

# A WOMAN AND POET AGAINST THE STREAM: RACHEL MORPURGO, ADVOCATE OF THE KABBALAH IN AN ANTI-KABBALISTIC AGE

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This essay deals with the defense of the Kabbalah by Triestine poet Rachel Morpurgo (1790–1871), in the context of the mid-nineteenth century controversy concerning the place of Jewish mysticism in modernity. Prominent Italian maskilic leaders in the Habsburg Empire rejected the validity of the Kabbalah and prioritized Jewish emancipation, for the sake of countering the challenge posed to Judaism by the “philosophical cast of modernity.” By defending the Kabbalah, Morpurgo struggled for her *différance* as a Jewish woman and poet.

In *Sefer haberit* by Pinhas Hurwitz and in the popularization of the Lurianic Kabbala as presented in Hayim Vital Calabrese’s *Sha’arei kedushah*, Morpurgo found the key to legitimating her atypical gendered path and overcoming its marginalization in patriarchal culture. In defending the Kabbalah, she conceived a direction for renewing traditional patterns of Jewish thinking.

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[. . .] If God continues to send me his grace and free me from my suffering, and reawake in me the spirit of poetry, I will not refrain from offering this as a sacrifice to God, as I wish and perhaps I will find a remedy for the shame that continues to be heaped on kabbalists by philosophers.<sup>1</sup>

Rachel Morpurgo (1790–1871), née Luzzatto, wrote this defense of the Kabbalah, in Hebrew, to the editor of the journal *Kokhvei Yitzhak* in 1853. She had started contributing to the journal, a vehicle of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment), in 1847, on the recommendation of her famous cousin, the maskilic Jewish scholar Samuel David Luzzatto. It is surprising, to say the least, to find a letter defending the Kabbalah written by a woman in the mid-nineteenth century to a maskilic readership. Who was this female poet who advocated an apparently obsolete—if not entirely lost—cause?

Rachel Morpurgo is remembered as the first west European female poet known to have written in Hebrew. Her poetry made good use of her Jewish cultural heritage, of which her knowledge was truly exceptional in comparison to most women of her time. Her poems were interwoven with allusions to canonical Hebrew texts and references to the mystical tradition.<sup>2</sup>

To defend the Kabbalah, Morpurgo wrote two letters in 1853 to the editor of *Kokhvei Yitzhak*. These were the years when arguments against the Kabbalah preoccupied Samuel David Luzzatto and Isaac Samuel Reggio, both well known figures of the Italian Jewish establishment under Austrian Habsburg rule. They wrote in the context of a crisis of faith in the German-speaking world—Jewish and non-Jewish. In 1852, Luzzatto (known in Hebrew by his acronym, Shadal) published, in Gorizia, the *Vikuaḥ ‘al ḥokhmat hakabalah* (Debate over the wisdom of the Kabbalah), which criticized the kabbalistic practices of the east European Hasidim; and in 1854, also in Gorizia, Reggio (known in Hebrew by his acronym, Yashar) published the *Yalkut Yashar*, a collection of writings which included a chapter on philosophy and Kabbalah that was censored from his earlier book, *HaTorah vehafilosofiyah* (The Torah and philosophy, Vienna 1827). In this chapter, Reggio expressed the views of a moderate rationalist who, on the one hand, did not wish to cut ties entirely with the kabbalistic traditions of the past, but on the other hand did not wish to side with those who took the more rigid position that Kabbalah is inextricable from Jewish tradition. Nonetheless, in the *Strenna Israelitica* (Jewish Yearbook), published in Gorizia from 1852 to 1855, Reggio openly opposed the Kabbalah.

*Anti-Kabbalistic Positions Take Root: “Thou Hast Asked a Hard Thing”*

Rachel Morpurgo grew up in the same household as Luzzatto, ten years her junior, and studied Hebrew texts together with him under the guidance of her uncles David and Hezekiah Luzzatto. Like most observant Italian Jews at the time, the Luzzattos were influenced by the Kabbalah.<sup>3</sup> Hezekiah, Rachel’s uncle and Samuel David’s father, was deeply interested in the Kabbalah from an early age. Samuel David recalled in his autobiography that his father had included books of Musar (ethics) and Kabbalah in the study program he established for his son, including Elijah de Vidas’s *Reshit ḥokhmah* (Beginning of wisdom) and Pinḥas Hurwitz’s *Sefer haberit* (Book of the covenant). The Luzzatto family library contained books that did much to popularize the Kabbalah developed in sixteenth-century Safed, and Samuel David wrote that his father regularly had him read passages from the older *Sefer hazohar* (Book of splendor) as well. Rachel not only studied with Samuel David, but even after he moved out, she maintained ownership of the well-stocked Hebrew library inherited by her brother Isaac from their uncle David.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas Samuel David, on the basis of a philological examination of the text of the Zohar, started to move away from the Kabbalah very early on, Rachel stayed faithful to

it. On this subject, Yitzhak Hayim (Vittorio) Castiglioni, Morpurgo's first biographer, reports a telling anecdote:

Many times, Shadal relates, my cousin prodded me to bring her a book she considered extremely precious, the Zohar; and one day in 5577 [1817] I found it and brought it to her, and she, handing me the money to pay for it, said, "And what can I do for you, my dear, in exchange for all the trouble you took for me?" And I answered, "I only ask you not to believe anything contained in this book." "Thou hast asked a hard thing," she answered forthwith in Hebrew, using the very words said by the prophet Elijah in response to Elisha's request for a double portion of his spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Samuel David reports that in 1818, the year after he gave the Zohar to Rachel, he started reading it regularly, transcribing the most important passages in his diary and noting the clearest signs of its lack of authenticity as a text dating back to the period of the Talmud, according to its own self-attestation.<sup>6</sup>

Even in Samuel David's milieu, anti-kabbalistic positions were gradually starting to take root. For example, Reggio, son of the talented kabbalist Abraham Hay Reggio, was influenced by Samuel David, to move away from supporting his family's kabbalistic heritage and take a more critical view.<sup>7</sup> In general, notwithstanding their basic theoretical differences,<sup>8</sup> the two scholars shared several criticisms of the Kabbalah:

1. The antiquity ascribed to the text of the Zohar is contradicted by critical philological investigation;
2. The chain of kabbalistic tradition is interrupted, and its supposed continuity is based on mystification;
3. The Kabbalah's fundamental ideas turn out to be dangerous heresies of pagan origin, which undermine the purity of Judaism;
4. The Kabbalah is in open conflict with reliance upon reason, and adherence to it rests upon uncritical acceptance of the authority of teachers and upon mere custom;
5. The so-called "practical" aspect of the Kabbalah is a remnant of unseemly superstitions and obsolete beliefs;
6. Kabbalistic mysticism, still extensively practiced in this period and a significant element in the lives of the east European Hasidim, reflected a dark and backward side of Jewish tradition, in comparison to the Haskalah's emancipating cultural project.<sup>9</sup>

*A Faith Greatly Threatened by Philosophically-Based Modernity*

Criticism of the Kabbalah was essentially criticism of east-European hasidic "barbarism," which threatened plans for emancipation. From the perspective of the enlightened Jews of Western Europe (including the Italian territories under Habsburg rule), however, the Kabbalah's mystical irrationality threatened to overwhelm a faith already

greatly threatened by a philosophically based modernity. To the polemicists against the Kabbalah, it seemed replete with elements of materialism and pantheism that contradicted their understanding of Jewish views of monotheism. It represented an unsuitable intrusion of philosophy (a clear hint at Spinoza's pantheistic thought) and an unwarranted assumption of Christian or pagan beliefs.<sup>10</sup> In view of the philosophical cast of modernity, the problem that the Jews had to settle was the relationship between religion (as revelation and authoritative tradition) and philosophy (as the free practice of intellectual inquiry).

In 1827, Reggio tried to end the conflict between religion and philosophy by casting them as "sisters",<sup>11</sup> however, Luzzatto, in 1828,<sup>12</sup> attacked this approach as one of dangerous rationalism. Reggio did indeed imply that religion, after making peace with philosophy, would undertake to examine its own customs, and Luzzatto feared that this would result in their reform. At the Rabbinical College of Padua, Luzzatto refused to adopt Reggio's *Religious Education Guide for Israelitic Youth* (Gorizia 1853) because, in his opinion, the book was too close to rationalist ideas that negated revelation and the miracles accepted as part of the faith of Judaism.<sup>13</sup>

The two scholars' disagreement regarding the usefulness of applying philosophical criteria to a close scrutiny of faith continued through the early 1850s. However, although they continued to hold different views about the possibility of reconciling philosophy and religion, they seemed to reach an agreement on the condemnation of the Kabbalah. In an article published in 1854/55, Reggio remarked:

If even today, after such brilliant progress in all fields of human knowledge, after the most illustrious scholars of Israel have put forward so many proofs of the fallacy and the absurdities of mystical doctrines, there still exist those who persist in believing them, this is a circumstance which must greatly sadden whoever deeply loves his coreligionists.<sup>14</sup>

In this climate, why did Rachel Morpurgo—Jewishly erudite, conscientious in her religious practice, but also raised in a family open to scientific knowledge—persist in her defense of the Kabbalah?

An anecdote related by Samuel David of his father Hezekiah Luzzatto is enlightening in this regard:

My father often took part in the weekly or half-yearly exams held in public schools. In one of these [ . . . ], after a child named the three Kingdoms of Nature, one of the directors [ . . . ], said: For example, this wooden board belongs to the mineral kingdom. My father spoke up from the other end of the room to say: Excuse me, wood is a plant.<sup>15</sup>

This comment, recorded by Samuel David as evidence of his father's "rough candor," reflects the ignorance of individuals who, in this period, held the highest positions in public education, even in a city like Trieste. Clearly, in a household like Hezekiah

Luzzatto's in which scientific knowledge and the Kabbalah were equally esteemed, it was the "modern" scientific mentality rather than scientific education in itself that was thought to be inimical to the Kabbalah. Once again, Samuel David gives us crucial information about the environment in which Rachel Morpurgo was educated, in affirming that his father thought very highly of the *Sefer haberit* as a source of knowledge about physics, geography and natural history as well as Kabbalah.<sup>16</sup> We will have more to say below of this book's influence upon Rachel's outlook.

The Kabbalah's opponents, Luzzatto and Reggio, thus considered it not only averse to the proper use of reason and to scientific progress, but also deleterious to a correct understanding of faith and antithetical to a highly developed morality.

### *A Woman Writing Poetry in Hebrew*

How, then, can we explain why Morpurgo, educated together with Luzzatto, was able to ignore the evolution in his ideas and those current in his milieu, which pointed toward a kind of modernity considered at the time more advanced not only intellectually but also on the level of religion? To answer this question, we must start with Morpurgo's poetry and its reception by her contemporaries. Her poems, interwoven as they were with images taken from canonical Hebrew literature, were admired; however, they also raised questions about the author's real sex. To be sure, learned Jewish women who had mastered sacred texts were a known phenomenon in Western Europe. Nonetheless, a woman writing poetry in Hebrew, replete with allusions to those texts, was unheard of until Rachel Morpurgo's debut in *Kokhvei Yitzhak*.<sup>17</sup>

Castiglioni, while claiming that the quality of Morpurgo's verse, even though it was written by a woman, would allow her to gain the favor of her readers, adds significantly: "In fact, many had assumed that a man hid himself behind a female pseudonym; and quite a lot of people passing through this city wanted to meet her in person to persuade themselves that they really were speaking to a woman."<sup>18</sup> A century later, Joseph Klausner, the first historian in Eretz Israel to write about modern Hebrew literature, deplored the lack of femininity in Morpurgo's poetry, which was produced, in his view, by a medieval ascetic in skirts. Judging it a collage of learned citations that lacked any poetic inspiration, Klausner concluded that it was of little value; however, he justified the pages he devoted to it by treating it as a bizarre phenomenon that had caused an uproar in its time.<sup>19</sup> Morpurgo herself reacted to the conjectures of her contemporaries by outwardly conforming to the traditional Jewish womanly ideals of modesty, reserve and awareness of her role as subordinate to men. In essence, however, she denounced these discriminatory attitudes with bitter irony while exposing their limitations.<sup>20</sup>

In the context of the crisis of religious faith in Western Europe in the nineteenth century, a crisis that threatened the "specificity" of Jewish belief, Morpurgo felt impelled to participate in current debates, pointing the way to save Judaism while not relinquishing the exercise of reason. I believe that in her endeavor to preserve the

Jewish people's specific culture, as embodied in the Kabbalah, her marginal status as a woman gave her more freedom in this regard than the male representatives of Jewish culture, such as Luzzatto and Reggio. The latter, under pressure to conform to the requirements of the Jewish emancipation movement, had to fight the "inconvenient" presence of the "barbarous" heirs of the Kabbalah, the Hasidim who lived in the Austrian empire, of which they themselves were subjects, though they considered themselves Italian by culture and language. Morpurgo may also have supported the Kabbalah because she did not wish to conform to the model of femininity demanded by the culture of her time. As she presented it, the Kabbalah opens a breach through which different viewpoints can be introduced, and through which an individual can assert the right to be different.

### *Reconciling the Enlightenment and Jewish Tradition*

In contrast to Luzzatto and Reggio, Morpurgo believed that the Kabbalah was very much part of the Jewish tradition. Loyalty to tradition did not prevent Jews from acquiring scientific knowledge, which requires the use of reason, but it did legitimize their specific Jewish identity, based on revelation and the tradition that had preserved it.

Morpurgo's view may be deduced from the book on which, in letters to Mendel Stern, she based her defence of the Kabbalah—*Sefer haberit*, by Pinḥas Hurwitz ben Meir of Vilna (1765–1821).<sup>21</sup> First published in 1797 (Brünn),<sup>22</sup> the book quickly became a bestseller in the Jewish world. Hurwitz set out to reconcile Jewish tradition with a conception of knowledge compatible with the ideals of the Jewish Enlightenment. In his preface to the expanded edition published in 1807, he called his book an "encyclopedia," using the Hebrew word *keshet*, a connection or knot, to express his endeavor to bind together all of the sciences and "all that can be known."<sup>23</sup> Hurwitz added that this *keshet* also linked the earthly world with the heavenly world, in which the connection between the Chosen People and God acquires an essential significance.<sup>24</sup>

*Sefer haberit* comprises two parts: an "encyclopedia" of natural history and astronomy, and a sort of compendium of the Lurianic Kabbalah, following the teachings of Rabbi Ḥayim Vital Calabrese. The "encyclopedic" part was intended to satisfy the desire for culture of Jews who wanted to be up to date without giving up their tradition. *Sefer haberit* is used to this day by ultra-Orthodox Jews intent on harmonizing science and faith.

Written for a wide readership, *Sefer haberit* quickly became a foundational element of the culture that nourished Mitteleuropean Jews at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Morpurgo relied upon it to bring her contemporaries back to the "path of righteousness." Hurwitz, too, was critical of the "immoral" Hasidim (presumably influenced by Sabbateanism), with their blind faith in thaumaturgic rabbis and their superstitious practices; in condemning the so-called "practical Kabbalah," he evinced a similar negative stance to that expressed by Luzzatto (in the *Vikuah*) and Reggio

(in the *Yalkut*). However, it was not in the name of the Enlightenment that Hurwitz denounced such magical practices, but rather in the name of what he believed was the correct understanding of mystical doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Hurwitz and Morpurgo also shared the maskilic aim of producing works in Hebrew, though Hurwitz's mother tongue was Yiddish and Morpurgo's was Italian. This choice reflected their intent to find an audience among the *maskilim*, who were fervently committed to using Hebrew in all fields of knowledge.

In the preface to the first edition of his book, Hurwitz declared that for each subject he dealt with, he would adduce three types of sources, expressing the views, respectively, of the *filosofim harishonim* (ancient and medieval philosophers), the *filosofim ha'aharonim* (modern philosophers) and the *hakhamim* (sages) of the Talmud and the Zohar, as well as of trustworthy Kabbalists. On the assumption that the philosophers' views were not opposed to those of the *hakhamim*, he would favor the latter, since the exercise of reason was legitimate only if it succeeded in harmonizing with tradition.<sup>26</sup>

Morpurgo thus chose the *Sefer haberit* because it provided useful arguments with which to refute the view that mysticism caused the degeneration of faith. Mysticism had been accused of being based essentially on the authority of past teachers, thus silencing reason. However, Hurwitz was ready to examine every controversial question "open-mindedly." In fact, certain views expressed in the Kabbalah—views considered to have been superseded by Aristotelian science—turned out, when carefully scrutinized, to be compatible with "modern" science. For example, Hurwitz noted that the Kabbalah and modern science agreed about the weight of air, contradicting Aristotelian science. That scientific results corresponded with explanations of the Kabbalah was enough for Hurwitz to legitimate the explanation given by the *hakhamim*. To continue the above example, the *hakhamim* determined that air is "heavy" because it is full of demons. Why, Hurwitz reasoned, should the opinion of modern scientists who spoke of "little beings who laid eggs" be considered preferable?<sup>27</sup>

In broader terms, Hurwitz was prepared to discuss any doubts with regard to the religion versus philosophy debate in his attempt to find an alternative to rationalistic deism, in accordance with the principle that only the acceptance of tradition (which is both *masoret* and *kabalah*) legitimizes the existence of the people of Israel, as such.<sup>28</sup> However, philosophy was banished from the domain of *Sefer haberit*, because *hokhmat Yavan* (Greek philosophy) was viewed as extraneous to Jewish thought; it insinuated alienating doubts that were harmful to the *kesher* linking legitimate worldly knowledge to the spiritual Jewish sphere.<sup>29</sup>

Modern thinkers such as Luzzatto and Reggio, on the basis of philological and historical criteria, considered the Kabbalah a spurious growth grafted onto tradition. But for the author of *Sefer haberit*—as for Morpurgo—the chain of tradition led unbroken from Adam to Abraham to the Sinaitic revelation, in which Israel was reaffirmed as the chosen people, and on through all the achievements of the Jewish spirit, up to and including the Kabbalah (but not the Sabbatianist heresy).

The need to verify sources philologically, which impelled Luzzatto and Reggio, was not yet a part of the project envisaged by the author of *Sefer haberit*; instead, he

preferred to express an affinity between his own encyclopedic aims and those of medieval authors such as Yehudah Hakohen in the thirteenth century.<sup>30</sup> The “encyclopedic” effort to reconcile secular knowledge and Jewish tradition was, in Hurwitz’s view, part of Jewish custom; it was not a signal of modernity as such, but the continuation of a cultural endeavor that had emerged in the Jewish world in several historical periods. *Sefer haberit* is thus as much a product of the Middle Ages as it is, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Enlightenment.

In this light, we may ask: in choosing *Sefer haberit* and thus avoiding the historical and philological objections raised by “moderns” like Luzzatto and Reggio against the authenticity of the Kabbalah, did Morpurgo not evade modernity altogether? And doesn’t her choice confirm the charge of medievalism, leveled against her by Klausner?

### *In Defense of the Kabbalah and Against the Male Establishment*

Even without entering into a discussion of Morpurgo’s poetics, we can see her letters in defense of the Kabbalah as an example of the tactics she used against the male establishment. In her first letter, anticipating the objections that might be elicited by a controversial female viewpoint such as her own, Morpurgo urged:

[. . .] and if they will say that your opinion has no substance, little ant, I am too small to be chastized by them and I will retort: You have vanquished a woman.<sup>31</sup>

This display of modesty, in accordance with the rules of the time, was clearly in opposition to the ambitious project described in her second letter, in which she invokes the author of *Sefer haberit* as a defender of tradition, including the Kabbalah, noting:

But what can I add to what he has written? I hope that thanks to the blessed Lord they will pay more attention to the chirping of a little bird than to the roar of a lion.<sup>32</sup>

The “roaring lion” could only be the illustrious *'Ari hanothem*, Leon Modena (1571–1648), whose cognomen derived from the title of the well known text he authored, a milestone of anti-Kabbalist polemic. Circulated widely in manuscript, it was published in 1840 in Leipzig together with a chapter on Kabbalah and philosophy (reprinted by Reggio in his *Yalkut*).<sup>33</sup> Morpurgo’s choice of Modena as her opponent, demonstrates the level of importance she attributed to herself, notwithstanding her outward displays of humility, as spokeswoman and defender of the Kabbalah. Note, moreover, that the section of *Sefer haberit* devoted to mysticism asserts that the chirping of birds should be considered as symbolizing a message sent from the higher world to the lower one.<sup>34</sup>

By ostentatiously conforming to the “canonical” model of femininity, Morpurgo openly deplored the untenable nature of her personal situation: As a devout woman in a religious milieu, she was denied the right of being what she was—a poet who,

by writing, had crossed over into male territory. We are thus faced with a paradox. Morpurgo championed a “strong” Jewish identity, based on the specificity of the Jewish people and Jewish lore (that is, based on the Kabbalah and not only on ethical monotheism), making no concessions to the universalizing rationalism so important to the male leadership devoted to enhancing Jewish emancipation. However, as a Jewish woman, she also sensed a conflict between these two roles: Even if she wished to conform, she could not help but be painfully anomalous. She thus had to demand legitimation of the right to be different. In short, we are dealing here with one of the most vital aspirations of modernity.

In the chapter of *Sefer haberit* devoted to the “path of faith,” considered by Morpurgo to be the most meaningful synthesis of all evidence in defence of Jewish tradition, Hurwitz claims that philosophers had attempted to threaten the faith but had not offered an incontrovertible alternative in its place.<sup>35</sup> If we then move on to the mystical part of *Sefer haberit*, which, again relied on Lurianic kabbalistic thought as presented in Hayim Vital Calabrese’s *Sha’arei kedushah* (Gates of holiness), we find Morpurgo’s ultimate truth as well as the most personal reason for her choice of Hurwitz’s text.

Vital (and Hurwitz) urged readers not to despair in the face of passages in the Talmud (BT *Sotah* 48b, *Sanhedrin* 11a) declaring that prophecy had ceased after the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Citing the midrash *Tana devei Eliyahu*, Vital maintained that *ruah hakodesh* (the holy spirit) is accessible to each person according to his or her actions, irrespective of sex or social status, or even of whether they were Jew and Gentile.<sup>36</sup> Consistently with his aim of writing an apologia, Hurwitz underlined Vital’s message of hope to the Jews, including those in the *galut* (exile): Even in modern times, far from the Land of Israel, it was possible to enjoy the gift of the holy spirit.<sup>37</sup> The Kabbalah offered every Jew driven by religious devotion and equipped with the teachings of the Lurianic school a way to carry out the *tikun*—to repair and reconstitute the original unity of the Cosmos and the Name of God.<sup>38</sup>

As described by Hurwitz, Vital’s Kabbalah has a deeply therapeutic aspect: The desire to attain the “salvation of the soul” cannot fail to include the search for the “root” of one’s own soul (*shoresh haneshamah*). If the soul cannot recover its root, it is as though mutilated and cannot reunite with the *ilan haneshamot*, the “great tree of souls,” and thus cannot fulfill its own *tikun* (repair). Souls are connected by secret affinities; they exist in relation to one another, and they transmigrate, according to the well established concept of metempsychosis (*torat hagilgulim*).<sup>39</sup> In this mystical search for the “root of the soul,” we hear the echo of a message that resonated with the sensibility of the Romantics: Only by realizing its own individuality may the soul rediscover the path leading to reunion with the original Totality.

### *Beyond the Bounds of “Modernity”: Anticipating the Future*

The great dilemma troubling mid-nineteenth century German thinkers was the conflict between biblical revelation and German philosophy. Even the more moderate

thinkers and theologians, if they managed to “save” Christianity by accepting Lessing’s definition of a gradual and progressive revelation in history, irrevocably condemned Judaism to obsolescence—precisely during the difficult period of ongoing Jewish emancipation.<sup>40</sup>

In *Sha’arei kedushah*, Vital wrote of a “spirit” that not only “saved” Judaism but also promised salvation for individuals who could not yet manage to make themselves heard within the Jewish world of their time. The latter point, in my view, is essential to understanding Rachel Morpurgo’s defense of the Kabbalah. The link between *ruah hakodesh* (discussed by Vital) and poetry (described by Rachel) made the Kabbalah a means of giving a voice to the individual and asserting one’s right to be different. Some talmudic and midrashic sources had already made the connection between poetry and *ruah hakodesh*.<sup>41</sup> Read according to Vital’s teachings, this connection acquired its full meaning for Rachel Morpurgo, who, referred to her poetry as a gift of *ruah hashir* (the spirit of poetry), granted her by the grace of God.<sup>42</sup> She used this gift as a telling point in writing to Mendel Stern to justify tradition—including Kabbalah—with the help of *Sefer haberit*.

In choosing *Sefer haberit*, Morpurgo promotes her aim of meta-historical Jewish salvation and at the same time hints at her aim of personal salvation—because the root of her soul was intertwined with her poetry. And whether that soul was male or female was a matter for the secret history of the *gilgulim* (reincarnations) and did not depend upon the opinion of the conformists of her time.

The right to leave behind the gender stereotypes fashionable in a given era, to differ from the norm, is an achievement of our time, but it was not part of the definition of modernity in the Jewish mentality of Morpurgo’s era. She may have been a model of righteous fidelity to the Sinaitic covenant, but she was anomalous—because of her poetics—with respect to Jewish standards of femininity in her day, to the extent that her works were considered “masculine” by their (male) readers (there is no evidence of the views of possible female readers). Yet Vital’s teachings allowed Morpurgo to legitimize her “different” writing as well as her “divergent” life. It was precisely by placing herself beyond the bounds of the “modernity” of her time that she found a means to express themes and conjectures that anticipated future developments.

I conclude this essay with the following observations. Today, we are seeing the revival of a popularized Lurianic Kabbalah as a gateway to Jewish spirituality in our individualist and secularized society. This revival shows how farsighted was Morpurgo’s defense of the Kabbalah, on the basis of *Sefer haberit* and the Lurianic Kabbalah as expressed by Hayim Vital Calabrese. Morpurgo extracted the principle of individualism from Vital’s Kabbalah, enabling her to be a poet writing in her own style.

I believe that Morpurgo’s path in dealing with the Kabbalah bore similarities to those of other women going against the stream of (gentile) European culture. One example of this is Simone Weil, who took the *Iliad*—the archetypal poetic canon of pagan Greek culture—and read it into the canon of modern Christian spirituality.<sup>43</sup> The marginal feminine position in relation to the patriarchal culture allowed women

to extract meaning from within the cultural canon and turn it in a totally different direction, transforming it and opening up new, fruitful perspectives for the future.

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*Notes:*

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1. Rachel Morpurgo: *‘Ugav Raḥel: sefer shirim ve’agadot umikhtavim shonim me’et Raḥel Morpurgo mibeit Lutzaṭo mi-yelidei Trieste ka’asher nimitze’u bikhetivat yadah aḥarei motah ‘im shireiha asher kevar nidpesu be-m.e. Kokhavei Yitzḥak; . . . ‘im he’arot vetikunim vehakdamah kolelet ma’amar ‘al matzav hanashim tokh benei Yisrael vesipur toledot hameḥaberet vema’amar aḥer ‘al datei hashir hanehugot etzel meshorei sefat ‘Ever ha’aharonim asher be’Italiyah* (Trieste: Y. Fischer printing-house Cracow, 1890), ed. Yitzḥak Ḥayim Castiglioni, Letter VII, p. 108. Tova Cohen interprets Letter VII as a sort of spiritual preparation for death and afterlife undertaken by Morpurgo through poetry. In my view, it is more appropriately interpreted as Morpurgo’s wish to bequeath to the Jews her position regarding the spiritual doubts of her time. Cf. Tova Cohen and Shmuel Feiner, *Voice of a Hebrew Maiden: Women’s Writings of the Nineteenth Century Haskalah Movement* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006), p. 107; Marina Arbib, “Rachel Morpurgo e la scrittura,” *Davar*, 4 (2007–2008), pp. 79–91.
2. On Rachel Morpurgo and her poetics, see, *inter alia*, Nina Salaman, *Raḥel Morpurgo and Contemporary Hebrew Poets in Italy* (London 1924); Dora Kobler, “Four Rachels”: *Portraits of Four Notable Jewish Women of Four Generations 1771 to 1890* (London: Education Department of the Federation of Women Zionists, 1947); Yaffa Berlowitz, “Raḥel Morpurgo—Hateshukah el hamavet, hateshukah el hashir: Letivah shel hameshoreret ha’ivrit harishonah ba’et haḥadashah,” *Sadan*, 2 (1996), pp. 11–40; Tova Cohen, “Betokh hatarbut umiḥutzah lah: ‘Al nikus ‘sefat ha’av’ baderekh le’itzuv intelektu’ali shel demut he’ani hanashi,” *Sadan*, 2 (1996), pp. 69–110; Umberto Piperno, “La cetra di Rachel: Un caso letterario nell’Ottocento triestino,” *Materia giudaica*, 4 (1998), pp. 32–39; Yael Levine Katz, “Rachel Morpurgo,” *Judaism*, 49 (2000), pp. 13–29; Wendy Zierler, “The Rabbi’s Daughter In and Out of the Kitchen: Feminist Literary Negotiations,” *Nashim*, 5 (2002), pp. 83–104; and my articles, “Il paradiso di Rachel: La poesia di Rachel Morpurgo,” *Davar*, 2 (2005), pp. 117–125; “Rachel Morpurgo e la scrittura” (above, note 1); and “Una voce femminile in difesa della Qabbalah: Raḥel Morpurgo (1790–1871),” *Materia Giudaica*, XV–XVI (2010–2011), pp. 397–404.
3. See Samuel Vita Lolli, *Devar Shemu’el (Samuelis Verbum)*, ed. Isaac Ḥayim Castiglioni (Cracow 1895), pp. 40–58.

4. Samuel David Luzzatto, *Autobiografia* (Padua: Crescini, 1882), p. 59.
5. Morpurgo, *Ugav Raḥel* (above, note 1), pp. 21–22.
6. Luzzatto, *Autobiografia* (above, note 4), p. 74.
7. See David Malkiel, “The Reggio’s of Gorizia: Modernization in Micro,” in E. Horowitz and M. Orfali (eds), *The Mediterranean and the Jews: Society, Culture and Economy in Early Modern Times* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), pp. 67–84.
8. Giuliano Tamani, “I.S. Reggio e l’illuminismo ebraico,” in P.C. Ioly Zorattini (ed.), *Gli ebrei a Gorizia e a Trieste tra ‘ancien regime’ ed emancipazione* (Udine: Del Bianco, 1984), pp. 32–40.
9. Alessandro Guetta, *Philosophie et Cabbale* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998), pp. 195–201; see also Jordan S. Penkower, “S.D. Luzzatto, Vowels and Accents, and the Date of the Zohar,” in R. Bonfil, I. Gottlieb and H. Kasher (eds), *Samuel David Luzzatto: The Bi-Centennial of His Birth* (Italia Conference Supplement Series, 2; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004), pp. 94 and 98–106.
10. See Moise Ehrenreich, “Behinat hakabalah: Examen traditionis di I.S. Reggio, Gorizia 1852,” *Strenna Israelitica*, 1 (1852/53), pp. 36–40; “Bibliografia,” *ibid.*, pp. 62–63; Abraham Lattes, “Letter,” *Strenna Israelitica*, 2 (1853/54), pp. 42–45; Isaac Samuel Reggio, “Sulle dottrine cabalistiche,” *Strenna Israelitica*, 3 (1854/55), pp. 27–30.
11. Literally, the title of Reggio’s essay means “Torah and philosophy bound together like sisters,” an allusion to the wings of the *ḥayot* described in Ezek. 1:9.
12. See his letter dated October 3, 1828, in *S.D. Luzzatto’s hebraeische Briefe gesammelt von seinem Sohn Dr. I. Luzzatto*, ed. E. Graeber, I (Przemysl 1882), pp. 153–154.
13. See Tamani, “I.S. Reggio” (above, note 8), p. 37.
14. Reggio, “Sulle dottrine cabalistiche” (above, note 10), p. 28.
15. Luzzatto, *Autobiografia* (above, note 4), p. 46.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
17. On Jewish women who were proficient in sacred texts see Luzzatto, *Autobiografia* (above note 3), pp. 26–28; See also Nahida Ruth Lazarus, *Das jüdische Weib* (Berlin: Siegfried Cronbach, 1922), pp. 129–136.
18. Castiglioni, “Prefazione dell’editore con cenni biografici dell’autrice,” in Morpurgo, *Ugav Raḥel* (above, note 1), p. 27. These grotesque speculations drew the attention of critics at the end of the twentieth century, when gender issues became a subject worthy of inquiry. See, e.g., Berlowitz, “Raḥel Morpurgo” (above note 2), pp. 17–21.
19. Joseph Klausner, *A History of Hebrew Modern Literature* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ahi’asaf, 1963), IV, pp. 39, 45, 46 and 49.
20. See Berlowitz, “Raḥel Morpurgo” (above, note 2), pp. 21–34.
21. For a bibliography on Hurwitz and *Sefer haberit* see Resianne Fontaine, “Natural Science in Sefer ha-Berit: Pinchas Hurwitz on Animals and Meteorological Phaenomena,” in eadem, A. Schatz and I. Zwiép (eds.), *Sepharad in Ashkenaz: Medieval Knowledge and Eighteenth-Century Enlightened Jewish Discourse* (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2007), p. 157, note 3.
22. Quotes herein are from Pinḥas Hurwitz, *Sefer haberit hashalem* (Jerusalem: Yerid hasefarim, 1990).
23. Hurwitz, *Sefer haberit* (above note 22), Second Preface, p. 18.
24. Contemporary scholars have seldom analyzed this book, and the few who have attempted to do so have provided different or even opposing interpretations. See Fontaine, “Natural Science in Sefer ha-Berit” (above, note 21), p. 178.

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25. See Hurwitz, *Sefer haberit* (above, note 22), pp. 76, 375–376 and 481.
26. *Ibid.*, First Preface, p. 8.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 318ff.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 330ff.
30. See Fontaine, “Natural Science in Sefer ha-Berit” (above, note 21), p. 180.
31. Morpurgo, ‘*Ugav Raḥel* (above, note 1), Letter VII, p. 108.
32. *Ibid.*, Letter IX, p. 109.
33. See Tamani, “I.S. Reggio” (above, note 8) , p. 36, note.
34. Hurwitz, *Sefer haberit* (above, note 22), Second Part, p. 484.
35. *Ibid.*, First Part, p. 357 ff.
36. See Ḥayim Vital, *Sha’arei kedushah* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1990), pp. 95–98.
37. Hurwitz, *Sefer haberit* (above, note 22), First Part, p. 476.
38. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1995), pp. 274–275.
39. Hurwitz, *Sefer haberit* (above, note 22), p. 485. On the Lurianic conception of the transmigration of souls and Vital’s additions, see Scholem, *Major Trends* (above, note 38), pp. 281–283.
40. Michael A. Meyer, *Judaism Within Modernity: Essays on Jewish History and Religion* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006), p. 113 and ff.
41. See Tosefta *Sotah* (ed. Lieberman), 6:2; *Mekhilta derabi Ishma’el*, Beshalah, 6; BT *Pesaḥim*, 117a.
42. See Morpurgo, ‘*Ugav Raḥel* (above, note 1), Letter VII, p. 108.
43. See Simone Weil, *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (Paris: La Colombe, 1951), *passim*.