Book Review


Reviewed by Elaine Starkman

The photograph on the cover shows a plain-looking, aging woman in a simple flowered dress, as dated as her wig…. Soon we learn that her physical appearance is one of the orthodox women living in Jerusalem, one from a prominent line of Hassidic rabbis. While her physicality may reflect that background, Zelda (Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky signed her work with only her first name) was a unique soul who became a best selling writer loved by a diverse Israeli readership. On the 20th anniversary of her death, Marcia Falk, Berkeley-based poet, Judaic scholar, and translator who has given us new liturgy in The Book of Blessings, presents us with a good portion of Zelda’s oeuvre in English for the first time.

When the two women first met in Jerusalem in the 70’s, Zelda commented on Falk’s attire—a head kerchief against the sun and a sleeveless blouse: “You have a religious head [head covering] and a secular body [short sleeves.] And so it is. Yet they resonated, Falk fulfilling her promise to work on Zelda’s untranslated work after the poet’s death in 1984.

On reading the poems along with Falk’s rich introduction and notes, we find Zelda’s wisdom universal and timeless, one which will appeal to a wide-ranging audience. Born in Russia in 1914, Zelda came to pre-state Israel in 1925 with her parents and grandfather. She studied both at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design and Mizrachi Teachers’ College. (Amos Oz praises her from his child’s eye in his recent memoir: “When [she read] a story that was about snow, it seemed written in snow. And what strange, hypnotic sweetness…as though the writer dipped the letters in wine. “) From her dynasty she inherited the hassidic concept that joy is divinely ordained and essential to the soul, yet the death of her husband, Haim Mishkovsky after 20 years of marriage left her long bereft. Childless, she called out to him “in the hidden world.” She also calls out to our conscience when we ignore those around us who suffer. In “The Bad Neighbor” she writes of ranting woman: “her mouth was hell….deep within me, my soul kissed/ the insanity of her longing, her tenderness.”

Zelda is sometimes compared with Emily Dickinson, in habit and style—self-mocking humor; lack of punctuation; unusual pairs of words; cloistering herself in her modest Jerusalem home…. As Falk notes, while Zelda’s sources stem from classic Jewish texts, at times they seem to draw on mystical imagery akin to folklore and fable, perhaps even
reminiscent of esoteric eastern philosophies when the soul of nature and the human soul inter-twine, “Nature’s constant renewals provide relief from agony and despair.” Yet within Judaism, within her poems, God remains illusive and hidden.

For Zelda, rescue often comes from the world itself: “suddenly in my house, the sun/ is a living thing/ and the table with its bread—gold/ and the flowers and the cups—gold. And the sadness? / Even there—radiance.” A grounded element remains; she strives for guidance while knowing that her quest for meaning will remain unfulfilled. While many of the poems personal, two political poems are sweeping in their vision: Each of Us Has a Name, now used at Holocaust Memorial services: “Each of us has a name/ given by our sins/ and given by our longing/„„Each of us has a name/ given by the sea/ and given by our death” and Pause, [written] “for the terrorist who saved an Israeli prisoner from the hands of the other terrorists who wanted to torture him….” “Both of them knew—/ this was not the whole truth,/ this was a pause/ on a green island, beyond all nations/ beyond all origins.”

Readers can find a favorite to re-read as personal balm in accepting the unknowable. Whether one is a believer or non-believer, a Jew or non-Jew there is enough appeal for a wide range. Although we may live in a world very different from Zelda’s, we can’t help agree with the lines we find in these pages:

Sun-startled pines / wafted a wild fragrance—
the same stunning strength / from the inmost flower
made the world my home again / but did not reveal the core,
the divine intention / in budding and wilting plants,
And the point of my life / and the point of my death—
I will not know in this world.

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