

Yahrzeit for the Seventh of Elul Remembering Rachel Luzzatto-Morpurgo: Poet, Mystic, and Scholar

By Rabbi Leah Novick

My God, my redeeming rock —

Rachel Luzzatto, called “the Queen of the Hebrew Versifiers” was born in Trieste, Italy on the eighth day of Pesach 1790 and died on the seventh of Elul in 1871. She is one of the few Jewish women whose study of the Zohar is noted by her biographers. A descendant of the great Kabbalistic teacher, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto: (1707-1747) she was taught Torah from childhood. Talmud and commentaries, in Hebrew and Aramaic, were added to her study curriculum during her adolescence; as well as “The Duties of the Heart” by Bahya Ibn Pekuda. She is supposed to have begun writing poetry at the age of eighteen and acquired her first copy of the Zohar in 1817 at the age of twenty seven.

Both her parents were Luzzattos; whose families emphasized both secular and sacred study. Her father Baruch was the son of the poet Isaac Luzzato and her mother was Beracha, sister of the scholarly Hezekiah Luzzatto. The latter served as tutor to both Rachel, her brother Isaac, and her first cousin Samuel David; the renowned educator known as the “Shadal.”(1800-1865) Rachel was not only prepared for a life of poetry by her distinguished family; she was also taught to be a lathe turner in the family business. Like other young women of that period; she was also taught needlework.

Within this family enclave that nourished intellectual and spiritual life; Rachel and her cousin Samuel David developed an intimacy in childhood which was continued in friendship and professional collaboration during young adulthood. Samuel David, who was ten years younger, was early identified as a prodigy and became a teacher and thinker of great importance in the Jewish world. He acknowledged being influenced by Rachel whose poetry indicates a wide range of literary and religious knowledge. It was the “Shadal”, with his advantages as a male scholar, who provided Rachel with opportunities to publish her poetry in journals which he edited or influenced.

The cousins differed philosophically, with Rachel moving in the direction of romantic mysticism and Messianic longing – like their Kabbalistic predecessor while Shadal developed and argued for his own brand of passionate but rationalistic neo-Orthodoxy. We know that it was Samuel David who provided her with a copy of the Zohar, which she had requested. Unfortunately, we do not know the extent of her Kabbalistic study and whether she had mentors for her reading of Zohar as an adult. While she wrote of the future redemption, “Shadal” engaged in critique and

dialogue with other great thinkers of the turbulent mid- nineteenth century in a process which ushered in the Jewish enlightenment movement and contemporary Zionism.

Rachel married late, at age twenty nine; reputedly disagreeing with her family's choices of suitors and holding out for her choice of merchant Jacob Morpurgo. One can't help wondering if she was in resistance to giving up her life of study and prayer. Her biographer states that she studied daily with her cousin Samuel David. After her marriage she was subsumed in a life of embroidery, lithography and housework plus rearing four children under difficult financial conditions. She had three sons (who all died within a few years of her death) and one daughter named Peninah who collected her Mother's poems for eventual publication. The daughter, who lived to the age of sixty seven, portrays Rachel's life as providing little time for study and writing except for sleepless late nights and "Rosh Chodesh"/ New Moon (which was celebrated by Italian Jewish women as time off) when she suspended the needlework she excelled at and presumably sold.

Rachel managed to sustain her professional life as a writer through Samuel David's publication "Kochavei Yitzchak" and the exchange of personal letters with Italian and German scholars, many of whom admired her work. This admiration is also reflected in the introduction to the collection of her poems, published in 1890 – 100 years after her birth – by Rabbi Vittorio Castiglioni, the chief Rabbi of Rome under the title of "Rachels Harp". (Ugav Rachel),

In the latter part of her life, Rachel encountered the Montefiores, the English philanthropists who played a key role in the early development of Jewish Palestine. When Lord and Lady Montefiore travelled through Trieste on the way to Israel in 1855, Rachel was deeply affected and dedicated a poem to commemorate their visit. Her admiration for them and her own longing to visit Palestine are expressed in her poems of that period, and a story that she considered accompanying them – as a servant – at age 65! She continued to write- in Hebrew – expressing her faith in the coming of the Messianic era and the resettlement of Eretz Yisrael.

As with so many other distinguished women, the biographical information on Rachel Luzzatto survived in part because it was connected with accomplished male relatives. . Since the "Shadal" was a famous scholar ,thinker , and writer there is material about Rachel's life in biographies written by and about him. Some of their poetic correspondence has been preserved in the annals of "Kochavei Yitzchak", which he edited.

Early in the twentieth century a short biography of Rachel, appeared in English, the work of biographer, Nina Davis Salamon, More recent and more available is the research and writings of Prof. Howard Adelman of Smith College. "See Women of the Word". Judith Baskin, Ed. Wayne State 1994.

Look and see and hear my voice.

I'll weep, I'll cry, I'll beg.

Oh! Have pity and compassion for a troubled nation.

Help erect my tent. For no one questions, no one helps.

Sons will return to their borders, crowned with the world's joy.

I beseech Thee, carry the weight of their transgressions.

Hasten and lift up the nations' chosen one.

O Cry no more. For God is gracious.

Though He tarry, I will hope for Him.

He'll build the walls of His House

And Rachel will rejoice in a new song

Excerpt from one of Rachel Luzzato Morpurgo's last poems

I watch the eternal hills, the far, far flying

with glorious flowers even over-run

I take me eagles wings, with vision

and brow upraised to look upon the sun.

Ye skies how fair the paths above your spaces

There freedom shines for ever like a star

The winds are blowing through your loftyplaces

And who, ah who can say how sweet they are

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