

THE RABBI'S DAUGHTER
IN AND OUT OF THE KITCHEN:
FEMINIST LITERARY NEGOTIATIONS

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Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice.

*bell hooks*¹

Do women write differently than men? Asked this question in a rare interview published in the 1950s, the Hebrew prose writer Devorah Baron gave the following answer:

No. [I don't] see a difference between the writing of men and women. But women may be more capable, perhaps, of describing the life of a woman from the inside, while male writers see women only from the outside. Yes, the woman writer is better at recognizing certain aspects of a woman's life, *all that is connected to the kitchen, to foodstuffs, the nursery, and so on.*² [emphasis added]

The kitchen? The nursery? By invoking these stereotypically feminine "inside" spaces, what did Baron mean to say about the potential distinctiveness of women's writing? Was she being ironic and flip to her interviewer, offering a paradoxically simplistic answer to what she considered a simplistic and irksome question? Or was she honestly delineating the spaces in which so many women's lives, and hence so many women's stories, have unfolded? Was she situating her own writing within this domestic realm?

One way to unpack the meaning of Baron's statement is to consider the

symbolic importance of the kitchen as a marginal space that can serve, as bell hooks has described, as a site not just of repression, but also of resistance, a location of “radical openness” and possibility.³ To be sure, the primary responsibilities traditionally assigned to women for preparing food, keeping the home, and feeding and raising children have seriously limited the opportunities of many women to do creative work. And yet, as anthropologist Carole M. Counihan has noted,

[t]he predominant role of women in feeding is a cultural universal, a major component of female identity, and an important source of female connections to and influence over others. Hence, although there are other components of female identity and other sources of their authority, the power of women has often derived from the power of food.⁴

In this sense, Baron’s observation about the ability of a woman writer to depict “all that is connected to the kitchen, foodstuffs, and nursery” might be interpreted as an effort to acknowledge these traditional areas of female agency, authority, and power, and to designate them as potential sources of literary inspiration.

This article will investigate the kitchen- and food-related powers of Jewish women through an examination of three female-authored works: (1) “Anaseh akh hapa’am” (Once again I’ll try, 1866), a poem by nineteenth-century Hebrew poet Rachel Morpurgo about her desire to write poetry and escape the spiritual limitations of her feminine domestic role; (2) *Breadgivers* (1925), a novel by early twentieth-century immigrant American Jewish writer Anzia Yeziarska about a young immigrant Jewish woman who flees her family kitchen and her rabbinical father to pursue her dream of an American education; and (3) “Mah shehayah” (What once was, 1939), Devorah Baron’s novella about the kitchen-based friendship of a young rabbi’s daughter and a female baker named Mina. All three of the chosen works feature a protagonist or narrator/speaker who is a rabbi’s daughter, a figure who moves in and out of the kitchen in particularly symbolic and powerful ways.

Throughout Jewish history, the rabbi’s daughter has occupied a “borderland” between traditional Jewish gender divisions. Latin American feminist critic Gloria Anzaldúa explains the notion of the “borderland” in these terms:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants ... those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the normal.⁵

As a borderland figure, the rabbi's daughter enjoyed a privileged exposure to the world of Jewish scholarship and ritual leadership, presenting an alternative to the traditional binary divisions of Jewish gender roles. Situated in terms of familial affiliation at the center of Jewish learning and communal responsibility, she often "passed over the confines of the normal," gaining access to a depth of religious education and involvement usually denied to women in traditional Jewish circles. In many instances, the rabbi's daughter was a happy exception to the rule of female religious illiteracy and Hebrew literary silence. Indeed, of the few women who attempted to write in Hebrew, from the post-biblical era until the modern period, virtually all were rabbi's daughters and/or rabbi's wives.⁶ Still, as a daughter rather than a son, the rabbi's daughter remained confined in certain crucial ways to the "women's gallery" or "kitchen-spaces" of Jewish scholarly and literary activity. At times in her life she might successfully cross into the male scholarly realm, but at other times this crossing might be blocked off to her. Hers was a mixed identity and a scholarly potential that, if actualized, had problematic, even transgressive implications.⁷

Emblematic of the obstacles placed before the scholarly daughter in her pursuit of an intellectual or literary life outside the kitchen is the story of Rachel Luzzato Morpurgo (1790–1871), a member of the scholarly Luzzato family of Trieste, Italy. Among the scholarly or rabbinic relatives who at one time lived with her in her family's house were Rabbis David and Hezekiah Luzatto, as well as her cousin, the scholar and writer Solomon David Luzatto (1800–1865, known in Hebrew by his acronym of Shadal), with whom she shared a deep, intellectual friendship. Morpurgo received an exceptionally rich education in Jewish sources, including study of the Talmud and the Zohar.⁸

Like many of the members of her learned family, Morpurgo wrote occasional verse in Hebrew — rhyming riddles and lyric poems inspired by

engagements, weddings, births, and deaths. In addition, Morpurgo composed poems about religious faith, about contemporary political events such as the Rebellions of 1848, and perhaps more significantly, about her personal literary aspirations and frustrations. Morpurgo's poetic achievements were especially remarkable given the conditions under which she worked. Unlike many of the great British and American women writers of the nineteenth century, who remained unmarried and thus were left relatively free to pursue a curriculum of writing and study, Morpurgo's career was often inhibited by domestic duties and allegiances.

As the Italian rabbi and poet Vittorio (Yitzhak Haim) Castiglioni writes, while Morpurgo was blessed with a rich education from her parents, she had little leisure in her adult married life to study and write. She raised three sons and one daughter – who remained unmarried until the end of their days – without any domestic help. In contrast to her life before she married, which was characterized by a strict discipline of study and ready access to her parents' vast library, there were few books in the house where she lived with her husband, and with her various domestic responsibilities, Rachel found little time to read. Only on nights when she could not sleep and on Rosh Hodesh (the New Moon), when it was customary for women to refrain from needlework, did she have the opportunity to read and compose poetry. Her husband, Jacob Morpurgo – whom she loved so ardently as a young woman that when her parents opposed the match, she vowed to marry no other man until they relented⁹ – was less than encouraging to Rachel the poet; only when he became aware of the praise she was receiving for her poetry did he countenance her literary activities.¹⁰

Despite these obstacles, Morpurgo continued to write poetry throughout her life, publishing some fifty poems in the journal *Kokhavei Yitzhak* (The stars of Isaac), which were collected after her death into the volume *Ugav Rahel* (Rachel's flute, 1890). Morpurgo gained much acclaim among readers in Germany and Italy, who were astonished to encounter a woman capable of composing erudite, rhymed, and metered poetry in Hebrew. This profusion of praise, based almost entirely on her gender, disconcerted her, as she suggests in several published poems, most notably "Ve'eileh divrei Rahel bevo le'ozneiha ki shemah nizkar letehilah bemikhtavei 'itim" (And these are Rachel's words on hearing she has been praised in the journals, 1847) and "Al mah adoni ram hirbah tzevahot" (Why does my

exalted Sir shriek so much, 1850).¹¹ Many of Morpurgo's male readers naively read Morpurgo's disinclination to accept praise for her poetry as evidence of her feminine qualities of piety and modesty. Indeed, Morpurgo often signed her poems with such self-effacing epithets as "the lowly and young," "the tiniest of the tiny," and "RiMaH," (an acronym for her name, *Rachel Morpurgo haketanah* – Rachel Morpurgo the Small – yielding a Hebrew word for "worm"). As Yaffa Berlovitz and Tova Cohen have pointed out, however, these professions of modesty can also be read as part of a complex poetics of duplicity, on the one hand satisfying male expectations of female demureness, while on the other subtly undercutting this humble stance with accompanying statements of poetic ambition.¹² Morpurgo was a scholar and poet with serious aspirations as well as a protofeminist; she was simply unwilling to accept the sort of praise that reinforced the general rule of female intellectual inferiority by imagining her as a wondrous exception to that very rule.

If in her earlier poetry Morpurgo veiled her feminist protest with professions of modesty and unworthiness, in her later poetry these elements are unveiled and overt. In "Anaseh akh hapa'am" (1866), for example, Morpurgo dramatizes in very stark terms the ongoing conflict between her feminine domestic role and her spiritual/literary aspirations, seeing a solution only in her ultimate release from physical existence:

Again I'll try To write a <i>poem</i> , I've left the <i>pot</i> Behind in anger.	אנסה אך הפעם אם אוכל לשיר, מאצל הסיר רחקתי מרב זעם:
I'm sick of wealth and <i>vanity</i> And long to escape My suffering. God shall reward me.	מאסתי הון והבל ולצאת מסבל יכוננו רגלי צורי יגמל עלי:
His blessings drizzle down Toward the hidden good I await my lot to come.	ברכותיו ירעפון אל טוב הצפון אקוה אל החבל

The creator of mountains	הנה יוצר הרים
And freer of slaves	מתיר אסורים
Will loosen all my <i>bonds</i> .	יתיר לי מכל-חבל.

הוא יום שימחתי	וביום מיתתי,
גילה ורינה	ובמקום קינה
לבשו נאים	ותמור שקים
מחול אמחול	גם אל מחול
הם נשואי	כי גירושי

And the day of my <i>death</i>	will be the day of my <i>mirth</i>
In place of a dirge	joy and song
And instead of sackcloth	finest dress
Even in renunciation	I shall surely dance
For my divorce	is my marriage. ¹³ [emphasis added]

The poem begins with the speaker's departure from the kitchen in an effort, once again, to compose poetry. The typographical arrangement of the poem, wherein the second, third, and fourth lines of the first four stanzas are set apart from or further ahead than the first, underlines this idea of spatial dislocation, of attempting to move from one sphere to another. The movement in the third and fourth stanzas from a quatrain form to a three-line form, as well as the breaking up of the lines in the final stanza into shorter, choppier units, creates a rhythmic sense of quickening, a sense of flight or escape.

This conflict at the heart of the poem is made very clear in the rhyme of *sir* (pot) and *lashir* (to sing or compose poetry), two words that sound alike, but which Morpurgo experiences as antithetical entities.¹⁴ By choosing to represent the kitchen through the metonymic reference to the *sir*, Morpurgo calls to mind a host of negative biblical associations. In Exodus 16:3, the People of Israel, yearning for food, rue the day they ever left Egypt, saying, "Would we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Mitzrayim when we sat by the *flesh pots* [*sir habasar*], and when we ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill the whole assembly with hunger." In this verse, the *sir habasar* is associated with a crass, slavish materialism, a willingness to forego spiritual freedoms so long as one's basic physical urges are readily satisfied. Elsewhere, the

image of the *sir* is associated with the threat of exile (as in Jeremiah 1:13, where the prophet sees an image of a “boiling pot, its face from the North,” signifying the menace of military attack by an enemy kingdom from the North) and with the evils of moral corruption (as in Ezekiel 24:6, where the prophet depicts a “bloody city, a pot in which there is filth”).

In stanza two, the speaker announces that she is tired not simply of pots and pans, but of all vain material pursuits. Her move away from her pots and pans thus comes to signify a rejection not simply of the feminine domestic role, but of a feminine identity grounded in materialism and the body. Longing for release from this bodily bondage, she yearns for death, which she envisions as a kind of divine reward, a liturgical dance of sorts, as indicated by the punned usage in the poem's second line of the word *mahol*, which means both “dance” and “forgiveness” or “renunciation.”

According to Yaffa Berlovitz,

Morpurgo translates death not only as a liberation from compulsions and obligations, but also as liberation from her life as a woman (with all of its attendant degradations) ... her longing for death becomes a longing not just for freedom but also for poetry, insofar as she describes death as a completely optimistic celebratory situation.¹⁵

According to this reading, however, Morpurgo's poem reinforces the traditional binary opposition between masculinity and femininity: the poet speaker's desire to escape bodily materiality into disembodied spirituality amounts simply to a preference for the traditionally masculine side of the binarity over the feminine.

I'd like to propose another possible reading, based on another set of intertextual references from chapter 7 in the Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes). Consider the following excerpted verses:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 4. Wise men are drawn to the house of mourning, and fools to the house of mirth. | ד. לב חכמים בבית אבל
ולב כסילים בבית שמחה. |
| 5. It is better to hear the wise man's rebuke, than to listen to the song [poem] of fools. | ה. טוב לשמע גערת חכם
מאיש שומע שיר כסילים. |
| 6. For the levity of the fool is like the crackling of nettles under a pot and that too is vanity. | ו. כי קול הסירים תחת הסיר
כן שחק הכסיל וגם זה הבל. |
| [...] | [...] |

25. I cast about in my mind to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of *folly* and *foolishness* which is madness.
26. Now I find woman more bitter than *death*; she is all traps, her hands are *fetters* and her heart is snares. [...]
27. That which I have sought I have not found.
28. One man in a thousand I have found, but among those, not a single woman have I found.¹⁶
- כה. סבותי אני וליבי לדעת ולתור ובקש חכמה וחשבון ולדעת רשע כסל והסכלות הוללות.
כו. ומוצא אני מר ממות את האשה אשר היא מצודים וחרמים לבה אסורים ידיה [...]
כז. עוד אשר בקשה נפשי לא מצאתי.
כח. אדם אחד מאלף מצאתי ואשה בכל אלה לא מצאתי.

As indicated by the highlighted words in the poem and in the biblical excerpts, Morpurgo's poem incorporates a number of elements from Ecclesiastes 7, including the emphasis on death, the twin references to *sir* and *shir* – pot and poem; the complaint against vanity (*hevel*); and the use of the word *asirim* (fetters or bonds). What we have in Morpurgo's poem, I would argue, are repetitions with several major and deliberate differences. The speaker in Kohelet claims that it is better to hear the rebuke of the wise man than the song or poem of fools. Later in the chapter, he reiterates his ongoing pursuit of wisdom over wickedness and foolishness. He follows this declaration by describing "woman" as a force that bonds and snares the good man, thereby "binding" womankind to the realm of foolishness and categorically excluding the possibility of female moral or religious seriousness.

In contrast, Morpurgo's daringly sets out to write a highly serious poem that is grounded in her experiences as a woman, in which she imagines God untying her spiritual bonds and releasing her into the realm of liturgical poetry. By stating her intention to sing or write a poem despite Kohelet's association in this chapter of *shir* with *sir*, that is, foolishness, Morpurgo self-consciously adopts an alternative feminine mode, offering her own wise woman's rebuke to the misogynist rant of the biblical "wise" man. Her angry move away from the *sir*/pot can thus be construed as a rejection not so much of femininity as of Kohelet's definition thereof. According to this reading, if Kohelet establishes a strict dichotomy bet-

ween man, wisdom, and the solemnity of death, on the one hand, and woman, levity and foolishness of song or poetry, on the other, Morpurgo subverts and breaks down this dichotomy, making a song out of death, mixing levity with gravity, invading the solemn, male, disembodied death space of Kohelet with her unfettered, femininely foolish song.

Notwithstanding this alternate reading, it is clear that Morpurgo is identifying a location of “radical openness and possibility” outside rather than inside the kitchen. The same idea is echoed in Anzia Yeziarska’s oft-discussed autobiographical novel, *Breadgivers*. Like Yeziarska herself, Sara Smolinsky, the protagonist of the novel, leaves the Lower East Side world of her family to pursue an education and a career as a teacher; like Yeziarska’s own father, Reb Smolinsky in the novel is a staunch traditionalist who carries on a life of rabbinic learning and scholarship even after the family immigrates from Eastern Europe to America, leaving economic responsibilities in the hands of his wife and daughters. As biographer Carole B. Schoen writes,

[Yeziarska’s] father’s unwavering devotion to the demands of religion prevented the family from joining the mainstream of American life. However much Anzia resented having to work at such an early age, she seems to have resented more strongly the continuance of her status as an immigrant, as someone separate from the “real America” of the native born. As strong-minded as he, as determined to become a “real American” as he was to remain an Old World Jew, she must have equated the minutia of religious practices with all the forces that kept her out.¹⁷

The spatial language in this critical passage – images of being separate from the mainstream and of being kept out – is particularly apt, given the emphasis on space and place in *Breadgivers*. From the very beginning of the novel, the traditional separation of male and female gender roles is represented in spatial terms, by the division between the kitchen and the front room in the Smolinsky’s Lower East Side tenement flat. In the Smolinsky household, the kitchen is the crowded, noisy center of female work and worry, where Mrs. Smolinsky and her four daughters prepare food for the rest of the family and fret over where the money will come from to pay for the next meal. In contrast, the front room, valorized both

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by its anterior location and by its larger size, is a peaceful center of male scholarship and spiritual activity, presided over by Reb Smolinsky, the sole male member of the family.

Sara, the youngest daughter in the family, bitterly recalls that “no one was allowed to put things in Father’s room Of course, we all knew that if God had given Mother a son, Father would have permitted a man child to share with him his best room in the house.”¹⁸ Reb Smolinsky’s domestic geography provides a physical mapping of his ideology of separate gender spheres. In his extreme, perhaps exaggeratedly misogynist re-articulation of the rabbinic notion of female “lightheadedness,”¹⁹

[w]omen had not brains for the study of God’s Torah, but they could be the servants of men who studied the Torah. Only if they cooked for the men and washed for the men, and didn’t nag or curse the men out of their homes; only if they let the men study their Torah in peace, then, maybe they could push themselves into Heaven with the men, to wait on them there. (p. 9)

The reality of life in America, however, eventually encroaches on Reb Smolinsky’s private space and compels a redrawing of this domestic map. When a number of shops close down and the Smolinsky daughters cannot find enough work to continue their familial “breadgiving,” Reb Smolinsky is forced to give up his front room so that the space can be rented out to boarders. He must move his books into the kitchen, representing a blurring of traditional borderlines that continues throughout the novel.

Significantly, it is when these boundaries are blurred, when the rabbi’s books are moved into the kitchen, that Sara resolves to find her future in books rather than in marriage. As Sara witnesses the various disappointments suffered by her older sisters as a result of her father’s various matchmaking schemes, she resolves to set out on an independent course of American education and autonomous self-improvement. Her educational zeal, though situated in a different cultural context, replicates the scholarly idealism of her father; like her father whose scholarly purpose and honor find spatial representation in the symbol of the front room, Sara leaves home in search of a room of her own, where she can dwell “with silence and stillness for her company.” (p. 156) Repeatedly in the novel, Sara acknowledges the paternal course of her scholarly quest:

The Rabbi's Daughter In and Out of the Kitchen

Who gave me the fire, the passion, to push myself up from the dirt? If I grow, if I rise, if I ever amount to something, is it not his spirit burning in me? (p. 286)

Like Morpurgo's poem, *Breadgivers* identifies the feminine sphere, as represented by the kitchen, with bodily rather than spiritual or intellectual sustenance. When Mrs. Smolinsky attempts to remind her husband about the need for money to feed the family, Reb Smolinsky responds with a story about R. Chanina ben Dosa and his nagging wife:

Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa was a starving, poor man who lived on next to nothing. Once, his wife complained: "We're so good, so pious, you give up nights and days in the study of the Holy Torah. Then why don't God provide for you at least enough to eat?" ... "Riches you want?" said Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa. "All right, woman. You shall have your wish." ... That very evening he went out to the fields to pray. Soon the heavens opened, and a Hand reached down to him and gave him a big chunk of gold. He brought it to his wife, and said: "Go buy with this all the luxuries of the earth." ... She was so happy and she began planning all that she would buy next day. Then she fell asleep. And in her dream, she saw herself and her husband sitting with all the saints in heaven. Each couple had a golden table between themselves. When the Good Angel put down for them their wine, their table shook so that half of it spilled. Then she noticed that their table had a leg missing, and that is why it was so shaky. And the Good Angel explained to her that the chunk of gold that her husband had given her the night before was the missing leg of their table. As soon as she woke up, she begged her husband to pray to God to take back the gold he had given them ... "I'll be thankful to live in poverty as long as I know our reward will be complete in Heaven." (p. 11-12)

What Reb Smolinsky offers here is a parable about the evils of feminine materialism and consumption. The wife of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa insists first and foremost on feeding the body; her (spiritually superior) husband teaches her the primary importance of feeding the soul.

Sara may despise her father for his unwillingness to accept any worldly or bodily responsibilities for the family, but in her quest for education, she

ultimately identifies more with her father than with her mother, more with the notion of food for the mind than with that of food for the body. Living apart from her family, with very little money and very little to eat, Sara hungers for her mother's cooking, but she repeatedly renounces this hunger. "I hated my stomach," she says. "It was like some clawing wild animal in me that I had to stop and feed always. I hated my eating." (p. 173) Sara's mother, against the judgment of her father, comes to visit her all the way from Elizabeth, New Jersey, bringing her home-cooked food. But when she asks Sara to take a break from her studies to come home and visit, Sara clings uncompromisingly to her life of the mind and refuses to enter her mother's kitchen. Only after six years of study, when she has already graduated from college and become a teacher, does she return home to visit her family, but by then it is already too late. Her mother is sick and dying; gone are her kitchen and the alliances among the Smolinsky women. When Sara's mother dies, the neighborhood women mourn the loss of this virtuous, skillful housewife:

"Such a good mother, such a virtuous wife," wailed a shawled woman with a nursing baby in her arms and two little tots hanging to her skirts. "Never did she allow herself a bite to eat but left-overs, never a dress but the rags her daughters had thrown away." "Such a cook! Such a housewife!" groaned a white-haired old woman wiping her eyes with a corner of her shawl. "Only two days ago she told me how they cook the fish in her village sweet and sour – and now, she is dead." (p. 254)

These almost parodic eulogies, paying tribute to the memory of Sara's mother solely in terms of her virtues of self-sacrifice and her skill at food preparation, demonstrate in no uncertain terms the gap between Sara's disembodied life of the mind and her mother's material life of the kitchen. Sara grieves for her mother, but she knows that she cannot and will not live up to that idealized image of the female "breadgiver."

Sara's departure from family life entails rejecting a feminine identity grounded not only in slavish domesticity but also in a hunger for material goods. Indeed, the character of Sara can be seen as Yezierska's effort to counter the prevalent stereotypes of the "Ghetto Girl" and the "Young Jewish Girl in Search of Marriage." According to Riv-Ellen Prell, the Ghetto Girl was a stereotype of the financially independent Jewish working

girl – garish, vulgar, loud, overly conspicuous, and far too interested in her appearance.²⁰ The equally stereotypical Young Jewish Woman in Search of Marriage “was defined by nothing so clearly as her [material] desires. ... She was dangerous to young Jewish men because of what she wanted.”²¹ In contrast to the latter stereotype, Sara rejects the urging of her more conventional sisters to marry rich businessman Max Goldstein so as to reap the consumer benefits of his wealth. Turning down the proposal, she reaffirms her resolve to seek self-actualization through books rather than through marriage and money. This is not to say that Sara harbors no hunger for good food and beautiful things. When she returns to New York to begin her career as a teacher, she relishes the opportunity to order dinner in the dining car of the Pullman train (p. 237), and later, walking along Fifth Avenue, she “devours with her eyes the beautiful shop windows” (p. 238). But unlike the Ghetto Girl, who opts for a garish, overdone style and always wants more, Sara buys a simple blue suit and furnishes her apartment sparsely: “A table, a bed, a bureau, a few comfortable chairs. No carpet on the floor. No pictures on the wall. Nothing but a clean, airy emptiness.” (p. 240) All of her desires are in some sense sublimated or redirected so as to assume a higher, more spiritual aspect.

Eventually Sara does marry, not a businessman, but a public school principal from an immigrant Jewish background similar to hers. More than that: Sara and her husband-to-be, Hugo Seelig – whose name, in German, conjures up images of spiritual or soulful bliss – invite Reb Smolinsky to come and live with them in their new home, and Hugo asks his future father-in-law to teach him Hebrew. Sara’s move from the kitchen world of her mother into the male sphere of the mind/spirit is thus rendered complete. There she is, living with two scholarly men, her rabbinic father, on one side, representing the scholarship and religiosity of the Old World, and her American-educated husband, on the other, representing the intellectual and social commitments of the New World. To be sure, this is not an entirely happy ending. Sara knows very well of her father’s enduring chauvinism and misogyny; she expresses to Hugo outright her fear that if her father moves in with them, they will lose their home. Hugo, however, insists that their home will be spiritually “richer” with her father there. “So there it was, the problem before us – the problem of Father – still unsolved” (p. 296). But part of the reason why Sara finds herself once again overwhelmed by the “problem of [the] Father” is that in all of her life

choices she has consistently and decidedly valorized the masculine realm (as conventionally defined): mind over body, spirit over flesh, father over mother.

Ironically, then, Sara's stubbornly individualistic quest for an education ultimately lands her in a place where she is compelled to cede her hard-earned private space to two paternalistic men. Critic Thomas Ferraro also observes that "Sara's ascent into individualism threatens an older form of women's strength, that of mutual support."²² The novel ends with Sara reinstated into a Jewish (patriarchal) family line, but completely without a female support network.

In contrast to *Breadgivers*, where the protagonist's self-development requires her to exchange both the physical space and the female companionship of the kitchen for the company of men, Devorah Baron's novella, "Mah shehayah," tells a story of interpersonal growth, resistance, and creativity that takes place in the kitchen, within the company of women.²³

This plot contrasts with the story of Baron's childhood and early adulthood, which more often than not found her among boys and men. The daughter of the rabbi of the town of Uzda in Lithuania, Devorah Baron received an extraordinarily rich education in Jewish sources, albeit within a framework that placed her, both literally and figuratively, in the women's gallery. While her father gave lessons to the boys in the synagogue, young Devorah sat behind a partition in the women's section, following along with the lessons, occasionally calling across the partition for an explanation of a difficult passage. From a very young age, then, Baron was designated a "borderland figure," one who moved back and forth between traditional gender spaces and designations. Her presence in the study house indicated her privileged status, her ability, recalling Anzaldúa's formulation, "to cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the normal." Her spatial location behind the partition, however, was a constant reminder of the traditional limitations on her movement.

Baron published her first Hebrew stories at the astonishingly young age of fifteen, around the same time that she left home to study, first in Minsk, then in Kovno and Mariampol, undertaking a lifestyle that was clearly atypical for a rabbi's daughter of her day. She settled in Palestine when she was only twenty-four and became literary editor of *Hapo'el hatza'ir*, a weekly newspaper edited by her husband, Yosef Aharonovitch. In Hebrew and Zionist literary circles, she was often a lone woman in an overwhelmingly

male group. But, as Naomi Seidman has aptly observed, “Baron alternated between transgressing the borders and gendered (and generic) spaces assigned to women and retreating ... to the generic and stylistic ‘women’s section.’”²⁴ “Mah shehayah,” a story of self-development and transformation that occurs specifically within the conventionally female domain of the kitchen, is one of those occasions of retreat.

The protagonist of the story is an awkward, illiterate young baker named Mina, whom the narrator befriends and whom she ultimately teaches to read, thereby helping her to discover inner reserves of strength and self-respect. Mina, in turn, tells kitchen-spun stories of her life to the narrator, unknowingly offering lessons about what it means to be a good storyteller. The kitchen might be an improbable birthplace for literary art, but from the first paragraph of the novella, Baron’s narrator offers aphorisms asserting that beauty often arises from the unlikeliest places. Her best friend Mina, she tells us,

was hardly what one might call a pretty girl; but, we all know the saying that it is in the earthenware jar that the best wine is preserved, and have we not seen the living word of God inscribed in a simple scroll?²⁵

This sentence is a crucial one, for it links food/wine preparation with the art of (sacred) writing.

In fact, throughout the narrative, stories are told against the background of kitchen work; images of food, drink, and the preparation thereof are yoked together with meta-fictional musing. Mina offers a vivid description of her family’s former mansion in the city while she “pounds the cinnamon with a mortar.”²⁶ She tells the sad story about how her family came to be reduced in its financial circumstances “as she was getting the cake-tins ready so as to save time for the next morning.”²⁷ The harrowing account of how she came to have such unconventionally short hair (the result of a painful altercation with her cruel mother) comes out “[o]ne day, as [they] were sitting together in the kitchen.”²⁸ The vivid, realistic, unembellished detail of all these stories impresses the narrator in her role as writer-in-training, although it takes her several years for these lessons to crystallize into a poetics. “It was much later,” she reflects, “that I realized that the good narrator does not labour his subject and encumber it with explanations, which only obscure it.”²⁹

Indeed, through the story of the narrator's relationship with Mina, Baron identifies the kitchen as a vital origin of culture. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously argued that "the conversion of the raw into the cooked represents a conversion process from nature to culture."³⁰ Building on the ideas of Lévi-Strauss, Renée Hirschon, in her research about houses and home life in urban Greece, contends that:

It is woman, who in dealing with the raw "natural" substances of the "outside" world, acts as the agent in the cultural process, and by extension, the man is designated to "nature" through his activities outside the home.³¹

These ideas are directly expressed in Baron's novella. Mina's role as an agent of culture, according to Hirschon's formulation, is symbolized through her eventual marriage to Avraham Itzi Hachohen, a miller from Libidov. Whereas Avraham Itzi's work situates him within the realm of the raw — he produces flour — Mina's work situates her within the realm of the cooked. It is her job to take her husband's raw products and transform them into cakes and pastry "fit to be served up at religious feasts and to have benedictions pronounced over them."³²

Baron's novella also suggests that the culture-forming function of the kitchen can serve as a metaphor and/or inspiration for women's writing and reading. It is from the illiterate Mina that the narrator begins to understand the principles of fiction writing. And it is from the rabbi's daughter/narrator that Mina finally learns how to read. In their spare time, the narrator teaches Mina how to form the various letters of the alphabet. Before long, they are reading the Bible, which becomes Mina's first Hebrew textbook.

Significantly, Baron's novel acknowledges the need for women to move outside, beyond the kitchen, in order to abet their development. The progress of Mina's reading lessons eventually necessitates a deliberate spatial relocation:

As we couldn't find a quiet place for ourselves in the house, we moved to the upper vestibule of the synagogue, and there, in the dim half-light, the wonders of Creation were gradually unfolded to her: There was light at God's command, and the heavens were created out of the

formlessness and the void, and day followed day, and man came to live on the earth, he and, with him, all that complexity of actions and struggles that makes up human life.³³

Mina's movement beyond the kitchen for these Bible lessons allows her to contemplate the origins of creativity, as represented by the biblical account of Divine Creation. Note, however, that this relocation situates Mina not in a masculine space, but in a kind of communal borderland, the upper vestibule of the synagogue, presumably leading to the women's gallery. It is here, in this architecturally liminal space, that the narrator imparts to Mina the lessons that her rabbi-father gave to her, opening Mina's mind to the wonders of knowledge and the complexities of human interaction.

In time, the narrator, like Baron herself, also relocates, leaving her hometown to pursue higher studies and eventually settling in Palestine. At their parting, she and Mina look back together on their shared experiences:

We recalled our first talks, our strolls together through the fields, how I had first taught her the letters of the alphabet, which she had then described as being "like rows of dishes set out along cupboard shelves," and from which she had drawn so much spiritual comfort. In the days preceding my departure we would share our reminiscences as she busied herself in a corner of the kitchen, or stood over her washing-tub, and we promised to make a point of letting one another know how we fared.³⁴

In this scene of reminiscences, Mina's place in the kitchen is repeatedly confirmed. She recalls her first lessons on the alphabet through the kitchen-based image of "rows of dishes set along cupboard shelves." They share their memories as Mina washes clothes or works in another corner of the kitchen. Baron makes it clear that Mina's familial and domestic obligations limit her mobility; she cannot simply leave home and study in the city like her beloved friend, for she has responsibilities to others. And yet, in contrast to Yeziarska's depiction of the domestic servitude of Sara's sisters, Baron's depiction of Mina's life and work is a tribute to the ways in which women of the *shtetl* sustained and cared for their families, in good times and bad. As time goes by, the narrator loses touch with Mina, but one day, Mina's son Ephraim, named after a younger brother who had

died in childhood, comes to visit her in Eretz Israel, linking her new world with the old, offering an image of familial continuity despite the disruptions and dislocations of early twentieth-century Jewish history. In telling the stories of Mina and her family, the narrator offers her own version of continuity as well, showing how the raw materials of a kitchen from her hometown, its fragrances, textures, and tastes, can be preserved and cooked into great fiction.

Perhaps the greatest paradox about this fictional tribute to the Old World kitchen is that Baron wrote it during that long period of her life (from approximately 1922 to her death in 1956) when she lived in self-imposed isolation with her only daughter, adhering to a strict diet that amounted to self-starvation. Scholars continue to puzzle over the riddle of Baron's later life.³⁵ Psychobiographer Amia Lieblich writes that for Baron, "fiction was a kind of 'monastic creed,' an end to justify all means."³⁶ Israeli feminist literary critic Lily Rattok similarly asserts that

Baron apparently imprisoned herself in her own house in order to achieve spiritual freedom at the expense of freedom of movement and worldly pleasure. This strange way of life was the only way she had to free herself from the accepted role of a woman in a patriarchal culture.

According to Rattok, Baron's renunciation of food and movement was an effort to control the one thing left entirely to her own devices, namely, her body.³⁷ All this recalls our discussion of Morpurgo's poem, in which the poet speaker, renouncing the kitchen and/or food, asserts a desire to retreat entirely from the material world, to embrace spirituality, poetry, and death.

Clearly, all three writers, Morpurgo, Yeziarska, and Baron, recognized the conflict between pots, pans, and the pen, between a desire to pursue a life of letters and the social pressures to conform to a predetermined gender role. Baron's novella offers the most positive portrayal of the feminine space of the kitchen; read with a knowledge of Baron's own life story, however, "Mah shehayah" also offers us a picture of a writer who successfully cooked her kitchen experiences into fiction, but literally starved herself in the process. According to anthropologist Carole Counihan, "giving food connects women to close relatives through an extremely intense emotional channel; women become identified with the food they

offer.”³⁸ In Baron’s case, however, this idea found poignant expression in fiction, but not in life.

Notes

1. bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Site of Radical Openness,” in Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden (eds.), *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 209.
2. “Beveitah shel Devorah Baron,” *Ha'aretz*, August 6, 1954 (my translation).
3. bell hooks, p. 206.
4. Carole M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and the Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 46.
5. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2nd edition, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), p. 3.
6. See Abraham Haberman, “Meshorerot ‘ivriot bimei kedem,” *Mipri ha’et veva’et* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1981), pp. 93–99. On other rabbis’ daughters who were poets see Yosef Chetrit, “Freyha bat Yosef: Meshoreret ‘ivriah beMoroko bame’ah ha-18” (A Hebrew poetess in Morocco in the 18th century), *Pe’amim*, 4 (1980), pp. 84–93; and “Freyha bat Rabbi Avraham,” *Pe’amim*, 55 (1995), pp. 124–130. Yona Sabar also writes about a poet named Asenath, daughter of Rabbi Samuel Adoni Barzani, in *The Folk Literature of Kurdistan Jews: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 123. See also Shirley Kaufman, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Tamar S. Hess (eds.), *The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press, 1999).
7. Beruriah (second century C.E.), said to have been the daughter of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion and the wife of Rabbi Meir, is the most famous case in point. Rabbinic literature offers a record of the breadth and depth of Beruriah’s Jewish legal knowledge. In BT *Pesahim* 62b, Beruriah is depicted as having achieved the formidable intellectual task of learning “three hundred ritual laws in one day from three hundred rabbis.” In Tosefta *Kelim: Bava kamma* 4:17 and BT *Berakhot* 10a, she is even portrayed as ruling or interpreting more correctly than her male counterparts. At the same time, the well-known legend of Beruriah’s demise dramatizes the danger attributed to the very notion of studious women. According to Rashi, [O]n one occasion, Beruriah scoffed at the sages who claimed that “women are light-headed.” In response, Rabbi Meir swore that in the end, Beruriah would agree that they were right. Rabbi Meir then went and ordered one of his pupils to seduce her. For many days the student entreated her, until she finally relented. When she realized what she had done, she hanged herself. Rabbi Meir then fled to Babylonia. (Rashi, at the lemma *Ma’aseh deberuriyah*, BT *Avodah zarah* 18b, my translation)

“Bat harav” (The rabbi’s daughter), by Hebrew writer Jacob Steinberg (1884–1947), is a kind of modern version of the Beruriah story. In this story, set in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, the exposure of a rabbi’s daughter to Russian novels makes her an unfit match for a pious scholar. Eventually she is betrothed to a tobacco shop owner, who seduces her before their wedding. Upon discovering that she is pregnant, she initially plans an abortion, but when her fiancé fails to accompany her for the procedure, she kills herself by jumping off the roof of her parents’ house. Here the rabbi’s daughter is no talmudic scholar, but she is a reader at a time when, as Iris Parush has shown, women readers were important agents of social change. On the subject of Jewish women readers in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, see Iris Parush, “Readers in Cameo: Women Readers in Jewish Society of Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe,” *Prooftexts*, 14 (1994), pp. 1–23; and idem, “Women Readers as Agents of Social Change among Eastern European Jews in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Gender and History*, 9 (1997), pp. 60–82.

8. According to Yitzhak Haim Castiglioni’s short account of Rachel Morpurgo’s life, written as an introduction to *Ugav Rahel*, his edited collection of her poems (Cracow, 1890; reprinted Tel Aviv: Hapo’el hatza’ir, 1943), her education was primarily in the Jewish holy books: “Until age 12 she studied the Pentateuch. ... At age fourteen she began learning the Babylonian Talmud with the great rabbi, Ben-Nadiv from Mantua” (pp. vii–viii). For an English paraphrase of Castiglioni’s short biography, see Nina Davis Salaman, *Rachel Morpurgo and Contemporary Hebrew Poets in Italy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1924). Salaman also provides English translations of three of Morpurgo’s poems. For more recent biographical articles on Morpurgo, see Howard Adelman, “Women’s Voices in Italian Jewish Literature,” in Judith R. Baskin (ed.), *Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), pp. 62–65; and Yael Levine Katz, “Rachel Morpurgo,” *Judaism*, 49:1 (Winter 2000), pp. 13–29.

9. Morpurgo published a poetic exchange with her cousin, S.D. Luzatto, on the subject of her refusal to marry anyone but Jacob Morpurgo, the man she loved. See *Ugav Rahel* (above, note 8), pp. 66–67.

10. Castiglioni, “Introduction” (above, note 8), pp. vii–xii.

11. See *Ugav Rahel* (above, note 8), pp. 12 and 19.

12. See Yaffa Berlovitz, “Rahel Morpurgo, Hateshukah el hamavet, hateshukah el hashir” (The desire for death, the desire for poetry), *Sadan*, 2 (1996), pp. 11–40; and Tova Cohen, “Betokh hatarbut umihutzah lah” (Within the culture and outside it), *ibid.*, pp. 69–86.

13. *Ugav Rahel* (above, note 8), p. 60 (my translation). For another translation, by Peter Cole, see *The Defiant Muse* (above, note 6), pp. 80–81.

14. Morpurgo creates a similar opposition between *sir* and *shir* in a verse letter written to Mendel Stern, the editor of *Kokhavei Yitzhak*, which was published in

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Kokhavei Yitzhak, 18 (1853), p. 41, and reprinted in *Ugav Rahel* (above, note 8), p. 77. In the letter, Morpurgo expresses her misgivings about writing poetry, admonishing herself to:

return to your pot (*lekhi etzel hasir*)
and prepare your provisions.
For the entire community
will prepare for themselves
to carry with them
mitzvot and good deeds
with which to approach God. [my translation]

What is so interesting about this text is that it begins by associating women with the kitchen work of the pot and then undercuts this by construing the pot metaphorically: what is being cooked up here are not physical provisions but a spiritual menu of *mitzvot* and *ma'asim*. Whereas the letter seems at first to reject poetry on the ground that it is not proper woman's work, it concludes with a concern for the religious implications of writing poetry and philosophy over and against the performance of traditional, religiously sanctioned good deeds.

15. Berlovitz, "Rahel Morpugo" (above, note 12), p. 34 (my translation).

16. Translation adapted from *The Writings* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982).

17. Carole B. Schoen, *Anzia Yeziarska* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), p. 6.

18. Anzia Yeziarska, *Breadgivers* (New York: Persea Books, 1975), p. 9.

19. See BT *Kiddushin* 80b.

20. Riv-Ellen Prell, "Ghetto Girls and Jewish Immigrant Desire," in idem, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), pp. 21–57.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

22. Thomas Ferraro, *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrations in Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 73.

23. For another article dealing with images of food, the kitchen, and female community in Devorah Baron's writing, and their role in the construction of an "alternative feminine national history," see Orly Lubin, "Zutot memitbahah shel Nehamah: Le'umiyut alternativit beHagolim shel Devorah Baron" (Small things from Nehama's kitchen: An alternative type of nationalism in Devorah Baron's Hagolim), *Teoriah ubikoret*, 7 (1995), pp. 159–176.

24. Naomi Seidman, "Baron in the Closet," in *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Yiddish and Hebrew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 73.

25. Devorah Baron, "Mah shehayah," in idem, *Parshiyot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1968), p. 126. The English translations are from idem, *The Thorny Path*

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- (English transl. by Joseph Shachter; Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1969), p. 77.
26. "Mah shehayah," pp. 128–129; *The Thorny Path*, p. 81.
 27. "Mah shehayah," p. 129; *The Thorny Path*, p. 81.
 28. "Mah shehayah," p. 132, *The Thorny Path*, p. 85.
 29. "Mah shehayah," p. 128; *The Thorny Path*, p. 80.
 30. See Renée Hirschon, "Essential Objects and the Sacred: Interior and Exterior Space in an Urban Greek Locality," in Shirley Ardener (ed.), *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps* (London; Croom Helm, 1981), p. 78.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
 32. "Mah shehayah," p. 127; *The Thorny Path*, p. 79.
 33. "Mah shehayah," p. 134; *The Thorny Path*, p. 89.
 34. "Mah shehayah," p. 178; *The Thorny Path*, p. 150.
 35. For an extensive biographical treatment of Baron's early life see Nurit Govrin, *Hamahatzit harishonah: Devorah Baron, hayeha veyetziratah* (The first half: The life and work of Devorah Baron; Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1988).
 36. Amia Lieblich, *Conversations with Dvora: An Experimental Biography of the First Hebrew Woman Writer* (English transl. by Naomi Seidman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 2.
 37. Lily Rattok, Afterword to *Hakol ha'aher: Siporet nashim ivrit* (The other voice: Hebrew short stories by women; Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1994), p. 276 (my translation)
 38. Counihan, *Anthropology of Food* (above, note 4), p. 49.