An Unexpected Heir:  
Response to Letters from Pre-state Israel  
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ABSTRACT  
Mordechai (Rabinowicz) Ben-Ami was a Russian journalist, writer and devoted Zionist. Letters he had written from 1924 to 1927 to his son are analyzed by his great-granddaughter from a variety of theoretical perspectives: their historical situatedness, the cultural politics involved in translating Russian Zionist letters from a postcultural American point-of-view, the gender aspects of reading and writing processes of the author and translator and the representation of the "other" in the letters.

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Introduction  
In December of 1995, while visiting my grandmother in Israel, I was given 226 letters written by my great-grandfather in French. The letters date from 1924-1927 and are written from cities as various as Berlin, Milan, and Haifa, and were all addressed to his son. Mordechai (Rabinowicz) Ben-Ami (b. 1854), my great-grandfather, was a Russian journalist, a short story writer, and a Zionist. Under the pen name “resh Galuta,” he wrote for the Russian Jewish monthly, the Voskhod. He published many stories that reflected his appreciation for Jewish tradition, including Priedz Tsadika, Baal Tefila, and Ben Yuhid. He was a committee member of the Hovevai Zion and a delegate to the first Zionist Congress in 1897. In 1923, he settled in pre-state Israel. Two books about him, Una Voce dal Deserto, Ben-Ami, Uno Scrittore Dimenticato (University di Bologna 1995) and Ben-Ami: Il Cantore della Sinagoga (Giuntina 1998) have recently been published; they are largely based on his correspondence with Theodore Herzl, Sholom Aleichem, and Haim Nachman Bialik.

My great-grandfather's letters to his son form the basis of my current book-length project, which examines the letters from a variety of theoretical perspectives: the historical situatedness of the letters, the cultural politics involved in translating Russian Zionist letters by a postcultural American, the gendered aspects of the reading and writing process of the author and the translator, and finally, the representation of the “other” in the letters.
This paper interweaves narratives from four generations of Ben-Ami women, recent historical research about women of the Yishuv, and my own personal reflections on what it is like to “peer” into letters that were intended for men's eyes only. The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of expectations of gender role performance on the rhetorical strategies used in my great-grandfather's letters and their impact on an unintended female audience. Much of Jewish Orthodox tradition can be read as a collection of patriarchal practices designed to exclude and diminish women's access and authority to public discourse and decision making. Since my great-grandfather identified himself within this tradition, it is relevant to discuss the tensions of identification this posed for me as an unanticipated reader not always invited into the conversation. My discussion includes an examination of the conceptions of gender presented in the letters, an analysis of the effects of these conceptions of gender on a female audience, and an explanation of the contribution of these constructions to current discussions about gender and writing identity.

**Written Out/ Writing Back In**

Many Jewish feminist scholars describe similar moments, when they realize, as Judith Plaskow puts it, that “there are aspects of Jewish and feminist identity that are irreconcilable” (ix). My purpose here is not to attempt to reconcile these often contradictory identities, nor to explore in more detail the tensions between them. Rather, I offer this narrative, and following narratives, as ways to fill in the gaps of Jewish women's history. In addition I offer my experience as a feminist reader of “normative” male texts. The lack of historical information about women in Judaism is painfully clear as I work on my book-length project translating and analyzing the letters of Mordechai Ben-Ami. Despite my brother's warning, I did travel to Israel, and these are the letters my grandmother gave me, for Mordechai Ben-Ami was my great-grandfather. He was one of Israel's pioneers, a political activist who shaped along with his close friends Israel's future political climate. If I could, I would be translating the letters of a female Israeli pioneer. But there are no letters or documents left from my great-grandmother Clara. My great-grandfather's private correspondence, on the other hand, is housed in archives in the Jerusalem museum and at the Bialik museum in Tel Aviv. There is even a small street named after him. To tell only my great-grandfather's story feels like a betrayal to my Jewish foremothers, but I have only the men's documents to work with. Plaskow articulates this recurring difficulty well:

> It is one thing to see the importance of recovering women's history, and another to accomplish this task in a meaningful way The Jewish feminist historian faces all the same problems as any feminist historian trying to recover women's experience: Both her sources and the historians who have gone before her record male activities and male deeds in accounts ordered by male values. What we know of women's past are those things men considered significant to remember, seen and interpreted through a value system that places men at the center. (32)

Although a large oil painting of my great-grandfather hangs in my mother's hallway, no one in my family remembers very well what Clara looked like. We have framed the document that declares my great-grandfather knighted by the French
government for his work with the Alliance Universelle Israelite; no official document recognizes my great-grandmother's efforts although I imagine they existed. To read and translate my great-grandfather's letters is to confront again and again the privileged place of men in Jewish history and tradition, a realization that is never comfortable. What do I do to ease this discomfort? Plaskow suggests that, hampered by this lack of material, we occasionally leave the domain of the actual for more risky and fanciful but no less valuable ventures: The gaps in historical record alone would prompt us to seek other ways of remembering. However sensitively we read between the lines of mainstream texts seeking to recapture the reality of women's lives, many of our constructions will remain speculations and many of our questions will go unanswered. Part of what we need to know we may with skilled probing recover, but the rest will need to be imagined. (52)

As I translate my great-grandfather's letters, I imagine Clara. She was stocky, taller than most women, my mother tells me. She worked hard, raising four children and keeping the house prepared for the Zionist meetings that often took place there. She must have spoken at least three languages: Russian, Hebrew, and French. Perhaps she spoke German as well and helped her husband translate the illegal Zionist pamphlets smuggled in from Germany. She must have looked up to my great-grandfather; she was fifteen and he was a student at the university when they met. Or perhaps she was smart enough to match him intellectually despite her lack of formal training. She was timid, according to my mother, and quiet, very much in the background. She always did what my great-grandfather told her to and had, according to family tradition, “no thoughts of her own.” On the other hand, perhaps her silence was diplomatic; my great-grandfather was prone to outbursts of anger. His close friend, H. N. Bialik, who later became the first Israeli national poet, called him “a man of rage and love.” And she must have had some of her own thoughts since she, the daughter of a wealthy family, married my great-grandfather, who was merely a writer and therefore a disappointment. Perhaps she shared his political passions and ideological commitments, however quietly and in the background.

There already were women's Zionist organizations in Palestine when Clara arrived with her family in 1923. But these were often agricultural and connected with the Labor movement, whereas the Ben-Ami's were urban pioneers, settling in a destitute collection of shacks and damaged roads that would eventually become Tel-Aviv. There is a popular and often unexamined myth in Israeli culture that these “women enjoyed full equality with the men in the pioneering endeavors of their times, broke down the barriers between feminine and masculine, and reshaped traditional stereotypes” (Bernstein 175). Americans can perhaps identify with this romanticization of the pioneer experience due to idolized versions of our own country's pioneering past. These misperceptions have been called into question by Jewish feminist scholars such as Deborah Bernstein and Dafna Izraeli, who argue instead that minutes from Zionist women's meetings, letters, and documents from that period all indicate that the few women who did organize themselves faced severe discrimination and lacked real access to the male political establishment.

Much of the lack of success of the women's Zionist movement is attributed to the cultural demand for undivided loyalty to Zionism. For example, one pamphlet of the times warns Zionist women that they “must bear in mind that even those [non-Jewish] women fighting for [feminist] emancipation view her first not as a woman, but as a Jewess” (Izraeli 89). It is easy to imagine my great-grandmother stifling
her desires for her own rights and liberties for the sake of the larger cause of Zionism. The image of Clara as the young pioneer servant rather than the radical questioner of traditional gender roles and divisions of labor is further suggested by this passage from a socialist party newspaper, written by a woman pioneer: “Many [of the workers] believed that the role of the young female idealist coming to Palestine was to serve them. The young women, who were still inexperienced, submitted to this view and believed that in cooking and serving they were solving most of our questions [concerning our role] in Palestine.”

It is likely that Clara similarly subordinated any of her own ambitions for political action in order to do the domestic work that would allow my great-grandfather to go to meetings and travel to conferences, such as Zionist Congresses in Basle. My great-grandfather, in a letter to his family, writes the following to them about this historic event:

It is almost a crime that you are not here, my dear little ones. How unhappy it makes one to not be able to give you such joy, the greatest and the most elevated that exists in the world. What a spectacle this congress at Basle is! One hears here the beating of the hearts of our people; one senses the soul and the great mind everywhere, everywhere. It is as if you hear the song of the ha-Tikvah sounded by more than a million voices. One is so shaken up that one cries of joy and sadness at the same time.

Clara, again, is conspicuous in her absence. As one of “my dear little ones,” she is allowed to experience “the greatest and most elevated” joy only vicariously, by reading about her husband's experiences. Ten years after Clara and Mordechai Ben-Ami made aliyah to Palestine, their future daughter-in-law arrived in Tel-Aviv. Channah Stern, who would become my grandmother, was one of the immigrants who are considered to be part of the fourth wave of pioneers. Izraeli argues that the women among the later groups differed from previous pioneers in significant ways:

The proportion of women among all immigrants during the third wave was larger, 36.8 percent. Among the single immigrants the proportion was 17 percent in 1920, increasing to 30 percent in 1922. Among the more strongly nationalistic pioneers, women comprised some 17-18 percent, compared with approximately 10 percent during the second wave. The pioneers arrived as members of different pioneering groups and social movements These were created in the diaspora and organized in communes committed to the principle of equality in production and consumption.

Although my grandmother Channah was not part of an organization affiliated with communes in Palestine, she did leave, at age eighteen and inspired by Zionist principles, the small Polish village of Bielsko. She did this alone, not following her husband, as Clara did, but as a single woman ready to leave the Orthodox way of life that she found stifling. Her story, just one generation after Clara's, is striking in its differences, for it does include a rejection of traditional gender roles and a refusal to be constrained by Orthodox prescriptions for women.

Channah Stern was the daughter of a large family who enjoyed close connections to their small village's most important religious authority, the Rebbe. As was the custom, when Channah was fifteen, a marriage was arranged for her by her parents and the Rebbe. Her husband was a young man from a neighboring village, someone
neither Channah nor her family had met before her wedding day. A few days into her marriage, Channah discovered that her husband suffered from tuberculosis and that he was dying. There could be no children from this marriage. In addition, according to Orthodox law, upon his death, Channah would be obliged to marry one of his brothers. This law, no doubt, was intended to protect widows from suffering a lack of status, financial and otherwise, in the Jewish community. Channah, however, did not want protection or a new husband.

Somehow she managed to persuade the Rebbe to allow her to divorce (in Orthodox tradition only men have this right), and within a few months, she left her village to be a part of the Zionist dream in Palestine. There is a story, popular in our family, that during the boat passage to the Middle East, Channah took off the head covering that women are required to wear according to Orthodox tradition (a woman's hair was believed to be dangerously seductive), and tossed it, along with the other Orthodox conventions of her small Polish village, into the ocean. 12

These family narratives and historical accounts have allowed me to imagine parts of Clara and Channah Ben-Ami's lives, but it is wise to remember these are only imaginative conjectures. Indeed, the few historical sources that I have been able to refer to are exceedingly rare. Izraeli's work in 1981 was “the first work dealing with women's history as part of the study of Israeli society in its early formative period” (Bernstein 173). As late as 1983, Bernstein bemoaned the fact that despite the rapid growth in interest in the history of pre-state Israel, there “nonetheless continue[d] the total neglect of women's issues and women's roles” (174). Thus, in including excerpts from letters and/or pamphlets by or about early Zionist women, I have drawn from a very limited range of available material. Bernstein emphasizes:

During the last decade social scientists appear to have discovered the highly formative period of the Yishuv, which previously had figured almost solely within ideological rhetoric, and have set out to demythologize it through academic study. Scores of books have been published on the period, a number of journals have appeared, research institutions have been established, and university departments opened, in a scholarly enterprise the effects of which at times have reached beyond the limits of the academic world. In all this upsurge of work there has been no reference to women (174).

Almost fifteen years later, the research on women in the Yishuv period remains minimal. Bernstein's work figures prominently as one of the few consistent voices in this area of research. Given this lack of available material, I must return to my great-grandfather's letters with an awareness of how sketchy the context of women's experiences during this time period remains. This does not mean in reading my great-grandfather's letters that I am forced to leave my interest in Jewish feminism behind. On the contrary, although most contemporary feminist research involves the analysis of women's writing and women's experiences, it was argued early on by feminist and postmodern scholars that reading male normative texts from a female and/or feminist perspective could contribute to feminist research as well. Jonathan Culler asks: “If the experience of literature depends upon the qualities of the reading self, one can ask what difference it would make to the experience of literature and thus to the meaning of literature if this self were, for example, female
rather than male. If the meaning of a work is the experience of a reader, what
difference does it make if the reader is a woman?”

Reading as a “Woman”

If the meaning of the text is co-created with the reader, or resides with the reader,
what difference does it make that, in this case, the reader of my great-grandfather's
letters is female? A woman, according to Orthodox tradition and Jewish history,
would not be considered the appropriate audience for these letters. Scholarly
pursuits, such as Midrash, interpreting the Talmud, and rabbinical study were
historically male domains, and in Orthodox and some Conservative congregations
remain so. Certainly, these specific letters were intended for a male audience; they
were written by my great-grandfather to his son Micha. As Micha's granddaughter
rather than grandson, when reading these letters, I see myself as a woman peeking
into the usually inaccessible terrain of the father-son relationship. This in turn
reminds me of my position within academic discourse and tradition, the rebellious
daughter, the unexpected heiress peering into previously exclusively male territory.
I know that none of these traditions are truly mine. Instead I am an interloper; I
eavesdrop, mimic, observe—but I do not identify myself as the intended heir of any
of this knowledge, nor do I seek to claim it or perpetuate in previously constructed
ways.

Still, even to lurk rather than to feel comfortable and completely present, women
need to have access if not full-hearted welcome. This, then, is a dilemma afforded
to most women only after Channah's generation. My mother, Micha's and
Channah's daughter, felt a similar discomfort about her place vis-a-vis the male
Jewish tradition. As the oldest daughter in a family with no sons, she was invited to
take the position that a son might have had. This privilege, however, was
bittersweet; for although she was permitted experiences that women previous to her
generation were not allowed, this made her feel separated and different from other
women. She was never able to shake off the impression that her father was
disappointed she was “not a boy.” My mother has told me the story of how my
grandfather Micha took her to the synagogue with him—where no other women sat.
Her mother stayed at home to prepare the Shabbat dinner while Micha and my
mother, a girl of about eight or nine at the time, went to Friday services. As my
mother walked to the Conservative synagogue with her father, she saw all the other
little girls playing on the streets and wondered why she was not permitted to play
too. Instead, her father took her to sit among all the men who looked just as
uncomfortable with her being there as she felt. Micha was a non-conformist who
paid no attention to the conventions and mores of the Jewish community in Tel-
Aviv. He must have assumed that he was offering my mother a better life than his
wife's. But he was unable to consider how complex a task it was for my mother to
insert herself into a male tradition that did not welcome or recognize her right to be
“one of them.”

This complicated and ambivalent relationship to male tradition and history can be
reenacted when women read male-authored texts that are considered normative. The
women who have access to such texts often read themselves into the text only with
discomfort, just as access to the Conservative synagogue did not mean that either
my mother or the male community were comfortable with her presence. Patricinio
Schweikart, a rhetorician whose work examines gender and reading, puts it this way:
“The feminist entry into the conversation brings the nature of the text back into the
foreground. For feminists, the question of how we read is inextricably linked with
the question of what we read.” (40). One of the ways to read my great-grandfather's
letters is to examine how conformity or non-conformity to expected gender roles
shapes both his writing and my reading of his work. These differences in gender
roles will need to be negotiated in order for me to be attentive to the varied kinds of
responses reading these male texts will create for me, the female reader.

Schweikart argues that “androcentric literature structures the reading experience
differently depending on the gender of the reader. For the male reader, the text
serves as the meeting ground of the personal and the universal. Whether or not the
text approximates the particularities of his own experience, he is invited to validate
the equation of maleness with humanity” (41). Conversely, we can expect that the
particularity of a Jewish woman's identity can create the opposite response while
reading male texts; i.e., that it is precisely the particularities that the male reader
finds so easy to dismiss as representations of the universal that will become the
stumbling blocks for her. These differences in identity can result in a more complex
process of identification between text and reader.

Bat-Ami Bar On, a feminist Jewish-Israeli scholar living in the United States
describes the complications “normative” male texts can create for someone who
sees that “what one is aware of as being a part of an identity is probably a function
of a pragmatic necessity in either a deliberative context or a context of differences”
(41). She gives an account of her process of reading a male text that is also
culturally different from her native nationality.

When I sit in my study reading a text, perhaps a text such as Plato's Symposium, I
usually do not think of or feel myself as a Jewish-Israeli. I begin to feel something
of this sort in relation to Plato's Symposium when I contextualize it and think of it
as the work of an ancient Greek philosopher, a person whose culture I imagine as
both radically different from mine and as familiarly intertwined with my culture,
even where the two do not coexist easily. (41)

This type of fractured response to cultural differences is often further complicated
by differences in gender which can result in what Schweikart calls a “bifurcated
process of reading the text both as a woman and as a man” (49). Thus, in order to
read a male text, the female reader attempts to insert herself into the male
experience and paradigm, a maneuver that is habitual and habit-forming. Fetterling
emphasizes that “as readers, teachers, and scholars, women are taught to think as
men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a
male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (quoted in
Schweikart 42). Women readers of male texts, from this point of view, have
become so accustomed to reading to accommodate both the male writer's vantage
point and a female reader's perspective that they are often no longer conscious of
making this accommodation.

When my great-grandfather writes about a successful meeting in Germany with
fellow Zionist sympathizers, I imagine myself to be like him, traveling, meeting
with like-minded people, actively attempting to change the world for the better.
And later, when he describes needing to retreat to nature from this busy world of
social engagements and politics, again I see myself as like him and am reminded of
my own escapes to the outdoors when the pressures of an academic life bear too
heavily on me. My great-grandfather writes:
An enchanted evening-- for the light of the moon that envelops all the verdant little hills with their sleeping woods. In the midst of the nocturnal silence a harsh and slightly sad cry of a bird comes from the Black Forest, sometimes a menacing bark of a dog indignant to hear the noise of steps and trembling for the well-being of his master who released him for the night from his eternal leash. And then again such silence that one imagines hearing the sound of the rays of the moon. This muted nocturnal symphony, without the slightest sound and so empty of harmony and so melodious. What a grand maestro that nature by its beauty divines. If only man did not tamper with it. I would like to walk and walk, bathe and purify myself in that white and pure light, to shake off the yoke and the mud of this life that weighs me down and suffocates me. Ah, if that were possible! Good night, my dear children. Mama is asleep. I will stay up a little longer. I embrace you strongly.

It was not until the last line that I realized I had been identifying with the wrong gender. My great-grandfather moved in political circles, published, met with the Jewish leaders of his time. Not Clara. And it was Mordechai who then occasionally wished to be released from this life of public responsibility, not his wife. My life is more similar to my great-grandfather's than my great-grandmother's, and if I were to identify with her, I would have to become that sleeping woman who does not act and therefore does not long for escape. While my great-grandfather battles with the public and political demands on his time, his wife, like his children, are asleep, innocent of such struggles. But he does describe these feelings to his son in a letter, as if to prepare him for the trials he imagines his son, unlike his wife, will face as well.

The question then arises if there is a possibility for “reading as a woman without putting one's self in the position of the other, of reading so as to affirm womanhood as another, equally valid, paradigm of human existence” (Schweikart 50). This would involve a shift in how we view the bifurcated process of reading, from emphasizing how it may contribute to sexism, to how it can function as a tool for heightened sensitivity to gender discrimination. We can choose to emphasize, for example, the role of the reader to determine the text's meaning, so that the gender of the writer ceases to define the conditions of meaning. The role of the woman reader and her subjectivity become the primary shapers of meaning in this paradigm; without her the text is nothing. In the case of my reading my great-grandfather's letters, instead of seeing myself as “peering into previously inaccessible terrain,” I could see myself as the shaper of his text. In this framework, I give my great-grandfather his presence and audience, and it is through my lens that he is read. In Schweikart's words, “the reader can submit to the power of the text, or she can take control of the reading experience” (49).

Forefronting the female reader's vantage point rather than the male writer's can result in a methodology of reading that is self-consciously resistant to the privilege of male experience. This involves resistant reading, which means reading the text as it was not meant to be read; in fact reading the text against itself. At times, the topic
of the text is what determines whether this type of resistant reading will be helpful. There are very few passages in which my great-grandfather directly describes the experiences of women. When he does, I often resist reading from his perspective. I cannot easily insert myself as the subject who gazes on the other, and so I then attempt to reread the text from a perspective antithetical to my great-grandfather's perspective. He writes:

I spent yesterday at Mrs. Ibri's house You remember the Italian woman to whom that clod is married. Well, they are at the moment in the process of separating. He has shown himself to be a true monster and he has bullied her worse than the last pasha. She lives alone in a pension at the moment, abandoned. She was truly happy to see me visit. She does not complain, she comports herself with enormous dignity. Naturally, we spoke frankly about the situation. The poor one, she is quite unhappy. She has had a small girl who is now three months, and he refuses to give her the infant for even one hour. She goes to feed her three times a day. She grows more lovely and has a remarkable beauty now. And she is also kind, simple, sincere, a fine nature, noble. Compared to her, he is a dirty scavenger of the streets. And it is he who renounces her out of selfish interests. You remember perhaps that I predicted accurately this tragic end. The poor girl has upset me a great deal. She is a tragic figure and the act of this animal is most terrible.

An accommodating reading would be to interpret this text as my great-grandfather most likely intended it, as a sympathetic male response to the tragic situation of a woman he admires. To take on this reading, however, would require that I then also accept the portrayal of this woman as “poor,” “simple,” “tragic,” and yet “remarkably beautiful.” This image of the pure and innocent woman suffering at the hands of fate and men and unable to rescue herself is not one I wish to identify with. Nor can I readily identify with the sympathetic onlooker, for that would mean denying my femaleness. The most workable reading in this instance for me is to recognize both the intent and the results of this perspective and to resist their implications. Thus, I can recognize how disempowering this image is, and then re-read the image to empower me to reject this perspective.

A resistant reading of this passage recognizes how my great-grandfather's portrayal of Mrs. Ibri relegates her to an ornamental position, but does not conclude with this image. Rather, recognizing that my great-grandfather shaped his portrayal of Mrs. Ibri according to his culturally conditioned expectations of gender role performance allows me to “remove” that lens for a while and move beyond this disempowering image. I can then imagine Mrs. Ibri as I would portray her-- not as “simple” or “tragic”, but as a woman who is surrounded by patriarchal assumptions and mores that severely limit her ownership of both her life and her child's, but do not diminish her desire for self-determination. Schweikart argues that this kind of conscious and resistant re-reading can result in a “therapeutic analysis-- acknowledging initial responses to texts and then revising them” (50). In these ways, reading my great-
grandfather's letters does not require me to give up my interest in Jewish women's history, feminist methodologies for reading, or my desire to identify with my great-grandfather despite our differences.

Finding My Own Way Back to Israel

I cannot let my brother's version of what will happen to me when I meet my Orthodox relatives stand. His reaction to my plan was: “they will not welcome you in the same way [as they welcomed him]. They can't. You're a woman.” I cannot let my great-grandfather's image of Mrs. Ibri be my final one. So, during my own trip to Israel in December of 1995, I arrange to meet my great-uncle Itzchak. I take a cab from my grandmother's house in Tel-Aviv to B'nai Brak, the Orthodox section nearby. I wear a dress with long sleeves.

Chaia, Itzchak's daughter, escorts me to a cold bare living room, a single white cloth on the dinner table. At the end of it sits a man with a shiny black vest and tumbling gray beard. Blue eyes. Itzchak. I have enough of my wits about me not to offer my hand; I just bow a little and say “Shalom.” Chaia sits across from me; she wears a fashionable wig; it is short with a little tail at the end. They ask about my brother, and I tell them how on his first night back in the States, he raised the traditional cup and sang the blessing in Hebrew, with deep reverence.

“What is reverence?” Chaia asks, who must translate for her father.

“Respect,” I say. Itzchak's wife, I discover, is senile. She repeats the same questions: “So, what do you do?” and “You don't speak Hebrew?” over and over again. To break the silence, I tell them about my experience at the Wailing Wall, where I quite suddenly and unexpectedly burst into tears. Chaia's eyes begin to shine; she translates this for Itzchak. Encouraged, I talk about my second visit to the Wall. My grandmother didn't want me to go because of some recent political turmoil, but I had one more slip of paper to leave; I'd left one of my friend's prayers in my wallet by mistake. On the way, I had an idea. I would leave a prayer of my own about my great-grandfather's letters. The ones my grandmother gave me. What am I supposed to do with them?

I tell Chaia that the day after this second visit to the Wall, a package arrived for my grandmother. “It's from Italy!” my grandmother had cried out in an excited voice, “Laura Salmon's book has arrived!” This is the book about my great-grandfather that all my family knows about. When I tell her this story, Chaia immediately translates it for her father. For a split second, I remember my father's less kind description of Itzchak, how he lived in the US for a while, got around quite a bit, and probably knows more English than he lets on. Still, it is wonderfully mysterious to have a translator, and Itzchak uses it to good effect, speaking to me only as I am about to leave. Chaia translates for me: “Itzchak says that the tears that you wept at the Wailing Wall were for your great-grandfather and through the letters he is speaking to you, calling you back to Israel.”

As a twentieth century American feminist, I may resist Itzchak's interpretation of my reasons for translating my great-grandfather's letters, but to give him credit, I am reading them, however resistantly at times, nonetheless.

ENDNOTES

1. See Encyclopedia Judaica. 462.


6. Mordechai Ben-Ami. Private Letter. “Nothing makes me suffer so much as to see all these enormous distances. A convent takes as much room as a Jewish quarter and they look to take over all of Jerusalem and its surrounding areas, especially the Catholics who do nothing but buy land and build. And when we go to buy a little bit of land, to build a new quarter, there are bellowings like the sounding of the shofar (in Hebrew: short, long, very long-these are instructions on how to blow the shofar during high holy days), and after this was nothing but a project for which all who have promised to have not paid, etc. And every time someone announces the foundation of a new society, there exists nothing of it but its name. What incompetence! What a group of jokers, of boasters (Tarascon is from a play by Daudet Tartarin de Tarascon) No, the boasters are fools in their tall tales.” (in French). See also Bernstein, The Struggle for Equality: Urban Workers in Prestate Israeli Society (Prager, 1986).


9. The HaTikvah was once a Zionist hymn; it is now the Israeli national anthem. Written by Naphtali Herz Imber.


11. Hebrew term for pioneer immigration to pre-state Israel.


13. This refers to the pre-state Jewish settlement in Palestine.


15. The quotation marks serve to highlight my desire to avoid essentializing when speaking of gender preferences. Ordinarily, I prefer to speak of differences in conformity or non-conformity to expected gender roles; however, in this case, the historical reality of women's lives in pre-state Israel inspired me to maintain what is now often considered “older” language that does make a distinction between genders based on biological difference.


18. Pasha is a title, placed after the name, formerly borne by civil and military officials of high rank in Turkish dominions.

REFERENCES


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