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## Resurrecting a long-vanished diaspora: The Portrayal of the Jewish Shtetl in Dvora Baron's *Sunbeams*

*Regarded as the first modern Hebrew female author, this essay contends that what set Dvora Baron apart from the male-dominated prose of the period, was her probing of the east-European Shtetl, rather than the Zionist project. Through the examination of Baron's short story "Shavririm", this essay probes Baron's vivid depiction of the Shtetl, as well as offering a scathing critique of the community's treatment of the heroine—an orphaned girl who overcomes emotional and physical hardships to emerge as a noble, triumphant figure. In her corpus, Baron betrayed a subversive strand of writing that focused on the Jewish women's experience and gendered traumas in a patriarchal society.*

### INTRODUCTION

Often hailed as the first modern female Hebrew author and the, "only female Hebrew prose writer known to have emerged from the Shtetl milieu in the last century,"<sup>1</sup> Dvora Baron was born in Ozdha, near Minsk, Belorussia in 1887. Her father Shabtai Eliezer, a Hassidic rabbi, recognized his daughter's artistic genius early on and gave her the rabbinic education usually reserved for boys. As has been observed, Baron was fortunate in having an extraordinary father who had a radical and generous approach to his gifted daughter's education.<sup>2</sup> While her father conducted classes in the study hall for the boys, the young girl, ensconced in the woman's section, would occasionally shout a question to her father or brother through the partition.<sup>3</sup> Naomi Seidman cites from a study by Nurit Govrin, a renowned Baron scholar, in further explicating the confluence of circumstances that enabled the young woman to obtain an education in Talmud and Midrash:

The rare combination of understanding parents, a brother who was also a spiritual guide, and a girl who was blessed with talents, eager for learning and iron-willed, was what made possible the very existence of a rabbi's daughter becoming a Hebrew-writer, for whom knowledge of Hebrew and grounding in the religious sources were natural and primary. The way for her to acquire the Jewish-Hebrew education normally given to a boy was to make a necessary compromise, which allowed her to receive an education without seriously overthrowing accepted social convention.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adler, Ruth: Dvora Baron: Daughter of the Shtetl, in: Baskin, Judith R. (Ed.): Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing. Detroit: 1994, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> For several excellent studies about Dvora Baron's corpus and life, see Jelen, Sheila E./Pinsker, Shachar (Ed.): Hebrew, Gender, and Modernity: Critical Responses to Dvora Baron's Fiction. Bethesda, Maryland: 2007; Seidman, Naomi: Baron 'in the Closet': An Epistemology of the 'Women's Section,' in: Seidman, Naomi.: A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish. Berkeley: 1997, pp. 67–101; Liebllich, Amia: Conversations with Dvora: An Experimental Biography of the First Modern Hebrew Woman Writer. Berkeley: 1997; Jelen, Sheila. E.: Intimations of Difference: Dvora Baron in the Modern Hebrew Renaissance. Syracuse, New York: 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Seidman, Baron 'in the Closet,' pp. 67–68.

<sup>4</sup> Seidman, Baron 'in the Closet,' p. 68.

Baron wrote a Yiddish play at the age of seven and began writing Hebrew stories that first appeared in 1903 in the magazine *Hamelitz* and later in the daily *Hatzfira*. Marking the emergence of a sterling literary career at a time when, “the very existence of a woman writing Hebrew fiction was an anomaly,”<sup>5</sup> she achieved wide acclaim among Hebrew authors of the time, as eminent author Hayyim Brenner wrote in a 1906 letter: “My sister you can write.”<sup>6</sup> With the encouragement of her parents, she moved to the city of Minsk with her brother Binyamin, who was a medical student, to complete her high school education. There, she was for a time engaged to the author Moshe Eliezer. After the couple ended their relationship, the Baron family immigrated to Palestine in 1911. In 1911 she married Yosef Ahronovitz, a leading figure in the Labor Zionist movement and editor of the weekly *Hapoel Hatzair* (The Young Worker), whom she met in her role as editor of the paper’s literary supplement. Their daughter Tziporah was born in 1915, the same year that the couple was deported to Alexandria, Egypt, under orders from the Ottoman authorities. The young family was to remain there for four years before returning to Tel Aviv. Their sojourn in Egypt formed the basis for the novel *Hagolim* (*The Exiles*, 1970), published 14 years after her death.

Shaken by the death of her brother from typhus after the First World War, and devoted to caring for her epileptic daughter, for the next thirty years, Baron did not leave her Tel Aviv apartment, not even to attend her husband’s funeral in 1937, though she did edit his collected works. Shattered by her brother’s death and suffering from an illness, she was bedridden, yet continued to write, edit the newspaper *Hapoel Hatzair* until December 1922 when she and her husband resigned from that post, and to translate masterpieces such as Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. Intensely involved in public life, her first collection of stories, *Sippurim* (*Stories*), was published in 1927.

Sara R. Horowitz draws parallels between the author’s name and what we know of her own life:

Baron spelled her last name in the Yiddish rather than the Hebrew manner, with the letter aleph following the bet. Later readers [...] would note the unintended punning created by this spelling, of Baron with ba’aron, in the closet. This play on words encapsulates her life, which she lived out literally as a recluse in the confines of her apartment for several decades, as well as the fate of her writing, metaphorically, in the closet, unread and underappreciated until recently.<sup>7</sup>

The first recipient of the Bialik Prize in 1934 (she won the award twice), she also received the Rupin Prize for her novel *Le-et Ata* (*For the Time Being* 1934) and the Brenner Prize for *Parashiyot* (*Chapters* 1951). Dvora Baron died in Tel Aviv on August 20, 1956.

Although Baron lived in Palestine and saw firsthand the upheavals and dislocation of settlement and Israeli statehood, she chose to anchor her portraits in the Lithuanian small town. Wendy Zierler explains that, “Baron’s fiction seems perennially and statically rooted – as if outside time – in a mythified version of the Shtetl, ensconced within its sacred texts and genealogies.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Rivka Gorfine suggests that Baron felt

<sup>5</sup> Jelen, Sheila E./Pinsker, Shachar: Introduction, in: Hebrew, Gender and Modernity, pp. 3–13, here p. 5

<sup>6</sup> Pagis, Ada (Ed.): Dvora Baron: Mivchar Ma-amarim al Yetizrata. Tel Aviv 1974, p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> Horowitz, R. Sara : Voices of Jewish Women. Canadian Jewish News (13 September 2001), n.p.

<sup>8</sup> Zierler, Wendy: In What World? Devorah Baron’s Fiction of Exile. Prooftexts 19 (May 1999), pp.127–150, here p. 28.

compelled, berthed amidst the ebullience and rapture that enveloped those involved in the creation of a Jewish state, to unmoor herself from her current reality and create a separate narrative of a long-vanished Diaspora. Thus, Gorfine opines that Baron knew that:

[a] day will come when we will retrace our steps and explore our roots of yore. And perhaps for that very reason her contribution within the revolutionary enterprise of her contemporaries is so special [...] here, within the flurry of building anew, of forming a city from the sands, she kept depicting all that we, and she, had abandoned. Through a unique and individual lens, utilizing delicate power and an almost lyrical beat, she erected a monument to the past – for the generations to come.<sup>9</sup>

This choice, to guy her stories and core subject-matters in the Jewish-Lithuanian milieu, was not an easy one, especially since the majority of the male authors of her generation – some of who came from Eastern Europe – sought to break with religious tradition in their narratives, rather than embrace and adumbrate the life of small-town Jewish folk. Indeed, Baron’s “[...]” thematics, her patterns of intertextuality and her treatment of popular expectations” sharply diverged from those of her colleagues.<sup>10</sup> Though Baron was ridiculed for honoring Jewish tradition and pressured by her fellow writers to fix her literary gaze on events in the Yishuv, she absorbed their mockery and did not waver.<sup>11</sup> Throughout, she endured the denigration of her peers, and insisted on preserving in her canon the memory of her home and of her father. It is worth quoting at length, the following analysis by Naomi Seidman about Baron’s struggle as a woman author in a male dominated writing fraternity that yearned to jettison the traditional religious world and locate her tales in the new Jewish settlement in Palestine:

By failing to set her stories in the contemporary Zionist community, Baron actively resisted the most overt of the ideological demands of Hebrew modernism for years after she migrated to Erets-Israel in 1911 [...] Baron was marginalized because she continued to write about the diaspora from the very heart of Tel Aviv [...] Baron’s marginal stance as a woman writer, as a bilingual writer in a militantly monolingual environment, as a chronicler of the diaspora at the heart of Zionist activism, as a modernist whose experimentation took directions that were not always identifiable cannot be entirely explained by the prejudices of her literary environment. Baron’s modernist techniques and protofeminist political content were overlooked not only because these techniques were different from those of her literary generation or because they were unexpected in the writings of a woman, but also because she cloaked herself in – or ironically reappropriated – traditional, “feminine” and subcanonical forms, genres, and styles.”<sup>12</sup>

In a wide-ranging disquisition, Zierler argues that Baron was criticized by her male counterparts for not only refusing to tackle the principal issues of the Jewish Yishuv and for thematically circumventing Palestine, but for also attempting to establish a scriptural

<sup>9</sup> Gorfine, Rivka: *Bikriah Kashuva*. Ramat Gan 1969, p.132. Nurit Govrin writes, “Another possible reason was her feeling that life in the small Jewish *shtetl*, as she had lived and known it, was fast vanishing, and that she had to preserve for future generations a past reality which was never to be again.” (Govrin, Nurit: *Alienation and Regeneration*. Tel Aviv: 1989, p. 131.)

<sup>10</sup> Jelen/Pinsker, Introduction, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Adler, Dvora Baron, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Seidman, *A Marriage*, pp. 71–72.

connective between the old and the new Jewish worlds.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, her oeuvre was often perceived as timid and outdated since it focused on the life of the Lithuanian Jewish community, a topic which contemporary Hebrew authors of that period chose to bypass. It is of particular salience that Baron's writing differed in substance and tone from both male and female writers. By zeroing in on female characters that elected to remain outside of Eretz Yisrael and in a state of so-called exile, Baron amplified the contrast in her fiction from the male-centered group.<sup>14</sup> In relation to the work of female artists, who employed the experience of immigration as a source of creativity, Baron rebelled against such tendencies, delineating Zionist homecoming as a male process from which women were barred. In contrast, Baron would, "[...] overturn fairy-tale motifs, thereby demystifying all happily-ever notions of upward and lateral mobility, and frequently portray women whose lives remain woefully circumscribed by the conditions of domestic servitude and exile."<sup>15</sup>

Baron's tales display psychological complexity and ambition in tackling woman-centered issues that hitherto were shunned by Hebrew literature or existed in meager supply. Despite the fact that Baron's stories depict and memorialize the traditional Jewish Diaspora, rather than being outdated and ignorant of modern themes, her tales "clearly respond to the problematic of early twentieth-century Jewish women's experience, providing significant insights into the phenomena of change, disjuncture, alienation, and immigration from a female point of view."<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, as Adler shrewdly points out, Baron differed from other Hebrew writers at that time in her positive portrayal of male rabbis, especially fathers. Whilst most father figures were depicted by her contemporaries as symbolizing a destructive element, as "fanatical, reactionary forces, intolerant of enlightenment"<sup>17</sup>, Baron in her fictions rebutted the negative depictions of those characters, and actively, "[...] resisted assimilation into the mainstream of male Hebrew letters [...] she carved out her own distinct literary space [...]"<sup>18</sup>

Baron felt that only a woman could offer a psychic identification and tenderness in confronting such issues as sexuality, abortion, divorce, abandonment, marriage, and autonomy. By orchestrating narratives revolving around female protagonists, Baron liberated the muted voices of Jewish women who often, due to social circumstance, were bitterly robbed of an outlet to articulate their frustrations and anger, "Throughout her career, Baron remained obsessed with representing the marginal status of women in Jewish culture [...] writing powerfully subversive fiction from within the small places and partitioned spaces, the conversations and commiserations of Jewish women's experience."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Zierler, Wendy: *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing*. Detroit: 2004, p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> Zierler, *And Rachel*, p. 229.

<sup>15</sup> Zierler, *And Rachel*, p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> Zierler, *And Rachel*, p. 229.

<sup>17</sup> Adler, *Dvora Baron*, p. 97.

<sup>18</sup> Zierler, *And Rachel*, p. 231.

<sup>19</sup> Zierler, *And Rachel*, p. 249.

This article seeks to show how these operating themes fuel the nucleus narrative of “Shavririm”<sup>20</sup> (translated into English as “Sunbeams” 1948), a story shorn of sentimentality, nostalgia, and clichés, underwritten by a style that chimes with the author’s fictional matrix – “disciplined, sober and realistic, without embellishment, restrained and enclosed in a well-defined artistic frame – and yet realism and lyricism blend well within it.”<sup>21</sup> Fellow author Yaacov Fichman called “Shavririm” one of Baron’s greatest achievements.<sup>22</sup> Intermingling realism with impressionism, a la nineteenth-century letters, “Shavririm” is about a quest by a heroic resourceful woman, who hits rock bottom and wins back her self-respect by transcending the belittling negative space in which she has been trapped. The young girl of “Shavririm” is perhaps the finest expression of Baron’s lifelong sympathy for women on the margins. Interestingly, it has received little academic attention in works written in English about Baron.

### SHAVRIRIM

As the story opens, the five-year-old orphan Haya-Fruma is brought from the village of Bikhov in Belarus to an unnamed town with a “bundle of bedding and a little warmth from her mother’s last caress, which was soon dissipated in the alien chill.”<sup>23</sup> Her only belongings, the last remnant of parental love and a home, are handled with disdain by the strangers who see the helpless child as a nuisance: “For days she was passed from hand to hand like an unwanted object [...] she trembled in the chill blast of orphanhood like a leaf whose sheltering parents-tree had been felled.”<sup>24</sup> Relegated to a corner near the stove, she is checked for skin disease, and her pillows are stripped of their pillowcases and beaten to make certain they are clean. No thought is spared for Haya-Fruma’s feelings.

The first sliver of hope is presented by an old woman, who symbolically pulls Haya-Fruma out of the depths of despair (down at the village) and takes her upward to her home on a hillside quarter. It is not long before the old woman recoils from the girl’s ferocious appetite and returns her to the valley’s slum, to the unremitting coldness of the community. Because of her outward appearance – “she roamed about in her peasant smock, her faded hair tangled and unkempt, her face devoid of a single endearing feature”<sup>25</sup> – the forsaken girl is exiled and denied any type of affection or sympathy by the townspeople. It is only when, at the age of eight, she breaks a leg, that the Jewish townspeople show any pity. Lying on the ice, crying, she is cared for by various families who, “with eager willingness of do-gooders,” ensure that she receives medical attention and food.<sup>26</sup> Yet, the instant her broken leg heals, she is again, “left to her own devices. Again, she became a street urchin, eking out her existence as before, by doing chores for

<sup>20</sup> First published in Hebrew in 1948. Baron, Dvorah: *Shavririm*. Tel Aviv: 1948. I am using the English translation by Joseph Schachter, which appears in: Abramson, Glenda (Ed.): *The Oxford Book of Hebrew Short Stories*. Oxford: 1997, pp. 85–93.

<sup>21</sup> Yoffe, A. B.: Introduction, in: Baron, Dvorah: *The Thorny Path*. Translated from the Hebrew by Joseph Schachter and edited by Itzhak Hanoch. Jerusalem: 1969, pp. ix–xiv, here p. xii.

<sup>22</sup> Yaacov Fichman cited in: Pagis, Dvora Baron, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 85

<sup>24</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 86.

the local housewives.”<sup>27</sup> To be sure, the physical injury foreshadows the chain of blows that will strike the orphan as the story unfolds. Because her leg was not properly set, she walks with a severe limp, and is assailed by a barrage of insults coming from the children who, never once rebuked by their parents, would shout, “There goes crooked Haya-Fruma.”<sup>28</sup>

Yet above all, it is the compassionless adults who inflict the cruelest and most painful of scars on the soul of the neglected child. Outside, they avoid glancing her way, “[...] the grown-ups, who appear to ostracize those of unlovely appearance, would not so much as look at her.”<sup>29</sup> In their homes, their stony and unfeeling attitude compounds her loneliness and isolation. In one episode, just before the Sabbath, amidst the intoxicating smells of the cooking and the friendly smile of the housewife, Haya-Fruma hopes that she might be invited to partake in the tender homely atmosphere. Such elevated expectations are immediately and mercilessly crushed: “No sooner had she finished her work than she would be given her pay in unmistakable dismissal.”<sup>30</sup>

Baron delineates a world that she knows intimately, vividly recreating daily life in a small Jewish Shtetl with all its customs and affairs. Baron’s evocations ring true because, “[s]he wrote only about things that were within the bounds of her own experience and never touched any subject with which she was not familiar or which was not sufficiently clear to her.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, we read about the ritual of fasting before a Jewish wedding, the sitting of *shiva* (the weeklong period of grief and mourning), the division of dowry, and the celebration of the Jewish New Year.

Baron condemns those religious leaders who mistreat her female protagonist and is highly critical of the hypocrisy of those who were seen to be the paragons of the community. Gnawing at the conscience of the reader, she shows the malignities that lurk behind the facade of piety, and forcefully drives home the message that the actions of the townspeople contradicted and violated the ethical code of Judaism. For instance, while at the beadle’s home washing the dishes, Haya-Fruma is intensely drawn to the beadle’s daughter, whose face and warm eyes remind her of her late mother. Seeking to connect with a distant memory, to once again experience human affection, she touches the girl’s golden locks that gleam from the bath she had just taken. The beadle’s daughter retreats in a “gesture of mild distaste,”<sup>32</sup> but it is the wife who viciously rejects the orphan’s heartrending attempt for a modicum of closeness: “Her mother who was standing near the oven, advanced on Haya-Fruma in a towering rage, brandishing her baker’s shovel. ‘How dare you crawl all over her with your clumsy paws!’ she screamed.”<sup>33</sup>

Haya-Fruma’s plea for support from the neighbor who witnesses the degrading reproach is predictable – a hollow refusal to meet her gaze. Overwrought, Haya-Fruma walks out, never to return. That scene captures the alienation and rootlessness that envelop the orphan, who from then on keeps her eyes down, aware that she will never be granted a welcoming, kind look. Instead, she accepts her dispossession and chooses to

<sup>27</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 86.

<sup>28</sup> Baron: *Sunbeams*, p. 86.

<sup>29</sup> Baron: *Sunbeams*, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> Yoffe, Introduction, p. x.

<sup>32</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 87.

withdraw into the oppressive shadows of the kitchen or the yards, and to merge with the inanimate objects around her. Shut out from those around her, she derives pleasure from polishing the kettle that would in return “send back a kindly gleam”<sup>34</sup> or the stove that would transmit “a gay, dancing flame.”<sup>35</sup> As time passes, she “gradually mouldered, like a dark, dank cell that has long been kept shut.”<sup>36</sup> In a purgatorial state, condemned to remain mute, Haya-Fruma demonstrates her inner strength as she diligently proves her worth as a cleaner and then as a worker in the bakery. In one passage, Haya-Fruma’s almost alchemical skills– “the gleaming window-panes, after she had washed them, reflected the splendour of the world”<sup>37</sup> – are overlaid with a religious patina as people remove their shoes before stepping onto the floors she had just scrubbed. Baron’s delineation of her protagonist’s magic-like regenerative qualities are phrased in a lyrical prose that sweeps the reader along emotionally and emphatically:

With a few deft strokes, she would restore to wooden benches their original colour, as yellow as the yolk of an egg, make the brass candlesticks glitter like gold, beat out the feather pillows till they bellowed and reared up like towers at the head of the bedsteads.<sup>38</sup>

The young girl is eventually matched with an old widower, who is taken by her strength and excited by the prospect of a maid he will not have to pay. Concerned that the young woman would be distracted by the news and neglect her duties, the baker’s wife waits an entire week, telling Haya-Fruma of the proposal only on Sabbath afternoon. One might recall that for Haya-Fruma the Sabbath is something ineffably larger than for those she briefly encounters. It is on the Sabbath eve that, like an alchemist, she returns the dazzle to household furniture and floors. And it is on the Sabbath eve that she prayerfully aches to partake in the family meal, emboldened by a housewife’s sympathetic smile, but ultimately is rebuffed and sent away to vanish into thin air.

This familiar, uncaring attitude, which defines Haya-Fruma’s condition, continues with the marriage, which becomes a study in abasement. The baker’s wife explains to Haya-Fruma that she would now prepare her own bread, and the other women venture the following lacerating remark, “Surely you can’t go on grubbing on other people’s dung-heaps all your life.”<sup>39</sup> The nameless groom betrays a similar objectifying attitude toward his bride-to-be. He arrives at the wedding ceremony with a cartload of vegetables and in his work clothes, a sight that embarrasses even his relatives and underscores the impression that for him this is simply another business transaction. After the wedding, the townspeople are relieved to they have finally have gotten rid of the orphan, a collective feeling that does not escape the eye of the all-knowing narrator, “[...] the children [...] accompanied her with loud hurrahs, which were this time possibly longer and more significant than their usual jeers.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 87.

<sup>35</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 87.

<sup>37</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 86.

<sup>38</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 89.

<sup>40</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 88.

Haya-Fruma's unjust suffering is exacerbated when she arrives in Kaminka, at the home of the villager, who is so preoccupied with his trade that he barely acknowledges his new wife. Unable to find a place to store her belongings, Haya-Fruma's sense of dejection and anguish worsens when she realizes that she has little hope of escaping the misery which lies at the core of her being: "The darkness inside her very soon permeated her whole being, filling her with the dark desolation of a long-forgotten dungeon."<sup>41</sup> Deprived of an affectionate look or gesture, in the evenings Haya-Fruma would lie on a bench near the stove; while her husband tends to his accounts, or stares outside, transfixed by the fields. Baron foregrounds the existential and all-enveloping communal wilderness the heroine is trapped in with the following passage: "After he had left she would go outside, only to be confronted by the same indifference there. The houses all along the street turned blank, windowless walls to her, just as their occupants cold-shouldered her."<sup>42</sup>

As the tone becomes more bleak and grim however, there are flashes of sunbeams that provide some relief from the gritty and impersonal. The rebirth of hope, and the beginning of a new life for the perennial outsider, is provided by the appearance of a milking cow (Rizhka) who turns out to be Haya-Fruma's first friend. Warned by her husband not to approach the agitated animal, Haya-Fruma enters the cowshed, drawn by what she believes is the cow's weeping. At that point, the cow looks at Haya-Fruma as if seeking her sympathy. It is noteworthy that in the Hebrew version Baron deploys the exact phrasing "as if asking for her support" for the scene in which Haya-Fruma and the cow first meet and the scene where Haya-Fruma looks to the neighbor for protection when she is so viciously put down by the beadle's wife.

It is no accident that Haya-Fruma and Rizhka immediately bond – both have lost their beloved (Haya-Fruma, her parents, Rizhka, her calf), both have been uprooted from their birthplace, and both have been forcibly brought to a strange, uncaring place. Together, the orphan and the bereaved mother give birth to a new pact. Rizhka is the means to Haya-Fruma's salvation, restoring the broken woman's dignity and infusing her crushed soul with light and joy. The two find in each other energies and emotions of immense solace: "For both this was an hour of silent communications, as it were, a reciprocal bond between them, wondrously precious, such as only those who are doomed to silence can savour in their hearts."<sup>43</sup> In this connection, it is worth noting that silence permeates "Shavririm". Baron's characters are portrayed through their actions. There are hardly any conversations, and the only 'unspoken' dialogue of any substance occurs between Rizhka and Haya-Fruma through their interactions.

Undergirding the whole of "Shavririm" is Baron's adroit and haunting creation of a terrifyingly indifferent Jewish society that tramples on a young girl's selfhood. The author loads the narrative with the mordant irony that an animal is the means by which this character renews her faith in humanity. Baron juxtaposes the 'bestial', deformed treatment by the town's residents, which brings Haya-Fruma to the lowest and darkest point of her being, with the cow's "human" kindness, which elevates her to spiritual heights and brings about her redemption.

<sup>41</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 89.

<sup>43</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 91.

At one point, the cow licks Haya-Fruma's hand, and "she – who had never known laughter – felt as though her inner being were pervaded by a broad smile, and the dark dungeon was suddenly filled with dancing sunbeams."<sup>44</sup> Equally, the cow "seemed to have calmed down and no longer looked sad [...]"<sup>45</sup> The sunbeams, of course, serve a larger symbolic purpose here. They should be read as the resurfacing of human warmth and affection that were buried with the death of Haya-Fruma's parents.

Scene after scene unfolds with a relentless movement toward the metamorphosis of the heroine. The turning point comes when her husband dies. Haya-Fruma forfeits her entitlement to the inheritance, asking only to keep Rizhka. One might also mention that in keeping with her earlier habitual theme, Baron continues to contrast the petty behavior of the village people and Haya-Fruma's graceful deportment. During the seven days of mourning, the old man's three sons and daughter argue about the splitting of the inheritance. At such times, Haya-Fruma quietly leaves the room, and while serving the mourners with dishes she has prepared from vegetables she picked from the garden she looks away when the offspring place items of value into their suitcases.

Afterward, Haya-Fruma moves out of the house (in which she never felt at home) and into an abandoned wooden shack, located symbolically outside the village. In order to support herself and Rizhka, she goes back, without hesitation, to cleaning and scrubbing floors in the valley. Slowly she lifts herself out of poverty, battling to escape the virtual prison in which the community would confine her. Equally, a more assertive woman emerges, a woman who takes control of her life. With a shrewd business sense, she buys a churn and vat, installs her own oven, and begins selling bread, butter, and cheese.

The physical changes in Haya-Fruma are remarkable – any trace of the limp is hardly noticeable, and in sharp contrast to her previous appearance, she now dresses in a matronly apron and a colored kerchief which frames her beaming face, which leads the villagers to wonder, "Can this be Haya-Fruma?"<sup>46</sup> The all-knowing narrator then adds into the brew the story's capstone motif: "What they did not realize was that even the salty, arid soil of the desert, if only it be watered from living springs and fertilized, will eventually become enriched and burst into bloom."<sup>47</sup>

Haya-Fruma's struggle against rigid social conventions and exclusion results in the triumph of the spirit. Baron employs numerous touches to build the affecting and touching portrait of this unusual woman who does not accept her fate and who eschews any retributory yearnings. The story is filled with striking moments of charity propelled by the arresting heroine whose benevolence is the stark inverse of the community's. Free of any seething anger, she forgives those who mistreated her. Now owning the shack and a plot of land, she finances the construction of a banister for the steps of the synagogue, purchases a candelabrum for the women's section so that they are no longer reliant on the dim light that escapes from the men's area, and extends her generosity to the blind old scholar who becomes her mentor and to the destitute of the village.

One of the operating motifs in "Shavririm" is the absence and presence of light. As the title indicates, throughout the successive shocks Haya-Fruma suffers, from the tragic loss

<sup>44</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 90.

<sup>45</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 90.

<sup>46</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 92.

<sup>47</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 92.

of her parents to the terrible obstacles placed in her path, the female principal searches for light in the ever-looming darkness. References to light permeate the fabric of the tale. The beadle's daughter's eyes are likened to "sunny sparkles," and her hair forms "glittering locks."<sup>48</sup> En route to her husband's home, Haya-Fruma glimpses the "green glow of the luxuriant fields";<sup>49</sup> serving her husband with various dishes, she would look at him sitting at the dining table "like someone climbing out of a dark pit towards the light [...]"<sup>50</sup> While strolling with Rizhka along the riverbank, she sees that the cow's reddish coat would be "gleaming gold in the rays of the setting sun."<sup>51</sup> And in one of the most poignant passages in the story, Haya-Fruma's face is analogized to a "long empty lantern in which a lighted candle has been placed."<sup>52</sup>

Another recurring motif that informs the narrative is that of the hand, which symbolizes the deprivation of maternal love, but also attachment and the coming together of two outcast souls. In the story's first sequence, the hand is intimately tied to the deceased mother: "a little warmth from her mother's last caress, which was soon dissipated in the alien chill [...] Her own hand, missing the one she was accustomed to clutching, hung limply at her side."<sup>53</sup> Later, it is closely aligned with the crude, "disdainful" hands of the townspeople who rip apart her pillows and who pass her "from hand to hand like an unwanted object."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, when Haya-Fruma stretches out her hand to stroke the glittering locks of the beadle's daughter, it is the hand of the beadle's wife holding the shovel that threatens to strike her. At the same time, the coldness of the strangers' hands is juxtaposed with references to Haya-Fruma's hands (referred to as "bear-like paws" in one passage), which diligently scrub and scour household items and repair their shine and color. One of the story's widest themes, the search for happiness, is stated most clearly through the mechanism of the hand, when Haya-Fruma first caresses Rizhka's side and the cow licks her hand – a gesture that animates the young woman's being with rippling joy.

The keen and sensitive reader will also notice that Baron ties the landscape and the changing of the seasons to the chronicling of the heroine's plight and subsequent growth and self-betterment. Thus, it is during the frostiness of winter that the demoralized Haya-Fruma fractures her leg and is subjected to the social injustice depicted so sharply early in the story. In spring, she is matched to the widower, a development that contains a kernel of hope and transcends her momentary reality. That optimism is expressed through the fields Haya-Fruma observes on the road to Kaminka, a vista which stirs up submerged memories:

She gazed around her with wide-open eyes, as if seeing some distant reflection of her native village: the same green glow of the luxuriant fields, the same song of birds merging with the blue stillness seemingly charged with far-away undertones of her mother's voice.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 87.

<sup>49</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 88.

<sup>50</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 89.

<sup>51</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 91.

<sup>52</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 92.

<sup>53</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 85.

<sup>54</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 85.

<sup>55</sup> Baron, Sunbeams, p. 88.

It is in spring that Haya-Fruma forms the sharing experience with the cow. It is in summer that Haya-Fruma's gripping transformation is captured in the flowering of radishes and onions in her garden, as the entire yard overflows with the scent of a village farm.

Central to the narrative is her relationship with the blind, elderly sage, who tellingly, despite his disability, "was able to pave a path of light to the dark recesses of the woman's soul."<sup>56</sup> The fellowship with the seer, who lacks sight but is possessed of insight, infuses the brave woman's being with spirituality and holiness. It is the old man who reawakens her belief in the redeeming comfort of community and charity. Because of his teachings, she regularly attends synagogue services and spends her time caring for the impoverished.

Toward the end of the novel, eight years after returning to her town, Haya-Fruma is afflicted with a terminal illness, a fate she accepts with a noble simplicity, drawing on her wellspring of inner strength. With her usual sense of careful management, she puts her affairs in order. She hands over the bakery to the neighbor, stops the production of milk, and sells Rizhka to an affluent family, only after satisfying herself that they have a properly built cowshed. The story's transformative tenor reaches its apotheosis when Haya-Fruma closes her eyes for the final time. At last, the righteous woman has attained sublime happiness and fulfillment: "As she sank into slumber, she felt as though she were becoming enveloped in the golden haze of an unseen sunrise. This radiance that dawned on her . . . awaits all those who have been refined and burnished by suffering in this world."<sup>57</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Remarkably for an author who has been dead for more than five decades, and who was virtually forgotten after her death, critical appraisal of her corpus has increased, with a new generation scholars unearthing multiple levels of meaning in her work. It is clear that Baron's writings betray not only a feminist concern with the role of women in Jewish society, but also trenchant criticism of Zionism and a challenging of the masculine dominance of the Hebrew canon. What makes Baron's works so delicately astute, for one, is their stark honesty and empathy in seeing the frailty of her characters, in pointing out their errors, and in her championing of the downtrodden, the marginal, and the weak. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, her vignettes of small Jewish East European communities that were destroyed, assume heightened documentary and historical importance, beyond their mere literary value. At the same time, despite her own provincialism, Baron's appeal lay in the stories' worldly, universal sensibility.

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<sup>56</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 92.

<sup>57</sup> Baron, *Sunbeams*, p. 93.

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