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Woman of valor

By Dalia Karpel

The lecture hall at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was packed, and there were quite a few young people in the crowd. The speakers could not hide their appreciation for the work of the poet Esther Raab, who in the last year of her life said, "I give birth to poems like a hen lays eggs. Sometimes a whole round poem comes out, almost without my being aware of it, and a week later, when I read it, I wonder whether I actually wrote it."

Only now, 25 years after her death, was a first academic conference being held about Raab, who has been called "the first sabra poetess." The literary scholar Ariel Hirschfeld, who read from her work with impressive dramatic panache at the conference, surveyed her singular attitude toward the country's flora. "Raab was highly sensual and apparently permissive," he told the gathering, which took place a month ago and was organized by Prof. Hanan Hever and Dana Olmert, an editor at Kibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House. "And that," he added, "set her sharply apart from the world [around her] and created a sense of alienation, in a period when the traditional Jewish culture still held sway."

Raab's oeuvre remained outside the canon of Hebrew verse, and she, who knew her value, once fulminated in an interview, "I never wrote poems for anyone, only for myself. I was actually born a poet and entered poetry on both my legs, without suffering any inner doubts."

According to Hirschfeld, the reason for her exclusion from the canon lies in her personality: "There was something provocative and bohemian in her behavior, in a manner that went beyond the bounds of the tender role that was assigned to female poets. She also did not subscribe to any of the poetic schools that existed at the time, particularly those of Shlonsky and Alterman. She didn't even like them. She liked other things, and she was explicitly a bit contemptuous of their made-abroad product. She felt more original and more suited to the place, but her spoken poetic style did not suit the dominant tone of Shlonsky-Alterman-Goldberg, which was rhymed and highly metrical, neoclassical and symbolist."

Esther Raab was born in Petah Tikva, Palestine, in 1894, the only daughter (she had three brothers) of a father whom she adored and a mother she abhorred. The home of her parents, Yehuda and Leah, was a one-story building, in which she was born on Purim - hence her name, Esther, after the queen in the Purim story, whom Raab would years later call a "ghetto prostitute," because of the use she made of her womanly charms. She viewed her father, a farmer with an education, as a spiritual mentor. Her talent was obvious from childhood: "The rhymes emerged instinctively. My father noticed it.

When I was a girl I spoke in rhymes and people laughed at me."

The first text she wrote in her memoirs dealt with her childhood home. In her parents' spacious bedroom stood her mother's curtained bed and her father's simple broad bed with iron sides, at the foot of which she liked to lie: "The bed had a good smell, the aroma of tobacco mixed with healthy sweat. Mother, in her bed with the netting, existed in a different world. The transparent white curtains moved in the wind, and there, in the end, was a great deal of mystery. It was in that end that my brother Elazar was born one night, with mother twisting and turning and uttering strange choking noises and me crying and wailing from fear." In the morning she was taken to the bed and saw her mother lying there, pale. "By her side lay a pink creature and I was very angry at him. Was it worth paining mother just for this?"

Music, too, was part of her world. Singing took place in the house, and instruments were played, and Raab loved classical music and knew the symphonies of Beethoven. However, nature and the landscape constituted the foundation of everything. "The nature was marvelous, primeval, the green rushes in the Yarkon were wonderful," she wrote. "We would travel in a carriage and I would play with my brothers, hitting them, and they would hit me back. I never gave in to them. Father educated me like a boy, to fight and protect myself."

"Esther Raab was a tremendous poet," says Dana Olmert, who teaches literature at the Hebrew University. "I love the way she shatters frameworks: the fact that she dared write in free verse, that she celebrates her sexuality, that she possesses a great deal of strength. She does not pretend to be modest and does not try to present herself as soft and tender. She does not play the normative game of womanhood. She possesses inner freedom, which is amazing when one thinks about the historical context. Let us not forget the bold verbal eroticism. In a certain sense she is the great-grandmother of Yona Wallach [Israeli poet, 1944-85]. She does not try to write like others and she does not try to write standard Hebrew. From her point of view, the normative and the standard are things that are meant to be deconstructed."

In her talk at the conference - entitled "Eucalyptuses, Ars Poetica and Transgenderism in the Poetry of Esther Raab" - Olmert noted that Raab began to write in a period when women in the Jewish community of Palestine did not write poetry. "Two years earlier, Rachel [pen name of Rachel Bluwstein Sela, 1890-1931] published a solitary poem. They were both pioneers in a cultural space in which there are not many feminine voices overall, and none at all in poetry. Her preoccupation with writing engendered questions of gender identity, of what it is to be a woman who writes in a culture in which there are no women who write, and in Hebrew on top of it, the holy tongue, the use of which was considered a male privilege."

Her first collection of poems, "Thistles," appeared in 1930. Olmert read out a poem that Raab wrote in 1922, when she was 28 and single, as an example of the erotic boldness implicit in the verbal

layer of her work: " ... You appear / And I am light and exulting / Brandishing a shining sword / And sheer at midday / In fields whiter than light / I passed judgment on us / Cuttingly."

In an interview with the poet Shin Shifra, Raab related that she wrote the poem while in a field at Kfar Yehezkel, in the Jezreel Valley. "Raab uses masculine symbols," Olmert comments. "She has a shining sword and she is going to kill her lover. There is something tempestuous here, and filled with life and the joy of life." In the 1926 poem "Thus shall you love me," she refuses to be married or to belong: "Thus shall you love me / And your heart shall read about me day by day / For a wife to you / Never shall I be."

Olmert: "Raab wants her passion to remain active, and for that to happen she must not give in to the temptations of the bourgeoisie. True, Raab married in real life, and to a rich man whom she did not love, but she always knew what was what. She knew whom she loved and whom she didn't. She was very much in love with her husband's brother, whereas she dedicated her book 'Thistles' to her husband [after his death], writing, 'To the memory of my friend.' That is highly charged, to use that term for one's partner, and she makes no attempt to paint their relations in false colors of love and desire. Raab doesn't buy the naturalness of the conceptions that are decreed for her by the very fact that she is a woman. She describes her teacher, whom she found very attractive because he was terribly feminine. Her admiration for feminine men and masculine women is not disguised."

Manya Shochat (1880-1961), who was one of the founders of the Hashomer (Guard) organization and whose name at birth was Vilbushevich, often visited the Raab home in Petah Tikva. This was the period of the Second Aliya (wave of immigration), in about 1912. "I was very impressed by her," the 18-year-old Raab wrote in her diary. Manya was in fact visiting Raab's father, Yehuda. "Mother didn't interest her and she didn't hide that, and mother had an openly crass attitude toward her. She called her 'der hetzi zachar'" - the half male.

Esther Raab found Manya an impressive masculine woman. "I remember her voice, a kind of low alto. She dressed in masculine attire and always wore a man's hat. She certainly stood out and was different from all the wimpy women, who wore muslin and lace." Her mother was jealous of the guest: "Apparently father was attracted to the woman with the masculine character."

Her father sat with Shochat in the living room and the two would immerse themselves in conversations in German. "Sometimes they argued loudly and heatedly, and then mother would bring in the coffee and the two fell silent. Although I didn't understand everything, I did understand that there was a battle of opinions between them ..." There were differences at the time between the veteran farmers, who were more traditional and employed Arab workers, and the pioneers of the Second Aliya, who advocated the "conquest of labor" - meaning exclusively Jewish labor.

Her father, Raab wrote, was about 40 and in the prime of his life. "His

green eyes sparkled in his healthy, tanned face. He was broad-shouldered and the opening of his shirt showed a broad masculine chest with an athleticism no less than the beauty of our times." After Shochat left, Raab's mother would snap sarcastically, "Nu, what did the half-male tell you?" Her father "smiled into his beard and jestingly yanked the tip of mother's white apron, and then everything would fall back into place."

Shochat's visits were disturbing to her mother. One day Esther Raab entered her parents' bedroom and found her mother standing in front of the mirror, trying on her husband's hat. "She turned it every which way, twisted her face and looked at herself from different angles. When she saw me she burst out laughing and said, 'Manya Bulbushevich,' and pointed to herself."

Esther Raab's rebelliousness sprang up at the encouragement of her father. "I always had a struggle with men, with my brothers, I wanted to be like one of them. There is an element of revolt, of malice in me. There was always something exceptional about me. The male teachers liked me, so the girls were jealous of me. I had long hair, which mother tied with large blood-red ribbons, and that stood out, so my braids were always being pulled. This difference made me be a 'mamzera'" - a clever little devil - "but there is also a large element of a child's innocence within me. On the other hand, I can't abide banality. I love the fighting masculine element; I admire warrior figures such as David, Bar Kochba, the Hasmoneans.

"Poetry is my masculine side," Raab declared. "My elements are not feminine. I write masculine poems ... If I were to be born again, I would want to be born a male. I don't like to give in. A guy can fight back. He just gives a punch in the teeth."

This wild element in Esther Raab arouses the interest of Dana Olmert. "Her love poems are fascinating, and it's interesting that they have been neglected," she says. "Even when her importance was recognized and people acknowledged that they had been wrong to ignore her poetry for 30 years, they dealt only with her landscape poetry. Dan Miron wrote about this in his book 'Founding Mothers and Stepsisters.' Even he, who rediscovered her in the 1960s, managed not to notice her erotic poetry. There is something there that's not easy to digest, especially for men. Raab was a tough machista who wasn't willing to kowtow or be clinging, and she demanded a type of relationship that had a power element to it. She enjoyed the power game and liked to compete with men. This was caused by her frustration at not being allowed to study or be part of the male world. In her love poems she tries to set the terms and she does not undertake to give herself. She truly is different in her own eyes."

At the end of 1909, when she was 15 and a half, Raab's father took her out of the school she had attended for about seven years and ordered her to stay home, while her friends stayed in school. In the two years during which she was stuck in the house, she kept a diary, which was posthumously published. "These parents, with a great deal of their own egoism, and my situation in this house, with all the

abysses getting constantly wider ... I am so distant and not understood, rejected."

In the diary she set forth her unrequited love for Moshe Yanovsky-Carmi, the son of one of the first families in Petah Tikva, and later also wrote of the love she felt for her cousin, Avraham Haim Green, who in 1908 went to Beirut to study medicine and three or four years later also became the object of a tormenting unrequited love, after he married another woman. He worked in Safed as a physician and died there during an epidemic.

"And I have given so much beauty already," Raab wrote. "So much heart and so many tears, and they, after all, are not worth it, but still, they did not notice me, left me." The melancholy of adolescence and her heartbreak from the disappointed loves were accompanied by a trenchant account to settle with her mother, which only intensified her rebelliousness and her emergence into a woman who perceived sexual relations as problematic.

The struggle between them was aggravated when new passions arose in Esther at the age of 16. "How embittered I was at people who marry and do this kind of abomination, yet now I myself feel a kind of desire entering my heart. It's so strange to me ... I am growing up ... I am becoming a mature young woman."

Her anger at her mother only increased. "Fire and brimstone she hurls on my head, and what did I do wrong," she wrote. Her photograph album contains a picture of her as a girl with her parents, but with the image of her mother torn off. When Esther's mother was upset that she was seeing boys, and called them "vulgar," Esther replied to her in the diary: "Such thoughts would enter my mind then, and I could not stop myself from calling her a whore ... you who performed such an act of abomination, you call me vulgar? She herself is the reason I started to think thoughts about the body, what, is it not she? Because you did not let me go with Moshe, or with Ben Zion, and you called me vulgar. Indeed, the fathers themselves do not know how they corrupt their sons ... There is nothing better than a stolen apple."

She still had four years to go before turning 20, the marrying age for the young women of the village, and Raab was afraid she would not have time to acquire an education: "But it's really up to you, you can study even to the age of 25, until 26." She fantasizes about studying music or art at an academy in Switzerland, "and afterward I shall marry or just take me a friend. No, I will not marry a man, why do I need that burden."

In the winter of 1913, she found solace in the sturdy arms of a man she calls "Deen Haglili" (probably Shmuel Dayan, the father of Moshe Dayan), and she has another suitor, named Mordechai, and there is also Moshe Carmi, the former beloved, who now tries to kiss her passionately, but "it disgusts me," and that is the end of his charm.

Raab resumed her studies when an agricultural school opened in the village. One of her teachers, the writer Yaakov Rabinovitz, noticed her literary talent. But as soon as she could, in late 1913, Raab left her

parents' home and joined the members of Kvutzat Degania, on the shore of Lake Kinneret. Within a year she understood that the religion of labor was not for her. She had high regard for the efforts of the pioneers, but found it difficult to be a good worker. She learned the names of flowers, picked up a little Russian from the women pioneers, and above all developed a powerful admiration for the great luminaries of the labor movement: A.D. Gordon, Brenner and Katznelson. Finally she came down with malaria and left.

Her first marriage was a compromise. Her husband, Yitzhak Green, the older brother of her beloved Avraham Haim, came from an affluent family that acted as the Middle East agent for a German pharmaceutical firm. "My first love was for my cousin, who disappointed me," she told the journal *Hadarim* in an interview. "That drew a line across my whole life. It is something natural, simple, which happens to everyone, but for me it was some sort of erasure."

She lived with Green in Cairo until she grew tired of the Egyptian capital, and then her husband built her a luxurious house in Tel Aviv, designed by the renowned architect Ze'ev Rechter. Her Tel Aviv home became a literary salon. "In my home I didn't lift a finger to get people to come ... It developed by itself, and that was the beauty of it ... I, for example, would talk about the French literature I was engaged in ... And Shlonsky was simply as brilliant as a star with his jests ... We were all young and we danced and sang and listened to classical music, and I think things were also created under the influence of that atmosphere, created without conscious thought, without intention."

Her self-consciousness is touching. "I was a bohemian, made up, not authentic," she said in 1971. "I was a great bourgeois but I loved the bohemian thing, I loved the 'I have nothing,' because I wasn't rich in the accepted sense. I loathed money but I used it well." She related that the house was open to everyone who showed up. "People would knock on the door at 11 at night and say, 'We want to party.'"

Yitzhak Green died in 1930, and Raab became a wealthy widow. She married the painter Aryeh Eluil, but got no satisfaction from the marriage. After several miscarriages, it was clear to her that she would never be a mother. She had a few love affairs, traveled often to Europe and changed houses and apartments and wrote poetry as well as prose. But the loneliness gnawed at her.

"Without poems I would have died long ago," she told Helit Yeshurun in 1981, in what turned out to be her last interview. "One is not lonely with a husband or children. I have done everything. And now I am waiting for the end."

The loneliness of the last 10 years, which Raab spent in the town of Tivon, near Haifa, was interrupted by a student from Kibbutz Yifat named Reuven Shoham, now 68 and a professor of literature at the University of Haifa. In his lecture at the conference, he concentrated on Raab's apocalyptic poetry, which dealt with the end of the world. Their first meeting took place in 1971, when Shoham was sent by his

teacher, the late Prof. Gershon Shaked, to interview Raab as part of his research. At the time, no academic study of her poetry existed, and Raab was pleased at the interest being taken in her.

"Her speech was like her poetry and her poetry was like her speech, in clean Hebrew, without prettifying," Shoham said this week. "When I came to her she already had a persecution complex. Sometimes she said she hadn't slept a wink, because people from the Civil Guard gave her electric shocks."

Shoham was married and had two daughters. Raab quickly developed a dependence on him and also wrote a poem about him: "I already met you once / Times ago / For eternity / You already held my hand / With a touch not from here." Shoham, who felt uncomfortable at her effusiveness, consulted a psychologist about how to avoid hurting the admired poet. At the psychologist's advice, he told Raab he had serious back problems and was therefore unable to visit her more frequently.

After her death, Shoham gave the letters she had sent him to her nephew, the writer Ehud Ben Ezer, who likes to relate that his aunt fell desperately in love with the handsome young man - the last love of this tempestuous woman. But what the letters reflect is the pain of an older woman who saw in Shoham a son figure and wanted to give him everything, both materially and spiritually, along with not a little love, but he kept evading her, and the more he evaded her, the more she wanted his presence. The meetings with him made her want to write poetry and the prose of memoirs. But when he told her that her attitude toward the landscape was erotic, she was outraged. "She didn't want an emphasis on too many elements related to sexuality," Shoham says.

When he finally had to explain why he was avoiding her, he wrote to her that it was because of his introverted character. She sent him her new poems, but also showed up in his home - without prior notification - bearing a gift, an electric heater (which Shoham still uses). He continually wrote her that he was not the person she was fantasizing about.

In a letter from 1975, when she was already 81, she implores Shoham and his wife to be her guests and offers fruits and steaks as enticements. She wanted to share with him the AKUM (Composers and Authors Society) Prize, but he declined. Her loneliness became unbearable, and in January 1977 she wrote him, "You have distanced yourself from me."

Shoham: "I don't know who I reminded her of. Maybe her husband, Yitzhak Green. Ben Ezer says that at the end of her life she went back to him, as it were. She didn't see me - she created a figure in her imagination. She knew me, but on the other hand I was someone she made up. Part of her creative output was that she created me as well. I was young, but I wasn't insensitive. From a perspective of years I can say that her encounter with me was important for her primarily because of the academic recognition. Raab never agreed to fall into step with everyone. She was willing to pay the price and did not feel

deprived, but was glad that finally an interest was being taken in her poetry."

He kept his distance from her, Shoham explains, because she developed a dependence on him. "Her expectations were beyond my capability. She was lonely. Her nephew, Ehud Ben Ezer, visited her maybe once a month, and she didn't see many people. I didn't want to break off relations with her, because I knew it was important to her and important for her writing, and I didn't want to be responsible for Hebrew literature losing a poet."

Was it that intense?

"She looked forward to the meetings eagerly. I didn't feel guilty, but I felt there was something wrong in the fact that she was seeing things from a stance of wishful thinking, and that I couldn't deliver the goods. I felt uncomfortable with her idealization of me, but she made me part of her poetic world."

You got quite a lot from this relationship - in 1988 you devoted a chapter to her in your book, "Voice and Image in Modern Hebrew Poetry."

"Yes. The encounter with her and with her world was an extraordinary experience. I had great regard for her. I don't like Ben Ezer's describing how his aunt was in love with me. She saw me as the child of her old age whom she never had. She told me once that she would forgo her poetry in return for 10 sons. Even now, I find it difficult to define the precise nature of the complex and problematic relationship. To fulfill her expectations, I would have had to be with her 24 hours a day, every day. I had to tread cautiously. On the one hand to watch over her, and on the other hand not to reach a breaking point, because she was sensitive and vulnerable and I very much wanted for her to continue writing as much as possible."

Why did you make her letters to you public?

"Ehud Ben Ezer published them when he put out a two-volume edition of her writings, prose and poetry, and in his biography of her, 'Days of Gall and Honey,' in 1998 [Am Oved; Hebrew]. I am not ashamed of my ties with her. When doing a study, all the cards have to be open. For serious researchers, every scrap of information is important. A serious researcher will turn the material into a study, while others will turn it into a telenovela."

In her last interview, in 1981, Esther Raab said: "It's disgusting, old age. No one prepares us for it. Just as my mother did not prepare me for my first menstrual period. Suddenly I was bleeding. What a trauma: This is the end. Leaving the world is to merge with nature. I am taking my leave of people and I don't care about them. With people I am in a very bad state. I am in a terrible state. And there was a time when I loved people. Now I don't want to see them. To escape from them, it's good for me to die. People are bad. People are sinners. Money and violence. There is no beauty. I escape from them to books, to birds, to trees."

Esther Raab died in September 1981, aged 87, in Tivon, and was buried in Petah Tikva. At her request, a line from the poem "Neshoret" (Fallout) was engraved on her headstone: "The clods of your soil were sweet to me, homeland, as the clouds in your skies."

There are two English-language editions of Raab's poetry, both published in Israel: "Selected Poems," edited by Ehud Ben Ezer, Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, Bnei Brak, 1996; and "Thistles: Selected Poems by Esther Raab," Translated and introduced by Harold Schimmel, Ibis Editions, Jerusalem, 2000 (see www.ibiseditions.com).

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