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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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Forging the Image of Pioneering Women

The Zionist movement was, from its outset, a masculine one; from Herzl, Nordau, and onwards, the Zionist utopia was formulated as a project intended to return to the Jewish man his lost masculinity. Biale, Boyarin, Gluzman, and others have shown how the Jewish national movement is closely connected to the image of the masculine, fighting pioneer, with Aryan physique and appearance, freed from “Diaspora,” that is, “feminine,” characteristics. The lost “Jewish muscles,” for which Max Nordau yearned, characterize that type of Judaism that Zionism would stir to new life “for the first time after the war of desperation of the great Bar-Kochba”; this is, of course, “masculine Judaism,” in which women have no part.¹ In the world of Herzl and Nordau, the only role a woman can play is that of a wife, a mother, and a homemaker.

The literature and press of the early twentieth century (the First Aliyah) tend to identify the man with the public sphere and the woman with the private. “In the Hebrew literature of the beginning of the century,” says Dan Miron, “the life-experience of the young female Jew is usually interpreted as a personal or private experience while that of the young male Jew is presented as a metonymy for the national experience . . . the severance [of the young Jewish women from their parents’ traditional home] is shaped — from the aspect of their subjective experience — as a private event, while the quarrel of the young man with his father or grandfather and his cutting himself off from his home are a symbolic national drama.”²

The literature of the 1940s and 1950s, the literature of the “Palmach generation,” identifies the “new” man with the national revolution and tends to hide his partner in the revolution in the shade; the figure of the *halutza* or the Palmachnikit (female Palmach member) in this literature is a support-

ive, “motherly” one, far from being “new” in its images and its roles. Miron stresses the uniqueness of the artists of this generation as men and creators who “were born into a world of war and its signature is imprinted on their personality.”³ Shaked identifies in their work the stamp of the Zionist meta-narrative. Shaked notes that the redemption of the nation through redemption of the land is the Zionist myth that most of the works of the members that generation contended with, and this myth is basically a masculine one.⁴

Thus, we can say that the place of the woman in the pioneering-socialist world of the Palmach generation authors is not essentially different from her place in Herzl’s liberal-bourgeois world. In a world where one’s contribution toward the national goal is measured mainly by fighting ability, or hard, physical work in agriculture, woman turns almost per force into the “other”: the one whose characteristics are those rejected by the new Hebrew man.

Against this background, the novella *Kirot Etz Dakim* [*The Other Side of the Wall*] by Nathan Shaham is a refreshing surprise.⁵ Of course, the novella, which takes place in the early 1940s, was written in the 1970s, but the centrality of the woman in this work stands out both when compared with the works of the Shaham’s contemporaries, Shamir and Yizhar, and when contrasted with later works or studies.

One may say that *Kirot Etz Dakim* is a harbinger of a certain change that took place in the public and literary atmosphere in Israel about a decade later. Even if in Europe and the United States the late 1970s were a period already bearing the marks of the first wave of the feminist revolution, in Israel these were years in which the masculine experience was still the central experience in literature. One could mention, for example, one of the important novels of the late 1970s, *Zikhron Devarim* [*Past Continuous*] by Yaakov Shabtai. It may or may not be a coincidence that both *Kirot Etz Dakim* and *Zikhron Devarim* appeared in 1977. Shabtai’s novel is decidedly masculine. The protagonists in his novel, the focus of both plot and point of view, are three men, while the women in it are secondary and seen through the eyes of the men. In contrast, the main consciousness in Shaham’s novel is the woman’s consciousness. One might argue that if the novella was written today, or even at the end of the 1980s, the central consciousness would be appreciated differently, but in the literary world of the 1970s, what we have here is quite a surprise.⁶

Looking back, to the 1940s, while adopting a feminine viewpoint, is far from being obvious. When Oz Almog writes, in the late 1990s, of the process fashioning the portrait of the *tzabar* of the 1940s and 1950s, he succeeds in excluding the *tzabarit* (female native-born Israeli), by including her in the

masculine concept “*tzabar*.”⁷ It might seem that there is no connection between an academic work published in the late 1990s and a novella that appeared twenty years earlier. But the 1940s, the years in which the image of the *tzabar* was being shaped as the embodiment of native Israeli culture, is the period both Oz Almog and Nathan Shaham look back upon. Apparently, this retrospective glance causes Almog to exclude the *tzabarit* from his research, even in the late 1990s.

Placing a female character at the center of a novella that takes place in the 1940s is exceptional not only when compared to the members of Shaham’s generation. In light of women’s status in the ideology and literature that fashioned the image of the “new Jew” and the “*tzabar*,” the shift to a story told through the consciousness of a woman is a revolutionary one, especially when we remember that Shaham is a male author who came from the center of the cultural system of the 1940s.⁸

Thus, one could assume that the novella *Kirot Etz Dakim* represents an improvement in the status of the main female character in Shaham’s work. It would seem reasonable to assume that the Shaham of the late 1970s could take the impressive step of writing an entire novella whose main character is a woman; furthermore, that woman’s consciousness dominates the text. Apparently, the move that Shaham makes is so extraordinary that it only becomes possible in the late 1970s. Not until the early 1980s could Shulamit Lapid make a corrective reading, as it were, of the story of the First Aliyah, in her novel *Gei Oni*.⁹ In this period, so it would seem, it also became possible for Shaham to award centrality and substance to the figure of the *halutza*, the partner of the kibbutznik and palmachnik of the 1940s.

Nathan Shaham’s novella takes place on a kibbutz in the early 1940s. The characters in the novella are fulfilling the Zionist-socialist vision of communal life and equality. The public status of the *Yishuv* as a “state before a state,” or “a state-in-the-making,” is highlighted by the fact that the protagonists in the novella toil at backbreaking physical labor, participate in the military activities of the Palmach and the Haganah, or at least in the acts of hiding weapons and smuggling them, and are keenly aware of the groundbreaking, conceptual status of their daily life.

The central female protagonist’s background could have been very impressive. Not only does the heroine live in a young, poor kibbutz, but she has come to it alone, by choice. This farmer’s daughter chose the kibbutz for ideological reasons, and arrived there despite—and not because of—the circumstances of her life and her education: “She used to be proud of the fact that she came to the kibbutz through the strength of her own decision and

nothing else. Without the youth movement, without the training camp, without close friends.”¹⁰

Precisely because Shaham’s heroine is given such an impressive starting point, and is so clearly placed at the center of the novel, it is ultimately even more disappointing to find out that Shaham’s idealistic *halutza* has remained a woman who thinks only about her love life, who is easily filled with what she herself calls “self pity, worry about the morrow, miserable fear for her own existence, and yearning for a male.”¹¹ Neither ideology nor creative self-realization fill the emptiness of the heroine’s life, but rather spying on her pretty neighbor’s love life.

Throughout the entire novella, Shaham’s unnamed heroine is occupied with what the text calls “the private arena.” As early as the first page of the text, she is described as someone who prefers to read “belles letters,” in contrast to the people who gather in the dining hall “to listen to the news and to analyze the situation as reflected in the different war fronts,” and as opposed to someone who reads books concerning the public arena. The young woman, who has left her rich father’s home and opted for a life of national and socialist realization in the kibbutz, is gradually depicted as someone who is only searching for a bit of love: “After the war it may not be necessary to keep such a stiff upper lip. Maybe then her sensitivity, her generosity, the great power to love welling up inside her will be noticed.”¹²

The book’s heroine is not the only lonely person on the kibbutz, but while the lonely men keep themselves busy with public affairs, she occupies herself with her [female] neighbor’s secret romance. For her lonely [male] neighbor, “For Meir Avrahami — the movement is everything. Without it he doesn’t exist.”¹³ In an argument with the heroine about a novel written by a kibbutz member he, of course, holds the opinion that the interest of the community takes precedence over personal problems, and says “A personal belly ache, who cares about it?” and she, “‘What’s wrong with that?’ she retorts.”¹⁴ Even Shmuel B., the lover whom the heroine calls “Theo,” cloaking him in her imagination with a romantic mantle, is thoroughly involved in ideological issues. Moreover, he sees himself as the opposition fighting against the movement’s institutions and always supports the minority opinion, while our heroine “listens to a long, inflammatory speech and goes away brimming with symbols whose meaning she does not entirely fathom, but which strike her as shimmering truths.”¹⁵ One might say, a bit bluntly, that whereas the male pioneers in Shaham’s novella act out of ideology and abate their loneliness through taking social and ideological stances, Shaham’s

halutza acts out of “yearning for a male,” is impressed by the discussions of social and ideological issues in a hazy, emotional way, “whose meaning she does not entirely fathom,” and abates her loneliness by peeping into her [female] neighbor’s life.

This means that even in 1977, even in Shaham’s novella, whose protagonist is a woman who has chosen socialist pioneering self-realization — at the end, “her world is as narrow as that of an ant” (phrase from a poem by Rachael). Not only is involvement in the main, meaningful, absorbing events of existence reserved for men, but even interest in them belongs to them.

The intellectual stance, reserved for lonely men, who are impressive farmers or amazing underground fighters — such as Meir or Shmuel B. — is not for women, or at least not for our heroine. Even when she does take an independent position, it is a stance based on personal embarrassment rather than on real principles. When she gets riled over the bakery workers’ cheating the English corporal while weighing bread, she is not standing for honesty but is embarrassed because her comrades are exploiting his attraction to her in order to cheat him.

When she discusses ideological issues with Theo, her neighbor Raheli’s lover, she is aware of his extending her intellectual credit that she is not sure she really deserves. Moreover, Theo extends to Shaham’s heroine a broader credit line than she receives from the narrator: “To Theo’s way of thinking, she is a little, bourgeois brat who has been taught French, and eurhythmics and playing piano in order to suitably grace the home of a doctor. He takes pride in the change that kibbutz living has wrought in her values. *She has no objection to assuming the role his imagination has assigned her, even though she senses no change whatsoever within herself.*”¹⁶

Shaham’s narrator could have intervened here or hinted that the heroine unjustifiably underestimates herself. But the narrator maintains his silence: He neither tries to convince us of the heroine’s worth, nor does he expose the “principled” lover for even a bit less than the heroine takes him to be. When the heroine imagines Theo’s character, when she “wants to fill him with characteristics,” we do not spot any reservations at all on the part of the narrator nor on the part of the hero from the range and specifics of the characteristics attributed to him. When a *halutz* imagines a *halutza*, she is a little bourgeois brat. When a *halutza* imagines a *halutz*, his wretched physical appearance is surprisingly unimportant, and it is unthinkable that he does not have his own opinion and ideology.

The woman’s status in the kibbutzim of Hashomer ha-Tza’ir is reflected in the words of Meir Ya’ari, written in 1936:

Some people find justification for the *havera*, who is not interested in politics. The woman, apparently, was not created for that. A song of praise is sung to the *haverot's* thorough understanding of educational issues and skills in establishing comradely and friendly relations in the kibbutz. In this sphere of members' relations it is customary to draw a line between the natural characteristics of men and women. The men's strength is in relations in the public arena, as it were, while the women's is in intimate friendly relations. . . . I do not accept any ifs and buts in this domain. Socialism cannot make do with partial solutions on the issue of women's equality, as well as on the agrarian question. We must demand complete, unlimited equality.¹⁷

Shaham's novella, set a few years after Ya'ari's statements, reflects the kibbutz members' approach that distinguishes "between the natural characteristics of men and women" more than it does Ya'ari's basic support of full equality. It seems that not only the heroine and the men surrounding her but the narrator too, and perhaps even the writer in the 1970s, bear the "psychological burden of the school of Weininger, Freud, and Nietzsche," as Ya'ari puts it. "In this anti-feminist literature," he adds, "the woman appeared as a passive absorbent receptacle, fettered to the specific time and place. As an unimaginative creature, hindering the conquering assault of the fighting men."¹⁸

Shaham's men are occupied with public needs and national issues. Even the superficial or vulgar ones among them, such as Big Isaac, Raheli's husband, contribute to the national needs, since they are recruited into the struggle of defending the *Yishuv*. Raheli, on the other hand, is totally occupied with her love affair and is not even touched by the news of the fall of Tobruk. Even our heroine, who is anxious about the fall of Tobruk and the imminent German threat to the Eretz Israel *Yishuv*, again sees things in proper "feminine" proportions the morning after. On the night she learns of the German conquest of Tobruk, the heroine also finds out that Raheli has a lover; come morning, the love affair is the sole focus of her interest and excitement. Tobruk fades into the monotonous background, and the heroine is titillated by her secret piece of gossip.

Even if we managed to ignore the meagerness of the heroine's world, at the end of the novella it is crystal clear that her world has become void with the conclusion of the secret love affair that she had been tracking: "Her life seems to have been emptied of its content. . . . At night she misses the voices on the other side of the wall and during the day the accidental meetings with Theo. Life is boring without the secret that was guarded like a sacred trust. Now, as she goes from place to place in silence, her silence is utterly empty."¹⁹

Shaham does not really imagine a *halutza* who plays an active, meaningful role in the settlement and defense endeavor. Maybe this should not come as a surprise, since “the young Shaham is, perhaps, the most definite successor of the mainstream Hebrew fiction written between the two World Wars, adept in the implementation of the Zionist meta-narrative” as Shaked puts it.²⁰ Shaham is placed well within the hegemonic center, and even his version of the Zionist meta-narrative, when all is said and done, is merely a nuanced version of the hegemonic view of the woman: her world is narrow, domestic, and bereft of any real interest.²¹

Shulamit Lapid’s portrait of the *halutza* in her novel *Gei Oni* is more of a surprise. Lapid’s point of departure differs from that of Shaham not only because she is a woman, and even not merely because she is writing about a more distant period. Shaham writes about the 1940s, about a period he was a part of, from a distance of about thirty years. Lapid, in contrast, harks back to the First Aliyah, which is much more distant in time and less documented in our common cultural corpus. Moreover, Shulamit Lapid’s *Gei Oni* is almost an explicit attempt at reclaiming women’s rightful status in Zionist history. The back cover of the novel states that its heroine “Fanya is one of those women-giants whose name is absent in the history books, since only the names of men appear in the lists of farmers who redeemed the land of Eretz Israel.”²²

Fanya, the heroine of Lapid’s novel, is a strong woman, who is capable of providing for herself and her family and of making her own decisions. It would seem that Lapid characterizes a feminist heroine, aware of her place and status as a woman. Even as an adolescent, Fanya thinks that “when the time comes she would prove that she is no less than the men,” and “indeed, now, as a adult, she has proven the equality of the sexes with a broken back, with unbearable suffering, with unrewarded work.”²³ Lapid presents her heroine as a kind of intuitive feminist, “I saw the regulations that the Rosh Pina committee had prepared [says Fanya]. Only men have signed it. Whoever will read the regulations a hundred years from now will think that there were no women here at all. And it is precisely they who are the true heroines of Rosh Pina.”²⁴

Yet, even Lapid’s heroine takes an interest mainly in “intimate relations.” Her motives, in contrast to those of the men in the novel, almost always belong to the private arena, and she sees her freedom of action as something granted to her by the men, or more precisely, by her husband: “*He gave her complete freedom. She was free to conduct business, to travel on the roads, to be away from the house. He respected her right to realize her life sepa-*

rately from his. None of the women she knew, even Helen Leah, behaved like she did. And Yehiel never hinted that *she had been given this freedom by him* or that she should act in the accepted manner.”²⁵

Contrary to what one might expect from a novel with a feminist point of departure, the main line of the novel’s plot indicates a woman driven by the will of others. Fanya cannot remain home in Lisabetgrad after the pogrom in which her parents were killed and she was raped. She immigrates to Eretz Israel and does not join her sisters in America, because her father’s dream was to go to the land of his forefathers. She is even aware that she is not fulfilling her own dreams but rather those of the men in her life. She stays in the country because it was her father’s dream, she fights to stay in Gei Oni — that is, Rosh Pina — because it is her husband’s dream, and even that emotional and practical role, ostensibly reserved for women in their own right, motherhood, is emptied of content when her husband dies: “Her house was not a home. It was a place to eat and sleep. Besides a roof over their heads she could not give her neglected children warmth or joy since her heart was as silent as a grave.”²⁶

Despite her inherent strength, despite her ability to manage affairs and make decisions, the course of her life is dictated by fortuitousness and by men. Fanya’s definition as someone’s wife is particularly prominent at the novel’s conclusion. At the end of the novel, we meet the new man in Fanya’s life who has come to redeem her from her desolation. Despite all her capabilities, Fanya does not manage to support her children or maintain her husband’s house in Rosh Pina. She is forced to sell the house, only to find out that the buyer is the person who is intended to be her new husband: “I am a person with a profession. My livelihood is guaranteed. That means . . . I need you Fanya! Will you allow me to help you?”²⁷

Like Shaham’s heroine, Fanya is occupied mainly with love life.

The division between the private-feminine sphere and the public-masculine sphere is further reinforced in *Gei Oni*. “The vision of the redemption burned around them [the women] like a fire in people’s bones, while they [the women] took pleasure in idle chatter!”²⁸ Fanya and Helen Leah are busy with idle chatter, with gossip, and with everyday needs, while the men redeem the homeland. The division of the areas of endeavor and interest between the men and the women is mentioned again in Lapid’s novel inadvertently, as it were, as if it were obvious. “The men don’t miss us, girl. Redemption of the soil burns like fire in their bones. Everything else is — nonsense!” said Fanya.²⁹ On the same page in which Fanya notes the importance of women in reclaiming the land, their being the true heroines of Rosh Pina,

Helen Leah, her good friend, brings us back to reality: “My Moinshטים only talk about redeeming the soil and national revival! Sure, that’s the most important thing and that’s the reason we’re here, but . . .” Helen Leah waved her hands in mock desperation. But then she became serious and asked: ‘But isn’t he worth the struggle, trying to win his heart?’ — that is, the thing that really matters to Lapid’s heroic, feminist heroines is the fight for the husband’s heart.³⁰ True, we are here for the purpose of national revival, but — one gleans from the words and behavior of the heroines — in the end this is a matter for the men.

Both Shaham’s novella and Lapid’s novel were written in hindsight, from the late 1970s (or early 1980s) to the 1940s and even further, to the beginning of the twentieth century. The differences between the two texts are greater than their similarities. Shaham’s perspective is that of someone who lives and writes from the center of the cultural system but who is trying to adopt the viewpoint of the “Other.”³¹ It is also worth noting that the system from within which he writes pretends to support equality and socialism and its concepts are supposed to include equality between the sexes.

Shulamit Lapid is looking backward, to the First Aliyah. She is writing from the margins of the system, from a woman’s point of view and with the rather express intent of presenting an alternative narrative to the Zionist meta-narrative. Lapid’s point of departure is more revolutionary than Shaham’s, since she is trying to change the prism and not only offer an additional viewpoint, a slightly different one. Yet Lapid’s historical starting point places her heroine in a more extreme position of inferiority than that of Shaham’s. The people of the First Aliyah did not even pretend there was equality, the way the members of the Second Aliyah did. Despite prominent differences, the status of both women protagonists is fairly similar. Unfortunately, women’s status in both the novella and the novel is not much more than a reflection of the socio-cultural norms of the two periods.

Even if we allow for the influence of “reality” on the literary text, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the status of the heroines in Shaham’s novella and Lapid’s novel attests to the influence of the dominant cultural discourse on literature. Obviously, national literature in general, and Zionist literature in particular, shape the dominant cultural discourse. Yet, one must keep in mind, too, that the dominant cultural discourse shapes the national literature; these are relations of mutual nourishment and mutual formation. Even those acting from the margins of the system are influenced by its center more than it seems at a first glance. Nathan Shaham, who adopts the woman’s viewpoint, presents it as peripheral to the main plot of Zionism,

and as a rather boring one due to its focusing on the less significant, personal aspects of the plot. Shulamit Lapid ostensibly tried to present an alternative narrative of Zionism; she chose a woman protagonist, an independent and feminist-like one, and set her story not in the clichéd framework of the Second Aliyah but rather in the context of the First Aliyah, the one whose story has not been told countless times and has not, perhaps, become firmly fixed as an ultimately defined and shaped cultural myth. Yet, Lapid, too, does not actually depict a woman who will play an active role in the national narrative, who will take an interest in the public discourse and not only in her “personal belly ache.”

Both Shaham and Lapid leave their heroines on the margins of the national revolution. The men are transformed in both works, becoming “new Jews,” farmers, fighters, revolutionaries. The women are occupied with the nonrevolutionary aspects of settling the country. They maintain their traditional roles: We were there, too, involved in the personal arena, in cooking, laundry, raising children, and capturing the husband’s heart. The Zionist revolution remains a revolution of men, for men, in which women play only a passive, marginal role.

One might have expected that in a period in which some of the influences of the international feminist movement penetrated the country, in the late 1970s, the literary images of the *halutzot* would be a bit different. One might have hoped for an independent woman, a fighter for her opinions and her world, who sees herself as part of the social change taking place in the country. But the difference between the women of the First Aliyah and those of the Second turns out to be a myth. Furthermore, it seems that the alternative view of the past is merely a slight variation of the dominant view. Regretfully, the *halutzot* of Shaham and Lapid are willing, perhaps even desirous, of acting the part the *halutzim* have cast them in.