

## **In Berlin, I Founded the First Diaspora Hebrew Publishing House Since the Establishment of Israel**



Dory Manor and Moshe Sakal are founding “Altneuland,” a publishing house in Berlin aimed at distributing Hebrew books abroad. “Hebrew literature needs a government-in-exile.”

## **Dory Manor and Moshe Sakal. Now, more than ever.**

*Photo: Shai Levy*

*By Ronen Tal*

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Like many Israelis, Dory Manor and Moshe Sakal read with a mix of sorrow and bewilderment the recent reports on a petition signed by literary figures worldwide, calling for a boycott of Israeli cultural institutions allegedly complicit in “violations of Palestinian rights” or in “whitewashing and justifying Israel’s occupation, apartheid, and genocide.” They wondered how it is even possible for writers to think that ignoring a potential audience interested in their work could ever lead to ending the conflict or drive positive change. Beyond their frustration, they were professionally intrigued by the petition, as the couple, living in Berlin for the past five years, recently announced the launch of “Altneuland,” a new publishing house to promote Israeli authors, distribute their works across Hebrew-speaking hubs worldwide, and translate them into English and German.

Among prominent names like Sally Rooney, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Jonathan Lethem, Manor and Sakal found on the list, now facing a counter-petition, Jacques Testard—a British publisher of French descent. His publishing house, Fitzcarraldo, has revolutionized the UK book market over the past decade. Testard was the first to publish in English four authors who later won Nobel Prizes: Svetlana Alexievich, Olga Tokarczuk, Annie Ernaux (a signatory of the new petition), and Jon Fosse, turning him into a legend in his field. “To me, he was an object of professional admiration, considering the risks he’s taken and how he’s shown that one independent publishing house can make a significant impact. He was a source of inspiration while working on Altneuland,” Manor explains. “If he operated in the U.S., it would be a hard blow because he’s a publisher we’d love to collaborate with.”

The choice of the name “Altneuland” (“Old-New Land”), the title of Herzl's seminal novel from 1902, which described a Zionist utopia in the Land of Israel, is a gesture loaded with meaning. It reflects the couple's aspiration to establish, for the first time since the state's founding, a Hebrew publishing house abroad. Since Germany was one of Hebrew literature's main hubs in the early 20th century, such a publishing venture challenges prevailing norms about the ties between Israel and Hebrew culture. It's as if Herzl's motto, “If you will it, it is no dream,” is moving in reverse, defying its legacy.

It's no coincidence, Manor says, that the only ones who attacked the choice of the name Altneuland when it was revealed were Jewish settlers in the Occupied Territories, “as if we are appropriating something that legally belongs to them. I'm glad they don't like it.”

The two have been mulling over the idea for several years, but it seems they chose to launch their venture at the most challenging time, while Israel, as evidenced by the latest petition, is becoming increasingly ostracized by growing segments of the Western world. These segments, traditionally more inclined to take an interest in literature, now exhibit hostility. While pro-Hamas demonstrations have subsided recently in cities like Berlin and New York, they could resurface at any moment. Even before the war, most Israeli authors—apart from a select few like David Grossman, Etgar Keret, and Yuval Noah Harari—struggled to find an international audience. Is this really the right time to try to carve out a new market for Hebrew literature?

For Manor and Sakal, the answer is a resounding yes. Their model is based on collaborations with publishing houses and editors in the U.S. and Germany, the two largest book markets in the world. Over the past few months, they've engaged with major industry players in both countries, and the responses, they say, have ranged from interested to enthusiastic. Both express optimism in our conversation, although it is clear that more than just optimism is needed for such a high-risk project. Altneuland operates within the framework of *Migdalar*, a new cultural incubator managed by Israeli singer Yael Nachshon Levin, who resides in Berlin. A non-Jewish German businessman serves as its primary investor. One of his first steps was to send Manor and Sakal to a business management workshop.

Sakal is the publishing house manager, Manor the editor-in-chief, and another key team member is Jessica Cohen, a U.S.-based translator of Israeli literature. Cohen has translated works by Grossman, Keret, Maya Arad, Dorit Rabinyan, Amir Gutfreund, Ronit Matalon, Nir Baram, Noa Yedlin, and others. In 2017, she won the Man Booker International Prize alongside Grossman for her English translation of *A Horse Walks into a Bar*. Cohen is well-acquainted with the current aversion to Israeli literature—and the strategies to confront it.

“I won’t deny there’s anti-Israel sentiment following the war in Gaza. Of course there is, and I believe it’s justified to an extent,” she says over a phone call from Denver.

“There’s a growing sense that Israel’s actions go far beyond acceptable moral standards, and people feel compelled to speak out. Authors, translators, and publishers don’t have the power to change the situation; their only power is in words, and that’s what they use. It’s legitimate as long as it’s directed against policies.”

“Can we, as a publishing house, combat this? No. We’re not here to say we’ll translate books to present an alternative perspective. The idea is more abstract and broad, and it suggests—without sounding pompous—that there is such a thing as a literary republic. Israeli literary and cultural figures want to be part of the global discourse. This is a region about which there are strong opinions, and it’s important that different voices are heard, showing that many Israeli citizens disagree with what the government does in their name. That’s what we aim to highlight.”

Altneuland’s first books—between six and eight titles—are planned for release in the second half of 2025. However, the founders aren’t willing to reveal the titles or authors just yet.

“It’s clear that this collaboration is not just a business endeavor; it’s primarily a vision,” Sakal explains. “Sure, we started this journey with significant unknowns—we didn’t know how Hebrew literature would be received. We come out to the world as Israelis, with Hebrew, at a sensitive time. We cannot, nor do we want to, deny our identity. At the same time, we’re building something new. And that new thing is about refusing to retreat, despair, or sit idly by, waiting for things to calm down. Change will come only through action, building connections, and fostering dialogue.”

### **Has anyone ever hung up the phone on you?**

“No, but we’re not reaching out to people who might hang up on us. In the U.S., Jessica connects us with publishers and editors she’s worked with at some point in her career, and the responses are generally excellent. And even if someone were to hang up—so what?”

Cohen confirms that she has yet to encounter outright hostile reactions: “Here and there, there are editors and publishers who don’t reply, but that always happens; it’s not necessarily political. That said, the political situation does come up in conversations with those we’re in contact with, but we’ve never had a response saying, ‘We won’t work with you.’ People understand the importance of a project like this and we try to figure out together how to make it work.”



**Jessica Cohen**

**Given the limited profit potential, why would anyone invest in translating books originally published in Hebrew?**

Manor: “The investor backing us isn’t a gullible do-gooder. He’s not a naïve person who thinks he’ll get rich from literature. He’s well aware there are more lucrative avenues, but this is important to him. And precisely because he isn’t naïve, he knows it is possible to turn a profit. In Israel, the audience is small, and in the most optimistic scenario, a publishing house might barely break even. But once you operate in the two largest markets in the world, you can indeed turn a profit.”

**A Multicultural Fabric**

We meet Manor and Sakal on a beautiful autumn day at a café in Schöneberg, a western Berlin neighborhood far from the crowded tourist spots in the city’s east. The skies are clear, the air crisp, and the wind swirls the fall leaves in an array of colors across the sidewalks. The café, a blend of bourgeois and hipster vibes, is the kind of place found in any attractive international city, even in Tel Aviv during better days. The space resonates with a mix of voices in German, English, French, and Hebrew. Yet, the familiar German rigidity hasn’t completely disappeared—you need to punch in a code to access the restrooms.

Manor, 53, is a poet, editor, and translator, with a doctorate in literature. He is known for translating key French poets such as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Paul Valéry. In 2005, he founded the literary magazine *Ho!* and serves as its editor-in-chief. Before moving to Berlin, he taught at Tel Aviv and Ben-Gurion Universities and found time to collaborate with musicians like Rona Kenan, Maor Cohen, and Shlomi Shaban. In recent years, he has turned to writing prose. However, the novel he has been working on will not be published through the new house. “The contract for its publication was signed two years ago with Kinneret Zmora, before Altneuland even existed,” he explains.

Sakal, 48, has published seven novels to date. He managed the literary department at Israel’s Center for Books and Libraries, founded *HaArkhiyon*, an online archive providing free access to Hebrew literary works, and served as Digital Strategy Director at the Steinhardt Museum of Natural History at Tel Aviv University. Both have received numerous awards and grants in Israel and France.

In 2019, they were each invited separately to teach a semester at Stanford University in California. Before classes began, they decided to spend a few months in Berlin. “But then my father’s health deteriorated, and he passed away,” Manor recounts. “After the *shiva*, we returned here. I was in bad shape; I practically broke down. I realized I couldn’t travel to America to teach and asked Stanford to postpone by a year, which they agreed to. When COVID hit, we got stuck here with just two suitcases. Our apartment in Jaffa was sublet. Later, we vacated the apartment over Zoom with Moshe’s parents.”

Given their professional biographies, it’s somewhat surprising they chose to settle in Berlin rather than Paris, where they both spent significant periods. Unlike their complete fluency in French language and culture, they didn’t speak any German when they arrived in Berlin. However, they discovered the city to be a place where each person can maintain their cultural identity without being pressured to conform to rigid local standards. As a result, a diverse community of Hebrew-speaking artists and creators has taken root here in recent years.

“It was clear to us from the start that this is a city with a strong Hebrew presence and lots of Israelis whom we enjoy meeting and talking with,” Manor says. “The city’s fabric allows you to come here and stay true to who you are, being a Hebrew speaker with all the cultural baggage that entails. In our building in Kreuzberg, the WhatsApp group operates in English because, apart from one apartment with German students, everyone else is a foreigner. Sure, Paris also has many foreigners, but the expectation there is to shed your identity and become French, to be like them. If you fit their mold,

great—they'll welcome you warmly, but it comes at a cost. Here, it's different. You can remain who you are, and the city accepts you as you are."

They explain that this isn't just about interpersonal dynamics or some vague sense of freedom and financial ease, akin to what spurred the "Milky Protest" a decade ago. "Both Moshe and I were awarded a prestigious scholarship from the Berlin Senate (which functions as a state within Germany's federation) specifically for writers working in non-German languages," Manor says. "In Paris, such a thing would be unthinkable. The French wouldn't dream of awarding writers in languages other than French." Sakal adds, "It's not just that Berlin lets you live and create in your language—they actively encourage it. They say, 'The texture of this city is multicultural. This prize is for people like you to create in your native tongue.' Not only is there no official demand to blur our identity, but they also encourage and strengthen it."

The city's unique character provides a fertile ground for establishing their publishing house. "We're in a great position because, on the one hand, we're deeply rooted in Israeli literature. We don't need to wait for some external agent to report on what's being published in Israel," Manor says. "On the other hand, we're a European-registered company operating both in Europe and in the U.S. Our feet are firmly planted in both worlds, allowing us to do things that haven't been done before."

Despite these advantages, there are objective landmines that are difficult to neutralize. The Western literary scene is primarily interested in narratives from marginalized populations or groups historically excluded from mainstream cultural discourse—writers from Southeast Asia, Africa, the Muslim world, or indigenous communities that have faced oppression. Israel, accused of colonialism and perceived as home to privileged white citizens, doesn't exactly fit this trend.

"I apologize for being optimistic," Manor says, "but prominent editors and senior publishers are showing great interest. We asked one American non-Jewish publisher we spoke to very directly: 'Aren't you afraid to get into it at this time?' His astonishing reply was: 'I'm a bit perverse. A project like this defies expectations, and I love doing the unexpected.'"

Others expressed a cultural stance beyond personal perversion. "A German publisher we met told us that this concept of a language without territory is highly modern. It's refreshing that, unlike the physical borders separating pieces of land, the world of literature is open," Sakal recalls. "I asked him, 'Are you willing to endure attacks from

leftist intellectuals that might follow?’ His response was, ‘Yes, I’m aware of the sensitive position, but it’s where I want to be.’”

Despite the grim contemporary image of Israeli identity, the two have found that reality is often more nuanced than it appears. “Israel and the conflict are splashed across the front pages of newspapers worldwide. It’s a magnet for attention, drawing a lot of opposition—but not only opposition,” Manor says. “We’ve learned that when something captures intense focus, it also piques interest on deeper levels, such as literature.”

“And we’ve discovered something else: In terms of awareness, older publishers, especially in Germany, are still stuck in the Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua era. Slowly, they’re beginning to realize that Hebrew literature has evolved. While contemporary authors like Dror Mishani, Ayelet Gundar-Goshen, and Zeruya Shalev have found success abroad, this hasn’t fundamentally changed perceptions of Hebrew literature. We asked a veteran publisher whether he expects something different from an Israeli book compared to one from Portugal or Belgium. His response was, ‘Yes, I expect it to bring the Israeli experience, Jewish fate, and Zionism.’ But with younger publishers, we’re getting different responses.” Sakal adds, “One publisher told us, ‘I need people like you. I’m eager to learn about Hebrew literature, and I have no one to talk to about it.’”

### **Without Waiting for Government Support**

Oded Wolkstein, the chief editor of the Israeli Institute for Hebrew Literature, a state-funded organization promoting the translation of works by Israeli authors, is well aware of the challenges local writers face in finding an audience abroad, challenges that have significantly intensified over the past year. He met with Manor and was impressed by the plans they shared but does not fully share their optimism.

“In the past year, attempts to secure translations of Hebrew works have been an unequivocal failure, and this must be stated clearly,” he says. “It’s extremely difficult to find a receptive audience for Israeli literature these days. Altneuland seems to offer authors an attractive publishing route, but how this could be economically viable, I don’t know. I’m not easily charmed by diasporic ideologies that frame Hebrew as liberating itself from Zionist gravity and finding a new home on Europe’s enchanted shores. Often, these ideas feel cosmetic and overly simplistic. But concretely, this is a very interesting initiative.”

**You speak of the difficulty in translating Israeli literature, yet they report interest from publishers in Germany and the U.S. How do you explain this discrepancy?**



“One explanation is that they are deliberately avoiding public Israeli funding. In this sense, their starting conditions are very different from ours. Perhaps they’ve found a niche they can successfully tap into. Since they have no official ties to the Israeli State, they essentially reframe Israeli authors as Jewish or Hebrew authors. Something about the institutional framework of their publishing venture downplays Israeli identity, emphasizing Hebrew or Jewish identity, which to some extent facilitates easier acceptance abroad. Essentially, they uproot Hebrew from its ‘incriminating’ ties to territory and nationhood and reestablish it within the rehabilitative context of the European literary scene, with all its rich traditions.”

**Manor partially agrees with this interpretation:** “There is no sidestepping Israeliness on our part. There is no one who talks to us or receives an email from us who does not know that we are Israelis. But if you mean the current government of Israel, then there is a very welcome sidestepping. The thing that gives me immense satisfaction is that I do not need to wait for some kind of support coming from the current Minister of Culture or the Israeli government.”

**Still, this essentially involves detaching the work from the broader Zionist framework to something more cosmopolitan and Jewish, doesn’t it?**

**Sakal:** “It’s a welcome detachment because it indicates plurality. It allows people like us, many Israelis living abroad – and there will be more – to live not in detachment but in peace with their identity and to create something that is both new and old. The ambition is to create a Hebrew diaspora that strengthens Israeli culture through mutual exchange. It’s not at the expense of each other”.

**Manor:** “In Israel, there are outstanding writers, but they find themselves persecuted by a regime that seeks to suppress culture and literature. This didn’t start with the current government—just recall [the extreme right-wing Minister of Culture] Miri Regev and her stance on Chekhov. Anyone involved in literary matters in Israel feels persecuted. We’re doing something that, under normal circumstances, the government should have done through institutions like the Goethe Institut or the Institut français. Hebrew literature needs a government-in-exile, and to some extent, that government already exists.

If you look at the field of classical music, for example, the number of Israeli performers, conductors, and composers living in Europe is likely greater than those living in Israel. Until now, this was less relevant for literature, but under siege-like conditions—the ghetto that Hebrew culture has been forced into—the chances of changing or preserving anything long-term are slim. I deeply respect the work of authors and publishers in Israel, but looking at it with a somewhat detached eye, it’s clear to me that we can no longer rely solely on what’s happening in Israel today.”

## **Ghetto, siege—those are harsh terms.**

“Do you want me to sugarcoat reality? People I’m in touch with in Israel tell me, ‘I’m living in exile. Internal exile.’ So many people feel like immigrants in their own country, disconnected from what’s happening and from what the government is doing. Cultural figures in Israel live with a sense of persecution, constantly second-guessing what they say or don’t say, censoring themselves even before addressing the larger political questions. My closest friends—the people I care about most and respect deeply as literary figures—live hand to mouth. Public grants are almost non-existent, and the literary and cultural industries are steadily eroding. Every slice is taken away—one after another.”

This growing sense of siege is first and foremost reflected in economic terms. Due to recent events, public libraries no longer have the budget to purchase new titles. On top of this, not only do authors struggle to make a living from their writing, but now they are also expected to pay tens of thousands of shekels to publishers for the right to publish their work. Sakal and Manor emphasize that Altneuland will not charge authors a single shekel for publishing their books. In the current economic climate of Hebrew literature, this is almost revolutionary.

“At the point in the conversation where we tell German or American publishers that respected and central Israeli publishing houses require authors to pay for publishing a novel, they are shocked,” Manor explains. “They see it as a fundamental betrayal of readers’ trust. If a publishing house claims to love a book but then asks for money to publish it, the motives are no longer literary. Not only are German and American publishers unfamiliar with this practice, but they are alarmed when they hear about it.”

“I’m not a fervent Zionist,” Manor says, “but this might be the most Zionist thing one could do—publishing Israeli literature worldwide as a lifeline for a culture that’s under siege.”

Sakal is only slightly less blunt: “Yes, our venture reflects an act of migration, but its success will strengthen Hebrew literature as a whole. We’re enabling people who have no other options to publish their books. Essentially, we’re supporting literature in two ways—encouraging a new generation without the means to self-publish, and bringing this literature to the world. And this isn’t philanthropy; it’s business.”



## **Altneuland Business Cards at the Frankfurt Book Fair. “This isn’t philanthropy; it’s business.”**

### **The Real Battle**

The two first met in 2000, in Paris. Manor had already been living in the city for several years, while Sakal was about to begin his undergraduate studies. “I had translated one of my stories into French and received an offer to publish it in a magazine there,” Sakal recalls. “I knew who Dory was, I was familiar with his poems and translations, so I reached out to him for feedback.”

The spark was mutual and immediate, though it took several weeks for their relationship to begin. Manor traveled to Israel for a month-long visit, and the day before his flight back to Paris, Sakal arrived. “We overlapped by just one day. That evening, we sat at the Minerva bar, and it was the first time we held hands.”

They are still holding hands, supporting each other’s literary projects, and are considered a power couple in Hebrew literature—a title they would gladly forgo. In the tight-knit, combative world of Israeli literature, they have often been criticized—with allegations of improper conduct, self-promotion, and conflicts of interest appearing even in this paper. Their ambitious new publishing venture is likely to rekindle skepticism and criticism. They are aware of this but remain undeterred. Distance provides a certain advantage—even the fiercest cultural battles seem less threatening from afar.

“Let them criticize,” Manor says. “I could have just focused on writing my books, but I feel compelled to do things that serve the culture I owe so much to and that is dear to me. This comes at a price, and not everyone is happy about it. For nearly 20 years, I’ve been editing a literary journal, during which we’ve rejected hundreds, probably thousands, of manuscripts. Some people take it in stride, saying, ‘Okay, I’ll try again,

and next time it might get accepted,' which often happens. But others might say, 'You didn't accept me? You'll pay for that.' People are complex, and in a field like ours, which is so charged with emotions, you take on risks. It's part of the job. If I wanted everyone to like me, I'd choose another field, but even then, it wouldn't work. I do what I believe in, driven by passion, love, conviction, and pain. And for those who can't handle it—they're welcome to start their own publishing house."

For now, they feel their vision has garnered enough supporters. "During the protests against the judicial overhaul, we weren't in Israel, but we watched from Berlin," Sakal says. "It was heartening to see the solidarity that formed there, something I had felt was missing before. I remember many internal struggles within the left and the literary world. Now, I hope that's over. People have learned—albeit late, but not too late—where the real battle needs to be fought."

Manor adds, "As someone who strongly opposes what the current government is doing, you realize you can't afford the luxury of fighting with your allies. You don't have the right to say you can't stand someone over literary disagreements because you're on the same side in the larger struggle. This moment is dramatic and fateful. In light of the current period, our actions are significant and far-reaching. We could have established a publishing house in Tel Aviv, and there are excellent publishers in Israel. But what we're doing isn't just another publishing house—it's providing Hebrew literature with the opportunity to make its way into the wider world. If our hopes are realized, this will become something monumental over time."