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In Memory of Esther Aumann z"l

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# MASSEKHET

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**'Massekhet'** is a periodical established in memoriam to Esther Aumann, one of the first students in the *Matan Beit Midrash*. Esther, who devoted her life to her home and to raising her family, began attending the *Beit Midrash* at the age of sixty-two and for the first time in her life delved into the depths revealed in the study of Gemara, Tanach and Jewish Philosophy. Six years later she passed away of cancer. The story of her life epitomizes the complete metamorphosis that women's Torah study has undergone in the last generation.



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**"And he desired her to be with him forever" –  
The Ramban's Sensitivity to Intimacy  
and Relationship in his Commentary on the Torah.**

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**Yosi Erel**

One of the Ramban's interpretative considerations in his commentaries on the Torah stems from his sensitivity to the underprivileged members of society. Throughout his commentaries on the stories of the bible, including their halakhic components, the high level of the Ramban's sense of thoughtfulness and compassion towards Jewish slaves and their families, the poor laborer and the elderly can be discerned. This paper examines the rabbi's sensitivity towards intimacy and a couple's relationship when coming to choose his interpretations. The Ramban attributes the verse "Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife, becoming one flesh" (*B'reshit* 2, 24), to a man's love and devotion toward his wife rather than to physical sexual relations. In the story of Abram and Sarai's journey down to Egypt, the Ramban surprises by claiming that "Abram unwittingly sinned a great sin" (Ramban's commentary, *B'reshit* 12, 13) by requesting from his wife "If you would, say that you are my sister. They will then be good to me for your sake, and through your efforts, my life will be spared" (*B'reshit* 12, 13), thereby causing her to be taken to Pharaoh's house. The Ramban interprets the verse "And God saw that Leah was unloved" (*B'reshit* 29, 31) as indicating a flawed relationship between Ya'akov and Leah. In his opinion, these flaws were caused by the collaboration between Leah and her father against her younger sister and husband on their wedding night. He further asserts that, as a result, this insult clouded their relationship as a couple for the rest of their lives. In the story of the rape of

Dina, the sages place partial blame at the feet the victim, however the Ramban disputes this interpretation and exonerates Dina from any guilt before, during or after the rape.

The Ramban also follows a similar approach of sensitivity toward a couple's relationship and the intimacy necessary for such a relationship in his commentaries on halakhic issues, and even in his halakhic rulings within these commentaries. The Ramban interprets the Torah's requirements from the master of the Hebrew maidservant designated for marriage "if the master marries another wife, he may not diminish [this one's] allowance, clothing or conjugal rights" (*Sh'mot* 21, 10) as a concern for three of the intimate needs of a woman from her husband. In contrast to other commentators, in the Ramban's opinion, none of the three words "allowance, clothing or conjugal rights" implies a monetary demand. The justice in the biblical judgments of the rapist and seducer is difficult for the contemporary bible scholar to understand. Even in the commentary of the wise medieval Ramban who lacked modern day vision, points aimed at correcting or at least refining existing distortions can be found. The Sages had already identified the difficulties in understanding the laws concerning a beautiful woman during war, when grudgingly recognizing this sanction as inevitable: "The Torah speaks only in deference to the wicked inclination, for if the Holy One, blessed is He, would not permit her, he would live with her illicitly" (Rashi's commentary, *D'varim* 21, 12). On this issue too, the Ramban chose to clarify the reason for some of the halakhot and, for others, to issue lenient rulings in order to alleviate the sorrow of the non-Jewish prisoner.



**From The Vale of Cedars to the Rhine Valley: Grace Aguilar  
and S.R. Hirsch – Do two walk together  
if they have not agreed to meet?.**

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**Shlomo Chertok**

If one were to judge Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch by any twentieth century standard he would fall short of being considered a feminist, yet when perceived in his own age and religious context, his achievements regarding the advancement of women's issues are noteworthy. He is the first rabbi within the orthodox camp to directly address the issue of women's religious status; in a series of articles entitled "*das Judische Weib*" published in 1864 in his monthly *Jeschurun*, he aimed to redeem the image of Jewish womanhood from its gross misrepresentation of degradation by the laws of the Torah and subjection to Judaism's ancient customs. He paints an exemplary portrait of Jewish femininity modeled on biblical characters. Taking advantage of textual and contextual opportunity, he presents his female subjects as individuals, spiritually and intellectually on par with their male counterparts, at times even surpassing them on both scores, functioning in accordance with the modern cultural standard.

Two decades prior to the appearance of Hirsch's series, Grace Aguilar, a young midrashist of Sephardic descent, published '*The Women of Israel*' in London. Aguilar skillfully etched biblical and post biblical figures according to the Victorian cultural standard of her era. Her short life was filled with literary creativity, spanning various genres, from historical novels to Jewish thought. A brief glance at the titles of her major works: '*Home Influence: A tale for Mothers and Daughters*', '*The Mother's Recompense*', '*Women's*

*Friendship* and *The Women of Israel* shows that the stature and role of Jewish women is a dominant theme throughout her writing. A brief comparison of *Women of Israel* to “*das Judische Weib*” yields the following commonalities: both authors wrote apologetically, combating Judaism’s alleged “oriental” character by which its women suffered greatly. Both turned to interpretation of biblical female figures to disprove this claim and concluded that Jewish women were indeed spiritually on par with, if not superior to, Jewish men. Both place women mainly within the domestic arena, wherewith education was their prime preoccupation. Both works are structured along similar outlines, beginning by portraying biblical figures as gender models, to briefly surveying Talmudic sources to enhance these models, and concluding with a contemporary statement for the modern Jewish woman of the nineteenth century. In this article I analyze these commonalities within each author’s cultural context and I explore the possibility of Aguilar’s direct or indirect influence on Hirsch.

## **Beyond the light-blue Parasol – The Lyric Works of Kadya Molodowsky**

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**Rivka Dvir-Goldberg**

In the world of children's literature in Israel, the name Kadia Molodowsky has a place of honor. Even so, only a few of the literature reading public in Israel are aware that children's verse is only one portion of the entirety of her work. Her children's poetry has been endowed with wonderful translations by our best poets, mainly Natan Alterman and Leah Goldberg, while the majority of her works still remain the estate of only Yiddish speakers. This paper, accompanied by a sample of Shlomo Zucker's translations, attempts to open a portal on the life and works of the writer beyond her children's poems.

Molodowsky, born in Russia in 1894, experienced, like many of her generation, the enormous upheavals that swept through the entire Jewish world during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These were both physical tribulations – pogroms, revolutions and wars – and resulting from them, also spiritual-cultural upheavals: the move from the closed community and its traditional way of life to the modern secular world and to the international ideological movements.

The crisis of faith and the severance from the old world characterized the personal lives of the generation, its spiritual world and its literature. Molodowsky's works contain the echoes of this crisis however its expression differs in two aspects. Firstly, it is expressed from a woman's viewpoint, a creative woman herself undergoing the crisis and not a female escort or a woman created by a man, and secondly, the crisis appears in the costume of the lyric verse, an uncommon form of expression of her generation's crises.

## **Between Sacrifice and Protest: A Meaningful Life after Bereavement (Rivka Guber and Manuela Dviri)**

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**Dorit Yosef**

Rivka Guber's 2 sons were killed in 1948 during the War of Independence. Manuela Dviri's son was killed in Lebanon in 1998. Both decided to live a meaningful life following and precisely because of their bereavement, and both did so by means of public activism and writing. Each one however chose a different path: Guber became publicly known as "*Em Habanim*" (the mother of the sons) and became a symbol of sacrificing Zionist motherhood, while Dviri, who sounded the voice of protesting mothers, became one of the main activists supporting a withdrawal from Lebanon. For both women, motherhood was the base and foundation on which they operated however each echoed a different maternal voice. Guber was active and built her identity as a model Zionist mother and in total accordance with the one and only narrative during that period - that of the Zionist vision, the establishment of the State, justification of the war, and the sanctification of sacrifice for the State. This almost "placard-like" image of the Zionist mother that Guber represents, illustrates the desired Zionist ideal (and not necessarily the actual one), and comprises an expression of the values that the then elite wished to propagate. Dviri, who was active during a period when Israeli society was undergoing a process of value undermining, including questioning the Zionist ethos and even more so, that of bereavement and the justification of sacrifice, relied on her individualism in protesting and objecting to the public consensus. It is however possible to detect in her an ambivalence that also reflects the vacillation, not to mention

confusion, that is characteristic of a large section of contemporary Israeli society.

The differing maternal voice and different aims can be better understood when recalling the large difference in circumstances and values between the periods that Guber and Dviri lived. Guber belongs to the generation directed by the Zionist ideology seeing it as the only legitimate voice. Dviri was active during the last decade of the twentieth century - during which the public agenda featured the questioning of the collective Zionist values, the airing of the individual voice, objection to the presence in Lebanon and the resultant protests.

An examination of the texts written by both women after their bereavement sheds light on the face of Israeli society in the contexts of motherhood, grief and gender as expressed during different periods and enables us to observe the manner in which each one gave significance to her life through activism and writing. The journey ends with the closing of the circle whereby the different paths they each chose converge at a single point: the creation of a meaningful life in the wake of bereavement.

**The Megilla of Ruth – Life in between Worlds:  
Between the Wandering Knight and the Fleeing Prophet**

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**The life and work of Prof. Ruth Reichelberg z"l**

Throughout her life, Ruth Reichelberg closely resembled the characters of Don Quixote and the prophet Jonah. These two characters, the wandering knight and the fleeing prophet, lived like her, between two worlds - the upper and lower - and endured the pain of the dual domains. As them, she floated between the scholarly world of Europe and the Jewish world of Torah, between her French and Israeli cultures, between the Jewish promise, ethics and spiritual teachings and the daily reality in the alleys of the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem.

Ruth's personal life was conducted according to the foundations of her intellectual principles, and she willingly and consciously chose to live the contradiction despite immense spiritual tension. In one of his last interviews, Borges said that in his opinion, the Jews' intellectual superiority is a result of the fact that every Jew simultaneously possessed two cultures: his own, continuing an ancient tradition, and the culture of the country where he grew up and was educated. Borges even expressed his concern that the establishment of a Jewish state will enable the People to exist solely within the sphere of one single culture, an existence that would detract from the uniqueness of the Jews. Through her personality and conduct, Ruth Reichelberg embodied the "Borges Jew". So it was that she mastered many European languages, was friendly with the finest European artists such as the playwright Fernando Arrabal and the author Milan Kundera, she specialized in French and Spanish literature, in poetry and in hermeneutics (the study of interpretation theory). On the other hand, she was a

religious Jew, an uncompromising religionist and an immense Torah scholar, and she even merited to learn the secrets of the *Kabbalah* with Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook Ztz"l and to be counted among the close students of Rabbi Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi (Manitou). Even though she immigrated to Israel because of Zionist and religious ideals, she consciously chose not to integrate in any way into the Israeli melting pot. Thus she maintained her stance as an external observer, a foreign viewpoint, that of the detached outsider, that enabled her to preserve her unique standpoint and on a clear and personal voice throughout her life.

## The Axed Heifer – From Ritual to Legal Procedure

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Adina Luber

The biblical ceremony of the axed heifer (*D'varim* 21:1-9) consists both of magical, ritualistic elements and legalistic, moral themes. *Chazal* were aware of the tension between the two themes in the ceremony: we find statements which relate to the ceremony as one which is meant to atone for sin and remove the impurity caused by the murder, but there is a strong tendency to emphasize the legalistic, moral aspects of the ceremony. The author suggests that this theme stems from the Sages' negative attitude toward the biblical ceremony's ritualistic character. When a ceremony is perceived as ritualistic or magical, there is danger that it will be performed in a perfunctory manner, without attention to the social, moral problems underlying the unfortunate situation of the unknown murder. Without moral emphasis, the ceremony is perceived by the Sages as devoid of meaning. The Rabbis could not ignore the ritualistic origins of the ceremony, but used creative interpretation in order to minimize the ritualistic character of the ceremony. Thus, *Chazal* constructed a vision of a just and moral society, in which the axed heifer ceremony is meant to remind the community leaders of their responsibility toward God and the people of Israel.



**A Feminist Tale of Declared Feminism:  
The Women of the National Religious Zionism Movement**

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**Margalit Shilo and Lilach Rosenberg-Friedman**

The paper wishes to examine the religious-female perception common amongst religious Zionist women who lived in *Eretz Yisrael* on the eve of the establishment of the State and to compare it with the outlook of modern day women from the same group. The issues discussed are: feminist-female awareness; Torah study by women; evaluation and expectations of the future. The constantly relevant questions who is a woman, who is a man and what are their rights, produce new answers which reshape society and seek to provide solutions to the as yet unsolved paradox between feminism and orthodoxy.

**A Bride as she is: On R. Moshe Cordovero –  
Ma'ayan Ein Ya'acov**

Edited with notes by Bracha Sack, introductions by  
S. Asulin, M. Hellner-Eshed, E. Liebes, L. Moris and B. Sack

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**Yehuda Liebes**

The Cordoverian text edited here, and most of the introductory articles, deal with the feminine element of the Godhead (*Shekhina*). This is a major issue of Kabala, and the article's authors treat it accordingly, doing so from various aspects, in a sound and non-ideological manner, the relevance of it to their life notwithstanding. The book also emphasizes the mythical nature of Cordoverian Kabala, research on which has been formerly suppressed. Points of criticism to be raised are that this book may unintentionally give the wrong impression that Cordovero wrote a special book on Shekhina, and that the hermeneutic element in his writing gets here sometimes less attention than its due.