



INTIMATIONS OF DIFFERENCE: DVORA BARON IN THE MODERN HEBREW RENAISSANCE

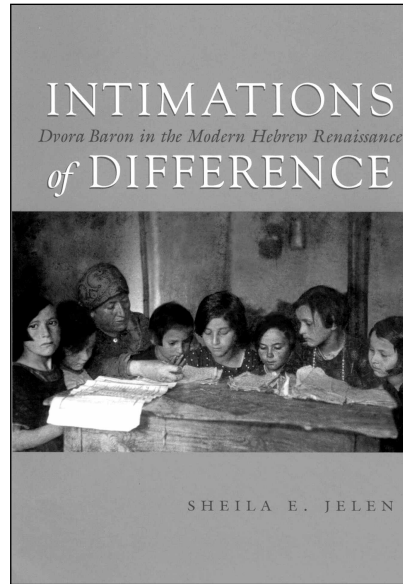
Sheila E. Jelen. Syracuse University Press, 2007. 240 pp.

Reviewed by Faith Jones

There is something quite irritating about the way these younger Jewish Studies scholars toss off interesting, innovative ideas as if they grew on trees. And particularly when they make a point that clarifies something that has been stumping you for quite a while simply as background information to support their main point, which is... **yet another** brilliant insight. They seem unable to stop re-writing and revising what we think we know, challenging suppositions and accepted wisdom, and generally being provocative. What the hell is the matter with them?

The immediate case in point which has stirred my ire is *Intimations of Difference: Dvora Baron in the Modern Hebrew Renaissance* by Sheila Jelen. Before we're even out of the introduction Jelen illuminates the context she's talking about with a few choice observations. Dvora Baron (1887-1956) is the only woman among the canonical writers in the first few decades of modern Hebrew literature. Jelen clarifies that she was not, as is often supposed, the first woman to write creative literature in modern Hebrew: she is the one who was adopted and recognized by her male peers, although that relationship was less than equal.

The modern Hebrew renaissance, Jelen tells us, was more about refusing assimilation and



renewing a tradition than about breaking with it. The birth of modern Hebrew “depended on young men, disillusioned with rabbinic systems of knowledge, yet unwilling to break from the wealth of its language, its imagery, its discursive breadth, and its history. Even so, the history of the modern Hebrew renaissance is generally told as a tale of rupture, of apostasy, of departures from the traditional Jewish home and the yeshiva. This narrative of fissure has long impeded the ability of critics to discern the traditionalism inherent in the movement.”

Well, that does indeed explain a lot. I have in fact many times wondered how a movement which wanted to break with tradition managed to be so backwards with regards to women (treating real women writers as well as female characters in male writings as expendable appendages). But tradition is trickier than we think. It holds onto us at the very moment we think we are throwing it off. Women, Jelen explains a few pages later, were to be taught Hebrew, according to the ideology

of the Hebrew renaissance, to make them suitable partners for men emerging from this movement. Since it was never about women's intellectual lives or desires, and since the education of women provoked other anxieties regarding the relations of the sexes, Hebrew education of women was never undertaken seriously or consistently.

We're still not out of the introduction, and if I had read no further in this book I would have already gotten my money's worth. But what about the book's real subject, Dvora Baron? There has been some writing in English about Baron, but not that much has focused on her literature. Her fascinating but frustratingly unknowable personal life has been the object of much speculation. Baron wrote in Yiddish early on, then in Hebrew; moved to Palestine in 1910; took to her bed in 1923 and did not emerge from it until her death in 1956. Any one of these facts would be interesting, but together they are irresistible, except that Baron resists us by having destroyed any of her personal papers that would help explain them. Jelen devotes only a few pages to the biographical details of Baron's life and focuses on the literature she produced. Again, Jelen is hampered by Baron's habit of destroying drafts and writing notes. That leaves us with exactly one avenue to understand this writer: the works as published.

Jelen engages in close readings of numerous stories, pointing out places where Baron is clearly in dialogue with the male writers of her era. Rejecting the tendency of male writers newly arrived in Palestine to set their works in the emerging Jewish community there, Baron set most of her works in the *shtetl*, although many reference individuals making *aliyah* or otherwise engaged with Hebrew nation-building. Critics of her era found her *shtetl* settings unfortunate, even while they acknowledged her works to be well-written. They forgave her, in general, because they felt the

FAITH JONES recently returned to her home town of Vancouver, where she is a librarian and teaches library science. She is part of a three-person collective that translates the poetic works of Celia Dropkin into English, and serves as Yiddish editor for *Bridges: a Jewish Feminist Journal*. She appeared in our January/February issue with an article, “Yiddish: The Vancouver Connection.”

The OUTLOOK on Books

stories provided a first-hand account of the female experience of the *shtetl*. Jelen begs to differ. The *shtetl* is only the setting, not the subject, of the stories, Jelen tells us that their theme is the relationship of memory and forgetting in the creation of the new locus and language of the Jews. In fact, Baron often inverts the relationship of exile and return: for many of her characters, a move to Palestine is a form of exile from the Eastern European homeland.

To me the most striking of Jelen's observations is her recognition of Baron's subversion of the realist genre in which she wrote. In one of Baron's most famous stories, "Fradel", an unhappy marriage is observed by the town's women, including a little girl who years later relates the story to us. The narrator describes the women hearing about Fradel's unhappiness from Crazy Gitl, who overheard the couple fighting. The source of the information is a character specifically considered a madwoman. This information is passed through a child and related to us as a distant memory. Does this sound like the unadorned reporting of a true story? It is not, and Baron is at pains to point that out. These are stories heard, retold, reflected on, and retold differently. As Jelen puts it, "without denying the seed of the 'real' in her work, because that source, after all, was a stylistic

imperative of the modern Hebrew renaissance, Baron accentuates the artistic mediation that renders her work fictional." It is, I think, a sign of how seriously blinkered her contemporary critics were (and many readers continue to be) about women's creative lives that Baron's overt gestures towards the constructed nature of her stories could be overlooked. Reading women's fictional writings as biography is so much easier, it seems, than revising our notion of the artist as male.

Jelen also goes into some detail exploring the most important literary way in which Baron was different from her Hebrew-writing peers. The figure of the *talush*, the uprooted, Eastern European young man, usually studying at a university unsuccessfully, unable to either wholly shake his *shtetl* past or embrace his westernized future, was the singular staple of the early novelists of modern Hebrew. Baron did write several stories featuring such a character; in the third of these, she killed him off and did not return to this theme. Moreover, Baron's *talush*, for his brief existence, was different from those written by the men writers of her era. Baron's *talush* stories are narrated in the third person, rather than the standard first person narrative which invited autobiographical identification. Such identification was impossible anyway, since Baron, as a

woman, could never be a *talush*.

Could a woman then be a *tlushah*, a female version of the *talush*? Jelen thinks not. Baron's women characters include one who is a fellow student of the male protagonist, but unlike him, she seems to suffer none of the torments that are part and parcel of the uprooted and ineffectual literary *talush*. In fact, it is this marginal woman character who literally has the final word on the male *talush*: she writes his epitaph. As Jelen has it: "Within the 'revival' rhetoric of the modern Hebrew renaissance, Baron indicates that there are certain textual traditions—perhaps Haskalah autobiography with its apparently compulsory maleness—that should be laid to rest..."

Intimations of Difference performs double service, both as literary criticism of a particular writer and as a provocative rethinking of an era in Jewish literary history. After reading Jelen's analysis it is impossible to approach Baron's stories as historical writings about women in the *shtetl*. Instead, we see a writer working both from within and against the modern Hebrew renaissance, which was itself both born of and in conflict with the rabbinic tradition. Jelen has restored literariness to Baron, and replaced an obsession with her life details with an inkling of the genius we encounter and struggle to understand when we read her work. ♦

IN/OUT...

Continued from page 9

(now thankfully, it seems, a thing of the past), jailing of opponents, and censorship of writers (such as the Padilla case in the late sixties). These repressive aspects have no doubt been reinforced by the punitive, decades-long blockade imposed by the U.S. (The terrorist campaign against Cuba, waged by right-wing Cuban exiles and aided and abetted by the U.S., including assassination attempts and bombings, has been largely overlooked in mainstream commentary on Cuba.)

In any case, it seems clear that the regime is not on the same level as Rumania under Ceausescu, present-day China, or Latin American military dictatorships in the last century (including the sordid Batista regime in Cuba before the revolution).

It is obvious that U.S. hostility toward Cuba is motivated not by a concern for human rights or democracy, but by a desire to restore in Cuba what Noam Chomsky has called "the fifth freedom"—the freedom to rob and exploit—which the U.S. has enjoyed throughout the rest of the Western hemisphere. No doubt changes are

called for in Cuba, but one hopes that moves toward greater openness and democratization—in whatever form—are realized in ways that preserve the gains of the Cuban revolution, and don't become a way for the U.S. to get its foot in the door.

This has implications for Canada. Michael Byers, writing in the *Toronto Star* (Feb. 20) warns that the Bush Administration could pressure Canada into joining the U.S. in its blockade of Cuba. He commented aptly, "When it comes to Cuba, it's the United States, not Canada, that needs to change course." ♦