

# A Forgotten Poet of the Bible

*Kathryn Hellerstein*

SOME YEARS AGO I DISCOVERED A COPY OF ROZA Yakubovitsh's first book, *Mayne Gezangen (My Songs)*, in the YIVO library. There seem to be no other extant copies of this slender volume; although its author had published a fair amount in Poland during her lifetime, she fell into obscurity after the Second World War. I became intrigued with Yakubovitsh because a number of her poems focused on biblical women, a topic that Yiddish poets seldom addressed in the 1920s, when socialist, nationalist, and modernist themes prevailed. Only a decade later, in the mid-1930s, did another Yiddish poet, Itzik Manger, perhaps aware of Yakubovitsh's biblical monologues, take up the topic of biblical stories. But while Manger's *Khumesh Lider (Torah Poems)* and *Megillah Lider (Megillah Poems)* made him famous, Yakubovitsh remained unknown.

Roza Yakubovitsh (1889-1942) was born in the town of Prashnits, in the Plotsker region of Poland. Her father, Dov-Ber Groybart, was the rabbi in Shedlets and Bendin, where she was educated in both Russian and Polish schools, as well as in Hebrew. She married and settled in the town of Kalish, where she lived, maintaining her observant Judaism, until the Second World War. She published her first article ("Ertsiung") and a poem under the pseudonym of Rozalye Yakubson in 1908. I.L. Peretz published another of her poems, "Tsu mayn tatn," in his anthology, *Yudish* (Warsaw, 1910). She later contributed poems, novellas, and articles to over a dozen publications. *Mayne Gezangen* was published in 1924 but a later collection of her poems, *Lider tsu God (Songs to God)* was lost during the Second World War. When the Germans took Kalish, she fled to Lodz and lived with another Yiddish poet, Miriam Ulinover. Later, she went to Warsaw, where she was murdered in the ghetto.

The poem published in this issue of *Kerem*, “*Shulames*” (Shulamit), is one of Yakubovitch’s six dramatic monologues in the voices of biblical women. In these poems, Yakubovitch transforms the women of the Bible from minor characters into major dramatic figures with whom a modern reader can identify. In “*Shulames*” Yakubovitch paraphrases the biblical text of the Song of Songs from the point of view of the woman lover in the biblical story. By foregrounding the woman’s voice, Yakubovitch tells a modern story about a woman in love. But Yakubovitch’s Yiddish poem responds not only to the Hebrew Bible. It also and perhaps primarily invokes the midrashic interpretations of the biblical book, which the poet most likely knew through the Yiddish translations and adaptations in the *Tsenerene*. This so-called “women’s Bible,” originally published in the 17th century, remained a best-seller in Ashkenaz through the early 20th century.

In Yakubovitch’s poem, the speaker, Shulames, dreams of her lover, who calls to her, inviting her, in the imagery of Song of Songs 2:12, to “come / Into the field; our garden blooms” (lines 9-10). But this lover, unlike the biblical one, is “full of regret,” and his absence disrupts the order of Shulames’ world — “At night, a sunrise dazzled me” (13) — and disturbs her with the knowledge that “He’s gone, your friend, he’s gone...” (16).

As in Song of Songs 3:1-3, Shulames wanders in the night to seek her lover, and is reprimanded by “two angry watchmen” who shout, “Girl! / Where are you going, you?” (19-20). In Song of Songs 3:4, the speaker “found the one whom my soul loves; I held him and would not let him go...” However, in Yakubovitch’s poem, Shulames does not find her beloved, and continues to wander, asking anxiously: “Who of you has seen my friend?” (21).

With these questions, she becomes increasingly desperate and expresses her longing and anxiety by direct and indirect quotations from the Song of Songs (3:3, 5:7, 5:8 4:13, 7:12, etc.), culminating in similes and metaphors that allude to the story of Moses in Exodus — the Burning Bush and the great sea that can be crossed against all odds (33-36). Eventually, the lover arrives, and Shulames rejoices. In Yakubovitch’s poem, however, that reunion neither fulfills nor invokes love. Instead, Yakubovitch’s poem ends with Shulames’ warning to her women friends (51): “You must not arouse love!” (56) This last line alludes to Song of Songs 8:4 — “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, why should you awaken or stir up love, until it please?” Significantly, Yakubovitch incorporates the midrashic glosses on the

next line (“Under the apple tree I roused you; It was there your mother conceived you...” Song of Songs 8:5), but changes the rabbinic warning against adultery and Eve’s childbirth pangs into a warning about romantic love itself. By revising rabbinic concerns about women’s sexual and reproductive lives into a statement about romantic and erotic love, Yakubovitsh sounds a note of rebellion against the traditional Jewish milieu in which she lived.

The allusion to the Song of Songs in lines 56-59 completely changes the biblical text. Sexual love replaces God: It possesses “the fragrance of God’s name” and is as dangerous as the divinity, for it burns “mightily and more/ Like the distant hurricane/Like life and like death!” And of course it’s even more complicated, because God does not appear in the Song of Songs at all. So here, Yakubovitsh introduces God into the biblical story and displaces him at the same time.

Traditional interpretations of the Song of Songs allegorize the erotic poem — the woman seeking her beloved represents the Children of Israel longing for God. But by comparing love to “the Burning Bush,” which burns without being consumed, Yakubovitsh intensifies Shulames’ sexual desire and transforms the biblical poem into an anthem to a modern woman’s passion.

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# Shulames

*Roza Yakubovitch*

*Translated by Kathryn Hellerstein*

1 I sleep, and my heart awakes in me...  
 I hear your voice full of regret,  
 It sounds lovely to me, like a harp song,  
 It calls me to your door...

5 It sings: Winter has already passed,  
 The flood of rain has ceased,  
 Once again, the fig tree is in bloom  
 With blossoms of all kinds.—

Arise, my quiet swallow, come  
 10 Into the field; our garden blooms;  
 The turtledove arrives  
 And fills our land with song.

At night, a sunrise dazzled me  
 And made my walls turn red,  
 15 Whispering in secrecy:  
 He's gone, your friend, he's gone ...

My restless heart led me around  
 The whole night through ...  
 Two angry watchmen shouted, "Girl!  
 20 Where are you going, you?"

“Who of you has seen my friend?  
 When he arrives — the whole world shines,  
 Streaked red and fresh with dawn.  
 With loins wonderfully formed,  
 25 And from his mouth, each breath is light,  
 His face, forever young, is crowned  
 With every woman’s love,  
 His curls are full of dew.”

The royal city is still asleep...  
 30 I call to my friend, I swear to God:  
 Whoever knows him, tell him that  
 I’m sick with longing, that I’m sorry,  
 And tell him, that my love is burning  
 Desolate as the Burning Bush,  
 35 There is no sea so great  
 I cannot cross!

\* \* \*

At night, in silent moonbeams,  
 I bathed in the wellspring  
 In order to find favor  
 40 With you, oh, my king!  
 With myrrh and pomegranate wreath  
 I ornament my brow —  
 Now the gleam of passion  
 Darkens beneath my braids...

45 He comes, leaping from mountains,  
 Voice ringing, like David’s song;  
 A wind throws open my door —  
 It is my beloved’s hand —

I am my friend's, and his desire  
50 Belongs to me, only to me.

Be quiet, my friends, I swear  
To you, daughters of the land,  
By the stag in the field and the young hind,  
By the wellspring's gush and the wind of the steppes  
55 Rising from all four corners of the world:  
You must not arouse love!

Love has the fragrance of God's name  
And burns on mightily and more,  
Like the distant hurricane,  
60 Like life and like death!

# שולמית

## ראזא יאקובאָוויטש

- 1 ...איך שלאָף און ס'וואַכט מיין האַרץ אין מיר...  
איך הער דיין שטים פֿון באַרג שניר.  
זי קלינגט מיר שיין, ווי האַרפֿן שיר,  
זי רופֿט מיך פֿאַר מיין טיר...
- 5 זי זינגט: פֿאַרביי דער ווינטער שוין,  
ס'האַט אויפֿגעהערט דער רעגנשטרומים  
און ס'בליט אויפֿסניי דער פּייגנבוים  
מיט בליטן אַלערהאַנט.
- 10 שטיי אויף מיין שטילן שוואַלב, קום מיט  
אין פֿעלד, וווּ אונזער גאַרטן בליט,  
די טורקלטיוב איז מיט איר ליד  
שוין דאָ אין אונזער לאַנד.
- 15 ס'האַט מיך ביי נאַכט אַ זון געבלענדט.  
גערויטלט זיך אויף מיניע ווענט,  
ווי ז'וואַלט מיר אָנגעטרויט אַ סוד:  
ער גייט, דיין פֿריינט, ער גייט...
- ס'האַט מיך ביי נאַכט אָן האַלט, אָן רו  
געפֿירט מיין האַרץ ... נאָר וועכטער צוויי

צעכעסן זיך: וווהין, וווהין,  
 דו שיינע יונג־פֿרוי, דו?

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"האַט ווער פֿון איך געזען מיין פֿרײַנט?  
 ער קומט – ווי אַלץ וואָלט אויפֿגעשײַנט  
 מיט פֿאַסן פֿרישן מאָרגנרויט?  
 די לענדען וווּנדערבאַר געבויט,  
 און יעדער הויך פֿון מויל איז ליכט  
 געקרוינט זײַן אייביק-יונג געזיכט  
 מיט ליבשאַפֿט פֿון יעטוועדער פֿרוי  
 די לאַקן פֿול מיט טוי?"

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נאָך שלאָפֿט די קעניגלעכע שטאָט...  
 איך רוף מיין פֿרײַנט, איך באַשווער בײַ גאָט:  
 ווער ס'ווייס אים, זאָגט, אַז איך בין קראַנק  
 פֿאַר בענקשאַפֿט, וואָס עס איז מיר באַנג,  
 און זאָגט אים אַז אין וויסטעני  
 ברענט מיין ליבע, ווי דער סנה,  
 און קיין ים, ר'זאַל זײַן ווי גרויס  
 קען איך נישט קומען בײַ!

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בײַ נאַכט ביים שטילן לבנה-שטראַל,  
 האָב איך געבאָדן מיד אין קוואַל,  
 כדי איך זאָל געפֿינען חן  
 בײַ דיר, אָ קעניג מיין!  
 מיט מור און מיט גראַנאַטן-קראַנץ  
 האָב איך מיין שטערן אויסגעצירט –  
 איצט טונקלט זיך דער הייסער גלאַנץ  
 פֿון אונטער מײַנע צעפֿ אַפֿיר...

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45 ער קומט, ער שפרינגט פֿון באַרג שניר,  
זיין שטימע קלינגט, ווי דודס שיר;  
אַ ווינט האָט אויפֿגעפראַלט מיין טיר -  
עס איז מיין ליבסטנס האַנט ---

איך בין מיין פֿריינטס, און זיין באַגער  
געהער נאָר בלויז צו מיר, צו מיר --- 50

שטילער, פֿריינדינס, איך באַשווער  
איך, טעכטער פֿונעם לאַנד,  
ביים הירש פֿון פֿעלד און יונגן אינד,  
ביים קוואַל-גערויש און סטעפֿן-ווינט,  
וואָס שטייט איצט אויף פֿון זייטן פֿיר:  
נישט וועקט די ליבע, איר! 55

די ליבע שמעקט, ווי גאטס שם  
און ברענט נאָך מעכטיקער און מיין,  
ווי דער אַרקאָן, אונגענדלעך ווייט,  
ווי לעבן און ווי טויט!... 60

