A LITERARY CRITIQUE OF THE WRITINGS OF DEBORAH BARON

by

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DIGEST

The world which Deborah Baron most writes about is a world which is no more; the world of the Jewish "Shtudle" in Eastern Europe, which disappeared completely with the Second World War.

There is, however, something in her stories which touches on those characteristics of life which exist eternally. There are small fragments of life which expand into great universal principles. In her works she brings into sharp focus the meaning of life and death, of joy and sorrow.

All her stories are graced with a clarity that shows us clearly the path that she feels will lead us, as Jews, to the right life. She broaches subjects so tender and close to the personal lives of people, as love and family relationships, that they must be spoken with care a fitting moderation, and a dignity. Most characteristic of her work is the degree of condensation and concentration. Each story she tells is worthy of a novel, yet she does not develop her characters or themes. They are revealed to us, in their essence, with minute details. There are no deviations and all distractions are silenced. Her stories fit the definition of the short story given by N. B. Fagin, they are "the compression of a maximum of life in a minimum of space".

Jewish sources are utilized in her story with a color and vitality unique in Hebrew Literature. Throughout her work there are little philosophical gems which sparkle in

their brilliance. There, over all, a gentle poetic touch which does not harm the reality of her characters, events, or deeds, but rather enhances them. Asher Barash justly calls her the "poetess in prose".

She has captured and preserved in her work a Jewish way of life which has passed into the oblivion of history, a way of life which is worthy of our attention in measuring our own status and progress.

PROLOGUE

She was a woman in whom words became bits of wondrous things. She was a woman for whom words were the doorways into strange houses. She was a woman by whom stories were given to every sort of person; the grieving, the joyous, the young, the old, and this was a woman of gifts. Her name was Deborah Baron.

To fully appreciate an art, one must know of the artist. Our art is prose, our artist is Deborah Baron, possessed of a name so songful in tone that its very pronouncement is, in essence, an image in song. She told tales of a simple people, of Jewish folk, of holy people and she told of these people in a sad monotone of motifs which spoke in truth if not in fervor. The core of Baron's experiences throughout her life is revealed expressively in her work. Her phraseology, her ideology of ethics, her instinctive compassion for all wretched peoples cascaded prolifically into her pen and from there onto paper where it remains fixed in unerfaced and unmistakable Baron style.

To discover from where this style originated, from whom and from what her ideologies sprang, must be an important objective, and is, in effect, the story of her life.

Her life was begun in the year 1887, in Uzda, Russia. Hers was not an ordinary family, for its patriarchs reached back for several generations in the rabbinate. Her father was such a Rabbi -- honored, wise, unembittered by lack and

impoverishment; glad always to give, in deed, in word, in spirit, of his good soul; and always proud and noble in stature and countenance he lived his years. Inspired with his child's mind, Deborah's father taught her Jewish studies. The Tanach, and the Agadah became sources of her life through hours of study with her Rabbi-father. ~~It was~~ as if she had been a son ~~that~~ the holy man indulged his girl-child in the treatises of Judaism, and she reveled in the knowledge, and became fruitful in texts with which she was later to weave her tales. So often her stories reveal a thorough understanding of Jewish law and reason -- unequaled in other authors.

By no means was her education limited to the scope of Jewish lore. She attended and graduated the Gymnasium in Uzda, thereby aquiring knowledge of that other world while she was still young. One wonders about the transformation Deborah made from her world of Judaic scholarship to the world of Gentile scholarship, which differed so vitally in intensity, in proportion, and in later influence on her.

The dreamlike transplantation of her emigration to Palestine formed conclusively the patterns of her mind and completed, one imagines, a process of development and experience which enriched her prose and enlivened her technical gift. She left Uzda in 1911, a young mature woman eager to express herself, eager to be free. She had lived a life engraved in realism. Her father's home had

been open to the hurts and burdens of Uzda, and throughout Deborah's young life, she had stood silently, in watchful mood, as the folk of Uzda came to their Rabbi with their woes. The gift of judgement she aquired from years of watching the judged. The gift of tolerance she aquired from years of watching the oppressed. The bitter secretions of Uzda stood before this imaginative child and she, with a head aged beyond its years, learned and saw life as life was. Yet, as there was misery, there was joy, and purity andlove and holiness. She consecrated Israel with each Jewish family in this tiny village. She remembered each face, each mannerism, each name, and wrote of them, when she could, in unerring truth. Her youth was a time of storage. Her youth was the wealth of her adulthood.

And so, having left Russia, Deborah travelled to Palestine and immediately became active in her chosen field. Two Worker's periodicals engaged her work. She wrote for "Ha Melitz" and "Ha Sheloah" for two years, then, in 1913, Baron became the editor of the literary section of "Hapoel Hatzair", a worker's party weekly.

The effect Palestinian life had upon her writings is difficult to infer. One wonders about her persistent return to "Shtetele" life in Russia. Her love of the European Jew was personified in so many of her stories. And yet the saga of an Israel in child-labor was seething all about her. It is true that she wrote many tales about the hardships she

saw in Palestine. When, in 1915, the Turkish government exiled all those with passports under alien country-liege, Deborah Baron was among those who were exiled to Alexandria. She wrote, then, a story, "That Which Was", about this very time and poured into it, all the emotion a young imaginative exile could muster. She felt as she did always, the pain of others, deeply, as if it was her own pain.

After the war, 1919, Deborah Baron returned to Palestine and resumed her life as a Zionist, a woman and a writer. She was a thoroughly dedicated woman and betrayed no emotion unless it was for her people.

It was at the beginning of the 1920's that Baron became productive. In succession she created "Sippurim" and "Ketannoth" ("Tales: Tel Aviv", and "Minor Things" respectively). For "Minor Things" she was awarded the Bialik Prize in 1933.

The scope of Deborah Baron's ambition was wide and uncurtailed throughout the late 1930's and early 1940's. She was the first Hebrew writer to translate Flaubert's "Madame Bovary" from its almost God-like craftsmanship to the difficult and individual language of Palestine. Baron's writing was greatly influenced by "Madame Bovary" and the tragic fateful destinies that ruled the French heroine often ruled those heroines which Baron created. There was still another French writer from whom Deborah learned much about style. Guy de Maupassant was an artist and craftsman in his field and added that extra touch of novelty to his

works which gave him an enviable reputation. Baron, many times, used the novelty of turning the end of a tale into something pungent, or comical, or paradoxical. And yet, so naively does this woman conceive her stories, that often this French craft is misused and lost among the over-present detailed figment of a woman's pen. This precision-like grasp of detail was, one thinks, the unspoken tragedy of Baron's life. She was engrossed and obsessed with each minute moment and motion, each insignificant daily task, and this was her dedication: to preserve the European Jewish village, to keep, for eternal time, the life of those holy Jews whose worlds were enveloped in the argosy of Orthodoxy and righteousness.

It was while she was in Palestine that she met and married a man as intensely dedicated to his work as she was to hers. His name was Joseph Aharonovitz, a writer, one of the founders of the Hisradrut, and for many years, editor of the weekly "Poel Hatzair". Their lives were dedicated, as one, to the rebuilding of Israel. Their work gave aid and courage to many workers there and one imagines that they were both, sources of inspiration to their friends as well as to their followers.

Baron, although married, continued to create and build her career. She wrote fluently all the years of her married life and stood firmly with her husband in all his endeavors, as well. Their married life together was not a very long one, for he died in 1937, leaving Deborah to carry

on and to create greater things. Her spirit never weakened and in 1943, for her story "Meanwhile" she was awarded the Ruppeen Prize given by the city of Haifa.

To tell of Baron's life in a span of years without disclosing a part, if only a part, of her thinking, would be to leave incomplete a life which was dedicated to completion.

She was a woman. A fine, proud, strong woman who understood the way of life of other women. She was blessed with kindness unduly bestowed upon many persons, and just as blessed with dislike of those persons who displeased her. She was not angelic, she was not prayerful, but neither was she caustic nor taut. Deborah had an overwhelming maternal love of all creatures, birds, dogs, humankind, children, and yet, bestowed this love with discernment upon those she thought wanted or deserved it.

Her entire life was for some purpose. Her childhood she caught in memories and painted these memories perfectly in her writing. She must have had a thirsting mind, and an audacious memory for when one reads her works, one sees the enormity of her storehouse of material.

Of her adulthood, one can say that she used it well. She recognized her potentials as a child, and wasted no time nor energy in polishing the prospective fruit of her adult world. She was a dogged worker and persevered through trial upon trial. The effect of her endurance is reflected constantly in her stories. Again and again all becomes

right, all returns to its former well-beingness again.

Regardless of the detailed motifs in which Baron's medium was portrayed, one sees a truly poetic mind and heart behind the often dour mononotonaus recreated actions in the Jewish village. Repeatedly, and unfailingly, Baron frees herself and launches beautiful phrases into her work. Again and again she flings exquisite tender bits of her own life into the lives of those she creates.

Perhaps one of the most highly significant emblems to Baron's simplicity and sincerity is the enrichment she took from her Rabbi - father. One often wonders if Deborah Baron's life would have been patterned differently had she resented her rabbinical heritage and not adhered so fervently to its precepts and goals. The literary world would have lost a great humanitarian had she not been aware of herself, of her people, of the world.

Deborah Baron died on August 20, 1956 in Israel. Her works are there, in Hebrew, a testimonial to a way of life lost, but yet not lost through her loving effort and dedication.

One hopes that future writers will take courage from the life of such a woman and remember always that it was love of her people that molded her life; love of a Jewish way of life which gave her impetus to life itself. Deborah Baron was a liver of two lives: that of her own present; and that life created in the dipping of a pen.

CHAPTER ONE

STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

In a recent conversation in Paris, Ignazio Silone, the modern novelist, is asked whether he was soon to travel to Mexico, Silone said, "I should like to very much, but how am I to understand Mexico if I haven't yet understood by own village?"[1] It has also been said that each man is a microcosm and carries the whole world about him. So too, Deborah Baron tells us quite clearly that the place in which a man lives is the center of his universe, and it is there that he lives, with all his body and soul. In her writing she attempts to brind into sharp focus the individual and his world.

One who comes to evaluate properly the work of Deborah Baron cannot overlook this great concentration which seems to govern all of her creations.

First of all the quantity of her works itself is not great. All of her stories are put into two collections, "Parshyot" and "Ma'emesh", which completes one of the stories in the first volume, and has an additional three stories.

Each of these stories is stamped with her seal of condensed concentration. The writer does not attempt to relate short episodes, or brief descriptions. Because of this she cannot be viewed as belonging to the school of writers of "novella", or of writers of short impressions. She attempts, in her writing, to create a complete story, though not as one

might suppose, within the mold of the large scale plot-type of novel. Her "story" is a plot-type novel, although condensed in all of its dimensions, owing to the limitations of external details.

From the vantage point of basic characteristics, the "story" of Deborah Baron resembles the novel, or, what we might call, short tableaux.

Deborah Baron did not write one comprehensive novel, but the story, "Ma'emesh", the continuation of "L'et Atah". Both together can be viewed as a comprehensive unit, but have, as well inner divisions, and within these, sections that the author has tied together, often rather weakly. The story "Ma'emesh" is divided into twenty-three chapters, each of which is, in a sense, an independent unit and lesson in itself.

N. B. Fagin, in the Dictionary of World Literature, states: "The compression of a maximum of life within a minimum of space is the ideal of the short story writer."[2] If this be the ideal, then Deborah Baron has achieved it. Her style reaches the heights of compression.

Reuben Wallenrod says of her: "She relates her quiet stories in a way which silences all other noises and makes her reader listen to the voice of her people, she shuts out all distracting lights and sounds, her characters become visible and audible. The few words said by these soft-voiced men are thus distinctly heard; the hitherto unnoticed men are revealed and understood. Deborah Baron uses to great advantage

the method she explains in one of her stories; the writer achieves his best through economy of words and colors; all he needs do is direct the scant light of his lantern and concentrate it on the subject to be described."[3]

One may add that there seems to be an economy of scenes in her writing. For the most part she draws the sources for her "lietmotifs" from the "shtiedle", the small Jewish village. She is well anchored in the atmosphere of the Lithuanian and Polish "shtiedle". Only on rare occassions does she turn to other horizons. In a few stories the central setting is in Israel.

There are other limitations in her stories; some which are the very mechanics of the story itself, ~~others, which~~ pertain to her choice characters. There is an overconcentration on women. Even the arena of activity is generally limited and the characters are tied to one locale. The brevity and condensation of her stories indeed make her a fine craftsman, as one can easily see from the structure of her stories. Deborah Baron however is an artist as well as a craftsman. W. Somerset Maugham has stated that: "to copy life has never been the artist's business."[4] Deborah Baron giving us detailed pictures gives us still another dimension.

Altnough she concedes the elements of changing scenes, she gives us a feeling of expansion in depth and in breadth. These two qualities do not contradict the first quality of limited scope. On the contrary, they seem to flow from ome

to the other. The beam of her light is directed and concentrated on the subject to be viewed. With this approach, the seemingly superfluous words of her characters take on an added impact and meaning. The directed beam of light gives her characters a stature they never before possessed. It is this which makes her writing so different from that of other writers of the period.

"Her style of writing fits well with the previous generation of writers, Gnessin, Schufman, and a bit of Brenner, from them she learned and was influenced but there is a definite distinctive style that is hers and gives her a uniqueness."[5] We might say that this unique angle, from which she views life and reality, is a very acute one. One can admit that any outlook is limited by subjectivity, but many times an artist attempts to see things from the point of view of others; that while deepening into the souls of others he can shade the reality he sees with many colors. This is not true of Deborah Baron. Her view of things in her stories are fed from a most egocentric point of view. This is that source of uniqueness but it is, as well, the source of her monotonic coloring which shades all her work.

To achieve in her stories what is known as "totality of effect", she has turned to the misfortunes of life. Her stories know the sudden catastrophy that comes upon man. They overflow with death and its ultimate social consequences: widowhood, orphanage, and loneliness. The central "lietmotifs"

are death, terrible illness, and infirmity. It is as if the tragedy is foreseen and becomes the molding factor in the fate of man. This is why there are the doleful echoes, the faint lamenting voice of the writer as she accompanies her people upon their trek on the "Via Dolorosa". That is the reason why many of her characters seem caught up in the dreadful light of her beam. The voices themselves seem to have a monotony, not only because of their dirge-like character, but also because many of their misfortunes are the same, and the author drives home their inevitableness. Many of her delicate characters are broken on the rack of life; these who would seem worthy of the good life and not bleakness and death. She seems to pose, many times, the question of theodicy. Yet, with an unquestioning fatalism, these characters step towards the final stage of destruction. Many times her stories have the appearance of the classic tradedies, wherein death brings along with it other tragic events; e.g. Oedipus, Romeo and Juliet. In the story, "A Terrible Moment", the author describes a widow whose husband and daughter dies, and then she receives news that her son, a student, the only remnant of her family, has suddenly dropped dead. When this tragedy is announced to her she too breaks down and dies. In the story "Shifra" the woman freezes to death under those conditions related to the death of her husband; a husband of a day in the story "Dreams" loses his wife in a train accident. In the latter the author remarks; "to him in such sorrow it

is impossible to find in any novel." Even in these tragedies, however there is no great cry. "In Deborah Baron there is the deep sigh which is more effective than the sharp cry."[6]

It is from this deeply felt inner experience that she adds her additional dimensions. From them she has deduced several laws of life. Each story, in a sense, is the case by which she proves the general law. Sometimes these general conclusions are phrased in the form of aphorisms. Her stories are imbedded with these wise sayings; they are like jewels which sparkle. It is quite interesting to pick out these sayings and to examine them. From the story "Grandchildren", -- "Things are sometimes wearying and sometimes go along well, there are both the high and the low, this is no life itself." From the story "A Terrible Moment", -- "Somebody has already made the comparison of the pain of another person to a fire that breaks out in a stranger's home, those who come to look are awed, or even saddened by it, but at the same time they are warmed by its light."

With such an approach the writer creates whole stories the symbols of which reflect on all embracing reality. Certain things said by Deborah Baron are as social laws to which life itself testifies to their truth. They repeat themselves to show their verity. Although her stories are not intended as decrees they are patterned toward that end. The characters are lifted up to the degree of being symbols and the happenings are depicted as if they emerged from a supernatural law from

which there is no escape. It is not that she is cut off from the basis of reality or that she is completely engaged in didactics. She rarely moves from concrete reality, from the real life of her characters. Her plots are almost a replica of life ~~as mentioned before~~, but all together they give us a glass through which we can see many things. She has a full identification with this existence.

This glass may be the camera lens used by a photographer-son to take his mother's picture in the story "Via Dolorosa"; "With her he uncovered and revealed all the hidden, condensing all character, and showed it to her. All her affliction, the pained love, the fear and pangs of her heart, the unsounded sighs, the dammed up tears and bereft motherhood, -- all these he drew out with rays of light and showed each wrinkle, all the grooves of her face which were untimely worn there."

She may tell of a paralytic looking out at her limited world through the window at her bedside, as in the "Via Dolorosa". Here she is able to sit and observe the world as a non-participant.

With her light, she takes one up closely to examine reality. In the story "Meanwhile" the girl, who has been idolized as a princess, is discovered, after her death, to have been a normal human being: "She came into the room, opened the clothes closet and examined by candlelight, the dresses hanging there. Indeed, it was so plain clothes, cotton and flannels without any kind of decoration."

It is light which gives to her the desired meaning of life. With it she can guide her view, here she speaks of the inner light of imagination, from the story "Fragments": "~~With~~ the imagination that is like the sun, it is given not only to the rich, the unfortunate can use it to refurbish to a great measure the defects of their lives. In it the prisoner sees himself free from his shackles, the exilee once more graces his motherland."

Understanding and experience are also illuminating. From the story "Freidl" we derive an image of what the artist was like in her youth: "She together with the singing sun drenched birds and the smell of the grass drunken with dew, absorbed within herself all the impressions of these daily happenings, all these segments of reality, the convulsions of the heart and the joys of the heart, and in the course of time after they have been refined and illuminated by understanding and experience were joined to chapters of life, which were to her later on in her solitude, and on sleepless nights a source of joy and comfort."

Love, as well, is light; that light that burns and stretches between a man and woman deeply in love, as in the story "Via Dolorosa" -- "From his look, when he was in her presence, there was stretched out to her a line of light, that shortened and lengthened according to the space between them, it was in this light, which she reared in coldness luxuriated in as in the rays of the sun."

Sometimes her light is rather hazy and she does not see too clearly. It is then that she becomes almost apologetic, In the story "Fragments" -- "The children crouched together and slept on the ground, like blades of grass. When the moon came up, it looked upon them with merciful wonderment. The things that are told here, are not in perfect order perhaps, but they are in reality, as I saw them once, many years ago, by that selfsame light, which I shall never be able to see again." There is a darkness within her reality; a darkness which can be piercing.

The author gives us an opportunity to witness experiences from the view of others. With this she can bring a new demension to her story. In the story "Meanwhile" two lovers sit on a rooftop; they look across the city of Alexandria to the sea. Then a young girl, who dreams of the time when she too will have a lover, sits in the spot after they have gone: "The scenery seemed to take on an additional beauty for those two lovers having been here and looked out on it, a new beauty. She smells the smell of the two lovers who have just left, it leaves her with her own imploring feelings."

Perspective is not only a matter of vision; for our author it involves a view of man and his world. Our perspectives depend upon the world in which each of us lives. She portrays this quite dramatically in a story called "Seeds", First in the eyes of the hangman of the deceased

and then in the eyes of the sister of the deceased. It is in parable form, much like the Midrash. The hangman says: "What is that fellow like, he is like a stone, when it is cast into the water, we can doubt if it will ripple or not, but it is certain that the rock will go down in the depths and be lost." The young girl says of her revolutionary brother: "He is a seed planted with the first spring plowing, indeed, the seeds disappear but they take root and soon flourish."

Sometimes it is through the eyes of an observant neighbor that she can portray the inner feelings of people's hearts, as in the story "Dreams": "I saw the daughter after several days walking along the path behind the Christian neighborhood -- this was no ordinary walk. Her future bridegroom had walked along this way, on this very path on his way to the train, and now the girl is walking in the very same direction."

N. B. Fagin, describing the techniques of the short story, states: "The characters in a short story are revealed and not developed as in the novel."[7] It is with her practiced concentration that in a few brief lines these characters come into focus. Their lines are drawn; the action begins. The introduction to the story "Meanwhile" serves as a good example: "Before the First World War there came to Jaffa a few tourists, who, because their roads had become blocked, could no longer return. Among them was a girl from Vilna,

whose name was Ita Block; a pharmacist; another traveler, an accountant by trade, a sickly person, with glasses, Menachem Gutt." The stage has been set and the action now required of the protagonists will be forthcoming.

Deborah Baron is not without a sense of humor in portraying certain Jewish types. In the story "Fragments", a father-in-law comes to visit his new son-in-law: "He was a heavy man, not too gregarious, he felt ill at ease in his daughter's living room, he spoke to his son-in-law, the Rabbi, in the polite form, he always tried to keep his face towards him, which was impossible since the Torah was behind him -- but, in the barn, near Pshoykah, the cow, here he was at ease."

The writer, with a word or phrase, can establish a type and set the scene. She has this touch, especially for women. Their clothing and their hair styles betray their inner secrets. She knows her audience and can utilize the images created by other writers. In the story "Dreams", the girl is portrayed as being similar to the Tamar of Mapu's "Ahavat Zion", she is idolized by a young girl: "The most wonderful thing about the new family was their young girl, who still wore her little cap from the gymnasium. She was tender and straight and not sun burnt like the rest of the girls in the neighborhood, she was to us, those of us around eleven years old, like the 'Tamar' that is mentioned in 'Ahavat Zion', like the women discribed in the Holy Writings.

"Her summer dress, free from any decorations, was tied on the bottom with a loose ribbon, there was no one who could imitate her nobility, and when she went out through the garden path, with her blond braids, that jumped about behind her freely, for they had no tie or comb -- one's heart beat in expectation that at any moment a handsome and fancily dressed young swain, like Amnon, would step out to meet her.

"And this thing came about and happened."

Through her poetic vision a scene is engraved in its essence by a few lines, much like the modern artist. The countryside, with the small village, is captured in this brief paragraph from "Meanwhile" -- "Fields and forests and gentiles, in the midst of this a strip of land, which is white in winter from the snow and golden in the summer sunshine -- over it always wafts the smell of Torah." Who can but agree with Asher Barash: she is indeed the Jewish "Poetess in Prose".[8]

It is with this poetic sense that she approaches nature as well. Nature is bound up with man and he is not separated from it. Many of her stories are achieved by making nature not the cause that molds the character, but rather a partner in each happening. Nature becomes then, the totality of all. The river and its floods and ice; the snow and rain, all these are woven into a pattern of feelings and happenings, there is an expression of completeness between man and nature. An exterior storm is accompanied by an inner

storm of the heart. This is not like ancient mythology where the elements have personal character and animation. It exists with man. We see this in the story "Dreams" where a tragedy is about to happen, "The daughter was still turning around and waving when the wagon came to the wood, and only the end of her scarf could be seen with its awful whiteness under the dark clouds, and with this the thunder roared and the tempest came which the woman knew would with the forefodings in her heart.

"It was already known the next day on the street where I lived, that the train had gone off its track and the girl killed."

Nature is used to build a mood, as in "Family": "She felt like a cold wind had suddenly blown about her, and a piercing sadness fell on her, like a deserted road in the fall."

Man's reaction to situations is often compared to his reaction to natural phenomena, as in the same story -- "There were tears flowing from her in such abundance that when she sat on the bench with her kerchief to her face, it was like rain falling inside of a cloud. There seemed to be a wind blowing about her, the kind of wind that men dislike, therefore they now quickly to get to the other side."

The author shows, quite well, that she knows the boundary lines between a set of causes and results whose source is man-made, and between those causes and results which are

dependent upon nature. She gives us a small fragment of man's contact with nature. From this, we, the readers, must see the laws of nature by which man's life is ruled. The general laws are given concreteness. Yet, just as in nature, as we know there can be no two years which are identical, we also know each year has its summer and winter, and that each being has life and death. Yet the variations of this are infinite. Deborah Baron gives to us a drop from the huge sea which reflects the whole ocean; it is a microcosm that reflets the macrocosm.

The author, in addition to her sense of sight, utilizes the voices of her people. Each has its own tone and purpose. As the clothing and hair style speak to us, so too do voices and speech. She points to it in the story "Friedle" -- "From the merchants he learned their sharp talk and their jesting manner -- that which the sensitive know is used to cover often one's troubles." Often, only a word need be spoken; when a mother asks her daughter how her marriage night was, in the story, "Ma'emesh", the mother asks: "Is it good Naomi? Good?" The daughter with the same smiling expresssion as the mother replies: "Good, very good!" Deborah Baron also hears the cruel gossip of the small town, with its distinctive character, in the story "Via Dolorosa"; a paralytic woman has given birth to a child. The neighbors chatter, "It is like a stone of the street, can a stone of the street bring a healthy living soul into the world? She can't even

take a ritual bath at the 'mikvehi'". We can almost hear the Talmudical sing-song reply of the Rabbi to a man, who demands a divorce from his wife; she only bears him daughters, in the story, "Minutiae". First the Rabbi calms the man and stops the woman from crying. "A 'get', give me a 'get'!" the husband shouts. In order to tarry a bit until the man's anger passes, The Rabbi peruses the laws in the Shulchan Aruch. Finally, he says, "I'm sorry, but I too am blessed with an only daughter, (the Rabbi is obviously Deborah Baron's father), but think for a moment of our great and learned sage Rashi, he was blessed with daughters, but look and see what men these daughters brought home to him, the wondeful 'Riban' and 'Rashbuam'".

Dialogues, in this way, can be found in other stories as well. They hint of a method of writing that forges a link in the long chain of the history of the Jewish people.

Throughout her writing do we find motifs and dialogues taken from Jewish sources. The "Parashot" of the Torah becomes enlivened and concrete in relation to what happens in her stories. Her utilization of Jewish sources plays such a special role that I have dedicated a separate chapter to it. In terms of style, let it be sufficient, at this point, to say that as a source of comparison the content serves in much the same way as it has for the medieval poets to whom the Bible was a living and concrete material and from which they drew their examples and their parables.

There is an aspect of her writing, which although not directly related to Jewish sources, does affect her style.

This may be called the tendency to didactics or moralizing. It is done as a voice that accompanies her stories. Israel Zmorah states: "One of the outstanding marks of the Hebrew story is that the voice of the writer is almost heard throughout the story. It is almost an ancient raciel feature, (e.g. the prophets), this may be true for our own generation as well. Deborah Baron like all the other Hebrew writers says to her readers: 'Listen and Know!' and sometimes even, 'Listen and Learn!'. From the point of view of the laws of literature this could be considered a negative value -- for in the pure short story one does not hear the voice except as an echo (and this at the end of the sotyr), and never while the story is being told does it accompany it."[9]

To a large degree this accounts for the monotonic character of Deborah Baron's stories. She does not, too frequently, either by dialogue or action, express her ideas through those of her characters. This technique could be perhaps perfected and in time become a positive trait, as it is in the prophetic literature, but it is a detracting factor in these stories.

One wonders if it is possible for detachment in her case; she so completely identifies herself with the character of her father, the Rabbi of the "Shtiedle", and with her mother; these good hearted people. In the "Shtiedle", described by Baron, there are no great inner spiritual struggles, hence the reader is not especially provoked.

For her the spiritual roots of these people are deep and unthreatened; they are perhaps the symbol of an epoch that has passed away without any hope of revival. This could be the most relevent feature of her writing.

To the quality of her depths there is a grace and charm which deserves note. It is her closeness to womanhood which gives her a delicacy in all her stories. A later chapter deals in its entirety on this subject. One may only say that in terms of style, a great deal of space is dedicated to household tasks.

Yet, Deborah Baron has a unique style. She can depict her characters in the space of a few lines and give them the definiteness of a sculptor. "Here is the mother, a city woman in her behavior, she like her daughter has an upright stature, her hair is blond and plaited. The only difference is that one seems as if she is standing in the light of the sun and the other in the shade." (Dreams)

The stories of Deborah Baron excell in the minute analysis of situations and their linkage with natural phenomenon: "The small room was filled up with the roaring of the waves of the sea and with the delicate smell of virgin woods." (Via Dolorosa)

In apposition to her limiting quality, there is, as well, a sense of totality. In her stories we have a parallel to all of life and its rhythms; the life cycle moves at various speeds, but it moves.

She achieves a great concentration by combining happenings with the environment: weddings, funerals, and holidays take place in the synagogue, as does prayer, education, and meeting.

Her style is stamped with great delicacy; one cannot detract or add a word. There is the feeling of standing on very solid ground.[10]

NOTES

1. Silone, I., "A Conversation In Paris" in The Anchor Review. New York: Doubleday, 1955. p. 262.

2. Fagin, N. B., "Short Story" in The Dictionary of World Literature. New York: Philosophical Library, 1943. p. 136.

3. Wallenrod, R., The Literature of Modern Israel. New York: Abeland-Schuman, 1956. p. 167.

4. Maugham, W. S., Tellers of Tales. New York: Doubleday, 1941. p. vii.

5. Ben-Ari, N., Archai Ruach V'Sofrut, Merkaz L'Tarbut. Tel Aviv, 1950. p. 107.

6. ibid.

7. Fagin, op. cit., p. 136.

8. Barash, A., "Introduction to Parshyot" in Parshyot. Jerusalem: Shiloah Press, 1953. p. 5.

9. Zmorah, I., Ha-Safrut Al Parshat-Dorot. Yahalom Press, 1950. p. 117.

10. Barzel, H., "The Works of Deborah Baron" in Literary Supplement -- Ha-Aretz. Oct. 12, 1956. p. 6.

CHAPTER TWO

PHILOSOPHY

Rachel Katznelson-Shazar, a lifelong intimate of Deborah Baron, said of her, shortly after her death on August 8, 1956: Deborah Baron's moderation is not only a characteristic of her style of writing, the rhythm of her prose, it is as well a view of the world. Life is viewed in a very serious way, it is filled with sorrows or with warmth and goodness -- it must be spoken with moderation.

"Although there is in life a great deal of the unknowable, the way of living one's life is quite clear; there are rules which direct us on the path, rules set forth quite clearly.

"The moderation, clarity and condensation fit the general character of her work -- the short story. For the person who reads her stories will not find things happening by accidnet; if he follows the thread, it will lead him to the laws of the universe, to the basic event which recurs. It is a truth 'That Which Has Been' (a title of one of her stories) is what is now, and what shall be."[1]

Deborah Baron has a rootedness in this world, although she sees the dilemna of man she does not forsake him. This thought is expressed quite poetically in a dialogue between a father and his daughter, in her story "Meanwhile". The little girl asks: "Why is it when birds soar, it is as if

they become larger, when on the ground they seem so little, and whn they soar upward they seem so big?" "The bird?" asks the father. "The bird is larger because it is aloft. Everyone when raised up from lowliness becomes greater by it." The girl responds, "The Greek brought home doves in a cage today, and all day they beat against the cage to escape."

We can easily see what Israel Zmorah meant when he said of her: "The minutiae in her stories are fragments which expand into the great universals."[2]

The experiences that she depicts give her a firmness and continuity in reality. The experience is complete and basic in essence. There are indeed many heavy blows which pour on this reality of life of the "Shtiedle". Natural disasters are abundant in all of her stories. There are vivid descriptions given by the author in these "emergency" situations, while the "Shtiedle" is cut off from the environment because of natural mishaps or because of pogromists. Even the lives of individuals suffer heavy blows. Happiness for these people is a remote idea, but the spiritual foundations, on which this life is erected, are whole and firm. One has the feeling that everything will become normal again and that these mishaps will pass away from existence; there may even be beneficial results. In the story "Minutiae" this idea is expressed in the following way: "There are often beneficial results bound up with great catastrophies, think of the healing springs which are discovered after earthquakes."

Life and its hazards are not necessarily taken for granted. There is a strength given to the man; the shock of death in the course of time is alleviated and accompanied by an inner quietude; there is not a submission to fate but rather a deep understanding of it, and we must continue to do our best even though we know our ultimate end.

There is a call in her writing for a facing of reality. In the story "Friedl" she points out that: "In their town at that time people did not feel that the face of the child need be covered by a purple veil from the nakedness of life."

She asks the reader to face the realities of life with all its perplexities and shortcomings. In spite of these we must strive for our goals: "Hasn't she heard of the great trials and tribulations of those who have set their goals high? These are the ones who feel that even if the cure is doubtful they will continue to drink bitter drugs." (Meanwhile) The author never assumes the possiblity of an escape from reality. There is always a great hope that the vision is correct. "Salvation's way is to come quite suddenly and in a wondrous way." (The First Day)

Life can reach great havoc in just such a quick and sudden way. "This appalling scene when the catastrophe happened -- twice the mightiest of trees was uprooted, while at the same time the meager little sapling that stands by its side is not even touched. The wind shook it about several times but after the storm it is seen rooted and whole in its

usual place." (Via Dolorosa)

Hers is not the role of a questioner of fate, her simple and direct faith carries her people through life. "Why should men complain and quarrel, if the sun casts upon them daily its loving light, and they are given their daily dark bread and a vegtable to eat with good appetite and health?" (Minutiae) Or she asks poignantly, in this brief paragraph from the same story, if we do not expect too much from life: "A big thing, you will say, for a person to wish for -- a single pair of house slippers, but think for a moment of all our wanderings and slavelings in this world for satisfaction, who among us can boast that he has achieved anything greater?"

As Deborah Baron's faith is simple and direct for individuals, so too is the faith of the Jewish people. In "Meanwhile": "It was explained specifically all the evil which would befall them if they strayed from the right path. It was also said however that if they came and pleaded to God with all their hearts he would return them to their land. Since the first thing had been established, behold there is no doubt that the second would soon follow.

"Indeed the land of Israel was far away, but the heavens were very near, and it was there where they lifted up their daily prayers."

Throughout, her general philosophy is a positive one, "that you-evil shall not prevail over us forever, for we are

living and enjoying life".[3] Although this life is fraught with dangers and filled with catastrophies, a beam of light is still wavering and inner strengths are mobilized for rescue.

Deborah Baron does not criticize values; the spiritual roots of life are deep. The world in which they lived had sound and unbroken values. They created banks through which the stream of life could flow. There are many turbulent moments in this stream, but they are due to fate; death; natural upheavals; war and economic causes. By no means can they be blamed on the spiritual foundation of life. She has a firm belief in what is "the Jewish way of life".

NOTES

1. Katznelson-Shazav, R., "Deborah Baron" in D'var Ha'Poelet. September, 1956. p. 211.

2. Zmorah, op. cit., p. 117.

3. ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

UTILIZATION OF JEWISH TRADITION

The Jewish way of life, for Deborah Baron, was life in its totality. It involved all of the Jewish past embodied in the Holy Writings and brought into the living present. She is in a sense a woman "Magid", reproaching her people and chastening them; but above all, she is the teacher.

"A corpse that is found near to a city, the elders of the city go out and offer up a sacrifice to atone for the sin. This man is only a stranger, a passerby, whom they didn't see or know, and in spite of this they washed their hands as a sign of innocence saying, 'Our hands have not spilled this blood' -- and here is a man recognized and known among them who went about in their midst for years broken and deprissed. No man came to help him or to encourage him with a few words. Now he is dead." (Via Dolorosa)

A great deal of her Jewish knowledge may be attributed to the fact that her father educated her in the way the Jews educated a son, and not a daughter. Many of the scenes reflect this education and her childhood experiences as a Rabbi's daughter. She knew him quite intimately, as is shown in this brief selection from the story "Family": "In our house which was the communal house, the house was not happy on the day of the giving of a divorce. 'It is called "the bill of cutting off"', father remarked, 'It is called

this because with it one soul is cut off from the other'. He, as usual, would not taste a thing on this day before the ceremony. All the previous night he had pondered over his books, examining carefully the names of those who were to be on the certificate, and weighing in his mind the whole matter of divorce. The opinions of the writers differ in this matter. In my mind, I could imagine those upon whom my father looked on favorably. To him, with his good heart, he looked upon those who defended the separation, like Rabbi Eliezer. The descriptive verse about the altar, that even it sheds tears for the divorced woman, this no doubt touched the very depths of his soul, but he could also from the other side view the night of the wonderful vision of old, when God brought Abraham outside, and the heart rending sound of his voice when he asked the piercing question, '0 Lord, what will you give unto me for I go foth barren?'"

It is only in the realm of divorce that she complains about the criteria of the individual and the community. In the case of the woman who after ten years of marriage without producing an offspring must concede her husband, the author does not hide her opposition. But even in this case she does not blame Jewish Law, but the man who asks for the divorce.

The life in the "shtiedle" revolves around two centers; the synagogue and the "heder", where the children are taught. They are the future and they are guarded. She gives us a brief description of the end of the school day; it is delightful.

From the story "Family": "From the 'heder' there came up a great turmoil like the beating of water against a dam wall. Quickly the children scatter out from it, spreading out according to their classes and ages, Bible students, Hebrew students, Aleph-Bet students, there were many, many. 'Thou shalt fill up the land' was the first blessing of God, and this little strip of alley was indeed 'filled up'. Like the blossoms of the field they swarmed here, like seeds in a garden bed, and when from time to time the summer rain came down they stood with their hands stretched out in prayer. 'God, God give your rains for the sake of little children -- it seemed clear that indeed, the rain was given for them.' The voices of the children are life prayer, 'From the "Heder" there came forth a beautiful sound, the sound of children at the Rabbi's house studying, which grew louder, going up in the air without end, from the morning until the evening.'" (In the Beginning)

The Torah is the staple of the "shtiedle"; its importance cannot be estimated. "In a time of a pogrom they forsook all their property and fled, they would only try to save the Holy Writings. For them they would give up their lives. For if they did not have these, what then did they have? They would then be like one who travelled in strange lands and whose identity card had been destroyed, or like a man upon whom that terrible illness falls wherein he forgets his own name and rank." (Meanwhile)

Scattered throughout, are lovely descriptions, such as this one, describing the observance of holidays in the "shtiedle" from the story "Fragments": "With the coming of evening of the first day, the congregation stood at the end of the field, by the edge of the river for the 'Tashlich' prayers, the trees sprinkled on the water a pure green splendor, the women there were dressed in white as on their wedding day and as on the day of their death."

One can also see many of the folk customs and traditions from a reading of her stories: "On Rosh Ha Shannah they cooked soup with round flakes of dough, and also the 'challeh' breads were baked round, and the pieces of turnip would be cut round, in order that the year should roll and pass easily." (Minutiae)

She will often utilize Jewish custom to express her soft sense of humor, as in the story "Family", where she describes how large a certain family is: "They were such a large family, that in the time of going up to the rostrum to wash the hands of the priests, it was so troublesome for them to find a place to hold the bucket and fulfill the obligation that each one of these large men could only hold it with a finger." In the story "Meanwhile" she touches on the conflict between the younger and older generation in a symbolic but humorous way, a group of young people are on a ship passing Greece as the sun sets, their faces are filled with awe at this wonderful scene, a woman sitting in a deck chair remarks, "Isn't it wonderful that we still have young people who don't

forget their evening prayers at sunset".

A characteristic of Deborah Baron's writing is her ability to use traditional terminology in her many descriptions in a poetic way. "The day after the festival came out on a Wednesday and it was like a profane bridge between one holy thing and another." (Family) Or in the story "Friedle", "There was a mixture of the holy and the profane -- the men still had their Sabbath suits on and on the table was the chess game and the steaming samovar."

There is an attempt, throughout almost all her works, to make a living comparison to the Bible; and, in a sense, to fill in between the lines of the Bible; again I feel it an excellent teaching device although, at times, too apparent. For example the story "Family" begins: "Links, links, in an uninterrupted chain, for thusly does it renew itself always, here is the order; there was born unto Adam, Cain Abel, and Seth, and Cain begat Hanoch, this is the Hanoch whose father built a city. And Seth he too begat an Enosh, etc., etc. Behold, there is the baker in my town from whom I buy my bread, his is Lazav the son of Chaim who is the son of Meir." There is a comparison made between the exiles to Egypt during the First World War and the sons of Jacob when they return to the land of Israel. "With a little bundle they went in their time to Egypt, and now they bore with a great quantity, furniture, household goods, clothing and food, for they had been in a place of abundance where prices were low."

Using her teaching technique again, she tells of a mother explaining to her daughter the history of the Jews since the destruction of the Temple. She compares the Jews to a gypsy whom the little girl, Naomi, knows. "Yes, Naomi knew the poor gyptsy that came to their courtyard. The nicest people would occasionally throw a piece of bread to him, but the others would merely close the door in his face.

If a vessel is stolen here, he is suspected, if a chicken flies away he is accused. Thus it was with those who went into exile. He would give them refuge today, would drive them out on the following day, and he who opened his hand would close it on another day." She expresses the great unity of the Jewish people as its saving trait: "For this is the saving trait of this people, that with all their dispersal, it is still one body and one unity, and all the pain that one part of the body feels, so the rest of the body feels it too." Deborah Baron explains how the Jews came to settle in the little villages: "They were starved, degraded and pursued from every place. They were forbidden to settle in the big cities, and prohibited from the villages. Thus it happened that after long wandering they came to settle in distant places, and there tney set up communities, and aren't these the little towns like Chemilorha and Techenovha, where Naomi to this day had uncles and cousins?" (Meanwhile)

The Zionism of Deborah Baron's people is not, at the beginning, the stark geopolitical type. It is rather dream-

like and romantic. This land waits, in its desolation, for the return of its people; it is like a mother waiting for her children to come home once again. "There it is still standing as it was told to them, in its desolation. It doesn't sprout a blade of grass and doesn't produce any fruit, it mourns for them like a mother whose children have been taken away. They have kept their faith with her all this time. They prayed for dew and for rain only when she needed them. In the fall rains, they dwelt in huts, with the green of trees, just as they once did in harvest time there, and on the fiftieth day of Shvat -- a time of storms, snow and cold -- they celebrated by eating fruit, for it was her festival of trees." This is the land of Israel, forever in the thoughts of those Jews far from their land; but forever, too in their dreams, is their return. When children are taught the Bibel they are told of this land, "Where the light shone sweetly on this grassy land, where the olive tree and the ponegranate grew, where the earth is watered by the dew of the heavens." (Meanwhile)

There are some charming descriptions of the "Yeshiva" students, who become swept up in this dream of redeeming their land and begin to make their dreams a reality. They train themselves by raising gardens in their village and, on their departure, their mothers pack them off with lunch boxes and food for the journey. When they arrive they are overcome by its seenery. "Here as in days gone by, the trees rustled, men dwelt in this lovely spot and kept their Sabbaths, drank

pomegranate juice and listening to the this same chirping of birds." (Meanwhile)

After the First World War, however, Zionism takes on a political and socieal meaning for her people. With the announcement of the Balfour Declaration, Israel means status and freedom. The import of this is felt by one of the ex-"Yeshiva" students: "This was the first time he could wald in the streets upright without the burden of two thousand years of shame on his back, without any complex of inferiority. He though that this must be the way a hunchback feels when his hunch has been removed. He thought of the passage in the 'Siddur', 'He will lead us quickly in an "upright" manner to our land. This was the right expression, not through the back door, with bent back, stealthily, but uprightly, like a man enters into his own home." (Meanwhile)

She makes a lovely play on words with the phrase in Isaiah 9:5: "For behold, a child has been given unto us", she changes it to, "For behold, the land has been given unto us." The hope and exuberant feeling of the new Israel rings through this story. She makes a comparison with the return of the Jews from former exiles; from Egypt and from Babylon; she states: "It is only the coiffure and the cut of the clothing which changes, but the strivings of those in exile after the homeland is one at all times and in all places." (Meanwhile)

In a brief story called, "Rami' Day", she shows the modern Israel under construction through the eyes of a young

child. "There were plasterers, plumbers, and carpenters each with his own work, it seemed like they hurried after something, their minds intent, and they sang a heart lifting song."

CHAPTER FOUR

JEWISH WOMEN AND FAMILY LIFE

"The women about whom she writes live in the world of the previous generation; the elderly and the young; the girls of Lithuania; the proud and the insulted; those who are choking in their fate; those upright women who seek to correct their blemished world."[1] The credit for a great deal of the correction in the "world of women" should go to Deborah Baron and those like her. It is no accident that Israel could have as its Prime Minister a woman, or that women there have equal rights. She understands women and most of her stories are primarily meant for a female audience.

Throughout her stories a great deal of space is dedicated to descriptions of women and of their tasks; the washing, cooking, baking, the cleansing of the floor and the primary task of raising a new generation of loyal and good Jews.

From the point of view of this male critic this domestic aspect is somewhat overdone. We can however get an accurate picture of the Jewish home as it existed there.

"She began to prepare for the Sabbath meal, cakes with a jam filling, apple dessert, this she hid in the warm oven, 'double pudding' and large potatoes dripping with chicken fat as a side dish, she boiled the grain and flour, which brought to the mind of the Lithuanian the cooking for the

'Pidyon Ha Ben' in their towns. This was done on Thursday night, which is baking night, she had slept for a whort while and then woke shortly after midnight, eager and energetic. She had that special inspiration which comes upon all her sisters on this night, those who kept their Sabbath." (Meanwhile)

There are also scattered here and there little "helpful hints" for health. "The beet borscht was set on the window sill to cool, it was spiced according to the season with cucumber and chives. For the weak Rabbi they added to it the yolk of an egg or two and three spoonfuls of sour cream." (Minutiae)

The character of the Jewish wife and mother is typefied in Nuhama Rothstien in the story "Yesterday": "For this is her nature, she does not enjoy anything, but her joy is derived from giving to others -- like a candle from which everyone is lit and yet her light is not diminished by it.

"During the course of the twenty-five years of their marriage, she had cooked, baked, white washed the walls of their home, washed the windows, raised children and been the mother of the house for their tenants.

"It was she who in essence had pulled the wagon, her husband would help it along with a push from his finger. She did not wonder at his ways nor did she ask." (Meanwhile)

The joy of motherhood is warmly stated and love has special meaning to a paralytic woman who has longed for a

child: "While leaning on the pillows she could wash him in the bath, put him in his swaddling clothes, and when her heart yearned for him, she could draw him near, close to her face, cheek to cheek absorbing the sweetness of his infancy. Then she put him to sleep with a song that was no lullaby, but expressed the sorrow of motherhood, that mothers from genreation to generation sang worrying about the future of their children." (Via Dolorosa) She shows a great social concern for those mothers who because necessity has forced them to work cannot give their children the love and attention that they need: "How awful is it for those who dwell in the cellars of the city, pressed to earn their bread, that arise with the dawn? Who will feen their children when they are hungry, give them drink when they are thirsty, keep them from the burning sun and from the falling rain so that they don't get wet?

"They are forsaken and unwatched always expecting any disease, there is no helper or comforter for them, but in spite of it all, if it be God's will, they will grow up, and may even be a help to their mothers." (Via Dolorosa)

The special joy of raising up children to be good Jews is a prime motive for Jewish mothers. "In the morning her two sons were called up to the Torah, for the 'third' and 'sixth' sections. One after the other, the old woman felt like Kimhit, the mother of Ishmael, who in her time both of her sons served as high priest on the same day." (Minitiae)

We can also have a glimpse of the superstitions of the "shtiedle". A woman who wants to become fruitful consults an old woman; she is advised: "Go to the synagogue and each day light two candles there and you will be fruitful." (Family)

The religious duties of these Jewish women are not neglected. They are fulfilled as an obligation they have received through the generations. They accept their duties unquestioning and with faith. "They, the shy ones, hidden in thier kitchens, how they went and came, when their time arrived, via the alleyways, before the glances of curious onlookers, who knew to call each by their name. The kerchief covering their faces, to hide their embarassment, with the ground slippery under tneir firm stance. Behind them they left tneir unkept homes, a goat that needed milking, children who cried out for bread, and an indifferent husband who disregards them. He, the gloomy one, who does not treat his children delicately, and doesn't speak nicely to them, but rather has nothing but scorn for them. Truly, it is not the desire for a little loving that pushes them, but a holy duty, a duty inherited from their mothers, a duty to life itself." (Friedle)

Although she is a great artist in painting these scenes, she does not attempt to penetrate deeply into the souls of her women. Depth analysis is not her forte. She has though, captured the speech and mode of thought of these Jewish women.

In all, there is a delicacy of soul, a hidden fear of this gruesome world, while, at the same time, they have a prevailing strength to stand against it all.

Deborah Baron has given us this wonderful picture of Jewish life, "a way of life that has lapsed into the oblivion of history, a way of life that must be captured and preserved betimes."[2] She is indeed, "a woman of valour."

NOTES

1. Barash, op. cit., p. 6.

2. Halkin, Shimon, Modern Hebrew Literature. New York: Schoken Books Inc., 1950. p. 117.

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