

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

Women of the Jewish World

Volume 20

2025

Vol. 20 * 5786 * 2025



Faculty of
Jewish Studies
Bar-Ilan University

Fanya Gottesfeld Heller
Center for the Study
of Women in Judaism



MASSEKHET

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ISSN 1565-3625

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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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“Letters in Place of a Memorial”: Enlightenment, Orthodoxy and Gender as Reflected in the Letters of Ida Burack

Roni Beer-Marx

The article deals with the character of Ida Burack, an educated woman from an Orthodox Jewish family, and with the letters that she wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century, which were published posthumously in the Orthodox Jerusalem newspaper *Moriah*.

By analyzing these letters against the context of their historical background, the article traces Burack’s identity, her intellectual world, and seeks to place her appropriately on the continuum between tradition and progress. Along with this, the article seeks to address in what ways the Jerusalemite Orthodoxy of the time gave her a platform to present her message.

Burack’s letters reveal a woman who was intelligent, curious, and thirsty for knowledge, who sought to attain education – both Jewish and general – but was forced to struggle with the gender-based limits that were forced upon her. Although she was prevented from receiving a formal education, she attained broad knowledge in Hebrew and in traditional sources, and even managed to actualize her intellectual capabilities by putting her hand to writing. Her letters, like the other available sources, reveal a woman whose commitment to Enlightenment stood alongside her commitment to a Jewish lifestyle and observance of *mitzvot*, and indicated that she wished to pass on this approach to her daughters.

Along with recreating the character of Ita Burack and adding her to the “pantheon” of Enlightened Hebrew women, the article shows clearly the character of Jerusalemite Orthodoxy of the period. The cultural-intellectual channel that Ita Burack suggested was trailblazing, especially when contrasted with the educational options that were available in Jerusalem in those days to Orthodox girls. The willingness of *Moriah* to give a voice to this program and to validate it was quite a novelty given the Orthodox climate of the time.

The article seeks to provide the background to the moderate, pragmatic approach of this newspaper, and links it to an episode that stirred the Orthodox community in various geographic regions, including in the Land of Israel. Central to that episode was a widespread phenomenon of girls from Orthodox families in Cracow and in the surrounding area who converted to Christianity, faced with the gap between the conservative, restrictive lifestyle that the traditional society had destined for them and the intellectual opportunities that the non-Jewish surroundings lay before them. This revolt of Orthodox girls in Galicia caused upheaval and introspection among Torah leadership and community leaders, and one can assume that the editor of *Moriah*, who was aware of the phenomenon and had reported on it, was influenced by it, and in an attempt to save the “lost generation” of Jewish women, saw Burack’s private initiative as a model worthy of publication.

“To Gather Fragments of Expressions” : The Battle to Free Women from Violence in the Yishuv

Tamar Schechter

The article deals with the battle to free women from the public violence in the period of the Yishuv (from the 1880s until the founding of the State of Israel), with a focus on the pioneering activity of three major activists: Rachel Katznelson-Shazar, Lilia Basevitz, and Yocheved Bat-Rachel. These three women saw the liberation of women from violence as a primary objective, and as the heart of their gender-based social activity. Feminine writing, in their eyes, is a central tool in the pioneering gender-based revolution in the Land of Israel. Their objective was dual: to give women a platform for emotional outlet – intellectual and social – and also to aid, by means of writing, in bringing about gender-based social change. The women’s writing, that would expose their character and the events of their lives, as seen through their own eyes, with no male mediation, would elicit an awareness for a need for social change on the matter of gender in the developing social

culture of the Land of Israel, and would also contribute to shaping the character of the new Hebrew woman.

These women created unique platforms for publication with the goal of breaking the barrier of silence and documenting the experiences of women, which had been caused by their public perception as addenda to the actions of the heroic male. Women, who would be referred to as “ordinary women” (lit. women who fall in line) or “simple women” would not write much, and even those who did write would fear publishing their writing. Accordingly, most female authors are not well known among the community of scholars. These women generally wrote “for their desk drawer,” with their writing functioning primarily as an emotional outlet and as a tool for introspection. They would avoid exposing their inner literary selves out of concern for a judgmental public, and based on the perception that the topics of their writing were considered unimportant or peripheral as topics of interest to the people of the Yishuv. They did not see themselves as documentarians, authors or poets, and felt a deficiency in self-confidence regarding the literary value of their works.

These three literary leaders recognized female writing as a separate category, emerging from the gender-based difference in experience and in the ways in which the world is perceived. They established an infrastructure for saving feminine “fragments of expressions” and publishing them. The three central platforms which served for actualizing their vision were *Divrei Poalot* (Words of the Female Workers) (1929), *Chaverot BaKibbutz* (Female Members of the Kibbutz) (1943), and in the periodical *Devar HaPo'et* (Word of the Female Worker) (1934-1967). Their preferred writing style was a sub-genre known as *reshima* which was documentary and personal, and also diaries, letters and memoirs, which are known in the research field as “ego-documents.” They considered, first and foremost, the authenticity of the work even more than the quality of the work, addressing the intended educational-social and ideological mission.

In order to overcome the “wall” of opposition to the writers, the editors undertook broad editorial activism, based on a recognition that without a supportive hand, many of the women could not be freed from the bonds of violence. Their efforts included, *inter alia*, personal inquiries, collecting material from hidden manuscripts,

oral interviews, translation and fixing both language and style while maintaining the personal voice. They recruited to their assistance activists from the labor movements such as: Devorah Dayan, Rivka Gurfein, Rivka Alper, Yehudit Simhonit, Xenia Pamfilova Silberberg, and Bracha Habas, who aided them in actualizing their vision.

The activism of Katznelson, Bat-Rachel and Basevitz, supporting the collection of these “fragments of expression,” became a compelling cultural-historical contribution that exposed in the inner feminine world that was not previously accessible. The article emphasizes the historical significance of this writing as a tool for fashioning the character of the new Hebrew woman and for bringing the feminine voice into the national narrative, thereby filling in this lacuna for the historical record.

*“We Strive to Build – Regardless of What we Destroy”:
Identification and Subversion in the Writings of Yehudit Mensch*

Tami Kaminsky

This article seeks to examine the pioneer, gender-based and professional identity of author Yehudit Mensch, and to present her identification with the Halutz (pioneer) Zionist movement, along with analyzing the subversiveness that is woven into her writings. Mensch, born in 1901, grew up in Lvov (Lviv), Galicia [today in Ukraine], in an observant Jewish family, and moved to Israel in the Third Aliyah, having been exposed to Zionism, without her parents’ knowledge – the latter having strongly opposed her move. She initially wandered about in Israel until arriving at Havurat HaEmek, where she met David Maletz, who would also become a known writer, and the two became a couple, joining Kibbutz Ein Harod, where they had two children: Uriela and Rafi. They both had turbulent souls and were prone to depression, which presented challenges for their life as a couple, and they separated in 1933. Sometime later, Yehudit connected with Nahum Benari, a prominent leader of the Second Aliyah, one of the founders of Ein Harod and one of its leading cultural members – and they had a

child together, Amos. In 1942, they left Ein Harod and were among the founders of the urban kibbutz Efal, and about a decade later, they moved to the Beilinson neighborhood in Petah-Tikva. On Passover eve (April 23) 1948, her son Rafi was killed in the Battle of Nabi Samuel; the loss impacted greatly upon her life, which is reflected in her writings.

During the course of the years of her writing, especially between the years 1930—1958, Yehudit Mensch composed about twenty-five original works of various types, most of which were published in the following newspapers and periodicals: *Davar*, *HeAtid*, and *MiBiFnim*. About half of her compositions were short stories; some were selections from her personal diaries; she wrote one novel with autobiographical bases entitled *Ne'urim* (Adolescence) which was published in 1958; one elegy – “*Olamcha Ellohah*” (Your World God), which was published in the newspaper *HaPoel HaTza'ir*, and several short articles pertaining to timely issues. In all of these publications, the inner dissonance in which Mensch lived emerges: the way she perceived herself as part of a revolutionary-Zionistic society in which she believed, but at the same time she did not hesitate to point out its shortcomings and to display its shame publicly; her desire to lead a simple, happy life despite the depression with which she struggled; her desire to be an author although she lacked confidence in her own capabilities; and her will to present a different, feminine voice notwithstanding the toll it took on her own internal strength, as part of the pioneering gender-based revolution, even though her own feelings were silenced. The revelation of the writings and the character of Mensch adds another piece to the mosaic of woman authors in the Yishuv period, which is part of a rehabilitative journey in the enlightening historiography of the entire period in arriving at new understandings regarding historical processes generally, and pertaining to the research regarding women and gender particularly. Some of this is revealed in this article, by means of presenting her and hearing the hidden, unknown voice of author Yehudit Mensch.

“Defeating the Shadows of the Soul’s Light” : An Analysis of Yael Gordon’s Writings and Letters

Einat Ramon

Yael Gordon (1879-1958) was a Second Aliya laborer and pioneer, a teacher in her profession, and a founder of the Israeli women's movement, who led a traditional life (she observed Shabbat according to the Jewish Law in the midst of the secular kibbutzim where she lived). From the time she made aliya in 1908 and following her mother's sudden death, only four months after she, her father and her mother were united in Ein Ganim, during the winter of 1909 – Yael, like her father – A.D. Gordon, who was the leading thinker and spiritual leader of the pioneer laborers' movement, moved from one laborer's community (commune) to another. In her fifties she eventually became a member of Kibbutz Degania A, Having had a rich Jewish home-schooled education together with her brother where they grew up near the Jewish Shtetle where she was born and raised – Obodovka,

Yael expressed herself in writing which reflected a spiritual language rooted in Jewish sources. She published a few articles in commemoration of her father's yahrzeit, as she was very close with her father and she considered him to be her teacher and mentor. Yet, she felt that her speeches at the women laborers' conferences were not fully understood [as they were imbued with deep philosophical-existential language.] Thus, this paper reveals that the main source of her profound, though minimalist, thought were her private letters to her father and to her friends in Degania A. Her letters, found at Degania A's archive, and quoted in this article for the first time, portray, through their interpretation of Jewish sources, not only her own inner spiritual life. The letters expose a unique ability that provide intellectual “sketches” and insights concerning the different Jewish groups that took part in the ingathering of the exiles at the Land of Israel at the turn of the 20th century, their unique challenges, and of Yael Gordon's vision of how they could possibly eventually come together.

From Humiliation to Empowerment: Rivka Alper Documents the Life Stories of Women in the Yishuv

Margalit Shilo

Although women in the Land of Israel had been writing Hebrew literature since the First Aliyah, appreciation for their literary works emerged only in the second half of the twentieth century, following the second wave of feminism. A close reading of their writings reveals their inner world and clarifies that the women's revolution and the national revolution were intertwined — the Zionist revival accelerated the awakening of women. As an example of this process, my discussion will focus on five of the six prose works of Rivka Alper (1902–1958).

Alper, for whom writing was a deep emotional drive, immigrated to Palestine in 1926 and in 1930 published her first book, *Convulsions of Revolution*, in which she recounted her life story up to her immigration. Alper depicted the poverty and the sexual harassment she suffered from her father, emphasizing the degraded status of the Jewish woman in exile, in Ukraine. Alongside this, in her later works she documented Jewish life in the Land of Israel from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. In four of these books, pioneering women are the speakers. In *The Story of One Family*, Alper describes the transformation in the life of Rachel Yellin Suchowolsky, a daughter of the Old Yishuv, as she moved toward identification with the New Yishuv ideals. In *The Settlers in the Mountain*, Alper portrayed the life and spiritual strength of Leah Cohen, one of the founders of the settlement of Motza. In *With All Our Souls*, she recorded how young women assisted in defending the kibbutzim Hulda and Ramat Hakovesh. In *The Histories of Women Workers' Farms and Training Institutions*, she included interviews with pioneering women who received agricultural training.

Alper was among the first to make the documentation of women's contribution to the building of the land her life's mission. The paper focuses on the process of empowerment experienced by women upon their immigration to the Land of Israel, as well as on the reception of Alper's works both at the time of their publication and from the perspective of the twenty-first century.

Jacqueline Laznow

This article explores the life and work of Adina Kahansky, a Jewish public figure active during the first half of the twentieth century who contributed significantly to shaping both national and feminist identity in the *Yishuv*. Kahansky, born in Lithuania, immigrated to Argentina and in 1902 immigrated to Eretz Israel. She was among the first women elected to a local council in pre-state Israel. Although she did not leave behind a formal autobiography, her legacy is preserved through personal writings and ego-documents recently found in an archive and in journalistic publications.

Kahansky was active in numerous fields, including women's rights advocacy, social and legal aid for women and children, promotion of the Hebrew language and labor, Jewish self-defense, opposition to partition plans, and the struggle for a Jewish nation-state. Her writing served as a powerful tool for public influence.

The article highlights Kahansky as part of a broader phenomenon of increased female authorship during that era, aligning with the four motivations identified by scholar Yaffa Berlovitz: education, historical experience, feminist awareness, and familial ties to leadership. Despite her substantial contributions, Kahansky remained a marginal figure in the collective memory, partly due to her critical stance toward labor leadership and partly due to the dominant historical narrative that favored labor movement achievements and the *Po'ilot* over the civil society women.

Using methods from folklore research, genealogy, and historical ethnography, the article reconstructs Kahansky's life and impact, offering a fresh perspective from the margins on the transition from settlement to statehood. Her story invites further research into pioneering women in the *Yishuv*, their writings, and their lasting influence.

Smadar Falk-Peretz

The article seeks to shed new light on the children's literature composed by poet Ella Amitan-Wilensky (born Dorpat [now Tartu], Estonia, 1893-1995), and to present careful literary analysis of the children's poems she composed in light of feminist theories. By means of close readings of select children's poems composed by Amitan-Wilensky, with special focus on the collection *HaYeled Eilam, HaYona VahaMabul* [The Child Eilam, the Dove and the Flood] (Dvir, 1980), the article analyzes the biblical allusions in her work, and the manner in which these allusions function as a means of promoting female resistance.

The article suggests that Amitan-Wilensky's children's poetry generates a poetic space for intertextual, critical dialogue with the biblical text, centering upon and drawing attention to feminine and juvenile voices, which are generally silenced and downplayed in the biblical narrative. In the earlier stages of her writing, she displayed quite conservative tendencies, which conformed to the Zionist educational ethos of that period; however, she gradually developed a more subversive approach, whose pinnacle was achieved in the aforementioned collection, *HaYeled Eilam, HaYona VahaMabul* – in which Amitan-Wilensky deconstructs biblical legends and then reassembles them in a new form.

Reliant upon a model of the stages of development of the feminine voice, along with the Gynocriticism approach proposed by Elaine Showalter, as well as on the notion of "stealing the language" suggested by Alicia Ostriker, it is claimed that Amitan-Wilensky oscillates between the "feminine" stage which is adapted to the patriarchal norms and the clear "feminist" stage of re-mythologizing the biblical narrative. The article suggests viewing Amitan-Wilensky's children's poetry as a soundbox to amplify the excluded feminine and juvenile voices. This exemplifies how a new reading of her works contributes to the rehabilitation of the "lost continent" of female writing in Hebrew literature, and also to the understanding of the role of biblical allusions in this regard.

The Consultation of the Heart: How Women in the Yishuv Period Wrote Romance

Dana Keren-Yaar

This article seeks to shed light on the personal component that can be observed among women writers in the period of the Yishuv, i.e., the last sixty years of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel prior to the establishment of the State. Faced with existing research regarding the relationship of the pioneering women of nationalistic Hebrew writing, who tended toward a judgmental approach vis-à-vis the authors, this article seeks to focus upon a different aspect, the personal one. When they arrived in the Land of Israel, into the collectivist-nationalistic society, the pioneering women of Hebrew writing did not disavow their hearts' desires, and managed to preserve, by way of their writing, a bond with their wishes, preferences, and choices. The involvement on a personal level that emerges in the stories cited below stems from writing about connections with men, bonds through which an independent woman raises herself up and asks questions regarding her independence. The independence addressed here is not representative or national but rather one that is experienced by way of intimate closeness to the other, clinging to him through the possibility of exposure and partnership.

The stories addressed herein were written by Hemda Ben-Yehuda, Miriam Tal, and Sara Levi-Tanai. The female protagonists in their stories examine connections by way of questions of authenticity, deception, and commitment. From their perspective, the total commitment would emerge as an ability of which they would be proud, and which they would choose as an enabler and one that increases strength. The authors, who did not abandon the personal aspect even in a period of sweeping nationalistic efforts, showed that writing about the individual and personal is not merely a matter of leisure and well-being, but also addressed an inner, existential need.