New Challenges in the State of Israel

The stories written after statehood describe female assertiveness in different and unexplored areas: The 18-year-old soldier in Dahlia Ravikovitch's "A Slight Delay" resolutely opposes sexual harassment by her superior officer, and she finds the inner resources to survive and come to terms with her experience.

The protagonist of Savyon Liebrecht's "A Room on the Roof" is a young mother. She demonstrates an impressive independence when she takes upon herself—in opposition to the wishes of her husband and in his absence—the responsibility for building a room of her own, because supervising the Arab construction workers is indeed a dangerous task. Yet the young Jewish mother succeeds, and even reaches moments of closeness and identification with one of the workers. Though these moments do not ultimately lead the protagonist to a deeper understanding or to change, Liebrecht seems to say that in the assertiveness that leads to her identification with the Palestinian Arab man, the young mother has become worthy of commendation.

Assertiveness is also apparent in Shulamith Hareven's "Loneliness," in which the sexual attraction that a mature woman feels for a teenage girl causes a lasting upheaval in her world. Sexual attraction outside the cultural norm characterizes "Shrinking" by Ruth Almog as well. Here a mature woman re-establishes a connection with a man who had been her student many years earlier, when she had just begun her teaching career. Although she ultimately recoils from sexual contact with the younger man, the possibility for fulfillment of their relationship testifies to the breakdown of the accepted societal phenomenon of "marrying up."

The stories that conclude the anthology describe four foci of pain within the Israeli community: the memory of the Holocaust in Michal Govrin's "La Promenade, Triptych," the unending fear of terrorism in Savyon Liebrecht's "A Room on the Roof," enduring social inequity in Orly Castel-Bloom's "Ummi Fi Shurl," and bereavement following war in Yehudit Hendel's "Apples In Honey." Great strength is demanded of the Jewish women who must live within this pain. Ultimately, Israeli women's fiction reveals the country's deep longing for peace—to heal the wounds of the past and to create a better future.

Begin

Excision

Dvorah Baron

Of all those who appeared before my father, the rabbi, for litigation, the ones who seemed to me most discriminated against were the women who were about to be driven from their husbands' home.

Certainly there were also others robbed of justice: workers who were exploited by their employers, or merchants who had been cheated, except that for these others, matters could be rectified.

The claims were presented and the witnesses testified, and he who was found guilty was convicted. Justice was on the side of the oppressed.

Dvorah Baron was born in Russia in December 1887. Her father, the Rabbi of a small town, taught her all the subjects studied by boys, including the Talmud itself. Their home, in the center of town, housed the Synagogue, the elementary school, and the religious court. From early morning onward, it was besieged by people seeking Rabbi Baron's advice. Dvorah Baron began writing at an extremely young age, and her work was first published in 1903. She was also active in Zionist circles, and in 1911 settled in Neve-Tzedek, near Tel Aviv. She married Yosef Aharonovitz (1877-1937), the labor leader and editor of *Hapoel Hatzair*. In 1915 they were exiled to Egypt, and were unable to return home until 1919. Her works, relying on an extremely supple and precise Hebrew, received great critical acclaim, and Baron was the first recipient of the Bialik prize in 1934. From 1936 until her death in 1956, she suffered from a serious illness which kept her bedridden.

Whereas these women—"divorced in heart" as they were referred to—the judgment against them was harsh.

"When a man takes a woman," it says, and if she doesn't find favor in his eyes, he will write her a "writ of divorce."

For really, what other remedy is there for lovelessness?

It is a malignant disease. Whoever contracts it will never be healed.

For five or ten years the woman sat at home, caring for his well-being; she washed, knitted and mended. She removed all obstacles and ironed out all difficulties with devotion.

Next to buildings in the midst of construction, she gathered wood for heating; from the parks she collected remnants of manure for the two vegetable patches in her yard in which she grew beans, carrots, and beets, and from this she skillfully prepared vegetable soups and relishes. She created something from nothing.

And when the man came home, he sat down to a set table, cut the bread with his strong hands, gulped the soup she served him and through the steam of the hot food, his glance lit upon her, flashing an expression of satisfaction or gratitude, and that was her reward.

And then one day, it happened, everything was undermined. Perhaps the influence of his family who voiced their hatred of the woman or perhaps he found "one more beautiful than she" and he had a change of heart. And without that spice which transforms bitter to sweet, everything became insipid and tasteless.

Suddenly the bread was burnt, or not sufficiently baked, and the meal was spoiled and smelled badly—and a quarrel flared. In the beginning, it was contained, so they would not be disgraced in front of strangers, and later when bitterness had accumulated in their hearts, it erupted in thunder and fury like those heavy clouds, discharged from their electricity, with everything stormy and churning.

If children were present, they protected themselves like chicks in the moment of disaster, when their nest is about to be destroyed. They were full of compassion for their mother and frightened of their father's rage.

He, crazed by anger, thinking that in this way he would hurt her, sometimes attacked them, hitting them relentlessly.

One of the neighbors intervened and took them into his house, and there they sat, abandoned, like objects without an owner, until night fell, for only then did they find the courage to return home. They searched in the dark to find their beds and in mute fear, crawled under their covers, and then the mother regained her dignity and realized that this was impossible, this had to be stopped. And then came the day when she went out to the town hall.

How could she walk this painful path, at the end of which she would be cut off from her home, her life?

The shopkeeper, near the alley by the town hall, stood at his store entrance to stare at her, and from the top of the bakery, in the alley, a woman, a housewife, descended, and greeted her.

They did not have a close relationship, but now she gave her the same look, which only a victim of fate would sense, a touching of raw wounds.

The clerk in the courthouse, who was an acquaintance of hers, chose to ignore her. He was now "at work," and the building itself, when she entered it, seemed like a bridge, with no handrails, a dizzying journey into the horrors of the abyss:

The scribe's instruments on the table, the open and sharpened penknife sparkling in their midst, the judges' chamber, which in her imagination looked like the heavenly court she would have to report to in the future when her time came, and the icy stare which came from the corner in which he sat, fortified by his family—who were like a wall around him.

They—if previously there was animosity between the woman and them—could now not hide their satisfaction. The man was the link that had been detached from their chain, and lo and behold he had returned to be reattached and reunited with them.

Already in the early morning, they had placed a bottle of water in his pocket so that he could wash his hands immediately after giving the *get*[1] and thus "be the first to have good luck"; afterwards one of them disappeared and returned with whiskey and cake, and from behind the wooden partition, he came to request a tray and glasses.

My mother, so courteous and so genial, didn't give it. "It's

1. The Jewish divorce writ.

difficult to reach the dishes," she said, and when the arrangements prior to the writing of the *get* were completed, she brought the woman next to her.

A meadow was visible through the window and from the stool upon which she was seated, she could, in the summer, see its green grass, stretching across the great expanse with a tranquility inconsistent with the struggles and hesitations of a person's heart:

The calm shallow water next to the edge of the gardens, with the heavenly radiance reflected in it, and the solitary linden tree in their midst, should have aroused feelings of encouragement in her heart, since surely, more than once, gales of storms had washed over the lonely tree, and nevertheless it remained standing securely in place.

My mother, on seeing the pensive look she wore, got up and left.

When a person is alone with his inner thoughts, it is sacred—she thought—and no stranger should approach.

But at last, it ceased, the silence, there behind the wall, and the final hour arrived, laden with responsibility and the gravity of judgment.

The words, written in Assyrian script[2] were carefully articulated, the witnesses arose to certify their signatures, and the man, in the presence of a *minyan*[3] handed to his wife her writ of divorce, informing her explicitly that from this moment she was divorced from him. Then the circle around her opened and she was pushed out of it, cut off; she momentarily wavered to and fro, and then she left.

My mother—if it was already night time—put the lantern on the windowsill, but the path of light which extended outward was empty. She was already totally engulfed by the darkness.

And afterwards also there was a continuation.

Some women, either out of feelings of compassion, or because they were dissatisfied with their own lack of domestic harmony, decided to do something for her betterment. They bought sewing goods or food products for her and she would sell them, but she still did not regain her strength.

2. The same script used in the Torah.
3. Jewish quorum of ten men, necessary to recite certain public prayers.

She was too weak to support a household whose central pillar had been removed, and everything seemed like one great vacuum:

Near the dining room table on the Sabbath and holidays, near a child's sickbed, and on the bench outside where they'd sat outside in the evening breeze.

And there were dreams, sparks of light reflecting the past:

His warm glance through the window when she returned in the morning from the market, a shared bathing of a child in the warm steam near the bathtub, shoulder to shoulder, and his genuine concern at the sound of her sigh, or cry of pain.

With these residual images in her mind's eye, she stood by her goods the next day and bargained with the customers, while her glance followed and grasped every wisp of smoke which rose from the chimney in his house—in every possible shadow she imagined that she saw his likeness.

And at times, in some nearby alley, she saw him bend and embrace their children, united with her in this moment in a shared love.

—And behold everything was not over, she stood, her whole being throbbing. Why was it so? Why had all this occurred?

But it also happened that one day, there chanced across her path, among the passersby in the street, a little child who looked exactly like him, and like her son who was walking next to her, and the child was told:

"Look, this is your brother. Please come and kiss him."

—And then the ground collapsed beneath her.

There was another type of woman condemned to divorce—women who had stayed with their husbands for ten years and had not given birth, women whose skin had never been scarred from carrying a baby.

Of these divorcees, I remember Zelta, the woman peddler from the valley, a brave woman, always kindhearted.

She had married someone from her neighborhood, a certain Isser Bar, an unemployed bookbinder.

For years she had waited for him—they said—and finally her heart's desire was fulfilled. And from then on she was invested with

the spirit that had inspired Jacob when his time came to roll the heavy stone away from the well.

With such ease she carried her two baskets overflowing with fruit and vegetables.

On the banks of the river she washed, between purchase and sale, other people's laundry, and at night at the baker, she kneaded the dough of the rye bread. She received, in addition to the copper pennies, a little bread baked from the leftover dough, which she ate later with her Isser Bar (outdoors in the summer under the pear tree). She sliced and gave him his portion, slice after slice, and the aroma of love came from there, mixed with the smell of the food that she'd made in the night hours in the baker's oven.

The people of the neighborhood, while passing by, would give a benevolent look, similar to the way they looked at a blossoming tree or a sun-and-dew-drenched garden.

But meanwhile the years passed, and the woman who was barren didn't know that their time had come, their limit had been reached.

She was weak in body and several years older than the man, and his family saw that one of the branches of their tree of life was withering.

When the designated year, the tenth year, arrived, his relatives from the village of Kaminka came and took him back with them, and she in her innocence, was happy. "He'll breathe some fresh air," she said.

And for every Sabbath, she sent him the braided *hallot* which he loved and also—to increase his appetite—herring, which he couldn't get in Kaminka.

The day he was supposed to return, she chanced upon some cherries, and with eyes sparkling with the same joyous glow that shone on the dewy fruit, she carried them home.

"I'll fry them for my Isser Bar," she said, "he loves cherry marmalade."

And later on while she was frying them, standing glowing next to the stove, she was surprised to see her two brothers-in-law from Kaminka enter, with the harsh expression on their faces of those coming to execute the court decree, and Isser Bar himself, walking behind them, with a sputtering and flickering look, like a flame doused by a cold wind.

I saw the woman the day of the *get* as she was about to enter the courtroom.

The scribe, in front of the reception table, began at that very moment to rub his knife with a rag, and then she made the movement of an ox who has been brought to the slaughterhouse and smells the scent of blood.

"No, no," she said.

And my mother, who stood at the entrance of the room, took one step backward and quickly averted her face.

A young girl who was the sister of fertile women with many sons had already been prepared for the man, and he quickly married her. And not a year had passed and she sat on the ledge near their house—the daughter of Yonah the carpenter was from our street—with a large baby at her breast.

Remembered for a long time afterwards was the confusion in the synagogue on the Sabbath she came to prayers for the first time after the birth. She was wearing a new dress that she had sewn by herself and that really drew the women's attention, because she was a seamstress who knew the big city fashions, and suddenly a strange cough came from the corner where the woman peddler sat, and then the sobbing burst forth—a moaning that comes from the depths, warding off all words of solace and comfort, and raising doubt in the hearts of the listeners as to whether everything in this world is conducted fairly.

Later, solicitous gestures were still made. She was offered a stall at the front of the market, and the baker from her neighborhood asked her to be the regular assistant in his house, but since she didn't respond, they left her alone, the way they leave a house on fire alone when it is not dangerous to others—and she faded and flickered until she finally was extinguished.

It was a summer day, and from the carpenter's shop came the sounds of sawing, filing, and singing, and then one of the valley people entered and the noise stopped. The funeral passed through the alley, a barren funeral, without the mourners' eulogies or cries.

The people, those who were busy with work, came and stood in their doorways, and the others went and walked until the turn in the

road, and then that same silence returned, through which the whispers of the heart buzzed like the words in a telegraph wire.

And finally the woman peddler's neighbor, Esther the pretzel maker, turning toward the carpenter's workshop, or was it the town hall, asked, "Why didn't they kill her, that woman, then, at the time, immediately? What was the purpose of prolonging the agonies of this death?"

Tears fell from her eyes. "If you cut off the head," she said furiously, "then at least cut it off entirely, all at once."

c.1943

Translated by Felice Kahn Zisken

Questions for Discussion

1. The story, written in 1943, explores the world Dvorah Baron knew as a young girl. Consider how the pastoral images of Eastern European landscape and the characters' rustic occupations contrast with the emotional devastation the women undergo. What effect is Baron creating?
2. The Hebrew title of this short story, *Kritut*, is the word for divorce, but also has the meanings: excision, cutting off, spiritual severing, amputation. How do these meanings deepen your understanding of the story?
3. Consider the different reactions of the townspeople: the shopkeeper, the clerk in the courthouse, the women who "decided to do something for her betterment," the narrator's mother, the baker who tried to help the childless woman. Examine your personal reaction toward another woman's divorce. Which of these characters do you most resemble?
4. Compare these *shtetl* divorces to divorce today. Have we "progressed"? Consider Jewish religious divorce law and the work of many Jewish women's groups on behalf of *agunot*. What are the issues today? Do they differ from the issues addressed by Baron? How?

5. How does Dvorah Baron's indictment of Jewish religious law and its consequences fit into the Israeli concept of "negation of the diaspora," with its repudiation of *shtetl* life and *shtetl* mentality, its rejection of the past? (Note that Dvorah Baron at times writes positively of upholding Jewish religious law, as in her story "Family."[4]) How do American Jewish attitudes toward the past differ? Why?

Program Suggestions

1. Organize a panel discussion on divorce within the Jewish community. Include at least one speaker who is knowledgeable about current divorce practice in Israel and its impact on women. Other speakers might include someone knowledgeable about the work of ICAR (pronounced ee-car), the International Coalition for *Agunah* Rights, to discuss abuses of Jewish divorce law, a family therapist, a rabbi, a divorced woman, and/or a child of divorced parents.
2. Compare Dvorah Baron's indictment of *halakhah* to American Jewish authors' attitudes toward Judaism. For example, in the 1923 American short story "The Lord Giveth" by Anzia Yezierska,[5] religion, though spiritually ennobling, is useless in the pragmatic business of day-to-day life. Invite a professor of Hebrew literature or Jewish studies to offer a wider perspective on Israeli and American attitudes toward religion as reflected in literature.

4. Dvorah Baron, "Family" in *The Thorny Path*, translated by Joseph Schachter (Jerusalem: Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature and Israel Universities Press, 1969), pages 1–37.
5. Anzia Yezierska, "The Lord Giveth" in *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), pages 233–244.