

Where Heaven and Earth Touched

*The sublime Hebrew works of an “astonishing” writer,
Malkah Shapiro, take us into a lost world.*

BY RABBI NEHEMIA POLEN, Ph.D.

From the time of the publication in 1814 of *Shivchei ha-Besht*, the classic collection of stories about the founder of Chassidism, many hundreds of books have appeared devoted to tales and anecdotes of the Chassidic movement and its masters, the *Tzaddikim*. Beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the *Haskalah* movement recognized the significance of the vast body of Chassidic tales and mined this great legacy, refashioning and presenting the tales in consonance with its own literary and ideological agenda. In the twentieth century, interest in Chassidic stories has intensified. Perhaps the most celebrated and influential expositor of this literature is Martin Buber, who found in the tales a vehicle to express his own existential philosophy of celebration of the moment and interpersonal encounter. Buber's approach to the tales has evoked withering criticism as well as spirited defense in the scholarly literature on Chassidism.

Most published Chassidic tales begin as stories transmitted orally, sometimes for generations. When a story is finally written down and collected for publication, it inevitably reflects the perspective and voice of the editor. If one has any doubts about this, one need only compare Buber's *Tales of the Chassidim* with Rabbi Shelomoh Yosef Zevin's *Sippurei Chassidim*: we are presented with two different worlds, not only in substance but in tone.

Whatever their religious and philosophical orientation, those who collected, edited and published Chassidic tales have almost invariably been men. One wonders how the world of Chassidism might appear when portrayed by a woman. But there is in fact just such a collection of Chassidic stories, written by an articulate and perceptive woman writer, distinguished for literary quality as well as a sublime spiritual sen-

sitivity. A particular virtue of these stories is that they were written from within, by someone who remained all her life within the world of Chassidism, rather than (as with so many of the collections) by a distant, if sympathetic, outsider. I am referring to the writings of Malkah Shapiro (1894-1971).

Malkah Shapiro, born Reizel Malkah Hapstein, was the daughter of Rabbi Yerachmiel Moshe Hapstein of Kozenice (1860-1909), who was a great-great-grandson of Rabbi Israel Hapstein, the famed Kozenitzer Maggid (d. 1814), one of the founders of Chassidism in Poland. She was born and raised in

Kozenice, a provincial Polish town of about 5,000 situated near the Vistula, 75 kilometers southeast of Warsaw.

Her literary *oeuvre*, published in several prose collections as well as a book of poems, provides a particularly woman's perspective on the Chassidism of her youth: the descriptions of people, places, objects and events are poetic, lush, precisely detailed, evocative, loving. Women figure as major characters in her stories: Malkah herself, her sisters, mother, grandmother, and her great-great-grandmother Pereleh (d. 1849?) — daughter of the Maggid of Kozenice, and a charismatic, powerful and independent spiritual leader in her own right. One of the main themes of her stories is the role of women in Chassidism and Judaism: women can excel not only in acts of service, kindness and charity, but also as scholars of Torah, transmitters of sacred traditions, and as spiritual beings who attain holiness and strive for elevated and sublime states of personal, inner piety.

Malkah Shapiro's work focuses largely on her own family. In many of her stories, the reader is introduced to the lost world of Polish Chassidism through the eyes of the writer's literary persona, the eleven-year-old Bat-Zion. Bat-Zion's childhood is protected and privileged. She is attended by nannies, governesses, chaperones, tutors, reverent Chassidim, as well as a large extended family. While she works hard at her studies, there are also times of fun and enjoyment: the winter brings sleigh rides in the pine forest, and summer includes trips to her grandmother's estate, filled



MALKAH SHAPIRO
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picture of holiness, grandeur and
loving spirit...*

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with apple orchards, flower gardens, and a fish pond. Most of all, her childhood is permeated with the aura of the sacred: the holiness radiating from her parents and their activities; the holiness of location anchored in the memory of her ancestor the Koziener Maggid, who studied and prayed in the very spots where she was growing up; and the sacredness of the Holy Days, the seasons of joy around which all life turned.

Bat-Zion herself is deeply spiritual. She is alive to the poetic beauty in the *mitzvot*; at times they affect her so powerfully — as at the kindling of the Chanukah lights — that she comes close to fainting. She is acutely aware of the wonders of nature, and notices how the events in the natural world appear to resonate harmoniously with the sacred times of the Jewish calendar.

The children of the household relate to their father and mother with formality and the greatest reverence. Bat-Zion's first activity each morning is to present herself to her parents for a formal salutation: she kisses her father and mother on the hand, and the parent responds with a kiss on the forehead, along with questions, directives, and a charge for the day. Bat-Zion's heartbeat would quicken before she saluted her father each morning; in her preparations she would attempt to remove all extraneous thoughts from her consciousness. Days end as they begin, with a formal presentation and good night blessing.

Malkah Shapiro's father, Rabbi Yerachmiel Moshe Hapstein, is a saintly figure, far removed from the affairs of the material world. His time is spent in prayer, study, and ministering to the needs of the community, especially the poor. *Chassidim* who are grateful for the Rebbe's prayers on their behalf offer contributions, but he gives all funds to the Holy Land, as well as to the local poor, so that the needs of his own household are slighted.

Reb Yerachmiel Moshe is a deeply learned and pious man. In addition to mastery of Talmudic literature, he has an unusual breadth of knowledge. He reads Rav Saadia Gaon's Bible commentary in the original Arabic, has an active interest in mathematics and astronomy, and corresponds with the *maskil* Chaim Zelig Slonimsky on the subject of calendrical calculations. A visible indication of his interest in matters astronomical is the sundial which he erected in the courtyard outside the family house. Malkah makes a point of portraying her father's breadth of knowledge as well as his piety, suggesting that intense *yirat shamayim* and wide-ranging scholarly interests need not be in opposition to each other, but may go hand in hand.

In his daughter's loving portrait, Reb Yerachmiel Moshe does not engage in extended conversation; his words are brief, gnomic, pregnant with meaning. His sayings and epigrams dot the pages of her stories. Encouraging Bat-Zion to rise early, he states, "One who rises at dawn for Torah study and *mitzvot* on a weekday tastes the taste of the lower Paradise, but someone who rises at dawn for sacred activity on the Shabbat tastes the taste of the supernal Paradise..."²

The only thing he is intolerant of is untruthfulness; any hint of deception elicits a quick response. In Malkah Shapiro's depiction, her father is characterized by inner dignity, radiant intelligence, and profound spirituality. Significantly, he encourages and fosters the religious and intellectual growth of his daughters as well as his sons. Tutors come to the house to instruct the girls in *Tanach* and other texts of Torah, as well as in secular subjects such as Russian, German, and history.

For all his many virtues, it is clear that Bat-Zion's father is detached from the affairs of the world. The practical responsibilities of the household fall largely on Bat-Zion's

mother, Bracha Zippora Gitl, daughter of Rabbi Mordechai Twersky of Loyev (d. 1909), a descendant of the famed Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl. In Bat-Zion's eyes, her mother is full of grace and beauty. She is a tall woman, towering over the other women of the family. Pious and hard-working, she is proud of the spiritual achievements of the women in her family. When others attempt to minimize the significance of women's spirituality, she asserts her views strongly, despite her modesty and shyness. Yet she subordinates her position in the family to that of another female presence who dominates every aspect of the household's functioning: her mother-in-law, Sarah Devorah Shapiro.

Sarah Devorah manages the affairs of the household and makes all major decisions. She is appropriately respectful to her son, who is, after all, the Rebbe, but R. Yerachmiel Moshe treats his mother with the greatest reverence. She is constantly chastising him for endangering his health with a grueling schedule of study and service, and with extreme asceticism.

A major point of contention is the question of building a new mansion to replace the elegant home which was destroyed in a fire. Rebbetzin Sarah Devorah, along with a group of loyal and generous *Chassidim*, conspires to go ahead with plans for new construction, but Reb Yerachmiel Moshe does his best to subvert their intentions, believing that it is improper to build elaborate edifices outside of *Eretz Yisrael*; even when *Chassidim* specify that donated funds should be used for his home, he immediately distributes the funds to the poor. Eventually the new house does begin to rise, due to Sarah Devorah's indefatigable marshalling of architectural, financial, and managerial resources. Speaking Polish, she works with contractors, artisans, and suppliers of raw materials, conducts labor negotiations and deals with work stoppages and strikes. Everyone is in awe of her: she need only give one look in the direction of a group of chatting workers, and they fall silent and return to work.

Sarah Devorah is a woman of elegance, culture and refinement, who prizes education and piety. Her knowledge of German and of delicate embroidery techniques was obtained from a tutor whom she herself had imported from Hungary. She maintains excellent relationships with members of the Polish nobility; they respect her family heritage and cultural sophistication, and share her aristocratic values rooted in an era that was fast disappearing. But along with the ambience of majesty and nobility that Sarah Devorah cultivates, there is also devout piety and the Fear of Heaven. In between her managerial activities she prays and recites psalms. The Rebbetzin's blessings are sought by Polish peasants as well as by *Chassidim*.

Sarah Devorah is a dynamic, enterprising and courageous individual who confidently travels to the crown city of St. Petersburg for an interview at the Russian imperial palace. With a memory of events going back to the first half of the nineteenth century, she is the repository and transmitter of the sacred family traditions and foundational stories. She is domineering and assertive, but these qualities are essential for her effectiveness in managing the household.

In addition to vivid descriptions of her family members, Malkah Shapiro portrays her surroundings with unforgettable richness. Her home is a sacred place, alive with ancient memories of the Maggid of Koziencice. This is especially true of the Maggid's *shteibel*, which is revered as a shrine. The Maggid's personal room had been left just as it was during his lifetime, one hundred years earlier. The room has a desk upon which the Maggid would write his miraculous amulets, as well as an imposing canopied bed. On the

eve of Shabbat, Reb Yerachmiel Moshe would enter the room with great respect, say "*Gut Shabbos*," and leave; on *Motzei Shabbat* he would bring his violin and play the special Kozienitzer melody for *Eliyahu HaNavi*. During times of illness, the room would be used for prayers and *Tehillim*.

Malkah's home and its environs are suffused with the rhythms of nature. Listen to her description of the sunset of the eve of Chanukah:

The courtyards of the Maggid, surrounded by ancient buildings — in which dwell his descendant and heir Rabbi Yerachmiel Moshe and his family — are intoxicated with the flaming elixir of the sunset, and are veiled in the deepest secrets... The shrubs in the garden are bedecked with crimson fire, as if they have stolen a whiff of the mysteries...

Her depiction of her family's procession to the river to draw water for Passover matzoh (*mayim shelanu*) is an enchanting evocation of sounds and sights: clouds, moon, and stars, the river's rush, and the interplay of darkness and light, are all alive with kabbalistic symbolism and mystery, combining to make an unforgettable picture of holiness, grandeur and loving spirit in the pure performance of a *mitzvah*.

The Significance of Malkah Shapiro's Work

We have already noted that Malkah Shapiro's *oeuvre* may be the only extended literary production on Polish Chassidism written by a woman. But the significance of her contribution goes beyond this simple fact. In her work we find vivid depictions and a specificity of detail simply not to be found in most Chassidic writings, which tend to focus on the anecdote, the wise saying, the word of Torah or insightful comment, but do not provide sustained descriptions of people and places. With her richness of expression, Malkah Shapiro recreates the taste and texture of Eastern European Chassidic piety, presenting Chassidism as a *derech avodah* — a path of Divine Service. Her stress is always on the interior life and the cultivation of sublime states of awareness and reflection. Malkah depicts all the members of her family, women and men, as attending to inwardness with loving, reverential care, and invites us by example to do the same. Many of her stories are in the nature of visual meditations,⁴ with multisensory specificity and particularity; in these stories nature is portrayed as alive with metaphysical and kabbalistic forces, so that humans and nature join together to celebrate the sacred days. Rather than dramas carried along by plot and the resolution of tensions, these stories are literary meditations, in which "nothing happens"; the point of the stories is to call forth a sacred moment from the author's past, to capture it, convey it, and prevent the dispersal and evaporation of the holiness in the face of the corrosive effects of forgetting and the pressures of profane existence.

Malkah Shapiro's portrayal of the meticulous care which her family members shower upon matters of the spirit finds a parallel in her own loving attention to matters of style and language. Her stories are written in a robust literary Hebrew, poetic and sensitive, revealing broad knowledge of biblical, rabbinic and kabbalistic sources — a rich palette indeed. It is obvious that she cared deeply about the literary and aesthetic value of her work, and placed as much emphasis upon the grace of her style as upon the substance of what she had to say.

Malkah Shapiro's idyllic and sheltered childhood was followed by an adult life filled with challenge and responsibility. At the age of fourteen, she married her cousin, Rabbi Avraham Elimelech Shapiro, moving to the town of

Grodzisk, another venerable center of Polish Chassidism. To escape the advancing armies during the Great War, her family moved to Warsaw, where she studied with Hillel Zeitlin. In 1927 she made *aliyah* with her husband and three daughters, moving first to Haifa and then to Kfar Chassidim, the settlement founded by her brother Rabbi Yisrael Elozor Hapstein. It should be noted that her love of *Eretz Yisrael* — a passion that she expressed in poetry as well as prose — was another legacy of her early education and her parents' influence. Eventually she moved to *Yerushalayim*, where she became prominent in the educational activities of Religious-Zionist women as well as in literary circles. In her older years, she was sought out by aspiring religious writers who looked to her for wisdom, guidance and inspiration.

Malkah Shapiro's portrayal of rural Polish Chassidism and its male and female personalities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is exceptional, perhaps indeed unique in the literature. Her labors have given us a window into a lost world where heaven and earth touched, a world of profound tenderness, exquisite beauty, and enveloping holiness. One cannot put down one of her books without having been moved, inspired, changed for the better. That would be an achievement even for a work of *Mussar*; for a book which presents itself at least overtly as a work of literature, it is utterly astonishing. Malkah Shapiro's activity as an Orthodox and Chassidic woman writer had almost no precedents in her time, and reflects her courage, creativity, and commitment to her gift and her vision.

In one passage she writes that as a young child she would go into the special room of her ancestor, the Kozienitzer Maggid, and pray for "wisdom like that of King Solomon, and grace like that of Queen Esther." The grace and wisdom of her writing suggest that her prayers were richly answered. §

Notes

1. *This is especially true in her final collection of stories, Mi-Din le-Rahamim, published by Mossad Harav Kook in 1969. The following sketch is largely drawn from material in Mi-Din le-Rahamim. Malkah received the name "Bat-Zion" as an appellation added in childhood, during a bout of acute illness. One may add that it is surely no accident that the name Bat-Zion links her to Eretz Yisrael and Yerushalayim, the location for her adult life.*

2. *Mi-Din le-Rahamim, p. 14.*

3. *Ibid., p. 18.*

4. *Thanks are due to my colleague and friend Dr. Menachem Rotstein, who pointed out the "meditative story" as a particular genre within Malkah Shapiro's work. My analysis has benefitted greatly from our conversations on this topic.*

5. *The way Malkah marshalls her powers of depiction and visualization for the purpose of evoking a powerful state of holy contemplation and awareness, is reminiscent of the techniques taught by her brother-in-law the Piaseczner Rebbe; see his Hachsharat ha-Avreichim, pp. 16-17, and my discussion in The Holy Fire, pp.4-5.*

6. *This essay is part of a larger work in progress which will, please God, include a biographical study of Malkah Shapiro as well as translations of major sections of her work.*

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