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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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Poems to the Ghetto

The Poetry of Yocheved Bat-Miriam in the 1940s

In 1946 appeared the booklet *1943 — Shirim la-Geto* (1943 — Poems to the Ghetto). This is a cycle of poems that Bat-Miriam wrote immediately after the Holocaust, poems in which she repeatedly evoked the Holocaust period and the ways of coping with its horrors and with its memory. In this book of poetry, her sixth, Bat-Miryam continued the great, rich tradition of the Hebrew symbolist poem of which she was one of the main creators and shapers, when still in Russia in the early 1920s. About a decade later, in the second half of the 1930s, symbolist expression developed into the dominant model in the poetics of Hebrew poetry in Eretz Israel, in the poetry of Abraham Shlonsky, Natan Alterman, Yonathan Ratosh, Lea Goldberg, and others; and this Symbolism then reached significant development and coalescence in the writing of Yocheved Bat-Miriam.

The symbolism in Bat-Miriam's poetry, already described to a fair degree in criticism and research, was characterized mainly by extremely high sensitivity to a varied, rich resonance of the meanings of the poetic word; by ramified figurative continua; by particularly intense attention to the musical suggestivity of the poetic text; by high language from which radiates sublime dimensions of human experience — to the point of mystical sublimation, resulting also in linguistic shifts, too, of representations of time — to language of territory and space.¹ But particularly prominent in the symbolism in her poetry is the presence of narratives that integrate the real, concrete details of external reality within the general narrative. This is a narrative that develops toward harmonious expression that merges the concrete into a metaphysical spiritual meaning, a meaning that graces the diverse details with a function and value in the common collective story. It is no wonder that in the Eretz Israel national culture of the end of the 1930s and of the 1940s, the Symbol-

ist poem served as a central conduit in the establishment of the national narrative.

The movement of such a national narrative is always one of advancement and growing strength toward effecting the “imagined national community,” in the terms of Benedict Anderson; this community includes territorial and other components as well as actual people, and thus Symbolist expression is likely and apt to fill the role of establishing it.² Symbolist expression does give the concrete components, and particularly the individual people, the common context, general and universal, in which they acquire meaning and value.

This Symbolist universalism was valid and stable until the end of 1942. Until then, other representations of death and bereavement could merge into this sweeping musicality, which granted them power and turned them into a source for collective hope. But toward the end of 1942, when the information reaching Eretz Israel about what was happening in Europe became clearer and more tangible, when the murders, persecutions, suffering, and tortures began to be understood increasingly as genocide, as the Holocaust of the Jewish people,³ Bat-Miriam’s poetry—and like it the entire Symbolist school in Eretz Israel—faced a new cultural reality.

In light of the basic duality in Symbolism, of distance from the real, on one hand, and high sensitivity to it, on the other, it was not surprising that with the outbreak of World War II there was a sudden shuffling of the careful, tense pack of cards that this school had held in Eretz Israel at the end of the 1930s. As early as the outset of the war, in 1939, a severe controversy arose within the Symbolist school on the way poetry should respond to the horrors of the war: leading this debate were Lea Goldberg, Shlonsky, and Alterman. How, they asked, could lyrical, musical expression contain the violent, murderous reality of the world war? But then, at the beginning of the war, despite the argument and confrontation, the members of the Symbolist school remained steadfast to the path they had been following. The Symbolist school perceived poetry as universalist and eternal, and therefore as poetry of hegemonic stature. The poet—argued Eretz Israel Symbolists—owes his loyalty primarily to the world of eternal, human values.

From 1943 on, however, the rift in the school’s poetry became progressively deeper. At the center of this fracture was the inability of the literary symbol to contain two trends simultaneously, two narratives that do not accommodate each other. On the one hand—the story of the soaring, the progress, congruent with the modernist narrative of the building of the new Zionist nationality, such as formulated by Bat-Miriam in her poem “Eretz Is-

rael" (1937), or with the sweeping symbolism of Mother Russia that parallels Eretz Israel in "Poems of Russia" (1942); and on the other, a narrative in which devastation and destruction have replaced the narrative of redemption; in which death no longer serves the national endeavor and vision and also does not become sanctified in its name, but just the opposite — it symbolizes non-existence, destruction, and devastation, from which it is no longer possible to produce strength and national hope.

The national significance of the literary symbol was faced with the serious contradiction in the very writing of a symbolist poem, which is simultaneously committed to universalism, musicality and, in particular, the narrative of redemption and hope — and yet, at the same time, has no choice but to represent death, the destruction of the individual devoid of redemption, from a position of despair and surrender. One of the most dramatic steps in this school's poetry was the abrupt, revolutionary, transfer that Natan Alterman implemented — from the redemptive symbolism in the poems *Simhat Aniyim* ("Joy of the Poor") in 1941 to the allegorical break, devoid of national hope, in *Shirei Makkot Mitzrayim* ("Plagues of Egypt") in 1944.⁴

Bat-Miriam gave incisive expression to this dilemma from the beginning of the collection 1943 — *Shirim la-Geto*, with "Pesuko shel David" (David's Verse), the very opening poem in the cycle, which gives the appearance of representing the Holocaust, set as it were within the framework of the narrative of national redemption. The yellow badge first appears in the combination "tzohav ha-telai" (the yellowness of the badge), the inverse of the combination "ha-telai ha-tzahov" (the yellow badge) — stressing the symbolic value of yellow.⁵ Ostensibly, everything is ready for a Symbolist narrative of redemption, in which the speaker is about to tell the story of the ladder "which is set in my heaven of heavens" facing upward and on which [it is] "ascending evermore to vanquish its death / my ghetto with the yellowness of the badge."⁶

But in actuality, the entire story of the approaching redemption and victory is based in the poem on a narrative whose structure is completely opposite, and which instead of indicating the vitality and redemption found in death, demonstrates precisely its finality. "David's Verse," in which the speaker rests the rung of the ladder from which her ladder stretches upward, toward the heavens, is that verse in which King David stopped his mourning for his child by Bathsheva the wife of Uriah, the child who died as a punishment for David's sin (2 Sam. 12:14–23). By relying upon this biblical story, the poem offers a comprehensive symbolic picture that contains, simultaneously, both the hope and continuity of the victory of the yellow badge as well

as the bitter recognition of the finality of the destruction, with death that is final and immutable

In this way, Bat-Miriam's symbolic text is a meeting point, actually a clashing point, between the progressive Zionist national narrative, which is formulated in decidedly symbolic language, and the terminal narrative of destruction and despair.

The clearest expression of the primary contradiction prevailing in Hebrew cultural discourse in the 1940s, which is also the most severe contradiction in Symbolist discourse in this paradoxical national situation, stands out in its representation of national-collective time. This time appears here, simultaneously, both as a time of progress — and as static, frozen time; both as a time of advancement — and also as time of a lack of advancement; confronting each other are two incompatible patterns for representations of time, which match the two patterns for representation of time by means of which Walter Benjamin formulated the principle difference between symbol and allegory. On the one side is the symbol, which generalizes without losing the reality and concreteness of the symbolizer; the organic symbol that, therefore, also promises hope and continuity, and on the other side — the mechanical, abstract allegory, which does not include future vitality, and which cannot extend beyond the representation of ideas lacking vitality and continuity.⁷ Symbolic time, which promises continuous advancement toward the future, is set in contrast to allegorical time, riven, lifeless, devoid of any clear hope.

In the face of the deep rift and the extremely serious contradiction between the representations of time, the time of national advancement versus the time of static observations of the destruction, Y. Bat-Miriam the Symbolist chose a special kind of representational apparatus. To cope with this contradiction, she elected to fashion Symbolist representation of the collective death, the ghettos, and the extermination camps precisely by means of a shift, a drastic displacement of the representational apparatus, from the contradictory representation of time — to spatial representation. This apparatus, which already had been common in Bat-Miriam's poetry, now became, during the Holocaust, an important instrument for containing this contradictory time.⁸ The way to represent the terrible and the horrifying is by means of categories of space.

To be sure, almost every section in the cycle of poems in *Shirim la-Geto* opens from a Symbolist viewpoint, placing the phenomenon represented at the center of the continuity of time of the phenomenon represented. Yet, it quickly becomes apparent that this continuity is only virtual. The section

soon develops into the presentation of space as an alternative to the conflict and contradiction of incompatible times, which contains the Symbolist image within it. From this Symbolist credo, which repeatedly merges the ghetto into a verbal continuum that blurs the difference between falsehood and reality; between the one creating the symbol and the symbolized, between the set symbolic formulation and what always extends beyond it as impossible to formulate, as impossible to exhaust in the full — from there Bat-Miriam moves on to the system of reversed, alternative representation that characterizes her poetic expression not as harmony but rather as expression split in space. Thus, she represents “a horrible appearance and flames” that freezes at the look of the generation whose poem she is writing as an entity that exists in spaces, as a persona, the observation of which — that is, the horror — is represented in the poem by means of pointing out its location there, which “as a guest / with us she will sit at the head of the table.”⁹

In a similar way, Bat-Miriam splits the poetic voice itself among different locations in space. A striking apparatus in this spatial distribution is the creation of an expression distinct from the voice that it itself makes heard. In place of the merging, blurring Symbolist voice that does away with borders and distinctions, the poem moves to language of fine distinction that splits the voice itself into two: Bat-Miriam distinguishes between the “I” of the speaker and his voice by separating them in space. The “I” is the bearer of the voice of exalted, transcendental, spiritual freedom; but despite that, his voice is also a voice that places physical, external fetters on this freedom: “The freedom in his voice, his voice is also his fetters.”¹⁰

Bat-Miriam garners the harmonic Symbolist expression for the benefit of the double, contradictory representation, and thereby presents the object of the problematic representation, that horrible vision and flames, as a kind of external entity; this entity puts the speaker — who wishes to fill the role of collective speaker — in the position of the intercessor between the representative and the object of the representation: “loved seven-fold more / they will carry our language. And we will not know how to read.”¹¹ In this way, she continues, on the one hand, to use the symbolic language of the collective and preserve the symbol; but on the other hand, she creates, within this symbolic representation, a space of flexibility in the speaker’s movement, of distancing oneself and drawing close to the terrifying object of the representation. This is a flexibility whose purpose is to preserve the framework of the national symbol, but at the same time allows it to locate itself within the national framework yet also in a secondary, peripheral setting.

By using this spatial, contradictory symbolic language, Bat-Miriam suc-

ceeded in fashioning an alternative space such that the territory appearing within it is not perceived exclusively as national territory. The territory of the ghetto and of the extermination camps, and the territory of “my city,” Tel Aviv, is located in the poem within a single, common space that is totally different than the space of the national territory. The national territory includes symbolic space with defined outlines of historical depth and meaning, while in *Poems to the Ghetto* separate spaces are intertwined with different and opposing histories, such as in the lyric voice, cracked into a spatial split between hope and despair and destruction, so that here, too, the shared space includes the national hope of Eretz Israel together with the destruction and eradication of the Golah.

The space that Bat-Miriam depicts in her poems is, therefore, not subjugated to the accepted Zionist-national dichotomy between Eretz Israel and the Golah. That accepted notion held that the *Eretz-Yisraeli* space engulfs and absorbs into it the space of the ghetto, turning it into its extension and continuation; this is exemplified, for example, in presenting the heroism of the ghetto rebels as an Eretz Israel pioneering act, as a national historical continuum between the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the revolt of the Jews against Rome, as Yitzhak Tabenkin expressed it on May Day 1943.¹²

In contrast to this, the step Bat-Miriam took as a woman, a female poet who introduces a female speaker into her poems, made a dramatic contribution to the establishment of the feminine place, of gender, in the national discourse. The special form she gives to the national space give her attitude toward the dominant national discourse and within it a subversive position, challenging the permanent exclusion that bars the woman from the national discourse. She establishes her feminine location in the national discourse by means of an alternative marking of the territory. The feminine speaker in this space disturbs the fixed order of the dominant masculine national discourse that regularly excludes femininity from it. Until now, the territory had appeared as a national symbol that was always perceived in categories subject to the feminine, national allegory of “Mother Earth,” “Mother Russia,” and Eretz Israel as grammatically feminine, and on this territory — the land, the platform — was erected the symbolic building of the people; here Bat-Miriam proposes the territory as part a space of junctures and markings that do not submit to the dominant national classification; it is possible to simultaneously mark within it both the ghetto and Tel Aviv, as part of a common space within which the female speaker moves freely, flexibly, not according to the hierarchy and division between Golah and Eretz Israel.

National time, too, like space, splits and moves away from the dominant

order, and it, too, presents trends and developments in a way that differs from the accepted national narrative, which binds the territory of Eretz Israel together with the historical advancement toward it within one common national cluster. So these poems depict an image of a split national memory that divides between time and space. By means of spatial figures the poems turn the national memory into a tool for the accumulation of the national time. Representing time as contained and located in spatial proximity within the memory tool enables Bat-Miriam to underscore the gap between time and space: the national memory is a memory “that curves time,” while the relation between time and oblivion is described by her as a spatial ratio between two stages of time, the relation between green rust and the copper on which it grows.¹³ In that way, Bat-Miriam diverts the focus of observation from existence in time to spatial, territorial existence. This movement does not decide between the representation of the national vision as progressing and developing simultaneously with continuous national time and between its representation as a separate space, a space in which the human presence within it is not congruent with the national time.

This ambivalent, undefined space turns into the only place from which the poetess can lament the fate of her people. In the name of devotion to her people, she glides to the mountains and mourns its fate, and there, appearing side by side with no distinction between them, are a green Eretz Israel orchard and the lands of non-Jews.¹⁴

But the gender location reaches its climax within the space of national memory in the final section of the cycle, section 14, where the female speaker presents herself as the one who, in contrast to the “daughter of my people” — who will forget the terrors of the Holocaust — she, the speaker, who will carry with her “forever with beating heart, while pacing / Maidanek and Treblinka, the raging Ghetto.”¹⁵ Preservation of the memory of the destruction and loss, of Maidanek and Treblinka, is carried out in a different way than the institutionalized national memory, which is ultimately also the memory of a thing that forgets and causes others to forget, and which you, “daughter of my people,” are in charge of.

But here, in contrast to the symbolic figure of “daughter of my people,” come an unprecedented peak that zigzags, the so-very-energetic dynamism of the feminine location of the female spokesperson; this peak is so extreme that ultimately the poetess undermines her own location and breaks down the gender boundaries. After the gender location had been established, it split in two: one is the location of “daughter of my people,” which is the institutionalized national memory that in the end forgets and makes others

forget and presents the Holocaust with precise numbers that turn off the imagination and define the horror in real terms, “with sword and wall.”¹⁶ And opposite it, in the same position of self-establishment, the female speaker defines her poem as “a sheet of fire in the rock,” as something undefined, breaking borders, like the impossible existence of burning rock, that is not stabilized, from which the fire does not flow and in which it cannot gain a foothold nor consume the rock.¹⁷ This is an expression that depicts a breached space, of undefined borders, within whose framework the memory of the history of civilization is represented as dust, as an external covering over stone and rock, on the surface of the memorial stone, the massive, real path and soil, memory of an open space in which a “solitary God observes, viewing the image / extending beyond his borders and his borders in his blue.”¹⁸

The first person voice’s being torn between national loyalty and the inability to take hold in the spatial territory is what ultimately brings her to the point of explosion; to the breaking point, to representation of the contradictions in which the large ladder she set up will separate her path into two. That ladder that she erected so that the yellow would mount it and win, the ladder of the scenes and shades and multiple shapes and styles, the ladder on which she tried to present “daughter of my people” as “one you are, and many, of clear style and color / with shores- and border-bound with song and agony,” this ladder separates, instead of bridging, divides the path into two and creates a contrasting situation, a kind of oxymoron, in which to be seen, to be reflected in the light, she closes her eyes.¹⁹ The sharp contrast between the light and dark leads to a situation in which “the command in the darkness shines seven-fold / like an oath, wandering I go [Hebrew “*holekh*,” masculine, first person, singular] to remember.”²⁰

This line, however, contains a many more times dramatic, revolutionary turning point: Not only is the space torn in two, not only is the act of memory translated into physical movement in space by the one who declares “wandering I go to remember,” and not only does the feminine dynamism and zigzags and swinging from side to side in face of the national symbol accelerate faster — but the rupture is so great that, in the end, it undermines the feminine position itself. Without any advance warning, with astounding suddenness, the spokeswoman switches to speech in the masculine form, using the language of a man, “*holekh ani*” (I am going).

In a mirror image of their passage to Maidanek and Treblinka and the raging Ghetto, a few stanzas earlier, to the language “*aten*” (you; Hebrew, second person, feminine plural) — so now, at the close of the process, the hov-

ering woman, representing the atrocities of the Holocaust while moving through the space of the horror and murder, brings the process of the representation of the terror to such deep extraction — to the point that she relinquishes her feminine location or leaves it empty. She shifts to speaking in a masculine voice, and she concludes her poem with liberation from the national territory and from the dialog with “daughter of my people,” for whom “your choice spot . . . [is] a closed cage.”²¹

Of course, unity was achieved without the exclusion of the feminine — but not before externalizing the feminine, splitting it in two, returning the masculine; as a strategy against the male hegemony there came at the end the ultimate removal of the gender confrontation, without this clearing away necessarily dragging in its wake a kind of totalization of another component.²² It is not nationalism that becomes primary in place of gender, nor do the Exile and the ghetto become the founders of the space instead of gender, but the new space is another, different one, and it does not respond to any of these elements, thus ridding itself of any mixture of identity and remains impossible to define, impossible to set permanently, and impossible to identify by name.