

"Leah" In Tel Aviv Museum of the Art

Blog by Prof. Amia Lieblich, 15.1.19

In one of the hats I wear, I can crown myself as a "Leah Goldberg expert". Ever since I wrote "To Leah", I have been tracking anything that has to do with this poet. It appears that Leah Goldberg remains an inexhaustible source for creation; it is surprising how her life has been continuing nearly fifty years after her passing away.

First, after her death, many of the poets' writings, which were not printed in her life, were finally published. New editions of her previously published works have been printed. Various biographies were written, which include a selection of her well renowned poems. An annotated edition of her personal diaries was published, as well as her correspondence with her friend. There was, of course, Yair Kedar's documentary film in "The Hebrews" series. All these were appended, very recently, by the play "Leah", produced by a completely anonymous group (at least for me), managed by Yael Cramsky, which I watched this week at the Tel Aviv Museum.

The play is based on the novel "And He is the Light", the only complete novel this poet had published in her life. As someone who translated Tolstoy's "War and Peace", and was knowledgeable in the classic European novels, she was not proud of this creation, as she had an exalted model for the genre of novels, one she was unable to match. Sometimes she wrote in her diary that she hadn't experience enough in her life to be able to write a real novel. I too, though not an expert of literary quality, felt that as a literary creation, this novel is lacking, definitely in comparison with her excellent poems. However, like many researchers, I saw the diary as a biographical treasure for anyone who wishes to learn about this poet's life and motives. This was also the premise of Yael Cramsky, who adapted the book into a play and directed it.

The protagonist of the novel, Nora, is made in the image of Leah, and the character of Nora's mother reminds quite a bit of Tsila Goldberg, the mother who took care of the poet throughout her entire life. The father's image, flashes of whom appear in the play based on the diary, also corresponds with the facts of life of the poet, as we know them. Only the lover's character, Erin, is not autobiographic, although one can guess where it was derived from.

The spectators sit in the hall around the open space in which the play takes place. There are four actors in the play (and several others, through recordings of their voices). When they don't act, the actors sit between the spectators in the four sides of the room. The color of their clothes is uniform – the color of cream-ivory. A video screen that resembles a round mirror transmits sonic vibrations of the singing that is played, and the only set accessory is some kind of a flexible bench that changes forms throughout the play.

The play accurately recreates the plot of the book. Nora, the student from Berlin, comes to spend her summer vacation at her parents' home, and finds out that her mother had divorced her father, who was hospitalized after his mental illness had worsened. She meets a friend of her father's Erin, who came to visit him, and despite the large age differences between them, she falls in love with him – a love that leads to disappointment (as usual also in the poet's life). The love of a man older than her and the disappointment this love results in are one of the focus points of the plot in the play. However, the main focus point is the gradual discovery of the mental illness in Nora's family, and the terrible threat that the illness is hereditary and will also manifest in her. What is implied in her life if indeed she also bears the seeds of the illness? Could one overcome heredity?

The image of the protagonist embodies a combination of fragile weakness and great strength, which arises precisely in the face of threat and disappointment. This is the light mentioned at the title of the novel. She declares that despite all these hard data, she will not let her childhood haunt her, and she will survive – or in the poet's words "dare", and challenge her childhood and heredity. In the subtext – as I wrote the novel, which, like almost all of her works, was written in Israel – Goldberg also speaks of the ideal of the New Jew, the Israeli Sabra, who will grow free of the burdens of antisemitism and diaspora.

To emphasize the biographical value of the play (and the book it was based on), the adapter of the play integrated into it highly relevant fragments from Leah Goldberg's diary, which her mother reads out loud from a hand-written notebook, very similar to the look of her real diary notebooks. The acting work by all four actors is brilliant, and all that is accompanied by wonderful original music by Fay Shapiro, which is sung acapella by the entire group. The outcome of all this composition is moving and powerful.

My psychologist readers will be interested by the question of the terrifying heredity of schizophrenia, which is seemingly the father's mental illness, and is at the center of the play. On the one hand, according to the familiar story, the disturbance burst after the father was captured by the authorities, tortured and experienced a daily staging of his execution, for seven times. Perhaps this was, therefore, a reaction to trauma, and not a hereditary mental illness. On the other hand, knowledge of other family members who suffered from schizophrenia could increase the probability of the hereditary assumption, which haunted the poet throughout her entire life. Could it be that in this book, the childless poet tried to explain to her readers why she, who could write poems, rhymes and stories for children, both big and small, and was known as an "aunt" to many of her friends' children, does not bring a child into this world? On the other hand, maybe she explained it to herself. By the way, one must take into consideration that this was a time in which single parenthood was very rare, and Goldberg had had many difficulties in her love life as well, in the creation of a "couple relationship". However, this is a topic that was already discussed many times in all that was written of the poet and her life, and Yael Cramsky did well to not enter this territory once again. In any case, as I wrote about Amos Oz about

two weeks ago, the great authors that leave wonderful books behind them do not ever really die.

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