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Retelling the Bible: Jewish Women's Midrashic Poems on Abishag the Shunammite

Abstract: Judaism traditionally barred women from studying; thus, much of Jewish feminism has been devoted to gaining access to the Jewish canon as a whole and the biblical text in particular. Adrienne Rich and Alicia Suskin Ostriker argue that, in re-visioning biblical/ancient texts, women help liberate themselves from male-dominated culture. This article focuses on what may be called feminine “midrashic poems”: poems that rewrite the biblical story from a feminine perspective, giving a voice to a female protagonist, Abishag the Shunammite, who is silenced in the original text (1 Kings 1.1–5, 1.14, 2.13–26). Each poet gives Abishag a different voice and way of tackling her situation: Hedwig Caspari's Abishag commits suicide; Anda Amir Pinkerfeld's Abishag is transformed from a hopeful young girl into a sexually abused woman; Louise Glück's Abishag remains passive and compliant in the face of the patriarchy; Karen Gershon's Abishag is not a poor girl forced into an impossible situation, but constitutes a powerful presence; Shirley Kaufman's Abishag is changed from an object into a woman who is cognizant of her power over the old King David; Rivka Miriam links Abishag with David's other wives; and Lou Barrett's Abishag dreams of erotic salvation.

Keywords: Abishag the Shunammite, contemporary poetry, Jewish women poets, Midrash

1 Introduction

In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich argues that in re-visioning biblical/ancient texts, women help liberate themselves from male-dominated culture: “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (1972, 19). Outlining three overlapping female hermeneutics of biblical revisionism – suspicion, desire, and indeterminacy – Alicia Suskin Ostriker posits that:

Women strive toward autonomous self-definition as women [...] [having] been defined by patriarchy for four thousand years. They write of the struggle against gendered muteness, gendered invisibility, and their own sense of being divided selves. [...] Finally, they write revisionist mythology, invading past tradition in order to change it (Suskin Ostriker 1993, 101).

This article examines the way in which various Jewish women poets retell the biblical story of Abishag the Shunammite. Following Norma Rosen's view of those who, seizing the spaces lying open in the text, set to "dreaming, to imagining answers to their own questions," I approach these works as "midrashic poems" (Rosen 1996, 422). As modern female avatars of this ancient genre, they exemplify the shift from *rabbani* (rabbinic exegesis) to *ribboni* – independent thinkers/writers who transfer authority from the Bible into their own hands, engaging with tradition in explicitly fictive ways (Elon 1996, 36; Selinger 2011, 137).

The biblical Abishag only merits two brief mentions in 1 Kings. In the first, she is chosen as a beautiful virgin to warm David's bones in his old age (1 Kings 1.1–4). In the second, David's son Adonijah asks Bathsheba to intercede with his brother Solomon for permission to marry her following their father's death. Solomon regards this seemingly innocent request as a declaration of intent to usurp him because taking the former king's concubine constitutes a bid for the throne (1 Kings 2.13–25). Adonijah thus uses Abishag as a pawn in his attempt to supplant his brother and become king (Tsevat 1958).

Later Jewish midrashic tradition also pays scant attention to Abishag, identifying her as the sister of the Shunammite woman for whom Elisha performed miracles and the "Shulammitte" of Canticles, but otherwise only using her as a means to prove that kings can much more easily keep concubines than divorce their wives (cf. b. Sanhedrin 22a).¹ Christian writers also make virtually no reference to the biblical text, one of the few who does being St Jerome, who rather implausibly adduces her as a prototype of the Virgin Mary in one of his letters (Jerome 2016, letter 52.4). Neither Christian nor Jewish traditions thus offer any precedents or models for interpreting the biblical account of Abishag. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, however, this episode has become the subject of numerous poems in German, Yiddish, Hebrew, and English.

¹ This Midrash thus depicts David both as sexually vigorous in his old age and Torah-observant (see Kadari 2009).

2 Hedwig Caspari: Abishag destroying and destroyed

Hedwig Caspari (1882–1922), who was born and lived in Berlin, published two books during her lifetime – a play entitled *Salomos Abfall* (1920) and a volume of poetry entitled *Elohim* (1919). Writing in *Das Zelt* two years after her death, Auguste Hauschner also refers to two unpublished manuscripts – *Das Blut*, a three-act play dealing with transgressive sibling love, and *I.N.R.I.*, a series of agony-filled poems related to crucifixion (Hauschner 1924, 101). Published in *Elohim*, Caspari’s “Abishag” (1919, 22) focuses primarily on the part Abishag plays in David’s sons’ rivalry.

The poem’s opening lines contrast the freezing old king and the “hot” young girl: Abishag matures as a “young wine that has survived its own fermentation” – a reflection of her inner fire.² Her heat is thus simultaneously comforting and dangerous. Compassionate towards the older generation, she threatens the younger, unwittingly constituting the cause of Solomon’s murder of his brother. Her awareness and fear of her power only come when it is too late and the sight of Adonijah’s freezing body lying in a pool of blood prompts realization that the passion she stirred in the two brothers led one to kill the other. Hereupon, her heat gives way to inner coldness and self-condemnation.

In the following stanza, she yearns for the warmth and security she had felt lying in David’s bosom, when the old king’s blood congealing slowly towards death provided her with a feeling of peace and security. Her dawning insight into her deadly influence on the brothers parallels her physical cooling as she approaches her own death. Crushing herself in protest against God’s failure to revive the aged, freezing David in her embrace, she dies a virgin by her own hand.

3 Anda Amir Pinkerfeld: Abishag’s emotional cycle

Anda Amir Pinkerfeld (1902–1981), a prominent Israeli poet also well known for her children’s writing, is regarded as “one of the first modernists in Hebrew poetry” (Gluzman 2003, 131). heralding the 1960s trend towards treating biblical themes in Hebrew poetry, her early work addresses a series of biblical figures

² All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

rarely venerated or paid any attention by traditional (male) writers – Jubal, Esau, Abishag, Eve, Hagar, Jephthah's daughter, Lot's wife, Delilah, Jael. In these poems, she gives voice to those – men and women – whom the collective tradition has silenced and marginalized, protesting against the use of the Bible for national or religious purposes (Zierler 2009; Oppenheimer 2011).

First published in 1931 in the literary journal *Moznayim* and later included in *Me-olam: Dmuyot mi-kedem* (1932), "Abishag" was later included in her 1932 volume *Yuval*. Here, the numbered stanzas of the first version give way to unnumbered stanzas and the sections are divided slightly differently. In *Yuval* the poem also falls into the category of what we might call "feminist" poems, appearing in a section headed "We are the Women", in contrast to *Me-olam*, which is organized around biblical figures (and which some perceive as an attempt at a "rewritten-Bible"; Berlowitz 2008, 258).

"Abishag" (Amir Pinkerfeld 1932, 86–89) comprises a dramatic monologue, with Abishag speaking on three separate occasions within patriarchal society, representing three stages in her life – her selection as David's bed-warmer, her sexual abuse at his hands, and her acceptance of her fate. During her preparations, and as she enters the king's chamber for the first time, she appears to feel privileged: "But what am I, who am I / that the king shall call upon me?" Her excitement and pride are conveyed by the image of the high-flying vulture who lifts her splendour on his wings because "The king wanted me." She downplays the king's senescence, characterizing him as "venerable" [ישיש] rather than "old" [זקן], and expressing her adoration of the king in the statement: "I will prostrate myself at his feet / and bow."

The second part relates to her growing awareness of having been deluded. Herein, the hero of Israel becomes a lascivious old man in her eyes, his "venerable" status being reduced to that of an "old" and then "very old" man. An increasingly pathetic figure, the impression he leaves on Abishag elucidates the revulsion she feels towards him (Cohen 1998, 220). The one-sided (attempt at) lovemaking underscores the humiliation and abuse she suffers at his hand:

Why do you drip death into my arteries,
drop after drop,
and I become very cold?
As with a sheet of poison you cover me with your kisses,
I wilt under them like a frost-infected rose.

As she lies passive and desperate, her youth is a passing rebellious thought seeking to escape into the hot sun: "Oh, how far I have gone away from my youth, overnight." After the king finally falls asleep, she wishes that he never wakes again, convinced that her only way out is through his death.

The third part of the triptych poem turns back the clock. Here, the king's lyre prompts an epiphany – an allusion to a talmudic Midrash according to which David arose to study the Torah when his instrument began playing in the middle of the night (b. Ber. 3b–4a). The time at which these mystical events occur remains obscure, as the initial pastoral scenery turns into an apocalyptic vision resembling the Flood (Akaviah 1975, 201). Overwhelmed by the revelation, Abishag asks the king to forgive her rebellious thoughts, accepting her fate.

Her statement at the end of the poem, “Take my virgin-years, / and may you live, live, / David my king!”, is ambiguous, however. While it may represent a genuine wish to understand the king's greatness as an artist, it may also acknowledge that she has become an impersonal and anonymous tool, reduced to merely physical dimensions (Akaviah 1975, 202; Bar Shavit 1997, 11). Both readings, though, show that the spark of rebellion prominent in the second part of the poem has now been snuffed out. Choosing to give Abishag a “voice,” Pinkerfeld adds diversified emotions and employs the Abishag story to give us a glimpse into the emotions of a hopeful young girl transformed into a sexually abused woman.

4 Louise Glück: Abishag remembering and dreaming

Louise Glück's “Abishag” forms part of *The House on Marshland* (1976, 30–31) – a group of poems that dramatizes the “collision of an androcentric and a more gyno-centric myth of language” (Bonds 1990, 60). Directing the biblical narrative onto new path(s), she explores Abishag's feelings and dreams (Morris 2006, 79–80). Recalling the past in the first section of the poem, Abishag attributes her having been brought to the king's palace to three patriarchal forces: God, the dying King David, and her own father. She replies to her father's question “How much I have ever asked of you” with “*Nothing*” (emphasis in original) – a response tantamount to silence. As the third stanza makes clear, she feels that she has been mutely forced into a situation that has stripped her of her identity. Although thinking of herself “as I was then,” her thoughts in fact relate to what she has become – a “featureless” figure “staring into a “hollowed gourd half filled with water.”

In many traditions, the many-seeded and curvaceous and womb-like shaped gourd symbolizes fertility and femininity (Wilson 1951). “Hollowed out,” Abishag is thus barren and unfeminine. This theme is taken up at the end of the stanza, where the king's kinsmen pass her over completely. Lacking identity and presence, she is destined to be ignored and discounted: “Not one among the kinsmen touched me, / not one among the slaves. / No one will touch me now.”

In the second section, Abishag has a recurring dream – also prompted by her father. While in reality he did not consult her when he gave her to David’s men, in the dream he appears to offer her a choice. The poem thus illustrates the human need to believe that choice is possible and, when it is not, to transfigure reality so that decisions seem possible (Wooten 1975, 5). Here, too, the dream is illusory; Abishag has to choose between three suitors. Her independence is in fact a sham, her true wish being not for “three sounds” – “*Abishag*” – but “two: *my love* –” (emphasis in original). Rather than being called by name, she desires someone for someone to love her.

In the second stanza, Abishag addresses the reader directly – “I tell you if it is my own will / binding me I cannot be saved” – and then only speaks again in the final three lines: “But they were not alike / and to select death, O yes I can / believe that of my body.” Her true feelings are revealed in her direct speech rather than the dream. The only thing she believes available to her is death. In the dream, the suitors all sound alike, having only voices and no heart(s). Her response is thus “chiefly in weariness.” In reality, after David’s death “No one will touch” her. Isolated, alone, uncourted, passed over – what is left but death? While Glück’s Abishag speaks, remembers, and dreams, she thus remains passive – an empty shell rather than a vibrant person.

5 Karen Gershon: Abishag’s David

Karen Gershon’s “David and Abishag” (1979) was published in the *Critical Quarterly*. Known primarily for her post-Holocaust literature, Gershon also treats biblical figures and themes, using them as channels through which “to perceive and comprehend the patterns of generations and inherited experience” (Wells 1990, 4). While many of her poems deal with her Jewishness and memory, those that revolve around biblical characters frequently focus on female figures (Davidson 1991, 546). “David and Abishag,” however, examines David at various stages in his life. In contrast to the other poems analysed herein, although written from Abishag’s perspective, it centres around the king.

The four numbered fragments paint a delicate picture of Abishag’s emotions towards the old monarch. The first opens with a question that leads us into the king’s bedchamber, the scene of the poem as a whole, the king wiping away Abishag’s tears “like a lover,” forgetting that there “had been others / more completely possessed.” While her weeping might have been a form of self-pity at being condemned as a young woman to spend her life in an old king’s bed, Abishag attributes it to her memories of David as a young man.

In the second fragment, she begins to indulge in some self-regret: “I’d rather look for a peasant boy / than stay here as a queen.” These thoughts nonetheless quickly fade when she dreams of the monarch as “young King David.” The third fragment ascribes the sorrow she experiences to the fact that David’s youth is trapped within a decrepit body: in his eyes “crouched the beauty they had known,” and in his fingertips bloom “the bodies he had touched,” his sense of being “jubilant within” resembling “precious mines” in the heart of the earth.

In the final fragment, Abishag expresses her envy of all those who had known David as a young man – God, life, the land, the people, the dead warriors, his enemies, the entire generation “harvesting your name.” Here, she is depicted as a girl, her jealousy being described as “singing with the dawn.” While the poem as a whole reveals Abishag’s thoughts as she lies with the king at night, Gershon’s Abishag is not a poor girl forced into an impossible situation; it is even intimated that she chooses to stay rather than go looking for a peasant boy. Her pitying of the king and not being pitied thus appear to lie at the basis of the power of her image.

6 Shirley Kaufman: From being objectified to mocking

Shirley Kaufman’s “Abishag,” published in *Claims* (1984, 36–37), contrasts sharply with Gershon’s. The poem’s motto is a line from the biblical story that focuses on Abishag’s role as the king’s bed-warmer. As the poem develops, however, she is transformed from the object of the gaze of the king and his servants into a subject with her own thoughts and aware of her power to mock. Although silent, she allows us access to her thoughts.

The poem consists of four equal-length stanzas of eight lines, divided almost exactly between the perspective of the king’s servants (stanza 1), the king himself (stanza 2), Abishag (stanza 3), and the king and Abishag (stanza 4). The first describes Abishag’s mission, the servants treating her as an object in a “blanket effect” (Cushing Stahlberg 2009): “To dangle around his neck, / send currents of fever / through his phlegmatic nerves, something / like rabbit fur, silky, / or maybe a goat-hair blanket / to tickle his chin.” The second stanza heightens this impression, for David appears to treat her as a garment or road-map. Despite her directions, however, he cannot find his way: “He spreads her out / like a road-map, trying / to find his way from one point / to another, unable.”

His inability to come and go highlights his impotence in her company. Here, a new factor is introduced, hinted at by Abishag’s words in the Midrash, which

interpret the biblical phrase “but the king did not know her” as intimating David’s incapacitation. Abishag’s passivity is thus paralleled by his.

The third stanza presents us with Abishag’s own thoughts, revealing the bed-warmer to be an ice-maiden. Her true wish is to make the king vanish: “She thinks if she pinches / his hand it will turn to powder.” The “lost bird pecking in winter” of the second stanza is elaborated here: “She feels his thin claws, his wings / spread over her like arms, not bones / but feathers ready to fall.” Although flying and wings frequently symbolize freedom of movement, a “bird’s view” being omnipresent and omniscient, the king is impotent here, unable “to find his way from one point to another,” the “feathers being ready to fall” from his wings (see Li 2014, 77). The metaphor thus seems to mock the old king.

At the end of the stanza, Abishag treats David cruelly, aware that her feminine body constantly reminds him of his current state, which contrasts sharply with his glorious past as a womanizer. In the final stanza, Kaufman explicitly portrays Abishag in sexual terms, mentioning her breasts, slightly open mouth, and hair spilling everywhere in order to highlight the loss of David’s virility. Rather than being a poor village girl, Kaufman’s Abishag is thus a woman who, while recognizing her function as a heating device, is also cognizant of her power over the poor old king, thus forming a constant reminder of his lost past.

7 Rivka Miriam: Abishag as a link in a chain

A contemporary Israeli poet born in Jerusalem in 1952, Rivka Miriam published her first book of poems at the age of fourteen. Her works are infused with Jewish literary motifs, particularly from the biblical texts. Linda Zisquit, translator of some of Rivka Miriam’s poems into English, notes how she speaks through biblical characters such as Rachel, Leah, Isaac, and Ruth with “playful familiarity” (Zisquit 2009, 73). Miriam herself describes her self-appointed function as that of “carrying” ancient and modern figures of Jewish history within herself (quoted in Zisquit 2009, 73). Her poem “On the King’s Bad Abishag” was published in her book *Amar Ha-ḥoker* [Said the Investigator] (2005, 30).

Rivka Miriam’s Abishag serves as a link in the chain of David’s queens. Lying on his bed as “an unopened flower bud,” she inhales the scent of her predecessors – Abigail, Bathsheba, and Michal – through his old-man skin. While Bathsheba gave birth to Solomon (יָלְדָה לוֹ חֲכָמָה [bore him wisdom]), Abigail’s role in David’s life is more obscure. The biblical text states that she told David: “If anyone should rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God; but the

lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling” (NRSV Anglicized Edition, 1 Sam. 25.29) – that is, that he would save his own life by saving that of her husband Nabal. Miriam, however, takes this to mean that Abigail was responsible for saving David’s life. The first person to publicly declare David as the king of Israel (1 Sam. 25.30–31), Miriam appears to hint that she enabled David to avoid “bloodguilt.” Together with Bathsheba, she thus introduces the character of Michal – “who spoke and since then is silent” (Zucker 2016, 74).

In the Bible, the dialogue between Michal and David when the maiden ridicules the king’s dancing in honour of the ark that has been restored to Israel is imbued with sexual overtones: “How did the king of Israel get him honour to-day, who uncovered himself to-day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself!” (1 Sam. 6.20). It ends with Michal’s silence; the narrator allows her to protest but robs her of her voice at a critical moment (Exum 1990, 61). This silence is infectious, as Miriam writes: “and with him she left her contagious silence / a silence that will live in his palace / and rides his horse / infiltrates secretly to his murmuring humming in bad.” When Michal’s silence affects David, Abishag wonders: “Is David silent, or whispering?”

The fact that Michal articulates her feelings appears to be directly responsible for her barren state: “she had no child unto the day of her death” (2 Sam. 6.23; see Morse 2013, 31). While commentators have traditionally sought to understand Michal’s childlessness as God’s or David’s punishment of her, Miriam asserts that Abishag has the power to save Michal from her fate. If – contra the biblical text – she conceives through David, the child will be Michal’s. Miriam hereby adds a sexual angle to Abishag’s relationship with the king. The latter’s desire to couple with her reflects his wish to compensate himself (and Michal?) for the lack of an heir by the woman who loved him. His senescence (“at the end of his potency”) undermines his ability to impregnate her, highlighted by the repeated refrain: “maybe he could.” As a substitute wife, Abishag thus forms a link in the chain of queens, one whose primary role is to provide the king with a successor.

8 Lou Barrett: Abishag’s erotic lover

In Lou Barrett’s “Abishag,” published in *Doors, Gates and Portals* (2009, 19), Abishag dreams rather than speaks. As in some of her other poems that relate to biblical themes, this one opens with a reference to the biblical scene, the willow-slender, “silk-limbed,” eucalyptus-scented Abishag slipping “her heat under his royal sheets.” This depiction brings into play three senses – touch, sight, and

smell. Derived from the Greek *eu* “well” and *kalyptos* “covered,” the unopened flowers of the eucalyptus are protected by a cap. Rather than Abishag’s delicate flower being protected and covered, however, she is tasked with covering the old king. Her sensuality failing to arouse him, his wintry loins instead prompt her to lull him to sleep.

Despite reclining on the king, however, she is uncomfortable; her sleek, soft body lodged against the “ridge of the king’s ribs” keeps sleep at bay. Homesick, her vivid and sensuous imagination further prompts her to daydream of deliverance – a “winged ship breasting” the sea towards her. Transforming David’s breastpiece/-bone into a knight in shining armour, the winged ship symbolizes her yearning to be free – a longing full of sexual content. Upon its bow stands a young, bronzed seafarer “erect on the full lip / of a galley / spurring on a sluggish wind.” According to Freud, “the female genital is symbolically represented by all those objects which share its peculiarity of enclosing a space capable of being filled by something – viz., by pits, caves, and hollows, by pitchers and bottles, by boxes and trunks, jars, cases, pockets, etc. The ship, too, belongs in this category” (1920, 135). The young seafarer standing erect (the male phallus) on the lip of the galley (the female genitals) thus represents the sexual act. In contrast to the king’s “wintry loins,” he is virile and erect.

The final two lines of the poem return us to the opening similes. Abishag’s silky skin deserves “purple silks” from Lebanon to “stir” and cover it rather than being forced to warm and cover the old king. Barrett’s Abishag is thus a dreamer who escapes into her own imagination, countering David’s impotence by the young sensuous man she summons up in her erotic dream. While Glück’s Abishag dreams that love has become impossible when she becomes the king’s warmer, however, Barrett’s Abishag dreams of erotic salvation by a young sailor who will take her away/sexually.

9 Conclusion

The poets discussed above are all examples of women writers “writing themselves” in order to liberate their voice and sexuality from “government by the phallus.” Making their Abishag speak or think in order (in Cixous’s words) to enable her to “de-phallocalize” the body, they re-tell the biblical story from their own modern position (Cixous 1981, 50–51). As Suskin Ostriker observes, while (female) re-readings of Scripture do not oppose the biblical text – the Jewish sages assert that God intended “all the meanings that He has made us capable of discovering” – they revise the biblical text by adding their own insights, direct continuing

the midrashic tradition (Suskin Ostriker 1997, xiii). Each poet thus gives Abishag a different voice and way of tackling her situation.

Caspari's poem focuses on Abishag's emotional development – her dawning awareness of her deadly influence on the two royal siblings, which parallels her physical cooling as she approaches her own death. While Pinkerfeld's Abishag also experiences a gamut of emotions, these relate to a hopeful girl turning into a sexually abused young woman. Despite speaking and dreaming, Glück's Abishag remains passive and compliant in the face of patriarchy (God, the king, her father), failing to achieve any freedom, personality, or sexuality/passion. In submitting to the male will, she forfeits her future.

Although Gershon's Abishag is a secondary character, in her pitying of the old king and his memories of youth she constitutes a powerful presence, choosing to stay with the king, perceiving his past glory in his senescent body and envying those who knew him in his heyday. Kaufman's Abishag is objectified by the king and his servants. Eventually, however, despite being treated as a “blanket” and “road-map” and “doing her job” by lying passively on the king, she becomes inwardly active, desiring to pinch him and mocking his impotence by stressing her sexuality.

Rivka Miriam links Abishag with three of David's other wives. Focusing on Michal, she seeks to portray Abishag as a substitute wife who, if impregnated by the king, will compensate for Michal's childlessness. While Barrett's Abishag is passive in/deed, her thoughts are active and sexual, her erotic dream infused with sexual intercourse with a young lover.

In the hands of these female Jewish poets, Abishag thus develops from a mute biblical pawn into a fully fledged person(ality), self-aware and self-acting. In re-telling the biblical story through women's eyes and/or a feminist lens, they employ Suskin Ostriker's three types of hermeneutics – suspicion, desire, and indeterminacy – in order to give Abishag a voice, thoughts, and dreams, putting power into her own hands and encouraging her to assert her independence. They hereby exemplify the new wave of Jewish women poets and scholars seeking a place on the “Jewish bookshelf” from which they have been excluded for so long.

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