Distant Signs and Ancient Wonders

Hasidic Faith in the Poetry of Zelda

Why is poetry so often the medium of prayer? Zvi Mark's study of the masterful poet Zelda shows how the musical magic of language can draw us closer to the Divine

The name Zelda – simply Zelda – is known to every lover of modern Hebrew poetry. Israeli schoolchildren are taught her poems the way youngsters elsewhere are taught Tennyson or Robert Frost. American readers who recognize the name Zelda may have encountered her recently in the pages of Amos Oz's wonderful autobiographical novel, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, where the Jerusalem-born author describes his infatuation with his second-grade teacher in 1947, on the eve of the War of Independence:

By **ZVI MARK**

She was my first love. An unmarried woman in her thirties, Teacher Zelda, Miss Schneersohn. I was not quite eight, and she swept me away; she set in motion some kind of inner metronome that had not stirred before and has not stopped since . . . I had not the slightest idea, and she never gave me the faintest hint, that besides being my teacher, my beloved, she was also Zelda the poet, some of whose poems had been published in literary supplements and in one or two obscure magazines. I did know that, like me, she was an only child. Nor did I know that she was related to a famous dynasty of Hasidic rabbis . . .

Zelda Schneersohn (1914-1984) was a direct descendant of the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady, and of his illustrious grandson, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, known as the Tzemach Tzedek. She was a first cousin of Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe. Zelda was born in Russia and at age 12 came with her family to Jerusalem, where she attended religious schools. While studying at a teachers' college she began to write poetry; she married (quite late by ultra-Orthodox standards) in 1950, and published her first book of poems in 1967. After the death of her husband, Haim Mishkovsky, in 1971, she published five more books. To this day, her readers continue to span the range of Israeli society, from secular Jews to the most devout.

The link between faith and poetry is of fundamental importance in Zelda's work. Indeed, her very definition of faith is bound up in her conception of the art of poetry and the role of the poet, as expressed in her poems themselves. Her vision of poetry is not didactic, but implicit. As we read Zelda, we may well recall the summation offered by the American writer Archibald MacLeish in his poem "Ars Poetica": "A poem should not mean/But be."

The braiding of poetry and religious faith is finely illustrated in Zelda's poem *Im Sabi* ("*With My Grandfather*"):

Like our father Abraham
who counted stars at night,
who called out to his Creator
from the furnace,
who bound his son
on the altar –
so was my grandfather.
The same perfect faith
in the midst of the flames, the same
dewy gaze
and soft-curling beard.
Outside, it snowed;
outside, they roared:
"There is no justice,
no judge."
And in his cracked, shattered room,
cherubs sang
of the Heavenly Jerusalem.*

The spine of the poem is the analogy between the grandfather and the Patriarch Abraham, who share "the same perfect faith in the midst of the flames." Abraham, according to the Midrash, was cast by Nimrod into a fiery furnace; the faith of the grandfather is tested by pogroms and crematoria. The repetition of the word "outside" stands in contrast to the grandfather's inner world. Outside, the heretical cries of "There is no justice, no judge" ring out, while ""the same perfect faith" endures within; outside, "they roar," inside, they sing. Outside, all is cold and alienated – "it snowed" – while inside, there is faith amid the flames.

But the heretical voices that threaten faith work their way in from outside. While the beginning of the poem portrays the inner world as one of "perfect faith," the end reveals cracks in this perfect world. First,

* All translations of Zelda's poetry in this article are from *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda*, translated, with an introduction and notes, by Marcia Falk. Copyright (c) 2004 Marcia Lee Falk. Used by permission of the translator.

the grandfather's room is "cracked," then "shattered." The grandfather is left defenseless, with no barrier against the roaring and menacing outside world. The voices of heresy penetrate the surrounding society, possibly even his home and family, perhaps his very thoughts. Yet the grandfather is able to hear the singing of the angels, and withstands the test of his faith. Within the cracked and shattered walls, he succeeds in maintaining an independent inner space that enables him to hear the cherubs' song.

Poetry, for Zelda, is inextricable from faith. The ability to listen to the poetic voices of the Heavenly Jerusalem within a world estranged from faith, where the cries of "There is no justice, no judge" constantly burst forth, is the modern test of faith. Hearing and reading poetry, and certainly poetry that comes from the heavenly realms, requires quiet, clarity of thought and deliberation. Only one whose inner world is unfaltering, with an ample measure of inner harmony, can create an enclave of sanctity, an island of faith and poetry within the encircling tumult and chaos.

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"She would read to me," recalled Amos Oz, "what she might have been intending to read anyway that morning: Hasidic tales, rabbinic legends, obscure stories about holy Kabbalists who succeeded in combining the letters of the alphabet and working wonders and miracles." Indeed, Zelda's conception of faith as the ability to hear poetry reflects a complete worldview that stems largely from the sources of her inspiration, which included, along with Hasidism, the teachings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook. In his *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*, Martin Buber retells the following story:

> On *Shabbat Shira* [the "Sabbath of Song," when the Torah portion about the crossing of the Red Sea is chanted], the Rabbi of Sadagora said: "It is not written that they sang the Song [of the Sea, *shirat hayam*] immediately after they crossed the sea. First they had to reach the rung of perfect faith, as it is written: 'And they believed in the Lord, and in his servant Moses.' Only after that come the words: 'Then sang Moses and the children of Israel.' Only he who believes can sing the song."

This linkage between faith and the ability to "sing the song" or recite poetry is founded on the belief that human life and the exterior world contain, beyond their physical or psychological dimension, a spiritual reality that poetry aspires to express. Listen to Rav Kook, himself an accomplished poet, writing in *The Lights of Faith*:

> Faith as a whole includes the poetry of life, the poetry of all existence. Poetry is the emotion that penetrates the deepest within, into the depths of the essence of a concept, into its inner content, which cannot be attained by prose. Consequently, the true mirror of life is to be found within the poetry of life, and not in the mundane life that is expressed by prose . . . There is no poetry in the world in which the sacred glimmerings of faith do not shine forth, and when sanctity is manifest in the poetical spirit in its purest and most whole form, then it is truly holy poetry, that will be sung only by the holy angels and the angels of God.

Poetry, for Rav Kook, is subsumed within faith; it is not merely a vehicle for expression, but a means of perceiving and sensing life's essence. The strength of prose is its ability to describe the outer strata of existence, but a poem brings us face-to-face with life's essential beauty, with the centrality of values in human life. Accordingly, loss of faith eliminates the possibility of poetry, for without faith poetry is merely empty verbiage that attempts to wrap the hollow reality within a stream of words and images.

The poet Zelda at home in Jerusalem, 1971. Photo: Israelsun

For Zelda, each poem emanates from the world of concealment. Poetry reveals the purity and holiness that are hidden beneath the pandemonium of the marketplace, the roar of the outside world. In Hasidism, and in the lyrical vocabulary of Zelda's poetry, the term "hidden" is laden with special meaning. The esoteric teachings of Judaism, known as "*torat ha'nistar*" (literally, "the teaching of the concealed"), focus on the unseen strata that lie beyond the visible layer of the Torah, and contain its deepest spiritual truths. Love and fear of God belong to this hidden realm, for simple language cannot transmit the love of God that one feels in one's heart. Poetry and song connect us with the vital essence of life; the absence of poetry is *hester panim*, the "hiding of God's face." For the poet, such concealment produces drought and darkness:

You hid Your soul from me
and within me there no longer is
the sound of the full river,
that overflows its banks.

My life has been severed from song
and I shall stand in the cleft,
confounded,
without sun
without moon
and without candle.

You have hidden Your soul from me
and the bread on the table is dry
and has grown stale.

The Song of the Grasses

Zelda's conception of poetry as divine revelation reflects the influence of a Hasidic master she particularly admired, Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav (1772–1810). A great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Rebbe Nachman is widely revered to this day, well beyond the Hasidic world, as a storyteller and mystic. The centrality of nature, of melody and song, in Bratslav thought and worship is illustrated by a story about Rebbe Nachman:

> A person from Zlatopol [Ukraine] told me that when our master, of blessed memory, was residing in Zlatopol . . . [O]ur master told him: "Come with me for a walk." He went with him outside the city, and they walked among the grasses. Our master told him: "If only you would merit hearing the sound of the songs and praises of the grasses, how each and every grass proclaims song to the Lord, may He be blessed, without partiality and without any foreign thoughts, and without the expectation of any recompense. How beautiful and fine it is to hear their song, and it is very good in their eyes to serve the Lord with awe."

The grasses sing to the Lord, but not everyone is able to hear their songs of praise, and not everyone hears the same song. "Know that every shepherd has his own special melody," Rebbe Nachman taught, "according to the grasses and according to the place where he tends his flocks." Melody and song are instrumental aspects of the vitality that sustains the world, and one must be open to receive them. In her poem "New Fruit in the Season of Childhood," Zelda reflects this intuition:

A light, sudden bird
prepared my soul for the song of the
grasses.

According to Rebbe Nachman and other Hasidic masters, the natural world not only contains layers of spiritual meaning, but is charged with divine signs. For Zelda, poetry is the fitting medium to absorb and express such messages:

There was something startling
in the blue of the sky.
I was amazed that the treetops
swayed gently

with no shadow of fear.
I wanted to flee from the white sky
but the small garden showed me signs
that His mercy had not ceased.

The religious process described by Zelda is made clear only at the end of the poem. At first, an undefined feeling of anxiety seizes the startled speaker, and prompts her to flee. Only thereafter, when the small garden "showed me signs/ that His mercy had not ceased," do we understand that an implied conversation about God has been conducted all the while, and that the poet's anxiety derives from a glimpse of God's fearsome countenance. The hidden melody of the grasses, a poetic language of signs, conveys the two essential components of religious feeling: fear and love.

Poetry reveals the purity and holiness that are hidden beneath the roar of the outside world.

Signs are able to express a primeval meaning that is beyond the range of concrete speech or explicit content. Attentiveness to the signs in the garden or the treetops prepares the poet for a conversation with the Creator. Bratslav Hasidism speaks of *remazim* – hints, allusions – that enable such communication, and Zelda, too, in another poem, speaks of "*remazim mishamayim*," (from the heavens). As Rebbe Nachman's leading disciple, Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, wrote:

> Everyone must direct his mind to understand the allusions [*remazim*], until he draws down to himself the Godhead, may He be blessed, everywhere, and understands that His presence fills all the earth.

This teaching is beautifully exemplified by Zelda's poem "In the Kingdom of Sunset":

In the kingdom of sunset
even a thorn shines.

Suddenly crowns melt away
and the thorn becomes a thorn again
and the mount returns to its
shapelessness,
the attribute of strict judgment
is revealed
and the skeleton of the Universe breaks
through.
But we do not die of fear
for the mercy of the night arrives
and the soul ascends to a new awareness
of the Creator.

As the Israeli poet and scholar Hamutal Bar-Yosef has observed, this is more than just a nature poem. It contains a number of terms that in Jewish mystical literature refer to the *sefirot*, divine attributes or emanations: *Din* ("strict judgment"), *malkhut* ("kingdom"), *nogah* ("radiance"), *keter* ("crown"), and *hesed* ("mercy"). Any of these terms can be understood more conventionally, of course, but taken together they comprise a dense, deliberate assemblage derived from the semantic field of Kabbalah and Hasidism. Zelda weaves this cluster of mystical language to suggest the way in which man experiences the divine world as revealed in the universe, not to conceptualize the world of the Godhead itself. Contact with the divine is diverse and constantly changing, along with the unceasing transformation of nature, even that of objects such as hills and thorns. The light of sunset, the falling darkness, the merciful night, all lead us to the "hidden song" of creation, and a new understanding of the Creator.

Signs and Wonders

> I loved the way Teacher Zelda placed one word next to another. Sometimes she would put an ordinary, everyday word next to another word that was also quite ordinary, and all of a sudden, simply because they were next to each other, two ordinary words that did not normally stand next to each other, a sort of electric spark jumped between them and took my breath away.
>
> *Amos Oz*

Zelda's poetic method is a journey of the soul. The poet begins by standing breathless before nature and emerges in a religious experience akin to revelation.

The sun lit a wet branch
and gold leaves captured my eyes.
The gold leaves that coursed
night and day
through my heart's blood
changed their configuration.

And when they reached the soul,
its solitude,
they became distant signs
of light,
clues from heaven,
ancient wonders.

Here, an aesthetic perception of nature undergoes a physical process of internalization, as the images gradually become part of the blood's circulation and the beating heart. By the time they reach "the soul, its solitude," they become "distant signs / of light / clues from heaven / ancient wonders." The wet branch and golden leaves are no longer an enchanting aesthetic experience; they are signs and allusions sent from the supernal world, from heaven.

In Hebrew, Zelda's "signs and "wonders" are "*otot*" and "*moftim*," words familiar from the Passover Haggadah and the biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt. God's signs and wonders are the miracles that exceed the bounds of nature, thereby confirming the existence of God and His authority and power. In the medieval period, when some philosophers rejected miraculous acts as a means of proof, the words *ot* and *mofet* took on the new connotation of rational or logical proof. Zelda adds another layer of meaning to these words. She, too, maintains that signs and wonders are a way to find faith in God and to experience His contact with human beings, but her poetry is not concerned with miracles that exceed the bounds of nature, or with scholarly exercises in logic. For her, a wet leaf on a sunny day is a sign that has come from afar, an ancient wonder that reaches the most secluded and intimate levels of the human soul, a "hidden song" awakened by nature's beauty. As in "With My Grandfather," the test of faith in Zelda's world is the ability to hear poetry: the song of the grasses and the song of the cherubs. Anyone capable of hearing and absorbing the song receives from heaven a wondrous sign of the existence of the Eternal God.

Revelation and Concealment

In her poem "The Good Smell of Distances," Zelda meditates upon the art of poetry:

Something within me
took his head from the sea,
longing for existence in words.
I stand like that beggar
and on the tablet of my heart a song
that tells every passerby,
every runner,
of the hidden regions of the heart –
what madness,
what shame,
to lead strangers there.
The song, too, begs for death,
for trees and stones touched ungently
the melody.

The Hasidic *Admor* of Kretchnif playing the violin on Hanukkah, Rehovot, 2005. Photo by Menahem Kahana

The song on the tablet of my heart
makes signs to me
for the sunset flung it
a drop of gold
so that I would rejoice once again
rejoice once again
for the rain that falls on a sunny day.
The song whispers to my soul:
"Do not flee,
I hear my friend's steps".

From one end of the world to the other
rove the songs
of every people and language.
Parables and signs come;
the good smell of distances
emanates from them
if on their way they did not touch
the stench of standing water
or blood.

But the finest of all the songs
is the white curtain
in which is embroidered with a white
thread:
"Silence is Your praise".

The poet is made anxious by the public nature of the poem, the exposure of intimate secrets. But the anxiety is mitigated by voices that burst forth from the poem itself. The hidden regions that are laid bare in the poem are spoken in a whisper and concealed in the language of signs and parables, deciphered by a friendly reader.

Zelda's poetic method is a journey of the soul.

The poem's final stanza introduces a new image, the white curtain, "finest of all the songs." Embroidered upon it are words from the finest of the Hebrew poets, the Psalmist: "Silence is Your praise." As in many of Zelda's works, God appears only at the end, as a culmination of the poem's argument. God is not called by name, but instead is addressed obliquely, with the words of Psalm 65. The religious imagery of the poem also appears only at its end, with the *parokhet*, the curtain that covers the Ark in the synagogue, and in the ancient Temple, was a screen that concealed the Holy of Holies. Thus the last stanza of this poem about poetry is a prayer, a poem presented to God, the apex of poetry, "the finest of all the songs."

Poetry itself is a portal and a cover, revelation and concealment.

Zelda's choice of white as the color of silent praise has an intriguing foundation in the Hasidic literature. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, in his *Sefer Kedushat Levi*, commented on the garments worn by the High Priest as he enters the Holy of Holies:

> This will enable you to understand why the High Priest would wear white garments on Yom Kippur: because the appearance of white is completely colorless, but can contain all colors. Now, the Lord, may He be blessed, has, as it were, no coloration, for He has no image or countenance.

For Zelda, the most exalted writing is white on white: neither complete silence, nor a blank page on which nothing is written. Silence (*dumiyah*) and praise (*tehillah*), embroidered in white thread, adorn the curtain, which is both a gate to the holy and the screen that hides it. So, too, is poetry itself a portal and a cover, revelation and concealment. As such, its highest form is religious poetry. The "finest of all the songs" is the poem concealed from all other poems, the subject of which is God, He who is both hidden and revealed.

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