

THE LIFE, WORK, AND LEGACY OF ISRAEL'S MOST BELOVED POET

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Raḥel will be read, sung, and recited long after many excellent Hebrew poets of her age, men and women alike, have been confined within classroom walls.

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About the author: Hillel Halkin's books include *Yehuda Halevi*, *Across the Sabbath River*, *Melisande: What are Dreams?* (a novel), *Jabotinsky: A Life* (2014), and, most recently, [After One-Hundred-and-Twenty](#) (Princeton).

This is the ninth essay by Hillel Halkin in his series on seminal Hebrew writers of the 19th and early-20th centuries. The preceding eight essays have dealt with the novelists [Joseph Perl](#), [Avraham Mapu](#), [Peretz Smolenskin](#), and [Yosef Hayyim Brenner](#), the poets [Yehudah Leib Gordon](#) and [Hayyim Nahman Bialik](#), the essayists and Zionist thinkers [Ahad Ha'am](#) and [A.D. Gordon](#), and the writer, journalist, and intellectual [Micha Yosef Berdichevsky](#).



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Bearing a dedication to the Zionist thinker A.D. Gordon and entitled “State of Mind,” it was Raḥél Bluvshayn’s first published Hebrew poem:

The day grew dark
And faded from on high.
A dull gold ringed
The mountains and the sky.

Black stretched the fields around me,
Black and still.
Far ran my dreary,
Solitary trail.

And yet I would not challenge fate,
Tyrant though it is.
Whatever comes I'll greet with joy,
With thankfulness.

Appearing in *Hashiloah* in the summer of 1920, it was not an exceptional piece of verse, although its simple language and Sephardi stress pattern in an age in which Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik's architectonic, Ashkenazi-accented Hebrew was still [the gold standard](#) for verse might have drawn some attention to it. (While Sephardi stress, with its favoring of final syllables, had already been adopted by Palestinian Hebrew speech, most Hebrew poetry in the early 20th century was still being written in penultimate-leaning Ashkenazi meters.) Raḥel—she signed her poems with only her first name, the Hebrew form of Rachel, and so she has always been known to her readers—was living at the time in Degania, and [Gordon](#), a fellow member of the kibbutz, sent her a short poem of his own in response. “Follow your trail!” it encouraged her.

The two had known each other since 1909, when Raḥel, then a nineteen-year-old, came to Palestine from Russia with two sisters on a visit, was enchanted by what she saw, and decided to remain instead of continuing on a planned tour of Italy. For several months she lived in the First Aliyah colony of Rehovot, studying Hebrew; then she joined a group of Second Aliyah pioneers (*ḥalutsim*) in the farming commune of Kinneret, named for the nearby lake known in most languages as the Sea of Galilee. In 1913, convinced it would be her best way of contributing to the nascent kibbutz movement, she traveled to France to study agriculture at the University of Toulouse. From there she wrote Gordon that she couldn't wait to finish her two-and-a-half years of studies and return to Palestine. He wrote back:

Why think of your stay in France as merely preparatory, a time of getting ready for life rather than of life itself? It's a mistake to look at things that way. We talked about this once when I said to you that a person should live as Jews are told to worship: “Know Him in all thy ways!” . . . Yes, Raḥel, *live*, live all you can! Don't be afraid of compromising your ideals or risking the hopes you have for the Land of Israel. More important than bringing back with you what you've studied in Europe is bringing back what you've lived there.

She heeded his advice. She excelled in her studies, perfected her French, read widely in its literature, enjoyed Toulouse's rich cultural life, hiked and toured the Occitan countryside, took art classes, spent summers in Italy, and had a romance with a Jewish Russian engineering student, Mikhail Bernstein—who, she later was to confide, was the great love of her life. (Though this ended with their separation, she and Mikhail continued to write to each other for years afterward.) Yet after receiving her degree in agronomy, she found the way back to Turkish-ruled Palestine barred by the world war: Turkey was allied with Germany, and its territories were off-limits to Russian nationals. She returned to Russia, lived for a while with a sister in Kremenchug, and found work in an orphanage in Berdyansk, on the Sea of Azov, where she spent most of the war years. When, in 1919, she finally made it back to Palestine, now in British hands, she brought

with her, besides more years of her life than she had counted on, a lung condition contracted in the orphanage.

Instead of rejoining Kinneret, she chose to live in nearby Degania. Her health being too poor for the farm work she had trained for, she was assigned to the kibbutz kitchen. "For some reason, I've been feeling worse," she wrote her sister Shoshanah, the great-aunt of the Israeli military historian Uri Milstein, who would write a biographical sketch of Raḥel. "The doctor told me that if I had any sense I would understand how irresponsible it is not to have my own separate dishes and utensils. But obviously, Shoshana'le, this isn't possible in a commune!"

From the kitchen, she was transferred to the children's home. (One of her charges there was the five-year-old Moshe Dayan, the future Israeli general and politician.) Re-examined, she was diagnosed with active tuberculosis. The kibbutz members were warned that she mustn't spend another day with the children. Indeed, she was a danger to them all.

She had had a premonition she would have to leave Degania. In "State of Mind," she had imagined herself a lonely outcast. Still, when it happened the shock was great. As described by Milstein:

There was much turmoil over how to inform Raḥel [that she was being asked to leave]. A young kibbutz member, David Gil'ad, was asked to tell her. Exactly what passed between them is unknown, but she was hurt to the core. She had yet to come to terms with her illness. She wanted to stay in the kibbutz; she loved her work with the children. It was a terrible blow. . . . [In a letter] she wrote how painful it was to be told by Gil'ad, "We're well and you're not. You have to go."

The kibbutz historian Muki Tsur relates that the event was traumatic for the members of Degania as well. They were a small group, living intimately together. Some delayed coming home from the fields that evening to avoid having to confront Raḥel. In the kibbutz's work sheet, found in its archives, her name on the next day's list of assignments is followed by the entry: "Gone to Tel Aviv with her belongings."

There is no record of Gordon, himself then ill with the cancer that soon would kill him, standing up for her. Of Gil'ad's visit to her room, she later wrote:

The messenger arrived at night
And sat upon my bed,
His fleshless bones protuberant,
His eyes deep-socketed.

At once I knew that the old bridge
The hands of time had hung
Between the future and the past
Had snapped and been unslung.

He shook a skinny fist and laughed
With cruel mirth, “You’re right.
Of all the poems you might write,
You’ll write the last tonight.”

In point of fact, nearly of all her poems were still to be written. But a life had indeed come to an end that night—not a whole one, certainly, but the one she had wanted to live.

I. A Mood Like None Other

Poems like “State of Mind” and “The Messenger Arrived at Night” have caused Raquel’s verse to be compared with Emily Dickinson’s. Although it is unlikely that she had any knowledge of the American poet, who died in obscurity four years before she was born, there are points of resemblance between them. Both were minimalists who preferred short poems, short lines, and plain phrasing. Both had a conservative preference for the rhymed quatrain. Both were fond of little surprises—the unanticipated phrase or word, the perspective-changing final line.

Raquel’s verse has been compared with Emily Dickinson’s. Both were minimalists; both were fond of little surprises; and in both there is a similar wryness of tone.

It goes beyond that. In both, there is a similar wryness of tone. A ruefulness over life’s caprices and missed opportunities. A fatalism and resignation to loss. A real or feigned modesty: *well, this is me—I know it isn’t much but it’s what there is*. Raquel paints her self-portrait:

As still as lake water:
That’s how I am.
I like quiet days, babies’ eyes,
And the poems of Francis Jammes.

Long ago my soul wore purple.
On mountain peaks
I walked with the wind
And the great birds’ shrieks.

Long ago, . . . but that was long ago
And time goes by.
It’s different now.
So am I.

Of Jammes, her favorite French poet, she once wrote, “He sits in his corner in his native mountains puffing on his pipe, reliving old memories, saddened by a passing cloud and rejoicing in a sun ray; not deep, not broad, not complicated, but evoking a mood like none other in which, all worry gone, you shelter and rest.”

Dickinson tells God:

Father, I bring thee not myself—
That were the little load;
I bring thee the imperial heart
I had not strength to hold.

Purple is the color of emperors. Both poets speak of having surrendered whatever large claims on life they may have had, in part because they are women in a man’s world. Though a source of regret, this is also one of strength. It frees them of the masculine drive to compete and control and allies them with all in life that is content to be merely itself. “I’m nobody!” declares Emily Dickinson.

Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there’s a pair of us—don’t tell!
They’d banish us, you know.

And Raḥel, who said of Jammes that “like the animals and birds, [he] demands nothing of anyone,” asks:

Was I once a wild thing among other wild things
In another, a far incarnation?
Is that why I feel such a sister to them
And a fear of man’s domination?

Yet as personalities, Raḥel and Dickinson were very different. Dickinson, the more quirky and original of the two, was a spinster and recluse who rarely ventured beyond the New England home she was born and died in. Raḥel, though she too never married, was a fully social and sexual being. When she was forced into increasing isolation by her illness in the years before her death in 1931, it was not of her own choosing. In her work is a quiet anger at her fate not found in Dickinson.

She was born in 1890 in Saratov on the Volga and grew up in Poltava in the Ukraine. Her father, Isser-Leib Bluvshayn, was a “Cantonist” in the reign of Nicholas I, one of thousands of Jewish boys snatched from their families, often by professional kidnapers, and impressed into military training and the Russian army to help fill the quota of draftees imposed upon the Jewish community. Although these youngsters, some no more than eight or nine years old, were not forced to become Christians, they were denied all means of practicing Judaism, and few had the

stubbornness and strength of character needed to retain their Jewish identities throughout their 25 years of military service. Isser-Leib was not only one of the exceptions, he was an outstanding soldier who served with distinction in the Crimean War, and the qualities that served him well in the army helped him to become a successful businessman after his discharge. When his first wife died and left him with four children, he married a younger woman, Raḥel's mother Sophia Mandelstamm, and had eight more children with her.

The Mandelstamms were a distinguished Russian Jewish family. Sophia's father was a noted rabbi; her uncle Leon was the first Jew to enroll, in 1840, in a Russian university. Her brother Max, Raḥel's uncle, was a noted ophthalmologist, Zionist leader, and colleague of Theodor Herzl's; in the debate over Ahad Ha'am's review of Herzl's *Altneuland* that [rocked the Zionist world](#) in 1902-3, he actively sided with Herzl. Somewhat less reputably, a cousin of Raḥel's, Rosa Mandelstamm, was a revolutionary involved in the 1861 assassination of Tsar Alexander I, while a more distant relative was the famous poet Osip Mandelstam. Sophia herself, who died when Raḥel was sixteen, was well-versed in Russian literature and corresponded with Tolstoy. She and Isser-Leib raised Raḥel in a home that was both strongly Jewish and thoroughly Russianized, something less uncommon in the 1890s and early 1900s than it had been in the 1870s and 80s.

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There were not many women in the Second Aliyah. Almost any female was an attraction, and Raḥel was more of one than most. One young *ḥalutz* who was drawn to her was Zalman Rubashov, later to become, as Zalman Shazar, the third president of the state of Israel. In a memoir, he would recall setting eyes on her for the first time after a nighttime hike to Kinneret along the lakeshore:

From a rise overlooking the lake, I caught sight of the commune's farmyard. Dawn was breaking. The Kinneret shone beneath me, peaceful and blue. The yard was surrounded by a fence. I hadn't yet reached the gate when I heard it unbolted from within, followed by an orchestra of lively quacks and flapping wings conducted by a wonderfully vibrant, commanding voice. I stopped in my tracks. The gate swung open and through it, flouncing over the hillside, burst a noisy gaggle of white geese. Behind them, gazelle-like on her feet and as winsome as the waters of the lake, strode a tall, stately, blue-eyed gooseherd in a snow-white dress. In one hand, her lithe figure held the branch of a date tree, and with this wand, in strong, young, ringing tones, she took charge of the clamorous flock. Gently but firmly, in a lilting Hebrew, she led it to pasture at dawn from the farmyard.

I watched from behind the fence, holding my breath, until the gleaming white procession had passed.

The gooseherd was the poetess Raḥel.

Needless to say, Shazar could hardly have made out the color of Raḥel's eyes from a distance in the dimness of dawn; nor was she likely to have been carrying a date branch, whose large fronds and nasty thorns would not have made it a suitable baton. When he wrote these words, Raḥel was long dead and had become a legend that his description partook of. Nevertheless, one can credit the substance of it. By all accounts, Raḥel was tall and striking; if photographs of her from this period fail to reveal a face of surpassing beauty, they do show a sensitive, finely-featured one of brooding intelligence that could easily have captivated a beholder. Shazar was not the only Second Aliyah *ḥaluts* to fall in love with her, nor the only one whose feelings were at least partly reciprocated.

“How did the days [in Kinneret] pass?” she wrote in a recollection from 1929.

Dawn would be breaking when we began work. There were fourteen of us—our hands callused, our legs barefoot, scratched, and sun-bronzed, our jaws set, our hearts aglow. The air rang with our singing, talk, and laughter. Our hoes kept rising and falling, stopping only long enough to wipe the sweat from our brows with a corner of our Arab *keffiyehs* while glancing lovingly at the lake. How good it felt! So much blue, so much halcyon, restorative, inexpressible blue! Far out on the water, a fishing skiff rocked. Soon the little steamboat that ferried passengers from Tsemaḥ to Tiberias would send up its plume of smoke.

It was, so to speak, the fulfillment of Gordon's prophecy to those laboring in “the workshop of Nature” that “when you pause to stretch your limbs and take a deep breath, you will be breathing more than air, . . . you will know the bliss of being in the Infinite.”

In the late 1920s, when the Second Aliyah was already history, Raḥel thought it wrong of its historians to emphasize the readiness of the *ḥalutsim* for self-sacrifice more than their spirit of youthful adventure. In a review of an article on the Second Aliyah by the physician and Labor Zionist publicist Moshe Beilinson, she took him to task for this. “They [put everything behind them] and started life anew,” she quoted Beilinson as saying as if this were the highest form of abnegation, and she commented:

What a common misperception! As if all young hearts (if they're truly young) don't hunger to start life anew, as if sleeping on a haystack or in a stable to the jingle of a mule's chain isn't a hundred times sweeter to them than a night spent in a featherbed!

Whereas Beilinson, she wrote, “saw [the Second Aliyah's] heroism in the renunciation of the comforts of the diaspora for a bitter subsistence in a desolate homeland, I see it in the courage to be happy in a homeland reborn and to stake one's life on it.”

She looked back on that time with longing. A poem written in 1927 wondered:

And perhaps it never happened that way?
Perhaps

I never set out for work on the garden path
In the first light of day?

Never once in the hot, long
Harvest time,
High on a wagon piled with hay,
Broke into song?

Never bathed until pure in the blue
Quietude
Of my Kinneret? . . . O my Kinneret!
Was it only a dream, then, not you?

She had known happiness in Degania, too, even when already ill. She described it in a poem called "Sabbath," written while still there. The kibbutz was situated at the Sea of Galilee's southern end, where the Jordan flows out of it, and the poem speaks of lolling by the river on the week's day of rest:

The Jordan's banks. I sprawl at ease.
A fishing skiff.
I drink my fill of peace.

I look above me: how much light!
And in my heart, as when I was a child,
There is no cloud in sight.

And now I know it: everything is here.
Let all the needy come
And take their share.

Was her being made to leave Degania avoidable? Moshe Dayan's mother Dvorah thought it might have been. "There were many things we didn't know how to care for properly in those days," she told an inquiring journalist years later,

the greatest of which was Raḥel's desire to remain in spite of her illness. I'm not overlooking the difficulties we faced; it goes without saying that we had to be as practical-minded as possible in building our collective. But we'll never cast off the shadow of that terrible night when Raḥel was told, "You're sick and can't live among the healthy." As obvious as that may have seemed to all of us, there was no real attempt to talk it over or to look for a better solution.

Milstein judges the members of Degania even more harshly. They were guilty, he writes, of an injustice that presaged, at the kibbutz movement's very inception, utopian socialism's incapacity to construct a more moral society than the one it had hoped to replace. In thinking only of themselves, they were acting as selfishly as the institutions of capitalism denounced by them. The banishment of a single sick woman from a small settlement by the Sea of Galilee was, for

Milstein, Labor Zionism's original sin, "a social and cultural tragedy." Not only Raḥel was expelled from her paradise that night. The Labor Zionist dream itself—[Yosef Hāyyim Brenner's](#) "Workers communes: that is our only revolution!"—was exposed in all its nakedness.

Quite apart from its sweeping historical generalizations, however, is such an accusation fair? Had Raḥel been made to leave Degania solely because she was too weak to carry her share of the load, it would indeed have constituted a betrayal of the kibbutz's principles. But what parents in even the most moral society would knowingly expose a child or themselves to a contagious and potentially fatal disease in order to accommodate a sick woman's needs? The members of Degania had to make a decision; one can legitimately fault the way it was carried out, but not the decision itself. Raḥel's was not the only case in those days in which high ideals foundered on constricted emotions. In remembering life and its daily hardships in Kinneret, the Second Aliyah pioneer Aliza Shidlovsky wrote of "how afraid we were of being weak. This fear made us cruel, knowingly so, to ourselves and to others. No one thought that a companion's feelings of loneliness or isolation needed to be a reason for concern. No one thought that anyone's depression or despair demanded special consideration."

Would it have been a "better solution" for Raḥel to have remained in the kibbutz in a state of quarantine? She herself never appears to have thought so. Nor did she, like Milstein, regard Degania's treatment of her as proof of a fundamental flaw in the idea of kibbutz life, in which she never lost her belief. Two years before her death she went back to Degania, now a larger but still Spartan settlement, and in "A Visit" wrote about returning to its children's home.

Evening. Autumn. A farm shack in the homeland.
Thin, chinked walls. An earthen floor. A room.
In one corner, a crib with white netting.
In the window, distances loom.

Guide me still, stubborn toil and hope of the tiller!
I still am yours, life of pure, patient want!
The children gather and silently wonder:
Why is she sad, the visiting aunt?

II. The Path of Simplicity

The argument that Raḥel's poetry, which has sometimes been called sentimental and simplistic, is neither of these things might start with "A Visit."

On the face of it, the speaker of its first stanza expresses no feeling at all. She simply lists what she sees or is aware of, from the all-pervasive (evening, autumn) to the specific (an earthen floor, a crib). And yet even as she is being merely enumerative, her voice is choked with emotion. This is conveyed to us by the pauses, dictated by the meter's caesuras, between each of her single or

several-word utterances, which are as long as the utterances themselves. We feel her eye linger on each thing that she names; the effort she puts into naming it; her need to rest from that effort before proceeding to the next thing; her fear that saying anything more might cause her to falter or break into tears.

Why? We cannot yet say. The little shack, the infant's crib with its mosquito netting, the gray evening gathering outside the window: in all this we sense a drama that has yet to be revealed. This is the very opposite of sentimentality: not an excess of emotion but a concealment of it.

In the second stanza, emotion bursts forth. It does so, however, in two different ways. In the stanza's first two lines, it takes the form of a sudden release. Speech breaks through the barriers holding it back, as though it had been forming behind them all along, in a pair of flowing, assertive exclamations so different from the halting words that have preceded them. *Guide me still, stubborn toil and hope of the tiller! I still am yours, life of pure, patient want!* Only now do we understand that the poet is standing in a place that belongs to her past, though she still identifies with its idealism, its ascetic way of life, its ethic of hard work, and its faith that it is building a better future for a people in its land. Resolutely, she declares that these values are still hers. Prayerfully, she hopes they always will be.

So she tells herself and us. But the stanza has two more lines. There are small children in the shack, apparently because it is a kibbutz nursery, and when they regard the visitor—the “aunt,” as Hebrew-speaking children were taught to address a female stranger in those days—they do not see resoluteness or hope. They see sadness. And although they say nothing, she sees in their eyes that they see it in hers. Is this a sadness she has been conscious of but has not wanted them to be? Or has she been hiding it from herself, too, and is now forced to acknowledge it? Either way, it is the sadness of knowing, all her brave words notwithstanding, that she can never again be part of what she sees.

A simple poem? Perhaps. But not simplistic.

Simplicity was Raḥel's poetic creed. It came from her reading of the contemporary poets she most admired: Akhmatova and Yesenin among the Russians; Jammes, Paul Fort, and Charles Wildrac among the French. “I consider it evident,” she stated in a short piece in the Labor Zionist newspaper *Davar*, in which she published her poetry and some prose throughout the 1920s,

that the signature of our times in poetry is simplicity of diction: language that expresses the first struggles of a lyric emotion to be born; that is immediate and has not had time to clothe its undress in silks and ornaments; that is free of all “literariness” and refreshingly unjaded, so that its human truth speaks to us directly.

Her sex—she belonged to the first generation of women authors in the history of Hebrew literature—had to do with it, too. Although she had received a Jewish education in Russia, this was more elementary than that given boys, and she arrived in Palestine with practically no knowledge of Hebrew. She learned it from speaking it and hearing it spoken, the way a child learns its native tongue, and while her poetry was not free of literary influences and mannerisms

—what poetry is?—her desire that it seem so was that of someone whose first, formative contact with the language did not come from books, as it had for every major Hebrew poet before her. The knowledge of Hebrew literature that she eventually acquired was appreciable. But although she knew, as she wrote in a poem, “All kinds of fine words/ That haughtily strut and parade,” none spoke to her like “The innocent speech of a child/ That is humble as dirt.” She had worked with such children in Degania.

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Rahel is the first modern Hebrew poet of note whose language is immediately recognizable to Israeli readers as their own. The two other leading young Hebrew poets of the 1920s, Uri Tsvi Grinberg (Greenberg) and Avraham Shlonsky, were both characterized by the “literariness” she criticized. Although both broke with Bialik’s prosody more sharply than she did, they retained his conception of the Hebrew poem as potentially interactive with the entire Hebrew literary corpus.

Grinberg, raised in a ḥasidic home in Galicia, came to Palestine in 1923; in his first years there, before veering politically to the right, he, like Rahel, was associated with Labor Zionism and *Davar*. In the opening lines of his long poem “Heroica,” which appeared in his first volume of verse, published in 1925, he addressed the *ḥaluts* of the Third Aliyah, the wave of immigration that reached Palestine in the years after World War I:

Like you I am poor on this holy earth the curse of whose beauty afflicts you and me
by day and by night.

Like you I know not why we left the house of our fathers and desertward came, joyous
and barefoot.

For us did the sands glow, the clefts of the rocks to inherit.
Words were as poems.

Like you I know not wherefore the soil’s clods
were sweetened for us by the mercy of God and the moon and the wailing of jackals.

Yet one is the well from which we have all slaked our thirst
on the hashish of Hebrew.

Grinberg’s long, sprawling lines of free verse were unique in the Hebrew of the times, as was their heavily cadenced, incantatory rhetoric whose sometimes archaizing language (e.g., “desertward,” the Hebrew *ḥamidbarah*) and obscurity (how is one, syntactically, to construe “the clefts of the rock to inherit”?) clash with brash modernisms like “the hashish of Hebrew.” His scavenging of ancient sources went beyond anything that Bialik and his generation permitted themselves. The dative “us” of “For us did the sands glow,” for instance, is, for rhythmic reasons, the Aramaic *lan* of the Talmud, a usage totally foreign to Hebrew, in which the word is *lanu*. It would be hard to think of a poetic style further removed from Rahel’s.

Shlonsky, too, grew up in a ḥasidic home, in the Ukraine. Arriving in Palestine in 1921, he briefly belonged to a pioneering work brigade and a kibbutz before moving to Tel Aviv. More tightly controlled than Grinberg's, his poetry was no less steeped in the imagery of a religious upbringing. In his poem "Work," one of his own salutes to the Third Aliyah *ḥaluts*, Grinberg's "Like you I" becomes simply "I":

Dress me, good Jewish mother, in a coat
Of many-colored splendor and send me off to work at dawn.
My land dons light like a prayer shawl.

Its houses are the boxes of phylacteries,
Their leather straps the blacktopped roads that muscled arms have paved.

The comely city prays to its Creator.
And a creator, too, am I,
Your son Avraham,
A poet-road paver in Israel,
And at eventide, home from the day's toil,
Father prays, whispering with pleasure:
Is not Avraham my dear son?
Skin, bone, and sinew.
Hallelujah!

"Work" is an extended metaphor in which the Land of Israel is likened to a praying Jew whose *t'filin* are the handiwork of the Zionist pioneer, and the pioneer himself first to the biblical Joseph, who sets out to join his brothers in his coat of many colors; then to God's partner in Creation with its "comely city" of Tel Aviv (Shlonsky's word for which, *kiryah*, is taken from Psalm 48, where it refers to Mount Zion and Jerusalem); and finally, to the wayward Ephraim of the book of Jeremiah, of whom God says, "Is not Ephraim my dear son? Is he not a pleasant child? For since I spoke against him, I do earnestly remember him still." As God is reconciled to Ephraim despite having been deserted by him for other gods, so the poet's toiling father in Eastern Europe, though initially angry at his son for abandoning him for a pioneering life in Palestine, is now pleased by it for having added, as the next-to-the-last line implies, the sinew of muscle to the "skin and bones" of the exilic Jewish body

Like "Work," Grinberg's "Heroica" frames the pioneers' experience in religious terms. The coarse bread that is their supper is "more sacred than the showbread on the golden table of the Temple." The smoke rising from their cheap cigarettes is like priestly incense. God Himself knows how "holy is the hand that seizes the hoe." Behind both poems, each a hymn to a new, physically robust type of Jew, stands a body of biblical and rabbinic literature and a century of Haskalah and Zionist thought, from Joseph Perl's [imagined utopia](#) of Jewish farmers to Ahad Ha'am's proposed secular recasting of the symbols and values of Judaism, and from Micha Yosef Berdichevsky's [call for a revolt](#) against Jewish tradition in the name of Jewish existence to A.D. Gordon's neo-ḥasidic "religion of labor."

Raḥel's experience as a *ḥaluts* was not necessarily very different from Grinberg's or Shlonsky's; she thought highly of both and with Grinberg she even had a friendship. This did not prevent her, however, from expressing what would appear to be her reservations about their poetry in "To My Land," written in 1926:

I have not sung to you, my land,
Psalms of high praise,
Or glorified you
With a hero's deeds;
Only with a tree
Planted by the Jordan's banks,
Only with a path
Trod through your fields.

How little, Mother,
That has been, I know,
How small
Your daughter's gift:
Just a cry of joy
When dawn broke over you,
Just, for your poverty,
A tear of grief.

It says much for such a poem that it makes "Heroica" and "Work," however taken by them we may be, seem posturing and declamatory. It, too, strikes a pose; but though its self-belittlement is as calculated as Grinberg and Shlonsky's grandiosity, it seems, paradoxically, surer of itself and no less accomplished in its art. "The path of simplicity is a difficult one," Raḥel wrote, and it is indeed harder to get away with being simple. Complexity leaves room for error: a wrong word or phrase can be outbalanced by others and go unnoticed, or at least not given too much weight. Simplicity leaves none. It is like a tightrope walker's rope: one false step and one has fallen.

There are no false steps in "To My Land." Its simplicity presupposes daring just as its humility presupposes pride. If Raḥel had poems like "Heroica" and "Work" in mind when she wrote it, she was saying, of them, "That's rousingly put, but don't expect me to compete with it." *She* had only planted a tree and walked through fields, and she knew how little that was. And how much.

III. Raḥel and Rachel

The Bible was as important to Raḥel as it was to Grinberg or Shlonsky, perhaps even more so, but in a different way. Although it was a book she kept by her side since her first Hebrew lessons in Rehovot, she rarely drew on it linguistically. She did so, however, thematically, often by means of

an identification with a biblical character. Such is her poem about her namesake, the matriarch Rachel:

Her voice sings in mine.
In me her blood wells.
Raḥel who pastured the flock—
The mother Raḥel's.

If all cities feel strange
And all walls hem me in,
It's because her scarf fluttered free
In the desert's *ḥamsin*.

And if I go my own way
With such confidence,
It's because my feet know the path
Ever since, ever since!

Does Raḥel see herself in the biblical Rachel or does she see the biblical Rachel in herself? She does both. She knows what it was like to have been Rachel because she knows what it is like to be Raḥel, and she is Raḥel because there is something in her of Rachel. A bond that starts with a name ends in a sense of deep kinship.

This was new in modern Hebrew literature. Depictions of biblical characters in terms other than those of traditional rabbinic exegesis were as old as, if not older than, that literature itself; in respect of them, 19th-century works like Avraham Mapu's [biblical novels](#), the biblical poems of Micha Yosef Lebensohn, or [Y.L. Gordon](#)'s poems "The Love of David and Tamar" and "Zedekiah in Prison," though innovative in other ways, had their 18th-century predecessors. But for a sense of closeness to a biblical character so great that it erases all distance and transforms her or him from a literary or historical subject to an immediately felt human presence, Hebrew literature had to wait for Raḥel.

When Raḥel speaks in her poem "Yonatan" to Jonathan, King Saul's son and David's loyal companion who stands by him even when Saul seeks to kill him, the thousands of years between them dissolve all at once. "Yonatan" bears a superscription referring the reader to a story in the book of Samuel (in a typical intertextually allusive Hebrew poem, we would have been left to make the connection unaided) about how Jonathan, having led his troops to victory over the Philistines, is condemned to death for tasting a morsel of honey in contravention of his father's command that no food be touched until the battle is won. Although he is ultimately pardoned, the news comes too late, as it were, to reach the poet in time:

Through a haze he emerges—a delicate youth
In princely finery,
Too stout-hearted to abandon a friend
Or flee an enemy.

And you must die, Yonatan? The path of a man
In this wrathful existence is sad.
Each of us pays with his life for the taste
Of what little honey he's had.

And you must die, Yonatan? The words, tender and sorrowful, have the intimacy of a friend's. "Yonatan," like "Raḥel," is about the poet no less than about a biblical figure; more precisely, it is about the poet's conviction that she and this figure share something in common. She, too, has fleetingly tasted the honey of happiness and been sentenced to die—not by a royal father but by an illness from which there is no reprieve.

The immediacy that the Bible had for Raḥel was paralleled by the immediacy of the biblical landscape that surrounded her in Palestine. This landscape is not stressed in her biblical poems. In "Yonatan" it is not mentioned at all while in "Raḥel" it is referred to only in the lines ". . . her scarf fluttered free/ In the desert's *ḥamsin*," in which Laban's daughter, the future wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph, is glimpsed as a surefooted young Bedouin shepherdess, the scarf that covers her face when in company now blowing freely in the *ḥamsin*, the hot Arabian wind.

But there is no need to look for prooftexts of this sort. "The Bible," as the Israeli historian Anita Shapira has written,

had a special place in the life of the Second Aliyah. There was hardly a *ḥaluts*'s room in which a copy of it wasn't found. The memory of the Land of Israel as the Jewish people's homeland was preserved in it. It was it that made the tie to this land tangible. It served the pioneers as a geographical, zoological, and botanical guidebook. They commonly hiked about the country with it, using it as a Baedeker to the places they passed through.

The First Aliyah too, of course, had been highly Bible-conscious; so was all of Zionism. Ben-Gurion's much-quoted remark to the British Peel Commission in 1936 that the Bible was the Jewish people's title deed to Palestine said nothing that Zionism hadn't said endlessly from the start. If the Second Aliyah was different, this was because many of its participants believed that living in the land of the Bible gave them a key to the Bible's text possessed by none before them and that this text in turn served as a manual to the land. This belief was passed on by them to the Yishuv of the 1920s and 30s, by which it was then transmitted to post-1948 Israel.

Participants in the Second Aliyah believed that living in the land of the Bible gave them a key to the Bible's text possessed by none before them, and that this text in turn served as a manual to the land.

Raḥel was a poet—*the* poet—of the Second Aliyah. No other book, no poet she loved, meant to her what the Bible did. Although it was not religious truth for her, neither was it fiction; it was a lived reality. She can make us feel, with a few simple words, that she experiences Jonathan from

within because she has taken Jonathan into her. The same hold true of Rachel; the same of Mikhal, Saul's daughter and David's first wife.

The story of Mikhal and David is found in the book of Samuel, too. It is a story of a romance and marriage gone sour, or at least souring from Michal's point of view, since the Bible that speaks of her love for David never mentions his love for her. Gordon's "The Love of David and Mikhal" follows the two, in narrative style, from youth to old age. Raḥel's "Mikhal" treats only of a single moment. In 2Samuel we read how David, upon recovering the captured Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines, accompanies it back to Jerusalem with a throng of rejoicing Israelites, "leaping and dancing" with no thought of his royal dignity, and how Mikhal, observing the scene from the window of her palace, "despised him in her heart" for his commonness. (She is after all a king's daughter, whereas David comes from a rustic home.) In a poem, Raḥel addresses Mikhal directly as she did Jonathan:

Mikhal, my distant sister! Unbroken is the cord that binds the ages.
In your rueful garden grow no weeds of time.
Your silken mantle's purple stripes have never faded,
Nor have your golden anklets ceased to chime.

Ofttimes I've seen you standing by your window,
Pride mixed with tenderness in your fair eyes.
Mikhal, my sister! I am as sad as you are.
The man I love I too, like you, despise.

IV. Love and Lovelessness

Raḥel's relationships with men were unsatisfying, to judge from her poetry. (In the absence of a full-length biography, this must remain our main source of information about them.) As her health deteriorated in the 1920s, it ruled out a full sexual life; her illness wasted her body and made physical contact with her a risk. Even before then, however, her romantic involvements failed to meet her expectations. She was easily disappointed; acquaintances ascribed to her high standards and a sarcastic wit deft at deflating mediocrity and pretension. High-born in Jewish terms on her mother's side, she was anything but a snob; but if there was a natural aristocracy of souls in the world, she felt she belonged to it. Men who demonstrated by their speech or behavior that they did not, however attracted to them she might be, were in peril of arousing her scorn.

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With the exception of Mikhail Bernstein, she seems never to have given her heart fully to anyone. In letters to her after his return to Russia from Toulouse, Mikhail stated his remorse for not having been more open and emotionally expressive with her; the thought haunted him that he had let slip an opportunity for happiness that would not recur. Raḥel's letters to him have not survived. Yet her poems reveal that frustrating ties with men who could not or would not share their inner selves with her were a repetitive pattern. One of these she called "A Cloister":

Who are you? Why, a hand held out,
Is none returned?
And those eyes that waver for a moment
And are downturned!

A cloister. No path leads up to it.
A cloister of a man.
Should I have gone away?
Or hammered on the rock until blood ran?

The image in the last line is taken from the biblical story of the rock angrily struck by Moses for its water, though God had told him simply to speak to it. Although the woman in the poem has tried speaking and gotten nowhere, she remains drawn to the man whose defenses she has been unable to break through. Why else think of laceratingly persisting in her efforts?

Only once did Raḥel write a poem about sexual intimacy. It, too, has a line from the Bible, the verse "Set me as a seal upon thine arm" from the Song of Songs.

Lips meet but hearts stay apart.
Each heart the other heart fears,

Jerked on a chain by fate's hand
Like two dancing bears.

The rattle of the iron leash,
The drunken dance, the blood's wild peal,
Drown out the yearning voice that prays,
"Set me as a seal . . ."

Not love but lovelessness is the subject of this poem, whose man and woman, yoked together by animal arousal, remain on guard against the aggression this might set off in the other. Although the woman is as willing a participant in the "drunken dance" of sex as is the man, a part of her has not joined in and longs for more. In the Songs of Songs, too, the Hebrew language's great duet of sexual passion, it is the woman who pleads for a "seal," a pledge of permanent love to anchor the precariousness of erotic emotion. In Raḥel's poem, this plea goes unheard.

It was not answered in her life, either. From some men, she could not have hoped for it to be; contemporary gossip linked her to several who were married. Such liaisons were humiliating for her; yet if she wanted meaningful male companionship, her choice was limited. The Yishuv of

the 1920s was a restricted world, its population no larger than a small city's. Not many men were her equal, and by the time she was in her thirties, nearly all of them had wives. Leaving them for her, even had they wished to, was not an option; sexually permissive in some ways, the Yishuv looked askance at divorce. Raḥel's poem "His Wife" describes being in such a relationship:

When she calls him by name,
Her voice doesn't tremble.
I don't trust my own
To dissemble.

She walks down the street by his side
In plain sight;
I, in the dark of concealment
At night.

She wears—shiny, serene—
A gold ring on her finger.
But my iron chains
Are seven times stronger!

The last two lines are ambiguous. Is the poet boasting that despite the disadvantage she is at, the husband is bound to her by an attachment more unbreakable than his marriage bond? Or is she confessing an inability even greater than his wife's to sever her connection with him? Her position is unenviable in either case.

Raḥel was not, in our sense of the word, a feminist. She did not make a cause of being a woman, and feminism was a marginal issue in her environment. Precisely the fact that the Second Aliyah and the Palestinian Jewish society it molded were, ideologically, outspokenly in favor of sexual equality made it difficult to protest against, or at times even to identify, the inequalities that existed. Raḥel was accepted by her male acquaintances as their peer and was well aware of their admiration for her. Milstein quotes an account by the author and journalist Meri Yatsiv of a meeting of *Davar's* editorial board that both she and Raḥel attended. Presiding over it were the paper's three senior editors, all married men with whom Raḥel was rumored to have had affairs: Shazar, Beilinson, and the prominent Labor Zionist intellectual Berl Katznelson.

There were three tables in the room. At each sat one of the men, a trio of close and good friends. Raḥel took her place among them, a starry twinkle in her large blue eyes. She was in high spirits and joked with an inimitable flair. All three men were her playthings. For one, she had a fond word; for another, a saucy jibe; for the third, a compliment. . . . Suddenly, the three friends were three rivals. They didn't look at each other. Each strove to outshine the others. The atmosphere grew tense. There was a sense of excitement in the air mixed with jealousy and a wistfulness that such a woman [so different from their wives] existed. Raḥel was scintillating, beautiful with a no-longer physical beauty—clever, witty, lively, casting a spell.

And yet *Davar's* highest positions, like those of every other major institution in the Yishuv, were reserved for men. Raḥel had no steady income from the newspaper and lived her last years in relative poverty. (Although her father, who had taken a third wife, also settled in Palestine, she did not get along with her stepmother, quarreled with them both, and received little support from them and no inheritance.) Despite her power over men in some situations, she could not help internalizing her dependence on them, even her gratitude for whatever crumbs fell to her from their table. Her poem "A Woman" is candid about this:

And so,
Seen crystal-clearly from below,
The view is like this
The hand of a master on which,
With the sad, selfless look
Of a slave or intelligent dog,
One has the indistinct wish
To lavish in silence
A kiss.

It is hard, nearly one-hundred years later, to appreciate the courage it took for her to publish such poems in a Hebrew-speaking community in which everyone knew everyone and anything, let alone a poem in a widely read newspaper, could set off a round of prurient speculation. Whose lips had hers met? Whose wife was "his"? There was no way to avoid such talk or to deflect it with the explanation that poetry, like fiction, need not reflect the personal life of its author. Such a parry would have been disingenuous in any case, because Raḥel's poetry *was* intensely personal. She once wrote, "I only know to tell of myself./ My world is as small as an ant's." The first of those two lines was true.

In one of her last poems, something in her relations with men seems to change. Written shortly before her death, it was called in Hebrew *Ednáh*. This is a difficult word to translate. It occurs once in the Bible, in the barren Sarah's bitterly laughing remark when told by an angel that she will conceive and give birth: "Now that I am old [i.e., no longer of child-bearing age], am I to have an *ednah*?" Biblical commentators have connected the word with a restoration of sexual vitality; in post-biblical Hebrew, it has the more general sense of a rejuvenation or renewal. In Raḥel's poem it refers, standing the biblical meaning on its head, to a quiescence of sexual feeling and the possibility of male-female friendship, or something even deeper, undisturbed by erotic tension.

How strange it is: all the anger
And all the words of harsh strife
Have fanned the tenderest embers
Wondrously back into life.

No longer are we man and woman
Locked in the old, deadly war.

You have become the brother I love,
The little son I adore.

A brother, a son: how uncomplicatedly one could love them! She had always, like the biblical Sarah, wanted a child of her own. In a poem called “Barren,” in which she compared herself with two other childless women in the Bible, Rachel and Hannah, she dreamed of being the mother of “a wise little boy,/ His hair curly and dark,/ With a hand I could hold/ When we strolled in the park.” In another poem, written in the same month as *Ednáh*, the dream is of returning to the blissfully pre-sexual state of childhood:

Again to be rosy-souled children who pick
Their joys like wildflowers in fields that are thick
With them! No one’s hands tire, and at a thorn’s scratch,
The sun with a smile wipes the teardrops from each.

“God would be kind,” the poem said, “if we could forget all/ The griefs of the years and their journey in which/ We grow up and grow sad with too much to recall.”

She died two months later, at the age of forty.

V. Last Years

At the editorial meeting described by Meri Yatsiv, Raḥel was already severely ill. “The marvelous show she put on,” Yatsiv wrote,

did not last long. When she felt her strength failing, she rose and asked me to see her home while declining each of the three men’s offer to escort her. They walked her to the street and a waiting hansom [automobiles were still uncommon in Palestine] while she threw off a few last sparks from the fire she had lit. Once in the cab, she fell back lifelessly with a deathly pallor. Her breathing was frightfully loud. She had to be carried to her room.

Her last years were spent in and out of hospitals. A poem written in the mid-1920s describes being in one:

The chalk-white path runs up the hill and disappears.
What good does that do in my prison?
I stare out the window and for no reason
Burst into tears.

The examining doctor remarks, “Your eyes are red.
Is it from straining to see past that hill?”

“That’s very well said,” I reply with a smile
And a bow of my head.

This is typical Raḥel: the straightforward first stanza and the ironic twist of the second one that follows. The irony is twofold. First comes the doctor’s: noticing that his patient has been crying, and that she knows that he knows, he seeks to ease her embarrassment with a teasing remark. Then comes the poet’s: the doctor has spoken, she declares, more truly than he knows. She has indeed been crying because of the hill and the path, whose unknown destination stands in her mind for a future that is blocked, perhaps forever, by her illness. The bow of her head is both an acknowledgement of the doctor’s kindness and a token of submission to her fate. Does he understand this? Does he comprehend all that is in her smile? That depends on how insightful he is.

In the rented rooms in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv that she lived in, she was bed-ridden much of the time, too. In her poem “At Night,” her bed has become a desk at which she conducts her correspondence. The poem harks back once more to the Bible, to its story of Saul’s nighttime visit to the witch of En-Dor. Saul, who is about to die the next day in battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa, asks the old woman to raise the spirit of the dead Samuel so that he might inquire of it what will happen to him. When the shade of the prophet appears, it angrily rebukes Saul with the words, “Wherefore dost thou ask of me, seeing the Lord is departed from thee and become thine enemy?” and informs him of his imminent death. Raḥel wrote:

Around, on sheet and pillow,
Old letters lie galore.
Bent over them, I call to mind
The sorceress of En-Dor.
Yet apropos tomorrow,
I need no prophecy.
The oracle that is my heart
Knows God is far from me.

It knows Gilboa’s sorrow.
My preparations made,
I stare all night at writing
That is about to fade.

God is rarely mentioned in Raḥel’s poems. The divine revealed itself to her, as it did to A.D. Gordon, in nature, and if she felt far from it, this was because, deprived of natural health, she was forced to live in cities removed from nature, too. “The sidewalks spurn/ The gift of the rain,/ And no clod of earth lifts/ Its stirred voice in a paean,/ To its maker,” she wrote of Tel Aviv. Her sense of exile from the Kinneret never left her.

God is rarely mentioned in Raḥel’s poems. The divine revealed itself to her in nature.

Yet poetically, her last two or three years were her most productive period. A large part of her work was written in them, as if spurred by the knowledge that she had little time left. She knew she was dying more clearly than did the friends who helped care for her. The future newspaper columnist and translator Rivka Davidit, who was barely twenty at the time, would remember:

One day she felt very poorly, and listening to her terrible cough, I thought to my horror for the first time, "She's not long for this world!" But I didn't dwell on it, and though her condition, if anything, grew worse, she was so alert and sometimes even merry that I regarded her coughing fits as temporary setbacks. . . . Such was my blindness that when she said to me one evening after a long silence, "You know, I'll be setting out soon," I gave her a joyful look. "Really? You're going abroad?" Right away I imagined her in some magical sanatorium from which she would return totally cured. I stared at her as if awaiting confirmation. She nodded slowly. She didn't have it in her to puncture my foolish happiness.

In the early spring of 1931, Raḥel was moved to a sanatorium in Gedera, near Rehovot. In mid-April, her condition deteriorated further. A horse-drawn carriage was summoned to take her back to Tel Aviv for hospitalization. On the way, she asked to make a detour to Rehovot; she wanted to see her friend Nakdimon Altshuler, with whom she had been in touch since he courted her in her first days in Palestine. The doctor with her begged her not to waste precious moments. She insisted. Altshuler recalled afterward:

I went out to her. She was lying in the carriage. . . . Before me was a human skeleton. Her magnificent hair had turned to dry straw. Her sensitive, high-spirited face with its enigmatically mocking smile that no man could get to the bottom of had shrunk and collapsed. I looked at her and started to cry. Her blue eyes the color of the spring sky looked back at me; there was a single tear on her cheek. . . . She said, "Shalom, Nakdimon." I said, "Shalom, Raḥel." The doctor signaled the coachman, who reached for the reins. With a lurch, the carriage began to move slowly.

Her last poem was found in her room in Gedera after her funeral. She had given it the title "My Dead":

They alone are left me, they alone won't feel
Death plunge in them its dagger of cold steel.
Up ahead, where the road bends,
They'll fall in wordlessly with me when the day ends.
We have a pact that no one can unsign.
Only what I've lost is always mine.

VI. A Zionist Heroine?

Two volumes of Raḥel's poems came out in her lifetime, one in 1927 and one in 1930. A third was published posthumously in 1932. Since then her collected verse has gone through many editions, some illustrated, some accompanied by photographs, memoirs, and essays. With the possible exception of Bialik, no Hebrew poet from pre-statehood Israel has continued to have so large a readership. Her books are given as gifts. Her poems have been set to music, some in songs that all know. They are part of every school curriculum. Her gravesite on the southern shore of the Kinneret draws a constant stream of visitors. Hers is now the face on Israel's 20-shekel bill.

There are obvious reasons for her high standing with Israeli readers. Her poetry is accessible in a way that most serious modern poetry is not. It conforms to the ordinary reader's notions of what poetry should be like. It deals with situations and emotions that are easily identified with. Raḥel's nostalgia for Kinneret and Degania strike a chord in a country that, too, feels nostalgic for a time when it was smaller and more cohesive. She has been embraced by a national narrative that has given her an iconic status. After her death, her story was turned by the cultural and educational organs of the Yishuv, and subsequently of Israel, into the heroic drama of a fetching and talented young woman from a privileged home who, a world of possibilities before her, sacrificed all on the altar of Zionism.

After her death, Raḥel's story was turned into the heroic drama of a fetching and talented young woman who sacrificed all on the altar of Zionism.

There is little to be said for such a view. Raḥel's tuberculosis, without which her life would have been unimaginably different and almost certainly happier, was contracted in circumstances having nothing to do with Zionism and would probably have been incurable in Europe, too. Even had she been healthy, she might ultimately have left Degania of her own accord, just as Shlonsky left Eyn-Harod, and looked back on her years as a *ḥaluts* as a fondly remembered episode from her youth. She would almost certainly have shrunk from being called a Zionist heroine, just as she would have winced at the thought of being fingered by a nation on its currency. Her large eyes stare out quizzically from the bill as if to ask, "Where have you put me?"

The justice of this question has been acknowledged. The same Israeli ministry of education that once helped propagate what the critic Dan Miron has called the "passion play" version of Raḥel's life has now adopted the opposite outlook. A recent ministry handbook urges teachers of literature to discard "gender stereotypes" that treat Raḥel as a suffering victim with no agency of her own and to avoid "the myth that has formed around her and helped 'market' her as a popular poet to this day." Her poems deserve to be studied, teachers are told to stress, "because of their great lyric power, which make them classic expressions of pain, solitude, yearning, and regret that are humanly relevant to everyone."

There can be no quarrel with this. Raḥel was a Zionist and she bore her life bravely, but it was not as a Zionist that she was brave. She never blamed Zionism for her misfortunes or sought to justify them as the price exacted by it. Herzl had thought that Zionism would solve the problems of the

Jews and Ahad Ha'am that it would solve those of Jewishness; by Raḥel we are told only that it would not solve, as A.D. Gordon and the young pioneers of Kinneret and Degania had dreamed that it would, the problems of the human condition—and we are told this without her bothering to say so. Although the 1920s were a tumultuous period in Palestine, one that witnessed the beginnings of large-scale Jewish immigration, the establishment of dozens of new Jewish settlements, the rise to power in the Yishuv of Labor Zionism, the emergence of a right-wing Zionist opposition to it, the first massive anti-Zionist violence by Arabs, and the first clashes between the Zionist movement and the British mandate administration, there is not a reference to any of this in her poetry.

A single poem of hers touched on Zionism at all. Written in 1927, it was called “Here, on This Earth!”

Here, on this earth! Not in some cloud land—no,
Here on this mothering earth that is near,
With its sorrows and joys, however threadbare,
That comfort us so.

Not in some mist time! Now, with what is at hand;
With this warm, fleeting, palpable day,
This day that is seizable only today—
Here, in our land.

Come, come all who can, before night's knell!
Can it be for a thousand arms too much
To roll with one last rallying push
The stone from the mouth of the well?

What is it, apart from this poem's subject matter, that makes it different from nearly everything else that Raḥel wrote? Its note of urgency, one might say. But what—apart, again, from the words—helps sound such a note? One can point to several things. (As in my other translations in this essay, I have tried to reproduce formal features of Raḥel's poetry without always matching them line for line.) A sense of agitated emotion conveyed by the meter's extreme irregularity in some places. A predominance in these places of strongly stressed, hortatory syllables. The insistent repetition of key words and phrases. We feel the poet's pressing need to be heard, to convince us of something.

What is this something? It is the need “to roll with one last rallying push/ The stone from the mouth of the well.” Once more Raḥel takes a key image from a favorite story in the Bible—this time that of Rachel and Jacob. Arriving at the home of Laban to which he has fled from the wrath of his brother Esau, Jacob encounters Rachel waiting by a well to water her flock, which she can only do when all the shepherds of the area have gathered, since their collective strength is needed to move the stone covering the well. But “it came to pass,” the Bible relates, “that when Jacob saw Rachel, . . . he went near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother.”

Raḥel is calling on her Hebrew readers in Palestine, then, to make a herculean effort to . . . do what? They are to do it *now . . . here, on this earth . . . not in some cloud land . . . before night's knell*, . . . but what is it that they are to do?

It is a call for action, this poem. It demands that something humanly fantastical take place without the aid of utopian fantasies, with plain, ordinary means, with “what is at hand.” Here. Now. Today.

What?

For the 1920s, 1927 was an undramatic year. Palestine was quiet. Jewish immigration was down. Between its explosion in the riots of 1921 and its next eruption in 1929, violent Arab resistance to Zionism was resting. A Jewish state still seemed far-off, if at all conceivable. What was Raḥel thinking of?

Perhaps simply this: *I'm Rachel, I'm at the well, I can't wait for all the shepherds to gather!* If you who are already here, in the Land of Israel, live this moment with all the intensity and solidarity that you can, you may yet accomplish something extraordinary before I—before all of us—die.

This is as close to a Zionist statement as Raḥel's poetry makes. It is one of her few poems written, as it were, in a major key. She was on the whole a minor-key poet. This is not necessarily the same as being a minor poet, but it invites such an appraisal. Would calling her a great minor poet be a “gender-stereotypic” dismissal of her? Only if one fails to recognize what a rarity great minor poets are. A literature is lucky to have several in a century. Apart from the truly major ones, they are the only ones who survive. Raḥel will be read outside the classroom long after many excellent Hebrew poets of her age, men and women alike, have been confined within the classroom's walls.