

## WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

# International Day of Study

## Leader's Guide: Poetry

### Introduction

Modern Hebrew poetry is part of a long literary tradition beginning three thousand years ago with instances of poetry found in the Bible and continuing to the present day. Hebrew poetry has been written in a variety of genres and in many different geographical locations throughout its history.

#### HEBREW POETRY FROM THE *HASKALAH* TO THE PRESENT

Modern Hebrew poetry began with the onset of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), which started in Germany and then spread to Eastern Europe. *Haskalah* poetry was largely didactic (educational/instructional) in its attempt to reform traditional Jewish society. The most prominent writer of this period, Y. L. Gordon (1830-93), employed biblical language and rhetoric to advance his critique of traditional Judaism and to spread “enlightened” values. Gordon’s poems dealt with themes ranging from criticism of the rabbinic establishment, and the promotion of Jewish women’s rights (he was influenced by the women’s movement in Russia in the 1860’s), to bemoaning the scarcity of Jews who could read Hebrew.

The next generation of Hebrew poetry was ushered in by Haim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934), the first “national Hebrew poet” who brought modern Hebrew poetry to a new height in terms of both form and content. Bialik freed Hebrew poetry from *Haskalah* rhetoric by making use of the many historical layers of Hebrew texts, and by writing about both national and personal subjects. His poems address the uncertain fate of the *beit midrash*, (the traditional house of study for Jewish texts) in light of western values and education, as well as more personal themes, including orphanhood (his father died when he was very young). In fact, the theme of abandonment, which resonates in his more personal poems, spoke to an age that was attempting to reconcile western values with traditional Judaism without abandoning the world of faith (a world that many felt had already abandoned them). The coalescing of personal and national themes in Bialik’s work helped define the generation in which he was writing by articulating its spiritual and social/cultural conflicts.

Since Bialik, several generations of Hebrew poets, including the ‘*moderna*’ poets in pre-state Israel, and then later the ‘statehood’ generation, continued expanding the range of poetic expression in Hebrew. Each generation has been influenced both by former generations of Hebrew poets, as well as by European and American literary influences, such as Russian and French symbolism, German expressionism and Anglo-American modernism. While Hebrew poetry continues to be written mostly in Israel, it is also written in the United States and the former Soviet Union.

# Harvesting the Land: Women's Hebrew Poetry of the Early 20th Century

## OBJECTIVES

1. The goal of this lesson is to read a Hebrew poem linked thematically to the book of *Ruth*.
2. We will look at this poem written in the 1920s in Palestine, when the concept of agriculture and the land was central — politically, socially, and culturally.

**Leader:** *What are some of the agricultural motifs that appear in the Book of Ruth?*

Possible answers include:

- The story begins with a famine that prompts Naomi and Elimelech to leave Bethlehem (which literally means “house of bread”) and travel to Moab.
- Naomi returns to Bethlehem, accompanied by Ruth, during the beginning of the barley harvest.
- Ruth meets Boaz by gleaning in his fields, as allowed by biblical laws regarding *pe'ah* and *leket*. *Pe'ah* refers to leaving the corners of a field unharvested, and *leket* signifies leaving behind individual stalks that fall from the bundles to be collected by the poor. (See *Leviticus* 19)
- Ruth comes to meet Boaz at his threshing floor (an elevated open space where the kernels of grain were winnowed, separated from the chaff).
- The book of *Ruth* is read during *Shavuot*. In the Torah, *Shavuot* is called *hag ha-katzir* (holiday of the harvest) or *yom ha-bikkurim* (day of first fruits). The holiday marks the transition between the barley harvest and the wheat harvest.
- The text is filled with agricultural terms, such as *katzir* (harvest), *kotzrim* (harvesters), *sadeh* (field), *se'orim* (barley), *hittim* (wheat).
- The story begins with famine, death and spiritual emptiness (see Naomi's account of her sorrows 1:19-21), and ends with harvest, birth, the fulfillment of biblical laws, and God's active role in shaping human history. The story shifts from famine to harvest, an agricultural motif that symbolizes and reinforces the larger theological meaning of the text.

**Leader:** *Now that we've discussed some of these agricultural themes in Ruth, and before we look at the poem, let's review some of the history of the era and the background of the poet, Rahel Bluwstein.*

*The poem was written during the period of the Third Aliyah 1919-1923 (the third wave of immigration to pre-State Israel). Because of the importance of the land and agriculture to these pioneers, they are tied to it.*

## Brief History of the Third *Aliyah*

[Rather than read this, you might want to encapsulate the points which are *italicized*.]

The Third *Aliyah* was a continuation of the Second *Aliyah* (1904-1914), that was interrupted by World War I. This latter wave of immigration was a response to the October Revolution in Russia and the pogroms that followed. It also occurred *following* the *Balfour Declaration*, which gave the immigrants the feeling that they were entitled to the land to which they were immigrating. This period saw much agricultural expansion, and the very *idea of “labor” and of “working the land” took on both national and spiritual significance*. In fact, the centrality, if not the spiritualization, of work was embedded in the double meaning of the Hebrew word *avodah*, which may mean either *worship or work*. The concept of *avodat ha-aretz (working the land) then became a national and sacred act*.

The *centrality of the land* and the importance of agricultural development were also expressed *through poems* written during this period. Periodicals were founded featuring literary texts promulgating the *ideology of labor Zionism*. This period also witnessed the emergence of several *women Hebrew poets, who chose to explore agricultural themes, among others, in their poems*.

The historical and social context of these women poets, and the ideology of labor Zionism makes the poetry, and its connection to the story of Ruth, understandable.

[Before reading each poem, give this brief introduction to the poet].

### The Poet Rahel Bluwstein

Rahel Bluwstein (1890-1931), whose poems and songs are still widely celebrated today, was one of the most popular poets and cultural figures in Israel of the Third *Aliyah*. She was born in Saratov, and spent her childhood in Poltava, Ukraine. She studied Russian in school and learned Hebrew from a private tutor. She visited Palestine in 1909 in order to work in agriculture on the Carmel, and later in the women’s farming school on the Sea of Galilee.

In 1913, Bluwstein traveled to France to study agriculture, but was unable to return to Palestine due to the outbreak of World War I. Instead she returned to Russia where her health deteriorated, and was only able to return to Palestine in 1919. Although she joined the *Degania* collective near the Galilee, she was forced to leave when she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. She moved to Tel Aviv and published many poems in the Labor movement’s daily paper, *Davar*. Her published collections include: *Safiah* (Aftergrowth) 1927, *Mineged* (At a Distance) 1930, and *Nevo* (published posthumously in 1935.)

The poem “*Safiah*” was first published in *Davar* in 1925, and in 1927 it appeared as the first poem in her initial collection of poetry with the same title. It was written during the outbreak of a famine that lasted from 1925-1927. It was received by its readers as a “labor poem” because it conformed to the ideology of the Labor movement. (This movement was dedicated to all types of work—blue collar and white collar—as the necessary and equally valuable components of a healthy, democratic society.)

## “Safiah” by ‘Rabel’ (1927)

[Either the leader or a volunteer should read the poem once in English and in Hebrew if possible.]

**Leader:** *Let’s pause at the title. It’s translated as ‘aftergrowth’ but the Hebrew word, safiah, is rich with resonance and biblical echo. This word occurs only twice in the Torah, in Leviticus 25:5 and 11, in a passage about agricultural laws. Safiah describes the growth from spilled kernels left on the ground after a harvest. Safiah is then what springs up in the second year by surprise, not from grain that is sown but from grain that is left from a harvest. In the biblical passage in Leviticus, we are commanded to let the land lie fallow and not harvest even the safiah, that which has sprung up by chance.*

**Question for Discussion:** *This concept is one with lots of metaphoric possibilities. Can you think of some?*

- What in our lives that seems to be left over, discarded, unusable has later taken root and grown, even flourished? What surprises have we had from those things that we had given up on, that we had abandoned?
- *Safiah* contains in it the possibility of surprise and nourishment from what we cast aside. It “grows of itself,” unhelped but also unhindered. What is *safiah* for you as an individual, for us as Jews?

[Leader splits participants into smaller groups, and ask them to discuss the following questions. You may want to prepare handouts with the questions to distribute to each group. Please note that the answers provided are meant to be a general guide only. Participants should be encouraged to come up with their own original and creative readings.]

**Discussion Question:** *Who is the speaker in the poem?* [Allow the groups several minutes to discuss. Then reassemble the group.]

**Leader:** *In stanza one, it seems that a laborer is describing working the land. “I did not plow, etc.” (We do not know the gender of the speaker yet.) What happens in the second stanza? By the time the reader reaches the middle of the second stanza, terms such as “the old” (me’az) and “long ago” (mikedem) suggest the ancient, even biblical past.*

**Leader:** *Now read the poem a second time, and this time as if the land itself is the speaker. What clues are there in the poem that the land is speaking?*

- “they have remembered me”
- “burst forth the secret way in me to grow”

**Leader:** *Does that change the meaning of the poem for you?*

**Leader:** *There are a number of biblical intertexts (a reference, key word or direct citation from the Bible) in this poem. Let's look at them.*

- The word *safiah* also appears in the book of *Kings*. Here this word is also accompanied by the very last word of our poem, *sachish*, and the last line of the poem (*tochlu safiah ve af sachish*—eat what grows of itself and what springs from that) is a near citation of the biblical phrase (*achol hashana safiah ovashana hashanit sachish*):

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And this is the sign for you. *This year you eat what grows of itself (safiah) and next year what springs from that (sachish); and in the third year, sow and reap, and plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*” 2 Kings 19:29-30

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The appearance of this intertext might be interpreted in different ways.

- On the one hand, it refers to the prophecy of Isaiah to King Hezekiah that after some time of eating *safiah* and *sachish*, the land will become fertile again, as is promised in these verses in *Kings*.
- Could it be speaking to the famine of 1925-27?
- This might refer to some kind of national redemption that living on the soil of the land of Israel will bring about.
- At the same time, the biblical passages state that after these periods of *safiah* and *sachish*, the people of Israel will begin to actively work the land, to sow, reap and plant vineyards. And, by working the land, the people of Israel themselves will grow roots and prosper.

**Leader:** The biblical assurance that “in the third year you will sow and reap” is omitted in the poem itself but suggested by the soft echo of this biblical intertext, perhaps a note of hope for redemption in a time the famine.

In the biblical prophecy working the land is central to national prosperity, but in Rahel’s poem, no work is being done. There is therefore an ironic tension between the biblical passage and the poem.

**Discussion Question:** *In what way is Ruth, herself, “safiah”?*

**Other biblical intertexts include:**

- The word “*dardar*” at the end of line 4, translated as “thorn,” appears in *Genesis* 3:18, when Adam and Eve are punished for eating from the tree of good and evil. Adam’s punishment requires him to work the land “*with the sweat of his brow.*” The text states: “*in sorrow you will eat from the land all the days of your life; thorns and thistles [dardar] will be brought forth to you...*” Once again there is an allusion to work, this time by evoking the biblical passage where the notion of work is introduced to humanity.
- Verb “*pakad*” (remember) that appears in line 7 evokes both *Genesis* 21:1 where God remembers Sarah and sends a messenger to tell her that she will give birth, even though she is past childbearing age. This ties in with the theme of unexpected growth and fertility de-

scribed in these lines of the poem. The verb “*pakad*” also appears in the book of *Ruth*, when God “remembers” Bethlehem, and ends the famine.

•Variation of the terms “*kitzurim*” (harvested) and “*bitay hadvab*” (wheat of joy), are also found in the book of *Ruth* (there is a reference to wheat, and not explicitly “wheat of joy”). These terms evoke the biblical scene and agricultural cycle described in the book of *Ruth*. While the poem may not explicitly refer to the book of *Ruth* here, the memory of the land of biblical times is evoked.

**Leader:** *What do you make of the speaker’s repeated claim in stanza one that she has not worked the land? Is this a positive or negative statement/confession?*

This question is somewhat open; perhaps the poem offers the possibility that work is not required for redemption. Given the cultural climate of labor Zionism in which the poem was written, this would be a surprising notion. Is this the time when the land itself stops producing?

**Leader:** *How and when do we explicitly know the gender of the speaker?*

The fact that the speaker in the poem is female is introduced in the second to the last line of the poem, when she speaks in the first person present, and says: “*ani zocheret*” (I remember). In Hebrew the gender of a first-person speaker is only evident when speaking in the present tense. The first person future and past tense are conjugated the same for both men and women. This might lead to a discussion of the importance of gender in the poem: why is it introduced only at the end? Is the English translation of the poem able to convey the speaker’s femininity? Where and how?

**Leader:** *Does knowing about the famine of 1925-27 influence your interpretation of the poem?*

The fact is that the poem was written during a famine. The many references to the land likewise suggest the agricultural interests of the time Rahel was writing. Be careful, though, not to reduce Rahel’s work to autobiography since it is a highly crafted poem, resonant with images and symbolism, clearly intended to be a literary work.

**Leader:** *What do you make of the last couplet (two lines) of the poem? How does it refer to 2 Kings 19:29-30?*

Refer again to the discussion of “*safiah*” and “*sachish*” above. It would be good to reinforce this question, since the poem ends with this almost direct biblical citation. You will eat what springs from discarded kernels (*safiah*) and what springs from that (*sachish*), even the discarded can yield up nourishment again and again. There is a hopefulness in this poem.

**Leader:** *Does the poem describe some sort of literal and/or metaphorical emptiness or fullness? Do you think the poem has a spiritual or theological message? Is there a connection here to the message or themes in *Ruth*?*

### *Interpretation of Safiah*

This poem is evocative of the book of *Ruth* through its use of biblical language and imagery. Specific words appear from *Ruth*, and in the second stanza, the poem refers to the ancient landscape of harvest time that appears in biblical literature, such as the book of *Ruth*. The fact that the poem was written during a time of famine likewise ties these two texts together. Just as the famine in the biblical story ends miraculously, as God remembers Bethlehem, the poem likewise depicts agricultural prosperity as a wondrous and inexplicable event that is not dependent on human labor or the earth itself. The miraculous nature of agricultural prosperity depicted in the poem is especially striking given the ideological commitment to work that was dominant during the Third *Aliyah*. For while the poem refers to biblical passages that acknowledge the importance of labor (references in *Genesis* and *2 Kings*) the poem seems to reject this model in favor of God's intervention and plan.

**Leader:** *What other interpretations do you see in this poem?*