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**HEBREW, GENDER, AND MODERNITY:
CRITICAL RESPONSES TO DVORA BARON'S FICTION**

EDITED BY SHEILA E. JELEN AND SHACHAR PINSKER

DVORA BARON (1886–1956) WAS THE FIRST WOMAN WRITER TO HAVE HER HEBREW FICTION CANONIZED DURING THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY. BORN IN DUZDA, A SMALL TOWN OUTSIDE OF MINSK, IN THE PALE OF SETTLEMENT, BARON BEGAN WRITING SHORT STORIES FOR THE HEBREW AND YIDDISH PRESS AT THE AGE OF 15. SHE IMMIGRATED TO PALESTINE IN 1910 AND SERVED AS THE LITERARY EDITOR OF THE INFLUENTIAL HEBREW MAGAZINE "THE YOUNG LABORER." FROM 1927 UNTIL 1956, BARON PUBLISHED NUMEROUS COLLECTIONS OF SHORT STORIES AND NOVELLAS, TO GREAT CRITICAL ACCLAIM IN ISRAEL. SHE DIED IN TEL-AVIV IN 1956.

UNTIL QUITE RECENTLY, MANY CRITICS READ BARON AS A PROVINCIAL SCRIBBLER, TELLING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TALES ABOUT THE SHTETL IN THE VOICE OF A YOUNG GIRL. IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, HOWEVER, VARIOUS SCHOLARS HAVE REASSESSED HER WORK AND FOUND IT TO BE RICH, ENGAGING, AND CENTRAL TO THE CREATION OF MODERN HEBREW LITERATURE. *HEBREW, GENDER AND MODERNITY: CRITICAL RESPONSES TO DVORA BARON'S FICTION* AIMS TO REPRESENT, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ANY LANGUAGE, THE SCOPE AND DIVERSITY OF THE RECENT SCHOLARLY INTEREST IN DVORA BARON AND HER FICTION. THE ANTHOLOGY PRESENTS THE WORK OF LEADING SCHOLARS IN THE FIELD OF JEWISH AND HEBREW STUDIES FROM ISRAEL AND THE UNITED STATES, AS WELL AS THREE NEW TRANSLATIONS OF BARON'S STORIES.

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TIDBITS FROM NEHAMA'S KITCHEN

ALTERNATIVE NATIONALISM IN DVORA BARON'S THE EXILES

Orly Lubin

In the imaginings of Modern Hebrew Renaissance writers, Zionist national discourse almost always involves arrangements between men. Thus, in the fiction of Dvora Baron, in which most of the central characters are women, the way into the Zionist national discourse of Palestine seems to be entirely blocked. Women seemingly have no place in the national story of an imagined political community.¹ A story of Zionist nationalism is one of male brotherhood, while the homeland itself is allegorized as a demure and faithful female figure, a daughter or a mother.

Women constitute national symbols; men constitute a national subject. Women are "the people," "the national spirit," and, most often, "the land." Thus, all national power, political voice, and historical agency rest in male hands. As Monique Wittig sharply formulates it, "There are not two genders. There is only one: the female, since the 'male' is not a gender. The male is not the male but the general [the universal]."² As a result, women are not constituted as female national subjects in the same way that men are; instead, women are subsidiary to the specific national story as a "universal human being," who, in a phallogocentric culture, is male.

The force of Baron's domestic "tidbits" and the large number of seemingly minor details she depicts have been a problem for those readers who insist that Baron's perspective is the hegemonic nationalist one. To maintain this reading, they need a formulation or heading that would identify the "macronarrative" of Baron's work. Critics, such as Dan Miron and Nurit Govrin, explain away Baron's focus on individual lives and domestic details by arguing that she represents the concrete universal, or the individual character who represents universal values. These critics' copious attempts to resolve the "problem" of writing about details and individuals are thus based on identifying the universal aspect of her work, which they use to recruit her into the camp of national writing. By reading Baron as an author who writes of the universal, the fixed, the cyclical, the myth-

ological, and the cosmic by way of "tidbits," many critics feel more comfortable including her in Israel's national literature.

ii.

In *The Exiles* [*ha-Golim*], however, gender cannot be expunged in favor of universalism. The main female protagonists in the novel are well off economically, especially when compared to the other characters, refugees who live in camps, hungry exiles driven from place to place. One cannot make the tribulations of the women in this novel an analogy to, or a metaphor for, the plight of the oppressed poor in general. The book contains no concrete distress that can be translated into a critique of religion or of society. *The Exiles* supplies critics with a different tool for subordinating canonic Zionist national discourse: a broad conceit, largely created out of biblical references to previous exiles and redemptions. Yet, unlike the biblical accounts, women are at the center of exilic discourse in this novel.

Published in 1970, *The Exiles* is a combination of the stories "For The Time Being" ("Le'et 'Ata," 1943) and "Since Last Night" ("Me'Emesh," 1955). It tells the stories of two families' exile from Tel Aviv to Alexandria during World War I and their subsequent return to Tel Aviv. Loosely organized around the domestic and emotional life of a series of Lithuanian-born women—Hannah Rabin and her daughter Naomi, Nehama Rothstein and her daughter Brakha, Ita Bloch and Ronya Berman—the novel takes us from Palestine to Egypt and back again, during and just after the First World War. Nehama Rothstein's kitchen and Hannah Rabin's sick-bed are the foci of this novel, as their daughters and their daughters' suitors, their husbands and their husband's business associates, war refugees, and their fellow exiles and neighbors, pass through these women's homes and lives, telling their stories and building, from the wreckage of their displacement, new lives. Hannah and Nehama, their families and their friends, all originally from Europe, are exiled from Palestine during the First World War. They are doubly displaced, first from their European homelands, then from their chosen Palestinian homeland. *The Exiles* sets the Zionist nationalism that motivated its protagonists' original immigration to Palestine against an increasingly diffuse notion of exile and homecoming. Exiles take place again and again throughout the book—first from the European homeland, then from Palestine, or the Land of Israel.

The Exiles has thirty-seven chapters, but only thirteen open with the speech of a man, and only nine have a man at their center. All the other chapters not only begin with women, but also have women as their central subjects. Even some of the chapters that begin with a man speaking turn their attention imme-

merchant, Morris Levy," who "came to spend the hot summer in Alexandria," but this sentence is followed immediately by:

He made frequent visits to Ita Bloch's room. Mrs. Rothstein was at first taken aback by his swarthy, frozen face, the face of an Egyptian, but when she heard him speak Yiddish, and even Hebrew when he set his mind to it, she was mollified and no longer took any notice when he arrived.

That was not the case with Brakha. She sensed the clatter of his motorcycle when it was still far off....³

The passage not only places a woman at the center of the action—she is the reason the man comes to visit—but it also immediately cites Mrs. Rothstein's point of view and opposes it to that of another woman, Brakha. The chapter abandons Morris Levy and instead addresses a matter no less dramatic than the Egyptian merchant's love life—Brakha's swing between her mother's perspective and values and those of Ita Bloch. This female triangle, Ita, Mrs. Rothstein, and Brakha, is noted at the very beginning of the chapter and it relieves the man of his ostensibly central place in the plot and of his control of the narrative. The same is true of chapter fourteen, which opens with the dramatic moment when the ill Menahem Gott declares that he has "been attached to the Jewish Brigade." But this chapter also, in that same sentence, shifts to Brakha's point of view and, in particular, to the mind of a young woman in love. The same happens at the beginning of chapter sixteen, when

the younger Green, who had been in Cairo for a few days, related upon his return that he did not see Ita Bloch there, because she was sick and bedridden...and a few days later he could already say unambiguously that she had died.⁴

This dramatic moment, which centers on a woman, does not remain in the man's domain. It immediately shifts to Brakha's point of view. Another example of tension between a male and female point of view can be found in chapter twenty-four, which is devoted entirely to Menahem Gott. In fact, the chapter centers on Gott's transformation into a mother when he takes Ita's orphaned infant daughter, Yehudit (Dita), into his house.⁵ Likewise, chapter twenty-seven, principally about the journalistic life of Hayyim Berman, is filtered through the point of view of a girl, Naomi Rabin, even though she actually does not play a part in the plot development of this chapter.⁶ The dramatic death of Ozer Abrams, which opens chapter thirty-two, is presented entirely from the point of view of another girl, Brakha, who attends the funeral.⁷ The most dramatic event in Hayyim Berman's life, when he is about "to go overseas for a time at his party's behest" (the opening of chapter thirty-four), is experienced entirely by Ronya, who will later become his wife. An especially smooth transition takes place in

chapter nineteen, which tells of the marriage of Brakha Rothstein and Natan Lev. It opens:

In Nehama Rothstein's boarding house, even back during their time in Egypt, Natan Lev was considered a member of the family. But at the time and place that Meir Rothstein ate, and sang here, when his soul enwrapped itself around him, songs of Zion, or prayer melodies in any of the rooms, and on Saturday night, which the proprietor sometimes spent in the city, he, at his wife's request, made the end-of-Sabbath blessing on a cup of wine, putting on his hat for the purpose, and pronounced the words plainly and nicely in his clear voice, and upon seeing how Brakha held the candles before him, her heart filled with feelings of supplication and the pure prayer of a mother for the little gratification that she would like to be accorded.

When she went shopping in the Alexandria markets, she sometimes purchased
....⁸

There is a nearly imperceptible transition from the sentence's subject, Natan Lev, to Mrs. Rothstein, and via Brakha back to her mother, Mrs. Rothstein. The latter dominates the rest of the chapter, diverting the chapter's discussion from male action to female action and experience.

The impression made by the chapters' openings is that men act and stand at the center of dramatic events, while the shift to a woman's point of view is in effect a shift to the position of an observer, not that of a subject. As characters, women ostensibly play no active role but, rather, serve as mirrors that reflect, through the prism of "small" experiences, the principal story and the drama, which is male. This impression is reinforced when the reader becomes aware of the division of labor between the novel's men and women, both in their daily lives and in their community roles. The women's lives are centered on the home, focused almost entirely on cooking, while the men are all active in the community: they are journalists; they serve on the Exiles' Committee; they are responsible for raising money to feed the exiles; and they are responsible for ties with the outside world—outside the home and outside the Egyptian exile. Here Baron sharply erects two systems, placing them in opposition—the home versus the construction of the national edifice. The novel's entire world, in the past and in the present, is organized along two opposing axes: exile and "home." But the "home" itself is divided in two: the private "home" and the national "home." And even as the two are situated as polar opposites, the national home is analogous to the private home.

This binary formulation finds its sharpest expression in chapter thirty-six, in which Hannah Rabin tries to dissuade Ronia from "building a home" with Hayyim Berman. Hannah, who knows what life with a public functionary is, describes to Ronia how "you'll sit in the wasteland of your room and turn the pages of some book, while he, the man, is at that very moment sitting in some

institution at some meeting, unconnected and far off."⁹ She orally depicts a life of loneliness, the exclusive responsibility Ronia will bear, the services she will be compelled to provide for her husband's partners. She sums up her description of Ronia's future husband (and of her own) with both a defensive and a condemnatory statement:

The truth is that he isn't sitting somewhere reveling, but in a meeting of comrades who seek, with what little power they have, to lay a foundation for a structure that will perhaps, in time, become very large, but for a man like him, what is "home" and family? Let him sit in the attic like a bachelor and eat his meals in a restaurant.¹⁰

Baron sets up an opposition between the two actions, masculine and feminine; they are two poles with no link between them. Only in the final chapter does she construct an analogy between the national and the private "homes." In doing so, she accedes to the hegemonic axis of the representation of nationalism: representation of the private home as an analogy to the national home. She also places within this analogy the feminine act as no less important than the masculine act of construction: "And he will be built up, this poor man, he will be built,"¹¹ Mrs. Rothstein says to herself about Menahem, when it looks as if Lulu, a local seamstress, has found a way into his heart and that another family will be established in the New Neighborhood. "'Construction, construction,' that's what was most important for her, whether it was the construction of a house, or arrangement of a person's life, which, for some reason, had been destroyed one day."¹² And when she prepares the wedding celebration, she dreams of "directing, in the yard, the labor over several huge pots in which dishes made of the best in the land are cooked" for those who in the meantime rest at the boarding house "until they finish building the apartment houses in the north, which are going up quickly."¹³

The private home is what awaits those who come from the enterprise of national construction, and the "national construction" of the entire book is now exchanged for the private home. Here, the national home collapses into the private home. The real activity in the novel is the women's. After all, they are the ones who facilitate and maintain human life (principally, as noted, through food, which is also a form of medicine). Moreover, those who build the national home, i.e., the men, play passive roles. The women continuously act, move, and create, erecting one home after another—both in Alexandria and Jaffa. The men, in contrast, build the "national home," but have no control over what they are building, and can do nothing but count how many exiles arrived, how many babies were born, how many people have left. They can record and give names. This is the sum total of the Exiles' Committee's activities. The newspapers report on what already exists or on what happened without their involvement.

The story's presentation of the dramatic promulgation of the Balfour Declaration is a moment in which the Land of Israel is given to the people of Israel by others. The Jews only hear about it, though, of course, they are excited and feel they are involved. But they are, in fact, passive listeners to testimonies from elsewhere about the state of their nation. They are also passive when they do no more than wait for the ships of immigrants to arrive, without having any ability to influence their arrival. In fact, the person who sees the ships when they arrive "in an early morning hour" is Nehama Rothstein, who "rises early," just as she is the first person to see Palestine when they return.¹⁴ In this way she reverses the woman's fixed position as the object of observation and becomes an observing subject. The universalism contained within the Balfour Declaration is experienced by the male world as a promise of national independence, freedom, and sovereignty, possessed by all other nations. But it remains mere rhetoric, the rhetoric of a "conquering army, marching forward with the assurance of victors," as Hayyim Berman imagines the construction in the New Neighborhood.¹⁵ Even when the Exiles' Committee goes to check out the refugee camp (chapter twelve), it discovers there a community of women, run by women, busy mainly in the home, not in "construction"—nourishment and childbirth, rather than the process of enumerating.

Female activity, the material manifestation of which is cooking, metaphorically dominates the narrative. The tourist group in the first chapter is "gorging itself on the East";¹⁶ Hayyim Berman collects material for his newspaper "like a bee gathering juice from plants";¹⁷ little Dita believes that the sea is rough because "someone lit a huge kerosene lamp under it";¹⁸ the unemployed Menahem Gott "dribbles away like warmed ice cream";¹⁹ and the Bible is compared to a cake with or without raisins.²⁰ Cooking and food are an axis along which an alternative narrative time is organized. The time at which an event occurs is not denoted with a date and the process by which the event unfolds is not indicated by a changing landscape. The exile is paced out on a temporal axis made up of the times at which meals are prepared and eaten:

The frying of the patties had just been completed in Mrs. Rothstein's kitchen, and the small woman stood next to the stove preparing a fresh compote, and here her husband came in from outside with news to relate, a Turkish policeman with a crop trailing behind him...it was evident that the people had been taken in the middle of a meal.²¹

In Tel Aviv, one of the "new people" testifies, "they 'took' my father from the table at lunchtime. He'd only picked up his spoon and they came and took him."²² The entire story of the witness's tribulations and reactions are arranged around food. Likewise, the solution found for him (as for other exiles, and for difficult memories and moods) is in the form of food. And while in the large

figures and metaphors—the analogy between the Bible and the present, between the various exiles throughout history—time progresses sequentially, according to a logical cyclical order, progress along the food temporal axis is broken, without chronological logic, organized according to the arbitrariness of the incident (which is external to the exiles) or according to personal (feminine) intuition. A report of the harsh conditions of the exile makes the listeners more and more dismayed, until Mrs. Rothstein decides: "Now is the right time to serve what has been prepared for you,"²³ and Shmuel Rabin, after "two or three gulps...again took up the sheet of paper, but this time the things he read from it were of a different sort."²⁴ Now he switches to talking about the community's support of the exiles, "how they fed them and gave them drink and provided all their needs. They opened the ovens...and took out the stewpots for them...."²⁵ Food actually marks a turning point in the concrete event itself, and by implication, in the larger national moment. The tea that the woman serves, at a moment that seems right to her, turns the time from one of dispersal and crisis to one of unity and consolidation (which is also, just like the crisis, marked by food). When Natan Lev futilely "sought some verse, or proverb, that would cast a bit of light on what is being done around here"—that is, to find a description from Jewish national history of deportation and exile—he does not find solace in the written hegemonic national tradition, whether linear or cyclical. Instead, "Mrs. Rothstein served him a bit of lemon juice and water in a glass, and he drank and took heart."²⁶

But food is not only a restorative. It also marks the other temporal axis, the alternative to the linearity of the hegemonic history. In Baron's work, even if the hegemonic national story is not entirely expunged, neither can it expunge the other story, the story of the body and food. In this way Baron maintains, by way of the two alternative narrative sequences, a subversive text. It presents two options—the hegemonic option, both on the level of the story (a closed and linear or sequential story) and on the level of meaning (the story of the constituting of modern Zionist nationalism as a canonic narrative). And it presents the story that subverts, or at least challenges, the exclusive authority of the hegemony: a broken narrative and alternative meaning, a different national story, in which the woman can constitute herself as a female Zionist national subject.

Still, *The Exiles* does not completely break a hegemonic narrative and thematic framework. On the contrary, it has sufficient elements to enable readers to identify a sequential and unified narrative with a traditional national meaning. Baron can thus be included in the canon and receive the critical establishment's recognition, yet she can also maintain her proprietary claim to constituting herself as a female national subject. Baron's story of how the female national subject is constituted is not presented in opposition to the hegemonic story. It exists *with the knowledge* of the hegemonic story but without internalizing, confronting, or

opposing it. In Jameson's terms, the modernist act represents the experience, not of loss, but of repression, where the thing that has been repressed (in Baron's case, male Zionist hegemony) continues to act omnipotently.²⁷

In "What Has Been," Dvora Baron depicts the feminine historical story as something that has not yet been presented:

I thus see myself as a kind of negative glass, all that remains after the photographed object has been lost. Am I not bound—so as to make a remembrance of them—to inscribe my impressions on paper?²⁸

The object that once existed was photographed, imprinted on a negative photographic plate, and lost. What remains is not a photographic image that recreates the lost object, but only the negative. The plate, the picture itself, is now the original. The object is gone, but it remains, not as a photograph of what once was but as a representation of what has not yet been given representation, imprinted on the plate but not yet as a photograph. The woman is now the original and she is the representative of what has not yet been presented.

iii.

Women in *The Exiles* orally recreate the worlds of the past and of the present—both with mouths that eat and mouths that speak. These female characters recreate the past through their cooking and storytelling; through gossip and matchmaking they concoct the future. Their Zionist national story is an oral story, yet it is a story that bears the authoritative status of being a singular, linear "truth." The stories that the exiled neighbors tell one another in Baron's novel are arranged not in a causal linear sequence, but rather like a woven fabric, as suggested by Elaine Showalter.²⁹ These stories, communicated by refugees and immigrants to Nehama Rothstein in her kitchen, and to Shmuel Rabin beside his wife's sick-bed, are like a quilt, each square being a story or episode, with the short units attached to one another by reappearing characters and advancing plot lines. To counter the chaos of these seemingly unconnected storylines, Shmuel Rabin struggles to create a linear narrative out of them. He was

asked to convey first of all the news received from the Exile, items that were still scattered on individual scraps of paper. As he read, he put them together into a single, whole cloth.³⁰

Gazing at the New Neighborhood, Hayyim Berman attempts to discern a continuous, contiguous arrangement: "the entire enterprise here was cast in a new light, and those whose eyes are open can see where the two ends, the end then and the beginning now, come together."³¹ In contrast, when Faige relates the history of her town it is a fragmented, interrupted story, built out of local asso-

ciations, a series of "little" stories that have no sequence of causes and effects. And when Hannah Rabin and her friend meet and chat,

It seemed as if they were walking arm-in-arm through their home town, street after street, lingering alongside one house and talking about it at length, then rapidly skipping, silently, to another.³²

The women's stories have no end. When the Italian neighbor relates her biography, she does not conclude her family story.³³ The female voice in *The Exiles* is primarily audible as an absent voice, a broken voice. In fact, the speaking voice—rich, vital, and immediate—replaces the written word and its authority. The men constantly read books and newspapers, while the women read nothing. Even when Hannah Rabin teaches her daughter Naomi Bible stories, she does so without the text of the Bible because the family, in its exile from Palestine to Egypt, had to leave all its books behind.

The passive men, whose major occupation is enumerating, are those who warehouse facts and organize them in "a chronicle-list, which will in time serve as the building blocks for the historian and the epic poet, when they come to tell the history of those days."³⁴ When Hayyim Berman, the journalist, meets "the survivors of a sunken ship—bent-backed and weary people...[he is] faithful to the objectivity he is charged with observing...he recorded only the number of the arrivals, the names of their places of origin, and the path they took during their journey."³⁵ In wandering the neighborhood,

he recorded what he'd learned in his notebook. And at home, afterward, at his desk, he made the "separation": he too, for the news story in the paper, the numbers and facts, and the rest, things that had a smidgen of emotion in them, or an element of mental attitude, he set aside. At most he'd take from here occasionally a few lines for his letters to Ronia Bern.³⁶

The facts go to the newspaper, the emotion to the woman. In moments of rest, the facts are nullified:

He made a short stop. He put his notebook in his side pocket and gave himself over to a gaze of entirely aesthetic pleasure at his own home: The shimmering white of the laundry blowing on a line in the wind, the play of the sunbeams and the sea blue in the windowpane with the muslin curtain behind it, and those wonderful, primal plant stems that poked up out of the desolate land.³⁷

Emotion and aesthetics are in the women's purview, but in exile the men are propelled into the woman's place; they are forced to become passive observers and to document their lives orally. As exiles they can best be likened to the traditional Jewish metaphor of the *agunah*, or the abandoned wife who is neither married nor unmarried, has no place in any particular man's home, and waits with bated breath for some resolution to her situation. The men in Baron's novel, like the metaphorical *agunah* in traditional Jewish literature, are in exile from

being independent subjects. Their talent for factual documentation integrates well into their passive, unproductive lives, and illuminates the act of documentation as an unproductive act in any context, even when not in exile. But Natan Lev cannot live his life orally, as he must do now that he has no books:

Had he a gift for expressing himself, he would surely select [from among his thoughts] all that was good and fitting, just as a builder does with the heaps of materials before him, and build, as it were, a kind of building, that would bring pleasure to him and to others as well—and the atmosphere around him would clear out and become more spacious as a result. But he was not given that gift.

Every idea, or feeling, that was born within him, remained naked, like a soul without a body....³⁸

And when he tutors his future wife, Brakha, the Rothstein's daughter:

Every verse of the Bible had for him a special melody, matching the subject spoken of, and more than he explained to her by commentary, she discerned the meaning in his voice, until, in time, she learned to listen to it alone.³⁹

With historical documentation impossible, only oral documentation remains, so the man is reduced to no more than a voice. He cannot erect his building because his world is like a soul without a body. When Natan Lev tries to relate history orally, he repeats the writing of history while placing himself, the man, in the center. But now, the thing that is in the center is a passive, weak, dependent exile who cannot hold the center. The center implodes; hegemonic history collapses under it, and what remains is the aptitude of the margins for creating their alternative history.

But for the women, whose entire national self-documentation is oral, history's story fills the air with "a rustle of movement and sights from far-off days,"⁴⁰ a story-like narrative laden with detail, emotions, pictures that have at their center survival and life devoted to preserving the home. National events such as war appear briefly, and are shunted to the sidelines: "True, from time to time the neighbors roused themselves and came to provoke war [on the Jews], but then a hero [a nameless one!—O. L.] would deal them a heavy blow, and the land would be quiet."⁴¹ The facts are not different, the world continues to be male, but the narrative is different. It is a rich and vibrant story.

Women's discourse appears again and again in *The Exiles*. Mrs. Rothstein and her elderly Italian neighbor chat "in their special language—the language of troubles."⁴² It is this language that allows Ronia to be helped by "Hannah Rabin, who saw that she wanted to cry"⁴³ and cleared out a room for her. Likewise, Riva, the mother of the deceased Ita,

poured out her bitter talk...generally only to Brakha, since the others, for all their sympathy, did not abstain from picking curiously over her wounds; whereas she, Brakha, only listened with silent understanding and an open heart

with such benevolence that she seemed to hear in her an echo over everything she said.⁴⁴

The national story is built out of this private discourse—a private conversation about neighboring families in the homeland, a private discourse about memories about those who had been lost and those who had arrived.⁴⁵

Information is transferred among the women as part of an established dialogue—as gossip ("She told Hannah Rabin...everything she knew about that girl."⁴⁶). But it is also part of the constitution of an alternative causal system that only women can explain. When Ita Bloch dies, Brakha goes to Lulu the seamstress "because only at her house—it was clear to her—could she know the things truly."⁴⁷ And, indeed, Lulu, "like a good commentator, explained all that was indistinct and incomprehensible—and it all became lucid and intelligible to her."⁴⁸ The women in *The Exiles* pass on news of the world to one another and teach each other about the organization of the world relevant to them. They have no need for mediation and instruction from men, as is typical in Western cultural representations, in which the rational male guides and leads the woman, who is unable to decipher the world on her own.

iv.

In *The Exiles*, Baron takes up the "tidbits" of daily life—food and gossip, the subject marked by way of the body, and not by way of an idea.

Through the body, the experience of exile, disconnected from the general national narrative, which sees it as a stage on the way to redemption, can also stand on its own. It stands in opposition to Jaffa, described as a network of

winding alleys, in which the braying of donkeys reverberates like the sound of the *shofar*, sidewalks strewn with banana peels, and the fierce gaze of the natives, who stand tall like the points of spits within the murkiness of the stores...[and] at night the sprinklers in the orange groves emitted their short, sharp yelps. The sea roiled below, menacing and so close that it seemed as if its waves lapped up against the walls as if they were a ship, and mosquitoes darted out from between the folds of the bedding and fell murderously on one's face.⁴⁹

And in Alexandria,

Shocks of beet-red bougainvilleas protruded from the curvaceous walls, birds hovered in the sunset rays as if cast in gold, and sailboats floated as if drowsing there, beyond, on the sea, on the surface of the crimson water.⁵⁰

All is serene. When Mrs. Rothstein walks around Alexandria before leaving, she sees it as a Garden of Eden.⁵¹ But the site of exile is not only beautiful in appearance, it is also nourishing—the food is good. For those who frequent her house, Mrs. Rothstein prepares "sumptuous meals, better than those in her boarding house in the neighborhood on the sea [in Jaffa]," and

as in her Lithuanian home town, back then, she began to prepare, for Sabbath meals, cakes with jam and stewed apple fillings, and kept hot in the oven "rolled" pastries, and huge potatoes, swimming in fat, and as an accompaniment, just for tasting, she also cooked that white, floury bean that evoked in the Lithuanians memories of the Friday night celebrations of a boy's birth back in their villages.⁵²

Additionally, everything is cheaper in Alexandria: the bread rises higher; the meat is juicier; the fowls grow plumper. Here, in her second exile, Mrs. Rothstein can recreate the physical attributes of the first exile. She can link the two not by analogy (in which she, as a woman, is demoted to the level of an image), not by national universalization, and not in a way that will be subordinated to phallogocentric values such as logic, causality, and sequence, but rather in a way that is built on an alternative temporal axis—one measured by food.

The one thing that does not depend on food—the link to the homeland—also finds its remedy when additional exiles arrive from Palestine, creating a community: "For Meir Rothstein it was now as if a thread between him and the Land of Israel that had been cut upon his exile had been tied together again, and was now resilient and stable."⁵³ The dimension of space loses its centrality in the national (territorial) discourse and makes way for an alternative centrality—that of the community, which maintains itself, as noted, not by the counting and endless numerical documentation of the Exiles' Committee, but rather thanks to nourishing food, matchmaking, and birth—by being a fundamentally female community. Space loses its centrality in organizing the national narrative and territory becomes secondary. The temporal axis based on this space is the line that stretched between exiles and redemptions, between "hutz la-aretz" (outside the Land) (the Exile) and in Palestine, the homeland, which loses its exclusivity and even its centrality. It becomes a bodiless, passive super-organization that makes way for an alternative organization of time. Women are shunted into the margins of the national Zionist discourse; they cannot constitute themselves as autonomous subjects in the hegemonic channel of this discourse, a channel that is "universal" (male), spiritual, and territorial. She must, therefore, constitute herself on its margins, in a discourse that is pushed outside—the physical, sexual discourse, not as an *image* of spirit and territory, but rather as self-sufficient authority. The turn to the body is a turn to the place of femininity in the organization of the female subject as a national female subject. Once the female body is placed as the national subject, the biological body links up to culture, an alternative national story is created. In other words, alongside the alternative narrative (broken, not closed, with a broken and illogical temporal axis) and alongside the alternative organization of history (orally, as a story) a dimension of the constitution of femininity integrates into that of the female national subject.

— Translated by Haim Watzman

Notes

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
2. Monique Wittig, "The Point of View: Universal or Particular?" *Women, Creativity and the Arts: Critical and Autobiographical Perspectives*, eds. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona and Lucinda Ebersole (New York: Continuum, 1997), 87–93.
3. Dvora Baron, *ha-Golim* [The exiles] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1970), 53.
4. *Ibid.*, 84.
5. *Ibid.*, 127–129.
6. *Ibid.*, 139–143.
7. *Ibid.*, 162.
8. *Ibid.*, 100.
9. *Ibid.*, 174.
10. *Ibid.*, 176.
11. *Ibid.*, 179.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 95; 132.
15. *Ibid.*, 141.
16. *Ibid.*, 5.
17. *Ibid.*, 140.
18. *Ibid.*, 171.
19. *Ibid.*, 71.
20. *Ibid.*, 60–61.
21. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
22. *Ibid.*, 133.
23. *Ibid.*, 21.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, 41.
27. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1983), xii. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that this Oedipal moment at the foundation of the classic narrative—which acts according to the nostalgic belief that the past has explanatory or redemptive powers regarding the present—cannot, nevertheless, explain female actions. The reason is that the Oedipal historical order of the male creation, which is motivated by the "anxiety of influence," has no point of contact with women's experience. Women writers, they state, therefore constitute an alternative historical order, based not in the Oedipal family novel but in "the fear of creation." Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 45–48.
28. Dvora Baron, *Parshiyot* [Tales] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1951), 127.
29. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).
30. Baron, *ha-Golim* [The exiles], 20.

31. Ibid., 141.
32. Ibid., 138.
33. Ibid., 18.
34. Ibid., 143.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 140.
37. Ibid., 142.
38. Ibid., 46.
39. Ibid., 113.
40. Ibid., 32.
41. Ibid., 33.
42. Ibid., 17.
43. Ibid., 170.
44. Ibid., 151.
45. Ibid., 138.
46. Ibid., 154.
47. Ibid., 85.
48. Ibid., 87.
49. Ibid., 6.
50. Ibid., 54.
51. Ibid., 94.
52. Ibid., 16–17.
53. Ibid., 19.



THE RABBINICAL COURT AS A SLAUGHTERHOUSE

DVORA BARON'S "BILL OF DIVORCEMENT"

Avraham Bala

For many years, readers of Hebrew literature knew of Dvora Baron only through the forty-three short stories included in the volume of her collected stories, *Parshiyot* (Tales).¹ In 1988, Nurit Govrin collected and published dozens of Baron's earlier stories printed over the years in various periodicals.² An examination of these early stories and comparison with her later work shows that Baron's better-known stories were shaped, to a considerable extent, by pressure from the literary establishment that prevailed in Palestine at the time. The straightforward style of Baron's earlier stories, which voice open protest against various aspects of traditional Jewish society, stand in stark contrast to her later works, works that are characterized by great restraint and ingenious techniques of camouflage and dissimulation.

This transition in style and subject treatment was not simply a reflection of a more mature literary perception and evolved writing style. Lily Feldman emphasizes the feminist fury expressed in Baron's early stories, and in her summary of the critical reviews that accompanied the publication of those stories, she concludes:

Thus, the secret diktat of the male literary establishment is a prohibition on feminism, which is foreign to the Jewish culture. By contrast, displays of authentic Jewish compassion and loving-kindness are encouraged. A female writer is permitted to feel pity for miserable wretches, because this helps bolster the image of the Jewish woman as a compassionate, caring person, attuned to the sufferings of society's victims, but she must not advocate equality for women. Baron accepted this diktat, and in her later fiction, she emphasizes the outrageous fortunes that afflicts men as well as women; but in those stories she does her best to underplay the cruelty of men, who hurt women and victimize them.³

Indeed, Baron, who had to wait seventeen years (1910–1927) for a new publishing house to publish her first book, had learned her lesson. Very few of her later stories express a feminist protest, and even those that do conceal their subject behind seven veils. The story "Bill of Divorcement" ("Kritut," 1941) is representative in this respect. On the one hand, a sensitive reader cannot mis-