



CCAR and HUC-JIR
Joint Commission for Sustaining Rabbinic Education



Sefirah Study

Portraits of the Holy Land: Antiquity to the Present
April 25 – June 13, 2005

Week 3 – Conclusion **Contemporary Poets: Development of Feminist Poetry** **Dr. Ezra Spicandler**

We have studied the contributions of some of the leading women poets to the corpus of modern Hebrew literature. We began with what Dan Miron called, “The Four Mothers,” Rahel, Esther Rab, Yocheved Bat-Miriam and Elisheva, but stressed Esther Rab’s and Bat Miriam’s poetry. They represented the first generation of women poets. To be sure, there were predecessors but almost none of them have been of literary significance nor have they influenced the subsequent development of Hebrew poetry.

The second generation of women poets was led by Lea Goldberg, one of the major figures in Hebrew poetry. In a sense, Dalia Rabikovich bridges the gap between the generation of Leah Goldberg, i.e. the generation who wrote most of their poetry before the State was established, and the next generation. This third generation marked the triumph of women’s poetry. Yona Wallach was the most important poet of her generation and had profound influence upon her younger colleagues, both male and female.

The last generation is marked by the appearance of several poets who were deeply religious in terms of the Jewish tradition, observing the halacha in their public and private lives. Their leader was Hava Pinchas-Cohen, who despite her adherence to tradition, gave expression to feminine sexuality.

Some of the themes that were prominent in feminine poetry were:

1. Revolt against masculine domination
2. The stress on biblical themes in which women play a prominent role
3. Eros and sexuality and
4. Religiosity

While some of the earliest poets, Rahel for example, expressed their resentment of male domination, they did so subtly, and usually in poems involving broken relationships with men. Esther Raab was on the other end of the spectrum. She was blatantly and aggressively a feminist. In the poem "Atad," she describes her militant sexuality—no holds barred. The "Atad" is mentioned in the famous parable of "Yotam," used to fight the election of Avimelech (Judges 9). The trees, seeking a king, all in turn refuse the office, except the lowliest of trees, the Atad (the Thornbush). That tree was full of thorns. Rab uses the Thornbush as the symbol for herself; thorny, untouchable, and independent. She stabs her lover with the thorns. At the end of the poem she waves a sparkling sword and then implies that she is the aggressor in the game of love. Notice that she is wearing a white dress and the fields are whitened by the light. Dan Miron suggests that she is alluding to the ancient rites of the 15th of Av—a sort of ancient Jewish, "Sadie Hawkins Day."

Yocheved Bat Miriam, like many of the poets, hardly draws upon the Aggadot of the rabbis. Her references in the poem are taken from the Bible. First of all, she has Adam name the flora and fauna. To this list the poet adds that Adam also names his sorrow and Eve's mute desire, and the haughtiness of his tempting heart (Genesis 2:19). Eve "touches the edges of the greenery, the fruit trees, and the animals of the field, morning and evening," in violation of God's command, "From the fruit of the tree that is in the garden you shall not eat of it and not touch it, lest you die."

It is clear that Yocheved Bat Miriam, despite her being raised in a traditional home, rarely refers to rabbinic sources. Like many of her colleagues, allusions to biblical personalities, particularly women, are frequent. The same is true of other women poets except Zelda and Yona Wallach. In different ways, they both allude to Hasidic and Kabbalistic lore.

Lea Goldberg's poem clearly expresses a longing for the lost paradise of her mother's home. The child looking at her image reflected in the river sees her face torn, and asks, "Where are you carrying my little face? Why are you tearing my eyes?" However, the rural scene seems to indicate the Lithuanian countryside and the beauty of nature. The river seduces her and she must follow the river and abandon her mother's home. These are symbols of her opting for nature, beauty, and values of the Gentile world.

In Dalia Rabikovich' poem, the theme is not only the aspiration of the mother to the birth of her child, but the yearning of the poet for a better and more idealistic world. Note that she rejects the scorn of the marketplace, holding fast to the dream of ultimate redemption.

Finally, with respect to the poem by Yona Wallach, I believe that Ruth Kartum-Blum's interpretation is ingenious and possible, but might also have been coincidental.

Yom HaAtzmaut Sameach!!

Under A Thornbush

by Esther Rab (1899-1981)

I am under the thornbush,
 Fickle, malicious.
 Its thorns,
 I laughingly pricked at you.
 Light strikes the wide field,
 Every fold on my dress
 whispers to me:
 You are going forth towards a white and
 dancing death.
 You appear--
 And I am fickle and footloose.
 Waving a sparkling sword and on high-
 noon,
 In fields whitened by the light.
 I rendered our sentence at once.

אני תחת האטד

אני תחת האטד
 קלה, ידוֹנָה,
 קוציו צוחקת
 לקראתך זקפתי;
 אור מכה על המרחב,
 כל קפול בשמלתי
 לי ילחש:
 לקראת מות
 לבנה ומחוללת
 את יוצאה.
 אתה מופיע--
 ואני קלה צוחלת
 מניפה חרב נוצצת
 ובעצם צהרים
 בשדות לבנים מאור
 את דיננו גזרתי
 באחת!

Translated by Ezra Spicehandler