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## Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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Published by Brandeis University Press

Kark, Ruth & Shilo, Margalit & Hasan-Rokem, Galit & Reinharz, Shulamit.

Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel: Life History, Politics, and Culture.

Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2009.

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## The Growing Silence of the Poetess Rachel

*This is the way — there is no other,  
to follow, to go to the end;  
and to remember, and sing, and yearn  
and to remember, and be silent . . . and be silent.*  
—“My Tiny Joy”

The way and silence are key concepts in Rachel’s poems. Rachel’s marching along the path began as progress, with knowledge that the purpose of the journey was to arrive at a target site within a defined period, and turned into treading in space until the end of time. In this article I would like to demonstrate that the emotional and ideological foundation in Rachel’s poems is the experience of remaining “afar”; this experience was designed in connection with Moses, the leader of the Jewish people on the way from Egypt to Eretz Israel, and is expressed in the poetics discerned in her poems.

The path that Rachel traversed during her life was one of wanderings, of immigration to Eretz Israel, and of exile within its borders. Rachel was born in 1890 in Russia and reached Eretz Israel in 1909 with her sister; in 1911, she made her way to Kinneret following Hannah Maisel-Shohat. In 1913, Rachel went to France to study art and agriculture. Because of World War I, she was forced to go back to Russia, remaining there until her return, ill with tuber-

Behind this article stand those who taught me the meaning of responsibility toward a text that is read and a text that is written — Dr. Ruth Ginsburg, Dr. Ilana Pardes, Tamar Hess, and my teacher Prof. Dan Miron. I thank them for the thought and time they invested in me as a student and for allowing me to feel that I was a teacher, too. In the Hebrew original of this article, all poems were cited as they appear in *Rahel — Shirim, Mikhtavim, Reshimot, Korot Hayyeha* [Rachel — Poems, Letters, Sketches, Biography], ed. U. Milstein (Tel Aviv, 1994) (Hereafter Milstein, *Rahel — Shirim*.)

culosis, to Eretz Israel, to Degania—from which she was asked to leave because of her illness. After five years of wandering between Petah Tikva, Jerusalem, the hospital in Safed, and Tel Aviv, she settled in a small Tel Aviv garret, living there for about five years. In 1931, Rachel spent time in a convalescent home in Gedera and from there she returned to the hospital in Tel Aviv on the day she died, 15 April 1931. She was buried in Kinneret.

This progression, of promise toward the realization of a personal and collective vision by the very act of settlement, and its being shattered on the threshold of realization, is a fundamentally important step towards understanding Rachel's poems. As an individual—with all the facets of her being—Rachel feels she is standing at the threshold, as a *halutzah*, as a woman, as a creative person. In this article, I will focus on the development of the sense of threshold by characterizing the poetics in this light and in the link between Rachel and Moses—on the basis of the shattering that came before realization could be achieved.

### Literary Reception

As a poetess, Rachel had to overcome a number of obstacles. The expectations of the masculine establishment in Eretz Israel at the beginning of the twentieth century from the feminine pen were nurtured by phallogocentric thought patterns, and they allotted women's poetry limited functionality and minimal access. From the time the feminine voice penetrated cultural discourse, it was identified with the emotional world composed of sensations of love, desire, pregnancy, and motherhood as an imperative thematic foundation, which is not congruent with intellectual-philosophical significance. In his book *Imahot Meyassedot, Ahayot Horgot* (Founding Mothers, Stepsisters), Dan Miron identifies these demands with genre expressions: It was recommended that women's poetry anchor its messages in the realm of the lyrical, become entrenched in the small lyrical poem, and be excluded from the "higher," more complicated lyrical genres such as the ode and the elegy. Actually, the male cultural establishment was quite amenable to personal, autobiographical, confessional, and sentimental women's poetry, and if despite this, women's poetry did aim for Modernism, it would be best if it would locate itself in its conservative wing.<sup>1</sup>

Rachel did indeed choose the small lyrical poem. With the publication of her first poems in *Davar*, there were signs of the perception of a poem that was likely to deceive many readers; by means of a short, minimalist, lyrical

poem, with clear language and personal-feminine subjects, a poetic framework was fashioned under an innocent guise but with sophisticated content. This model left an opening for the general step of very reduced appreciation that dominated the attitude to Rachel's work.

Adjectives such as "small," "innocent," and "simple" characterize the general nature of the lexicon recruited for describing her poems. "Genteel," "pleasant," "charming" are frequently used adjectives and despite their positive aura, what is common to all of them is the lack of identifying this poetry with an aspect of power and strength.<sup>2</sup>

In his article "The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History," Michael Gluzman points out this distortion that was firmly fixed in the description of the development of Modern Hebrew poetry. Defining the 1920s as the years of Expressionist-Futurist and Neo-Symbolist expressions, while ignoring an Acmeist such as Rachel and an Impressionist such as Esther Raab, is only a partial description and therefore askew. Expanding the canon, by recognizing the stylistic breakthrough inherent in women's poetry, adds the connecting link between the two waves considered central in Hebrew poetry — that of Abraham Shlonsky (who came out against the poetics of Bialik) and that of Nathan Zach (who came out against the poetics of Nathan Alterman). A serious discussion of the poetesses', and including their work in a review of the development of Hebrew poetry, makes possible a more faithful and complete depiction of Hebrew Modernism, which is characterized by a "simple style" and rejects rhetorical language.

Rachel made her way into the world of Eretz Israel Hebrew poetry by sounding the first feminine voice in it. The only way in which Rachel's poetry could have been accepted by this establishment was by being delimited through formal and thematic conventions, with the idea that they were what she wanted to implement and that she would continue to exist within their framework.

The expectations of the target audience for short, simple poems, reinforcing the link between the Jewish people and its land and its historical past on the social plane and presenting the image of a weak, needy woman on the personal plane, found support in Rachel's poetry. The explanatory process was halted at a very early stage; the distribution Rachel gained, derived from a one-dimensional, narrow reading, led to her evaluation as the spokesperson for the people, the nation, and the Hebrew language but not as a poetess. And in the way that "popular" is perceived, according to the romantic critical tradition, as authentic, simple, and naïve, so was her poetry accepted as such.

Most of Rachel's poems offer subversion hegemonically framed. One sees

in them the image of a strong and obstinate, independent and rebellious women; the figure of a women that gains for herself exclusive possession of the land by her nature; and a creative woman who makes her way into the masculine cultural and literary discourse.

### The Way and the Threshold: The Association between Rachel and Moses

The world of the speaker in Rachel's poem, as developed in the collective consciousness, was painted in the colors of yearning — for a child, for love, and particularly for the Kinneret. The Kinneret was perceived as the region of longings and as a source of inspiration. Actually, the poetess who was identified with the myth of “the longed-for Kinneret” did not write her poems in her Kinneret period. Rachel stayed at Kinneret for only two years and that period did not serve as inspiration for her poetic work; the bulk of her writings came in the last six years of her life.<sup>3</sup> The claim that her work was built out of bricks of yearning for Kinneret indicates a disregard of her symbolic charge and diminishes its reading to a halutzic manifest.

The Kinneret did indeed serve in the construction of the central poetic stance in Rachel's work, but it constituted a symbolic means; Kinneret is the name for defined aspirations, well delineated in the speaker's imagination, embedded in the roots of her consciousness — and impossible to attain:

There, the mountains of Golan, stretch out your arm and touch them! —  
In sure silence they command: Stop. (“Kinneret”)

To see — and not to touch. To live alongside the firm knowledge that the evasive contact will remain just that forever, as an immutable decree.

The basic experience fashioned in the poems is the experience of marching along the way, standing opposite, and remaining on the threshold. Coping with this experience is given expression in three collections of Rachel's poems: *Safi'ah* (Aftergrowth), *Mi-Neged* (From Afar), and *Nebo*. The collections' titles are taken from the biblical context to which the readers are referred even before they meet the poems; at the heart of the biblical context stands Moses. The association that is woven into the poems between the speaking figure and Moses is not exhausted through these references but is interspersed in the speaker's stance, in the shaping of the path as a theme and as poetics that reflect this basic experience and are seen through it.

The way in which Rachel yokes Moses' situation to the definition of her own is a one-time occurrence and is not assimilated as of equal value in the general dialogue that Rachel maintains with other biblical figures. The association between Rachel and Moses organizes around itself the definition of the speaker's identity and accompanies her throughout her changes along the course of the poems

Moses — the infant who was rescued and survived, who was chosen and led, the emissary of God who stumbled and was betrayed — is also the person who was stopped on the threshold and remained standing opposite. At this point, Rachel joins him and stands with him. The speaker in Rachel's poems merges with the figure of Moses; she employs gender reversal when formulating her words and she sees herself as the prodigal son:

Both of us know: the prodigal son  
will never again see the homeland skies. (*"Kach et Yadi"* [Take My Hand])

The background for the merging of Rachel and Moses, which cuts through generations and genders, is their standing on the threshold and looking directly at the unobtainable goal. In Moses' case, this is the goal that remains an impossible destination; in Rachel's case, this is the place where she lived and blossomed — and wilted and was forever banished. Both of them are dispossessed from the place where they belong — as seen personally and in the eyes of the collective.

Moses is on his way to external exile on Mount Nebo and hears time and again that he will never set foot on the ground of the land to which he is leading the people of Israel. The earth, which at first seems to be a source of life, becomes a region of estrangement, death, and burial. Like the fate of Moses, so too, Rachel is destined to remain beyond the pale:

If my fate  
is to live far from your borders —  
allow me, Kinneret,  
to rest among your graves.

Even though she is locked in a narrow room in a strange city, Rachel's journey still goes on. The infiniteness of the journey stems from the fact that she will never again live in the space she sought for herself as a home; and from the circular treading that never leads to the finish line, she says

Weary my soul from a journey-without-path  
in the vast desert of life. (“*Ki Littuf Ahim*” [For Brothers’ Caress])

Marching in the desert, which in the biblical ethos symbolizes the journey to Eretz Israel, is none other than marching in the desert for Moses. This is a chronotopical, emotional, verbal tautology.<sup>4</sup> Rachel feels that she, too, is drowning in a desert of dearth and of absence. The journey she is making does not succeed in bringing her closer to her destination, which remains stationary and unobtainable

The heart listens. The ear awaits:  
Has he come? Will he come?  
In every hope, the sadness of Nebo.

Facing each other — two shores  
of one stream.  
The stone decree:  
distant forever.

Lift up your hands. See over  
There — no one comes.  
To each person his Nebo  
over a wide land. (“*Mi-Neged*” [From Afar])

Inherent in the poem is the link between Rachel and Moses; while she continually draws further away from Kinneret, Rachel moves closer to Moses. She has so deeply internalized the sadness of Nebo that for every expectation engulfing her, she experiences Moses’ viewing of and expectation from Mt. Nebo.

The one who has opened his arms and found himself facing a vacuum and silence is both Moses and Rachel. The poem creates an illusion as if the two of them are standing on Mt. Nebo, at different times. The titles of the collections “From Afar” and “Nebo” are close to each other. Both are bound up with Moses’ punishment and exile from the land he never reached. Yet, there is a fine distinction between the two: They deal with different stages of being cut off. Standing “from afar” refers the readers to God’s order to Moses to ascend Mount Nebo where he will die, for the land, as noted, he will see from a distance (Deut. 32:49–52). Two chapters later, the moment of truth arrives. Moses, alone, ascends Mount Nebo and climbs to the summit. The

Lord shows him the entire land, and again, as an echo of a great cry, reminds him that he will not cross over to it.

In the title “From Afar,” there is an allusion to a picture of two sides, of being located on one of them and looking toward the longed-for goal. In the title “Nebo,” one hears despair expressed from being on only one, single side, dispossessed of the hope of reaching the land that stands opposite and even of dreaming about it. “Nebo” is definitely a final stage; of man’s burrowing within himself and waiting for death that will gather him once again to the earth.

In the poem “*Eini Kovela*” (I Do Not Complain), taken from her first poetry collection, “*Safi’ah*” (Aftergrowth), Rachel draws a direct comparison between the narrow room in which she is confined and Mount Nebo:

I do not complain! In a narrow room  
the yearning for space is so very sweet;  
for days of sorrow, the chill autumn has purple and gold.

I do not complain! A song flows  
from a wounded heart in its love,  
and the desert sand—like the green of a meadow  
from the highest peak, from Mount Nebo.

In an article entitled “*Resisim*” (Shards), Lotte Sela writes: “Rachel called her flat rooftop near Haderah ‘Mount Nebo,’ sitting there and gazing towards the sea and watching everything that was happening below. She was filled with yearnings for life—but she saw this “from afar” and never reached them.”<sup>5</sup>

### Poetics of Silence

Moses stands between memories of Egypt and dreams of Canaan, the desert is an “intermediate chronotope” in which he is located, as Ilana Pardes defines it.<sup>6</sup> Being situated between, in the middle, is characteristic of the spokesperson in Rachel’s poems. She is found between a meeting and a separation from which there is no return, between discovery and renewed searching, between closeness and an ever-increasing distance.

This position, which is neither absolute nothing nor absolute being, is given expression in the poems’ structures and in the repeated motif around which they are organized. Rachel’s intermediate existence is built on the po-

etics of silence: She is continuously silent. The speaker's wandering, her steps forward and her retreats all hover around the longed-for goal, an eternal region of yearning. It is the same whether she speaks of a light blue lake or a broad expanse of land; the experience described is one of standing afar and of paralysis that prevents moving closer. This paralysis is mediated by silence. That same space surrounded by clods of the soil from the land is transformed into a vacuum surrounded by words.

Rachel's poems are woven into a network of interactions between speech and silence, with the poetic decision of its creator favoring the expression that is in silence over explicit expression. At times, this is seen through the lexical or graphic design of the text, at others it is realized through an ars poetica declaration within the poems.

In the poem "Niv" (Idiom) the speaker declares explicitly:

I know an infinite number of words—  
So I will be silent.

Out of so much chatter, she chooses the means of silence. Only this channel can transmit the abundance of expression she wishes to deliver. Any other lexical possibility seems too poor and hackneyed; she rejects the use of "flowery phrases" and "decorative rhetoric" because of their restrictedness. The raw material used for her work is that same

expression that is as innocent as a babe  
and as modest as the dust.

This is the most penetrating possibility that language can afford, other than the option of silence. This is the poetics of the borderline, for we are not speaking of total muteness. The final verse seems even demanding and determined in its aspirations:

Will your ear take in, even through the silence,  
the phrase as spoken?  
Will you cherish it as a friend, as a brother,  
as a mother in her bosom?

The poetic motto of the speaker is silence, quietude. Yet the speaker herself stresses that under discussion is silence by choice; despite the infinite number of words standing at the ready, she prefers silence over all of them. Now

the reason for this poetic choice becomes even clearer: her desire to be received by her listener with full force and internalization, in a way that the addressee will need to absorb the message actively and to fill in the gaps.

The choice in favor of distancing oneself from verbal ornateness and of remaining steadfast to what she calls “the simplicity of expression” is made clear in the poem “*Naftulim*” (Convolutions), written in 1927. The speaker is describing her internal war against her natural attraction —

To the glory of ruby and emerald,  
to words as beautiful as a gem.

At times she finds herself betraying her stylistic decision:

I do not know how to distinguish dawn’s light,  
I do not listen to that still, small voice.  
Is this me, I swore to be faithful  
to words as simple as a scream?!

The speaker staunchly declares that her artistic path is embedded in what seems to be an oxymoron — simple words and the still voice whose status is like a scream.

In the poem “*Sefer Shirai*” (My Book of Poems) Rachel continues to interweave simplicity and the cry:

My desperate cries, in pain  
in times of misery and loss,  
have turned into a heartwarming chain of poems,  
into the white book of my poems.

The experiences, likened to screams, turn into a heartwarming chain and a delicate-looking book.<sup>7</sup> The screams go through a transformation and are embodied in the text in the form of silence. Defining the background from which the poems grew as screams reinforces the feeling that the quiet and silence derive their meaning from experiential and expressionistic exhaustion and not from emptiness and non-existence.

The text grants silence an audiovisual standing; silence is presented both as expressional muteness and as a graphic empty space. The genre in which the “scaffolding,” in Bakhtin’s terms, is particularly prominent and effective is poetry.<sup>8</sup> Those places in the text that are presented as an absence — a dash,

a hyphen, an ellipsis—attest to the difficulties inherent in the verbal embodiment of the experience described.<sup>9</sup> The ambiguity of simultaneous utterance and non-utterance fashions two parallel messages: that which derives from what is said and that which arises from the silenced.

There is congruency between the poetics and the basic experience laid in the poems' foundation. The path is the axis bisecting Rachel's poems. The finish line of the progression will not be determined in space but in time; the end of the road will not be determined by reaching a defined goal, but by force of cessation. Even though the end of the path does not symbolize realization—the speaker continues to march toward it, or to hover around it, and with that her experience is one of perpetual absence.

This range of nothing and of being is expressed in the poetics of speechlessness and chatter. Just as the speaker stands at a distance—that is, looking at what exists while remaining within forced confines, prohibited from reaching it—so too is poetry built from written words whose meaning is constructed as a result of the silenced words interspersed with them.

Rachel wanders—and marches in place, writes—and erases. The same way that absence bears no meaning without an axis of presence to which it refers, so also silence is not felt without a voice. Thus Rachel is in the middle: She moves between the ends of hidden and revealed, of stated and muted. The chronotopic lack is translated into the poetics of silence, this is Rachel's "silent space" (*"Helekh Nefesh"*).

In 1920, Rachel broke the silence of the women poets. The channel of silence that she established with her poems fashioned "another" voice in relation to the voices that were heard in the cultural discourse of that period. This is her feminine resonance. This is the "from a distance" that she objects to.

In 1927, Rachel published an article entitled "On a Sign of the Times" in which she wrote,

It is clear to me: the sign of the times in the art of poetry is simplicity of expression. . . . Simplicity of expression is not always matched with ability of expression, though it always makes up for paucity of ability. . . . And even despite ability some will fail in non-simplicity, and this will not be forgiven. Of course, the path of simplicity is difficult. On one side lurks prosaicness, and on the other—floridness. It turns all our usual ideas topsy-turvy.<sup>10</sup>

In this manifesto, Rachel formulates her concept: simplicity as a type of sophistication.

The appearance created by poetics that carries simplicity and quietude on

its banner might be understood as diluted and minor, but a different reading of the poems shows that this poetic line held within it great poetic strength and that in the collective consciousness erroneous conclusions took root on the nature of the poems and the poetess. The verbal parsimony, the little poems, the combination of expressing things and silencing them — all of these were not perceived by the critics as strength and power, but as weakness.

The developing Israeli culture did not reject Rachel's silence; quite on the contrary, it was taken warmly into the establishment bosom, since it was perceived as a nonthreatening phenomenon. Rachel's poetry is modest and self-deprecating. It seems that the ideopoetic soil was not mature enough to discern Rachel's syntactic innovations, her linguistic perception, and that all of this was the product of a conscious, mature female pen.

### Conclusion — Rachel in the Mirror of Moses

In his book *Moses*, Martin Buber writes,

Moses, who was sent as the bearer of speech, the intercessor of speech between heaven and earth, is not an orator whose speech flows unabashedly. So he was created and so he was chosen. As such, a divider was set between him and the world of mankind. . . . By serving as the “mouth” of the Lord himself who speaks his word through him, then this is a stammering mouth. . . . The stammering is what brings the voice of the heavens to the earth.<sup>11</sup>

Moses was silent because of his stammering and Rachel silenced her poetry. Both of them delivered statements with a clear, lofty echo, despite their silence. Apparently Rachel plays the role of Aaron; situated on her own Nebo, situating her own idiom — here she is, on the one hand, externalizing another voice that did not succeed in being heard: the voice of Moses, while on the other hand — even though her poetry was etched in the collective consciousness as modest and unpretentious — she is deeply identified with the person who “never again did their arise in Israel a prophet” such as he — with Moses (Deut. 34:10).

In 1927, Rosa R. wrote in *Hedim*: “Months have passed, and you the men have not paid attention to *Safi'ah* (Aftergrowth). What do you care about an aftergrowth when this is a woman?”<sup>12</sup> A woman who created in her poetry her own Nebo, who was forced to pay the price of superficiality and miniaturization of her poetic style and her lyrical world in the minds of the

addressees — both aesthetically and thematically — in her literary reception. The linguistic simplicity was perceived as obligatory modesty, and the treatment of motherhood, femininity, and the “experiences of the diary writers” was taken as the only area that feminine writing is fit for.<sup>13</sup> The frame that was forced on Rachel’s poetry at the time it was read by the critics did not permit readers to move on to that multi-time, general, cosmic register that many people did not even think existed in her poetry.

Rachel maintains a dialog with the biblical text, asking, reworking, and thinking through the verses.<sup>14</sup> The discourse with the Bible stands out for the range of biblical figures starring in her poems and merging with her own figure. The lepers in Samaria, Jonathan, Michal, Job, and Rachel (in two poems) — they are figures introduced into her poems by virtue of the speaker’s identification with the various aspects of their relations with God, with fate, and with their close associates.<sup>15</sup>

Many critics have dealt with Rachel’s affinity for the Bible, but Rachel’s connection to the Bible was limited in the criticism to the matriarch Rachel and to Michal (and resounding here is the expectation of her identification with feminine figures, who also went through experiences of barrenness and unfaithfulness).<sup>16</sup> In light of her perception as a poetess writing little poems about barrenness and disappointed love, about Kinneret and the matriarch Rachel, a poetic stage in which Rachel’s self-definition was intertwined with Moses — could not be identified.

The link to Moses is not made specifically, by mentioning his name or weaving in the feeling linking the speaker to the biblical figure; at the same time, the connection with Moses was much deeper. It is based on the deep, common suffering of both — the pain of the threshold, separation from the group, and imprisonment within the borders of one side of the divide:

For you, too, shall go  
And I will remain in the vast land alone. (“*Hen Yatzanu ba-Sakh*”)

There are poems in which the dialog with Deuteronomy is specific (by allusion or direct), as in any biblical intertext; but there are poems in which Mount Nebo, the prodigal son, the living desert, and standing opposite are concepts into which Rachel breathed new life; the national narrative turned into a private story. This is an intertext read as text; concepts borrowed from the biblical source appear repeatedly in her poetry and accumulate intertextual and personal meaning.<sup>17</sup>

The chronotopical starting position of Moses served Rachel as a direction

by which she tried to answer the conundrum of her life. Gaps of silence are interwoven in her poetry and the enigmatic nature of this poetry demonstrates the intermediate location — not in the home port and not in a safe haven:

Thus I shall rise . . . thus: for the thousandth time.

Thus I shall go drained of all strength.

Thus I shall wander the paths, in heat and in drizzle;

Thus I will love . . . thus: with no solutions. (“*Ba-Nekhar*”)