakespeare, but I would learn from them at least as much as I would teach to them."[39] In one of her most potent passages, Bates writes of how her life and those of her inmate students became connected,

> I had the answer to my Shakespearean research question regarding verisimilitude. I could leave prison and write the articles I needed to publish in order to apply for tenure...But then I thought about all of these people we had locked away from the world, whom I had started to know...They had no one. They seemed to need me – or, at least seemed to need Shakespeare. I realized I couldn't leave – not now, and maybe not ever. In a way, I started to feel like I was serving a life sentence myself.[40]

I first learned about the book *Shakespeare Saved My Life* in a radio interview with Laura Bates in 2013.[41] My undergraduate honors thesis at U.C. Berkeley was on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, so I was fascinated. *Shakespeare Saved My Life* was one of the inspirations that encouraged me in 2015 to start a college-level faith-based weekly study program inside my local

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[39] Laura Bates, *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard, A Memoir* (Napierville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2013), 37.
[40] Bates, 78.
[41] "Teaching Shakespeare in a Maximum Security Prison," *Tell Me More,* hosted by Michel Martin, on National Public Radio, 22 April 2013, 14 minutes, https://www.npr.org/2013/04/22/178411754/teaching-shakespeare-in-a-maximum-security-prison.

county jail. Like Bates, best practices I use in my jail ministry are intended to show prisoners respect and compassion and give dignity in an incarceration system that rejects privacy, respect, compassion, and dignity for inmates.[42]

In this paper I have presented the hermeneutic of suspicion questions I use in my jail class and have engaged with four of Amichai's poems using that interpretive lens. I considered how the hermeneutic of suspicion works in jail and how it may be used in other circumstances. Analyzing Amichai's poems allowed me to compare my understanding of his perceptions as a former soldier with the experiences of inmates, giving me a better understanding of both groups. I look forward to continuing to use Amidhai's poems in my jail class for many years.

[42] Dickinson, 68-70.

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