

Book Review

Bitton, Michèle. *Poétesses et lettrées juives: Une mémoire éclipsee*. Paris: Editions Publisud, 1999. [French]

In this book, author Michele Bitton reviews a long list of women writers from Deborah in the Bible to Pnina Moise, a 19th century American writer. This important book is long overdue since it debunks the pervasive myth that, until the previous century, women were generally uneducated and incapable of any literary endeavour. Deborah's song, in which she calls herself "a mother in the midst of Israel" is the oldest song in the Bible. Moreover, Hanna, Sarah and Rachel all expressed their plea to God to grant them a child in very lyrical prayers. Esther, trembling with fear, before her meeting with the Persian King, begs God to assist her in some of the Bible's most memorable words.

Following the Biblical period, Jewish women continued to write delightful poetry in both Hebrew and Arabic. Sarah, a contemporary of the founder of Islam, Mohamed (570-632), and a member of the Kurayza tribe, wrote verses so beautiful that they appear in *Kitab al-Aghani*, a classic anthology of Arabic poetry; Kasmouna, daughter of Samuel ha-Nagid, (983-1056) the famous poet, warrior and statesman, was also a noted poet in the Arabic language.

Others wrote in Hebrew; for example, the wife of the famous grammarian, Dounash ben Labrat, Rashi's (1040-1105) three daughters and Paola Anav dei Mansei (8th-9th centuries) of Rome.

In 1475, Estellina Conat became the first female printer in Mantova. The daughter of Rabbi Samuel ben Ali (1164-1193) in Iraq was known for her great knowledge of the Scriptures, and in Yemen, in the 15th century, Miriam, the daughter of Benahya the scribe was a well known copyist.

Although there were no great female poets in the Middle Ages, at least none known to us currently, Bitton clarifies that literate Jewish women were not as rare as we tend to assume.

After the Middle Ages, the Inquisition and the Alhambra Decree mandating the expulsion of all Jews from Spain, the locus of Jewish culture shifted to Italy, the Ottoman Empire, the Netherlands and Central/Eastern Europe.

In Italy, Giustina Levi-Perotti became very famous upon sending two poems to Petrarch (1304-1374). In 1510, Rosa Levi wrote a sonnet for the Venitian poet Luigi Grotto. Pomona de Modene left us a scholarly correspondance with Rabbi David Immola, and Fioretta de Modene was very knowledgeable in the Zohar, and wrote extensively about the Rambam. Two very well educated women of the 16th century were Benvenida Abravanel who was chosen by the vice-king of Naples to be his daughter's tutor, and Dona Gracia Nasi about whom Cecil Roth wrote: "in all of Jewish history no woman has ever been so worshipped, no other woman has deserved it more".

In 1602 in Venice, Deborah Ascarelli published poems in Italian, and in 1621, still in Venice, Sarah Copio Sullam, accused by a priest (who had tried, unsuccessfully, to convert her) of not believing in the immortality of the soul, wrote a defiant manifesto on the subject, followed by two poems on related topics. A century later, Anna del Monte, forced by her husband to convert to Catholicism, described her painful inner struggle in a very moving journal.

During this period, many Spanish Jews fled to Amsterdam where they returned to Judaism and founded Jewish Academies wherein women such as Isabel Henriquez and Isabel Correa, rich and famous aristocrats, were welcome. Both women wrote poems in Castilian (a provincial Spanish language). Other Spanish women such as Sarah Fonseca, Pina y Pimentel, Manuela Nunes de Almeida and Bienbenida Cohen Belmonte, chose to settle in England. They also wrote poems in Castilian.

Rebecca Tiktiner from Poland wrote biblical poetry in Yiddish, and Gluckel de Hameln (1647-1724), wrote *Zykroynes*, her memoirs also in Yiddish. Towards the end of the 18th century, Henriette Herz, nicknamed "the Beautiful Jewess", born in Berlin in 1764 and converted to Christianity in 1817, translated travelers' journals into German; her own memoirs were published after her death in 1847. Dorothea Schlegel, daughter of Moses Mendelssohn, born in Berlin in 1765, converted to Protestantism in 1804, after three of her siblings had already converted, and a few years later she converted to Catholicism. She became extremely devout towards the end of her life and convinced her two sons from a previous marriage to a Jewish banker to convert. She was famous for her "salons" and left mostly German translations of French works. Her sister, Henriette (1768-1831), also kept a famous salon and converted to Catholicism in 1807. Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1823), born in Berlin to an orthodox family kept a very modest salon from 1790 to 1806. In 1800, her brother Ludwig converted and she followed suit in 1808 to marry Karl Varnhagen, an officer, 13 years her junior. The couple shared a passion for Goethe. After her death, her husband published her writings; her journal and three volumes of letters she wrote about the people and events of her time.

Marianne Meyer (1770-1812), born in to a very rich orthodox family converted to Protestantism and married the old Prince Henry XV de Reuss. She left mostly letters. Goethe trusted his manuscripts to her, and quoted her letters in his writings.

In England, Grace Aguilar (1816-1847) lefts works about Judaism as well as novels. Abigail Lindo (1803-1848), wrote one of the first Hebrew-English dictionaries and dialogues in Hebrew and English. Lady Judith Montefiore (1784-1862), wife of the famous philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore whom she accompanied in his frequent travels, left a report of these travels as well as a personal journal.

Esther Rebecca Rodrigues-Henriquez, called Eugenie Foa after her marriage to Joseph Foa, was a very prolific writer, although she is now practically forgotten. Her father, Isaac, was a banker who, in 1808, was asked by Napoleon to help bring progressive changes to the French Jewish community. She first wrote works on Jewish themes, and later on, books for children. Pauline Caro (1835-1901), a popular novelist, wrote many of her works anonymously. This anonymity seems to have been common practice among Jewish women of the 19th century.

In America, Rebecca Gratz (1781-1869), left letters which are a valuable historical testimony. Pnina Moise (1797-1880) wrote poems, hymns and letters which were very popular, and which she signed: Fancy's Mail Bag. At the age of 62, she became blind but this did not stop her from writing until her death in 1880. Emma Lazarus (1849-1887), wrote many poetry books and translated the works of Heinrich Heine, the Jewish-born German poet who converted to Protestantism. She became one of the great figures of Americana in 1903 when her poem "The Colossus" was chosen to appear at the feet of the Statue of Liberty.

Michèle Bitton ends her book with what she calls: "Two late Hebrew exceptions": Friha Adiba and Rachel Morpugo. Friha was the daughter of the Moroccan Rabbi Abraham ben Adiba. Friha and her father fled the Muslim persecution in Morocco and went to Tunisia where she received an excellent education in a Yeshiva. During the early 18th century, she wrote beautiful poems addressed to God in Hebrew.

In 1849, a poem in Hebrew by Rachel Morpugo (1790-1871), born in Trieste to the renowned Luzzato family, appeared in *Kokhavei Ytshaq*, a Viennese Hebrew review. In 1890, the Chief Rabbi of Rome published her poems in a volume called *Ugav Rahel*.

Michèle Bitton's book is a fascinating reading as it chronicles so much of both Jewish literary and general history. Indeed, the author enlivens her subject with biographical anecdotes and deep historical context, which captivate the reader. Thus, the book becomes an invaluable source of interesting and useful information on multiple levels.

This brief review does not do justice to a delightful book deserving to be read in its entirety and hopefully be translated into English. The style is exquisite and the quotes, although always in French translation from the original language, are always enlightening and often revelatory.

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