

 **MASSEKHET**
say to wisdom, thou art my sister
In Memory of Esther Aumann z”l

Women of the Jewish World

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MASSEKHET

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Massekhet is a periodical established in *Matan, Women's Institute for Torah Studies*, in memory of Esther Aumann, one of its first students. Esther, who devoted her life to her home and to raising her family, began attending *Matan* at the age of sixty-two and for the first time in her life delved into the depths of Bible, Talmud and Jewish-thought studies. Six years later she passed away of cancer. The story of her life epitomizes the revolution undergone by women's Torah studies in the last generation.

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Rhetoric and Ideology in the story of Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter

Tamar Werdiger

Miriam is one of the female characters who are glorified in Jewish literature from the time of Hazal until our days. Yet, in the exegesis of the biblical narrative of the meeting between her and Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam did not receive the full recognition she deserves for her actions. The article 'Rhetoric and Ideology in the story of Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter' analyzes the story of Moses's birth and salvation, and advances two assertions regarding the manner in which Miriam is presented in the narrative. The first assertion deals with Miriam's character and actions as they emerge from the data of the represented world given in the verses, while the second assertion discusses the manner in which Miriam is represented in the narrative.

The first assertion is that in the biblical narrative of the salvation of Moses, Miriam's portion is much greater than what is generally attributed to her – determining the identity of Moses' nursemaid. This claim is established via a close reading of Exodus chapter 2, verses 1-10, examining carefully the bible's record of Pharaoh's daughter's perception of Moses and her feelings towards him and recognizing the discrepancy between Pharaoh's daughter's consciousness and words, analyzing the rhetorical devices Miriam used, and comparing Miriam's words with Pharaoh's daughter's words and actions, a comparison that is indicative of Miriam's great impact. Through this reading, some of Miriam's impressive characteristics are manifest, particularly her keen observation skills, her courage and her rhetorical capabilities.

The second assertion is that the common tendency shared by most readers, to downplay Miriam's role in Moses's salvation (a tendency shared even by those who speak highly of Miriam's character), is a result of an intentional effect in the representation of the biblical narrative itself, not an accidental result of the manner in which this event is represented. This claim is established by following the reading experience, which the biblical narrative presents to the reader and from analyzing different elements of the narrative, and examining them against various indicators to identify the focus of narrative interest (the 'hero' of the narrative).

A rationale for this intentional downplaying of Miriam's role in the narrative is also presented in the article. The article explains how this downplaying helps instill the faith in free will in the reader, and it suggests that implanting the principle of free choice, which is one of the fundamental principles of biblical faith, is the very reason that Miriam's character is downplayed in the story of Moses's salvation.

How fair and how pleasant you are, like the shining moon: Wedding Poems from the Cairo Genizah Containing Previously Unknown Piyyutim by R. Yehezkel Hacoheh, R. Elhanan bar Shemaryah and others

Shulamit Elizur

Many poems on wedding-related themes were composed during the Genizah period. Alongside these, however, there is evidence that nationally-oriented poems were also sung at weddings, which addressed themes such as God's love for His nation, as well as Exile and Redemption. In this article, the latter phenomenon is exemplified by examining a manuscript from the Cairo Genizah that contains a collection of *piyyutim* many of which were intended for weddings, as indicated in their headers. Almost none of these poems have any parallels in other sources.

The manuscript commences with poems that, according to their content, were indeed composed for the wedding festivities. Throughout, they express good wishes for the bridegroom, and occasionally also for the bride. All of these poems feature the Patriarchs, who are referred to by means of epithets, with the *paytanim* expressing the wish that the groom become like them. As opposed to these, there is a poem appearing later in the manuscript, which, judging by its header, also seems to have been used as a wedding poem, though it contains no reference whatsoever to a bride or a groom. This is a nationally oriented poem, dedicated in its entirety to bemoaning the Exile and yearning for Redemption.

The discussion then goes on to treat a more complex situation: a poem that opens with the stanza *Like a groom in his attire, like a bride in her betrothal*, which is entirely devoted to praising the

bride and groom, but continues with an extensive alphabetic containing themes that are clearly nationally oriented. An analysis of the opening stanza praising the bride and groom reveals that it appears independently (in the variant form *The groom in his attire and the bride in her betrothal*) in other contexts. Indeed, to this day it is sung as the opening verse of a litany that is performed under the wedding canopy according to the custom of the Jews of Cochin and, surprisingly, deals with the giving of the Torah. Furthermore, the stanza *The groom in his attire* is similar in structure to a wedding poem portions of which survive in a number of damaged Genizah fragments. The poem is reconstructed in the present article, and the possibility is raised that this stanza was originally an integral part thereof.

The final section of the article addresses the most complex and delicate element yet. Three love poems are published here, in each of which the lover seeks to win over the heart of his beloved. Based on their headers and their context within the manuscript, it would seem that these, too, were sung at weddings. However, careful analysis of their content reveals that these poems are allegorical. The lover is none other than God, and his beloved – the Jewish people. All three poems open with the same line, which is not part of the acrostic that follows in each of them: *How fair and how pleasant you are, like the shining moon*. The first poem, which is the most beautiful of them all, contains an acrostic with the name of the well-known Babylonian poet R. Yehezkel Hacoheh, one of the great Hebrew poets of the end of the first millennium CE. The composer of the second poem is also a known figure – R. Elhanan ben Shemaryah, one of the leading Jews of Fustat (Old Cairo) in the first half of the eleventh century. R. Elhanan was not known as a poet, and in the past only one poem of his had been published, composed within the context of the anti-Karaite polemic. The poem published here indicates that R. Elhanan also tried his hand at the composition of poetry in more traditional genres. The third poem opens with the same anonymous line. It is not found in the Vienna manuscript but rather in another, badly damaged, source. Its significance is thus limited to its bearing witness to the fact that the opening line, *How fair and how pleasant you are, like the shining moon*, was employed by other poets as well.

*From Sefer Hasidim to the Ma'aseh Book:
Women behind the Stories before and after Death*

Noga Rubin

The article addresses three stories from the *Ma'aseh Book* (*Mayseh Buch*) which are derived from *Sefer Hasidim*, which present female characters. In the first story, the sinning protagonist is a man, while the women are all limited to supporting roles. In the two other stories, the women are the protagonists of the stories: the stories are all told in exemplum style, but there are dreams woven into them, and, I claim, that in terms of the genre definition, they straddle the two genres of exemplary and dream literature. Unlike typical exemplary literature, their moral is not unequivocal. However, unlike typical dream narrative, they do not enable the characters to undertake corrective behavior (referred to in Jewish texts as *tikun*). The reality of the narrative is not open to interpretation, and it does not lend itself to interpretation, but rather presents a clear behavioral or ethical truth.

Despite the fact that the characters are given no opportunity for corrective behavior in any of the three stories, there is a fascinating process of developing an awareness of sin, and of taking responsibility for one's actions. This retrospective insight is noteworthy, even if it leads only to the realization that 'the twisted thing cannot be made straight' (i.e., that the error is not correctable). This process of developing an awareness of sin is undergone in parallel by the protagonist of the story and by the reader in each case. In the first story, the protagonist understands the deep connection between the deaths of his children and his sin against his sister. In the second story, the protagonist learns, following her death, that when she was alive, her sin was that she regularly left the prayer service before its conclusion. In the third story, the woman gains an understanding that the 'sign' that was placed upon her in the Garden of Eden was caused by her sins in this world.

As can be seen throughout the article, with regard to certain points there are significant differences between the respective versions of these stories as told in *Sefer Hasidim* and in *Ma'aseh Book*. One of the most fundamental changes is that in the *Ma'aseh Book* version the stories do not remain at the theoretical, principled level, as they

do in *Sefer Hasidim*. Rather, they are presented in a practical manner, in a manner that calls out to the readers, men and women alike, to undertake real improvements in their own lives.

So that you shall not need to ask a Rabbi: Torah Knowledge as a Source of Power for Women in Ashkenazic Society at the Beginning of the Modern Era

Yemima Chovav

The disengagement of women from the world of Torah study generally, and the study of Halakhah particularly, had clear societal implications, as it enhanced the dependence of women upon the rabbinic establishment generally, and upon the group of Torah-educated men generally. However, with the print revolution, which led to the widespread distribution of Yiddish religious literature, this reality changed to a great degree. Jewish women in Ashkenazic society were able to acquire a large degree of Torah knowledge generally, and halakhic knowledge particularly, via this literature, that supplemented the halakhic knowledge that they would obtain on their own, through the living, oral tradition. This knowledge was appended to the central roles of women in the family livelihood, and helping strengthen women's status, both at home and in the community. At home, it strengthened women's status as the one responsible for the halakhic realm vis-à-vis all matters of running the household, and it helped develop the woman's perceived role as she who fashioned the religious character of the home. In the community, they would help form religious female leadership that functioned in the female community: leadership in teaching Halakhah in the *mitzvot* that pertain to women, in organizing women's activities in the context of a 'Women's Synagogue,' and in directing various rituals for women.

*The Appropriation of the Hassidic Miracle Tale in Sarah Feiga Foner's **Memories of My Childhood***

Michal Fram Cohen

The memoir *Memories of My Childhood, or: A View of Dvinsk* (Warsaw, 1903), by Sarah Feiga Foner (1854-1937), relates events that happened in the 1860's and early 1870's in Dvinsk (Daugavpils, Latvia), the author's childhood town, which was then a part of Russia. The memoir includes twelve episodes, which are mostly dedicated to the conflict between the community's *Hassidim* and *Misnagedim*. The author's family was among the *Misnagedim*, and as a result, her account of the conflict is consistently biased in their favor. Nevertheless, the conflict and other events in the memoir are documented in the period's papers, which affords the memoir a certain reliability despite the author's bias.

However, in the sixth episode the author recounts a miraculous occurrence which deviates from the memoir's overall realism. Foner presents the miracle as her mother's reward for assisting a Hassidic baker and as the baker's punishment for later insulting the *Misnagedim* in her parents' presence. The miraculous occurrence, which does not seem to fit into the memoir's overall realism, can be construed as Foner's appropriation of the Hassidic miracle tale that fulfilled a central function in the Hassidic movement. Since Foner belonged in the circles of the *Maskilim*, it appears that her miracle tale follows the practice of the *Maskilic* satire, which modelled itself on Hassidic stories. However, Foner's miracle tale differs from the *Maskilic* satire, which was intended to ridicule the Hassidic belief in supernatural events, by inverting the roles of the *Hassidim* and the *Misnagedim*. It appears that Foner's miracle tale corresponds with tales of the Sages that recount the miracles that happened to righteous women, as well as with similar Hassidic tales. Thus Foner's miracle tale elevates her mother rather than degrade the *Hassidim*. Such interpretation emphasizes Foner's overall feminist thrust in her writings, as well as in her life.

An additional possible interpretation of the miracle tale is the literary context in which Foner's memoir was published: the ascent of the School of Neo-Hassidism in Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. The memoir's appendix, which recounts a

gentile's wondrous discovery of his Jewish roots and his subsequent return to Judaism, may support such interpretation.

*'She makes a fine impression on all whom she meets':
On the question of the place of women in the novel **Ke'ir Netzurah***

Ofra Matzov Cohen

This study investigates the developing status of female characters, both single and married, in the realms within which they operate, based on the novel *Ke'ir Netzurah* by Asher Barash, especially in contrast to the man or men with whom they share space.

Many compositions of Asher Barash describe the society in the Jewish settlement of the land of Israel at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Barash's compositions written in Israel, one can discern a common medium of materials that describe the lifestyle of the Jewish settlement in Israel, in which a range of characters – men and women living alongside one another – most of whom had arrived in the land of Israel from Eastern Europe, along with some who came from Yemen, Lebanon and Turkey.

The novel *Ke'ir Netzurah* depicts the small town of Tel Aviv of those days, and, as Barash states in the "author's statement" as a preface to the novel, he seeks to describe in this work, "the spirit of our small settlement in the First World War... and its end following the expulsion of all its residents at the decree of the Turkish authority." The male and female characters are fashioned in this spirit, with the women mainly described in terms of their connection to the daily life of the man they accompanied. The dependence of these female characters is not merely economic; it is also manifest in their schedules and in their outlooks. Most of the female characters are presented as submissive, accepting the policy of the head of the family, and reliant upon him financially. A few of these, a distinct minority of the women – display independent positions and schedules, and they seek to challenge the social norms that are set out by the heads of the community.

It seems that the mimetic writing style, seeking to describe a wide range of female characters, is indicative of an effort on Barash's part to describe a social reality that is faithful to the time period. Yet, with this exceptional story of salvation by the young maiden Gonkin under the most challenging of circumstances, one can see a symbolic act of substantive, pragmatic female power that is expressed also in ordinary, daily life.

A Helper to Match Her: Discovering Ita Yellin from behind her Letters

Roni Beer-Marx

Ita Yellin was one of the fascinating, influential women who lived in the land of Israel at the turning point between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She was positioned at the seam – between old and new, between east and west, between tradition and progress, between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi worlds. Her extensive communal works – particularly in her role as the administrator and president of the psychiatric hospital *Ezrat Nashim* – etched her in the public awareness and in the historical memory, as a groundbreaking woman, and a harbinger of progress.

The central source that facilitates assessment of her character is her autobiographical work, *LeTze'etza'ai* (To my descendants). The work bespeaks her self-perception as a progressive woman, and delineates a litany of advances and positive developments that came about in Jerusalem thanks to her and her family. Yet, notwithstanding these developments, the main public responsibilities she took on, particularly her role as administrator of *Ezrat Nashim*, finds no expression in the work. In the book she emerges as a humble, unassuming woman, whose public works were secondary in her life, and whose primary sphere of activity was the home. What emerges from the book is a woman whose gender identity was a clear product of a patriarchal outlook, which sees the home as the woman's stronghold, and the public affairs as being in the man's hands, reducing the role of the wife to that of a *helper to match him*.

The discrepancy between the fresh objectives that Yellin set and her patriarchal worldview raises a question: how can it be that this woman, with high education and modern positions, did not challenge the gender division of roles? How can it be that her conservative worldview was not cracked?

In this article, I seek to clarify these questions, based on the picture that emerges from Yellin's correspondence. From the hundreds of letters that Ita Yellin wrote and that were written to her over the course of more than twenty years that she served as administrator and president of *Ezrat Nashim* hospital, the persona of an independent woman with her own opinions emerges, committed to public service, not merely to domestic duties. One sees there a woman who took initiative in forming institutions and projects, who advanced projects independently, traveled for business around the country and around the world. One sees that she met with political and religious leaders, scientists and intellectuals, Jews and non-Jews, and formed social networks with all of them. Not only that, but in contrast to the perception that the book gives off, according to which she limited herself and focused upon domestic affairs and the needs of her husband, it emerges from the correspondence that she put the communal affairs that she ran at the top of her priorities, even recruiting her husband to help advance the cause. In other words, the persona that appears from the letters is one of a woman who does not passively accept the patriarchal order and the classic gender roles, but rather one who challenges them through her actions.

The article delineates the picture that the letters paint, and, in light of that, tries to grapple with the question: how can it be that Ita, who throughout her adult life was not bound by the gender role definition, and who challenged the patriarchal order, chose in her autobiography to hide these aspects? In other words, how are we to explain the discrepancy between the image that emerges from her correspondence and that which is described in her autobiography?

And You shall Tell your Daughter – Female Tradition in a Cooking Dish: A Reading of Diti Ronen's Poem, Tziporkatan (littlebird)

Nitza Keren

The bird, whose beauty and delicateness alongside its upwards soar have made it into a preferred poetic symbol for writers, and particularly for women writers, is the focal point of Diti Ronen's long poem *Littlebird*. The poem documents a profound event in the life of her mother, one which symbolically signifies her survival in the death camp, an event celebrated repeatedly in the family by preparing and eating a special dish – the *bechinalt*. The article traces the mother's story as told by her daughter, based on the testimonies of the mother and her long-time friend, while pointing to Ronen's particularly challenging task in writing poetry after Auschwitz. Ronen tells her story in a careful manner, choosing her words cautiously, deliberately avoiding the melodramatic. As someone who makes a metaphorical use of the bird, her depiction begins up high in the heavens, where the absent-present God resides, and slowly descends to the concentration camp, a move which embodies the sense of entrapment felt by the women in the death camp. Her description alludes to familiar texts from both Hebrew and World Literature, which provide a cultural and poetical framework, while resonating feminist literary criticism theories.