

 **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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Mephiboshet – From the Bible to Zelda's Poetry

Miriam Sklarz

Although Mephiboshet, Jonathan's disabled son, is only a minor character in the Bible, he plays a prominent role in Zelda's poetry, as a symbol of betrayal and degradation. Zelda's empathy for the unfortunate prince exemplifies a central aspect of her Hasidic upbringing and her poetry – her sincere identification with social misfits. Thus, Zelda's poetry provides us not only an aesthetic and emotional experience but also a profound moral one.

Between Death and Pre-Life: The Centrality of Birth in Jewish Myth

Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel

This paper deals with the idea of birth as an experience constantly reflected throughout a person's life. In contrast to the 'being-toward-death' that lies at the center of existential philosophy, this paper seeks to examine the existential situation of 'being-out of-birth'. According to one of the central schools in Jewish thought, the foundation of which can be found in the bible and rabbinic literature, and which later developed in Kabbalistic literature, birth is a constitutive event influencing the world of belief, ritual and *halakha*. In Kabbalistic literature, birth possesses a metaphysical and theurgic nature and represents an important meeting point between the human world and that of the divine. Through examination of various aspects of birth and links between its conceptualization in psychoanalysis and in kabbala, I will propose that in contrast to the fear of death, many Jewish sources focus on a deeper fear, that 'of not being born', thereby remaining in a state of incomplete realization.

'Because it is pleasing to Women' - The Halakhot of Nida in Sixteenth Century Northern Italy

Zahava Weishouse

The manuscript 'Seder Nashim (Order of Women)', written in 1504, and the book 'MitzvotHa-Nashim' (1552) written in Yiddish, deal with the three *mitzvot* specifically identified with women – *Challa* (Separation of dough), *Nida* (ritual impurity) and *Hadlakat Ha-Ner* (lighting Shabbat candles). The majority of the two works is devoted to the laws of *nida* of which the central issues discussed are: ritual impurity and purity, the observance of the customs of couples' abstinence before the seven days of *nida*, the counting of the 'seven clean days', the laws of the woman giving birth, *dam tohar* (pure blood), marriage customs and immersion in the *mikveh*. The *mitzvot* and laws that appear in the two works do not deviate from the rulings of accepted *halakha*. The explanations regarding the manner of performing the *mitzvot* are simple and elementary and do not involve an in-depth halakhic discussion. Furthermore, they do not feature words in Aramaic and those in Hebrew are used repeatedly throughout the works. Examples of such include: *ta'ef*, *kasher*, *nida*, *tevila*, *mikveh* etc. The author repeatedly emphasizes that the principles discussed apply only to the standard cases and that women should consult with Torah scholars or rabbis in order to clarify any irregularity. The phenomenon of popularization of the *halakha* is common in all the Yiddish books of women's *mitzvot* and the view and treatment of ritual purity and impurity accorded by these two works is therefore exceptional.

The author clarifies that even during the days of her *nida*, a woman must continue performing all her *mitzvot* and prayers as usual. The law is similar for a woman after childbirth who, even though she is still not ritually 'pure', and on condition that her room is clean, is obligated to sit in her bed and recite her personal blessings however she must refrain from reciting prayers until the bleeding after birth has ceased. A positive attitude towards women can be found in expressions such as: 'modest and

god-fearing women', 'the world exists by the merit of righteous women in our generation', 'the modest woman is her husband's crown'. The importance of this stance is in the fact that women were able to take part in religious life during the year, to enter the synagogue during public prayers and to be a full participant in religious ritual throughout the Jewish calendar - a central component in people's lives during the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era. The works feature no expressions of derision against women despite the misogyny that was common in halakhic and *musar* literature of the period. The two works open a window on the religious, social and cultural life of Ashkenazi women in northern Italy during this fascinating period.

Girls and Young Women in Yiddish Literature of the Early Modern Era

Chava Turniansky

The information we have regarding the raising and education of boys in Ashkenaz of the early modern era is significantly greater than that concerning girls. Yiddish literature of that period clearly testifies to the spread of reading skills among women. However only a re-examination of the contemporary sources – the majority of them in Yiddish and a minority in Hebrew – reveal, even if only scantily, when, where, by whom and how this and other skills were instilled in young girls. These sources indicate – while raising arguments of both support and objection – the various options for educating a girl, whether in '*cheder*' or at home; by a male teacher, a 'proficient woman' or a family member. The account of one Italian author, who used to teach the female members of his family, enlightens us regarding the skills and study content that were considered fitting to be taught to girls. The books he wrote for his students and for women in general, and an anthology impressive in scope and variation preserved in a manuscript given as a gift by a father to his

daughter, provide evidence of the literary genres that were considered suitable for their readers. Girls and adolescent women, who worked as typesetters in printing houses, left their mark, whether by a mere mention of their name or by a short poem they wrote in the colophon of the books they set in Hebrew, Yiddish or both languages together. In Yiddish books of the period, the role of the young women can be clearly seen – as an instructive illustration, a literary character or a central addressee. The findings expand our knowledge regarding the raising and education of girls and young women in Ashkenaz of the early modern era and lay a foundation for understanding the role played by Yiddish literature in their lives and in the gradual formulation of their spiritual world.

The Reflection of the Male Character as portrayed in Women's Stories in the Yiddish Press of Czarist Russia

Nurit Orchan

Women began writing in the Yiddish press almost immediately upon its emergence in 1862. Initially writing letters to the editor, fiction soon became the second genre via which they expressed themselves. Two generations of female writers can be detected in the period before World War 1. The first generation begins with the appearance of the first story in the press – that of Miriam Lerner 'Aheim' (Home) in 1887 – and continued until the appearance of the daily newspaper in 1903. All the female writers of this generation, with the sole exception of Rochel Broches, eventually stopped publishing stories in the press (and perhaps even writing stories). The second generation of writers began in 1903 and lasted until World War 1, with the majority of them also continuing to write thereafter.

While most of the central characters in these writers' stories were women, a significant proportion of the secondary characters were male. In my

essay, I wish to investigate the changes in their representation during the two generations of writers and to thereby examine the changes that their self-consciousness and the perception of their status have undergone over the past centuries.

The writers of the first generation express a world irreparably divided between tradition and modernity. In this world, the characters in their stories are recruited to express the writers' social philosophy and world view more than they constitute individual expression. The male characters (father, beloved, husband) are therefore representative: for example, the father figure is always a positive one. He is the agent of modernity, he understands his daughter, and initiates and permits her studies both at school and thereafter. The mother figure on the other hand is always negative. She objects to any hint of modernity and is, on occasion, simply cruel. The character of the bourgeois lover is illuminated in a positive light while the gentile revolutionary lover is thoroughly negative. The other characters are portrayed similarly.

In the second generation, the writing became individualistic. The writers use the stories to express their troubles and their hopes. Nonetheless, in most of the stories' male characters are portrayed in an extremely negative light. All the love affairs fail and marriage, whether arranged or affairs of love, is perceived as a comfortable arrangement for the man. It allows him to live his life as he wishes and frees him from responsibility for his family, his wife and children. In contrast, for the woman, marriage shackles her to the children and family leaving her to only dream of a better life.

In general, this second generation of writers expresses a world in which the majority of inter-personal relationships, both familial and individual, were falling apart.

Henriette the Domestic Doe – The Figure of the House Wife in Agnon's Unfinished Novel *Shira*

Ziva Shamir

Agnon's posthumous novel *Shira* (published in 1971) was presumably written in the late 1940's after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. The plot of this enigmatic novel is based on a romantic triangle: Doctor Manfred Herbst, a German born scholar, his wife Henriette, and Shira, an assertive Russian born mid-wife who invites Manfred to her flat and makes love with him while his wife is still giving birth to her third child. This paper focuses on the character of the deserted woman who fled Germany with her husband and two daughters in the early 1920's, a decade before the Nazi seizure of power and the mass expulsion of German Jewry. She is presented, paradoxically, both as a dry tree unable to yield any fruits and as the epitome of fruitfulness. She is both a fertility goddess from Teutonic or Scandinavian mythology and the incarnation of the *Shekhinah* – the female divine presence of God and His cosmic glory. The most intriguing mystery in this novel relates to the absurd relations between Manfred Herbst and his mistress: why would a serious married man leave his devoted wife for the sake of an unattractive woman who suffers from an incurable disease (leprosy)? This essay will attempt to propose an explanation to this unresolved enigma.

The *Bloodline* – Menstruation: Between Ritual Impurity and Rebirth in Haim Be'er's novel *Havalim*

Tamar Luz Gerber

The written and oral discourse surrounding the menstrual cycle are, as is well known, a taboo issue in all cultures. It is rare therefore to find descriptions of the monthly menstrual period in literature in general and Jewish literature in particular. There are two main reasons for this: the first a general one – its classification as part of the system of inferior bodily secretions that should be concealed (stool, urine, semen and menstrual blood), and the second, a Jewish reason that affiliates menstrual blood with *nida*. The menstrual period as a literary motif was absent from Jewish literature until the second half of the twentieth century, and has made an indirect appearance in recent decades. Mentions of the menstrual period can be found in a number of poetry, prose and theater works. This paper focuses on the novel 'The Pure Element of Time' by Haim Be'er (originally written in Hebrew in 1998 under the name 'Havalim'). The novel constitutes a cultural intersection that reflects the changing attitude to menstruation. The feminist intellectuals Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva together with their successors Emily Martin and others relate anew to the body in general and to the female body in particular, this as part of their occupation with the questions regarding control, redemption from shackles and the study of taboo prohibitions.

The appearance of menstruation in 'The Pure Element of Time' constitutes a turning point in the evolution of the story's plot. In the scene that takes place in the middle of the novel, a woman aged approximately 40 receives her period while contemplating whether to commit suicide. The scene is a constitutive one both for the woman herself and for the son to whom she subsequently gives birth. Interestingly, A. B. Yehoshua's novel 'The Extra' ('Nitzevet' in the original Hebrew) also identifies menstruation as a symbol of potential motherhood.

We have before us a critical feminist reading that negates the perception that a woman establishes her identity solely via a female viewpoint. These novels, written by men, have transformed this silenced issue into both legitimate and relevant.

Hebrew in Motion: The Emigration of Two Hebrew Women from the Land of Israel to Morocco and their Educational Work

David Guedj

This article investigates the life story of two women, Miriam Grubstein and Bilha Banderly, in the Land of Israel and in Morocco. The first objective of the article is to examine the causes that motivated the two women to emigrate from Israel to Morocco during the period of the French Protectorate (1912-1956). As the two women do not constitute isolated examples of emigration from Israel or Europe to Morocco during this period, an analysis of their story may be useful in providing a method through which the cases of other women may also be studied. Banderly's and Grubstein's emigration will be examined via their private writings and in light of theories that examine their individual decisions to emigrate within a wider context. In this context, a combination of assorted evaluated parameters – gender, economic and network (family and social) – in the country of origin (Land of Israel) vis-à-vis the destination (Morocco), prove critical in the emigration decision.

An additional objective of the essay is to add a further layer to the study of Modern Hebrew culture in Morocco and of the part played by women from Israel therein. The endeavors of Banderly and Grubstein are unique and exceptional in the Hebrew cultural scene in Morocco, which was led by men and in which women occupied only a secondary and limited role. It is for this reason that the encounter between Banderly and Grubstein and the communities in Casablanca and Sefrou (respectively) sheds light

on the nature of the Hebrew culture of these communities and on male attitude to the activity of women in the public domain. Banderly's endeavors gained significant success, having taken place in Casablanca, the largest metropolis in 20th century Morocco, and home to sectors of the population that had, to some degree, already begun undergoing modernization processes. Banderly associated herself with European networks of Hebrew culture or those undergoing processes of westernization thus allowing her to participate and play a significant role in their activity. In addition, she was assisted by local mediating factors in order to act among those communities not yet undergoing westernization. By contrast, Grubstein's endeavors in the small and conservative town of Sefrou were minor. Her efforts to promote national Hebrew culture in surroundings that had been previously closed to women encountered difficulties and floundered. Grubstein separated herself from the other networks in Morocco and acted without mediators who may have been capable of facilitating greater success.

Listening to the Unique Voice of a Yemenite Woman from the Gadera Transit Camp

Nili Aryeh-Sapir

This article deals with the personal story of Shamaa (Shoshana) Katii, a Yemenite folk seamstress and weaver, who came to Israel with her family from Tanaam, a village near the city of Zanaa during Operation 'Magic Carpet'. Here in Israel she was her family's sole provider, working in menial household chores and doing tapestry and weaving in her spare time. As opposed to the accepted behavior mode of traditional women, she made her voice heard publicly about political and social subjects. She positioned herself as the mouthpiece for the voices of Yemenites who experienced a mental and spiritual crisis following their encounter with

the Jews in Israel. In this article, I discuss a series of expressions that may be developed into proverbs orally transmitted by Shamaa, all based on antithetic parallelism, in which she sharply contrasted between the value world of Jews from Yemen and that of the Jews from Israel. Shamaa's expressions are both personal and collective creations, and serve as a vehicle of utterance for her personal pains and those of her society.

