

Ella Bat-Tsion – From Love of Woman to Love of God

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Abstract

[1] *The paper presents the poet Ella Bat-Tsion as a distinctive voice in contemporary Hebrew poetry. In the 1970s and the 1980s, under her previous name, Gabriella Elisha she published five books of poetry surprising her readers with lesbian themes. During the 90's however, she changed her name to Ella Ban-Tsion, and published *The Book of God's Dreams*, which portrays new poetry revealing her new religiosity. The paper analyzes the poetic transformation she underwent, while examining whether her early poems hint at the process to come, and whether her later poetry holds motives and structures known from her early poetics.*

In the book of God's dreams
I found the calm stream of poetry
On the bank of that stream I fell asleep

(The Book of God's Dreams, 1994.
Translated from Hebrew by the author)

[2] Ella Bat-Tsion is a poet of the margins. In three decades of creative work, she has published more than ten books, many in the most distinguished publishing houses in Israel, as well as numerous publications in the daily press and in various journals from "Moznaim", "Iton 77" and "Siman Kri'aa" to "Meshiv Haruach", a journal of Jewish poetry, and the online journal "Hadag Ha-anonimy". Yet despite all this, Ella Bat-Tsion is a poet of the margins. She does not belong to any literary generation or group, and in her way even challenges traditional generational classifications; she deals with womanly love, and, unconventionally, with the love of God; she is not a political figure – she stays hidden from the public eye. Ella Bat-Tsion is a poet of the margins because all her books receive only a few lines of criticism and every mapping of Hebrew poetry will overlook her. Yet it is just for these reasons that I find it important to pay attention to her, to recognize her distinct voice and through the discussion of her poetry, to redeem the margins of Hebrew poetry from forgetfulness.

[3] Gabriella Elisha (b.1954) appeared on the Israeli poetry scene in the early 1970's with her book *My Lips Breathed Darkness into the Body* (1973). During the 1980's she published five books of poetry, surprising her readers with the lesbian themes of her poetry. During this period she also translated the 18th century Zen poet Rayokan and the poet Elsa Gidlow, one of the founders of the lesbian feminist community. Her poems of the 1970's and 1980's deal, in intimate and translucent language, with womanly love, music, loneliness and the writing process. Often they remind us of Japanese *haiku* poetry, seeming to follow a fleeting vision, to paint a short and focused

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picture describe an entire world in few words. Her longer poems usually address another person – usually her lover – present a dialogue, describe a memory, or draw a picture of an intimate moment. Although many of her poems invoke sadness, they do not express protest but acceptance. This is also true in her lesbian poems: the sexual relationships, described with tenderness and sensitivity, create a picture of intimate and personal love. [4] In the early 1990's Gabriella Elisha changes her name to Ella Bat-Tsion, and in 1994 publishes *The Book of God's Dreams*. From this point on, Ella Bat-Tsion portrays different poetry: her loneliness mutates in to a will to merge with the Transcendent, and womanly love changes to intimate (non-sexual) relations with God. Her addressee is God, who gives her a new purpose but demands she turn her back on who she was before. Her poetic language is infused with a new vocabulary, religious and kabalistic in nature; the gentleness gives way to an intensive, sometimes violent, process of effacing a previous identity and assuming a new one which will lead, eventually, to peace and tranquility. [5] Ella Bat-Tsion publishes four volumes of poetry after 1994, *Half-Love Half-Hate* (1996), *Sub-Language or Water, Mother, Psyche* (1996) *The Book of Ella Bat-Tsion* (1997), (a collection of her previously published poetry), and in 2000 she publishes her latest book, *After*. Her later books invoke the image of God, but lack their predecessors' powerful fervor; they present a retrospective overview of the process undergone by the poet, and recognition of the fact that the transcendent search is not yet over. [6] In this paper I wish to present the poet Ella Bat-Tsion as a distinctive voice in Hebrew poetry from the 1970's onwards. Through a discussion of her poems I will analyze the poetic transformation she underwent, from Gabriella Elisha to Ella Bat-Tsion, while examining whether her early poems hint at the process to come, and whether her later poetry holds motives and structures known from her early poetics.

[7] My rebellion started
Between 8:30 and 10:00
By padding the floor with absorbed cotton wool
By cleansing the face which carries me

My step has begun before that
The mirror cracked and my figure bisected
In the school library I found
The "God's Book of Memories"

(Excerpt of "My Rebellion Started", in *Half-Love Half-Hate*, 1996
Translated by the author)

[8] In the first two stanzas of the poem "My Rebellion Started", the poet describes, in retrospect, a change she had undergone. The first word, "rebellion", is joined by the precise statement of the time, "Between 8:30 and 10:30", giving a sense of the occurrence of a sudden event. The padding of the floor invokes a preparation for a great fall, which is preceded by a process of cleansing. The word-choice "cotton wool", "cleansing", and "face", paint a scene which can take place in the bathroom before going to bed. The speaker cleans her face with cotton wool, removing the filth which had covered it during

the day. This stanza forms an ambiguous relationship between the face of the character and her inner being. While the image of the face-cleansing might seem analogous to the process which the speaker is about to begin, the use of the formulation “the face which carries me” (instead of “my face”), creates disconnection between the face and the “me”, between the shape of the vehicle and what goes on underneath it.

[9] In the second stanza the movement towards change – the turning to “God’s Book of Memories” – leads back to the image of the bathroom. Here too, the character’s gaze into the mirror, and the face reflected there, express the inner process she experiences. The reversal is transferred from the speaker to the cracked mirror.

[10] The description of the “rebellion” in these two stanzas denotes a sudden change, which may hint at the biography of the poet: before 8:30 Gabriella Elisha stood in front of the mirror, and after the rebellion it is Ella Bat-Tsion who faces it, choosing God’s Book. Indeed, the poet’s change of name from Gabriella Elisha to Ella Bat-Tsion, and the publication of her book *The Book of God’s Dreams*, which is devoted solely to the experience of faith and devoutness, create an illusion of “rebellion”, as if we are faced with two poets who differ from one another in their poetic and thematic concerns (one writes in the 1970’s and 1980’s about womanly love, while the other writes in the 1990’s about God.) But I would like to offer a re-examination of Ella Bat-Tsion’s poetry, and suggest a different key to understanding her poetry, one which replaces the model of a split (a sudden change) with a model of evolution. In this paper I would like to divide her poetry into four sections, which trace a process:

[11] The first section, **Love and Music**, deals with the writing of Gabriella Elisha in the first four volumes, up to the volume *Another Music* from 1983. The second section portrays **The Search** in the volumes *Texts and Mini-Texts* from 1985 and *Inspiration* from 1987. The third section – **Devoutness**, presents *The Book of God’s Dreams* from 1994, and finally the fourth section – **Recognition** – characterizes her later books of poetry.

1. Love and Music

[12] Dolls go crazy
On a chair
In the nude

Hair within hair
Of animal
Stage Setting for a dream

Stage Setting
Of animals
In the hair
In the nude

On a chair
Dolls go crazy

(*Verbal Respiration*, 1980
Translated by Ofer Shorr)

[13] This poem describes an erotic moment of sexual play, where two women frolic naked on a chair. The poet chooses to substitute the women with dolls and even with animals, and uses the words “go crazy” to emphasize the physical experience, the play of flesh, and also to distance the (mental and emotional) human element from a scene characterized by total submission to physical pleasure. The poem has powerful sound patterns which stress the physical, especially emphasizing the guttural letters. The text consists of very short lines, repetition and word-play. Ostensibly the poem is written in a free style, but it is actually constructed as a mirror-like structure, where the first word is also the last word, the second word is also the second-to-last word. The only word in the poem which is not repeated is “dream”.

[14] One cannot talk about the poem "Dolls Go Crazy" without referring back to Dahlia Ravikovitch's well-known poem, "A Clockwork Doll", and understanding the transformation of this figure in Gabriella Elisha's writing:

That night, I was a clockwork doll
and I whirled around, this way and that,
and I fell on my face and shattered to bits
and they tried to fix me with all their skill.

Then I was a proper doll once again
and I did what they told me, poised and polite.
But I was a doll of a different sort,
an injured twig that dangles from a stem.

And then I went to dance at the ball,
but they left me alone with the dogs and cats
though my steps were measured and rhythmical.

And I had blue eyes and golden hair
and a dress all the colors of garden flowers,
and a trimming of cherries on my straw hat.
(“A Clockwork Doll”, translated by Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch)

Ravikovitch's poem, published in her first collection, "The Love of an Orange" in 1959, when she was only twenty three years old, is etched in the critical discourse as a classic poem about the feminine condition. In the poem, the doll undergoes a transformation from a plaything for young girls to a representation of the woman as an adolescent and later as an adult, who is herself objectified – she is required to act in a certain way and is

controlled, as if with strings, by other forces in her life. Like a damaged toy, the doll is broken and inadequately mended. She remains damaged and obedient, and experiences loneliness and humiliation: instead of participating in the ball, she is ostracized from human company. The poem ends with the description of the doll's outer beauty, which contrasts with her inner crisis – her performance is supposed to display normativity in correlation with the sonnet-structure of the poem; the wound supposed to be hidden and repressed, almost illegitimate.

[15] Elisha's poem, written in 1980 when she was 26, also uses a doll as a representation of a woman, but fundamentally subverts the way in which the woman is portrayed. On the one hand, the choice of a doll figure turns the woman into an object, and in this poem the dolls are obviously sexual objects – they are characterized as naked and playing sexual games. On the other hand, the doll is multiplied – the poem describes the play of two or more dolls. And herein lies the fundamental difference between the texts: in Elisha's game, the dolls do not need some outside force to "operate" them, there is no hint of any interference in the dolls' world, there is no sign of the "others" who manipulated Ravikovitch's doll, who tried to mend her shattered pieces, who left her with cats and dogs. The pairing of the dolls allows total freedom, the opposite of proper, normative behavior. They go mad together, and the only addition they make to their erotic dream is the chair, which can be either a household or theatrical object. The mirror-like structure of the poem heightens the aspects I have discussed: the inverted repetitions create an enclosed image, where the dolls gaze at themselves. If we assume that the eye of the beholder is always masculine, then replacing the theater curtain with the mirror strips the masculine from the poem and helps realize the lesbian relationship.

[16] In the poem "Dolls Go Crazy", the dolls take part in a sexual game which contains musical aspects. In the next poem, Elisha continues to realize the connection between musical and sexual movement.

The thighs' pulse weakens.
The heart's pulse relaxes
(a gallop in slow movement)

Fingers
A staccato of words
Between two bodies.

(Excerpt of a poem, in *Another Music*, 1983
Translated by Ofer Shorr)

In this poem, as in many others in the volume, love, like music, moves in different rhythms, from "a staccato of words / between two bodies" to "an elaborate oriental melody"; the tune connects with other sounds, with the voice of a bird, with "a different music that we used to hear, excited", with "a stereo system [that] will play / selecte human music."

The feminine collaboration which characterized the dolls in the former poem appears here as well, and accentuates Gabriella Elisha's lesbian writing in the poetic landscape of her time. While today the gay community in Israel is vibrant and engaged, in the past the picture was quite different. It was not easy, within the framework of the political and cultural reality, to create personal poetry in general, and poetry containing any sort of "otherness" in particular. Yona Wollach introduced erotic images, including typically aggressive multi-sexual experiences, into the poetic landscape. During the seventies only male homosexual writers such as Mordechai Geldman and Motti Baharav appeared in the arena of Hebrew Poetry. Elisha was one of the first lesbian writers in Israel – Lesbian writers, such as Sigalit Davidof, Dana Amir and Shaz, appeared only in the next decade. [17] However, Elisha is a trailblazer not only chronologically, but also stylistically. Instead of lesbian writing which presents an experience enveloped in loneliness and misery, Elisha depicts an experience full of love, acceptance and wholeness. The relationship between the speaker and her lover is multifaceted – it contains moments of grace, as well as times of great sorrow. Fundamentally, it shows a basic tenderness undisturbed by its queerness.

[18] But the wholeness and the harmony apparent in the description of the feminine relationship, together with their musical imagery, are further stressed in the book *Another Music*, where they subtly move into another realm – the description of God.

[19] Most of the poems in the collection *Another Music* are addressed to the departed lover, but out of the desire “to caress your body in an actual movement of caressing your loved body...” and the wish “to touch so as not to die”, the speaker discovers that it is loneliness, rather, which leads to inspiration. And so in this book a new equality is created, where love is music and solitude is the creative silence. And in the shift between the music and the silence the figure of God appears, almost for the first time:

Music is prayer. There's no disagreement.
Humans pray to God
For timely rain, timely sun, comradely and love
But let there be silence, please, the creating silence.
(*A Different Music*, 1983
Translated by Ofer Shorr)

2. The Search

[20] In the books *Texts and Mini-Texts* from 1985, and in *Inspiration* from 1987, the poems dealing with the loved one are less common, while the experience of solitude and silence grows stronger.

[21] Gabriella Elisha writes haiku-style poems, short and concentrated poetry depicting a single moment. In a mini-text: “put out the cigarette / and come to bed”, Elisha turns a common sentence in the language into a poem depicting an entire relationship between a speaker waiting for her lover, and the lover who wants to suck to its last the final cigarette before bed. In this short text, the poet endeavors to preserve the moment before sleep.

[22] In the ironic poem “The Name of My Girlfriend”, the poet confronts for the first time the discrepancy between the experience of womanly love and the process of searching for God:

The Name of My Girlfriend

On about the ten thousandth night
I go to bed
These last few nights smoke creates images for me
Which suddenly pass
In the glare of the flashlight I cannot see
Anything that should not have been here
I illuminate the page to write down a few words
It's fitting that I write The Name
Of my girlfriend
It's fitting that I close my eyes.

(Inspiration, 1987

Translated by Ofer Shorr)

The first line delineates a time frame: something takes place in the ten thousandth night of the speaker's life, meaning that for about 30 years (almost her entire life) she has been going to bed at night. But on the ten thousandth night, or the several nights which precede it, something extraordinary happens – images are drawn which the speaker cannot see, even with the aid of a flashlight.

[23] In the second part of the poem, there is a recognition that something exists which should not be there. And this discrepancy is expressed when the speaker illuminates the page and wishes to write words: “it is fitting that I write The Name”. The expression “The Name refers to the explicit Name of God. But in the next line it becomes clear that it is “the (explicit) Name of my girlfriend”. The caesura, and the connection made between “The Name” and “my girlfriend”, creates an ironic quality which spreads out over the entire poem and infuses it with bitterness. The recognition of the discrepancy between the mate and God leads the speaker to relinquish the will to write, to shut her eyes and give in to the surrounding darkness.

[24] This poem shatters the image of harmonic female relationships presented by Elisha in her previous volumes. Instead of female harmony, the poem gives way to darkness, while presenting an internal struggle between God and the lover. Indeed, as Shalom Ratzabi (1986) has claimed, with the publication of this volume Elisha's poetry moves "from poetry of dreaming to a poetry which attempts to define the nature of existence, agonized in its loves, fears, and hopes."

[25] In “The Name of My Girlfriend” God and the lover are presented as interchangeable elements. On the one hand, this description reveals a deep rift, as the speaker feels she cannot hold on to both of them – choosing God would mean giving up the lover, and vice

versa – there must be only one Divine Name. On the other hand though, the poem suggests equating her relationship with her lover and her relationship with God. This alternative, seemingly radical, is reminiscent of several Kabbalistic ideas. Yoav Alshstein (1985: 19-21) presents the possibility of integration between form and matter and between the spiritual and the sensual as they appear in the Book of Zohar and in Hassidic texts, as using the libidinal energy created by a woman's love in order to love the creator. He recounts a story told by Yitzhak from Acre, where a man has achieved religious greatness after managing to disengage from all emotion while waiting for a woman he craved. The conclusion goes: "whoever has never lusted after a woman is lesser than an ass. He must channel his feelings to serve God." (Eliahu Di Vidash, "Reshit Chochma," Kushta, 1736). This passage contends that man must not be torn away from flesh-and-blood emotions, because they are an essential pathway to knowing the God. He, who never feels sensual love, will never feel love for the Creator. Judith Plaskow (1990: 208-9) expresses a similar idea, referring especially to homosexuality:

...vision offered by the Jewish tradition that sexuality can be a medium for the experience and reunification of God. Historically, this vision has been expressed entirely in heterosexual terms. The reality is that for some Jews however, it is realized only in relationships between two men or two women. [...]

Homosexuality then does not necessarily represent a rejection of Jewish values but the choice of certain Jewish values over others [...] the choice of the possibility of holiness over control and law.¹

[26] The description of part-parallel part-opposition of the lover and God, serves the poet in her passage from a lesbian secular life to a life of religious mysticism. Thus, the act of unification, completion and harmony with the lover turns to a craving for unification and harmony with the whole of creation. And with this unification and harmony, darkness dissolves and light emerges.

[27] In the poem "Praise the Dawn: The Surface-Level of Transitory Things", the speaker is drawn to a pure ray of light, wishes to shine in the vacuum and exist in a place beyond the corporeal world. This tendency is highlighted again in the poem "My Body Will Not Be Left of Me", in which the speaker describes her yearning to merge with the transcendent, and asks to disintegrate and lose her body and desire.

[28] The shift towards the transcendent and the mystic, which is described through the nature and the light, leads Gabriella Elisha to relinquish her former addressee and choose God in her stead, in a sort of "prayer bereft of all ritualistic articles", in Shmuel Shetel's formulation (1986).

[29] The poem "As a Wanderer Shivering before his Creator" is in many ways a precursor for this shift of tendency in her writing:

As a Wanderer shivering before his Creator

¹ Regarding the legitimacy of lesbianism according to Jewish law, Plaskow (1990: 182) claims that: "lesbianism, because it involves no intercourse and no 'wasting of seed', was a less serious offense, a rebellious and condemnable act that brought no legal penalty"

Moshe Ben-Shaul (1998 : 66) argues:

I don't exactly know when the poet Gabriella Elisha became the poet Ella Bat-Tsion. I don't know the borderline, but through my familiarity with her poems since her first book, this borderline, which separates here and there, also separates the poems of the past, of Gabriella, from the poems of today, of Ella.

Ben-Shaul utters these words critically, for he thinks that her early poetry was brave, confessional, less stylized, wild, and full of magic and daring, while her religious poetry is lacking, marked with pathos and simplicity.

[31] I do not share Ben Shaul's criticism of her religious poetry, but I also do not know when Gabriella Elisha became Ella Bat-Tsion. Her attraction to Judaism and to Kabala may be part of a larger trend. Goldwasser (in Dan Orian, 2001:34) claims, following research conducted on people who "went back to religion", that "there is no common thread in them, save for a feeling of wanting and restlessness which characterizes them." The weakening of Zionist ideology, the search for roots and for a full "cultural cart", life in Jerusalem with its religious population, and the connection of Jewish mysticism to the "new age" atmosphere, have all led Elisha to a process of self-exploration, formulated in religious terms. Furthermore, as I have attempted to show, this process may be uncovered through a reading of Gabriella Elisha's poetry, which exhibits, already from its earlier stages, a desire for harmony and perfection.

[32] Nevertheless, as Oded Peled (1997) attests, it is important not to see Ella Bat-Tsion as a run-of-the-mill orthodox:

In her writing, and probably outside of it as well, Ella Bat-Tsion undergoes an intensifying spiritual religious process, which finds its most concentrated and pure form in her later books. She is an excellent example of a 'religious' artist in a non-establishment form, who has a consistent inner discourse with her God. She chooses to open her earlier book, *The Book of God's Dreams*, with the motto 'Come Holy Spirit to me/As the dove which landed on the shoulder of the Galilean.' I may be wrong, but it is hard to think of a religious poet who will choose Jesus, of all people, as a figure symbolizing her desire to come under the wings of the Divine. And maybe this motto is a sure sign of an all-encompassing spiritual power which is not bound by the borders and prohibitions of an institutional religion.

[33] *The Book of God's Dreams* is a private book which describes the speaker herself and her relationship with God, and expresses God's desires as analogous to her own. The figure of the book appears repeatedly in many of the poems in the volume, which note a page number from the book in their first line: "In page III of *The Book of God's Dreams*, I found channels of music / previously unplayed", "in *The Book of God's Dreams* page XX, quarrels and a discord came to me." And so on. The use of the book as a mode of communication with God is familiar in Modern Hebrew writing. For instance the writer Pinchas Sadeh, in his story "Moses or the Unfulfilled Love of God", uses repeated references to his own perusal of a book, thus alluding to the act of study in almost every chapter heading "and I read on", "and I return to reading the book," As if these phrases open a window into the Divine World.

[34] The element of the dream in the phrase, *The Book of God's Dreams*, is difficult to clarify: it can relate to the mystical experience, which man achieves once shedding the corporeal world. The Biblical dream is one of the ways in which the Word of the Lord reaches His subjects. The dream is not only a sleep time message, during a period of complete respite, but also has power to work in the world. It plants a seed and waits for the moment of sprouting. This sprouting is dependant on the relation between memory and forgetfulness in the sleeper, on his or her faith and ability to remember the dream, despite its uncertainty. The dreamer has a responsibility to realize the dream – to answer the Divine message. It is interesting to note that in the biblical narrative, not a single female character dreams a dream which is told as is, or which gains an authoritative position, such as Jacob's or Joseph's dreams (Hava Pinhas-Cohen 2001: 80,87). Nevertheless, Bat-Tsion is ready to embark on a voyage to discover the dream and receive it, as a woman, from God.

[35] In *The Book of God's Dreams* God is described in words of light and flashes, and the speaker uses the Kabbalistic elements of the core and the peel. He is portrayed as a presence and as a non-presence, as someone who has the power to plant light, separate the water from the sky, as a protecting and saving creator, but also as someone who wishes to return to his own potency, as a dreamer, and as vulnerable.

[36] By showing these faces of God, Bat-Tsion opts not to choose between the idea that reality is a Divine title and God exists in everything, and the idea that God is intrinsically different from the reality of everything outside of it.

[37] First, her poetry exhibits the mystic experience which finds its apex in the dissolving of the borders between man and the universe, and even between man and God. She presents a reciprocal version, based on the Kabbalistic idea that Divine perfection chooses to limit itself, to give a place for created and finite beings, in order to spawn the love not borne of necessity, to use Franz Rosenzweig's ideas (Rosenberg Shalom 2001:64). Bat-Tsion describes God's frailty in an essay, where she writes:

The notion of the fragile God is opposed to the common belief, which sees God as omnipotent, powerful, a terrible hero with superhuman traits... in the Lurianic Kabala, founded by The Holy ARI (=Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac), we find the theory of crisis in Divinity... and here a reversal in the common relation to God is needed. Reciprocal relations, mutual help, are what is needed. It is not only us who need God's assistance, God needs ours as well... this concept lends a far-reaching meaning to our deeds, which go beyond the personal, and give spiritual meaning of value and necessity in the plane of our relationship with God ("Saving God", 1991).

[38] Secondly, however, in *The Book of God's Dreams*, the other viewpoint is expressed too, where an individual encounters the ultimate other which is totally different from any reality. To borrow the terms coined by Rudolf Otto's "mysterium tremendum" (1950: 23), this experience invokes awfulness and fear – religious dread, and overpoweringness, alongside urgency or energy – vitality, passion, emotion, temper, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, and impetus:

A Religious Trip Comes Over Me

A religious trip comes over me:
I seek Jehovah
Cure me O Lord and I shall be cured
The cut, the wound,
Bind up, Almighty,
Fill the hollow
Empty the fullness
Expel the Satan
From my body
And come you yourself to dwell
Grant the right also to me
To be one of your servants in holiness
Like your prophets, your Levites,
And humble people who were killed in your name
Let me devote myself to you
O Lord my God
(*The Book of God's Dreams*, 1994
Translated by the author)

[39] This poem is like a prayer to God, to help the speaker in her distress and infuse her with faith. The poem opens with a Biblical allusion from Jeremiah 17:14 – “Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.” In the biblical context, the prophet turns to God because he feels loneliness and scorn emanating from the people to which he preaches and attempts to educate. The words are directed to God from His messenger.

[40] Bat-Tsion’s usage of the title "Jehova", instead of God or Lord, is akin to the distortion of the way in which God is usually referred to when one wishes to keep the appropriate distance – "Jehova" is a written name and usually not uttered. Moshe Ganan (1995) claims that Ella Bat-Tsion's religious poems exhibit a tension between a personal, inner religion, which listens to the voice of God from the depths of the persona, and an institutional religion, which dictates what is allowed and what is forbidden. This characterization of her religious poetry refers also to Peled's words (1997), noted previously. Ella Bat-Tsion uses Biblical sources, quotes abundantly from Scripture and uses Kabbalistic themes and figures. But, following on her former poetry, she also maintains a strategy of directness and intimacy.

[41] In the poem, the speaker speaks to God in a commanding tone: “cure me”, “bind up”, “fill”, “empty”, “expel”, “grant”, “let”. God is referred to directly through various names: “Jehovah”, “O Lord”, “Almighty”, “O Lord my God”, as well as in the 2nd person – “you”. The speaker demands that God cure and bind her wounds. This process is described through a series of oppositions: she asks that he fill the hollow and empty the fullness, and replace her satanic substance with a new, divine one.

[42] In the second stanza, the speaker continues to construct the connection between herself and God, and asks to be granted a role – to serve God and even give her life for him. Just as in the previous poem, “As a Wanderer Shivering Before his Creator” where the speaker chose to present herself as a wanderer in the masculine form, so also here, in the equation between herself and God, she prefers to assume a masculine role – to be like the prophets and Levites. And if she will not be able to rise to their stature, she is willing to be like the simple people who chose death over betraying God.

[43] Bat-Tsion accepts God's masculinity, and is willing to internalize his patriarchal metaphor³. She accepts that just as the gift of the divine dream was not bestowed on women, so the list of roles through which God is served has apparently skipped her gender. Or, as Amy-Jill Levine puts it “As secondary and derivative to Jew the Jewess in something less” (1997: 151). Bat-Tsion does not write the poem in the masculine and her speaker is a woman. When she presents the desired roles, however, she does so in the masculine. She does not attempt to change God's image and nature, but strives for a renewed characterization of a believer, who is willing to change her gender in order to serve God.⁴

[44] In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker's devoutness is presented as something which should not be taken for granted. She is filled with the creeping realization that in order to serve God she needs powers of spirit which she may not possess, and so turns to him and asks from him one last wish – that he imbue her with the necessary devotion to do as she desires.

[45] After the speaker in the previous poem asks God for a cure and powers of spirit, in the next poem he sends her on a new journey, and gives her a special role:

Lo, I confound age with age
And scribe line upon line

Lo, I confound the ages, the words and the deeds
Everything has become infected, shake yourself, arise,
Go back to the starting point
And I will send you on another journey.
Lo, I am giving you a new heart
And your old heart which still bleeds
Wrap it up in newspaper, cast it into the trash can

³ See Plaskow, 1990: 7: “God and Israel are metaphors borrowed from the patriarchal family – images of dominance softened by affection. God as husband and father of Israel demands obedience and monogamous love. He repays faithfulness with mercy and loving-kindness, but punishes waywardness.”

⁴ Ammiell Alcalay introduces other Hebrew texts in which women authors choose to speak in the masculine voice. In Shelley Elkayam, “Yes Indeed I'll Answer God” the woman who has invited readers into the garden of poetry, describes the experience, by using the word “remember” in its masculinity (1997: 103).

I am giving you a new heart.
Your old brain, smash it on the highway
I will inject new thoughts into you
That will intertwine from within a bountiful tree
Uproot the corrupted tree and cast it out.
In time of danger you may spread your arms
And fly to see the world from above
But look not downward lest the earth draw you in.
Lo, I am giving you two new sacks for breathing air
And countenance and sign of the covenant
And this is the word of the covenant between me and you
Here he shut out and did not interpret and his voice faded
As line upon line.

(The Book of God's Dreams, 1994
Translated by the author)

[46] In this poem, God turns to the poet and strikes a covenant with her. Before discussing this poem, I will mention the ending lines of Zelda's poem, "My Mother's Room was Illuminated", (from her volume "Leisure"):

When I die
God will unravel my embroidery
Thread by thread
And into the sea will toss my colors
To his ware houses in the abyss.
And maybe turn them to a flower, maybe to a butterfly
Dark-nocturnal-soft, dark-nocturnal-living
(Translated by Ofer Shorr)

[47] At the end of Zelda's poem, God unravels the threads into the warehouses of the abyss and is preparing to build something new. Ella Bat-Tsion's poem begins from the point of unraveling. It opens with the descriptions of the warehouses of God, which contain ages, words and deeds, and in a melting-like process he mixes them and forges from them something new. This poem alludes to the Kabbalistic notion whereby the individual empties himself and his corporeal being, and becomes a vessel for the containing of God. It is God who fills the body with substance, who is able to grant the speaker a kind of reincarnation and imbue her body with new substance. Although there are notions which claim reincarnation only for men, the speaker is granted a chance to mend her ways, to return to the point of embarkation and begin a new journey filled with purpose.

[48] In the past all is tainted, so one must return to the point of embarkation. Whatever she was before must be totally eradicated. The process of change is difficult, violent even. God gives her a new heart, but demands that she throw away the old bleeding heart

– tear away all the arteries and throw it in the trash, wrapped in a newspaper. And after throwing the heart away, she should also relinquish the brain, which similarly must be violently destroyed – “smash it on the highway”. The heart – feelings, and the brain – thoughts, are substituted by new ones which will sprout and grow out of a new tree, a new core given to her by God.

[49] God promises that in time of danger, she could spread her wings and fly. This hovering, reminiscent of the spread wings of the *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence, represents the speaker’s yearning to belong to two worlds: the upper world – the spiritual world, from which she is delivered with a gospel and purpose, and the lower world – the physical and actual one, where she lives her life. Yet she must beware that the physicality will not devour her – then the connection to the upper worlds will be severed and she will be mired in the corporeal.

[50] The sacks for pumping air are a continuation of the hovering, but they also delineate the process of re-creation undergone by the speaker. Just as spirit was injected into the individual, “[God] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7), so the speaker receives the breath of life, and God thus completes her renewed creation.

[51] After replacing the entire inwardness of the poet The Creator grants her a body and visage, as well as the mark of the covenant. Here too the speaker asks to stand in front of God like the male human being on the occasion of his circumcision. She reaches the metamorphosis in order to redeem her sins, to receive assistance and an objective, and strikes a covenant of blood with God. The speaker wishes to face the Lord as an individual, and therefore, maybe like Jay Geller’s (1997, 177-178) description of the historical figure of Rahel Levin Varnhegen (Born in Berlin in 1771), who, in her letters, “depicts her Jewish difference with allusions to circumcision and fantasies of circumcision-like inscriptions in her flesh”, she feels that she loses by being a woman, and is willing, even wants, to receive proof of her relationship with God through a covenant which will mirror the male blood bond.

[52] The poem’s last two lines emphasize the occasion of the covenant. This is a secret covenant, which cannot be recreated.

In the End and Always the Solitude

In the end and always the solitude will remain with me
And how to make it pleasant, and how to lighten its burden
And how from the void comes creation
And how in stillness, the voice of God is heard
Or maybe from the solitude I imagined his voice
And how at last the silence remains
As I sit in a winter watch by the new kerosine stove
And the flame is glowing like an orange
And I imagine the way you are sleeping.
And poems -
Still there are words
In the end there will not remain any words

And the words only strive to reach -
The words express the effort to row
Some private rowing in the sea of entities
And boundless nothingness...

(The Book of God's Dreams, 1994
Translated by the author)

The poet's purpose, to which she was sent in the previous poem, is not a simple one. The lines have been erased, and it is no longer possible to assure that such a shift took place that the materials were switched, that the artistic experience is also the religious one.

[53] Maritian claimed that there is a difference between the poetic experience and the mystical experience. While the poetic experience deals mainly with the created world, and with the relations between things in the world; the mystical experience deals with the essence and unity of things. Furthermore, the poetic experience strives towards expression and is created in the realm of language, whereas the mystical experience strives towards silence – its mode of expression concealed within it.

[54] However, Alshtein claims that despite their differences, the poetic and mystical experiences were born in proximity to each other, and are very close. Only seemingly does poetry deal with abundance through emotion and language. Sometimes, as Ella Bat-Tsion tries to show, it can reach for the mystical by trying to recognize the unity of things and to observe with mental concentration, by striving towards silence (Alshtain, 1985: 14).

[55] In this poem the speaker is left with the loneliness, the same loneliness that was typical of her previous volumes of poetry – the one which is key to the experience of writing, and therefore to the religious experience. The mystical experience in the poem consists of three parts: loneliness, revelation and finally a return to the corporeal world. Thus, after the conclusion of the mystical experience, the speaker doubts all that she has witnessed and moves to an ars-poetic mode. The connection between the mystical experience and the creative one is complicated. On the one hand, it is based on the analogy between the artist and God – between the creative writing process to the process of creation, (as we witnessed in her early poem, “As a Wanderer Shivering Before his Creator”.) On the other hand the poem creates another analogy, between the mystic and the poet. Just as the mystical experience demands that the mystic cut himself off from his environment, so writing is born out of the loneliness and disassociation from the concrete reality of life to that which the poet submits herself. But both the mystical experience and the poetic inspiration, which in this case may be one, are temporary and bound to end. What is left are the words which make up the poem, yet these are also elusive in nature, since the words “only strive to reach”. The oxymoronic nature of the religious experience – “and how from the void comes creation/ And how in stillness, the voice of God is heard” – and the indefinable nature of God are not describable, and so, in the end, the poem is sentenced to silence. This ending is similar to the ending of the poem “In The Book of God's Dreams, page XX,” which opens with “A quarrel and a discord”, and after

the reconciliation (“And since I requested, it has been opened for me”) sentences itself to silence.

4. Recognition

[56] “Do I have a future?” I asked the computer and it answered:
“Should I delete Gabriella Elisha” I replied “yes”

(Excerpt from the poem “What I Tried to Remember Vanished Completely”,
in *Sub-Language or Water, Mother, Psyche*, 1996
Translated by Ofer Shorr)

These lines, from the poem “What I Tried to Remember Vanished Completely”, express the feeling that the shift from Gabriella Elisha to Ella Bat-Tsion is a requisite for life, a requisite for the future. However, her last books of poetry reveal that the transformation is not simple and – despite the effacement – is also not complete.

[57] The book *Half-Love Half-Hate* (1996) includes many poems which depict a divided soul. The violence, which in her former book of poetry stood for the shift in designation and represented a positive purpose, receives in this book a negative quality describing an unhealed inner split.

Also the fruit also the psyche also the sex
Are split, it means half-love and half-hate,
The right half and the left one
Symbolically, even the mirror reflecting my image
Is bisected, because of a real crack

Hands and eyes and breasts are half-right half-left
Half my life is behind
Half my life is up front
The half that wishes to die and the half which is proud
One half worships God and the other worships the dark

(Excerpt of “Also the Fruit also the Psyche also the Sex”, in *Half-Love Half-Hate*,
1996. Translated by the author)

[58] In this poem the speaker presents, as she herself says in the final line, “a wholeness of one star / One heavenly body called by my tongue“, as a divided body. The reconciliation and devotion which were present in *The Book of God’s Dreams* cannot totally erase what was there before, and the process leaves a divided soul – with mismatching parts that nevertheless cannot be eradicated. The text is loaded with oppositions, time and space, backwards and forwards, right and left, love and hate, warm memory and memory of betrayal, death versus pride, and God versus darkness.

[59] Yoram Selbest (1998:9) claims that in this poem, "the full measure of the poet is revealed, complete with its internal rift which binds her feet to earth while her spirit floats in the metaphysical sky." As I have shown, this poem does indeed describe the internal chasm, but this chasm is not one-dimensional. It has a facet of belief and heresy, a facet of mysticism and materiality, and a facet of past and future. The split is therefore chronological as well as diachronical, and manifests itself in the divided body as well as in its memories.

[60] Like many of the poems in the volume, this poem is long and not as dense and refined. The language lacks the pathos of the poems of her previous volume, and there is a return to the lonely, private, inconsolable self.

[61] Faith and the mystical experience are neglected in favor of great doubt, as the poet notes in the last stanza of her poem, "My Rebellion Started"

And how long I have not seen you
And I build myself (one always builds love)
On foundations of sand
By a seaside that erases

(Excerpt of "My Rebellion Started", in *Half-Love Half-Hate*, 1996
Translated by the author)

The speaker remains without God for a long time, and therefore lacks a solid base on which she can continue to build herself, out of her love for him.

[62] In her last book of poems, *After*, the power of the book, as a basis for communication between herself and God, is undermined as well. She turns to God to give her a doctrine which will suit her, which will be easy and applicable, and rejects the idea of concentrating on the Holy Scripture. She finds that she cannot hold on to the elaborate God, wants something readily available and asks, in the poem "A Doctrine My Lord Give Me a Doctrine", a kind of instant text, "an easy, applicable doctrine / without discord and disagreements", which will connect her to him without difficulty. In another poem she looks for Nietzsche, who announced the death of God, and searches for "one book which brings salvation / a book to bring consolation always (because sadness always)".

[63] In light of this recognition, I conclude with the following poem:

I wake like a hawk
Preying, but I've learned to fast
To conquer passion, kill it,
In order to wash my soul in the water of the Scripture
Of all cultures

After I die I'll bequeath the world
An impressive body of poetry
For I have no other offspring

Have I already written this? It seems I have

In another place in the mother's darkness
(*After*, 2000, translated by Ofer Shorr)

In this poem, not only does Scripture fail to bring any solace, but there is no consolation in poetry either. Versus the experience of living – the prey, the passion and the violence – stands the fast. The poem presents a series of surprising contradictions; since the religious experience is emptied of the physical and experiential force it possessed in previous poems, and therefore cannot present an adequate replacement for sensual life. The Scriptures and the poet's poems are only texts, which will survive after her death but are themselves devoid of life. This poem, and the hidden irony in it, subverts the role of religious experience and of poetry which served, from the very first stages of Ella Bat-Tsion's writing, as a means to justify loneliness. The ostensible fraud is revealed when the speaker discovers that the creation of the poems is not similar to the creation of flesh and blood offspring (and to God's creation of us.) It is achieved by fasting, not with life but against it. Asceticism, therefore, is not justified.

[64] However, in the last stanza of the poem the discovery of the fraud leads to resignation. "In the mother's darkness" – maybe the mother's womb – things were already written. Inside the divided soul there is recognition of the necessity, a recognition that this is the only way things had to be.

[65] In this paper I have endeavored to map the various shifts in the poetry of Gabriella Elisha / Ella Bat-Tsion. Her poems, distinct voices in Hebrew poetry, offer a different poetic option in the description of womanly love, God, and the process which the poet underwent from secularity to religion, all of which negate any possibility of easy categorization.

[66] In all her writing, and in all the stations in her life, Gabriella Elisha / Ella Bat-Tsion chooses otherness, chooses the margins. Whether it is in her lesbian writing, which in addition to blazing a new trail has managed to depict the experience of female love not out of protest and torment but out of the search for calmness and harmony, or whether it is in her religious writing, which combined motifs of faith with unapologetic intimacy. While writing on the margins, However, Gabriella Elisha / Ella Bat-Tsion does not scream, does not bring the house down with a vengeance, does not revel in the blood of destroyed idols. Her artistic accomplishment lays in the subtle way in which she reaches her subversion. In nuances of the description of female lovemaking, in nuances of the direct appeal to God and in raising the question of her Gender in front of Him, her writing shows that especially today, on the backdrop of the flowering of marginal culture in Israel and the urgent need of certain groups to make their voices heard, a different poetry is possible, one which will be nonconformist yet not extreme or vulgar. And maybe, as her poem states, perhaps as a metaphor for her poetic way, Ella Bat-Tsion finds her place on the bank of the quiet stream of poetry, within the wide and ever-widening margins of contemporary Israeli poetry.

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