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Women's Voices:
the present through the past

Sue Ann Wasserman

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

1987

Referee: Dr. Stanley Nash

To My Parents

for five years of encouragement and gentle "nudging"
and for twenty-seven years of constant love and support

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Introduction

After spending the past five years studying Judaism intensively, I have realized that for me studying Judaism is equivalent to studying Jewish literature. Each year I have studied a mixture of Bible, midrash, codes, Talmud, liturgy, and modern Hebrew. This vast amount of literature has been written down century after century, layer upon layer. Every generation of Jews tries to make itself part of shelshet hakabalah (the chain of tradition) as well as trying to create new links of its own to pass on to future generations. Through careful study of the various forms of Jewish literature mentioned above, we can piece together the lives of our past generations. We do not only learn about their ritual practices or legal structure but also about their hopes, fears, dreams, conflicts, and beliefs.

If we listen carefully we can hear their voices struggling with their Judaism and struggling with the world around them. Their ultimate goal was to synthesize the two worlds, making Judaism respond to the world around it. And because that has been our goal, the Bible has not been enough, though it is the foundation upon which all else was built. We have created the other forms of literature to make the biblical text relevant to us in each and every generation. This process is a two-way street. At the same time that we are updating the Bible, thereby insuring its perpetual relevancy, we are also validating our own life struggles by tying them back into the biblical text. Therein lies the power and beauty of midrash: the simultaneous validation of tradition and modernity. It is essential that we continue to forge the chain today; by rooting ourselves in tradition, confronting current issues and recording the struggles so they can be transmitted to the next generation.

Midrash, in its narrowest sense, is a "homiletic interpretation of scriptures" (Alcalay, p. 1209): in other words, a sermon, discourse or lecture. We know that classical midrash was originally an oral form, written down only when Jews were threatened or in danger. In a broader sense midrash is what David Jacobson terms, "the Jewish tradition of interpretive retelling of biblical stories that began within the rabbinic itself, developed in the rabbinic and medieval periods, and ... has continued to the present" (Jacobson, p. 1). This definition would include not only literary and art forms, music, drama and dance. It also includes the present collection of modern Hebrew poems.

While I was translating and analysing the poems in this collection, I found that I had to have a Bible open at all times; that I was continually rereading the biblical stories involved. The poems allowed me to understand the women in the bible more fully. I was using the poems the same way I use Rashi and classical midrashic texts: looking for the questions the poets were asking, accepting some of their interpretations while rejecting others, reading the biblical text through the eyes of the poem. Although the reading of the modern material was similar to the reading of classical exegesis there was one striking difference: these poems were written by women about women's experience.

Through the course of my studies in classical Jewish literature I have heard many voices; yet not one of those many was a woman. All of the struggles between Judaism and the world and all of the forging of new meanings has been recorded by men. And as meaningful and as true as much of it is for me - it is not enough. It is not enough because it is only half of my Jewish past. My foremothers' stories have been left in the oral

stage for generations. It is only now, since the late 1800s, that I have been able to hear their voices. Women have just begun writing their own stories and they are different from men's stories. The concerns and struggles and resolutions they voice are theirs - and mine.

This thesis is a partial answer to my need to hear women's voices speaking through the tradition, asking and answering my questions. It is one way of helping me feel rooted in Judaism, an integral part of Judaism - a feeling I do not often experience when studying classical Jewish literature. I want the women from my tradition, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Rizpah, Michal, Lot's Wife, Miriam, Eve, to help me understand myself better by lending me insight and by making me reflect upon and examine myself by their light. I want Judaism to teach me about the wonder of giving birth as well as helping me to accept the fact that those I give life to will eventually die. At the same time I need Judaism to recognize that my value as a human being does not begin and end with my womb. I want Judaism to recognize that women's relationships with each other and with men are a unique experience for us. I need to have Judaism recognize my right to self-determination and then push me to live up to my potential.

My major goal in collecting these poems has been to validate women's experience through Judaism; just as classical midrash validated the life experience through Judaism of those who wrote it. Collecting these poems is not enough. If they are truly to become a part of our collective Jewish literature then we must teach them and study them alongside the rest of our literature. I would suggest that when we study the Bible with children and adults, during a Shabbat morning parshat hashavua group, through a sermon, that we turn to these poems - these modern midrashim.

On the more technical side, the poems, unless otherwise noted, were translated by me with numerous corrections by Dr. Stanley Nash. They are literal translations and not poetic renderings of the poems in English. There is no special significance to the order in which the poems appear. Those poems for which there is little or no analysis, for the most part, followed the biblical text so closely that analysis seemed unnecessary. All biblical texts quoted were taken from the new Jewish Publication Society translation.

Yokheved Bat-Miriam

(1901 - 1980)

Born in Keplits, Belorussia, Yokheved Bat-Miriam attended the universities of Odessa and Moscow. Although her poems began appearing in 1923, her first volume of poetry Me-Rahok ("From Afar") was published in 1932, four years after she settled in Erez Israel; it was followed by six other volumes of poetry. The bulk of her poetry was written between the two world wars against the background of the Jewish tragedy of this period, and her personal experiences as a child in Russia and a settler in Israel. Influenced by Russian symbolist poetry, her verse is written against a dreamlike landscape, charged with nature symbols drawn from the world of childhood. One image fades into another, with past and present merging.

Her works include: Erez Yisrael (1937); Re'ayon (1949); Demuyyot me-Ofek (1942); Mi-Shirei Rusyah (1942); 1943 - Shirim la-Getto (1946); and Shirim (1963). A list of her works translated into English appears in Goell, Bibl.

(taken from Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 1)

מרים

עמדה מול הסוף והנמא
ונשמה כוכבים ומדבר.
עין אפס עגלה ורדמת
הציפה כחולה המזהר.

- אתך. אתך בסער
נוסף משתרבב כחף,
אתך במחולך מול להט
נשם חולות ואין סוף.

על החול, על אשתו הזוהבת,
על חיוך בת מלכים הנלאט,
על שיח חרטמים עלי אבן
חמר היכלים המצעד.

- אספר מקנאה ומצרעת,
אספר מלינה על עצמי.
השבעתיך בגזירותך לא נכזעת,
בכדידותך הזוהרה נא תיי!

מגד, בדשן הזכר,
כשספון בתאות עולם,
אמצה גשן הנדרכת
דמיון שבטים מעמדם.

עמדה מהלחש מגדגדת
קמלבן פעמי הגל.
ותנה על התינוק כנדר,
כצו, כסדות, כגורל.

Miriam

She stood across from the reeds and papyrus
and breathed in the stars and the desert.

A sleepy and round eye of Apis
flooded its luminous blueness

Upon the sand, upon its golden rustling,
upon the secretive smile of the daughter of kings,
upon the words of hieroglyphics engraved in the rock
and upon the marching music of Temples.

From the opposite bank, in the ashes of memory,
like a viper in its timeless lust,
a poised Goshen adopted
the dimmed memory of tribes.

- With you, with you in the storm
your body is stretched taught as a drum,
with you in your dance facing the burning
scent of sands and infinity,

- I will recount mystery jealous and leprous,
I will recount complaining about myself.
I adjure you by the spirit of your unyielding abstinence,
By your luminous isolation, live!

She stood swayed by the rustling
as from the whiteness of the beating wave.
She bent over the infant as a vow

as a command,
redemption,
destiny.

הגור

אלמגיה תלתה על הליל	בדויה תרשרש הצמרת.
ותלך דלה ודמומה.	באר לא-קִימת תמלמל.
ירח בחומת המים	תשכון שלותם המהרהרת
צלל. השתקשק ונע.	במבטי הלח ומצל.
לבדה. רק היא. הדרך.	ועם זה שנשאר מעבר.
מעשבת כמלכן אלהות.	שחרג ועבר את גבולות
ככתבת קצקע מסתחררת	אהבה יחידה ומככבת
הסלינה מתינוק ובדידות.	שתיקה, פרידה ונעוה -
- אליך לא אשוב, מולדת.	אתי, אתי מאפסים.
כססיוכס בפחת חמה.	עם עצמי בשכול ובדרור
אשאר הנה כאן מול הדר	אכנף לאחיות עינים.
מדבר, גורל ותעלומה.	לדמיון מתעתע ושכור.

גודד רדוף אי-מרגוע.
אהוב זהרי הנמנע -
יאמצנו כהנשמה וככח
ממלכת חלומי הנשבע.

מתח-נא, בני, את השלח.
יענה לחץ ההד -
במקדום בברכה מחלחלת
ומכתיר את שבילי האובד.

Hagar

She hung her coral beads about the night
She walked humbly and silently.
While the moon sank in the wall of water
thrashing and dying.

She is alone. Only she, the path,
she is blown as if from a divine whiteness,
like tattooing she reels
she sailed far from the baby and solitude.

My homeland, to you I will not return,
like a sphinx at the doorway of the sun,
I will stay here across from the beauty
of the desert, fate and mystery.

In her imagination the tree-top rustled,
a non-existent well gurgles.
Their reflective tranquility dwells
in my moist and radiant gaze.

And with this person who remains far away,
who deviated and crossed the boundaries
of a single and respectable love
silence, separation and radiance.

With me, with me from the far reaches,
with myself in bereavement and in freedom
I will be swept up by an illusion
by a deceiving and intoxicating illusion.

Wandering, pursued by restlessness,
infatuated with the radiance of the inevitable -
he will strengthen us like realization and strength
of the kingdom of his sworn dreams.

My son, please draw your weapon.

Let the arrow reverberate
as if greeting tremblingly
and crowning my lost path (wasted life).

חֲזוֹה

נִשְׁמָה עֲלֻטָּה פְּנִיָּה
כְּלֶהָבָה נִסְרַחַח מִרְחוֹק.
זַעַה בְּזוּיוֹת שְׁפָתֶיהָ
וְנִשְׁבָּה וְנִשְׁבָּה בְּבֵת-צָחוֹק.

נִנְעָה בְּשׁוּלֵי הַיָּרֵק.
בְּעֵץ-פְּרִי וְחַיִּית-הַשָּׂדֶה.
בְּמוֹעֲדֵי שָׁחַר וְעָרֵב,
בְּחֻזֹּת, עֵנָן וּמִרְאָה.

שְׁתַּקָּה. וּכְאֵד וּכְהֶבֶל.
כְּעֵין בְּרִסְסֵי הַדְּמָעָה.
תַּעֲתָה שְׁתִּיקָתָה מֹול מַחֲשַׁבֶּת
דְּבָרִים וְחֻרוֹתָם הַנָּאָה.

מִחֶסֶד צְלוּלָה וּמִרְגָּשׁ
בְּכִי-זֶמֶר פַּעֲתָה הַיָּד,
אוֹסֶפֶה וּמִלֻּטְפָה כָּל רִנֵּעַ -
נִמּוּל, מִתַּחַשָּׁא וְנִמְלֵט.

מִנּוּד, כְּמִים מֹול סֶהַר.
הַצִּטִּיר אָדָם וְצֶעֶד.
וְתִנְהַר מְאִיקָה וּמִדִּיעַת
וְתִנְאָה תְּטִיחַ לְעֵד, -

פֹּרֶשֶׁת מַעֲבָר לְעֵדוֹן.
עַל קוֹץ וְדִרְדִּיר, שְׁבִתוֹן
מִתְהַדֵּד מִחַיִּים וּמִהָדָר
מָוֶת, סוּד וְדִמְיוֹן.

Eve

The darkness of her face breathes
like a flame which is blown upon from afar,
moving in the corners of her lips
and blowing and blowing with a laugh.

She touches the edges of the foliage,
the fruit tree and wild beasts,
at the times of dawn and evening,
with prophecy, cloud and vision.

She was silent. Then like mist and damp air
like an eye amidst the droplets of tears,
her silence wandered opposite the thought
of things and their proud freedom.

From translucent mercy and from the emotion
of crying-which-is-singing the hand whined
gathering and caressing each moment -
weaned, forgiven, and escaping.

Facing her, like water facing the moon,
the outline of Adam appeared walking.
And she flowed from terror and from knowledge
and she crested proudly banished forever *

Spreading out from beyond Eden,
on a thornbush and thistle, complete rest
gaining resplendence from life and from the splendor of
death, mystery and imagination.

Yochevad Bat-Miriam has written a cycle of poems portraying six biblical characters: Saul, Miriam, Abraham, Hagar, Adam, and Eve. She published the poems in the late 1930's and early 1940's under the title "Between Sand and Sun" (*enei shin ya*). All of these poems are discussed in a new book, Modern Midrash, by David C. Jacobson. The analysis which follows is a combination of both his and my interpretations. He analyzes the poems about Miriam and Saul separately, then pairs the poem about Abraham with the poem about Hagar and the poem about Adam with the poem about Eve. For obvious reasons I will focus on only three of these poems: Miriam, Hagar, and Eve.

"Miriam"

Bat-Miriam, by choosing to change her family name from Zhelezniak, suggests that she feels a strong tie with this particular biblical figure. The poem, "Miriam", is a blending together of significant events in Miriam's life. The first series of events (Exodus 2:1-10), is mirrored in the first three stanzas of the poem. They involve Miriam's role in saving Moses from death as an infant. In the biblical story Miriam's parents placed Moses into a basket on the Nile to avoid Pharaoh's decree to kill all Hebrew male babies. Miriam stands by the side of the Nile to watch her brother and see what becomes of him. When Moses is found by Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam offers to bring her a Hebrew wet nurse, ensuring that she would adopt Moses. Miriam brings her own mother.

The poem begins with Miriam standing by the Nile "breathing in the strength of the stars and the desert", gathering energy for the role she is to play in the liberation of her people. The image of the stars and the desert recall God's promise of descendants to Abraham. By turning to

this source, Miriam is connecting herself to the past, placing herself amongst the originators of our people. At the same time, as Jacobson notes, she is the link to the future exodus into the wilderness which will eventually lead to Canaan. Yet, while Miriam stands gathering strength, another force is present, "a sleepy and round eye of Apis". Jacobson interprets it as follows:

As the sun shines on the scene, it resembles the eye of the ancient Egyptian god Apis, the bull-god of the Nile, who was sometimes depicted with the sun between his horns. Apis is presented here as a sleepy god who floods Egypt with a light that casts a spell of mystery and inertia. This spell is embodied in the secretive smile of Pharaoh's daughter, the magicians' hieroglyphics frozen in stone, and the music of the royal palace, which resembles a monotonous, rhythmic marching song.

(Jacobson, p. 116)

In the third stanza, Goshen, the territory in Egypt in which the Israelites settled, is used to represent them. The Israelites' memory of themselves prior to the enslavement in Egypt lies in ashes. Yet it is being revived. They are like the viper who is always ready to attack its enemy in order to survive. Jacobson reads this puzzling line about the viper in a creative way. He sees the act of adoption as represented through sexual allusions to the snake and the Hebrew words *תאכל זרעם*. (page 117) In the biblical story it is only Moses who is adopted. In the poem it is the whole nation of Israel who is adopted. Their fate is completely bound up with the life of Moses.

The poem then moves on to Miriam's role as prophetess (Exodus 15:20-21), nearly equal to Moses in leadership. When the Israelites cross the Red Sea Moses leads them as a whole community in song. Miriam then leads the women in song and dance. The speaker in the poem dances with Miriam, identifying

with her here as in the next stanza. She admires Miriam's body, "stretched taught as a drum", ready to face the hardships of the desert. Miriam is strong and inspiring at this moment.

The last biblical event (Numbers 12:1-16) referred to takes place during the desert wanderings. Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses' marriage to a Cushite woman and they challenge his role as the primary leader with themselves as secondary leaders. God is angered by their challenge to Moses' authority and strikes Miriam with a leprous-like skin disease for which she is quarantined outside of the camp for seven days. Aaron is not punished. The speaker clearly identifies with Miriam. She too leads a life in which she has been limited. And when she reacts with jealousy, she is punished. The speaker begins to internalize this dominance of her life: "complaining about myself". (Jacobson) But when she does she remembers Miriam and her, "unyielding Nazarite abstention". She sees Miriam's isolation as self-imposed. It is a way for Miriam to break away from the domination of others. Miriam can live fully only in her "luminous isolation". This last line, "In your luminous isolation, live!", is reminiscent of the verse from Ezekiel (16:6) which is used in the circumcision ceremony. "In your blood you shall live" ('h ?'wq).

Throughout the poem Miriam is portrayed as a leader, yet her models of leadership change. She begins as an enabler, helping Moses survive. Being the one who helps others achieve their potential is a very female leadership model. Then Miriam grows, matures into the role of prophetess. Here she steps into a visible leadership model and leads the women in dance. Miriam moved out of the shadows into the light and then with a third change she tries to move beyond the circle of women into the Israelite camp as a whole.

By challenging Moses she has broadened her role as a leader once more. This time, though, she is rebuked. She is stricken with leprosy by a male God who is threatened by her ever-widening circle of authority.

In this light the final stanza can be read two different ways. In the final stanza Miriam is again watching over the infant Moses in the basket. This could be seen as her return to the leadership model of an enabler. She has been rebuked and therefore returns to that which is safe and acceptable. Or, it can be read as Jacobson suggests, as a total gender role reversal.

The male-female relationship earlier in the poem has been radically changed. Miriam is no longer the victim of Moses' authority, but rather the parental authority and divine being teaching the male child the path to liberation.

(Jacobson, pp 18-19)

A combination of the two interpretations would see Miriam's return to the role of enabler not as a lessening of her status as a leader but as an elevation of the worth of the model of enabler.

After reading this poem one has the sense that Miriam was the primary force behind the Israelite liberation from Egypt, and not Moses. Miriam herself becomes a model of liberation. She was able to free herself from male domination and find her own place of freedom. This path towards liberation required gathering internal and external strength and a period of isolation, a time when Miriam could reaffirm her own worth and capability. Only then could she rejoin the world of both men and women and begin to teach what she had learned.

"Hagar"

The biblical background of this poem is Abraham's expulsion of Hagar (Gen. 2:9-21). After Isaac is born Sarah resents both Hagar and Ishmael and tells Abraham to send them away. Abraham is distressed but, with God's approval he sends them out into the wilderness. The poem "Hagar" does not focus on the biblical story, or on bringing together the various events in Hagar's life, as did the poem "Miriam". It focuses instead on Hagar's inner thoughts and feelings, how she faces the humiliation of rejection.

At the beginning of the poem Bat-Miriam describes Hagar as she is leaving, "walking humbly and silently". Yet, this image of quiet complacency which we also sense from the biblical account, is shattered by the image of the moon, "thrashing and dying". Hagar may appear to be merely sinking out of sight but she will not give up her life so easily. Hagar is alone on her path, blown around, seemingly by Divine decree. However, this aloneness and reeling does not drive her back to her native Egypt. She will hold her own "like a sphinx at the doorway of the sun". She will not run from her present fate, she will face it. Jacobson sees a parallel here to Bat-Miriam's own life.

Bat-Miriam may also identify with Hagar the Egyptian in her decision not to return to her native land, despite the tragic circumstances of her life in Canaan. As an immigrant from Europe, Bat-Miriam similarly decided that despite the difficulties she encountered as a woman and a Jew in the Land of Israel, she would remain there and dedicate herself to create a poetic world in Hebrew in which these difficulties could be transcended.

(Jacobson, p.124)

This is perhaps the only glimmer of strength we see in her portrayal of Hagar.

In the fourth stanza Hagar seems to be experiencing hallucinations, the kind one would expect someone to have who has been wandering in the desert alone. She hears tree-tops rustling and wells gurgling; it is almost as if she were seeing mirages: "Their reflective tranquility dwells/ in my moist and radiant gaze."

In the fifth stanza, Hagar admits that she still feels the warmth of Abraham's "radiance". Even though he has "deviated and crossed the boundaries" by loving her and Sarah and even though he is far away and silent. Alone in the desert, bereaved yet free, she will dream, "I will be swept up by an illusion/ by a deceiving and intoxicating illusion." Somehow Abraham will rescue them, Hagar and Ishmael. When the prophecy of "his sworn dream" comes true and he becomes powerful and the father of a multitude then Abraham will be able to provide for them even against Sarah's will. The closing verse refers to Ishmael's becoming an archer. Hagar asks, almost pleads with her son to draw his bow and to be the "crowning" of her wasted life. This has two possible interpretations. The first is that she asks him to become a worthwhile person - an excellent archer - so that she will have done at least one thing good with her life, giving birth to Ishmael. The second possibility is that Hagar is asking Ishmael to kill her, to draw his weapon and with the arrow, crown or finish off her life of "wandering, pursued by restlessness". A life filled with deception and illusion and imagination.

Strangely, the poem does not leave you with the sense that Hagar ever fully moves past her love for Abraham. While she has her freedom, she does still mourn and hold on to illusions of reconciliation. At the end of the poem Hagar refers to her life as a "lost path", she feels that her life has

been a waste. We do not see the strength in Hagar which we found in Miriam.

"Eve"

In the opening stanza, Eve is created. She alone is created in this act of creation. God, who is distant, blows life into her dark face. Eve then roams through the Garden, but she does more than just look at it, she senses it, "she touches the edges of the foliage, / the fruit tree and wild beasts". "At the times of dawn and evening", the times when the world is fuzzy, just coming into focus or just going out of focus, through these clouded periods she gains sight and prophecy. The "mist", "damp air", and "tears" all dry up and become clear, like the day following dawn. Her silence is followed by an understanding of freedom. All things are "proudly" free.

In the fourth stanza Eve, as mother, is experiencing the separation of a child. A mother holds on to and "caresses each moment". When she cries at the moment of separation she is also singing with pride because her child has grown and reached maturity. A child is "weaned, forgiven" and then "escapes". Then she sees Adam. He is like the still water which reflects the image of the moon. Because of his reflecting image she runs away. Eve is running from the knowledge that childhood must end - the Garden can not last forever. We must be weaned, do wrong and then be forgiven, and then escape into personal freedom.

The last stanza is life outside of the Garden. The thornbush and thistle refer to the curse God put on Adam in Genesis 3:17-19. Adam will have to toil to grow and gather food. Yet, it is now, outside of the

Garden that their lives will be a שבת - a complete rest. This is just the opposite of how we interpret shabbat. We see it as a taste of what life was like in the Garden. It seems that Eve is grateful to be relieved of the continual splendor of life and mystery and imagination which was daily life in the Garden. There is, thankfully, no mention of the apple nor of the snake nor of guilt nor of blame in this poem. This Eve has brought us different messages from the Garden.

All three of these poems reflect women's struggles. Miriam's conflict was between displaying her own leadership abilities and falling into the traditional female "back seat". Hagar's struggle was to survive rejection by a lover and regain a sense of self worth. Eve grappled with her desire to hold on to the world as it was knowing all along that she had to let go for the world's sake. By allowing us to see these struggles through these biblical characters, Bat-Miriam has said that these struggles are important and real. Even more so, she has pulled women's voices out of the tradition and shown us that they speak to us as Jewish women today.

Rivka Miriam

(1952 -)

Rivka Miriam was born in Jerusalem. She is the daughter of Yiddish writer Leib Rochman. Miriam has been writing poetry since her childhood. Her first book, My Yellow Nightgown, a collection of her poetry and sketches, appeared in 1966, when she was only 14. In 1979 she received the President's Prize. An artist as well as a writer, she exhibited her drawings at the Tel Aviv Museum in 1969.

Among her books are: I Drowned in Dreams (1969); Seats in the Desert (1973); Wood Touched Wood (1978).

(taken from Burning Air and a Clear Mind)

הזמר אל יעקב שהאבן מעל פי הבאר הסיט

הוא לא ידע שאני לא
ואני — לאה הייתי.
רחל, אמר, רחל, ככבשה שהעשב מתערה בה
בן ערויים בן גבעולים.
עדרי רחלים המו בין שמיכותינו.
יריעות האהל נמשכו אל הרוח.
רחל, אמר, רחל —
ועיני רפות היו
כקרקעית של ביצה אפלה.
אל חלבוני עיני לבני עיניו התכו.
יתרי האהל התאמצו כל בן
אל האדמה לדבק
כשהרוח מכפוח ידי נושבת.

והוא לא ידע שלאה אני
ועדרי בנים פרצו מרחמי אל ידיו.

A Song to Jacob Who Removed the Stone From the Mouth of the Well

He did not know that I am Leah

and I - was Leah.

Rachel, he said, Rachel, like a lamb that strips the grass bare
thusly in you are stems stripped.

A flock of sheep made noise between our blankets,
the tent flies were dragged in the wind.

Rachel, he said, Rachel -

And my eyes were weak

like the bottom of a gloomy egg.

To the egg whites of my eyes the whites of my eyes melted.

The tent ropes strained greatly

to join the ground.

While the wind is blowing from the palm of my hands.

And he did not know that I am Leah

and a flock of children burst forth from my womb to his hands.

רחל בכתה שם את בניה

רחל בכתה שם את בניה שטרם נולדו
 וטרם תינוקות היו רכי פנים שאמהות אליהם גמוגות.
 בשדה עמדה אל הרוח. שקופה כצלה.
 ובשדה היה עם האדמה
 יוסף ובנימין כבד היו רגבים
 והיא בכתה את בניה מול הגבעות.
 רחל בכתה את בניה
 בטרם לבכות ידעו
 בטרם מן העפר נחו
 כדי אליו לשוב.

או אולי בכתה רחל את בניה אחרי מותם
 כשנחו באבנים חורים בראשי הגבעול
 וקברה הרחב פתוח מארבע רוחות לכנסם
 וזרועותיה הרחבות פתוחות אותם לקלט
 והם מרחפים בדממה אל תוך בכיה
 כאל תוך גבולם.

There Rachel Wept for Her Children

There Rachel wept for her children who were not yet born.

And the babies were not yet soft faces

towards which mothers feel much emotion.

She stood in the field facing the wind, transparent like her shadow,

but her flesh was with the earth.

Joseph and Benjamin were already clods of earth

and she wept for her children across from the hills.

Rachel wept for her children

before they knew how to cry

before they burst from the dust

in order to return to it.

*

Or perhaps Rachel wept for her children after their deaths

as they rested like paling stamens at the heads of the stalk

and her wide grave was open to the four winds to gather them in

and her broad arms open to receive them

and they flutter in silence into the midst of her weeping

as into the midst of their border.

רבקה

הַשְׁעֲנֵנִי כִּדֵּי אֵל פִּי הַבָּאֵר
עָסוּף בְּחֵלוּם.

נָלְשׁוּ שְׁעָרוֹתֵי הַשְּׁחָרוֹת
וְעֵינֵי אֶעְצָם.

פָּשַׁטְתִּי יָדַי מִתְכַּלֶּת נוֹגָה
אֶל שְׁפָתַי

וְלַחֲשֹׁתִי דוֹמָמָה:
שְׁדִי-!...

רָאִיתִי יְלָדִים

עוֹטִי לְבוֹשׁ חֲקָנִים

שֶׁלֹּחֲיָהֶם וְרִדּוֹת וּמִצְחוֹתָם צֹהָבִים -
צוֹעָדִים.

רָאִיתִים מִהֲלָכִים.

פְּשׁוּטֵי זְרוּעוֹת -

שְׂאִינִם מִצְפִּים לְאוֹת.

רָאִיתִים, בְּנֵי בְלִי שֵׁם

וְלַחֲשֹׁתִי שְׁדִי, אֲנִי הָאֵם, אֲנִי הָאֵם.

וְאֶרְאֶה אֲנָשִׁים,

בְּמִצְחוֹתָם הָאוֹת

עֵינֵיהֶם צוֹחֲקוֹת

וְהָאוֹת בָּם קְמוּט -

צוֹעָדִים.

הִלְכוּ בְּעָשָׁן

חֲקָנִים הִלְכּוּ

כָּשָׁל

וְנוֹפֵס הַזָּקֵן

מִעֲרָסָל

לִתְיֵיהֶם הוֹרְדוֹת.

צוֹחֲקוֹת.

וְאָמַר: "הִנֵּה הָאוֹת-

וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת בֵּית

עֵינִם עֲצוּמָה

וְאָמַר: "אֲנִי הַבֵּית, אֲנִי הַבֵּית.

הוּא, אֵלַי-בֵּית."

וְדַמְעָה עֲנָלָה.

נִטְפָּה לְכִדֵּי

וְהִדּוּ הַשְּׂאִירָה

בְּמִי הַבָּאֵר וּבִדְלִי.

Rebekah I

I leaned my pitcher over the well's mouth
wrapped in a dream.

My black hair was flowing
and I closed my eyes,

I extended my hands from the azure light
towards my lips

and I quietly whispered:

"Shaddai!" ...

I saw children

wearing clothing and beards

whose cheeks were pink and whose foreheads were yellow

I saw them marching.

I saw them walking

arms outstretched -

not waiting for a sign.

I saw them, my children without a name

and I whispered "Shaddai, I am the mother, I am the
mother."

And I saw the people

On their foreheads the mark

their eyes laughing,

the mark wrinkled into them -

marching.

They walked in the smoke

their white beards

רבקה

פָּנָיו רָאִיתִי -
 וְאָפֵל מֵעַל הַנֶּמֶל.
 פָּנָיו רָאִיתִי
 וַיִּהְיֶה גַי מַעֲרָטָל.
 אֶרֶץ לֹא אֶרֶץ הִלַּכְתִּי
 וְאֲנִי אֵלָיו צוּפִיָּה -
 אֶת פָּנָיו רָאִיתִי -
 וַיִּהְיֶה תוֹשִׁיָּה.
 לִקְחָנִי עֶבֶד זָקֵן
 הוֹבִילָנִי אֵלָיו
 הִנַּחְנִי עֲדוֹ
 לְהִרְאוֹת לִי פָנָיו.
 וְשִׁמְשׁ דְּרָכֵי הוֹרְתָה לִי
 בֵּין רִקְיעַ וּבֵין יַבֶּשֶׁה
 רַק פָּנָיו רָאִיתִי -
 וַיְהִי - תוֹשִׁיָּה.
 פָּנָיו רָאִיתִי.
 וְאָפֵל מֵעַל הַנֶּמֶל
 וַיִּהְיֶה גַי מַעֲרָטָל
 וּסְרַחִי שְׁלוֹ שְׁמֵרָתִי -
 יָבֵשׁ וְקָמַל.

רָאִיתִי - וְהוּא -
 לֹא הוּא.
 וּפָנָיו -
 לֹא פָנָיו
 אֵלָיו בִּלְאֵט צַעֲדָתִי -
 וְאֶכְרַע לְפָנָיו.
 יְרַח חַיָּךְ אֵלָיו
 וְנִטַּף אֵלָיו הַמָּטָר
 וְרַק לִי -
 כְּסוּד נִשְׁאָר.
 רָאִיתִיו -
 סִנְדְּלִי נָשָׁל
 רָאִיתִיו -
 נִפְלָתִי מֵעַל הַנֶּמֶל
 וְנִשְׁאָר מוֹלִי -
 כְּתוּבָה, כְּחֶלֶל.
 וְרֹאשִׁי כְּשֶׁל.
 פָּחָדוֹ בִּי נָסַל
 וְאֶעֱרָטָל.

Rebekah II

I saw his face -

And I alighted from the camel.

I saw his face

and he turned away and my body was laid bare.

I walked upon ground which was not ground

and I looked upon him -

I saw his face -

and he turned into a source of wisdom.

An old servant took me

he led me toward him

he guided me toward him

to show me his face.

The sun of my path directed me

between heaven and earth

I only saw his face -

and it was - wisdom.

I saw his face,

and I alighted from the camel

and he turned away and my body was laid bare

and I guarded his flower -

as it dried and withered.

I looked - but he -

was not him,

and his face -

was not his (face)

toward him I silently walked

and I kneeled before him.

The moon smiled upon him

and the rain dripped upon him

and only to me -

he remained a secret.

I saw him -

I alighted from the camel

and he remained facing me -

like an abyss, like empty space

and my head slumped.

A fear of him fell upon me

and I was laid bare.

רבקה

רֹאִיתִי אוֹתוֹ מְטַלְטֵל בְּמֶטֶר
וְהַנֶּשֶׁם מַצְלִיף עַל פָּנָיו
לְבוֹשׁוֹ הַלַּח מִהַבִּיל -
וְאֵלֶךְ אַחֲרָיו.

רֹאִיתִי וְהוּא - לֹא הוּא
וּפָנָיו - לֹא פָנָיו -
וְאֵלֶךְ אַחֲרָיו.

הִלְכוּ אַחֲרָיו אֲרָחוֹת גְּמָלִים
שְׂסָחוֹת נִשְׁקוּ שְׁלֵמוֹתָיו
גְּבוּ גִבָּה הָיָה וְכַפּוֹף
זָקֵנוּ רָטַב מִמֶּטֶר

הָיָה בֶן לְאָבִיו - וְאָב לֹא הָיָה לוֹ.
הָיָה בֶן לְאִמּוֹ - וְשָׂדֵיָהּ זָקֵנִים -
חֲשֵׁתִי מִבְּעֵטִים בְּכֶרֶסִי תְּאוֹמִיו -
וְאֵלֶךְ אַחֲרָיו.

רִדְעָתִי - עוֹר יִהְיֶה וְזָקֵן.

בְּאִפְלָה יִנָּשֵׁשׁ אַחֲרֵי יָדָיו

וְאִנִּי אֲרַמָּה אֶפְלָתוֹ הַכְּבֵדָה

וְאֵת בְּנֵי אֲשׁוּשׁ, אֵת אֶחָד בָּנָיו -

וְאֵלֶךְ אַחֲרָיו.

רֹאִיתִי אוֹתוֹ מְטַלְטֵל בְּמֶטֶר

וְאִנִּי רָטַבָה הָיִיתִי כְּלִי

וְרִטְבוֹת הַכְּתָנוֹת הִדְּבֻקוֹת לְעוֹרֵי

וּבִנְשָׁם תוֹצְאוֹתִי, וּבִנְשָׁם רֹאשִׁיתִי -

וְאֵלֶךְ אַחֲרָיו.

Rebekah III

I saw him wandering around in the rainfall
with the rain whipping at his face
his moist clothes giving off steam -
yet I went after him.

I looked and he - was not him
and his face - was not his face -
yet I went after him.

A caravan of camels followed him
maidservants kissed his robes
his back was tall and bent
his beard was wet from the rainfall
he was his father's son - but he had no father,
he was his mother's son - but her breasts were old -
I felt his twins kicking inside my belly -
yet I went after him.

And I knew - he would be old and blind,
in the darkness his hands will grope for me
I will deceive his heavy darkness
I will abandon my son, one of his sons -
yet I went after him.

I saw him wandering about in the rain
and I was completely wet
and wet were the tunics clinging to my skin
and in the rain were my outcomes, and in the rain
was my beginning -
yet I went after him.

ואשת לוט נבראה לנציב של מלח
 ובנותיה לא הביטו אחר
 לבנה שרתה עם המלכה
 כשפתוחים נצוקים סביבותיה
 ומלח היה ברחמה שפעם היה בו איש.

הבת עם לוט

לא ידע איש בשכבה ובקומה
 ולא צפור
 ולא אריה.
 היא שכבה מטה ומטה
 והחול היה דק
 והוא צעק
 ושדיה ננעצו אל תוך המלכה.

And Lot's Wife

And Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of
 salt
 but her daughters did not look back
 she alone remained with the desert
 while the crumbs were cast all around her
 and salt was in her womb, where once there had
 been a man.

The Daughter with Lot

No one knew when she lay down or when
 she rose up
 no birds
 no lion.
 She laid down slowly
 and the sand was fine
 and he cried out
 and her breasts toward the desert

Rivkah Miriam has written eight poems about biblical women. She explores five different women: Leah, Rachel, Rebekah, Lot's wife, and Lot's daughter. The first two biblical figures, Leah and Rachel, will be analyzed together, the three Rebekah poems will be analyzed as a group, and the last two poems have been included but not discussed.

"A Song to Jacob Who Removed the Stone From the Mouth of the Well"

Miriam explores Leah's experience on her wedding night. What happened in the tent when just the two of them were alone? Leah feels a great distance between them. Jacob didn't know that she was Leah and yet she was Leah. He was in a sense oblivious to who she was, he was lost in what he wanted to know. Further separating them was the flock of sheep (אֵיִשָּׁה) which made noise between their blankets. It was not really sheep but rather Rachel who was between their blankets. Jacob thought he was with Rachel and Leah knew that she had to pretend to be Rachel. Rachel was there with them, preventing Leah from being with Jacob as herself. Referring to Rachel as a lamb who strips the grass bare, allows us to feel Leah's loss of identity. She has been stripped bare of her very self by Rachel.

Jacob again calls Rachel. Leah disappears even more. The very whites of her eyes are melting. That very thing which set her apart from Rachel, made her undesirable, even that is being taken away from her. The tent ropes are straining and the tent fly was being dragged because the wind is blowing. The wind is blowing from the palms of Leah's hands. I am not sure if the wind is the distraction she created, to keep Jacob from discovering who she really is.

You have the sense that their wedding night set the tone for the rest of their married life. At the very end of the poem, Leah repeats the phrase, "he didn't know that I'm Leah." This time it seems to have a different meaning, going beyond the simple deception. It gives the sense that Jacob never really knew Leah as herself, as an individual. The last line seals Leah's lack of identity to Jacob. "A flock of children burst forth from her womb" and became Jacob's property. Today, we view the creation and raising of children as a joint venture -- the parents sharing both. Here we see Leah giving birth and then Jacob taking the children for his own.

The title sets the tone for the poem. It is not a song to my husband Jacob, or to my beloved Jacob. It is a song to a man who has done something useful for you and your family. In this light, the poem seems to show Leah as the repayment for Jacob's deed.

"There Rachel Wept for Her Children" and "Or Perhaps Rachel Cried for Her Children After They Died"

In these two short poems Miriam explores Rachel's feelings about barrenness and birth. The poems are based on Jeremiah 31:15. "Thus said the Lord: A Cry is heard in Ramah -- Wailing, bitter weeping -- Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone." In this passage Rachel is crying for her children who are no more. Miriam tries to more fully explain her weeping. In her poems, the reason for her weeping comes into question.

In the first poem, "Rachel wept for her children who were not yet born./ And the babies were not yet soft faces/ toward which mothers feel much emotion". It seems that she is crying for the children she has been

unable to have. Rachel feels, "transparent like her shadow". She is invisible because she has not produced children. Children would give her validity and substance. No matter what she feels like, "her flesh was with the earth". She is a living breathing human being. Though Rachel did not know it, Joseph and Benjamin were already fated to exist.

In the first poem Rachel weeps for want of children. In the second poem she weeps after their death. You have the feeling that Rachel is weeping from the other side -- the realm of the dead. Her sons die and move towards the sound of her weeping. Her grave embraces them in death as her arms did in life. There is a sense of reunion. The two poems together show the role of mother as almost a closed circle. She is there before you are born and she is there when you die. What Rachel missed, because she died in childbirth, was being there during their lives. Rachel seems to weep, in the first poem, because she knows, even before her children are born, that they will die. She is acutely aware of this. In the second poem, her weeping may almost be at the joy of being reunited with her children.

In all three of these poems, images of nature figure prominently. In the first poem: 1. "lambs that strip the grass bare", 2. "flocks of sheep", 3. "the wind" and 4. "egg whites". In the other two poems: 1. Rachel's flesh was earth, 2. Joseph and Benjamin were "clods of earth", 3. her children would "burst out from the dust" and return to it and 4. her children's death was natural as "paling stamens at the heads of the stalk". Miriam wants us to associate Rachel and Leah with nature, for them to appear to be a part of nature. Yet, the irony is that that which would be the strongest "nature" connection to women, that is bearing

children, does not make either woman happy. Leah's children are taken by Jacob and Rachel mourns her children's birth and subsequent death.

Miriam's three poems entitled "Rebekah" come from two separate collections. The first two appear in her first book of poetry, כתותי הרהר, and the third is from her last collection, לך רעך רחוק. The second and third poems fit into the realm of modern midrash. They are elaborations of the biblical text. The first poem uses the biblical character Rebekah as a framework for a poem about the Holocaust and Jewish suffering.

As the child of survivors, much of Miriam's poetry is about or is influenced by the Holocaust. According to Hannah Yoaz (.....), there has been a great change in Miriam's treatment of the Holocaust from her earlier work to her later work. Her first collection reflected a sense of identification with and a longing for the generation of the Holocaust. In her last collection, Miriam's poetry takes on a morbid and at times violent attitude towards the previous generation. "Rebekah" I (I,II,III are my own additions) clearly reflects Miriam's earlier sentiment towards her parents' generation. Miriam uses certain code words in order to trigger images of the Holocaust throughout, כתותי הרהר. In particular Yoaz mentions the color yellow and smoke, both of which are used in the poem "Rebekah" I: "Whose foreheads were yellow -" and "They walked in the smoke". While the second stanza is a clear reference to the victims of the Holocaust, I don't think that the poem is meant to be exclusive of other "marches" the Jewish people have endured.

As Rebekah stands at the well, ready to draw water, she has a vision. Rebekah closes her eyes and sees the future. She sees her children's future

persecutions, their endless marches: "I saw them walking". Rebekah sees their stolen childhoods, portrayed by Miriam as rosy-cheeked children with beards and yellowing foreheads. Rebekah realizes that she is their ancestral mother and seemingly takes responsibility for them: "Shaddai, I am the mother, I am the mother." These nameless children bear a sign, a sign which has become a permanent part of them reminiscent of "the mark" of Cain: "on their foreheads the sign.../ and the sign wrinkled into them." As "the mother" Rebekah says, "Here is the sign", it begins here and now with me. The sign which would forever set them apart is their history, which Rebekah has facilitated. Perhaps the sign referred to here is for Rebekah. The vision was a preview for her of her descendant's future.

Rebekah's descendants, as Miriam portrays them, openly accept their lot in life. They walk with "arms outstretched/ not waiting for a sign." They even find laughter in their lives: "their eyes laughing" and "their pink cheeks/ laughing." There is a sense of admiration for this ability.

To this laughing, marching people Rebekah is daughter. At this point, the end of the poem, I think that it is Rivka Miriam herself breaking through the poem. This last Rebekah is her. She proclaims, I am the daughter, I am the daughter." She has inherited what Rebekah "the mother" has initiated.

"Rebekah" II

This second poem about Rebekah focuses on a specific moment in the biblical narrative, the meeting of Rebekah and Isaac. The biblical passage reads:

... to be at one with or at least made prior to this focus: "The moon

⁶³ And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. ⁶⁴ Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel ⁶⁵ and said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" And the servant said, "That is my master". So she took her veil and covered herself. ⁶⁶ The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. ⁶⁷ Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. (Genesis chapter 24)

The actual moment of meeting between Rebekah and Isaac is lost in the biblical text. Miriam creates that moment and allows us to see it through Rebekah's eyes. In the biblical text Rebekah covers herself with her veil when she learns that Isaac is approaching. Through Miriam's poem we see that this veil does not shield her from Isaac's scrutiny. Rebekah feels naked, exposed by Isaac: "and he turned away and my body was laid bare". This line is repeated again in the first stanza and a similar line, "and I was laid bare", closes the poem. Rebekah was not just meeting Isaac. She was being scrutinized as if she were interviewing for a job. In a sense she was interviewing for the position of wife but not just any wife, our second matriarch.

Miriam has created a sense of surrealism around their encounter. Rebekah sees Isaac, but it isn't him and his face is not his face. Rebekah walks on "ground which is not ground" and she walks "between heaven and earth". In addition to this feeling of being out of focus, the events leading to this moment appear to have been guided by some outside force: "the sun of my path directed me". Isaac's servant is an agent of this force. He leads and guides her toward Isaac. The force is represented by the wisdom Rebekah sees in Isaac's face. Isaac seems to be at one with or at least made privy to this force: "The moon

smiled upon him/ and the rain dripped upon him". Rebekah was left ignorant, a puppet of a force beyond her control: "and only to me - / it was left like a secret". Exactly what is kept from her is not made clear. Perhaps it is the future and her role in creating our people. Perhaps it is the magnitude of this moment of meeting.

Rebekah feels exposed by Isaac's gaze. Her life seems to be moved by something greater than herself. Finally, when she sees the face which is wisdom, she concedes: "and my head slumped", overwhelmed. Isaac himself does not calm her, wisdom does not comfort her. Her total silence throughout the poem is not the silence of serenity but rather the powerlessness of fear: "a fear of him fell over her". Miriam does not portray this moment as the star-crossed meeting of lovers; there is no "love-at-first-sight" between them, only fate and destiny.

"Rebekah" III

This last poem about Rebekah takes us to a later point in Rebekah's life with Isaac. There is a connection made between this poem and the second one. A few phrases are repeated from the second poem: "I looked and he - wasn't him/ and his face - wasn't his face -." Both poems are similar in style and both have certain lines which are repeated. Here, the haunting line "yet I went after him" repeats five times. This line lends an air of resignation to the poem. As in the first two poems there is a strong sense that life is fated. Rebekah is given the ability to see the future, such as her deception of Isaac and her abandonment of Esau, yet she does not change it. She lives out the part she was assigned.

Yet, unlike "Rebekah II" this poem is filled with grotesque pictures of old age. Miriam has created a sad, morbid picture of an older couple in their last years. Any emotion which flowed between them is gone. They remain together out of habit or because they have tangled themselves up with the past.

Once again we are looking at Isaac through Rebekah's eyes. At times he seems unrecognizable to her, not the man she married. Rebekah no longer sees him as a man with piercingly inquisitive eyes but rather as an aging man. Isaac is alone in the world except for Rebekah and his sons. Though Isaac is still a man of importance, "A caravan of camels followed him/ maidservants kissed his robes", Rebekah is able to see the rain whipping him about, the bent back, and the future. And so she follows him. She will be needed in the end: "in the darkness his hands will grope for me". The twins kicking in her belly are his, he prayed for them. (Gen. 25:21)

At the beginning of the poem Isaac wanders around in the rainfall. His clothes are wet and steamy. At the end of the poem Rebekah too is caught in the rain. The rain made her clothes stick to her skin, molding themselves to her form. In this rain is Rebekah's "beginning" and her "outcome". Isaac is lost and beaten by the rain while Rebekah is more clearly defined by the rain and as well her future was made clear. What is detrimental for Isaac is beneficial for Rebekah.

Anda Amir

(1902 -)

Anda Amir was born in Galicia, into an assimilated family. Her father worked as an architect for the Austro-Hungarian government. She completed secondary school in Lvov, and published a book of verse in Polish at the age of 18, her first poem being the prayer of a Polish child for the liberation of his country. After studying at the universities of Leipzig and Lvov she immigrated to Palestine in 1923. In 1921 she published another volume of verse in Polish, Piesni zycia ("Songs of Life"). Thereafter, under the influence of Uri Zvi Greenberg, she began writing in Hebrew. The themes of her verse are love of nature, romantic love, and the joys of motherhood.

Among her books are: Yamim Dovevim ("Days Tell", 1929); Yuval (1923); Geisha Lian Tang Sharah (1935); Gittit (1937); Duda'im ("Mandrakes", 1943); Gadish ("Grain Heap", 1949); Kokhavin bi-Deli ("Stars in a Bucket", 1957).

(taken from Encyclopaedia Judaica; vol.1)

חור

יום אחר יום נחרז

לילה אחר לילה -

בעדנה שטפוני וברגן.

גם אני נבהתי -

כמוך אשא את פריי.

אכן למדתני, עץ.

מבקר עד ערב לטפוני חשמש.

מבין הפארות קרניה הנגיבה.

לנשק תלחלי.

מערב עד בקר

האזוב הרך העדין שחני.

פוק חלומותי.

עד אשבע.

עד איצף.

עד אלא -

ולא אוכל עוד.

הבשילה השמש גיי.

הלילה העיר לשדי.

ואין להם מען.

יכבד עלי כל טפח עורי

כמו אבה פרץ

ומוצא לו אין.

הנה ראייתי, עץ.

הכרתיה בתפוח זה.

חכמת כל לשדיה בו אצרת.

ואדע תפוד, למענו גדלת.

למענו נבהת. ואף הסתעפת.

גם אני גדלתי.

איכה זה ריקה עד עתה הלכתי

בין נושאי פריים

ואף פני כבשתי

בכלמה מזורה

בסני אילות שתפח נון.

הכורעות מכבדן.

כל צפור ועירה

יושבה על ביציה.

פרי דמה וקרביה.

חכלימתני.

בסני קטנתי.

אשר נוצרתי אף לצהלה:

אשר דלגתי מעין אלי עץ.

ורגלי רחצתי בגביש וכותם.

אשר קפצתי ממנו אלי מנו.

לחכי ערב, לשמחתי.

ועתה אדעה.

ואכבד מאד, אף אאשר:

אחות אני לכן.

אילות תפוחות.

ואבות כבדות.

מעט - תכרע מכבדנו.

כמוכן - כמוני.

ולא עוד אבוש במיכן -

מיטב דמי. כמיטב דמיכן

יתגבש לסרי.

קבל אקבלנו.

זשא אשאנו.

אף אם לאהזן ישחני.

כמוכן.

הלף לא אלף עוד ריקה ביניכם.

כנחל זה פוזי, לא ידע.

אנה ילכו מימיו הקלים.

תברך לי, נחש-לחש שבלב.

לפרי תבאמתי.

בו אנאל.

אף אם עדינה פוחזה לא אדע עוד.

Eve

Day after day was strung together
 night after night -
 they flooded me with pleasure and with joy.

From morning until evening the sun caressed me,
 slipping its rays between the branches,
 to kiss my curls.

The moist hyssop made my sleep gentle,
 it pampered my dreams.

Until I'm satisfied,

Until I tire,

Until I become exhausted -
 and can do no more.

The sun cooked my body,
 the night aroused my bodily fluids,
 but they have no where to go.
 The whole span of my skin is heavy upon me
 as if it wants to burst forth
 but it has no outlet.

Then I saw you, tree,

I recognized you by that apple,

you have stored it in the wisdom of all of your juices.

And I knew the secret, for which you had grown,
 for which you have grown tall, and even branched out,
 I too have grown up,

I too have grown tall -
like you I carry my fruit.
So you have taught me, tree.

How is it that until now I have walked empty
between those who bear their fruit?

But I only hid my face
in a strange disgrace
in the presence of those whose bodies swelled,
bowed down from their weight.

Every little bird
Sits on her eggs,
fruit of her blood and innards,
She disgraces me.

Before her I am insignificant,
I who was created only for joy;
I who skipped from spring to spring,
and washed my feet in their crystal transparency,
I jumped from choice fruit to choice fruit,
whichever was sweet to my palate, to make myself happy.

And now I know,
and I am very heavy, yet happy:
I am sister to you,
swelling does.

Heavy she-wolves.
in a little while - we will bend down from our weight
Like them - so I.

And I will no longer be ashamed before you -

The best of my blood, like the best of your blood
will be crystalized into fruit.

I will surely accept it,

I will surely carry it,

even if it bends me to the ground,
like you.

I will no longer walk empty between you,
like an impulsive stream, it does not know
where its light waters are going.

You will be a blessing to me, magic spell which is in the heart,
for bringing me to the fruit,
through it I will be redeemed,
Though I will no longer know flighty pleasure.

אשת לוט

ותבט אשתו מאחריו ותהי נציב כלה. (בראשית י"ט. כד)

צַעְרָה! צַעְרָה! - תִּקְרָאנִי.
אַחֲרַיָּךְ לֹא תָבִיט.
לִשְׁמָאל. לִימִן לֹא תַשְׁעָה:
צַעְרָה!

קוֹלָךְ מִה אֶזְכֹּר בְּבִטְחוֹן הַבָּאוֹת.
נִדְרָאָה הַשְׁלֹחַ בְּעֵינַיִךְ.
לָךְ כָּל שְׂבִיל יִשְׂרָאֵל.
כָּל מַשְׁעוֹל יִשְׁטַח לְרַגְלֶיךָ.
יִקְרָא וַיַּעֲדֶדְךָ:
צַעַר בִּי וּבִטָּח.

אַתָּה - כָּל חַיִּיךָ עָבְרוּ. מִקְרָבְךָ מַחִית
לֹלָא אֲנִיחָה.
בְּאוֹר הַמַּחֲרָר טְבִילָת.
בּוֹ תִּסְתַּהַר.
בְּהִירִים וּבְרִים הַשְׂבִּילִים לְסִנִּיךָ.
יִרְחוּ לִקְרָאתְךָ, הַצּוֹלָח.

מִה מֵאֵד אֲשֶׁרָת.
אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתָם.
בְּקִרְאָתְךָ: צַעְרָה.
אֵךְ אֲנִי -
אֲנִי לֹא אוֹכֵל;
אֵל נָא. אֵל תִּקְרָאנִי.
אֵל בִּי תֵאֵץ. אִישִׁי -
הֵן כָּל דְּמִי נִתּוּנִים לוֹ. לִשְׁחַלְךָ.
לוֹ קָרְבִי. לוֹ מִצִּי הַמִּרְמָרוּ.

שְׂכֹרֶת-הַמּוֹל אֲנֹכִי.
בְּכָל הַלֵּם דְּמִי שְׁמוֹר רַחֲשׁוֹ.
שְׁמוּרִים רִנְנוּ. עֲצָבוּנוּ.
בִּי. בִּי יִפְעֻמוּ.
כָּלִי רִוְתִיב.
וּמָתָם בִּי עוֹד אֵין. לֹא נִעַ בָּם.
וְאִיכָּה אֶמְחֶם מִלְּבִי
אִיכָּה אֶבְרַח מִרַחֲשֵׁיהֶם
וְהֵם עֲמָדִי יִבְעֻרוּ.
בְּאַלִּי וְרוּעוֹת יָד בִּיקְוִי:
שׁוּבִי!

לֵנו אַת -
בָּנו אַת -
שׁוּבִי!

וְאִיכָּה לֹא אָבִיט אַחֲרֵי -
וְלוֹ גַם עִם סְדוֹם אֶסְפָּה?

עֲרֹסָל כְּבֹד רְבוּד לְסִנִּי.
יָכֵס רֹאשִׁי הַהָרִים.
מִסְלִשִׁי בְּקַעוֹת יַחֲסָה.
כָּל שְׂבִיל לְרַגְלִי יִסְלַף.
יָכֵהָ מִבֶּטַע עֵינַי.
וְלֹא אֶרְאֶה עוֹד מְאוּמָה
מִבְּלַעֲדֵי הַדְּמִיּוֹת.
מִבְּלַעֲדֵי הַחַיִּים.
אַחֲרֵי נִסְתָּהִים.
בָּם בְּנֹד צוּיָתִנִּי.

יִפְתַּח לְסִנִּי הַדֶּרֶךְ -
כֹּה יִיָּשֶׁר לִקְרָאתְךָ.
אִישִׁי הָתָם.
שׁוּבִי
לֵנו אַת -
בָּנו אַת -
שׁוּבִי

תִּבְט אָבִיט אַחֲרֵי.

לוֹ גַם עִם סְדוֹם אֶסְפָּה.
לוֹ גַם אֵדַע יְדוּעַ.
כֹּה אֶחָדֵל.
כִּאֲכֹן סִלַּע אֶקְפֹּא מִה.
לְרַגְלִי סְדוֹם הָאוֹבֶדֶת.

אֶעֱמֵד כְּאֲכֹן תַּחְתִּי.
לְעַד אֶצְפָּה אֲשׁוּרֵי-תְמוּלִי.
אֶצְפָּה אֲבִדָנָם - אֲבִדוֹי.

Lot's Wife

To Zoar! To Zoar! - You called to me,
do not look behind you,
do not turn to the left nor to the right:
To Zoar!

Your voice was so harsh with its certainty about
the future,
the quietude in your eyes is terrible.
For you every path is straight,
every road becomes smooth before your feet,
the road calls out and encourages you:
tread on me and walk safely.

You - your whole past life, you have wiped it out
from your very midst
without a sigh.

You have immersed yourself in the light of tomorrow,
you will be purified in it.

Clear and pure are the paths before you,
they are wide open to you, the one who crosses over.

How lucky you are,
you righteous and simple man,
when you called out: To Zoar.

But I -

I can not;

please, do not call me

do not press me, my husband -

Surely all of my blood has been given to him, to the
one who vanished,

for him my very insides, for him my bowels burn.

I am drunk on yesterday,

its murmuring is preserved with every pounding of my blood,
preserved its joys, its sorrows,

beating within me, within me.

All of me is saturated,

there is no uninjured place in me, no place left untouched
by them.

But how will I wipe them out from my heart?

How will I flee from their murmurings?

and they march with me,

with a thousand arms they catch up to me:

Turn back!

You are ours -

You are part of us -

Turn!

Then how could I not look behind me -

even if I am to be destroyed with Sodom?

A heavy fog is spread out before me,

it covers the mountain tops,

the expanses of the valleys,

every path at my feet distorts,

and dims what my eye sees.

I no longer see a thing except for the figures,

except for the life,
which I have abandoned,
which you have commanded me to betray.

The road twists before me -
How straight it is for you,
my simple husband.

Turn back!

You are ours -

you are part of us -

Turn!

I will surely look behind me,
even if I am to be destroyed with Sodom,
even if only I surely know.

Here I will meet my end,
like a huge stone I will harden here,
at the foot of the doomed Sodom.

I will stand like a stone in my place
forever will I look upon the footsteps of my past,
I will look upon their destruction - my destruction.

לאה

יהי בבקר והנה היא לאה... (בראשית כ"ט, כ"ה)

יום ליום דמה

ככבשה לכבשה תאומה.

עם שמש קום השכמנו.

אתר הצאן הלכנו.

שתי אחיות.

כשתי תרזות גבהנו

בין הרועות.

אנחות רועים לקטנו.

למבטם שחקנו.

לקלם היו לנו.

שנים ובהירים היו ימינו.

כשמש זה ממעל.

ותבוא אתה -

נאזה ונשא בין רועים תהלך.

תבטח בארחותיך.

שחו לסניף האבות.

שחו לסניף הבנים.

והרועים לראשם שמוך.

התקדדו ימינו.

התלהטו לילותינו -

כי באת.

ונסתר פנינו. אחות בסני אחות.

עין בעין לא תביט ישרה.

אתר צללים תתור.

הצפין בה רשעה.

השמש

השמש והשמש והשמש והשמש

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כלך. כלך מצסה.
לא לי.

פראית אקרע תיריעה.
פראית לברכיה אפל, -
קחני.

ועם בקר תקום חרפתי.

עם הנץ השמש אתה תבנוי.
עיני לא ארים עוד בפני כל קסמה.
להתום החרפה יגלו חיי.

הלילה אשת דודיך הנזכים.
אשת וארזה לבלי הותר.

אני מרימה ידי ליריעת האהל --

Leah

And in the morning, behold, it was Leah (Gen. 29:25)

Every day was like another
like twin lambs.

With the sunrise we arose,
we went after the flock,
two sisters.

We were as tall as two oaks
amongst the shepherdesses.
We gathered up the shepherds' sighs,
we laughed at their stares,
we made fun of them.

Our days were bright and the same,
like this sun above,

★

then you came -

Handsome and erect you walked along amongst the shepherds,
confident in your ways.

The parents deferred to you,
the children deferred to you,
and the shepherds made you their leader.

Our days grew glum,
our nights grew hot -
because you came.

We hid our faces, sister from sister,
 our glances could not be direct,
 they chased after shadows
 secreting in them our passion.

And when a word was spoken,
 your name was hidden tremulously within it.
 Then one morning we divided our flock,
 and our paths were parted on the way to the pasture.
 For indeed we had become isolated, one sister from another -
 So how could we graze together?

★

On that day
 your flock lay watered and tired
 made hot by the afternoon sun -
 and you leapt like a deer amongst the bushes.
 You picked mandrakes.

My heart was agitated over you, restless:

Here you are coming,
 you are coming to embrace me,
 holding out your mandrakes to me.

You examined the package of mandrakes with your glance,
 your eyes laughed at it:
 then you turned your steps to the path,
 fast on the heels of the flock.
 And not to me did you pay attention.

Not for me did your heartbeats quicken,
not for me.

Every morning your flock was combined
with my sister Rachel's flock.

I would be late in rising,
I would be late going out with my flock,
lest I see you going out together
with joy on your faces,

I roamed over strange paths,
so as not to meet you
near the spring.

But the paths in their malice
led me in your track,

My stubborn feet

led me to the place where you were lying:
and from the hiding place I counted
every caress of your hand upon my sister's breasts,
every kiss upon her mouth.

And even if I say to my hard heart:

there are many shepherds here,
they also appear handsome to me,
their hands strong -

Why should I not relax in their arms?

But my heart does not want to listen:

for you, only for you it longs.

And even if I order my hard heart,
to be silent:

for it is my sister that you love -
my heart will not be silent,
by night by day my heart incites me.

And I follow your tracks, and do not relent.

My eyes are weak from crying
and my face is pale;

I fear to look at their reflection
in the mirror of water.

And my mother asked me:

Why are you grieved, daughter,
why is your face so sad?

- My sister has abandoned me,

my sister has separated herself with her flock
in strange pastures.

The mandrakes too were given to her,
to my sister,
in hidden pastures.

And my mother understood my pain:

It is not done that way in our place
prepare yourself for your wedding, daughter.

Let the players come, let them ready their instruments,
let the poets come, let them rhyme their songs,
for the wedding day.

My sister's face was radiant,

your face was radiant -

for the wedding day.

Your gaze caressed my sister's body,

through her dress.

Her face was covered in a flush from shame and joy,

her desire burst forth to you.

And I kept silent, carrying my secret within me

in disgrace and reproach.

I will surely steal your love,

to your tent I will come

not called, not invited,

not the betrothed of your love.

I surely feel your caressing hands,

although they did not think they were caressing my body.

Drums deafen me,

dances make me dizzy!

My beloved, my beloved, love me;

for my nights cry out to you -

Pity me - please!

See, my body is beautiful too,

as the beauty of her body, whom your soul loves.

But you do not even send me a glance,

even if I dance my dance before you,

with my hips undulating.

*

The night comes
night of my stolen joy
shall I truly open the flap of your tent
will my knees not grow feeble beneath me?

There in the tent you are waiting
there in the darkness you are waiting.
Upon the palms of your hands longing trembles
upon your lips your kisses are frozen.
In expectation.

All of you, all of you is waiting,
not for me.

Wildly I rip open the canvas,
wildly I will fall at your knees, -
take me.

And with morning my shame will be evident,
at the daybreak you will despise me.
I can no longer show my face before any
handmaid.

My life will roll down to the depths of shame.

Tonight I will think of your stolen love,
I will drink and be satiated without leaving over anything.

I lift up my hands to the tent canvas - -

הגדר

וישכם אברהם בבקר... וישלחה ויחלף ויחטע במדבר... (בראשית כ"א, י"ד)

כי זמם אדם.

איכה אשפילך ולא השפיליך עוד.
איכה אנרשך ולא תשובי.
ולא אוסיף ראותך לעולם.

טרף לשחל אשפך
בלב המדבר.
אותך ושנך רחמך
ועם מותך אך תנים ילילו.
איים ייבבו
סניך ילקו.

ולא סלל אברהם
כי לילות לו יבואו
ואיים ותנים התנומה ידיו
מעל עפעפיו
כי ביללתם יללת שפחתו
יבבת ילדו ידמה שמע.
שכם טרף לשחל
בלב המדבר.

ולא ידע אברהם
כי אגרוסו הקמצים
עד זב דם ידך
בחרטה וכלמה.

1

ועקרה אברהם מלבו.
בעקר צמת.
השריש בין חנוי הסלע.
עמקו מאד שרשיו.

הלא שנאתיך הגר שפחתי
נסתלת כצמח-שרג
בין כמות הרגלים.
ולא תרסי עוד.
אוסף כאב, הוססת אהוב
ואדע ידע:
שבע אתעלל בך -
ואת שבע תשאי לי.
ושנאתיך שבעתים, הכנועה.

המדברה גרשתיך - ותשובי
שחתי מלאכים מלבך לי בדית,
לרצונתי.
חנני אחשה:
אמרי סי לי שפרו
מהשמיעם באזניך, השפחה.

ואת, בעקשות אתכתך
את לבך חנני
כי אכן ושנאתיך בקרבתי:
ולא ידעת.
ולא אכית ידע

Hagar

And Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread
and a bottle of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting
it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away,
and she departed, and wandered away in the wilderness of
Beer-sheva. (Genesis 21:14)

And Abraham uprooted her from his heart,
like uprooting a plant,
which had struck root between the clefts of a cliff,
and whose roots are very deep.

Surely I hate you Hagar my handmaid
you have wound yourself like a vine
between the palms of my feet
and will not let go.

The more I pained you, the more you loved
and I surely know:

I will persecute you sevenfold -
and you will forgive me sevenfold,
and I will hate you sevenfold, the submissive one.

To the dessert I banished you - yet you returned;
the enticements of angels from your heart you invented for me
to appease me,
and I was silent:

the words of my mouth were too good for me
to speak them into your ears, the handmaiden.

And you, in the stubbornness of your love
you deceived your own heart
that I indeed bore your affection;
and you did not know,
nor did you want to know
that I was indeed plotting.

How can I humiliate you in ways that I have not yet
humiliated you,
how can I drive you out so that you will not return,
so that I will no longer see you ever again.

I will make you prey for the beast
in the heart of the desert,
you and your offspring
and upon your death only the jackals will howl,
only coyotes will whine
and lick at your face.

★

And Abraham did not think
that nights would come to him
when coyotes and jackals would interfere with his sleep
from his eyelids?
Because in their howling was his handmaiden's wailing
he imagined hearing his son's whimpering.
he sent them to be prey for the beast
in the heart of the desert.

And Abraham did not know
that he would bite his clenched fists
in disgrace and reproach
until they bleed.

But Abraham did not get up
from his placid bed,
in the dark of the night;
he did not run to the desert
to save the boy's soul,
and to bring the maidservant back,
only in her abundant love for him was she guilty:
her submissiveness was too great to bear.

And Abraham did not think
that the beast had not torn them apart;
that Hagar could indeed survive
and wander in the arid desert.
the jackals howling after her.
And Abraham did not know
that in all of her paths Hagar could wait for him,
for his call: Come back!

Every day naive Hagar waited
ready to forget the insult done to her,
as if it never was.

If he would but summon her
and give her water to drink
from the palms of his hands.

Oh, if only he would call her,
 whole and pure she would run after him,
 She would kiss his feet,
 as before.

Hagar will surely wander
 through deserts,
 through fields, through markets,
 through towns and cities, -
 She will wander from generation to generation,
 Abraham's image before her,
 and she will live forever -

For indeed was the injustice greater than death,
 so that death could not overcome it?
 The injustice is greater than death,
 it will not be exonerated
 only in Abraham's hands was the power to erase it,
 and he did not erase it.

Thus Hagar will live forever,
 search forever.

PART TWO

And these are Hagar's songs to this day: (a suite)
 ... the more you hurt me the more will I love you.
 For it is wonderful to me (R. Yehuda haLevi)

A

There in your tent spread out carpets,

caress your feet

I wove every cord and every thread which was in them,

every flower bud was raised by my finger's music, out of

the chaos of threads -

for you.

Each flower in them conjured up my love,

to give pleasure to your soul.

How can my carpets not feel soft to you,

and flood your eyes with the multitude of their colors?

How could the leaves of their flowers not be ignited

into burning flames

which will sear your legs?

How can you placidly trample

upon my finger's blessing,

sent to you in my carpets,

and your calmness not be disturbed as the leaves scream

as they bewail my shame?

B

My skin still remembers your hands' touch;

glistening in the dark bared and radiating:

it dreams of your hands.

In vain do I calm it with caresses of my hands,

with great mercy:

the stubborn one remembers the touch of your hands,

it refuses to be consoled.

C

Day after day sings,
sparkles with a myriad of light,
to greet you.
Day after day withers and falls,
lights are extinguished,
because you did not come.
It is only in my dreams that I bring you,
against your will,
and you, even you will not know
that you have blessed me?

D

Seven times you kill me
death after death,
one death more bizarre than the other,
more terrible than another,
yet seven times I will rise up to you,
hope-stuck.
From where is the source of your hatred
terrible and flowing -
that you hate me so?

From where is the source of my deep happiness,
that it has not completely dried up,
it is still streaming
under your feet?

E

Without desire you held my soul
 between your two fingers
 up to the light of the lamp:
 your eyes studied it sharply:
 will it reflect all of the beams?
 And it did not see.
 Without desire you let go of my soul
 rejected and defective from between your fingers.

F

Do you really not remember
 how you hugged me,
 how you placed your hand close
 with the softness and pride of a father
 to my swollen body:
 with anxiety you waited
 to sense your son's every movement inside of me.

Have you indeed forgotten
 how tears poured from your eyes
 at the sight of my body contracting,
 contorted by labor pains;
 could you have forgotten?

Every merciful glance from your eyes
 shone to me, sank into me.

But perhaps the tears were visible only to me,
 only I brought them to your eyelids?

Did I perhaps cause the expressions from your lips
to be heard,
a fountain of joy to intoxicate me?

And even then
you stood as a stranger across from me
a stranger as you are today,
and I, I did not know.

G

Towards you I will wander on paths, byways
between thickets thistles and thorns,
along every path I sought you,
and because of the hurting of the palms of my feet,
burnt by the burning sand,
torn by stones,
I will go on my belly,
I will move toward you -
but I will not find you.

And wherever I will go,
I will remove every stone from the roads,
I will weed them of every weed,
I will straighten them and smooth them by hand:
and when the day comes
that you stride upon them -
you will not wound your feet
on the sharpness of the stones,
then only the soft sand will caress them.

H

Oh, had I known then,

that that was the last time for me,

you would walk with me, hand in hand,

never to do so again, -

I would have looked at the hills surrounding us:

their crags certainly shed tears in redness;

I would have looked

at the trees along our way:

sorrow was certainly suspended from their branches

and silently wailed.

But I did not hear,

and I did not see, -

in my naiveté I walked by your side,

and as always my face shined, upon you.

Oh, had I known then,

I would have fallen on my face

at the foot of the hills,

at the foot of the trees:

let them speak on my behalf

let them ask for mercy before you,

they would never let you go away from me.

Oh, hills, hills,

why, why did you not warn me?

Why did you not thunder with a rock slide,

by throwing an obstacle under our feet?

Oh, trees, trees,
 why, why did you not alert me?
 Why did you not wave the branches of your trunk,
 as when a fearful storm is threatening?
 But rather sorrow hung from your branches,
 and silently wailed,
 like the silent complaint of your leaves?
 Why, why did you not then rend
 my last tranquility?

I
 Had I but been blinded,
 my legs would have led me
 to your doorstep:
 my legs which know every stone of the way by heart,
 every mound and curve,
 even if I would not want to,
 even if I would not know where,
 and I asked my legs: to where is your path leading?
 And they are so surprised:
 - Why are you asking us?
 Are we not bringing you to the threshold of his house,
 forever and always. -
 I obeyed and I went.

I stood in my place before your threshold.
 My unrequited love is like a slap in the face,
 and I will return.

* *
*
*

But today I will not back away from

your threshold,

today I will go up to you

Step after step,

one step higher than the other,

caused my faltering knees to trip.

But today I will not go back;

today I will be stubborn, and I will see your face.

and hear your voice.

I will surely come to you,

even if you have not called me,

even if shame makes red my paleness.

I will surely go up,

a hand not mine will knock on the door,

you as if hesitating will open,

with eyes of stone you will look at me:

- What are you doing here?

And I will be silent before you,

you have beheaded the dove of my happiness

with a cold hand:

and the dove was not even offered up

in the sanctification of the sacrifices:

without a blessing you spilled its blood on the earth.

And how could I not be silent?

And how I only wanted to see your face,

only hear your voice.

J

revenge

to Sarai

I am still with you, my love, I am still,
even if you act strangely, for you in you here I am,
seven times you will deny it,

you will not root out

my name from your core:

it lives, lives within you.

You will surely remember, it will occur to you:
at the acme of your joy you will cry out my name
in torment - suddenly, uncalled for

it will come to mind

avenging my revenge, becoming a curse:
from the depths of your soul, like a living thing it will
flow forth,

it will agitate your blood and strike up waves in it.

let her pathetic skin turn yellow and harden,

let it feel like parchment in your palms;

let her two breasts wither

in the palms of your hands

let them wither, - let her gaze become dazed:

to whom do you call now,

to whom?

Ha, it is my name, the stubborn one, it is my name

it is the name which will afflict you

this very night.

K

You can still
hold out your hand
towards the blue,
to call me back from wandering,
into your outstretched hand.

You can still
call out my name
from every direction of the universe -

and I will come.

From any corner of the universe I will come to you;
I will gather the fragments of my soul,
scattered throughout it,
in my searching for you.

But you will not stretch out your hand,
you shall not call to me.

L

If it is still possible
to be happy
and to drink deeply thus -
be blessed,
if a person can still
hurt and suffer thusly -
and agonize so -
be blessed.

For you it began,
 and with you it ended,
 With you it was joyous
 and with you my happiness
 flickered out.

Light - and darkness came
 with you: indeed you
 crown me and you bind me.

M

My life is again in confusion:
 it is tossed about without an anchor
 on the great waters;
 but the blueness from above
 calm and tranquil
 prophesy for me an end to wandering.

Then I will no longer mourn,
 but rather I will bless you,
 because I will have known you
 source of my joy.

And because you were mine -
 oh, be blessed.

N

This is the prayer of Hagar, the naive handmaid
 one bright day,
 I will come to you,
 and I will lay out my life

in the palms of my hands.

I will come to you, saying:

Look

here is my life,

look and accept it:

behold my life is pure before you

there is nothing else

except for this one bright crystal

Accept it!

Anda Amir has written five poems about biblical women: "Eve", "Lot's Wife", "Leah", "Hagar", and "Delilah". "Delilah" will not be reviewed. "Eve", focuses on discovering one's true nature of identity and not living out roles which have been planned for you by others. "Lot's Wife" cries out against the expectation that women are just their husband's wives. "Leah" is the story of how women sometimes let men come between them by placing their relationship with a man before their already established relationship with a woman. "Hagar" is a detailed portrait of how one woman experienced the ending of a love relationship. In each poem Amir uses the biblical character and her story to explore an issue for women today. For the most part, the characters emerge stronger at the end of the poem as a result of their struggles.

"Eve"

"Eve", focuses on the second story of creation (Genesis 2:4-3:24). In this story Eve is created as a helpmate for Adam out of his rib. The fruit of the tree of knowledge is forbidden to them. Eve eats of the fruit and gives Adam a bite and they are both expelled from the Garden.

The first three stanzas reflect the peaceful, pleasurable life Eve led in the Garden. Day follows day, the sun caresses her, she sleeps gently, and life is seemingly perfect. Then in the fourth stanza we glimpse an imperfection: "the night aroused my bodily fluids,/ but they have nowhere to go." Eve is an adolescent who is just beginning to become aware of her own sexuality. Her skin is heavy upon her, "as if it wants to burst forth/ but it has no outlet". Eve was created with hormones and desires yet the biblical account of the Garden mentions nothing about Eve and Adam having a sex life. At this point in the poem, Eve's feelings,

sensations are as yet undirected and undefined.

Then she sees the tree, the tree with the apple. The apple fascinates her. The tree has "stored in it the wisdom of all (its) juices". The Hebrew word **זֶדֶד** is used here for the apple's juices and above for Eve's bodily fluids. The repetition of this word calls attention to the affinity Eve senses between herself and the tree. The knowledge she gleaned from the tree was, "the secret, for which you had grown". The tree taught her that bearing fruit was the reason for growing and maturing. She realized the potential for creating life which existed within her.

When the "secret" is finally made known to her, Eve is amazed that she had until then, "... walked empty/ between those who bear fruit". When we become aware of our sexuality and our reproductive ability, it is inconceivable that we did not recognize it before. How could we have been so out of touch with ourselves? As Eve wanders through the Garden now, with her new self-awareness, she feels disgraced and insignificant. With opened eyes she observes the does, "whose bodies swelled,/ bowed down with their weight" and the bird who "sits on her eggs,/ fruit of her blood and innards". Eve's carefree existence, skipping from "spring to spring", living for her own pleasure is worthless. In fact she realizes that she was, "created only for joy".

The triviality of her created purpose and her life until now is over. Eve now knows her own purpose, her own desires, her true nature, and she will pursue it. Eve acknowledges her sisterhood with the female of all living creatures. She will bear fruit and be bowed down under its weight. Eve accepts this as her role in life. Yet, with this knowledge, her life of impulse and self-centeredness will be lost. "I will no longer know

flighty pleasure", Eve says, for with knowledge comes responsibility, both with regard to the children she will bear and with regard to controlling her ability to reproduce. Eve is willing to give up this carefree life.

Eve feels blessed by the "magic spell" or awakened yearnings of the heart which have led her to the fruit. The Hebrew words *ehd-ehj* mean magic spell or incantation. *ehj* is a homonym with the word for serpent. The murmurings in her heart are represented by the serpent in the biblical story. Through them she will be redeemed, set free. Freedom, however, is never an absolute. Redemption from childhood and its limitations frees one to take on the responsibilities and limitations of adulthood. Being redeemed from a life of meaningless simplicity frees one to take responsibility for one's own life. Amir's message, through Eve, is clear: it is always better to rule your own life, to set your own goals and to make your own choices. We must live our lives being true to our own nature.

"Lot's Wife"

In Genesis 19, Lot is warned by two angels, disguised as visiting strangers, to leave Sodom immediately because the city is to be destroyed. They tell him to gather his family and flee to the hills. He is warned not to look back once he leaves. Lot does not discuss their departure with his family, he does not think twice about leaving.

The poem, "Lot's Wife", is a soliloquy by Lot's wife, directed at her husband. She begins with Lot's warning to her not to turn back. One might expect her to hear his voice filled with caring or concern but no:

to Lot's wife Lot's voice, "was so harsh with its certainty about the future". She finds the quietude in his eyes "terrible". Everything is so easy for Lot; choices in his life are black and white; and the "road becomes smooth" before him. It is a simple matter for him, the one chosen to receive the message, to pick up and leave. Lot is able to wipe out his life in Sodom "without a sigh". He immerses himself in, "the light of tomorrow" as one would immerse in a mikvah: emerging purified.

Lot's wife refers to him as a righteous and simple man, **אִישׁ צַדִּיק וְפשוט**. Amir has reversed the words used to describe Job (1.1). He is called **אִישׁ צַדִּיק וְפשוט**, which is usually translated as, "blameless and upright". Lot's wife uses it in a tongue-in-cheek way to refer to her husband. The irony is that you think of Job as a man who suffered much at God's hand; yet, in this poem it is Lot's wife who suffers and not Lot. He can simply pick up and leave but she can not. She has given her very blood to him, her insides, everything. The phrase "**אֶנִּי חֲרָמְךָ**", for him my bowels burn" (from Lamentations 1:20) conjures up an image of the most intense emotional distress. Lot's wife can not leave her past which "is preserved with every pounding of my blood". Lot's wife can not bear to leave her Sodom, the place in which she has lived, the place in which she has raised her two daughters, the place she calls home. The "joys" and "sorrows" of their lives there beat within her. She can not wipe this from her heart.

As she stands, reflecting, feeling the pull of the past upon her, the city is destroyed. A fog settles over everything - nothing is clearly visible except for the retreating figures of her family and the destroyed life she has been forced to abandon. Here and now she has made the conscious choice to stay and face her own destruction. She alone knows that she will harden like stone -- forever facing her past.

According to Anda Amir, women more than men, weave their lives out of the people, places, and everyday events that they experience. To separate from a place is as painful as cutting off a part of yourself. Women today are often asked by their husbands to move because they have been offered a better job elsewhere. The pain and upheaval caused in their wives' and families' lives is not considered; they are expected to follow him. Though Amir has chosen to ignore Sodom's wickedness, thereby straying from the biblical storyline, she has filled in the reason for Lot's wife looking back. Amir has made Lot's wife's act a conscious act of defiance and self-assertion.

"Leah"

The biblical background for "Leah" is Genesis chapters 29 and 30. The story begins with Jacob's appearance in the pasture. He immediately falls in love with Rachel, Laban's younger daughter. Jacob agrees to work for Laban for seven years in exchange for the right to marry Rachel. When the wedding night arrives, Leah, Rachel's older sister, is substituted for Rachel. Jacob discovers the deception in the morning. Laban explains that their custom is to marry the older daughter first and that Rachel can be his at the end of the bridal week. The Bible does not tell us about Leah and Rachel's relationship before Jacob appeared. We have a fleeting glance at how Leah felt about Rachel in later years from the incident with the mandrakes. (Genesis 30:14-16). Rachel asks Leah for some of her son's mandrakes. Leah replies, "Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?" We also are never told whether or not Leah loves Jacob. Anda Amir answers some of these questions in the poem "Leah".

The first section of "Leah" describes the sisters life before Jacob. They seem to be close companions. Their life was pleasant and simple: "Every day was like another" and "our days were equal and bright". Both were tall and beautiful, attracting the attention of the shepherds and enjoying it. Then everything changed. Jacob came walking, "along amongst the shepherds handsome and erect". Jacob had a strong presence which everyone acknowledged. The sisters' lives changed, "Our days grew glum, / our nights became hot". Their relationship with each other changed, "we hid our faces, sister from sister our glance could not be direct". They both desired Jacob and knew the other did as well. Not only could they not look each other in the eye but speaking too revealed their common longing, "And when a word was spoken, / your name was hidden tremulously within it." The deep rift was made obvious as they began to graze their flocks in separate pastures "For indeed we had become isolated, one sister from another".

This common love of Jacob destroyed the two sisters' friendship. Perhaps they were at fault to have let it happen. Amir suggests that Jacob may have contributed to the problem. Amir seems to suggest that Jacob led Leah on. In the third section, while Jacob's flock was resting, he gathered mandrakes. He then approached Leah, embraced her and gave her the mandrakes. Was it a brotherly embrace, the kind one gives to win over a future sister-in-law? Then why did he give her mandrakes which were used for their magical powers, possibly as an aphrodisiac or fertility drug? Jacob then goes back to his flock and pays no more attention to Leah.

Leah is completely in love with Jacob and very jealous of Rachel. In the fourth section of the poem, Leah tries to avoid seeing Rachel and Jacob together. Now they graze their flocks together as Leah and Rachel

had done. Yet hard as she resists, Leah eventually does follow them and spies on them, "and from the hiding place I counted/ every caress of your hand upon my sister's breasts,/ every kiss upon her mouth". What pain and anguish Leah must have felt. It is hard enough to love someone who does not return your love but to have his lover be your own sister must be nearly unbearable. So Leah tries to interest herself in the other shepherds whom she does find handsome. But her "heart does not want to listen". She can not help herself, she seems to be possessed, and she continues to follow them. Her eyes are weak, not from lack of beauty as is commonly thought, but rather from crying.

When her mother asks Leah what is making her so sad, Leah's first response is, "My sister has abandoned me". Not only did she not have Jacob's love but she had lost her sister's friendship and companionship as well. Leah continues, "my sister has separated herself with her flock/ in strange pastures". Leah is not just referring to Rachel's choice of new grazing areas. The strange pastures also refer to a new stage in life. Rachel is experiencing a kind of love relationship which Leah has not experienced. The hardest part to accept, that which Leah mentions last to her mother, is that Rachel too received mandrakes from Jacob. Her mother understood Leah's pain and reassured her daughter by letting her know that she would marry Jacob as was their custom.

The wedding day arrives and we see just how much in love are Rachel and Jacob. Their love and desire can not be hidden. Yet, the plans have been made. Leah will go to Jacob at night: unrequested, unloved, knowing that nothing she can do will make her beloved love her. She daydreams of the night throughout the wedding. She knows how Jacob will be longing for Rachel and not her. She knows, too, that she will go through with the

charade though it will mean humiliation in the morning. Leah will take this one night and will, "drink and be satiated without leaving over anything".

Leah's story is sad. It is the story of a woman totally consumed by an unrequited love. She is so absorbed by it that she is willing to destroy her relationship with her sister, ignore other possible men, and endure lifelong humiliation.

"Hagar"

Though "Hagar" primarily focuses on Hagar's feelings after her second banishment (Genesis 21), the poem begins at an earlier point in the biblical story. In Genesis 16, Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham because she is barren. Hagar becomes pregnant and Sarah feels negated by Hagar's pregnancy. Sarah makes Hagar's life so miserable that she flees into the desert. There Hagar encounters an angel who tells her to return to Sarah and to name her child Ishmael. She returns, only to be banished again after Isaac is born. Both times Abraham steps back and lets Sarah have her way. The first time he does not argue. The second time Abraham must be instructed by God to obey Sarah and banish Hagar into the desert.

Amir opens the poem with a brief allusion to the difficulty Abraham must have had sending Hagar away. Hagar is likened to a plant whose roots are deeply imbedded in the "clefts of a cliff". It is a difficult task to uproot such a plant. Hagar was imbedded within Abraham's heart and it must have been hard to rip her out. This sympathetic view seems to be an aside placed here by Amir in order to give us a more objective view of Abraham before she presents Hagar's view. It is most definitely not the voice of

Hagar, who later on in the poem speaks of Abraham as a very cold and unfeeling person. The poem then moves to Sarah's voice. Sarah is painted as a heartless, vengeful, plotting woman. Sarah's loathing of Hagar is made plain. Sarah despises Hagar because she is submissive, because she is abused and yet still remains loving and loyal. Sarah feels that she is superior to Hagar, "the words of my mouth were too good for me/ to speak them in your ears, the handmaiden". Sarah refers to the angel who spoke to Hagar in the desert as an invention by Hagar, "to appease me". Sarah sees how Hagar deceives herself, believing that she is loved by Sarah. All the while Sarah's goal is to humiliate her and make sure that she is sent away, never to return. Sarah is cold hearted enough to daydream of Hagar's death in the desert, "and upon your death only the jackals will howl,/ only coyotes whine/ and lick at your face".

The poem then returns somewhat sympathetically, but not without criticism, to Abraham. Abraham is portrayed as misguided or naive in that he himself did not realize what Hagar and Ishmael meant to him. He thought he could just send them away. He did not realize that the coyotes and jackals would keep him awake at night, "Because in their howling was his son's whimpering". Abraham never thought that he would feel disgrace because of his actions. We are led to feel almost sorry for Abraham, until we are reminded of his inaction to right his wrong. Abraham could have risen "from his placid bed", but he did not. Abraham, like Sarah, can not bear Hagar's submissiveness and undying love. By totally subjugating her desires to please others, Hagar only negates herself in their eyes. This seems to be her major failing, one which women today are struggling to overcome. And so Abraham knowingly condemns Hagar and Ishmael to certain death in the desert.

So, we come at last to Hagar. Throughout the rest of this lengthy poem we hear only the voice of Hagar. We hear her call out from the depths of the wilderness in anguish and bewilderment and in anger, too. Hagar begins by waiting for Abraham's call to her to return. She is willing to forgive everything, "she would kiss his feet,/ as before". Hagar will wander through place and time with "Abraham's image before her". She is the universal symbol of the suffering rejected lover. She suffered an "injustice greater than death", greater than her own death. It will live on past her own lifetime. And Abraham had the power to rectify the situation but did not.

The second part of the poem is a suite of short poems, each reflecting a thought, a memory, or an emotion of Hagar in her wanderings. The first is about the carpets she lovingly wove for Abraham. Hagar shows anger here, anger that the carpets she made - which should serve as a physical reminder of her relationship with Abraham - do not affect him. Hagar asks: "How could the leaves of their flowers not be ignited/ into burning flames/ which sear your legs?" She can not understand his calmness. In the second poem she remembers their physical relationship, the touch of Abraham's hand. She tries to duplicate his touch herself, but it is to no avail. Hagar was called the submissive one in the first part of the poem by both Sarah and Abraham but here she refers to her skin as "the stubborn one," refusing to let go of the memory.

In the third poem we learn that each morning, with the light, she hopes that Abraham will come for her. Each night the light is extinguished because he did not come. In the fourth one Hagar accuses Abraham of killing her seven times. Perhaps this is a figurative reflection of a week's wandering in the desert. Each night she dies and each day she rises up

again "hope-struck." Hagar does not know from where Abraham's hatred of her comes any more than she knows "From where is the source of my deep happiness." Hagar continues in this vein, trying in the sixth poem to understand her crime. She assumes that Abraham has closely examined her soul and then rejected it because it was defective. Strangely, however, she sees him doing both, examining and rejecting, without desire -- without feeling.

Hagar next reflects upon her pregnancy and Abraham's reaction to it. He touched her "with the softness and pride of a father," and he cried at their son's birth. Then Hagar^o thinks that perhaps she imagined it all: the tears, the glances, the anxiety. She realizes that he was a stranger to her then, as now. Hagar echoes Jacob's words at Beth-el when he finally realized that God was present in that place and he said "and I did not know". This too is a moment of vision, a cold, clear, realistic vision. She realizes for the first time that Abraham was not the man she had wanted him to be. It becomes clear to her, that even if his reaction to her pregnancy and his son's birth were not imagined, that his feelings did not necessarily transfer to her as a person. He may have felt tenderly towards her as the mother of his only son and nothing more.

In the seventh poem, Hagar continues her searching for Abraham. The difference, however, is that she is not just waiting for him to come to her. She is actively seeking him out "along every path". If she has to she will crawl on her belly. And everywhere she goes she will make a clear and easy path for him to follow, in case he does come after her. Hagar is always thinking of his needs and his comforts. She will cut her feet on stones and burn them on sand but she will protect Abraham from a similar fate.

The next poem is a longer section in which Hagar regrets not having known that the last time she and Abraham were together was the last time they would ever be together. If she had known she would have called out to the hills and the trees, to nature itself to defend her, to plead for her before Abraham. She reproaches the hills and trees for not warning her of Abraham's intentions. Hagar thinks that if she had known he was going to abandon her she could have stopped him. Hagar also thinks she should have seen the warning signs: the rock slide or the branches waving. Both are common reactions to rejection: the sense that you could have done something to change the other person's feelings if only you had known and this self-reproach for not picking up on those warning signs that we assume, in retrospect, were readily evident.

In the ninth poem Hagar, who has been wandering, lost and unable to find Abraham, now instinctively knows the way to his doorstep. But this poem has a dream-like quality to it. It is all in her imagination. She questions her feet as to the direction of their path and they reply: "Are we not bringing you to the threshold of his house, / forever and always". She is able to admit that her "unrequited love is like a slap in the face." Yet, in her dream she continues to return to his door, to climb the steps that make her knees weak, determined to see him and hear him. The dream-like sensation continues when she knocks on the door with a hand not her own. Yet, even in her fantasy she realizes that Abraham will not welcome her back with open arms. He looks at her with eyes of stone and asks: "What are you doing here?" With that Abraham has killed what she thought was an endless well of joy and love, and she cries out: "You have beheaded the dove of my happiness". The cruelest blow dealt to Hagar was to be offered as a sacrifice without the necessary blessing to sanctify it.

Hagar was not even given that much. She was not allowed to see the importance of her part in the drama.

Hagar moves from this realization to her fantasies of revenge against Sarah, her hallucinatory satisfaction. In the tenth poem Hagar knows that even though Abraham threw her out she will always be a part of him. She knows that some night when Abraham and Sarah are making love he will call out her name instead of Sarah's. That will cause anger and hurt between them. Hagar knows that when Sarah's skin becomes yellow and has the feel of parchment, when her physical beauty is gone, Abraham will remember Hagar in her youthful beauty and long for her.

Finally, in the last few poems, Hagar is able to make peace with herself and with Abraham. After all of the pain and suffering if he can be happy she wishes him well; she blesses him. She realizes that the affair, begun with Abraham and ended by Sarah, is truly over. With Abraham she had joy and sadness, light and darkness. He made her feel important ("indeed you/ crown me") and he made her remember that she was a handmaiden ("and you bind me"). Hagar realizes the balance that existed in the relationship; it was not all wonderful -- nor was it all bad. After taking stock she is able to move on. Yes, her life has been thrown into chaos. The burning desire to return to Abraham which was once the focal point of her life is gone. "But the blueness from above/ calm and tranquil/ prophesy for me an end to wandering". When she is completely free of it she will be able to bless Abraham. Hagar will bless him because he brought her joy and they belonged to each other for a time. She will be able to hold on to the positive memories she has and let go of everything else: the anger and vengeance and pain and self-reproach and the consuming

need for Abraham.

The poem concludes with Hagar's prayer. She prays that in the future she will be able to come before someone, perhaps a new lover, and say: "Here I am, see me for who I am and accept me as I am." She will not try to be what she thinks the other person wants her to be. She will be herself. Hagar is now proud of that self. She sees it as a bright crystal which others must accept as it is.

The poem is a journey home, back to a sense of pride and self-esteem. We were observers, allowed to follow Hagar through her painful journey. Rejection by a lover is a destructive experience; it tears at the fabric of the self. Women often pass through the same cycle as Hagar. It is a long process from pain to anger, to self-reproach, to revenge, to rebuilding of self-esteem. Along the way there is often back-sliding into that feeling of desperation, that sense of "I must get him back."

Anda Amir has given voice to the painful process women go through. She has also given us a model of a healthy resolution to the process; one in which the past relationship is put into proper perspective within your life and you are then able to move forward, stronger and more self-assured.

Ahuvah Bat Hanah

רצפה בת-איה

יחזקח רצפה בת-איה את השק ותשהו לה על הצור ולא נתנה עוף השמים לטח עליהם יומם ואת חית-השדה לילה (שמואל ב' כ"א)

בראש חוצות יללתי כתנים.
נדו לי נשים. חלפו על סני
ועבדי המלך כסותו את בני
במבטם, בי נחלה.
רעדו מוסרי-ארץ.

ויד לא שלחה לעצור -
רק הרוח זעפת נסרה באוני
כרעם מהר-סיני.
ואני נותרתי זכרון
ולא נקראתי להעיד.

בכי נפשי. כל עוד כך דמע.
מחי שמים מעינך
וצלם אפק מן הארץ
היושבת על הדם!

הכי בראני רבוני
ובנדיבות לבו - הבו.
שאהבה זו בי נטע.
בשר וגיד ונשמה
וסרי-הבטן - לשמצה!

שמעני העים והשיב לי תשובה.
דבור מאלף ואתמה.
ואשים את לבי אל העים
ואראוהו ישר.

מעורר כבוד.

ואמר אל העים: למדני לרקד
את רקוד המתים עם שחר.
אם דין הוא דמיון - מה לי החי?
ומרש את כנסיו אל רחבת-מרומים
הרקד דרך-עוף את רקוד המתים
ואני לסניו בשדה הרחב -
עד הנענו הלך ורקד
אל גבעת העיות.
כאן ירד העים לסעד את לבו.

אז
קמה כי הרוח
לארב אל עיני.
פתע ידי תקרב
תדקר את עינו העמאלית.
ויוצק העים זעקה מחרידה
וירד על גיה שניה.
ואשלח את ידי אמונה בשנית
ואדקר את עינו הימנית.
אז צנח העים למרגלות הנבעה
לא נע עוד ולא זע.
ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום אחד
יום ראשון בביראה.

שש פעמים השתר האיר.
יום-יום את העים דקרחי.

וביום השביעי.
הוא יום המנוחה.
איתן, תרגי.
עים חדש על ראשי.

והיה היום השביעי
קדש לעים השביעי.

וביום השמיני.
אבוי לי, אבוי.
אביט אל נסי
ותנה הוא נדר.

לא יחפץ עוד לישב, לא יוכל עוד לילך, יחוג, לרגע ויחזק.
רק בשער עמד.
עת בלי ילון יעמד הוא ער

לעוף ולחיה נדר.

מורוצותי - סרג כבול.
מעולמי - צמצום הנבול.
קסאון האפק של נדר.
ואזעק אותו יום על כחש הסרי
המבתיק מצמרת גבוה.
תפוזי לשין יום, רקב לעץ ליל.
ועד יחיד לזעקי.
בקר יתבע הכסר
העים השמיני.

אזקף קומה, אניף מקל.
הנצחון מוכסח רק לו -
אך מה אני בלא מאבקו

חזה אמי בדורות

חזה, אמי בדורות,	לו שמוני שנית באותו נ.
לא הרחקתי הלוך ממך.	לו הקרו לי שנית את הנחש -
אף עשות לא הנדלתי כמוד.	כמוד כן הייתי נוהגת.
עץ החיים עוד נדור כמו אז,	בעבור נניסה בתפוח
אל עץ הדעת שנית לא קרבת -	אשליך את חיי לי מנגד.
נחרון אלהים עוד מעיק על כחסי.	

Rizpah, Daughter of Aiah

"Then Rizpah daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it on a rock for herself, and she stayed there from the beginning of the harvest until rain from the sky fell on the bodies; she did not let the birds of the sky settle on them by day or the wild beasts approach by night." (II Samuel 21:10)

Out on the main street of the market I howled like the jackals.
Women pitied me, they passed by me
and the King's servants tied up my sons,
in their look, fixed on me,
the foundations of the earth trembled.

Not a single hand reached out to stop -
only the raging wind buzzed in my ears
like thunder from Mount Sinai.
And I remained a memory
and I was not called upon to witness.

Cry, my soul, as long as you have tears within you,
wipe out the heavens from your eyes
and the image of the earth's horizon
which sits upon the blood!

Did my Creator create me
and with his generosity - the scorn,
which this love has planted within me,
flesh and vein and soul

and fruit of the womb - for disgrace?

The vulture heard me and it answered me,
an edifying speech and I was surprised.

Then I paid attention to the vulture
and saw him as honest,
arousing respect.

I said to the vulture: "Teach me to dance
the dance of the dead at dawn,
if justice is fantasy - what is a living thing to me?"

Then he spread out his wings over the wide heavens

like a bird he danced the dance of the dead
and I before him in the wide field -
until we arrived dancing

at the mountain of the corpses.

Here the vulture descended to eat to his heart's content,
then

the spirit arose within me
to lie in wait for his eyes.

Suddenly my hand approached

stabbing his left eye.

And the vulture let out a frightening scream
and descended upon the corpse.

I extended my firm hand a second time
and stabbed his right eye.

Then the vulture descended to the foot of the mountain
no longer moving.

And it was evening and it was morning one day

the first day of creation.

Six times the dawn was lit.

Daily I stabbed at the vulture.

Then on the seventh day,

the day of rest,

steadfastly, festively,

there was a new vulture over my head.

And the seventh day

was dedicated to the seventh vulture.

And on the eighth day,

woe to me, woe,

look at my body

and behold it is a fence.

It no longer desires to sit, it can no longer walk,

it can only stand by the gate.

At the time when all is asleep it stands alert

to the birds and to be a fence against the beasts.

My arms - intertwined fettered,

my world - the limited border,

the frozen horizon of a fence.

I cried out on that day about the deceit of

fruit glistening from the heights of the tree-tops,

my oranges which appear during the day, appear rotten

at night.

And the only witness to my cry,

the eighth vulture

has already claimed his ransom.

I will stand erect, I will swing a staff,
he will circle for a moment than slip away.
Victory is assured only to him -
But what am I without the struggle?

Eve, My Mother Throughout the Generations

Eve, my mother throughout the generations,
I have not gone any further than you,
I also have not acted as greatly as you.
The tree of life is still fenced as it was then,
I did not go near the tree of knowledge a second time -
And God's anger still weighs heavily on my shoulders.

If they were to put into the same garden a second time,
if I were to meet the snake again -
yes I would act like you.

For the sake of a bite into the apple
I would jeopardize my life.

Ahuvah Bat Hanah

Ahuvah Bat Hanah has written two poems, one about a well-known biblical character, Eve and one about a fairly obscure woman, Rizpah the daughter of Aiah. Both poems portray the two characters as women of action. Both Eve and Rizpah respond actively to the world around them: Eve eats the apple and Rizpah guards her sons' bodies.

"Eve"

In this short but powerful poem, Eve is held up as a role model for women of every generation - an ideal for which we should continually strive. Even though the poem was written in the first person singular it is clearly referring to women in general. Eve's act of eating the apple is exalted. It was a great and daring act, one which we as women have never surpassed. We have never approached the tree of life, we have not even returned to better explore the tree of knowledge. Instead we have walked throughout the generations feeling that "God's anger still weighs heavily" upon us. Still, Bat Hanah would like to think that if we were given another chance, we would rise to the occasion and bite the apple. Bat Hanah would sacrifice her life as it is in order to "bite into the apple" - in order to taste of all that is forbidden to women in the world.

"Rizpah Daughter of Aiah"

Rizpah is only mentioned twice in the Bible. The first time is in II Samuel 3:7, where she is identified as Saul's concubine. Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, is chastising Abner for having slept with Rizpah who is his father's concubine. Abner assured Ish-bosheth that it has nothing to do with his steadfast loyalty to Saul.

Rizpah reappears for the second and final time in II Samuel chapter twenty-one. There was a famine during David's reign. God told David that the famine was a result of the bloodguilt of Saul for putting to death many Gibeonites, Saul had tried to wipe them out. David asked the Gibeonites what he could do to make expiation. They turned down gold and silver and asked instead for seven male descendants of Saul to impale at Gibeah. David agreed and gave the Gibeonites Rizpah's two sons and the five sons of Merab, Saul's daughter. They were all impaled on the same day at the beginning of the barley harvest. Rizpah stayed with the bodies from their death until the first rains. She guarded them, keeping away both birds and beasts. David was told what Rizpah did. He then collected Saul and Jonathan's bones and the bones of the seven and buried them in Zela in the tomb of his father Kish. The famine ended and that is the last we hear of Rizpah.

Surely Rizpah acted out of love for her sons. She also acted in accordance with the biblical injunction of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 which states, "If a man is guilty of a capital offense and is put to death, and you impale him on a stake, you must not let his corpse remain on the stake overnight, but must bury him the same day. For an impaled body is an affront to God." This passage was developed into an ethic of kevod hamet (respect for the dead). Through halacha this ethic was translated into observances. Interestingly enough the custom of not abandoning a corpse has remained an important expression of kevod hamet.

The thought of seven innocent people being killed to settle a vendetta is horrifying. Perhaps the worst part is that it is seemingly condoned by God. In the biblical story neither one of the mothers speak. They do not protest or cry out in anguish and only Rizpah acts. Bat Hanah lets

Rizpah speak out. From this virutally unknown biblical figure we learn about the consuming, never ending loss a mother feels when her child dies and how one woman reacts to glaring injustice in the world. This poem is as horrifying as is the biblical story and perhaps more powerful.

The first stanzas describe the abduction of Rizpah's sons. Rizpah "howled like the jackals" in the open marketplace but nobody cared. The very "foundations" of her world were being shaken and "Not a single hand reached out to stop". They pitied her but they just passed by. Perhaps these other women were relieved that it was not their sons. The wind buzzing in her ears was "like thunder from Mt. Sinai". It was loud and terrifying and spoke of a power much greater than her own, something not to be challenged or ignored. Even though Rizpah was there and heard the thunder of the revelation, she "was not called upon to witness". She played no part in this drama. It sounds like the experience of mothers and wives who are forced to sit by and watch the men in their lives go off to war. The women are never asked to give their consent or to participate nor are they allowed to stop the madness. They fade into the background and remain "a memory".

Rizpah then turns to anger; anger at everything that exists. She tries to "wipe out the heavens" and "the image of the earth's horizon". When the phrase *hikl omeh* is used in the Bible it does not refer specifically to the heavens and the earth but rather it refers to the whole created world. Rizpah sees everything as an accessory to this crime by condoning it, by "sitting on its blood". Rizpah then lashes out at her Creator. How could her Creator have created her with this intense instinctive love for the "fruit of her womb", only to have them killed in such "disgrace".

The vulture, who alone has heard her cry, appears and responds to her honestly. The vulture did not tease and torment her as God had nor did the vulture pretend to act justly as the people around her had. The vulture has only one purpose, to survive, and he pursues it openly. So Rizpah calls out to the vulture to teach her "the dance of the dead at dawn". "If justice is fantasy", elusive and unreal then a "living thing" - a person too is unreal and valueless. She danced with the vulture to the mountain and thought that she had learned its message: there is no sanctity in once living. Yet when she saw the vulture descend upon her sons' bodies "the spirits arose within" her. Rizpah stabbed his eyes out, sending the vulture to its death. She may have wanted to stop caring about her sons because without caring there would be no pain, but she could not. Rizpah could not let the vulture destroy what was left of her sons.

Rizpah killed the vulture and it fell "to the foot of the mountain, no longer moving". Immediately following this picture of death we read "And it was evening and it was morning one day/ the first day of creation." The use of this phrase from Genesis stands out sharply against the background of death of both the sons and the vulture. The biblical week of creation is mimicked by the daily arrival and stabbing of the vulture. What was being created becomes clearer in the next to last stanza. It is Rizpah's life that is being re-created, reformed: "look at my body/ and behold it is a fence." With each passing day, with each new vulture Rizpah's world of existence is narrowed until she has only one purpose: to guard her sons' bodies. Her arms have become twisted and bound, her world is nothing more than "the frozen horizon of a fence." It appears that Bat Hanah is juxtaposing two forms of creation. Rizpah's new creation - her only function in life - stands in contrast to the creation of the world which was expansive.

Rizpah cries out "about the deceit of/ fruit glistening from the heights of the tree-tops." The fruit is her sons and she has been deceived by their appearance because at night they are "rotten". Rizpah has been tricked throughout the day, her earlier years, into believing that her sons are healthy and growing ripe. Now, in the night, she sees that they **have** withered and have been wasted. The eighth vulture is the only witness to her outcry - to the life she now lives. Rizpah will remain at her post "standing erect" and "swinging a staff" though she knows that victory will be the vultures. At this point Rizpah has no choice: "But what am I without the struggle?" Her life no longer exists outside of this daily struggle with the vultures. The struggle over her sons' bodies is only the physical manifestation of her emotional and intellectual struggle with injustice in the world. If Rizpah gives up the struggle against the injustice which is perpetrated by people against each other and the struggle against the inherent injustice which exists in the world where those whom we nurture and love die, then she will merely exist. Mere existence and the acceptance of the status quo is not enough for her. She is willing to be re-created - to bend and change so as to continue the struggle. Though it is beyond the scope of the poem, it is possible that Rizpah was complacent about life until she was faced with this personal tragedy. She can not return to her life as it was before her sons' deaths. Rizpah will never see the world in the same light again: she knows that the "oranges rot on the trees."

Rivkah Aharon

(1929 -)

Her family moved from Iraq, to Israel at the beginning of the century. Her family was miraculously saved from the anti-Jewish riots. They moved to Tiberias and from there to Haifa where Aharon was educated. In 1955 she married Aharon Zakai.

Her poems were first published in 1956 (in "Hapo'el Haza'ir) and since then her poems have appeared in most newspapers and literary magazines. She also wrote children's poetry and stories for children's publications. In 1964 a collection of her work was published: Kanfei Yonah (A Dove's Wings).

צעדי יעקב

עת סהר החל לעלות בדמי הערבים. ורחל צופה הליכותיה ברסיסי לבא...
 ישבה רחל ובכתה.
 ולאח חובקת ילדיה על כתפה...
 עת זהובי רקיע החלו שרים,
 הרדימה לאח את ילדיה על שתי ברקיה.
 (כדרךכם של אבותינו בטרם עריסה).
 הכל שומם ומאום אין לה
 הנה אף הסהר בוכה עמה...

רחל נרדמת ונען בעינה.
 רחש בדלת הקורא בשמה.
 החלום ראתה!
 לא!
 צעדי יעקב.

הנה הוא בא...

Jacob's Footsteps

At the time when the moon began to rise in the still
of twilight,

Rachel sat and cried,

While Leah clasped her children to her shoulder ...

At the time when the gilded heavens began to sing,

Leah put her children to sleep upon her two knees

(as was the custom of our ancestors before there were
cradles),

and Rachel watched her actions* with the fragments
of her heart ...

Rachel dragged her feet to her house,
everything was desolate and she had nothing
look even the moon cried with her ...

Rachel falls asleep with sorrow in her eye

A stirring at the door calls out her name,

did she see a dream?

No!

Jacob's footsteps,

here, he is coming ...

* alternate reading: with her heart in pieces

עם שוב נעמי ורות לארץ יהודה

יחשב נעמי ורות

ורות

נשאה רגליה

במורדות הנבעה.

הלכנה בסעור לבה.

נרות דלקו עיניה.

לשדה השבלים.

אל בעז.

כונה פעמיה.

פסיעותיה חן.

שולי שמלתה

רוזים אפופה.

ומחלסתה ברוח

לוטטת ערסה...

ורות.

יתום - לילה.

חור - עניה.

לשדה חלקט הביאה.

כי ביתה לא שר

וכרמה לא נזמר.

כי אמה - היא אמו -

השביעתה לבוא.

אל גרן הזר...

ורות.

לשונה לא עמה.

רק ניבה ולש

זחורות משסתה.

על צרמה

שעורים.

הניחה ראשה

ובתסה הקמושה.

קולה לא נשמע.

בשעורי הגרן

נבלע.

ותשא דברתה בזון.

ותעלם בטרם שחר..

ורות.

לאמה חזרה.

אסת שעורים

על שקמה.

ותספר רזי נפשה.

ותמחה דמעיתה

ברסיסי שמחתה.

ותחלוף מחשבתה

אל עמה וארצה..

ותבין נעמי לב כלתה.

ותשא שסתה

בטללי נפשה:

אחי היית

בימי חסד ורע.

רות בתי.

הנהורה הנברה.

סורי אלי.

השיתי ראשך

ותאכר בכך.

ובטרם אלך אל מתי.

תחיי בדמותך

את בני.

ותיית בבוא הימים.

בת עמי טובה.

משכעה בנים..

והאיש כי יבוא.

עמו ברפת נבו.

תחלישי שמלתך

ונעלך תכלה.

ותיית אשת-חיל.

כי ידבנו לבו.

ובטרם אלך אל מתי.

תחיי בדמותך

את בני..

With Naomi and Ruth Upon Their Return
to the Land of Judah

And Ruth

lifted her feet

upon the hill-sides,

the moon locked in her heart,

her eyes lit candles,

to the field of sheaves,

to Boaz,

She directed her steps.

Her steps graceful,

the hems of her dress

enfolding secrets,

and her braided hair

caressing her neck in the wind ...

And Ruth,

her night - orphaned,

her sorrowful lot - made pale,

She brought to the gleaning field,

because her house was not singing

and her vineyard was not pruned,

because her mother - that is his mother -

had sworn her to come,

to the strange man's threshing floor ...

And Ruth,

barely able to speak,

only her expression overflowing
purely from her lips,
on a heap
of barley,
She rested her head
and her withered shoulder.
Her voice was not heard,
it was swallowed up
in the barley of the threshing floor.
And she spoke her piece gracefully,
and she disappeared before dawn.

And Ruth,
returned to her mother,
with a measure of barley
on her shoulder,
and she told the secrets of her soul,
and she wiped away her tears
with the fragments of her happiness,
and her thoughts passed
to her people and her land ...

And Naomi understood her daughter-in-law's heart,
and she spoke
with the dew of her soul:
you have been with me
during days of grace and misfortune,
Ruth my daughter,
the radiant and pure one,

come over to me,
bow your head
and I will bless you,
and before I go to join my departed ones,
you will resurrect my sons
through your image,
and you will be in the days to come,
as a good daughter of my people,
better than seven sons ...

And if the man comes
bearing the blessing of Nebo,
change your dress
and your worn out shoes,
and be a woman of valor,
if he is able to be bountiful
then before I join my departed ones,
you will resurrect my sons
through your image ...

Rivka Aharon has written two poems about two different pairs of biblical women. The first is about Rachel and Leah and the second is about Naomi and Ruth. In each poem we see the women as individuals and we also see how their lives are intertwined. Each pair of women is joined by a man in whom they place their hopes and desires. Rachel and Leah seek out Jacob for love, of which the tangible result is children. Naomi and Ruth seek out Boaz in order to carry a part of their past into the future, also through a child.

"Jacob's Footsteps"

The language of this poem is simple and the lines seem more story-like than poetic: "At the time when the moon began to rise in the still of twilight" and "look even the moon cried with her". As I read it, I see a mother sitting with her daughter at bedtime telling her the story of Rachel and Leah. She tells her daughter how Leah put her children to sleep at night. She even explains that Leah would have to rock them to sleep on her knees because they did not have cradles at that time.

This mother is honest, she does not leave Rachel out of the bedtime story. Her story is important, too. Rachel "sat and cried" and Rachel watched Leah with her heart in pieces. Rachel was desolate and felt that she had nothing because she had no children. The mother reassures her daughter, in the last stanza, that this is not so. Rachel has Jacob's love. Leah whispers into Rachel's tent looking for Jacob, "did she see a dream?" Rachel replies "No!" Then Jacob's footsteps are heard. They are coming to Rachel's tent.

"With Naomi and Ruth Upon Their Return to the
Land of Judah"

The biblical background for this poem is the book of Ruth. In it Naomi's husband dies and then later her sons, one of whom was Ruth's husband. Naomi decides to return to her native land of Judah from Moab where her family had settled because of famine. Ruth, her daughter-in-law insists upon following Naomi wherever she goes. Upon their return to Judah, Ruth goes out into the fields to glean food for Naomi and herself. She is noticed by Boaz, the owner of the field. Naomi realizes that Boaz can be Ruth's redeemer because he is a relative of Elimelech, Naomi's husband, and therefore a relative of Ruth's husband. Being a redeemer means that Boaz will acquire Ruth's husband's property and marry her and that their firstborn son will be accounted to Ruth's husband. The son will inherit Ruth's husband's land. (Deut. 25:5-10).

Boaz could refuse to marry Ruth so Naomi instructs Ruth how to go about asking Boaz. Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing floor at night and tells her to wait until he has gone to sleep and then to uncover his feet. Ruth is then to wait for Boaz's reaction. Ruth does this and responds to Boaz's surprise at her presence by asking him to take her for his wife. They do marry and Ruth has a son. Naomi becomes the child's foster mother. The son is King David's grandfather.

The poem describes the night Ruth goes to Boaz. The first stanza describes her walk to Boaz's fields. It is night and every part of her is involved in getting her to Boaz's side: her eyes light the way, her mind directs her feet, her feet move, the hems of her dress keep her goal a secret. In the second stanza we see that Ruth has been pressed into

going "to the strange man's threshing floor". Because she is a young, childless widow she must remarry. Ruth is thought of as unhappy. She no longer has a man to fill her nights, "her night-orphaned". She does not have a house full of children, "her house was not singing" and her potential for childbearing is going unused, "her vineyard was not pruned". Naomi - "that is his mother" - has sent her to his threshing floor.

During the episode on the threshing floor Ruth is depicted as silent, speaking only the set speech Naomi sent her with, disappearing before dawn. This comes directly from the biblical story. The feeling the poem leaves us with is that Ruth is an overlooked, unheard woman. When she returns to Naomi Ruth cries and pours out her soul to Naomi. Naomi comforts her by letting Ruth see the happiness her potential marriage to Boaz brings her. Yet Ruth still thinks of "her people and her land". Naomi knows Ruth's heart and is not insensitive to her. Naomi speaks to Ruth with soft, sweet, soulful words. She blesses Ruth and tells her that she will bear a son who will take the place of those who have died. In the biblical story, after Ruth has given birth to a son, the women say to Naomi, "He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons". (4:15). It is this blessing that Naomi passes on to Ruth in the poem.

In the last stanza Naomi speaks to Ruth about a man "bearing the blessing of Nebo". The man is Boaz, for whom Ruth is to change her dress and shoes and become a woman of valor. The "blessing of Nebo" refers to Deuteronomy 34:1-4. Moses climbs atop Mount Nebo and God shows him the promised land. He is allowed to see what his life's work was for but is not allowed to enter the land. Naomi is hoping that Boaz will "be bountiful" and Ruth will

have a son - fulfilling Naomi's hope for the continuation of her family. She will not see the child mature nor know of his illustrious descendant but she will have a glimpse, as Moses had.

Rahel

(1890 - 1931)

Born in Viatka, Russia, she went to a Russian high school, wrote her early poems in Russian, and studied art in Kiev. She went to Palestine in 1909 and worked as a farm labourer at Rehovot, and later at Kinneret. She was greatly influenced by A. D. Gordon. In 1913, she went to France and later to Russia, where she taught. Returning to Palestine in 1919, she became a member of the Kevutzah of Degania. In her latter years, she suffered from consumption, and the knowledge of her approaching death is reflected in her poems. She wrote simple, sensitive lyrics charged with delicate symbols and imbued with a love for the countryside and nature. Many of her poems have been put to music.

Her poetical works include: Saphiah ("After-growth:), Mineged ("From Opposite"), Nevo ("Mt. Nebo") and translations into Hebrew of poems by Anna Akhmatova, Charles van Leerberg and Francis James. Her collected poems appeared as Shirat Rahel ("The Poetry of Rahel").

(taken from Anthology of Modern Hebrew Poetry)

רחל

מן ויסה בְּדָסִי חֶרֶם.
 מן קִלְהָ בִּי רֵן -
 רחל תִּרְצֶה אֲנִי לְכוּ.
 רחל - אִם תֵּאֵם.
 וְעַל בֶּן הַבֵּית לִי צֵר
 וְהָעִיר - זָרָה.
 כִּי תִהְיֶה מִתְנַסֵּף סוּדָא
 לְרוּחוֹת הַמִּדְבָּר;
 וְעַל בֶּן אֶת דְּרָכֵי אֲחִיו
 בְּבִטְחָה כֹּאֵת.
 כִּי שְׂמוֹנִים בְּרָנְלִי וְכִרְזוֹת
 סָנִי אִזּוּ, סָנִי אִזּוּ

מיכל

וְתִאֲהַב מִיכָל בֵּת-שָׁאוּל אֶת דָּוִד

— — — — —
 וְתָבוּ לוֹ בְּלֶקֶה
 (שְׂמוּאֵל-א.ב.)

מִיכָל, אֲחוֹת רְחוּקָה! לֹא נִתַּק חוֹט הַדּוֹרוֹת.
 לֹא שָׁלַט בְּכֶרֶם הַנוֹגֶה חֲרוּלֵי הוֹמָן.
 עַל בְּתוּלַת-מִשְׁיָה לֹא דָהוּ פְּסִי אֲרָגְמָן.
 וְלִצְלוֹל אֲצַעֲדוֹת-וְהִבֵּךְ עוֹד הָאוֹן תִּקְלַם.

לֹא אֲחַת רְאִיתִיךָ נִצְבֶּת לִיד הָאֶשְׁכָּה.
 בְּעֵינֶיךָ הִיפָה מְהוּלִים גְּאוּה וְרָה;
 מִיכָל, אֲחוֹת רְחוּקָה, אֲנִי עֲצוּבָה בְּמוֹד.
 בְּמוֹד נְדוּנוֹתֵי לְבוֹ לְאִשֶּׁר אֶהֱבֶה.

Rachel

For her blood runs in my blood

and her voice sings in me.

Rachel, who pastured the flocks of Laban,

Rachel, the mother of mothers.

And that is why the house is narrow for me,

and the city foreign,

for her veil used to flutter

in the desert wind.

And that is why I hold to my way

with such certainty,

for memories are preserved in my feet

ever since, ever since.

Translated by N. N.

I Sam 18:28 "And Michal, Saul's daughter, loved David" -

II Sam 6:16 "and she despised him in her heart."

Michal

Michal, distant sister! The thread of the generations

has not been severed

The brambles of time have not overrun your

sorrowful vineyard,

the stripes of royalty on your silk

garment have not faded

and the ringing of your golden bracelets can

still be heard.

More than once have I seen you standing

next to the window,

pride and softness mixing in your beautiful

eyes;

Michal, distant sister, I am sad like you,

like you I have been sentenced to despise

the one whom I love.

One of the most appealing characteristics of Rachel Bluwstein's poetry is her ability to be both universal and personal at the same time. Her poetry, while accessible, is far from simplistic. Rachel, herself feels and senses things deeply and in turn allows us to do the same through her poetry.

Rachel grew up in Russia within an orthodox family and received a socialist-Zionist education. She was also well-versed in Russian literature. With her receptivity to the ideas of A. D. Gordon and Tolstoy it comes as no surprise that by the time she emigrated to Palestine, at age nineteen, Rachel's poetry would be filled with biblical images, scenes, vocabulary, and characters. For the Hebrew intelligentsia the Bible represented a return to nature and a wholesome Jewish life. (Kahn) Two of her poems, "Rachel" and Michal" focus on two biblical women with whom Rachel feels a strong connection.

In "Rachel" we experience the almost mystical tie Rachel feels with her biblical namesake. To her, mother Rachel is carried in her blood and in her voice. Rachel is Bluwstein's image of the model mother. She calls her, " *אמא אמא* ", the mother of mothers. If Bluwstein feels cramped and like a foreigner in the city, it is because Rachel lived in the open spaces of the desert. If she feels justified in holding on to her "way", it is because by following this path she preserves the memories of mother Rachel. Bluwstein's legs march as if by themselves, as if by instinct they knew which way to go. As she has inherited a name she has also inherited qualities, characteristics, an essence from Rachel.

The poem leaves us with the feeling that everything is connected. The

past and the present are one. To take it one more step, the past lives on in the present.

"Michal" is very similar to "Rachel". We reexperience Rachel's tie to the Bible and through it its continuing relevance. In each line of the first stanza, Rachel makes explicit her continual sense of Michal's presence. We are allowed to walk in Michal's vineyard, see her gown and hear her bracelets. The secret Bluwstein shares with Michal is made clear in the second stanza. Michal and she both love a man whom they also despise. Michal loves David, her husband, and yet when she sees him ecstatically dancing with the returning ark, she despises him. The precise details of Bluwstein's love life are not known, but her unrequited love of Zalman Shazar is documented. We are left again with a sense that life repeats itself, that human experiences are universal and shared. And once again we see our present lives reflected in the Bible.

An underlying theme, in both poems, is the existence of forces which control our lives. In "Rachel" the force which guides her is mother Rachel's presence. Rachel's control over Bluwstein may be so strong because Bluwstein is in the land where Rachel walked. The force found in "Michal" is love. Neither Michal nor Bluwstein seem to be happy being in love with a man they despise. Bluwstein writes, "אני צ'נובה כמוך". "like you I have been sentenced". Again the sense that forces beyond Bluwstein's control are shaping her life. Michal and Bluwstein may mix "pride and softness" in their eyes but they do not act out of the former. They seem to be caught in a love they do not want, unable to break free. Perhaps Bluwstein feels this loss of control, this being shaped by outside forces, is a reflection of her lack of control over tuberculosis. Her life was drastically altered by an illness which was beyond her control.

Dahlia Ravikovitch

(1936 -)

She was born in Ramat Gan and was educated in Haifa and Jerusalem. She has worked as a journalist and as a teacher. Her first poems were published while she was in the army. She is perhaps the best known of Israel's women poets.

She has written five books of poems - the most recent, The Shouting Abyss (1976) - short stories, and children's books. A book of her poems, The Dress, appeared in English, translated by Chanah Bloch.

(taken from Burning Air and A Clear Mind)

כמו רחל

למות כמו רחל
כשהנסה רועות כצפיר
רועה להמלט.
מעבר לאהל שמדו גבהלים יעקב ודסף.
דברו בה רחל.
כל ימי חיה מתהפכים בה
כחיתוק הרועה להולד.

כמה קשה.
אטבת יעקב אכלה בה
בכל פה.
עכשו כשהנסה יצאה
אין לה חסץ בכל זה.

לסתע צוח החיטוק
ובא יעקב אל האהל
אך רחל אינה כרנקה
עדנה שססת את פניה
וראקה.

מנחה גדולה ירדה עליה.
נשמת אפה שוב לא תרעיד טפה.
הגיוו אותה בין אבני הרים
ולא הספידות.
למות כמו רחל
אבי רועה.

Like Rachel

To die like Rachel

With the soul quivering like a bird

Seeking escape.

Beyond the the tent Jacob and Joseph stood stricken,

They spoke of her with awe

All her days tossed about within her

Like a child wanting to be born.

How hard it is.

Jacob's love consumed her

Voraciously.

Now while the soul expires

She has no desire for all that.

Suddenly the baby screamed

And Jacob came to the tent

But Rachel feels nothing

Tenderness floods her face

And her head.

A great peace came over her.

Her breath of life will never again stir a feather.

They laid her down among the mountain stones

And spoke no eulogy.

To die like Rachel

That is what I want.

(Taken from Israeli Poetry)

Dahlia Ravikovitch envies Rachel's death. Rachel died while her soul was still full of life and strength ("כל הנפש הוצת כנר"). In her death Rachel was surrounded by a son and husband who loved her. Ravikovitch portrays Rachel's death as something Rachel herself longed for: "seeking escape" and "like a child wanting to be born". This last line mentioned taken with the preceding line, "All her days tossed about within her", very powerfully portray Rachel's death as a birth. What was struggling to be born was her life.

The second and third stanzas of the poem give one the feeling that when Rachel died, a heavy burden was lifted from her: "but Rachel feels nothing/ tenderness floods her face/ and her head." A great peace came over her. What was that heavy burden? It seems to have been Jacob's consuming love for Rachel. The love which she felt could only be returned by giving Jacob children. She finally does and through this gives up her life as well. At the moment of death Rachel was free from the needs and the expectations of Jacob. This is heard in the line "she has no desire for all that". This line may also refer to her uneasy relationship with her sister Leah.

The last stanza portrays the simplicity of Rachel's burial: "They laid her down among the mountain stones/ and spoke no eulogy." Ravikovitch appreciates that quiet dignity. She would like if for her own death, all of it. The simplicity, the release from life's burdens, and being surrounded by loved ones is the portrait Ravikovitch has painted of her own death. This poem seems to be a will of some sort, a guide for those who will survive her.

S. Shifrah

רחל

- שדים
יבשים וחמוקים
חלולים והלא הבסן
הוו חלקה ללדת
לך שנים-עשר
שכטים
- היית
לי תחת אלהים.

בת שאול

א
על נדל
לקבי -
ראיתי
אותן ברחוב ואמרתי
מדוע לכל פרות הבשן
ורק אני
מיכל -

ב.
שם לך בדרך
ורוח, מבקשת לסנים משורח
הדן, אולי לא במקומות
הנכונים, אולי לא ביום
הכסורים, או מהו אומרים שבעל-
אתה נמצא, כה גדול
משואו

Rachel

- Breasts

dried up and hollow

thighs but did not this stomach

seek to bear

you twelve

tribes

- You were

to me a substitute for God.

Saul's Daughter

A

About the greatness

of my heart -

I saw

them on the street and I said

why do all of the cows of Bashan have

and only I

Michal -

B

Humble

of spirit and of demeanor, seeking to act fairly

beyond the measure of the law, perhaps not in the proper

places, perhaps not on the day

of atonement, so what? It is said that You

are everywhere. Is it so great

that you can not bear it?

הגֹר

אל תסַחֲדִי יְלִדְתִּי
 מִסִּנִּי הַגֹּר,
 רַק הַשֵּׁם מִחֵר,
 סוּפָה בַּמִּדְבָּר
 נֶרֶץ נֶחֱרָה,
 אל תסַחֲדִי מִסִּנִּי
 הַגֹּר,
 כִּי עֵרַל הַגֹּר
 אוֹרֵב בַּסֶּתֶחַ
 אֶהְיֶה
 שָׂרִי.

בְּדֶרֶךְ שׁוֹר

וְהָאֵל שָׁלַח
 אֶת־דֹּרְשׁוֹ לַמִּדְבָּר,
 וְהִרְחִיף בְּקִנְיָנָהּ
 מִלִּפְנֵי אֶת־דֹּרְשׁוֹ לַמִּדְבָּר.
 וְהָאֵל הָיָה לֹא יָדָע
 אֶת־נִסְתָּרוֹ. אֵלֵי קִשּׁוֹם
 בְּרִיחַת מִלִּפְנֵי אֵלֵי נִשְׁוֹא
 קִשּׁוֹם שְׁלֵבֹה קִלָּא
 - רְחִימִים.

Hagar

Do not be afraid oh my child
of Hagar,
only the name is strange,
a storm in the desert
a parched throat,
do not be afraid of
Hagar,
because Hagar's fate
is lying in wait at the opening
of the tents
of Sarai.

By Way of Shur

He sent
you to the desert
and your rival in her jealousy
expelled you to the desert.
And perhaps they did not know
your soul. Perhaps you simply
fled from the tent of a venerated
man whose heart was full of
- mercy.

S. Shifrah

S. Shifrah has written four brief poems about three different biblical women: Hagar, Rachel and Michal. (There is a fifth poem entitled "Tamar" which focuses on Judah and not Tamar and so will not be included.) They were published in a book of her poetry, Desert Songs. In this section I will primarily provide biblical background which helps to illuminate the text of the poems.

"Rachel"

In Genesis 30:1 Rachel says to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die." In 30:2 Jacob replies, "Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb" (*התחת אלֹהִים אֲנִי אֵלֶּךְ - מֶנֶּעַ*). The final lines of the poem "Rachel", " - You were/ to me a substitute for God" is a play on Jacob's response to Rachel. Rachel here admits that Jacob was like God to her.

"Saul's Daughter"

The phrase "cows of Bashan" (*כֹּרוֹת הַבָּשָׁן*) comes from Amos 4:1. Amos uses this phrase to refer to the wealthy women of his day who live only for their own pleasure and do not help the poor and needy. In part A of the poem, Michal seems to be referring to her barrenness. In II Samuel chapter six David returns to the City of David with the ark. David dances wildly with the people. Michal condemns him for exposing himself so. David responds saying that he is the king chosen by God and he may be lowered in her esteem but the slavegirls will honor him. "So to her dying day Michal daughter of Saul had no children." (II Samuel 6:23).

For her condemnation of David she is cursed. In part B of the poem, Michal tries to have the curse revoked. She appeals to God claiming to have acted justly and humbly. Michal admits that she may not have offered sacrifices in the "right" places at the "right" times but asserts that God is supposed to be everywhere. Michal asks God if her sin is so great that even almighty God cannot forgive it.

Edna Aphek

(1943 -)

Edna Aphek was born in Haifa. Aphek is an artist, poet, and university lecturer. She has done stylistic analysis of Agnon's short stories and exhibited her paintings in Jerusalem and New York. Aphek received her doctorate in Hebrew literature from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

(taken from Voices Within the Ark)

★

שרה היטה
 אשה
 רכה וציתנית
 חלומה כמענית
 והוא —
 אצל הגר
 תמיד.

שרה היטה
 רכה וציתנית
 חלומה ושתקנית
 אשה
 ורחמנית
 והוא —
 אצל הגר
 תמיד.

שרה היטה
 רכה ורחמנית
 אבל
 אשה
 כנועה ואכזרית
 והוא —
 אצל הגר
 תמיד.

שרה היטה
 פגועה ואכזרית
 אשה

 אך כשערן רחמה
 בבנה
 קרא לה
 צחקנית.

*

Sarah was
a woman
soft and obedient
like a furrowed field
and he --
with Hagar
always.

Sarah was
soft and obedient
closed and silent
a woman
and compassionate
and he --
with Hagar
always.

Sarah was soft and compassionate
but
a woman
submissive and cruel
and he --
with Hagar
always.

Sarah was hurt and cruel
a woman

....

but when her womb was soft
 with her son
 she was called
 the laughing one.

Based on the translation by Yishai Tobin

This poem revolves around the famous biblical triangle: Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar. (Genesis 16 and 21). Through the course of this brief poem about Sarah we are witness to a change in her personality. Sarah is at first a "soft and obedient" wife. She is "closed and silent" and "compassionate". Then towards the end of the third stanza she becomes "a woman/submissive and cruel". This is obviously the result of the last three lines which are repeated in each of the first three stanzas: "and he --/ with Hagar/always". She bears Abraham's and Hagar's affair silently, partially out of compassion.-- either for their love or for Abraham's desire to have an heir.-- and partially because she is an obedient hurt wife. However, by the final stanza Sarah is "marred and cruel". The continuing relationship between Hagar and Abraham has scarred her. Though when she becomes pregnant she is able to put the pain behind her and laugh.

Though the poem is short and the lines are clipped and succinct, we are given a very poignant picture of a woman twisted by her husband's affair with another woman. It speaks to us today, in a world where sex is freer. We may say it is all right to have more than one lover at a time and that extra marital affairs are inevitable but we are only fooling ourselves. When a monogamous relationship is broken, it eats away at the victim and the partner, and profoundly changes them.

Rena Lee

(1932 -)

Rena Lee was born in Bialystok, Poland. She moved to Palestine in 1935. Her poems, stories and literary studies have been published in magazines and literary supplements in both Israel and the United States. She now lives in New York City and teaches at Queens College.

Her three volumes of poetry are: In a Nocturnal Avenue; Days of Wear and Tear; To the Districts of the Sun.

(taken from Voices With the Ark)

לא הפל אודות חנה

An Old Story

והנחש

בכחש לשונו נשה

דבר אל האשה

מלאה אונה

רחש-לחש תוסס

משמר פסס

היפה בנשים

פך אמר לה

והיא שכתה כי נשים זולתה

טרם היו בעולם

בחלקות זו שתי עליה

אנספור טבעות

כשכש בקשקשיו

הו חנה הו נאווה

את ממש מאווה

בואי נכשיו

אליד תשוקת

מהרי נא מהרי

פן אצא מזורי...

פחץ חיש עף

והיא - אחרי

שנה ארכה שהא שם

השנים

מתחילים שוב ושוב

מבראשית חסדא

פזוג שחקנים בחזרה

של איוה מתוה גתיד

Englisch

וכל אותה העת

היה אדם גובר בפרה

שוקד על מלאכתו בנין

all the time

למען אלהים

was

אי אל חשכת בין-הנצנים

busy busy busy

An Old Story

And the snake was
talking to Eve
in his forked-tongue,
hissing into her ears
sweet words like
how s-swell she was-s
and how he wished
to s-swallow her all up.

"Come-on" he said
"I'll give you a taste
of real Eden."

His body shot as an arrow
in the direction
of the darkest tree,
and she darted -

Long hours they spent there
the two, on their plot,
perspiring conspiring,
as if rehearsing
overplaying
some future scene

And all that time
Adam was
busy busy busy

dressing and keeping the garden
for God.

Translated by the author

ל א ה

אני האשה השנואה שענייה רבות
וקרה נקשה.

אני האשה
שהיא סמך טעות לאישה.

ויש לי לב ואהבה בו
אין מקלה -

ויש לי אחות קטנה
שדומה נכונ -

אחותי סמתי -
צדתי.

ויש לי אב
הרואה דעני
וקנחם.

ויש לי אל
הרואה לרחמי
וקרנחם.

Leah

I am the hated woman whose eyes are weak
and whose soul is bitter.

I am the woman
who was a bad bargain for her husband.

But I have a heart with love in it
without end -

And I have a sister
firm breasts -
my faultless sister -
my rival.

And I have a father
who sees my misery
and consoles.

And I have a God
who sees my womb
and is merciful

רחב

זה ארע לפני הרבה שנים

(כך מספרים)

בעיר קרא שמה עיר-התמרים -

(מדוע בעצם המיד מדברים

על כך שהזמנים משתנים?)

והיתה שם אשה שמשום מה

בקש הספור לציינה

שלבה פחד

ורחב שמה

והיתה היא אשה זונה -

והטמן במשת-העץ

אותם האנשים

שבקשו להפוך את ארצה

ולעמה קץ לשים -

(אכן גם הנסים

דורשים מעשים)

אשה זונה

היא שלאחרונה

נותרה.

אשה זונה

כי מי כמוה

נכונה

לכל תמורה?

בעבור חסדה הציבו לאות

את חוט השני בחומה

כדי שיוכלו הכל לזהות

את הזונה הזאת

ונידחו לה לחיות

(אולי בשל כך נהגות הזונות

להדליק אור אדום

בחלונות?)

מוטר השכל מן הספור

לי לא ברור

וגם עכשיו

לא אדע

אם מעשה רחב

טוב - אם רע -

רק אמת אחת מרה

מזדקרה בחירוה

Rahav

It happened many years ago

(or so they say)

in a city they call the City of Dates -

(In fact, why do they always speak about
the fact that times are changing?)

There was a woman who for some reason
the story sought to point out about her
that her heart was afraid

and Rahav was her name

and she was a prostitute. -

And she hid them in the stalks of flax
the very men

who sought to spy out her land

and to destroy her people -

(truly miracles also

require actions)

On account of her mercy, they set up as a sign

the crimson string in the wall

in order that they could all identify

this prostitute

and allow her to live

(perhaps it is because of this that prostitutes usually
light red lights

in their windows?)

The moral of this story
is not clear to me
and even now
I do not know
if Rahav's action
was good - or bad -

Only one bitter truth
Stands out in its anger

A prostitute
in the end
remains
a prostitute
for who like her
is ready
for every kind of barter?

דלילה

עגלגלה עקלקלה
רכות-רכות בחלקות -
דלילה.

אבוי לאומך.
אוי לו לשועם
ערלת-אהבתך.
אבוי לו ללוגם
מתוך אויבך.

היית לו לשמשון
באישון.
קסלא המפוס הראשון.
היית לו לשמשון
רעב-תמיד, ענות.
חידה שואלת את נקשו
למות.

האנקבה הייתה לך פח.
האנקבה הייתה לך חת.
עגיל של בדיל
על גדל אונג
לצוד בו עין-נרים -

על ראש שמשון
מורה עליה
כי לא ידע
מורא -
ועל ראשך
דלילה -
אנה.

Delilah

Round, devious
softly, softly flatteringly
Delilah.

Woe to your desire
woe to him who tastes
your ¹unripe love.
Woe to him who sips
from your divining vessel.

For Samson you were
like the pupil of his eye
like the wonder of the first apple.
For Samson you were
an eternal hunger, suffering,
a puzzle asking his soul
to die.

Love was a trap for you,
love was a hook for you,
a tin earring
on your earlobe
with which to catch a stranger's eye

Upon Samson's head
a razor fell
because he knew no
²fear -

and upon your head

Delilah -

a curse.

¹ The Hebrew word **צרם** can mean unripe or gentile. The play on words is obvious. The line could be read, "Woe to him who tastes your gentile love." This, too, would apply to Delilah.

² The word **מורכ**, razor, is a homonym to the word **מורא**, fear.

Miriam Oren

Born in Tel Aviv, Miriam Oren worked for many years as a literary critic for the newspaper Maariv. She is now a translator of prose. She is the author of three books of poetry, And It Came to Pass After These Things (1962), Man is Fated (1971), and Land of Water (1977).

(taken from Burning Air and a Clear Mind)

חֹה

לא על הלחם לבדו
 תחיה חוה
 ולא על כסותה
 עונתה
 ואור עיניה

שבע תפול חוה
 ובין שניה
 גיסה אחת קטנה
 מסרי העץ הזרק כלענה
 לא עץ הדעת
 רק עץ החיים
 לבדו.

Eve

Not by bread alone

does Eve live

nor by her garments

her conjugal rights

and the light of her eyes

Eve will fall seven times

and between her teeth

one small bite

from the fruit of the tree which was

as green as wormwood

not the tree of knowledge

only the tree of life

itself.

In Exodus 21:10 we are told that if a man takes a second wife, his first wife shall not have her food, clothes or conjugal rights diminished as a result of this. Proverbs 24:16 reads "seven times the righteous man falls and gets up, while the wicked are tripped by one misfortune."

Epilogue

Having analysed the poems individually and collectively by poet, I now turn to the biblical women themselves as they emerge from a cross-sectional view. Only four of the biblical women lend themselves to this type of analysis, Eve, Hagar, Rachel and Leah, because these are the figures about whom I found a substantial quantity of poems. If we read the poems written about each of these women, by the different poets, does a multi-dimensional personality arise? Can we better understand the biblical women and through them, ourselves?

Eve

Bat-Miriam, Bat-Hanah, Oren and Amir all write about the garden as a period of transformation. Eve grows and matures and the garden becomes too small and confining for her. Through their poetry, Eve emerges as a true heroine, the model of a self-determined woman. She knowingly took the apple in order to break the yoke of the garden. For Amir, the apple taught Eve about her own need to bear fruit; for Bat-Hanah, it was an act of defiance; and for Oren, it was an act of righteousness.

Eve was willing to throw off the images put upon her ["I was only created for joy" (Amir) and "Not by bread alone/ does Eve live/ nor by her garments/ her conjugal rights" (Oren)] and dig deep within to find her own self ["And now I know,/ ... I am sister to you,/ swelling does." (Amir)]. She has entered a new world and will not return back even though this new world is hard ["though I will no longer know flighty pleasure" (Amir) and "Eve will fall seven times" (Oren) and "spreading out from beyond Eden/ on a thornbush and thistle..." (Bat-Miriam)]. Through the banishment,

from the garden Bat-Miriam's Eve had gained "resplendence from life and from the splendor of/ death, mystery and imagination." Eve has tasted "not the tree of knowledge only the tree of life/ itself." (Oren) and it has made her strong.

Hagar

Through Bat-Miriam's poem and Amir's poem, Hagar also emerges as a woman of strength - but acquired strength. It is through the trials in her life that she comes to know and love herself and finds a sense of self worth. At the end of Amir's poem Hagar finally learns to accept Abraham's rejection and we move forward with her own life: "Then I will no longer mourn,/ but rather bless you" and "but the blueness from above/ calm and tranquil/ prophesy for me an end to wandering." Her process is laid open to us, to serve as a guide and hope for us. Bat-Miriam's Hagar too has strength - she does not follow the easy path, "- My homeland, to you I will not return". Hagar will face "fate" and live life on the terms it has been given to her. She is able to draw strength from her son as well, she asks him to crown her lost path.

Rachel

Of the six poems in this collection about Rachel, only two focus directly on her early infertility: "Jacob's Footsteps" by Aharon and "Rachel" by Shifrah. Aharon expresses Rachel's profound sadness: "everything was desolate and she had nothing". Shifrah uses Rachel's body itself to portray her consuming desire to bear children for Jacob - "-Breasts/ dried up and hallow/ thighs but did not this stomach". Miriam's two poems -- the second is a continuation of the first -- revolve around her children and

their inevitable death. They are a response to Jeremiah 31:15 where Rachel is heard weeping for her children (that is, the children of Israel). Bluwstein explores the legacy of Rachel which lives on in her: "For her blood runs in my blood/ and her voice sings in me." Ravikovitch focuses on Rachel's death, a death she wishes for herself: "To die like Rachel/ that is what I want."

Through these poems, we see painted the portrait of a woman whose life was joyless, a burden to her. Her life was ruled by her yearning to have children. This desire consumed her so, that she could not even enjoy Jacob's love: "Jacob's love consumed her/ voraciously." (Ravikovitch). Even in the poems which do not center around her early infertility, images of children and birth are prevalent and are mingled with death: "Rachel wept for her children/ ... before they burst forth from the dust/ in order to return to it." (Miriam). It is indeed an ironic and sad commentary that "Rachel, the mother of mothers" (Bluwstein) knows so little joy in her brief motherhood.

Leah

All three of the poems written about Leah revolve around the triangle with Rachel and Jacob. Lee's and Amir's poems speak openly about the rivalry between the sisters: "my faultless sister -/ my rival." (Lee) and "for indeed we had become isolated, one sister from another" (Amir). In both poems Leah's marriage to Jacob is her parents' way of consoling her and Lee sees God's mercy towards Leah expressed in her ability to bear children. Miriam's poem talks about Leah's non-existence during the wedding night: "He did not know that I am Leah". It is Rachel he calls out for that

night. Leah's insignificance continues even after she has had many children because they are immediately given over to Jacob.

These poems tell us that Leah too loved Jacob but that that love was not returned. Leah, like Rachel, leads a very unhappy life - an unfulfilled life. Leah is not able to find joy, or at least consolation, in her children just as Rachel found none in Jacob's love. The two external things which are supposed to fulfill a woman, a man and children, did not fulfill Leah or Rachel. These two women led miserable lives because they lived them trying to live up to someone else's expectations and not their own.

Personalities and individual characters have been developed through this cross-sectional analysis. In spite of the depth of these poems, their complete personalities have yet to be fleshed out. This will occur through continued study and writing about these biblical women.

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