



And Rachel Stole the Idols The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing

Wendy I. Zierler
Wayne State University Press, 2004

Anxieties of Authorship: The Example of Yokheved Bat-Miriam (1901-1980)

The tradition of Hebrew Literature is one that extends from the Bible to the present day. It includes prose and poetry, interpretive and homiletic writings, codes of law, responsa, liturgical works, and memoirs. From the time of the Bible, however, until the 19th century, the number of literary contributions made by women to this wonderful rich Hebrew

literary tradition is excruciatingly small. The point emphasized by scholars who have researched the stories of such extraordinary medieval or early modern Hebrew women poets – women such as the wife of Dunash Ben Labrat (late 10th century Moslem Spain) or Asenath Barzani (16th century Kurdistan) – is their sense of wonderment that these women poets even existed. It is not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the emergence of such poets as Rachel Luzzato Morpurgo (Trieste, Italy, 1790-1871), and later, Yokheved Bat-Miriam (1901-1980),

Rachel (Bluwstein, 1890-1931), Esther Raab (1894-1981), Elisheva (1888-1949), Shulamit Kalugai (1891-1972), Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir (1902-1981), Miri Dor (1911-1945), and Leah Goldberg (1911-1970) that this picture begins to change.

What does it mean to be a poet or prose writer in a language and culture where women's contributions have been relatively absent? What does it mean to be a writer and a pioneering builder of an old/new Jewish homeland? To be sure, early Hebrew women writers both in Israel and abroad demonstrated mixed feelings about their distinct positions in Jewish social and literary history. The early poetry of Yokheved Bat-Miriam, collected

under the title *Merahok*, provides an excellent example of the ambivalent responses offered by the first Hebrew women poets to their remarkable historical position. The ambitious, aspiring pose adopted by the speaker in many of her early poems, her complicated and original syntax, her striking metaphors of color and recurrent use of images of wide-open space and distance all connote a brave discovery of new geographical and literary worlds. Even before her immigration to Palestine in 1929, Bat-Miriam wrote poems proclaiming the desire and ability to span continents and oceans, to explore unprecedented vistas in order to unite with the "you" of love, transcendence, and/or



WENDY I. ZIERLER

Dr. Wendy I. Zierler is Assistant Professor of Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies at HUC-JIR/New York, where she teaches courses on American Jewish literature, popular culture and theology, modern Hebrew literature, and Holocaust literature, in addition to courses dealing with gender and Judaism. Recently, she has lectured on the issues of gender and sexuality for the CCAR-HUC Joint Commission for Sustaining Rabbinic Education.

Dr. Zierler holds a Ph.D. in comparative literature from Princeton University, where she wrote her dissertation on Jewish women writers and the immigrant experience in Israel and the U.S. She received her B.A. from Yeshiva University, Stern College and studied at Hebrew University and Michelelet Bruria in Jerusalem. She has published numerous articles in books and journals, including *Jewish Women in America: A Historical Encyclopedia*, *Shofar*, *Journal of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum* and *Prooftext*, among others. Prior to joining HUC-JIR, Professor Zierler lived in Hong Kong for five and a half years while she was a Research Fellow in the English Department of Hong Kong University. She is married to Daniel Feit and they have three children.

poetry. At the same time, she often abrogated the bold assertion after daring to utter it.

Frequently, Bat-Miriam's speaker unleashes her bold thoughts but cannot escape the self-perception that in doing so, she is being witch-like and sinful; we see this in the following poem, which opens the title cycle of *Merahok* (originally published in *Hatekufah* in 1922):

*The distance, that lies
between you and me
I'll cross completely
and come before you.
All of its blueness
I'll conquer
and like a breath, swallow it,
and come
to tell you something.
What shall I say?
And if I say? – – –
And when I say
and turn to go,
my expanses will be shut,
like gathered wings,
and but a thin path
will thread itself
like a disappearance
revealed before me,
resting appeased at my feet.
This, my path
I'll drape with Elul leaves,
and amid columns of birch and
their mourning bliss,
sinning and bent, I'll return alone.*

This poem can be divided neatly in two halves, as indicated by the triple dash at the end of line 11. In the first half, the speaker audaciously introduces her plan to unite with the addressee, perhaps a lover, perhaps God or some other figure of transcendence. Intrepidly, she will cross the blue expanse dividing them (the oceans? the blue skies?), swallow it whole like a breath, and then stand before this “you” to speak.

Notice the way Bat-Miriam mixes images of space and utterance. Indeed, at the heart of this poem is a concern with how one commits the transgressive act of speech. The poet-speaker aspires not only to collapse the distance between her and the addressee but also to say something to him, to encapsulate the moment with some momentous (poetic) declaration. Then the speaker stops short. What shall she say to him? Will she say anything at all? Right here, at the very moment of union and poetic utterance, the speaker falls silent, the poem folding in on itself “like gathered wings,” and the poet trembling before the seeming omnipotence of her male addressee. What begins as a triumphant ascension or transgression seems to culminate in a disappearance, an autumnal fall from aspiration (as signified from the fall leaves of Elul, the Jewish month of penitence preceding the New Year), a shame-filled repentance for daring to speak.

According to Ruth Kartun-Blum, this and other poems in the title cycle of *Merahok* are primarily about the conflict between a desire for material bodily love and a spiritual desire for transcendence. Kartun-Blum reads this poem as expressing the speaker's regret at violating her monastic ideal and giving worldly expression to her romantic desires; for Bat-Miriam, “the sin inheres in the desire to realize the feeling, to achieve a resolution.”

I'd like to suggest an alternative reading, one that concentrates more on the poet's fervent and transgressive desire to claim (or steal) a poetic voice in a formerly masculine literary culture. As

noted earlier, the poem divides into two neat halves, with the second half expressing regret or undoing the bold assertions of the first. Yet what do we make of the fact that the lines in the second half are longer and far more redolent with metaphor and description? Does this increased poeticism represent a falling away from speech? Is it possible that in imagining a union with the (male) addressee, the poet-speaker has experienced a kind of artistic epiphany, allowing her to speak even more freely and poetically? Is this a poem about the speaker's regret over daring to speak or does it dramatize the poetic process that begins with an impatient spring-like burst of feeling and ambition and culminates with a contemplative emotional autumn?

Throughout the poem cycle, Bat-Miriam's speaker expresses feelings of sinfulness and regret, but unlike Kartun-Blum, who reads these expressions at face value, I see them as dubious declarations at best. Notice, for example, the celebratory description of sinful excess in the second poem of the cycle:

*In my dream
I saw a green flame,
rise and flicker,
rise and continue,
incline to the sides,
tremble,
frightened and roaring.
In my dream I saw a green flame.

I awakened, rose from my bed.
The daylight sun grew strong
before me
and as if contesting my eyes
before it
I opened to the expanse,
I stood,
I said:
Here I am, wicked.*

*A huge flame,
larger than the daylight sun,
took hold of the lock [tsitsit] of my
burning head
and rose in my eyes,
and trembled on my lips,
and kindled my hands and feet –
and they were carried like winds
in silent thirsty deserts.
And raised me aloft –
exposed
and open to all four winds of the
world
and before a screaming bursting sun,
I was presented
sevenfold as bright as him,
wicked,
bound to fiery flame
a wild scream on my lips
against the day sun.*

The first stanza of the poem circumscribes the vision, tucking the marvelous oxymoronic image of the green flame neatly into the nether world of dreams, between the repeated lines: “In my dream I saw a green flame.” In the second stanza, though, it is morning. The speaker awakens from her dream and faces the daylight sun – inspired and emboldened by light – like H. N. Bialik's poetic speaker in his famous poem *Tsafririm* (Imps of the Sun). In contrast to Bialik's poem, where inspiration comes to the poet in the form of mischievous, “wanton, madcaps of light” that “leap and dance and touch [his] soft skin” in a form of sexual play, Bat-Miriam describes a far more aggressive and explosive encounter. In the third stanza the poetic vision overcomes all boundaries of time, space, even gender. In defiance of the daylight sun, the dream persists, exceeding its nocturnal incarnation.

(continued on page 29)

HUC-JIR'S Wexner Graduate Fellows

(continued from page 7)

Fellows, guiding them in decision-making with regard to courses and careers.

Wexner Graduate Fellowship alumni can also be found on the HUC-JIR faculty, including **Dr. Alyssa Gray**, Assistant Professor of Codes and Responsa Literature at HUC-JIR/NY and **Dr. Jonathan Krasner**, Assistant Professor of American Jewish History at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati.

Dr. Aaron Panken, Dean of HUC-JIR/New York and a Wexner Fellowship alumnus, continues to be involved with the Program as a member of its faculty. He teaches professional skills development at the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Institute. For the past five years he has also worked with the Director of the Alumni Institute in teaching a session that transitions the Fellows to the next level as Wexner Graduate Fellowship alumni. "As a Wexner Fellow,

I was given a set of resources I would not normally have access to," explains Panken. "The combination of learning tools, peer mentorship, and the network of people I was exposed to are resources I still utilize today." Recently, Panken, along with his Wexner classmate, Rabbi Dov Weiss from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, brought together their Reform and Orthodox students for dinner and dialogue. It was a rare opportunity for both groups of students to discuss issues that affect their respective movements and to learn more about each other.

In this and so many ways, HUC-JIR's Wexner Graduate Fellows bring the enrichment of the Program back into the fabric of student life and learning on campus. Together with their classmates, they are builders of the Reform Movement and the Jewish People.

And Rachel Stole the Idols The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing

(continued from page 17)

At this point in the poem, the speaker steals the poetic/prophetic language of Ezekiel 8:2-4 as a means of expressing her own vision of inspiration. Suddenly, the poet speaker sees a huge flame that takes hold of a lock of her hair [*tsitsit roshi*], sets her on fire, and carries her aloft. The poem reaches its climax as the female speaker, hovering in the heavens, proclaims herself sevenfold as bright as the (male-gendered) sun, an allusion to Isaiah 30:26, where the prophet foresees that "on the day that the Lord binds up the breach of his people, and heals the stroke of their wound," the light will be "sevenfold, as the light of seven days." As in the case of the Ezekiel reference, this biblical allusion endows Bat-Miriam's

vision with a prophetic importance. More precisely, Bat-Miriam's speaker seizes upon the language of prophecy as a means of giving voice to her countertraditional poetic vision. David Jacobson reads this poem as transforming "Ezekiel's vision of a fiery God who causes the prophet to view Israel's evil into a vision of a cruel sun-god who implants an evil fiery passion within the speaker and shouts at her." According to Jacobson, in these early poems Bat-Miriam "conveys her longing to discover the image of a divine being who could serve as a positive alternative to the cruel uncaring image of the shouting, bursting sun-god." Contrary to Jacobson's reading, I would argue that Bat-Miriam is championing herself

over the sun-god and celebrating her superior form of illumination, even as she seems to apologize for it. Yes, the poem describes an explosive daytime encounter between the speaker and the screaming sun, but the speaker bravely and proudly announces that in her inspired state she is sevenfold as bright as the sun. The speaker relishes rather than rails against this poetic confrontation.

The combination of audacity and trepidation evident in these early poems by Bat-Miriam is a widespread feature of early Hebrew women's writing both in the Diaspora and the Land of Israel. These women knew well that they were treading on territory previously off-limits to them. It was their unprecedented task to cross into these spaces, seize the language, and transform it into something new, even as it echoes or borrows from tradition. On occasion, they faltered in this task, but more often than not they triumphed.

In Memoriam

Muriel Berman

Loving mother of Nancy Berman, Director Emerita of the HUC-JIR Skirball Museum, whose devotion to Jewish learning and the arts endures as a source of inspiration.

Jane Evans

Cherished honorary alumna of HUC-JIR and Director Emerita of the Women of Reform Judaism, whose visionary leadership advanced human rights and whose love for the arts beautified the HUC-JIR/New York campus.

JoAnn Morrison

Beloved friend of HUC-JIR, whose devotion to HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, which she shared with her husband, David, found expression in generous support for its programs and the establishment of its Hallel Community Choir.

Peggy Weil Steine

Dedicated member of the Cincinnati Board of Overseers and the Board of Governors and, together with her husband, David Steine, z"l, a generous supporter of HUC-JIR.

Laurence A. Tisch

Esteemed friend of the College-Institute; beloved father of Andrew Tisch, a member of the President's Council; and beloved father-in-law of Bonnie Tisch, a member of the Board of Governors, whose visionary philanthropy and leadership to strengthen Judaism were recognized by HUC-JIR's Award for Distinguished Jewish Service.