

The primary meaning demands a period after the word "bones," with "I'm the King's son" as a separate sentence. But the absence of punctuation promotes, as an undercurrent of meaning, the structure "Thus in my bones I'm the King's son," where the colloquial meaning of the expression "in my bones" (in the sense of "with instinctive certainty") contributes an extra dimension to the overall concept of the internalizing and individualizing of religious community-categories.

It is interesting that in this latest version of the poem, Menashe has substituted "domain" for "terrain" in the penultimate line. A preoccupation with death has always been characteristic of Menashe, as of all romantic poets, for whom the individual life assumes a terrifying importance. That this world has become not merely death's "terrain" (his sphere of operation) but his "domain" (his sphere of rule) shows a sharpening of this preoccupation, and a heightening of the contrast between the holiness of life and its inevitable negation. In traditional religion, as opposed to its humanistic sublimation, death too becomes part of the "procession."

Those who have followed Menashe's poetic development will turn with particular interest to the section "Uncollected Poems," hitherto available only in scattered periodicals. Almost immediately we come across the poem "Memento Mori":

This skull instructs

Me now to probe
The socket bone
Around my eyes
To test the nose
Bone underlies
To hold my breath
To make no bones
About the dead

This poem is typical of Menashe's method, which is to drop an observation into our minds like a pebble whose ripples gradually fill the whole pool. Seeing a skull makes the poet aware of the skull beneath his own face, and to become aware of the miracle of breath that differentiates him from the dead. Meanings proliferate. He is prompted to "hold his breath" — to stop breathing — but this might also mean to retain his breath of life as long as possible. He is instructed also to "make no bones/About the dead," which might mean not to make too much fuss about death, or not to underestimate death, or delude himself about its inevitability, but, in any case, is a sardonic play on the expression "to make no bones" — we may try to cope with the fact of death and somehow explain it away, but we cannot really "make no bones" of death, because its bones are all around us, even underlying our living flesh.

There are metaphysical conceits here that might have prompted John Donne to write a long poem, but Menashe sketches them in so lightly that they seem to engage us on a subliminal, rather than a conscious, level — like a message flashed on a screen for a second. Like the ambiguous title, "Memento Mori," the poem tells us both to concentrate

on life, because death will come all too soon, and to concentrate on death, because it is the underlying reality. This poem even prompted me to look again at the line about bones in "The shrine whose shape I am," and to see in it the chilling meaning that only "in my bones" am I "the King's son" — i.e., that our bones, rather than our flesh, make us divine. (Menashe's use of the image of bones may be the key to his poetry.)

What does this mean? Possibly that structure, not ornament, is the essence of art, which alone confers immortality. If so, this may be the meaning of the saying of Menashe's mother, which he is fond of quoting (and even includes in this collection as a complete poem): "When one sees the tree in leaf one thinks the beauty of the tree is in its leaves, and then one sees the bare tree." For leaves, read "flesh."

Out of the wealth of poems in this collection I have dwelled on only two, but this is a poet who demands our full attention. While one can make generalizations about his work, his essence lies in the contemplation of the particular. He is a true poet of such an individual kind that he defies categorization and cannot be fitted into any current "school." This makes his vision all the more essential for those struggling to retain a sense of meaning and sanctity in a disenchanting world. ■

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All About Eve

DAVID H. HIRSCH

Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition, by Nehama Aschkenasy. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 269 pp. + xv., \$29.95.

In an age of hype, authors and publishers regularly make exaggera-

ted claims for their books. Titles, bookjackets, and prefaces are freely given to overstatement. But *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* presents the unusual phenomenon of a title that *understates* the scope of the book.

Much more than a study in "femi-

nine images in Hebraic literary tradition," the book is a dazzling example of comparative literary analysis at its best. Aschkenasy, director of the Judaic Studies program at the University of Connecticut, Stamford, skillfully guides the reader through the biblical texts themselves (i.e., from Genesis through the historical books, as in the examination of the parallels and differences between the two rape stories of Dinah, in Genesis 34, and of Tamar in II Samuel 13); the rabbinical com-

mentaries on the biblical texts; the responses of later Hebrew writers (medieval through modern Israeli) to the biblical and midrashic texts; and hints suggestively at the possibilities of an excursion through European non-Hebrew writings which adapt biblical archetypes of the female from various translations of the Bible.

While the motif of "feminine images" remains the central focus of Aschkenasy's study, it is subordinated to the analysis of literary texts. The reader does not doubt for a moment that the beauty and power of the literature is of primary importance; it is clear that the author's commitment is to literature and that she uses the feminist perspective to uncover hitherto unperceived riches in the texts themselves.

Aschkenasy's insights and revelations are so abundant that a reviewer looking for examples of the author's method is faced with an embarrassment of riches. As a consequence, it might be advisable to start at the beginning: the Adam and Eve story that has been so influential in shaping Western thinking about women and about the relations between the sexes. Reading the highly compressed tale "dramatically," Aschkenasy contends that the biblical narrative itself is non-sexist, and that

The polarity created in this story between Adam and Eve is not between good and evil, morality and sinfulness, but rather between a passive, lackluster personality on the one hand [Adam], and an intellectually curious, aggressive individual [Eve], on the other. Interestingly, when Adam tries to shake off his responsibility for the violation of God's law, he excuses himself by claiming that Eve 'gave' him the fruit, using the verb from the stem *ntn*, which implies the mechanical way in which he acted.

Moving on to the "rabbinic exegetes and storytellers," Aschkenasy demonstrates how they introduced their own "patriarchal norms" into their readings of the Garden of Eden story. Aschkenasy's guided tour is too complicated to duplicate in detail here, but her provocative conclusion is worth citing: "The biblical Eve, then, may be seen as epitomizing the human predicament in her wish to transcend her limitations and expand her hori-

zons. The midrashic Eve [who becomes the standard Eve of western culture, including Milton's *Paradise Lost*], on the other hand, is a mundane housewife, frivolous and jealous, who needs man's wise guidance and often tries his immense patience."

After a brief detour into a consideration of the "Kabbalistic figure of Lilith, the winged she-demon," Aschkenasy moves on to "modern incarnations" of both Eve and her fully demonized counterpart in two works by S.Y. Agnon, and in works by two later Israeli writers, Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua. Of the three Israeli writers discussed in this chapter, Agnon is the one who is treated at greatest length. In fact, detailed discussions of Agnon's works run through the entire text, becoming almost as strong a unifying thread as the motif of "feminine images" itself. Since Agnon is one of the acknowledged giants of modern Hebrew literature, his prominence in this book should come as no surprise. He surfaces repeatedly as the writer whose genius enabled him to link the rebirth of Hebrew as a living language to its complex roots in biblical, midrashic, and Enlightenment Hebrew. Aschkenasy shows better than any previous critic I know of writing in English the way in which Agnon fused the legal-historical-metaphorical-mystical Hebrew of the Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah, and Enlightenment with the reborn secularized language that had to carry the freight of "mimesis," the burden of "picturing" *shtetl*, *Yishuv*, and Israeli life.

Agnon's presence here is a bonus for the lay reader as well as the scholar, for the Agnon materials that are woven through Aschkenasy's study amount to a brilliant little book within a book. Readers of *Eve's Journey* who are not familiar with Agnon's fiction will undoubtedly be tempted to dip into the works of the Israeli master after reading what Aschkenasy has to say about him. Casual readers of Agnon, as well as experts, will surely feel a desire to re-read him, for in a sense it is Aschkenasy's penetrating understanding of Agnon's genius that enables her to illuminate the full

range of Hebrew literature, from the Bible to the present.

In one other respect the title *Eve's Journey* is an understatement; Eve is not the only female archetype whose wanderings are studied here. A female archetype whose peregrinations are perhaps as fascinating as Eve's is the protagonist of a biblical-Hebraic cluster that Aschkenasy calls "The Dinah Chain of Tales." The biblical Dinah story, as Aschkenasy makes clear, is elliptical and enigmatic. The female victim, as she points out, has no voice; her father seems to be angry with her, while her brothers, who are more sympathetic than her father, are mainly concerned with revenge and with the family's honor. Aschkenasy demonstrates that the biblical narrator's insensitivity to the woman's predicament converts what should have been a woman's story into a story about men and power, men and land. Her close reading reveals that the story veers away from the interesting character of Dinah to focus on the tensions in Jacob's family and on the conflict between the Israelite nomads and the indigenous residents of the land. Thus, for the biblical writers, the rape of the woman becomes important only as a symbol of the power struggle in the male community.

Aschkenasy goes on to show how the rabbinical treatment of the biblical story of Dinah reveals not only the rabbinical exegetes' preoccupation with the problems of their own times, but also an ingrained universal male tendency to blame the raped woman by suggesting that she probably "asked for it." The implication that the woman may have cooperated with her victimizer, which is a sub-layer in the biblical story, is openly articulated by the Midrash sages, who blame the woman entirely. As the Dinah figure enters into Medieval literature, there is no longer any doubt about her culpability; she is simply (and simplistically) perceived as a "whore."

This medieval bias is then corrected in modern Hebrew literature. Saul Tchernichovsky, re-writing the biblical tale from a new perspective, gives Dinah the voice denied her in the early sources, making her the pivotal character in his poem, "The Dinah Affair." Agnon's Dinah, in

the story "The Doctor's Divorce," is a modern woman who is perceived as both guilty and innocent by her husband; the man in the modern tale is thus re-immersed in the tradition of duality of the woman Dinah, whose name, it may now be perceived, has become a code name alerting the reader to an ambivalence toward the female.

Although Aschkenasy is often forced to deal with subtle, complex,

and somewhat unfamiliar Judaic concepts, and though she must often discuss "exotic" texts by writers not well known in the English-speaking world, such as Y.A. Gordon, Dvorah Baron, Leah Goldberg, and Saul Tchernichovsky, among others, she is never esoteric or obscure. She fuses lucid plot summaries into her discussions, so that even the non-Hebrew reader can get a sense of what the literature is about, and can follow her analyses

and understand her arguments without difficulty.

All in all, this is a remarkable book that makes Hebrew literary works available to the English reader at the same time that it sets a new standard for English criticism of Hebrew literature. ■

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A Door to the Zohar

YAACOV LURIA

Zohar, The Book of Enlightenment, by Daniel Chanan Matt. New York: Paulist Press. 320 pp., hardcover \$12.95, paperback \$9.95.

Judaism's mystic masterpiece, the Zohar, is in its entirety over 2000 pages of closely printed Aramaic. Daniel Chanan Matt of the University of California at Berkeley has, in *Zohar, The Book of Enlightenment*, distilled its essence in two percent of the original text superbly retranslated. Zohar is one of seven important Jewish texts included in the series *The Classics of Western Spirituality* published by Paulist Press, a Roman Catholic organization.

Matt's book is an opening of a door, an invitation to come in and see more. No background in Kabbalah is necessary because he supplements his text with explanatory notes.

The mysteries of the Zohar used to begin with a question about its authorship. Today, except for the most rigid traditionalists, scholars agree that it was set down between approximately 1280 and 1286 by a Spanish Jew named Moses ben Shemtov de Léon. Perhaps to spur the demand for his book, de Léon insisted that he had merely discovered a work that had been written more than 1000 years before by the celebrated Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai.

The shape of the Zohar is similar to that of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. A handful of scholars, including the great Rabbi Shimon himself, discuss the hidden themes of the Torah

while they amble through the hills of Galilee. They agree at the outset that their aim is to ferret out truth: "As wine must sit in a jar, so Torah must sit in this garment. So look only at what is under the garment. . . ." They begin at *Genesis* and eventually arrive at *Deuteronomy*.

It is a pleasant, unhurried journey, almost a gentleman's fox hunt with wisdom as the quarry. The verse, "God said, Let there be light. And there was light" evokes luminous reflections on light in all its connotations — physical, spiritual, moral, religious. "Male and female He created them" leads to the conclusion that "The Blessed Holy One does not place His abode in any place where male and female are not found together . . . A human being is only called Adam when male and female are as one." God's command to Abraham to leave the comfort of home and family becomes a challenge to spiritual rebirth. Dreams — like Joseph's — become the first level of aspiration towards prophetic vision.

Since not a word, or even a letter, in Scripture is random, "The days of Israel came near to die" inspires a meditation on time as a spiritual dimension. Manna is the true soul food — the exaltation that comes from study of Torah, the reward of true scholars. A verse in *Leviticus* 26, "I will place my *mishkan* in your midst," takes flight and soars. *Mishkan* and *Shekhinah*, both derived from the Hebrew word for "dwell,"

are connected with the constancy of God's concern even when His children suffer in exile.

The Zohar is more than midrash, more than homiletics, more than allegory. It prefers intuition to intellect: "A little bit of foolishness reveals the sublime glory of wisdom better than any other way in the world." It scorns mundane study, asserting "the grave of Moses is Mishnah." By leaps of imagination it takes us into realms that transcend the insights of rational scholars.

Let a parable told by an old donkey driver, whom the questing kabbalists meet on their journey, serve as an example of the treasures strewn prodigally through the Zohar. The old fellow, a marvelous wise naïf, hints that their erudition — because it relies on reason — cannot discover the elusive truth of Torah. The Torah is

a lovely princess, beautiful in every way and hidden deep within her palace. She has one lover, unknown to anyone; he is hidden too . . . She opens a little window in her hidden palace and reveals her face to her lover, then swiftly withdraws . . . His heart and his soul and everything within him flow out to her. And he knows that out of love for him she revealed herself for one moment to awaken love in him . . . Once he has grown accustomed to her, she reveals herself face to face and tells him all her hidden secrets . . . since primordial days secreted in her heart.