

To My Land (*El Artzi*)
By Rachel Bluwstein

I have not sung to you, my land
Nor have I glorified your name
Through deeds of heroism,
With the spoils of war:
Only a tree -- have my hands planted
Along the quiet shores of the Jordan.
Only a path -- have my feet conquered (trodden)
Over the surface of the fields.
Indeed, it is very meager
I know this, mother,
Indeed it is very meager
The offering of your daughter;
Only the sound of the shout of joy
On the day that the light shines,
Only crying in secret
For your suffering.

1926 Tel Aviv

Rachel Bluwstein (1890-1931): Founding Mother of Modern Hebrew Poetry

Into the twentieth century, Jewish poetry, like most other Jewish writings, was the domain of men. From the Renaissance through the time of the flowering of modern Hebrew poetry – that produced Bialik and Tchernichowsky – no female poets emerged within a written medium that was nevertheless highly popular with women. It was only in the 1920s that women began to write serious poetry, with intellectual intent, in Hebrew. Rachel Bluwstein, born in Russia in 1890 – one of the few Jewish women known by just her first name (like Golda or Mathilde) -- is rightfully considered the “founding mother” of modern Hebrew poetry.

In 1910, Rachel and her sister Shoshana immigrated to Palestine where she began working in agriculture. She joined *Kevutzat Deganyah*, where, in 1920, she published her first Hebrew poem in the prestigious literary journal *HaShiloach*. It was not only the first poem written by a woman to be published in the journal since its creation, but was the first poem by a professed woman poet in modern Hebrew poetry.

Like other Zionist poets, Rachel tied her love of nature to the return to the Land of Israel where religion, per se, was abandoned, but the secularized product was infused with spirituality.

Discussion Questions:

What descriptive words does Rachel employ in this poem? What images do they conjure?

What is Rachel's heroic deed?

How does this deed complement or conflict with traditional notions of heroism?

- Past glorifications were of military (or intellectual) heroes (biblical heroes: Moses, Joshua, Samson, David, Bar Kochba, rabbinic heroes, spiritual leaders, etc.) Eastern Europe, where Rachel was born, also maintained this collective memory of heroism long in the past.
- However, heroism to the *chaluzim* (pioneers) was in the physical reclamation of the land, making it habitable and able to provide nourishment, pleasure and shade

How do you regard this poem in light of the history of modern Israel?