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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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

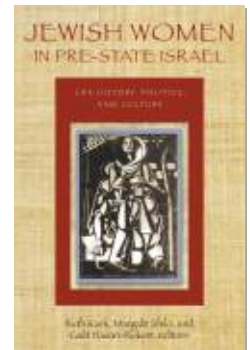
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Anda Amir's *Me-Olam, Demuyot mi-Kedem* *A Proposal for a Modern Feminine Bible*

Anda Amir's Pantheon of Women

In the summer of 1942 appeared the fourth book of poetry by Anda Pinkerfeld (later Amir) titled *Me-Olam* (From Time Immemorial), with the subtitle *Demuyyot mi-Kedem* (Ancient Figures). In the following, I would like to present this book as an attempt at or proposal for a feminine biblical narrative. Before that, however, I would like to sketch a few lines from the portrait of Amir, who has remained in our collective cultural memory as a popular poet for children (who still read and sing her poems today), while the other corpus of her poetry, which is not for children, increasingly is neglected, with little attention paid to it even in academic research.¹

Anda Amir, born in Galicia in 1902, died in 1981. She belonged to Hashomer Hatza'ir and immigrated to Eretz Israel twice: in 1920, as a seventeen-year-old member of a *hakshara*, and again in 1924, this time as a married woman. Amir had an academic education (she studied microbiology at the University of Lvov in the early 1920s) but scarcely worked in her field. She wrote her first poetry in Polish (a book of her verse in that language was published in 1921), but from 1928 on she wrote and published only in Hebrew. Amir was prominent in public life, pre-state and after the establishment of Israel, both as a prolific poet (among the first wave of female Hebrew poets in the country, with Rachel, Esther Raab, Elisheva, and Yokheved Bat-Miriam) and as a communal activist (author of a regular column in *Davar*).² After World War II, Amir went to the displaced persons camps to help the survivors, established an archive for the writings of those who died in the War of Independence and immortalized their images in collections and ar-

ticles of her own, directed the Manya Bialik's Women's Home (1967), and encouraged female writers.³

Me-Olam, Demuyyot Mi-Kedem is actually a corpus of ten poems all of which wend their way toward one topic: biblical figures. As we know, from the very beginning of Modernist Hebrew literature, involvement with the Bible was a kind of political declaration for liberal Judaism: So it was that Enlightenment literature chose biblical language as a weapon in its battle against rabbinic-talmudic Judaism and against the conservatism of the anti-Enlightenment *halakhah*, and so it was with Zionism that placed the national revival in Eretz Israel following the biblical period model of "renew our days as of old," and not the rabbinic period of the Mishna and Talmud. Anda Amir, too, as a Zionist-socialist poet, had sought from the outset of her writing a way to link herself to the Bible and to be imbued with it, whether as poetic masterpiece or as the canon of Hebrew national culture. This is also the case in her books *Yuval* (1932) and *Gitit* (1937), in which she deals, among other things, with biblical figures such as Jubal the ancestor of all who play the lyre and the pipe, Abishag the Shunammite, Yael the wife of Heber the Kenite, and Esau. In contrast, in the volume of poems under discussion, *Me-Olam, Demuyyot mi-Kedem*, the biblical presence is dominant. That is, this is not a random collection of figures from the past, but an intentional poetic arrangement, concerned primarily with the exclusive presence of the biblical woman. Specifically, Amir assembles the three feminine figures whom she had dealt with in her previous books (Ashtoreth, Jael, and Abishag), adds another seven, and inadvertently creates not only a new corpus of creativity but even a new feminist ideological statement. Let's elaborate it.

Anda Amir sets this pantheon of women in a kind of chronological-genealogical order that relates the development of ancient Israelite history according to a dynasty of women. To the point, she begins with Genesis and concludes with the kingdom of David, with her biblical narrative to be perceived as a matriarchal alternative to the traditional patriarchal story. This feminine historiographical alternative presents the cosmic "genesis" in the figure of Ashtoreth the fertility goddess, the Hebrew-national "genesis" in the image of the founding mothers of the nation (for her they are Hagar and Leah), and the period of the Judges and the first monarchy with a series of women (such as the daughter of Jephthah, Delilah, and, as noted, Abishag). In other words, Amir, in this poetic collection, proposes a different Bible, a feminine Bible, that serves to appropriate these canonic cultural texts and to retell them in her own way. Through this feminine Bible, she turns to defining

her identities as a woman, *halutzah*, and poet, while at the same time setting up a representation and “a free approach to the symbolic order” to the rejuvenation of the Eretz Israel spirit.⁴ This last idea leads to the question: Why did Amir find such a short feminine history sufficient, and why does she not continue through the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, with their queens, prophetesses, and wise women?

My answer is that this feminine history is actually an analogy for the historical process of the national revival in Eretz Israel, from its genesis: from the first settlers (1882) until Amir's own time, that is, the 1930s and 1940s. These were the formative years of the “State in the making,” as a parallel to the formative years of the society of ancient Israel during the period of the judges and the early monarchy (the reign of Saul and the reign of David). So it is no wonder that in this biblical female dynasty, there is no representation of biblical women outside of Eretz Israel, such as, for example, the Jewish women in the Egyptian period, the time of the Exodus, or the sojourn in the desert. Amir's version of the biblical woman is identified solely with the Eretz Israel location, its landscapes, sites, and so on. Another question: Why did Anda Amir choose to populate her Bible with a dynasty composed of these women, and not others; and according to what system of rules, or criteria, was this selection made?

Over time, various types of answers have accumulated in the writings of critics and scholars, such as B. Y. Michali (1942), Shmuel Ridnick (1944), and Nurit Govrin (1972); to these I shall add my interpretation.⁵

A Feminine Morality

The common denominator linking these figures into one feminine historical dynasty is, in my opinion, the fact that all of them appear and operate at junctures of sin, or argue with sin. Obviously, this choice is a demonstrative declaration intended to protest against the biblical text. For, even if the Bible enraptures Amir as a linguistic-cultural canon, as a woman she cannot read it other than as a chauvinistic masculine narrative that defines her as “woman equals sin,” that is, *Femina* which comes from *Fe Minus* meaning “faithless.” In other words, *Femina* (woman) from its very lexical origin denotes sinning creature, defective creature;⁶ and so it is with Amir's chosen dynasty, each of the women is found to be a sinner: whether against God (like Eve in the Garden of Eden or Lot's wife in Sodom), whether against man (Jael kills Sisera, Delilah turns in Samson); whether as a necessary factor that

leads to sin (like Leah who collaborates with her father in deceiving Jacob); or whether as a sin offering owing to circumstantial caprices or social norms (such as Jephthah's daughter whose father uses her to fulfill his vow).

As stated, all these women are presented as tragic objects in a criminal-judicial-ethical context; but even though they are embedded in situations so fateful and traumatic, they are not given the opportunity to explain themselves. Moreover, the patriarchal biblical narrator not only silences these women but also interprets them and tells their story from his totally hegemonic position as he sees fit. So the first radical step that Amir takes, as a reader, with the aim of disassembling the biblical text and reloading it with what it lacked, is the subjectification of these women; that is, from a neutral object in silent third person (as they are presented in the biblical narrative), she tells their story anew in first person, with their own "voice" and their own "right to speak." So it is for good reason that these poems are arranged in the formal-poetic structure of a monologue, that of "I speak," while each one of them projects herself in her own way, in her own style, and her own rhythm.

Moreover, the portraiture of these women, in Amir's version, no longer relates to the story of the biblical sin from an apologetic stance of self-defense or self-depreciation, but just the opposite: through their own personal interpretation of the same situation, an interpretation that is product of their worldviews and their understanding, as women of independent, critical minds. In other words, the biblical narrative in Amir's words is the rewriting of the feminine "sin" as historiography of holding one's head high and self-liberation.

The subject of sin is arranged here, as noted above, in feminine monologues that are conducted essentially as polemical ones. Yet, even if these feminine monologues subvert their controversial ideas toward the complete deconstructing of the biblical text, they do not do so "by way of oppositional totality," but rather attempt to construct "a different system of relations with this totality," in the words of R. Radhakrishnan.⁷ This system of relations develops, as we have said, as a discourse that argues with the biblical codes of values, ethics, and religiosity; below are a few examples.

Amir opens the series with a dispute with the Book of Genesis and with God's categorical commands against the woman, presenting two women: Eve (the events in the Garden of Eden) and Lot's wife (the events at Sodom and Gomorrah). In her argument with God, Eve absolutely rejects the biblical decree that descended upon her because of her original sin and, obviously, her original punishment, as it appears in the Bible: "I will make most severe your pangs in childbearing" (Gen. 3:16). According to Eve's argu-

ments, the act of birth is at the same time also the birth of her feminine self, and with the Lord keeping her away from the "Tree of Knowledge," he denied her "the knowledge of birth" and, of course, "the knowledge of her essence"; for what is this immanent feminine essence, if not that inchoate consciousness of the creation of life. Hence Eve's contravening the Divine prohibition was not a case of sin but of illumination and insight: insight into her essence, her body, and the capabilities of her creative power: "And now I shall know / and I shall be heavily weighted also happy." In other words, the God who prohibited "knowledge" to her, sentenced her to degeneration and extinction. Therefore, Eve blesses the feminine human instinct that seduced her to eat from the fruit of the tree, in order to produce her own fruit, or in Amir's language: "Blessed be you snake a whispering in the heart / for the fruit you have brought me / with it I shall be redeemed."⁸ The snake in the biblical narrative is a metaphor for Eve's own heart, her feelings and her yearnings for a child; so that in contrast to the masculine biblical stance, it is not a corrupt or cursed representation, but the opposite, a blessed element that redeemed the feminine potential that gives birth from sterility and desolation, and with it, of course, the entire world.

Birth, however, as an act purifying and cleansing from all sin begins for Amir not with Eve but with Ashtoreth (or alternatively, Ishtar, Anat, Asherah). Ashtoreth who is the "Queen of Heaven" (Jer. 7:18), the wife of El in the ancient Semitic cult, namely, the mother-goddess, the goddess of fertility, whose vital dominance drives the continuity of the entire universe. The cult of the goddess Ashtoreth encompassed the entire family (see Jeremiah above), but its focal point in life-cycle rituals, and particularly in birth and fertility rites increased precisely women's involvement (the cakes or cookies baked and dedicated to Ashtoreth were in the shape of the female sex organ). One should take note here that within the feminist writings of the past few decades a discussion has also developed on spiritual feminism that has sought, among other things, to restore the ancient, protective goddesses as a response to the categorical abstract God.⁹ Anda Amir followed a similar path when she chose her own feminine divinity, Ashtoreth, who serves her not only as an objective for thanksgiving and adoration, but also as a model for her existence as a woman. For if man were born in the image and likeness of God, then woman, according to Amir, was born in the image and likeness of the feminine divinity Ashtoreth: "For we are your blood and your flesh / every clod of earth / and life hidden in it / are your blood and your flesh." Therefore Amir seeks support and encouragement in this feminine divinity, and as a woman and as a poet even gains strength through her, mainly when she contends

with God and with his “J’accuse,” aimed at the woman’s sins. And indeed, here, as in the poem “Eve,” she succeeds by means of the feminine divinity to shake the birth narrative free of any stigma of the eternal curse, and even to turn it from a depressing scene of punishment, sadness, and pain (“in pain you shall bear children,” Gen. 3:16), to an occasion of joy, full of excitement, and rhetorical wonder. It is not happenstance that the word “*tzahalah*” (“joy”) appears in the poem in combination with the word “*piryon*” (“fertility”), this trio of goddess-joy-fertility is heard more than once as a repeated declaration: “By the persistence of your motherhood [. . .] / the world and all therein shall become green again / in joy [*be-tzahlah*]”; or “the offspring of the flock in bleating will bless you / they will be fruitful and multiply [. . .] in joy”; or “How happy were your eyes / [seeing one] carrying fruit of the womb / and toward every mother / you were joyous toward her.”¹⁰

The feminine divinity stressed by Anda Amir also as a local Eretz Israel divinity leads to the poem “*Eshet Lot*” (“Lot’s wife”), and the debate conducted here with God—this time by means of the location (Sodom and Gomorrah). As we remember, Lot’s wife violates the Divine prohibition not to look back upon the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and turned into a pillar of salt. Her argumentation, as she phrases it here, is not a writ of defense but a confession. Lot’s wife “admits to being guilty” and decides on her death consciously and willingly; for she does not consider this death as punishment but rather as solution by choice. Why did Lot’s wife choose to die and not to escape? Amir presents this as decidedly gender behavior, what Carol Gilligan (in her book *In a Different Voice*) describes as the difference between the sexes. As we know, the basic principle according to which Gilligan examines woman’s socio-psychological development is the difference in response and behavior of men versus woman in any similar situation examined. These differences apply also to that feminine sample that discerns “the relation between judgment and action in a situation of moral conflict and choice.”

In other words, women’s way of judging in ethical conflicts also leads to different decisions and methods of action than those of men; for according to Gilligan, male judgment derives from a “formal” and “abstract” type of thinking, maneuvering between legal systems and “competing rights,” while the woman’s judgment derives from “a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative” concerned with responsibility and caring for the needs of the other; the man stresses “separation,” the woman, “attachment”; the man, “individuation,” the woman, “social interaction and personal relationships.”¹¹

So, here too, feminine-ethical preference is what yields the decision by

Lot's wife to look back and die. For unlike her husband, Lot's wife is incapable of cutting herself off or taking leave from the place where she was born and raised, from the spiritual, emotional bonds that link her to the surroundings, the landscape, the memories. For a moment she even wonders how her husband can just make such a decisive break, separating himself from everything as if it had never been: "You, all your past life, from your inward you erased / without a sigh. You dipped yourself in the light of tomorrow." Lot's wife wavers, for an instant she adopts one stance, then for another she changes her mind, and Amir follows after her, registering the seismograph of her swings between following the husband's command, which is the Divine command, or following the command of her own, individual heart.

So at first she goes after her husband, she goes — but she does not run or escape despite the danger. This is the slow pacing of separation, in which she proceeds confused and in shock, continuously pleading to let her take leave of the place at her own rate: "Do not call me / do not urge me, my husband." Conversely, the pain of abandonment, and — worse than that — the pain of betrayal, rend her soul, and she decides to remain faithful to herself and to her feminine ethos, that is, to commit suicide and to be swept away with Sodom. Thus, the death of Lot's wife, according to Amir, is not a derivative of sin (disobedience), but an independent, courageous feminine choice. Beyond that, Lot's wife does not turn into a pillar of salt prominent on the landscape (so that all shall see and be afraid), but into an anonymous rock swallowed up by the dullness of the local landscape she so loves: "Here I shall cease to be / as a stone of rock I will freeze here [. . .] I will stand like a stone under me / forever I will observe the steps of my yesterdays / I will observe their loss — my loss."¹²

As noted, the polemic between the woman and the Bible in this series of poems is not only religious-divine but primarily moral-human. Anda Amir, as we read in this poem and others, weaves a semiotic-feminine profile that distinguishes the woman as an ethical entity in her own right, that is, the possessor of essential moral codes by her very nature and sex. In "Lot's Wife," this is the steadfastness and loyalty to a place (even if it is one of horrendous crimes as Sodom and Gomorrah); in the poem "Jael" it is love and devotion to one's spouse even to the point of willingness to murder him. For Jael, according to Amir's interpretation, did not kill Sisera as a gesture of assistance to the Israelites' war, but just the opposite: Sisera is her great love, and he, aware of his desperate situation, escapes to her to share with her their last night of love; but she, the devoted one, precisely owing to her strong feelings for him, decides to kill him in his sleep — to prevent the humiliation, torture,

and certain death awaiting him at the hands of his Israelite enemies.¹³ Amir examines in this poetic workshop the vista of her expressions of feminine love, while she pulls in unexpected directions and toward surprising messages, among them the striving for equal relations between the sexes.¹⁴

Obviously, the establishment of this equality requires that it also be applied to the discourse of love in Amir's poetry. To be sure, the poet does not shy from exposing even the difficult and wretched aspects of this discourse, such as with the abandoned Hagar, the conflict-ridden Leah, the suspicious Delilah, or the exploited Avishag; at the same time, each one of these women (wife, concubine, lover, and so on), who is in confrontation with her man, is always in constant rebellion against the practice of "And he shall rule over you," when she remembers fondly those rare moments of caring, emotional mutuality of the type "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." So, for example, Hagar, in whose long, tortured confession memory clings to blissful pictures of mutuality; or as it is with Delilah, too, who reconstructs that pleasurable intimacy between her and Samson in which he was not a superman but a human creature the same as she.¹⁵

"We the Women"

The attempt to reconstruct the semiotic-feminine profile that finds its definition here by means of figures from the past, leads to another discussion that was relevant during the *Yishuv* period and that concerned the anticipated profile of the new woman in Eretz Israel; and in the context of Amir—the new woman as creator and poet.

Lily Ratok, in her article [in Hebrew] "Portrait of the Women as an Israeli Poet," argues that, until the 1960s, women's poetry responded to the masculine cultural message that considered "introversion, modesty, and perhaps even lack of confidence as the characteristics of femininity." That is, the female poet during the *Yishuv* period and the early days of the State took upon herself the dictates that the masculine, hegemonic poetics applied to her and restrained herself from grappling with materials such as "myth," "vision," and "valor," or with the poet's sense of national mission as "prophet" and "watchman for the house of Israel"—which were among the goals of canonic masculine poetry. Thus it turns out, Ratok determines, that the "poetic I" in a large part of Hebrew women's poetry is the inverse of the strong, confident figure that copes with the vistas of history and deep theological questions; but rather, "this is a very private figure, and not at all public in her

appearance, who speaks of her innermost feelings, and does not give expression to any metaphysical, religious, or cultural mission.”¹⁶

Yet, if we are dealing with Anda Amir, her definitions and her characterizations cannot be sorted according to these categories of the portrait of the female poet. Of course, while she does not offer poetic images of a female prophet or emissary, she also does not enter the realm of the private, the modest, and the introverted, which come under the rubric of “feminine characteristics” given above (such as “lack of confidence,” “fear,” and “shame” “of exposure of the internal world”). Just the opposite: Amir reveals issues of her femininity and her sexuality as an individual, the same way she exposes social and national issues in general, when she contends with material — historical or current, philosophical or political — out of national public involvement and concern.¹⁷ *Me-Olam, Demuyot mi-Kedem*, too, is a poetic work that makes a relevant public statement. So it seems to me that one should read Anda’s series of biblical women not only as “metaphors of I,” but also as metaphors of us (we the women), as Amir writes in poems such as “*Anahnu ha-Nashim Holkhot ba-Olam ka-Avukot Ahava*” (We the Women Go through Life as Flames of Love), “*Anahnu ha-Galmudot la-ad*” (We Who Are the Lonely Forever”), and so on.¹⁸ In other words, this book of poems is not only a proposal for a feminine biblical narrative but a typological proposal as well of an Eretz Israel cultural feminine model. What does this mean?

As we know, from the outset of the revival of the Eretz Israel national project, the identity of the “New Jew” was set up and fashioned, as if pre-planned, with a repertoire of symbols and characteristics structured as a “system of components” in opposition to those of the Diaspora Jew. It was as if this visionary, ideological foundation did not have the patience to allow the environmental conditions and the fitting rate of development to produce and consolidate a natural Jewish anthropology as a product of the future time and place. It turns out, therefore, that even before the native Eretz-Israel type (the sabra) was created, his “invented” identity populated the journalistic and literary writings of the members of the early Aliyot, as if were solidly based in reality.¹⁹ The situation was not the same regarding the shaping of the woman’s identity. A portrait of the Eretz Israeli woman, despite the turnabout from Diaspora to homeland, continues to be delineated here, too, in the canonic *Yishuv* writings, in those same routine, traditional conventions (of the helpmeet or as a romantic object) that nourished most Hebrew writing in the Diaspora.²⁰ Yet, attempts or tentative tries at consolidating models of Eretz Israel feminine identity (“New Jewess” parallel to “New

Jew”), however, are found only in the works of women. And, indeed, already in the early writings by First Aliyah women discussion of this issue is pivotal, only that in contrast to the oppositional notion in the structuring of the “New Jew,” the structuring of the “New Jewess” is not perceived in women’s writings in opposition to the Diaspora woman, but in the consolidation of linkage to biblical women. Nehama Puhachewsky, in a militant article written in 1889, demands education and culture for girls, and she uses the models of Miriam and Deborah (the prophetesses); Hannah Trager, in her memoirs from 1886, unfolds the struggle of the young women for the right to vote in Petah Tikva, and she wants to identify them with the biblical model of the daughters of Zelophehad; Hemdah Ben-Yehuda who, in a 1919 article calls for equality of women, pays tribute to fighters such as Jael and Judith who slew leaders of the enemy army.²¹

The identification of the First Aliyah female writers with the portraits of these women indicates that they did not cling to the traditional models of the intimate, domestic periphery (such as the Matriarchs [Sara, Rachel] or the beloved [Shulamith]), but rather that they chose to find renewal according to unique, one-time models of creative women, involved in the overall public arena, such as female fighters, leaders, scholars, and poets.

Anda Amir, too, wishes to become infused with the biblical feminine portrait, but the model of the independent, critical-minded woman facing her is not congruent with that one-time creative, leading woman. Quite the contrary: she picks from among the “ancient figures” those who represent woman whoever she is; women who first of all distinguish themselves in their difference from the man: an essential gender difference expressed in the most elementary manifestations as we saw above (love, parenthood, moral behavior, and so on). In addition, by preferring precisely these biblical women, Amir also stresses the basic element rooted in them that connects them with uncompromising loyalty to place and land (again as different and in contrast to their man); and perhaps this is also the reason for the striking choice of local, Eretz Israel women, not necessarily Jews, such as Jael, Delilah, and Hagar, let alone the goddess Ashtoreth. That is, as Amir sees it, feminine national identity or consciousness is first of all down-to-earth local, alongside all those theoretical, ideological principles. In other words, in the attempt to fill in the lack of a portrait of the “New Jewess” in the Eretz Israel national narrative, Amir proposes an egalitarian typological feminine repertoire based on indicating, approvingly, the difference from the man as well as stressing woman as she is.

In conclusion, let us put it this way: The debate that Amir conducts with

the Bible as a masculine hegemonious text is not an argument over the past but about the present. In this controversy, Amir rewrites the Bible as a feminine biblical narrative, while she places at the center of her discourse not only biblical women, but rather the *Yishuv* woman of the twentieth century. And indeed, as in the process of her subversive reading beneath the patriarchal biblical culture, Amir undermines the authority of the androcentric Zionist culture which from the outset banished the woman (the female settler, laborer, pioneer) to the margins of the *Yishuv* discourse, and made dominant an exclusively masculine “renew our days as of old” (the male settler, laborer, pioneer).²² Amir does not reconcile herself with this, and she springs into action with her own meaning of “renew our days as of old”; that is, not only a portrait of the new woman, but also a foundation for a national feminine alternative culture. So it is that she reads the masculine biblical texts as feminine cultural texts, so it is that she organizes through them new feminine narratives that the *Yishuv* woman was missing (such as feminine history, feminine genealogy, feminine ethos, and of course, a pool of feminine myths), and so it is that she restores forgotten heroines to the collective Zionist memory. In other words, this small book, *Me-Olam, Demuyot mi-Kedem*, is another feminist literary act in the history of pre-state women's literature, in the struggle to extract the woman from her excluded position and to equip her with the proper alternative tools to conduct that problematic dialog with the leading masculine narrative.²³