

Video Clip: Rachel Luzzatto Morpurgo

The First Modern Hebrew Poetess

Rachel Luzzatto Morpurgo hails from a distinguished literary and rabbinic family that includes the likes of Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto (RaMHaL) and Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (ShaDaL). She received a strong Jewish education from her uncle, studying Bible, the Talmud, medieval Hebrew literature, and ethical writings. As a result, she was well-versed in Hebrew and wrote poems that frequently weaved in Biblical references. Rachel Morpurgo is considered the first modern female poet whose collection is available to us today.

Suggested Implementations

Hebrew Language

1. Part of a unit on poetry

TaNakh

1. Connecting her poems to their Biblical references

Prayers

1. Personal prayers and piyyutim

Philosophy

1. Women and Torah study

Background

Rachel Luzzatto was born in 1790 in Italian-speaking Trieste, a city that was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but would become part of Italy at the end of WWI. She was born into a well-known family of scholars and joined the ranks as she studied with relatives and private tutors. She was taught Bible and its commentary, Talmud, medieval Hebrew literature, and ethical writings. Aside from her Jewish education, there is evidence that she was well-versed in Italian literature and math as well as lithography and turnery.

With a strong background in Hebrew texts, Rachel began writing Hebrew poetry. She wrote about her yearning for Zion and redemption. She wrote about people and events. And she wrote riddles and plays on words. Much of her poems were written in the form of sonnets. Due to her fluency in Jewish texts, she also seamlessly weaved in Biblical references.

Evidence of her Hebrew language skills were found in select poems published during her lifetime in a periodical called *Kochvei Yitzhak* in Vienna. Among her writings published in the journal was Rachel's defense of kabbalists. In 1817, her cousin, Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto (ShaDaL), bought her a copy of the Zohar. In Western Europe at that time, there was much debate about the status of Kabbalah and Rachel was among its vocal proponents.

Rachel's published works were so well-received many did not believe they were written by a woman. In one of her poems, she responds with doubt to the positive feedback she received, as she notes that she fears she will not be remembered due to the poor status of women in her society.

Rachel further shows her humility as she signed each of her poems with the acronym R.M.H. for “Rachel Morpurgo HaKtana,” meaning the little one.

Rachel Morpurgo wrote poems throughout her life, even after she married merchant Jacob Morpurgo in 1819 and raised a family. Following her death in 1871, Rabbi Vittorio Haim Castiglioni published a collection her poems in a book called *Rachel’s Harp*.

Poems Quoted in the Video Clip (in order of appearance)

חידה: לפני גבעות חוללתי

מן שמים נפִלתי אֶרֶץ
תמיד אֶשְׁכֵּן בְּמְרוֹמֵי עֶרֶץ;
בְּרֹאשׁ אֲמַצַּע וְסוֹף בְּקֶשׁ
לְמַצָּא שְׁמִי בְּלִי כָל-יֵשׁ.

הֵן שׁוֹנְאֵי חֶסֶר כָּל-רֶגֶל,
בְּסוֹף יֵשֵׁב, וְלֹא כַּעֲגֹל
שְׁלֹשׁ אֲנִי וְשֵׁשׁ תַּחְשׁוּב,
פְּרָשׁוֹ חִידָה וְדַגּוֹ לְרוּב.

ואלה דברי רחל בבוא לאזניה כי שמה נזכר לתהילה במכתבי העתים:

אוי לי תאמר נפשי, פי מר לי מר,
טפח רוחי עלי¹ וְאֶתְנַמֵּר.
שְׁמַעְתִּי קוֹל אוֹמֵר: שִׁירָךְ נִשְׁמַר,
מִי כְמוֹתָךְ רַחֵל לֹמְדֵת שִׁיר?

רוחי יָשִׁיב אֵלַי: רִיחֵי נֵמֵר,
גֹּלְהָ אַחַר גֹּלְהָ, עוֹרֵי סֵמֵר,
טַעֲמֵי לֹא עֵמֵד בִּי, כְּרַמֵּי זֵמֵר,
מְקַלְמוֹת אֶפְחָד, לֹא עוֹד אֶשִׁיר.

אֶפְנֶה צִפּוֹן דְּרוֹם קִדְמָה וְנִמָּה.
דַּעַת נְשִׁים קֵלָה, לְזֹאת הַוְרָמָה².
אַחַר כִּמָּה שָׁנִים, הֵן עֲתָה לָמָּה

יִזְכֵּר מִקְלָב מֵת כָּל-עֵיר כָּל-פְּלֵאָה?
הִנֵּה הָעֵד יַעֲיִד תּוֹשֵׁב וְהֵלֵךְ
אִין חֲכָמָה לְאַשָּׁה כִּי אִם בְּפֵלֵךְ.

על הבורחים מקטב הקאלערא

אֶרְאֶה רֵץ לְקִרְאָת רֵץ, מִמִּי יִבְרַח?
נִפְשָׁם בְּיַד אֵל כָּגֵר כְּאַזְרַח;
יִמְסָץ וְיִמִּית רַעְגּוֹ אֶזְרַח,
צַדִּיק יִרְפָּא, כְּתִמֵּר יִפְרַח.

לְכֹן כָּל יְצוּרֵי אִישׁ עַל יָדוֹ (מְקוֹם)
יִשְׁכֹּן לְבִטָּח יִבְטַח עַל יָדוֹ (כַּח ה')

לְנוֹס אִין שְׁנֵה מִפְסַד יָדוֹ (מִכָּה)
יִגֵּשׁ יִקְרַב וְיִתְחַזֵּק יָדוֹ. (יֵד)

חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם חוֹסֵה נָא עָלֵינוּ

מאף ומחמה רפא נא לנו
בודה לשמך אשר הצי לנו .

הפה-נא לששון ימי אכלנו
ונשמח ונגיל יחד פלנו
לה, לא לנו אדני לא לנו.

Questions for Discussion

1. Traditionally Kabbalah is only to be learned by men, and only those above the age of 40 who are extremely learned. What does it say about Rachel that she began learning as a young female? What does it say about those who taught her?
2. RMH was able to seamlessly weave Biblical, Talmudic, and scientific items into her poetry. Taking one of the poems from her collection, can you find the references (do a search)? What is the significance of the references?
3. Her poem about the Cholera pandemic (third poem listed above) borrows from prayer, almost creating a new prayer. Cantors across much of the Mediterranean were known to create new prayers, some were incorporated into the siddur as well. Is there opportunity to create new prayers and adapt them for the current time? Does it make sense for us today, having lived in a pandemic, to adopt the prayer for our own use?

Suggested Readings

“A Woman and Poet Against the Stream: Rachel Morpurgo, Advocate of the Kabbalah in an Anti-Kabbalistic Age” <https://library.osu.edu/projects/hebrew-lexicon/02164-files/02164202.pdf>

“A Silenced Harp: The Life and Works of the Italian-Hebrew Poetess Rachel Morpurgo”
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/nashim.31.1.09?seq=1>

A collection of Rachel’s songs (Hebrew): <https://benyehuda.org/author/137>