ZIONIST DREAMS AND SAVYON LIEBRECHT’S
“A COW NAMED VIRGINIA”

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Savoyon Liebrecht’s story “A Cow Named Virginia” opens with a

dream. Ruhama Gurevitz, who has devoted her life to Zionist pio-

neering ideals, is on her way to visit her son in America. She is getting on

in years, and she hopes to persuade him to return to Israel to help with

the cows she takes such pride in raising. On the airplane she dozes off

and dreams that she is giving birth to herself.

This dream provides the reader an effective entrée into the story as it

introduces a number of elements of Ruhamah’s inner life, preoccupations,

and values. In addition, it presages the outcome of the story as well.

Through this dream the author begins to construct the main character.

Later, the insights offered here will aid the reader in understanding

Ruhamah’s own construction of her identity, as her Zionist dreams and

love of Israel collide with her son’s decision to remain in America.

1 The story, “Parah al shem Virginia,” is included in Savoyon Liebrecht, Tsarikh

sof lesippur ahavah (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), 9–29. All translations are mine.
Then she dreamt and saw herself, with legs spread, as if sitting on a low stool. She was crouching over a satin sheet embroidered with small, white, star-shaped buds, a sheet that she had gotten as a wedding present from her aunt in the city and which was now spread on the ground of the old cow shed with grains of sand gathering along the lines where it had been ironed and folded. The cows pressed around her, curious, and under the mound of her moving belly those twinkling flowers appeared and disappeared by turns. She rubbed her palms on the orb of her belly and directed her breathing, her cheeks swelling like twin bellows, just as she had done almost half a century earlier in the birthing room in Afula. She felt with wonder the fullness, without pain, of the baby striving to burst out. She waited calmly, breathing deeply, until the muscle that locked the opening of her womb gave way and allowed the head to break through. Then, immediately, there appeared the rounded shoulders and her infant self slipped between her thighs, pure and unblemished, cleansed of blood, with two perfect little legs. Clear water, as from a fountain, flowed from her womb to a watering trough, carrying small flowers, fragrant herbs, colorful bits of confetti, and a small iron key—a key to the diary that her father had sent her as a bat mitzvah gift, while he was away in Europe on shelihut. Afterward she lay for a long time on her back, her face to the torn roof tiles, clasping the baby to her heart. She saw the calves leaning over to drink from the flowing water, and more than anything, rejoiced that she had found the key to the diary on whose every page she had written, Hello Dear Diary! (9–10)

The images of birth here are a harbinger of things to come. As one reviewer aptly put the case, the dream is prophetic, for upon her arrival in the U.S. Ruhama “is faced with a reality which requires a far-reaching ideological, cultural, and emotional transformation.”2 Her son confronts her with a number of surprises. He has never liked the cows and is not going into business with her; what’s more, he is not coming back to Israel at all. In addition, unbeknownst to her, he is contemplating marriage. He

is living with a woman who is not Israeli, though she is Jewish; she has been married twice before, and she has three children—one of whom is a son by her African American second husband. Ruhama reacts to all this with bitter, fretful indignation. Eventually, though, the strenuous work of adjusting to a new reality brings special rewards. It turns out that the little boy loves cows as much as she does, and so, in a place and time and way she never expected, she finds a kindred spirit. In fact, the meeting with this child in Virginia lets loose a flood of emotions, a warmth and vitality that Ruhama has not known for many years. The story thus ends on a note of joy, even though the journey has brought a series of heart-rending rifts for Ruhama, tearing her away from her old expectations, hopes, and values. The opening dream, which pictures birth as rupture, letting go, and then flowing happiness, has helped prepare the reader for this moment. Ruhama is single-minded and set in her ways; but the dream has hinted that she is also capable of great changes and can face both rift and new possibility.

Looking more closely at the text, we may note that the Hebrew emphasizes tearing, rift, and new possibility as it repeats the root bet-quf-ayin—the child is about to burst forth (navaqiya), and the roof consists of torn tiles (te’afim mevuqa’im), which, presumably, give a glimpse beyond the roof, perhaps a glimpse of the heavens. The semantic range of this root allows for connotations of severing or splitting, but also breaking through. In keeping with these meanings, Ruhama’s experience in America will also be one both of rupture and of emotional breakthrough. Moving past shock and outrage, she will arrive at a measure of acceptance that brings her closer to her son and rejuvenates her. Many details from the dream, indeed, suggest a labor that is well worth the effort. The profusion of flowers, the confetti, and the gifts signify joy, celebration, and love. These elements help to weave into the scene memories of other joyous occasions and life-cycle events (Ruhama’s wedding, a previous experience of childbirth, her bat mitzvah). Not surprisingly, cows are an inseparable part of this vision, both as observers and participants. They have been a large part of Ruhama’s happiness in life, so it is fitting that her rebirth takes place in a cow shed. Furthermore, in this dream the waters that flow from her sustain and give life to the cows. In this regard the Hebrew is more resonant than the English translation: te’alat hahashqayah (watering trough) calls to mind the phrase te’alat ledah (birth canal), aligning Ruhama’s self-fulfillment with her care of her animals.

As the flow of flowers, herbs, confetti, and water hints at the flood of emotions that Ruhama feels at the conclusion of the story, one striking oddity of the dreamscape emerges. This is a birth free of messiness, blood, and pain. The emphasis on purity makes sense, however, as it recalls a discussion that the old-timers in the valley once had regarding
one of Ruhama’s cows, called Virginia in honor of her son in the States. The farmers had balked at the foreignness of the name. A Zionist cow, they felt, should have a fitting Hebrew name, and so they urged her to find an equivalent to Virginia, such as Tehurah (purity) or Tsehurah (whiteness or purity). That conversation, reinforced by the dream imagery, anticipates the later encounter with the little boy that will be marked by an exceptional innocence of feeling; eventually, as it turns out, Virginia will become for Ruhama a scene of pure and unexpected tenderness, untainted by manipulative self-interest.

It is significant that in the dream the greatest happiness is associated with the key to the diary, a bat mitzvah present. A diary, of course, is an instrument of self-expression and self-discovery. Diaries traditionally help young adolescents construct for themselves an emerging identity. Accordingly, the diary here reinforces the paramount emphasis of the text on construction of self. It is in the nature of dreaming to gather pieces of the past and synthesize them or recombine them into new self-understanding. Certainly, Ruhama’s dream functions that way. In addition, this particular dream pointedly presents Ruhama as someone capable of remaking herself and constructing herself anew. Mention of a diary therefore adds a metanarrative element, a recognition that self-articulation and self-renewal are important components of the psychic business at hand. These aspects of the dream find correlates in Ruhama’s waking life, of course. She eventually proves to be a character who, despite her prickliness, embraces the opportunity to make new choices and to adapt herself to new values.

Those adjustments entail a shift toward the personal arena. Ruhama’s past was oriented to Zionist labor, with its collective, ideological emphasis. Her labor in the dream, however, is a private matter, one that focuses attention intensely—doubly—on the self. Further highlighting the tensions between personal and collective is mention in the dream of her father’s shelihut: he was absent on the occasion of her becoming a bat mitzvah because he was away in Europe on an ideological mission. The dream foretells that Ruhama’s trip to America will have a different quality. Originally intended as a kind of mission undertaken to return her son to Israel, her trip is a failed shelihut. Ultimately, Ruhama will have to accept that defeat, and only then will she find unanticipated compensations in a more personal arena.

This emphasis on the personal also represents a departure from Ruhama’s previous sense of herself and brings her a new understanding of her own motivations. All her life she has seen herself as self-sacrificing. She remembers how, many mornings, she rose at dawn to take care of the cows, covering them with cool canvas on hot days, bringing them fresh water on cold days when the water in the trough had turned to ice. In her
eyes, her life has been a labor of love undertaken for the sake of her family, so that they could build a dream—the Zionist dream—together. What she finds in America, to her distress, is that her son Yair doesn't want what she wanted for him. That which she had read as self-sacrifice, he reads as self-centered, as determination to mold him to her dreams. She must face the harsh truth that he has fled to America to escape her influence. The trip, consequently, dismantles the opposition selfless/selfish. Along with this deconstruction the text also disaggregates components of identity that have long given her life meaning: homeland, cows, children. In her old age she can have homeland and cows, but not children; or she can have children and cows, but not homeland. Early in the text she explicitly articulates the thought that her home is one in which "the children and the cow shed are the two things that are sacred" (hayeladim ve harefet hem shenei devarim mequdashim [12]). Yet those things she had once viewed as inseparable phenomena are now disjunct and discontinuous.

The text further dismantles her certainties by turning the tables on her. This woman, known in the valley as a "living legend" (11), has been a formidable figure in her own community, a pioneer of renowned accomplishment whose cows have won awards for many years. But travel to a foreign country infantilizes and makes Ruhama feel helpless. She dislikes being herded about in the airport by a flight attendant, as if she were "a child" (11) or "a calf" (12). Whether this character realizes the implications or not, the reader can see that this is very much a story concerned with who is constructing whom. Ruhama clearly dislikes being powerless in someone else’s construction of reality.

Yet, as she slowly makes a transition into her son’s world, an important shift in Ruhama’s assumptions begins. She realizes that his assumptions may not be the same as hers. A telling scene takes place on the highway. On the way to his house from the airport, Yair stops to show her a dogwood and tells her about this kind of tree in considerable detail. The scene invites commentary in terms of both "roots" and "routes," James Clifford’s felicitous formulation of issues at the heart of Diaspora studies. Trees and rootedness have been very important to Ruhama. Now, en route to a new, alien address, she reacts with alarm when she finds her son affected by a dogwood. Not only has he disrupted her life with his dislocations, but he may, she realizes suddenly, feel rooted rather than displaced in this distant place.

That’s that, she said in her heart, as if in this very time and place the matter was settled. He won’t come home. People come and go in your life, but whoever falls in love with a tree, well—she remembered when they first saw their house, standing opposite the gate, how she was drawn to the mulberry tree in the courtyard and at that moment her fate was bound to that place and she said to her husband, “This will be our home.” (24)

Hers is a very Israeli reading of his experience. The return to the Land, with its passionate attachment to the geography of Israel, is a central component of Zionist pioneering thought. Here, although in a non-Zionist locale, Ruham a presumes that a tree will have the same importance for her son as it might for her. In this way the text shows the cultural assumptions through which she filters information, while at the same time revealing that she is beginning to accept the authenticity of Yair’s own experience. She has begun to comprehend that he is truly not coming back and will not conform to her dream of the future.

This initial resignation of hers is tinged with despair, but she develops a fuller acceptance of Yair’s new life at the end of the story. Increasingly cantankerous, upset by all the shocks she has had to absorb, she demands that Yair put her on the first flight back to Israel. However, when she meets the little boy, eight-year-old Jonathan, she is disarmed by his sweet smile. He has learned a few words of Hebrew to greet her, and best of all, he has prepared a surprise, a hafta’ah; in the context of a child’s world, the word hafta’ah carries the very positive connotation of “a treat.” When the boy shows her his room filled with cows—a cow lampshade, a cow bedspread, a green carpet like a pasture on which graze all manner of toy cows—she is overcome with emotion. “How the tears burst from her, how the child was pulled, drawn to her arms, she didn’t recall. As in a dream she found herself cradling him in her bosom” (29). This moment of flowing warmth and hopefulness, as it recalls the opening dream sequence, avoids mawkish sentimentality, for the ending acknowledges the disjunction and ruptures with which Ruhama must contend. Touching ironies abound as Jonathan shows his cows to her, naming them one by one: Edna, Dafna, Yisraela, Virginia, and more. It is clear he has been aware of her and her world long before she knew of his, and he has honored her by naming his cows after hers. Although Ruhama has lost the opportunity to share what she loves with her son, she has gained
a new opportunity to share what she loves, in a different way, with the next generation.

The story concludes as she barks at her son to get her photos from the car: "I want to show you my Virginia," she announces. In her surliness she tries to cover vulnerable sentiments, while also celebrating what she, Yair, and Jonathan have in common. In this way she both reveals and attempts to bridge the angry distance between herself and her son. Significantly, she also establishes ownership; emphasis falls on the word "my" in the phrase "my Virginia." She refers, of course, to her cow, but the reader can understand that statement to encompass also the experience of the U.S. that at that very moment is occurring. Her Virginia is a scene of both reconciliation and bitter disappointment. Her emphatic "my Virginia" contrasts starkly with the earlier talk of Hebraizing Virginia to Tehurah or Tsehurah. At this juncture foreignness is undeniably something she must now negotiate and bear on intimate terms.

It is noteworthy that this culminating moment seems to her as if "in a dream." The dreamlike feeling at the end of the story is in some ways a fulfillment of her initial dream, yet it also forms instructive contrasts with other dreams in the story. In contrast with the opening dream, here she has moved definitively from her past to her future. Similarly, this concluding moment provides a favorable contrast with the dreams she once had for her son, dreams that were realizable only in her imagination and in her world, not in his. The ending dream also differs from her sense that, from the airplane, the broad fields of Virginia had looked like a dream—beautiful but remote, unreal. Now her inner feelings come in contact with much more tangible external circumstance. Virginia is no longer beautiful and distant, but beautiful, upsetting, ironic, and close at hand.

In the course of these events, not only Virginia but other names become highly meaningful too—for example, Israel, the name of Ruhama's eldest who was killed in a war. That this son might well have carried on her interests and taken over the family dairy adds to her sorrow and grief over his loss. It is not coincidental that this character is called Israel; the loss of Ruhama's cherished personal dreams and ambitions means that the Zionist dream, itself, has slipped away from her. Other names, too, are apt. While highly believable, natural-sounding names, they subtly add symbolic dimensions to the story. Ruhama, from resh-het-mem (a root related to "womb" and to "compassion"), is a character first construed as giving birth; and, ultimately, she is a woman capable of an abundance of maternal/grandmotherly love despite profound hurt and confusion. The little boy, Jonathan, as his name suggests, is a gift—an unexpected treat at the end of the story. As he brings Ruhama joy, his presence recalls the motif of gifts in the opening dream.
(the embroidered sheet and the diary). Ruth and Naomi, Jonathan’s sisters, bear names that highlight issues of continuity and loyalty in Jewish life. Yair (from the root for “light”) is also appropriately named, for his face beams with happiness when he sees his mother reconciling herself to the new situation (or qoren mitokh eynav hayeraqraot [29]). Radiance was an element of the initial dream, in the twinkling of the star-shaped flowers, and here at the end of the story light joins other elements of the opening (gifts, maternal love, reconnection with family), reappearing in novel combinations and new guises in Ruhama’s life. Naming as an act of constructing reality and infusing the world with meaning was, of course, an integral part of the Zionist project. In Liebrecht’s story the act of naming is of high importance, both as Ruhama, the staunch Zionist, takes great care in naming her cows, and also as Jonathan names his cows after hers in an act of identification that de-territorializes. The author herself artfully chooses names for her characters, bringing into play meanings that resonate in new ways within the shifting territories of Ruhama’s life.

This moving and well-crafted story deserves close scrutiny on its own merits, for its psychological insights and for its deft deployment of imagery and plot. It is also a text that invites examination in the context of several recent literary developments. First, Savyon Liebrecht is not alone in her fictional treatment of yeridah. Rather, her story is indicative of a growing interest in this topic among Hebrew writers. Increasingly, since the 1980s, Israeli literature has grappled with the issue of Israelis who go abroad and of those who stay abroad. However, when this theme began to gain visibility, wandering Israelis most often met with strong disapproval or at least with unhappy fates. In the 1990s less opprobrium is attached to yeridah. Some characters who are yordim even claim to be no different from any other immigrants in a postmodern world. This is the case, for example, in Dorit Abusch’s 1996 novel, Hayored. At the same time, tensions and debate continue. In Yoram Kolerstein’s “Idolatry,” for

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6 Zerubavel, “The ‘Wandering Israeli.’”
instance, the protagonist embraces a secular American life wholeheartedly but eventually finds himself caught comically in limbo between two worlds, unable to relinquish the vestiges of his emotional attachments to Judaism and the Jewish State. "A Cow Named Virginia," published in 1995, is thus part of a growing body of fiction that can help gauge shifting Israeli attitudes regarding Zion and Diaspora in an era of post-Zionism.

Beyond the realm of Israeli literature, Liebrecht's story raises interesting questions in connection with the growth of Diaspora studies. In the past decade the literary domain has witnessed an intense rise of interest in cultural dispersions, immigrant writing, and migrant populations. "A Cow Named Virginia" may serve to interrogate some of the salient trends in that discourse as it provokes the question, Can the new vocabulary of contemporary Diaspora studies be applied usefully to the study of yeridah?

Arnold Band raised this issue astutely in an essay that appeared in 1996, "The New Diasporism and the Old Diaspora." Noting the long history Hebrew literature has had in dealing with issues of Diaspora, exile, and homeland, Band cautions theorists not to overgeneralize the term "diaspora." He urges readers not to lose distinctions among varied phenomena (immigrants, expatriates, refugees, guest-workers, exile-communities, overseas communities, and more), and not to overlook the specificity of Jewish experience.

Jewish literature that deals with exile can never be dissociated entirely from traditional Jewish assumptions. Integral to Judaism is the notion of exile as a divine punishment. Diaspora residence entails "a sense of guilt, of betrayal of a cherished ideal—or commandment—requiring residence in the homeland." Yet contemporary circumstances

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9 The ambitious scope of the term "diaspora" in contemporary cultural studies is evident in the following remarks from the introduction to Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton, eds., Borders, Exiles, Diasporas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), a wide-ranging collection of essays on fascinating but highly disparate phenomena: "The importance of the concept of ‘diaspora’ as an explanatory paradigm stems from its malleable qualities given that it can apply to diverse communities. Dissociated from the historical experiences of a defined group of people, it becomes a universal nomenclature applicable to displaced groups of people" (5).
10 Band, "The New Diasporism," 326. For further discussion of Diaspora in modern Jewish thought, see Arnold Eisen, Galut: Modern Jewish Reflections on
do raise novel perplexities. Importantly, Band queries, do Israelis outside of Israel comprise a new type of transnational community, and how should they be designated?

Are they similar to the Jewish communities in the same countries in which they settle or do we define them differently? Do they define themselves differently? Are they part of the traditional diaspora, or are they a totally new phenomenon, coming as they do from a sovereign Jewish nation-state...?  

Current Diaspora studies do provide a helpful set of coordinates to measure some thematic elements of Liebrecht’s fiction. Strands of this critical discourse often highlight ways in which fixed identities are unsettled by border crossings. Calling attention to the blurring of national boundaries and loyalties, this line of debate often opposes nationality (as a basis for stable identity) and transnational contexts (typified by multiple subject positions and hybrid selves and communities). In “A Cow Named Virginia” Ruhama’s newfound openness, the element of fluidity that enters into her sense of identity, does indeed unsettle or disrupt a hierarchy of values she has long held. New movement and freedom challenge ideological certainty and stasis.

Still, we must not forget the specificity of her border crossing and the heritage of Jewish obligation that Band notes. The story would have much less impact if it were read as somehow separate from Jewish historical background. For Ruhama, Zionism is a substitute for religious obligation. To build a new home and a future for the next generation, through a return to the Land and a commitment to farming, is for her a supreme value. (Remember her statement in the story that the children and the cow shed were sacrosanct—shenei devarin mequdashim.) To leave the Land is not to emigrate but to lose a sacred dream. Her devotion to a tree, a cow, a piece of land is depicted with sincere respect. Even more importantly, we should note that in connection with this text such notions as fluidity, hybridity, and dislocation are useful primarily as a point of departure; they are not the main point. Postmodern dislocation and disjunction are part of the textual landscape, but what Liebrecht seems to be driving at, primarily, is the love that bound

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Ruhama to her old world and that emerges in Ruhama anew, allowing her to cope with the fragmentation of her world. Consequently, it would be misguided to read this story as a celebration of Diaspora. The point is significant, for a prominent strain of recent cultural studies has in fact valorized de-territorialization. Furthermore, critiquing nation-states and deconstructing notions of stable identity, this line of thinking has quite specifically featured vehement attacks on Israel and/or found extensive fault with Zionism. Liebrecht, in contrast, is not set on discrediting Zionism. Rather, she portrays with humor, irony, and respect the inner world of a Zionist who must cope with a post-Zionist world. Post-Zionism has set for itself the goal of revising and sometimes undermining the foundations of Israeli collective memory. In this story Yair challenges the family memory. Insisting that he was never interested in cows, that his father was never interested in cows, that the dream of a dairy was never for the sake of his future, he topples long-standing assumptions and forces Ruhama to face a world in flux. As circumstances undermine her feelings of wholeness, the story invites the reader's empathy for her. In "A Cow Named Virginia" Liebrecht places less emphasis on ideological stances than on compassion for the individuals who experience the forces of transnational dispersion.

This is not to say that the text overlooks Ruhama's shortcomings or the limitations of the positions she espouses—it doesn't. Her initial resistance to meeting Jonathan is indisputably racist. Similarly, her stance toward her son is overbearing. Her single-mindedness borders on rigidity. Her protestations of martyrdom condemn her to stereotypical gestures and behaviors. Yet, the story places those behaviors in conjunction with depictions of inner life that show Ruhama to be capable of great dreams—imaginative, perceptive, humorous, creative, highly individual,

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and, above all, loving. She has devoted herself to her family and her life’s dreams with vigor, and in her old age finds herself, surprisingly, capable of new dreams.