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From an Old World to a New Language: Eastern European–Born Israeli Women’s Writing in Hebrew

SHEILA JELEN

MALKAH SHAPIRO. *The Rebbe’s Daughter: Memoir of a Hasidic Childhood*. Translated with an introduction and commentary by Nehemia Polen. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002. Pp. xlviii + 253.

DVORA BARON. *“The First Day” and Other Stories*. Translated by Naomi Seidman with Chana Kronfeld. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Pp. xxv + 236.

ZELDA. *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems*. Translated with an introduction by Marcia Falk. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004. Pp. xv + 270.

I have long wondered whether there is an argument to be made for a unique Hebrew literary canon of Eastern European–born women writing in Israel. Leah Goldberg (1911–70) and Dvora Baron (1887–1956) are just two examples of such women who helped define modern Hebrew literature in the first half of the twentieth century. Each in her own way brought her European heritage into the Israeli literary scene—Goldberg, a secular cosmopolitan literary sensibility, and Baron a traditional Jewish one. In contemplating a conceptual framework for the unique linguistic and thematic contributions of Eastern European–born women to Israeli literary culture, however, I would, implicitly, be acknowledging the role of biographical history in my reading of literary texts; I would be privileging places, languages, and cultures of origin in my mapping of Israeli literary history.

Three recent English translations of Hebrew literary works written by Eastern European–born women in Israel provide a good starting point for an interrogation of the uses and abuses of historical, biographical, and

gendered contextualization of an author's literary oeuvre. Interestingly, translation is an ideal medium through which to gauge the optimal sensitivity to contextual consciousness when interpreting a literary text; translation can serve as an example to critics and other readers for what to do, and what not to do, in contextually mediating a literary work. The first of these works is Malkah Shapiro's novel *The Rebbe's Daughter*. The second is Dvora Baron's collection of short stories "*The First Day*" and *Other Stories*, and the third *The Spectacular Difference*, a poetry collection by Zelda (Zelda Schneurson Mishkhovsky).

Malkah Shapiro (1894–1971) was the fifth of seven children born to Brachah Twersky and her husband Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshe Hapstein (1860–1909), the incumbent Rebbe of Kozienice. From 1943 to 1971 she published five books of Hebrew poetry and prose in Israel, where she had settled in 1926.¹ Shapiro's 1969 publication *Mi-din le-rah'amim: Sipurim me-batserot ha-ādmorim* (From Justice to Mercy: Tales from Hasidic Courts) was her most ambitious and generically most ambiguous book. *Mi-din le-rah'amim* is presented by Polen in his English introduction to the book as an astonishing insider's perspective on the Hasidic court of Kozienice, a community fifty miles southeast of Warsaw. It encompasses the eleventh and twelfth years of its young protagonist's life as she prepares for her betrothal and marriage to her first cousin. In *The Rebbe's Daughter* we observe the cycle of prayer, ritual observances, holiday preparations, and meditations that punctuate life in a small, wealthy Hasidic court on the eve of the Russian Revolution.

Nehemia Polen, in a discussion of the genesis of his translation of Shapiro's text, tells us that when he first discovered it on the dusty shelves of a used book store in Jerusalem, he had been working on a collection of Hasidic homilies written by a rabbi named Kalonymous Kalmish Shapiro in the Warsaw Ghetto. After having completed a cursory reading of Malkah's book, Polen realized that she was the sister-in-law of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapiro. He decided that Malkah's text would serve as a valuable complement to the work he was already doing and that it would bring to bear, in his own words, a valuable "woman's perspective on Hasidism at the start of the twentieth century" (p. xi).

Feminist translation theorists throughout the 1980s and 1990s attempted to reclaim translation from the metaphorically "female position" of literary discourse. According to Sherry Simon, "translators and women

1. *Mitokh ba-Se'arab* (1943), *Be-lev ha-mistorin: Sipurim u-foemot* (1955), *Yeladim bi-gevulot: Perek mishbenot ba-baf'alab* (1964), *Mi-din le-rah'amim: Sipurim me-batserot ha-ādmorim* (1969), *Shiri li bat ami: Shirim, sonetot u-foemot* (1971).

have historically been the weaker figures in their respective hierarchies: translators are handmaidens to authors, women inferior to men."² Translation, in other words, has often been considered a discursively "inferior" form of literary art, in which the "original" is considered hierarchically superior to its translation, and the translation is considered a derivative, feminized form. Susanne de Lotbiniere-Harwood drives home the absurdity of the metaphorically gendered discourse of translation when she says, "I am a translation because I am a woman."³ Much of feminist translation theory works to reclaim translation from a gendered metaphoric in which women's inferiority is consistently invoked in order to delegitimize the autonomous and aesthetic practice of translation. Few feminist translation critics, however, focus on the need to consider what I would call cross-disciplinary translation, which takes place when a text formulated and received in one discursive mode is imported into another culture within a totally different discursive context. A work of fiction, having undergone cross-disciplinary translation, for example, could become a work of autobiography. I would argue that minor voices (such as women's) within minor literatures (such as modern Hebrew) are particularly vulnerable to cross-disciplinary translation because of their palpable absence in cultural discourse.

Deconstructionist critics have long argued that translation is largely independent of an original referent. Barbara Johnson has argued that "while both translators and spouses were once bound by contracts to love, honor, and obey, and while both inevitably betray, the current question of the possibility and desirability of conscious mastery makes that contract seem deluded and exploitative from the start."⁴ She discusses the translator's exemption from classical notions of "fidelity," to the text upon which the translation is purportedly based. I would expand upon the feminist discourse involved in reclaiming translation from a hierarchical metaphoric that degrades women and translation simultaneously, as well as on the deconstructionist notion of translation as an independent aesthetic practice not bound by the niceties of mimetic correspondence and literary fidelity, in order to examine how the process of translation in the field of Jewish studies has, to a large degree, imported texts—particularly texts authored by women—from one discipline into another. I would argue that deconstruction allows for such a dynamic while feminist criti-

2. Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (London, 1996), 1.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Barbara Johnson, "Taking Fidelity Philosophically," *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), 142.

cism points to the risks inherent therein. To what extent, then, should we accept translation as a vehicle for historical reconstructions of women's milieu in Eastern European pre-Holocaust culture, and to what extent should we be wary of the loss of fictional voices in the process of cross-disciplinary translations?

Polen translates only "Kozienice," the first part of Shapiro's three-part volume. "Kozienice" is a series of thematically interconnected stories of life in the court of Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshele, the father of the stories' protagonist, Bat Zion. As Polen points out, while the first fifteen of seventeen stories are narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator, the last two are narrated in the first person from the perspective of a narrator looking explicitly back over time and from a great geographic distance at a world destroyed by the Holocaust. The second part of the book, entitled "Hassidim Tell," is a series of four stories which focus on individual spiritual leaders within the Hasidic community and their relationship with their followers. The last part of the book, entitled "The Land of Israel," contains stories written in an omniscient voice about the spiritual qualities and physical beauty of the land, as well as tales of dynamic individuals such as "The Rabbi from Kurdistan" whom Malkah Shapiro, presumably, would only have been able to meet in Palestine. A final story, "We Rejoice in Having Been Deemed Worthy" (*Ashbrenu she-zakbinu*), is subtitled "Pieces of Memory" (*Kite zikbronot*).

Polen's translation of only the first section, which could be viewed as a story cycle or even a novel, and his omission of the last two sections, which can be broadly construed within the more conventional generic categories of Hasidic tales and memoirs, belies his framing of the first section as a memoir. He has, in fact, omitted the memoiristic segments in the third part of the book, ignored the Hasidic hagiographical tales in the second part of the book, and framed the first part of the book as a memoiristic hagiography of Shapiro's father and other members of his Hasidic court. It is indeed those very elements of the first part of the book, which he identifies as signs of its "memoiristic" and "veiled autobiographical" nature, that make it most closely resemble the work of the outstanding Hebrew female fiction writer of her generation, Dvora Baron.

Polen argues in a special section of his introduction designated "Is *The Rebbe's Daughter* Autobiographical?" that the primary argument for reading the text as such is the startling change in voice during the last two chapters from third person to first person, indicating a breaking down of the fictional pretense and kind of surrender to the autobiographical

backbone of the story.⁵ Indeed, Dvora Baron, throughout her later fiction, does the same thing. In her 1939 story “What Has Been” (*Mab she-bayab*), for example, Baron employs a primarily omniscient third-person narrative voice but introduces a first-person narrator into the story’s beginning and end:

Of all the youngsters I went about with in my home town, the one dearest to me was Mina, our neighbour’s girl, who was nicknamed “Spotty” on account of her freckles. Mina was hardly what one might call a pretty girl; but, we all know the saying that it is in the earthenware jar that the best wine is preserved, and have we not seen the living word of God inscribed in a simple scroll? Yet as I come to tell about her I find I cannot abstain from sketching in details of the life surrounding her, just as it would be inconceivable for a painter to draw any object, living or inanimate, without setting it in an appropriate background.⁶

At this point, the narrator largely recedes, making room for a virtually omniscient account of Mina’s difficult and complicated nuclear family. In the course of the narrative, Mina overcomes her ugliness, and her state of being unloved by gaining literacy and a trade. The narrator plays a game of hide-and-seek, appearing only at junctures when the narrative’s rhetorical origins seem to need some kind of justification. Similarly, she appears in order to teach Mina how to read and write. The narrative concludes with the narrator’s first-person reappearance in the following passage:

For a long time I—now settled in my new homeland—heard nothing of the family. News began to reach us of the horrors that befell our brethren, and many believed that all had perished in the disaster; yet I, in my heart of hearts, had faith that He who keeps alive the seed of grain under the winter snow and gives strength to the tree-trunk to weather the severest storm, had preserved some survivor of this family. Years later, there came to see me a young lad from my hometown; and I immediately saw that he was a sturdy fellow of fine mettle. In reply

5. A “homodiegetic” narrator is one who appears in the story as a character as well as providing the first-person voice that carries the story.

6. Dvora Baron, *The Thorny Path and Other Stories*, trans. J. Shachter (Jerusalem, 1969), 77.

to my question about his parentage he told me his mother's name was Mina.⁷

Here, Baron's narrator relocates her voice at the end of this narrative as a justification for the telling of this tale, filling in the ethnographic details of a world long gone. Her narrative embodies both the death in reality, and the imagined continuity, of life in a small town that has been entirely destroyed. In this closing statement, we get the first inkling of the narrator's temporal and geographic distance from the narrative we have just read.

In the last chapter of Malkah Shapiro's text we read, in Polen's translation:

Sometimes on a Sabbath eve as we sing the prayer melodies, I feel myself back in the room of the Maggid's wife the Tsaddekhet which in my day served as the women's prayer room . . . I imagine myself between my sisters, the martyred Hannah Goldaleh, and the Rebbetzin of Piaseczno, Rachel Miriam of blessed memory, the wife of my uncle Rabbi Kalmish'l, his righteous memory a blessing, who along with his dear children were burnt offerings in the Nazi Holocaust. I am standing next to grandmother, the Rebbetzin Sarah Devorahleh of blessed memory, who is immersed in her prayer sighs for the coming of the Righteous Redeemer and for the resurrection of the dead; and next to my mother, the tzaddekhet Brachaleh, her righteous memory a blessing . . . They were wise women, tall of stature; when I was a child I imagined them to be like the daughters of Zelophehad from the Bible, with their energetic spirit and forceful speech. Sometimes I am taken by the feeling of being caught in that unbroken chain. Whether it exists in reality or just in my imagination, it nevertheless gives me both pain and occasional comfort. (p. 188)

Playing with the categories of the real and the fantastic, invoking the memories of her female forebears, and reflecting on a moment in the present that brings up moments of the past, Malkah Shapiro sees herself in an unbroken chain of women's voices lifted in prayer.

By reading a moment of transition in both Baron's and Shapiro's work—transition from third person to first person, from fiction to memoir, from proximity in the present to distance from the past—we can better understand a moment in Israeli literary form. Why should this

7. *Ibid.*, 153.

dynamic be evident specifically in work by women? Women born in Eastern Europe who immigrated to Palestine were moving between different cultures of Hebrew. In Eastern Europe Hebrew was largely a male language, limited to the world of scholarship and legal discourse—a world that was closed to women in traditional Jewish society. In Palestine, however, they discovered Hebrew had been mobilized as a nationalist language—a language that was being cultivated and developed for daily discourse. By writing in Hebrew about a world (the shtetl or the Hasidic court) in which they would not, by most accounts, have been able to speak out or distinguish themselves in Hebrew, these writers encode a certain kind of fundamental linguistic and cultural transition into their work, one which became the backdrop for the broader transitions from shtetl to Zionist homeland, or from religious to secular milieu.

Baron immigrated to Palestine from the Pale of Settlement in 1910 while Shapiro immigrated in 1926. Both engage the narrative persona of a “rabbi’s daughter”; in Baron’s case it is a small-town Litvak rabbi, in Shapiro’s a small-town scion of a Hasidic dynasty. Both Shapiro and Baron write about girls’ intellectual exclusion in a culture that values Jewish learning of traditional texts above all else. They both write about their ambivalent relationships with brothers who are both accepting of their sisters’ special intellectual gifts and exclusionary about their intellectual access. Both of them discuss contentious grandmothers who are disappointed at the birth of a granddaughter, and loving fathers who advocate girls’ education, if not on par with boys, then at least in a way commensurate with what they perceive to be the girls’ God-given abilities. Most importantly, both Shapiro and Baron gesture to themselves belatedly in their works as first-person narrators of a world long gone. Is this an indication that their work is autobiographical? No. A proliferation of similar themes and character types indicates instead a *fictional* resonance, a situating of oneself within a canon of similar tropes.

I am not arguing here that there are no autobiographical elements to Shapiro’s story. On the contrary, I heartily agree with Polen that *The Rebbe’s Daughter* is an incredibly valuable witness to the insular world of European Hasidism and the particular court of the Kozniece Rebbe from the perspective of what has been called elsewhere an “intimate outsider” or a young girl in a highly rarefied and highly gendered milieu. I argue here rather for a new orientation to the work of Malkah Shapiro, one which does not automatically situate her in the camp of Hasidic memoirs but which situates her in a trajectory of Eastern European-born writers of Hebrew in Palestine/Israel—particularly women.

In her translation of two sequences of short stories by Dvora Baron,

Naomi Seidman strikes a subtle balance between biographical considerations of Baron and the fictional nature of the work at hand. Baron's relationships with her father and brother, who taught her to read Hebrew and thereby enabled her to become a Hebrew writer, are emphasized in the introduction, as is her thirty-three-year isolation in her Tel-Aviv apartment at the end of her life, during which the bulk of her canonical stories were written and edited. Extraneous biographical material such as a broken engagement or the map of her journey through Eastern Europe before her immigration to Palestine are not discussed. The story collection itself is divided, interestingly, in accordance with what Nurit Govrin, the foremost contemporary biographer of Baron, has deemed Baron's "early" period and her "late" period.⁸ Her early period is constituted by stories that Baron refused to canonize in her definitive 1951 collection *Parshiyot* or in any of her other published collections published between 1927 and 1970. These stories were written primarily in the first three decades of the twentieth century and are stylistically far less polished and more overtly ideological than her later works. These early works were often mistaken for autobiographical narratives, because of their overt critique of Jewish patriarchy, and because of their frequent use of the first person. The later stories, on the other hand, characterized to a large extent by a third-person omniscient, intertextually erudite, ideologically circumspect narrative voice, represent the literary work that Baron proudly published later in life. The later stories (nine in number) come first in Seidman's collection, and the earlier stories (nine as well) follow, in what is an appropriate gesture towards Baron's literary identity as opposed to a strictly biographical (or chronological) one. Seidman eschews creating her own narrative trajectory of Baron's biography.

In fact, the title story of Baron's collection explicitly addresses the issue of autobiographical overtones in a fictional work. "The First Day" (1927) tells, in the first person, about the day of the protagonist's birth—her grandmother's rage at her gender, her mother's exhausted indifference to her, and her father's warm and loving welcome. The narrator says: "It's embarrassing to relate, but the events should be written simply, exactly as they happened" (p. 20). When an author gestures to the autobiographical transparency of a literary text, to the possibility that events can be narrated "exactly as they happened," the careful reader is automatically alerted to the facetious implications of such a statement. How, for example, can an author narrate "exactly" her first day of life? Indeed, Dvora

8. Nurit Govrin, *Ha-mahatsit ha-rishonah: Dvora Baron, hayebah vi-yetsiratah* (The First Half: Dvora Baron, Her Life and Work) (Jerusalem, 1988).

Baron's daughter Tzipora Aharonovitch engaged in an angry, if somewhat comical, exchange with Yehudit Harari, the author of an encyclopedia of Jewish women from biblical times until the 1950s, when Aharonovitch found that Harari had based her biography of Baron on the family described in "The First Day." "It is important, dear woman," Aharonovitch scolds, "not to rely on fictional belletristic material for biographical information."⁹

Baron's life has frequently been conflated with her literary self, particularly in the critical voices of her own generation. This owed in part to her gender, and in part to the subject matter about which she most frequently chose to write. Dvora Baron wrote about the shtetl even after her immigration to Palestine in 1910; in so doing, she violated the dominant principle of Hebrew fiction in early-twentieth-century Palestine, which was that literary production was to be channeled into nationalist expression. In theorizing Dvora Baron's insistence on depicting the shtetl in her work, I have elsewhere proposed that Baron, having moved to Palestine several years before World War I and leaving the bulk of her family behind in the process, struggled to strike a balance in her literary work between an ethnographic impulse and a fictional one.¹⁰ Additionally, as a woman writer in an exclusive cohort of male writers such as S. Y. Agnon (1888–1970), Y. H. Brenner (1881–1921), Gershon Shofman (1880–1972), and others, she was expected to write, with a sort of artless realism, a domestic fiction about women's experiences for which there had been no precedent in modern Hebrew literature, and certainly not in the literature produced on the new Yishuv. To what extent, then, does Baron accentuate her right to be considered a fiction writer, first and foremost, unbound by the perceived obligations and aesthetic limitations of her gender, and to what extent does she herself feel compelled to write about a European world that had disappeared during the first few decades of her life in Palestine?

Like Baron and Shapiro, Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky (1914–84), known as Zelda in the Hebrew literary community, wrote in Palestine and Israel throughout the period of the development of the Hebrew language from an ideological experiment into a norm. Born in Russia, Zelda immigrated to Palestine when she was twelve years old. She was a close descendant of important scions of the Habad dynasty, and she lived as an Orthodox Jew throughout her life. Zelda's first book of poetry, *Pnai*

9. Ibid., 25.

10. Sheila Jelen, *Intimations of Difference: Dvora Baron in the Modern Hebrew Renaissance* (Syracuse, N.Y., forthcoming 2006).

(Leisure) was published in 1967, and five books followed.¹¹ Her predominantly lyric poems, like Baron's and Shapiro's work, often present a "world of the fathers," a world of prayer and faith. In her earliest collection, she describes a pious grandfather, cast in terms of Abraham undergoing his most famous trials:

Like our father Abraham
 who counted stars at night,
 who called out to his Creator
 from the furnace,
 who bound his son
 on the altar —
 so was my grandfather.
 The same perfect faith
 in the midst of the flames,
 the same dewy gaze
 and soft curling beard.
 Outside it snowed;
 outside, they roared:
 "There is no justice,
 no judge."
 And in the shambles of his room,
 cherubs sang
 of the Heavenly Jerusalem. (p. 33)

At the same time, in other poems, she employs a different kind of idiom — an idiosyncratic symbolic idiom of private faith:

I am a dead bird,
 one bird that has died.
 A bird cloaked in a gray coat.
 A scoffer mocks me as I walk.

 Suddenly Your silence envelops me,
 O Ever-living One.
 In a teeming market, a dead fowl sings:
 "Only You exist."
 In a teeming market, a bird hobbles
 with a hidden song. (p. 37)

11. *Ha-Karmel ha-i nir'eh* (1971), *Al tirhak* (1974), *Ha-lo bar, ha-lo esh* (1977), *Ha-Shoni ha-marbiv* (1981), *She-nivdelu mi-kol Merhak* (1984).

Marcia Falk's translation of Zelda disregards biographical considerations, at times to a fault. Falk, the renowned author of *The Book of Blessings*, a book of Jewish liturgy rendered in gender-neutral and nonhierarchical language, in translating Zelda's frequent allusions to traditional prayers has imposed a strangely egalitarian voice onto those prayers.¹² In a poem entitled "All Night I Wept," for example, the Hebrew phrase *Ribono shel 'Olam*, commonly translated as "Master of the Universe," is translated into English as "Sovereign of the Universe" (p. 145). While in general Falk succeeds in maintaining Zelda's original tonalities and the poems' distinctive register, in cases such as the aforementioned, Zelda's voice is lost in the deliberate avoidance of standard God language. As with Malkah Shapiro and Dvora Baron, for whom one of the notable aspects of their growth into Hebrew writers was their having to acquire Hebrew in opposition to the strictures placed upon them by Orthodox Eastern European society, so, too, Zelda's spare and modern poetic voice is particularly remarkable in light of the pious imagery and traditional liturgy which constitute it.

Amos Oz has recently described Zelda, his first and most beloved teacher, in the following way:

Teacher Zelda [also] revealed a Hebrew language to me that I had never encountered before . . . a strange anarchic Hebrew, the Hebrew of stories of saints, Hasidic tales, folk sayings, Hebrew leavened with Yiddish, breaking all the rules, confusing masculine and feminine, past and present, pronouns and adjectives, a sloppy, even disjointed Hebrew. But what vitality those tales had! In a story about snow, the writing itself seemed to be formed of icy words. In a story about fires, the words themselves blazed. And what a strange hypnotic sweetness there was in her tales about all sorts of miraculous deeds! As though the writer had dipped his pen in wine: the words reeled and staggered in your mouth.¹³

Oz, a major voice of the generation of Hebrew writers born and raised in Israel and Hebrew, acknowledges here the power of marginalized Hebrew idioms within a contemporary Hebrew linguistic fabric. Zelda's Hebrew, according to Oz, is a "defamiliarizing" Hebrew, a Hebrew cobbled

12. Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival* (San Francisco, 1996)

13. Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, trans. N. de Lange (Orlando, 2004), 294.

out of Yiddish, out of Hasidut, out of the Talmud and the Torah and the Prayerbook—a Hebrew that was for the most part rejected by the Israeli establishment—a Hebrew that in its strangeness renewed itself time and again. Zelda’s wonderful Hebrew voice, an importation from the literary and cultural traditions that preceded the era of Zionist nationalism, is indeed palpable in Falk’s translation. With the exception of her strange manipulation of liturgy, Faulk preserves Zelda’s unique voice in an instinctually balanced and resoundingly accurate English rendition.

Do Malkah Shapiro, Dvora Baron, and Zelda form the nucleus of a noteworthy tradition of Israeli women writers of Hebrew from Eastern Europe? What does a glimpse through the lens of translators’ treatment of them show us about the likelihood of such a tradition? Shapiro, Baron, and Zelda share the world of traditional texts, flaunt their erudition and the transformation of a traditional idiom into an elegant modern literary fabric. Their translators, in turn, are particularly sensitive to the textual and cultural implications of each of these writers finding a voice in Hebrew despite their gender and the historical and geographical accident of their birth into traditional Eastern European families who could have denied them access to Hebrew. Polen remarks, correctly, on Shapiro’s displays of textual erudition and her challenge to women’s enforced ignorance in traditional Jewish scholarship, while Seidman chooses stories that highlight Baron’s intertextual consciousness and challenge to traditional notions of “women’s” knowledge versus “men’s” knowledge. Finally, Falk gracefully translates Zelda’s innumerable biblical and rabbinic allusions, drawing attention to them in comprehensive notes at the end of the volume. The stylistically and thematically apparent religious origins of Shapiro’s, Baron’s, and Zelda’s voices fly in the face of the secularism of modern Israel and modern Hebrew. Perhaps therein lies the necessity for a grouping of these works into a canon that challenges the marginality of women and of religious creativity in the early years of Zionist nationalism.