

Prologue

Yosef Haim Brenner's life story encapsulates the drama of twentieth-century Jewish life: the transition from faith to atheism, from tradition to crisis; the wandering and migration from country to country; the transition from a profound connection with Russian culture to the discovery of Western culture; vacillation between Yiddish and Hebrew, between the first buds of the Zionist enterprise and an attraction to the big world. Brenner's murder in an Arab-owned orange grove near Jaffa during the 1921 riots, when he was only forty, made him the great martyr of the Jewish rejuvenation project in Palestine and, subsequently, an icon of Hebrew culture. Each decade, he is rediscovered by young writers seeking not only a literary model but also an exemplary figure, a guide and mentor for the afflictions of the time. Brenner is not easy to read, but in his writing his young admirers discover an abrasiveness and authenticity and the striving for truth that they seek. He delves into the soul's deepest recesses; he favors no one; he shouts the pain of the hopeless, uprooted Jewish individual and of the Jewish people who have yet to find solace. Brenner's wailing was later interpreted as predicting the great calamity that was to befall the Jewish people in the twentieth century. In addition to being revered as a man of God and a guide to truth in literature and life, he was also hailed as a prophet. In the new Jewish Yishuv (community) in Palestine, Brenner—with his Hasidic rabbi image of a miracle worker possessing moral authority and capable of speaking the unvarnished truth to anyone—met the needs of the young secularists. His charisma shone through his shabby clothes and the heavy coat he wore even in the scorching summer heat. There was something mysterious and inscrutable about him that attracted and repelled, that aroused admi-

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ration and awe. He was thought of as a great rebel who challenged petit bourgeois conventions and sought a reformed world, a just and egalitarian society. Every few years since his death, Brenner has been rediscovered and espoused by perplexed young people trying to find their way first in the twentieth-century and now in the twenty-first-century world. He is admired as a writer and cultural leader by religious and secular people alike—and even more so as a person who laid down norms for a society that had lost its moral compass. He was a man of contrasts: skeptical of Zionism and loyal to the Land of Israel, the country where he wanted to raise his son and where he was killed; he possessed the boundless pessimism of a realist who unblinkingly observes reality and also the latent optimism of a man who irrationally claims that “despite everything” the Jews’ will to live will prevail; he epitomized the love of man, the willingness to help anyone in need, and also the terrible awareness of the shortcomings of the human race in general and those of his people in particular. Since his death, idealists have held on to Brenner as the righteous man, the secular saint of Israeli society. In these times of social turmoil and seeking the right path, young people in quest of social reform are turning wistfully to Brenner as a symbol, a beacon for all seasons.