UCLPRESS

Jewish Historical Studies
Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

Obituary:

In memory of Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert (26 October 1945–18 June 2020): personal and academic memories spanning forty years

Rachel Elior[1,*]

How to cite: Elior, R. 'In memory of Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert (26 October 1945–18 June 2020): personal and academic memories spanning forty years'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2021, 52(*1*), pp. 248-268.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.011.

Published: 03 June 2021

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard editorial peer review.

Copyright:

Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

*Correspondence: rachel.elior@mail.huji.ac.il
[1]Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.011

In memory of Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert (26 October 1945–18 June 2020): personal and academic memories spanning forty years*

RACHEL ELIOR

Translated by Lily Kahn, Chani Smith, Wojciech Tworek, and Daphne Freedman, and abridged by Michael Berkowitz[1]

Friends of Ada in Israel and around the world, her family, colleagues, and students, will agree that it is nearly impossible to speak about her in the past tense, to acknowledge the painful fact that our beloved friend is no longer among us.

I first met Ada in the summer of 1979 at the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem. We were both young mothers who had written doctorates on Hasidism. Ada completed her dissertation on Bratslav Hasidism at University College London (UCL) in 1974, and I wrote mine on Habad Hasidism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem two years later. Contemplating her beauty, nobility, and wisdom, I imagined that the Bible referred specifically to Ada: "The woman was intelligent and beautiful" (1 Samuel 25:3).

Ada was exceptionally smart, as was evident to everyone who spoke to her, attended her lectures, and read her articles and books. She also was radiant and endearing, as she was endowed with a personality that combined inspiring brilliance with external and spiritual beauty.

Our first conversations in the late 1970s developed into a close friendship of forty years, and a fruitful intellectual partnership that yielded memorable discussions and long candid letters. Our respective intellectual

1 Translated into English by Wojciech Tworek and Chani Smith; English version edited by Daphne Freedman and Lily Kahn. As Ada's PhD graduates, the translators and editors of this English version feel honoured to have had the opportunity to participate in the preparation of such a detailed and moving tribute to our beloved and dearly missed teacher and supervisor.

* Presented on 22 July 2020 at a memorial conference organized on Zoom by the Historical Society of Israel and the Zalman Shazar Center.

development, beginning as dialogues in person and correspondence, continued in many joint research initiatives, conferences, edited volumes, translations, articles, and books. I soon learned that Ada was wise, understanding, and utterly original. She was generous but detested claptrap, her ideas expressed in impeccable Hebrew and English. She was extraordinarily sensitive to music and poetry – curious, creative, and erudite. Ada was fiercely independent in her own choices, while being open to diverse lifestyles and talents of others, and devoted to her relatives and friends. She did not simply accept norms. She took a deep interest in individuals – their world, family, work, and research.

Ada was her parents' only child. Unexpected challenges, to which she was exposed in her youth, made her unusually responsive to the material and spiritual quandaries of friends, to their struggles in academia and private life. She always offered sound, honest, and candid advice, and did not hesitate to share her own challenges. Ada devoted keen attention to teachers, friends, colleagues, and students, ardently following their work. They frequently received her insightful comments, poignant questions, eye-opening remarks, and corrections of errors, significantly improving their efforts. She spoke about scholarly developments in Jewish history and literature, and was quick to respond to new work in Jewish languages, the understanding of leadership and transmission, and changing patterns in communal life from the Middle Ages to modern times.

Perhaps more than anyone else in the field of Jewish Studies and linguistics, Ada was multi-talented. Her academic gifts are apparent on every page of her work, which made her an invaluable colleague. Ada excelled in everything, was loyal and discreet and generous, absolutely honest while being optimistic and cheerful, wise and resourceful, and was full of joie de vivre, and took a deep interest in persons of all ages. She was known for the inventiveness of her thought, eloquence, and diligence. Always willing to help, edit, and improve, she took great responsibility for any matter in which she was involved. She showed initiative and readiness to collaborate with domestic and international scholars. Her academic excellence, original thinking, critical vision, and analytical skills, as well as her understanding of human nature, multilingualism, refined style, and sincerity accompanied by her discerning judgment, were soon recognized throughout the academic world. Ada rapidly became a sought-after lecturer, writer, researcher, adviser, editor, supervisor, translator, and appraiser.

Ada was gifted from childhood in music and acting, and she loved

theatre. She was also blessed with outstanding language skills. Her linguistic sensitivity reflected her musical acumen, as she was extremely attentive to the precise linguistic, religious, and social register of words, idioms, and expressions. She was always concerned with improving her comprehension of Yiddish, Russian, Zoharic Aramaic, Ladino, Polish, Judeo-German, and other languages. Her favourite hobby was examining the historical developments of words and concepts of Jewish languages in the diaspora, and her large collection of dictionaries was among the gems of her extensive home library. Her research in Hasidism, Sabbateanism, Frankism, gender, Judeo-Christian historiography in the Middle Ages and early modern period, in the lives of widows in Yiddish literature, in the world of ascetic, single, and prophesying women, as well as Zoharic Aramaic, reflect her outstanding historical and philological skills.

Her work as a whole reflects a multifaceted vision, revealed in stunningly detailed arguments, bringing to bear wide-ranging expertise, multilingual erudition, and inexhaustible energy in presenting new interpretations. All of this is equally evident in her vast reshaping of the big picture that arose out of fresh perspectives on previously known and new details, examined and compared in totally novel ways.

Ada's research lay in the fields of Hasidism and Kabbalah. Her writing about Hasidism concerned first and foremost the crystallization of the movement, the emergence of its decentralized charismatic leadership and various legacy models, the role of the *tsadik* and his status in relation to the kabbalistic tradition of *devekut*, Rabbi Nahman's life and thought, Hasidic hagiography, the status of women, and Habad Messianism. In the field of Sabbateanism she was mostly interested in the relationship of the Sabbatean revolution to *halakhah* and the status of women in the movement from the mid-seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. She showed that the Sabbatean heresy was the first to offer equality for women, whereas the Frankist antinomianism proposed stricter separation between women and men, alongside obedience to charismatic authority and sharing in spiritual and carnal life, as the inception of a gender revolution in the Jewish world. Her research in historiography concerned the Judeo-Christian conflict, the *Shevet Yehudah* (the historian Solomon ibn Verga, 15–16th century), and the connections between biography, hagiography, and historiography. In the field of gender, Ada investigated the lives of single women as ascetic hermits and widows; the lives of female prophets who became leaders in their own right and not as wives or mothers of luminaries; and the birth of ideas in the world of women in relation to fertility and asceticism. Her

Zoharic Aramaic research, which combined social history, history of ideas, and philology, was pathbreaking.

Ada addressed new questions to familiar texts, engaging in penetrating studies, as well as translations, often of texts only recently made known to scholars. She proposed entirely new historical-cultural connections to commonly accepted conventions. Ada rigorously assessed previous research through in-depth analyses of sources, offering new, subversive arguments. She had an almost uncanny aptitude for combining and juxtaposing known and less familiar facts, and placing them in new analytical-critical contexts.

Ada frequently began with a seemingly innocuous or marginal question, or a call for clarification of a concept, such as "What is the exact meaning of the terms 'smallness' and 'simplicity'"? "What is the precise meaning of the word 'generation' in the eighteenth century?" "What does the phrase 'the first three generations' really refer to in the study of the Hasidic movement?" "What is 'oylem' in Yiddish?" "What is the meaning of the phrase 'a virgin who fasts'?" "When was the phenomenon of female prophets first attested?" "When were female spiritual leaders in their own right first documented?" "Where was the word *mitnagdim* [opponents] first used in the conflict with the Hasidim?" Searching for answers, she opened new historical and cultural vistas related to the social reality on the one hand, and to kabbalistic, Sabbatean, and Hasidic mystical thought on the other.

Ada always excelled in a two-way vision – firstly, in an enthusiastic pursuit of new terms and concepts in various languages in Jewish texts that indicated historical, religious, and cultural turning points, and secondly, in a multi-directional attention to evolving interpretations in various fields, including history, theology, and philology.

A native speaker of Hebrew with eloquent English, and proficient in Aramaic, Yiddish, German, and French, Ada also studied Polish, Russian, Old Yiddish, and Ladino. With a little help from friends she could read more distant tongues. Her language acumen gave her unusual access to Jewish thought, mysticism, Kabbalah, Sabbateanism, and Hasidism in their specific historical-cultural contexts. Her multilingualism and her broad historical, cultural, and social outlook contributed to her original research insights in the wide range of sources she discussed, and to her achievements in historical research, translations, and editing.

Ada was born in Tel Aviv in the autumn of 1945 and came to London in 1965 following her desire to study theatre. By then she had completed

her military service in the Israel Defence Forces, where she was a budding actress and a singer in the Armed Forces' Entertainment Troupe in 1963–65. Theatre training in London proved to be intellectually and even artistically unsatisfying, so she sought new challenges. Ada chose to remain in London and study in the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at UCL.

Having grown up on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv in a secular Israeli environment, Ada enrolled in UCL in 1965 to study Jewish History. She began under the guidance of Joseph Weiss (1918–1969), a Hungarian-Jerusalem intellectual who had been a brilliant student of Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the pioneer of the academic study of Jewish mysticism. In his doctoral dissertation, Weiss examined the life and teachings of Nahman of Bratslav. He formulated a new model of synthesis between the intellectual-biographical-psychological history of Hasidic mysticism and the social history of Hasidic communities, which crystallized around charismatic Kabbalah teachers. These teacher leaders would later turn into Hasidic *tsadikim*, gathering around them spiritual and social circles of followers.

At that time, however, Weiss did not offer classes on Kabbalah or Hasidism. Instead, he taught the *midrashim* and about the Golden Age of medieval Spanish Jewry. This was new to Ada. She was an Israeli, whose mother, Alma, née Tager, was a pianist born in Sofia, Bulgaria, who had emigrated to Mandate Palestine in 1939, and whose father, Zalman Rapoport, was an agronomist born in Hasidic Berdychiv, Ukraine, who aged seven had emigrated to Ottoman Palestine with his parents in 1914. Ada now learned from Weiss about medieval Jewish history and literature. She took her first steps in the library of Jewish texts, in Hebrew and Aramaic, in the *halakhah* of the first millennium, and in the Hebrew and Arabic poetry of the Judeo-Spanish Golden Age.

The course of her academic life changed completely, however, as her scholarly and professional fate became entwined with that of her teacher. In the late 1960s Ada was asked to assist the ailing Weiss in preparing his long-overdue book on the history of Hasidism for publication. He intended to compose a first draft of the manuscript from the materials he had worked on for many years, but he had difficulty writing, and came up with the idea of employing a "scribe" to whom he could dictate his book, at home, in order to complete the task.

Many of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hasidic books that Weiss dealt with were written by scribes, who transcribed on Saturday

night the words of the *tsadik* delivered orally during the third meal on Shabbat or during festival sermons. Probably this phenomenon inspired his idea of finding a "scribe". Ada wrote down Weiss's words to the best of her ability, as they were full of kabbalistic and Hasidic concepts that were then foreign to her. She was struck by Weiss's responses to her many questions, as well as by the breadth and depth of his insight. But his plan to write a book on Hasidism was soon scuttled, and it was never published, as the reading and writing sessions at his home became long conversations and tutorials on Hasidism. These included discussing the sources and books that occupied Weiss at the time, and the scholarship she read on his recommendation, in order to bridge knowledge gaps in both the exoteric and esoteric Jewish literatures.

With other teachers of the Department Ada read the sources of traditional Judaism, the literature and poetry of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. All of this was essential for an understanding of Kabbalah and Hasidism. She continued working with Weiss and loved her studies. She graduated with honours in 1968, and soon afterwards began research for her doctoral dissertation with Weiss, which dealt with Hasidic leadership succession with an emphasis on the circle of Nahman of Bratslav.

Weiss, who had long been ill and hospitalized, died in 1969 at the age of fifty-one. Ada persevered with her doctorate under the direction of Chimen Abramsky (1916–2010), who was aided by his close friend and historian of Hasidism, Shmuel Ettinger (1919–1988) of the Hebrew University, as well as other scholars who were deeply saddened by Weiss's early death. Ada submitted her dissertation at UCL in 1974.

Ada's daughter Maya was born in 1972 and her son Shaul (Bobble) in 1977. She proceeded to publish a series of stunning, original articles on Nahman of Bratslav, his dialectical thought, and the concept of the *tsadik* in Hasidism. Seven years after completing her doctorate, Ada lectured at the 1981 World Congress of Jewish Studies about Hasidic leadership succession. Four years later she published "The Hasidic Movement after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change", now regarded as a foundational article.[2] It reflected Weiss's integrative conception of Hasidism as a religious idea manifested in specific social-historical models. Ada's formulation offered a fresh perspective on common but problematic depictions of the movement. The article focused on the historical and social

2 Ada Rapoport-Albert, "The Hasidic Movement after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change", *Zion* 55 (1990): 183–245.

significance of the transition from a decentralized and non-hereditary charismatic leadership in the second half of the eighteenth century to a pattern of hereditary dynastic leadership in the early nineteenth century. She examined the significance of the transition from a small and dispersed group of ascetic and charismatic Kabbalah teachers in the middle third of the eighteenth century in the Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania, to a large movement of Hasidic spiritual revival in the last third of that century. This turned in the early nineteenth century into an institutionalized network that touched most of Yiddish-speaking Europe.

Ada's point of departure, which challenged the prevailing historiography, was that "the accepted and convenient chronological division into three 'generations' in the Hasidic leadership, namely that of the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid [of Mezritch], and his disciples, was misleading. The 'generations' overlapped to a great extent".[3] Ada re-examined the key spiritual and social factors for determining Hasidic leadership, and stressed the crucial role of the Lurianic doctrine of "sparks of the soul" in shaping the relationship between the Hasid and the *tsadik*. She also presented the social context of the Hasidic doctrine of *devekut*, which gradually transferred the object of adherence from God to the *tsadik*.

About a decade earlier, in the academic year 1982–83, I was on my first sabbatical in Oxford, where I worked on manuscripts of the *hekhalot* literature[4] and on rare books in the Bodleian Library, focusing on Habad Hasidism. I also received an invitation to be a guest lecturer at a weekly Kabbalah and Hasidism seminar in the Department at UCL, where Ada worked. We talked at length before and after each session, as she generously invited me to stay at her home on the day I taught, and to enjoy together the pleasures of London before returning to Oxford. On the days when the library was closed, I had time to read Virginia Woolf's books and diaries, which were in the home library of the book-laden apartment I rented in Oxford. This library gave me and my family great joy, and provided an entrée to my conversations with Ada in Oxford and London. These lasted into the night at Ada's home on Richmond Avenue in Islington – with her well-kept rooms and corridors covered with bookshelves. Every possible space, except for the spectacular balcony of plants and creepers on the top floor – was dedicated to her love of flowers and sun-tanning.

3 Ibid., 5–20.

4 Editor's note: mystical texts of the second to sixth centuries CE; literally 'chambers of the heavenly palaces'; ascending to such chambers, and ideas about their nature and practices within.

This was the setting for germinating a new scholarly entity that interested both of us from a perspective unknown in the early 1980s.

At this time, in Oxford, I came to appreciate Woolf's heartbreaking insights in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). English libraries were full of books written by men, Woolf argued, who had enjoyed many years of top-notch education, and the received literature is invariably written in a particular socio-cultural-economic male context. This led me to think about a question I had not thought of before: why is the Jewish library full of books written only by Jewish men in Hebrew or Aramaic, and why are there none by Jewish women in the Holy tongue at all? Suddenly I realized that every Hebrew or Aramaic book I had studied, from the beginning of my studies at the Hebrew University in 1969 onwards, and every manuscript I had read as part of my research in Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah and Hasidism, *midrashei ge'ulah* (rabbinic teachings about redemption), or *hekhalot* literature, had been written by a male author, never by a woman.

Inspired by Woolf, I realized that producing literature requires certain conditions. These include a good education, acquired at the best educational institutions, provided in an egalitarian and nurturing environment, as well as a private, unsupervised space, and a rich, accessible library. Few of these conditions were ever met for women in general, and for Jewish women in particular. Woolf's second book, *Three Guineas*, originally titled *On Being Despised*, noted that many of these libraries, filled with books written by men, were open only to male readers. The Jewish public libraries in the study halls, *yeshivot*, and synagogues also were open to men exclusively from time immemorial. These books, which signalled the absence of women from the spiritual and creative life of the traditional patriarchal world, influenced my perspective in relation to new questions that we, as female scholars, should address to the texts we studied, and led me to extensive discussions with Ada.

Consistently voicing concern for independence and freedom of conscience, Ada was especially attentive to female spirituality associated with celibacy and asceticism. The body was the only space over which women had power. Women and girls, denied access to the world of reading and learning, were permanently excluded in most Jewish communities from significant religious participation. Very occasionally one might find a separate synagogue for women, but a women's partnership in all aspects of religious life was not known before the end of the twentieth century. Ada became mindful of the women who deviated from tradition: women

who remained virgins and refused to marry; women who strayed from the accepted social order, and began to be known as prophets, mentioned in documents concerning Spanish crypto-Jews; and the traditions concerning extraordinary Jewish women who were associated with strict celibacy, solitude, and asceticism, or who joined the Sabbatean movement, which opened up new possibilities for them.

At that time, the beginning of the 1980s, we were early-career researchers in the field of kabbalistic and Hasidic thought, teaching in the departments which had granted us our doctorates, and raising children. Our perspective as aspiring women scholars and as young mothers – who divided their time with home, family, work, and the library – was different from that of our male counterparts. We began asking different questions. Men's scholarship in the field of Jewish history and thought in Israel and around the world had a long tradition, and had produced a formidable library. Women's efforts in these fields possessed a very short tradition, and had yielded a meagre shelf or two. In 1982–83 we started to think, talk, read, and ask questions related to the religiosity and spirituality of Jewish women who were forbidden to study, to lead prayers, to teach or preach in public, and to practise asceticism. We discussed the historical, social, and ideological factors that led to the absence of women in Hebrew culture, liturgy, and ritual, in relation to the essentialist distinction between men and women in the patriarchal tradition that assigned completely different roles to both sexes, imposed different duties on them, and granted them different rights. We began to think of alternative spaces of existence for Jewish women who wanted to learn to read and write in Hebrew and to take part in the religious, spiritual, liturgical, and ritual world of their fathers, brothers, and sons. We thought of new direct and indirect sources that had not yet been discussed, and of reading the known sources from a new perspective.

Some of these conversations, animated by our affinity with Woolf, took place in the spring of 1983, following an unexpected invitation to Ada from Harvard University. She told me, with mixed feelings, that she had been asked to be a fellow in the Women's Studies in Religion programme at Harvard's Divinity School in 1984–85. The excitement of the opportunity was tempered by her reluctance to concentrate on women in Jewish history. We had never dealt with this subject in our own research, for the simple reason that all Jewish written lore, in all periods, in Hebrew or Aramaic, was created exclusively by men. We took for granted that all written Jewish culture was created by men, since until the twentieth century there was no Hebrew or Aramaic book written by a woman, brought to print during

her lifetime, and considered part of a Jewish canon. My latest book, *Savta lo yad'a kero u-khtov* ("Grandma Could Not Read or Write"),[5] is devoted precisely to the historical reality that the "People of the Book", who have always cherished knowledge and learning, and compelled their male children to undertake education in the first and second decades of their lives, simultaneously denied girls this prerogative.

In 1983, however, few scholars in Jewish Studies had yet questioned the absence of women from written Jewish culture in the entirety of its spiritual manifestations. It was self-evident and uncontested that the entire liturgical and symbolic spiritual space outside the home was reserved for men. That men learned the Bible and Mishnah from their childhood in all the communities of Israel, and women remained ignorant of Hebrew throughout their lives, buttressed the traditional patriarchal world. In the early 1980s the word "gender" was not yet known in Hebrew, and Jewish culture in all its halakhic, theoretical, spiritual, and physical aspects, written and read, symbolic and liturgical, philosophical and kabbalistic, was considered essentially masculine.

At first, Ada considered declining the invitation. She questioned the feasibility of research into women in Judaism in a comparative framework. She pointed to the lack of writing by women, to the premise that up to the twentieth century women had no place in Jewish religious culture, and that there had never been such a field of study in London or Jerusalem. It did not exist as an academic subject. But our lengthy conversations on this question motivated her to change her mind, accept the invitation, and reconsider the problem. She sought to explore the notion of Jewish female space in the spiritual and cultural margins, rather than the centre, and that which had emerged more in a spirit of defiance, rather than by consent.

When Ada arrived at Harvard in 1984, she beheld the great gender revolution that was under way in American academia. She first turned to familiar Hasidic texts, raising new questions that led to a reassessment of women's involvement in the movement. She examined popular narrative traditions about female spiritual leadership in nineteenth-century Hasidism, and was moved to refute the prevailing assumption of Shmuel Abba Horodetsky (1871–1957). He had asserted that Hasidism granted women full equality and allowed them to participate in the leadership. Ada argued, instead, that a woman's claim to spiritual leadership was not recognized as legitimate in most of the movements in the history of Jewish mysticism. She focused her research on the well-known story of Hannah

5 Rachel Elior, *Savta lo yad'a kero u-khtov* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2018).

Rachel Werbermacher (1805–1888), known as the "Maid of Ludmir", Ukraine. According to Horodetsky, she gained the status of a Hasidic *tsadik* as an ascetic virgin girl from roughly 1820 to 1850. Following a series of traumatic personal experiences, she underwent a spiritual transformation and decided to lead a community of followers in Ludmir. Legend has it that she attracted local devotees, who would listen to her from the other side of the synagogue partition. But a rival *tsadik* from Chernobyl, who had spread his network across Ukraine, forced her to marry and stop her unusual practice. Unlike Horodetsky, who interpreted this story as evidence of equality given to women in Hasidism, Ada saw it as a "story of a social abnormality, whose failure served the conservative interest well, fortified the boundaries she wanted to cross, and certainly did not bring them down". Ada was aware of extraordinary women in the history of Hasidism – mothers, wives, or daughters of *tsadikim* – of whom she wrote that "one may assume that within the Hasidic movement women occasionally emerged whose spiritual powers were recognized by the general public, and may have even gathered around them a Hasidic following". However, Ada completely rejected the claim that Hasidism gave equality to women, and allowed them to take part in its leadership as *tsadikot*. In her words, "the movement did not devote any message of its own to women as a separate audience, did not formulate any ideological platform that would make their religious, educational, or social status equal to men, neither in the court nor outside it, nor did it back up or legitimize the phenomenon of tsadikot". On the contrary, in the circles of official leadership, women asserting authority was perceived as "an embarrassing deviation" and a threat to the natural and traditional order.

Ada set this out in an article which had begun to take shape during her time at Harvard. It was published in English in 1988 under the title "On Women in Hasidism: S. A. Horodecky and The Maid of Ludmir Tradition" in *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, which she co-edited with her colleague and friend, Steven Zipperstein.[6] This signalled a shift in the research in the 1980s that added the gender perspective to historical and social studies. The article was translated into Hebrew by the late David Lubish and updated by the author.[7]

6 Ada Rapoport-Albert, "On Women in Hasidism: S. A. Horodecky and The Maid of Ludmir Tradition", in *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steven J. Zipperstein (London: P. Halban, 1988), 495–525.

7 Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Tsadik ve-'eda: hebetim historiyim ve-hevratiyim be-heker ha-hasidut*, ed. David Assaf (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2001), 527–96.

The volume in honour of Chimen Abramsky was the first of seven highly original books in English and Hebrew which Ada edited or co-edited. Her second edited volume is entitled *Essays in Jewish Historiography: History and Theory*.[8] The second edition of that book was published in 1991 with a new introduction and summary by Jacob Neusner as *Essays in Jewish Historiography*.[9]

The next volume she edited was in honour and memory of Michael P. Weitzman (1946–1998), a close colleague and friend. Weitzman was a scholar of ancient languages who had conceived an original statistical method for deciphering ancient texts. He died unexpectedly at an early age. From a modest background, he had been a prodigy in mathematics, Syriac, Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. He was Ada's study partner in Semitic languages, and her colleague at the beginning of her appointment at UCL. His death was not only a heavy personal loss, but also meant she had to take over many of his academic and administrative tasks. Ada devoted herself to two major books comprising a tribute to Michael, which she edited with Gillian Greenberg. The first was a substantial volume of his articles[10] and the second an anthology in his memory.[11]

In each of her edited works Ada was meticulous, and she markedly enhanced every contribution. Her close scrutiny of content, translations, and transliteration saved many colleagues from errors. Her critical editorial interventions, unfailingly precise, instructive and subtle, greatly enriched the books she edited, and earned her the heartfelt gratitude of the authors.

In 1988 Ada initiated a large international conference at UCL's Institute of Jewish Studies in memory of Professor Weiss. Held on 21–23 June 1988, it was the first scholarly meeting to explore comprehensively Hasidism from historical, social, ideological, mystical, and spiritual aspects. Its main purpose was to present and reflect on shifts in scholarship as a consequence of Eastern European archives having become accessible. The conference which materialized as "The Social Function of Mystical Ideals in Judaism: Hasidism Reappraised" was organized by Ada, along

8 Ada Rapoport-Albert, ed., *Essays in Jewish Historiography: History and Theory* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

9 Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Essays in Jewish Historiography*, intro. and appendix Jacob Neusner (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991).

10 Michael P. Weitzman, *From Judaism to Christianity: Studies in the Hebrew and Syriac Bibles*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Gillian Greenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

11 Ada Rapoport-Albert and Gillian Greenberg, eds., *Biblical Hebrews, Biblical Texts: Essays in Memory of Michael P. Weitzman* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

with Immanuel Etkes of the Department of Jewish History at the Hebrew University, and myself. At the time there were no mobile phones, email, or internet: therefore we painstakingly located and invited every scholar who, to the best of our knowledge, was conducting significant research into Hasidism.

One of the contributors was Professor Jacob Katz (1904–1998), a historian and sociologist from Jerusalem, who had been born in Hungary and was an older friend of Weiss. He spoke movingly about the complex scholarship and personality of his late compatriot. Katz himself had studied with both Weiss, whom he had met on sabbatical in 1956–57 in Manchester and London when they became friends, and Gershom Scholem, his colleague and friend in Jerusalem.

Twenty-eight scholars of Hasidism from around the globe lectured on various dimensions of Hasidism and mysticism. Ada spoke about Messianism and historiography in Habad in the twentieth century and wrote an enlightening introduction to the published collection. While each member of the organizing committee worked diligently towards the completion of the volume, it was Ada who saw it through to publication, with the intensive assistance of Connie Webber, the Managing Editor of the Littman Library. Eight years after the London conference, the substantial volume was published in English, including an unparallelled bibliography on Hasidism and a detailed index.[12] It is regarded as a milestone in the study of Hasidism.

Before arriving in London in June 1988, I had been on a sabbatical in the United States (1987–88). In addition to work on the conference and our common research interests, I shared with Ada what I regarded as some particularly surprising experiences from my time at Oberlin College (Ohio), which were related to thoughts about the book I was preparing for Jerusalem's Bialik Institute, on the doctrine of the unity of opposites in Habad Hasidism. The first of these was an encounter in the Oberlin library with the Dead Sea Scrolls, which I began reading after stumbling on a critical edition of *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* by Carol Newsom, a Harvard PhD written under the supervision of John Strugnell, published in 1985.[13]

This ancient, little-known composition, attributed in the Scroll of Hymns found in Qumran to David, son of Jesse, the Sweet Singer of Israel,

12 Ada Rapoport-Albert, ed., *Hasidism Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996).

13 Carol Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985).

concerns a series of sacred songs from the first millennium BCE, involving the Priests of the Inner Sanctum and the holy angels who were said to sing in the seven heavenly sanctuaries and the earthly one. The poems are related to the cycles of the Temple services and follow a fixed and pre-calculated solar calendar, that of the Priests of the House of Zadok. Reading about this priestly/angelic world of the "Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice" – which deal with holy angels, the sacred services, and the *merkavah* (chariot world) tradition – illuminated the history of the Second Temple era in the last centuries BCE from an unfamiliar angle. It brought a new perspective to the entire *hekhalot* (sanctuaries) and *merkavah* literature, which I had been researching in the previous decade. Similarly, these describe holy hymns claimed to be sung by the angels, written in the first millennium. This liturgy motivated me to re-examine the Dead Sea Scrolls published up to that time, to look for the roots of the *hekhalot* literature.

The other experience which so moved me was in the synagogue of the Hillel House at Oberlin, where I had my first opportunity to hear a female cantor and a *shelihat tsibur* (female prayer leader) leading Yom Kippur prayers in an egalitarian service, and to listen to a shofar blown by a female. Until then, 1987, I had not seen women actively participating in any of these liturgical roles. Moreover, such a possibility had never occurred to me.

There was a connection between these experiences: the poignant liturgical experience in the college synagogue, in a congregation of male and female students, where *Elohima* (or *elo'ima*) was pronounced, and not just the "male" names *Elohim*, the Ineffable Name, or *Adon Olam*, by young observant women partaking in the services as cantors and prayer leaders. They acted as readers of the Avodah and the poems about the High Priest and the Yom Kippur rituals as part of the new feminist consciousness demanding equality in the religious world. The feminist ritual was related, I felt, to my becoming acquainted with the mystical prayer of priests and angels singing on high in the "Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice". The fact that there were forgotten mystical rituals and liturgies in the past, such as found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, just as I myself had experienced new ceremonies and prayers in the present, revealed in a liberal-arts college Hillel, opened up new horizons.

To the question of why there were no female cantors or Torah readers, preachers, or prayer leaders in a synagogue which serves the whole community, the answer given was: this is how it was. It had always been a male world. The exclusivity of male authority was preserved throughout

the ceremonial and scholarly public space, the legal and the judicial, the theoretical and the interpretive, the halachic and the kabbalistic, the liturgical, the poetic, and the creative.

In the scroll of *The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness*, from the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are likewise scriptures dealing with priests and angels, I learned for the first time the ancient justification for barring women from religious ceremonies and their separation from the Holy, as well as the mutual exclusion between women and angels. In a holy place where pure angels are found, women, who are destined for *nidah* (menstrual impurity), are forbidden. Women are subjected to uncontrollable menstrual cycles, associated with impurity, excommunication, and death. They may endanger, by their presence, the sacred and pure space where the eternal, holy, and pure angels exist, representing the eternity and continuity of life and their divine origin.

Angels are found in eternal and sacred places like paradise or the seven higher *hekhalot* (sanctuaries), in the *merkavah* (chariot world), in the Holy Camp, in the Holy of Holies in the Temple, and in stories and songs that priests tell and sing, according to various traditions in priestly literature found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The War Scroll explicitly states who is forbidden to be in the company of angels: "No young boy or women shall join their camp when they come out of Jerusalem to go to war until they return . . . and any man who is rendered unclean on the day of the war must not go with them because the holy angels are together with their armies" (Deuteronomy 22:11 and onwards).[14]

Ada was likewise tantalized by issues of impurity and purity, separation and holiness, exclusion and distancing, and legal questions concerning virginity and fertility. These related to her interest in written traditions about nuns, ascetics, and women hermits in the Christian and the Jewish world. She wanted to know what they were allowed to do, and what they were forbidden. She was intrigued by descriptions of Jewish women's spiritual life in higher worlds in the kabbalistic imagination, and in references to women's active engagement from the Inquisition to the Sabbatean movement. For many years she worked on a volume called *Female Bodies – Male Souls: Asceticism, Mysticism and Gender in the Jewish Tradition*, which was to be published in the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.

14 Yigael Yadin, *The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness*, trans. Batya and Chaim Rabin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 300.

I told Ada that I was reading about the priestly tradition in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and I found an explicit statement there that purity is a condition of proximity to the sacred ritual and liturgical space in which angels are present. Women, from the beginning of the second decade of their lives, cannot meet this condition, because of their subordination to the natural cycles in their bodies, marked in the Jewish religion in terms of impurity and purity, *nida* and ritual immersion. This served to allow only men in sacred spaces where angels are located. These cycles of impurity and purity in the female body, which were uncontrollable until the twentieth century, are known to condition pregnancy, fertility, childbirth, and the continuity of life.

The insight into the ancient connection between the exclusion of women from the Holy, related to the laws of purity associated with angels and priests, in connection with the Temple, where priests and Levites were claimed to serve alongside angels, was also related to the synagogue. After the destruction of the Temple the synagogue as a "Little Temple" became a sacred space of communal worship where women were forbidden to enter, as documented in the Baraita in Tractate Nidah: [בְּרַייתָא דְּמַסֶּכֶת נִדָּה, הוא חיבור הלכתי ואגדתי הנשנה בשם התנאים, ומיוחס כברייתא חיצונית למשנה]. In this context we began to discuss the question of where there might be a place for Jewish women who wanted to study or pray, or who wanted to participate in spiritual life and religious services.

The sealing of gates to women in normative Judaism, in terms of denying access to Hebrew, to knowledge, to the synagogue, to prayer and holiness, to study, cantorship, or leadership, motivated Ada to seek the history of alternative paths and social frameworks. This was the background to her great research journey following women in the Sabbatean movement, in the new mystical space of Messianic heresy, in the light of the new possibilities opened up in Sabbateanism. That torrent aimed to dismantle, in the name of the Messianic age, the old order that had essentially differentiated between men and women, and completely barred them from participation in the accepted traditions.

Ada told me that she wanted to concentrate on women in Sabbateanism. She began with Shabbetai Zevi's well-known appeal: "And you poor women, how miserable you are, on account of Eve you suffer great pain when you give birth, and moreover – you are enslaved to your husbands, unable to do anything, small or great, without their consent and more. But thank God I came into the world to redeem you from all your torments and to set you free and make you as happy as your husbands, for I came

to nullify the sin of Adam, the first man". This was recorded by the Dutch priest Thomas Coenen (1626–1676), a member of the Calvinist Church, who served in Izmir in the last third of the seventeenth century as a teacher of children of Dutch traders, in his book *False Expectations of the Jews as Embodied in the Character of Shabbetai Zvi*.[15] What was the relationship, she asked, between this proposition, and the reigning exclusion of women from all areas of religious and spiritual activity? Ada thought that the sparse traditions about women's spirituality in the World to Come, such as heavenly sanctuaries designated for them in the Zohar (III, 167a) –a mystical space for biblical women who had gained eternal life and shared in sacred work with angels, or martyred women, or women in the Messianic future – serve as the antithesis of the normative tradition which was closed to them.

An opportunity to articulate these new insights on the place of women in the mystical tradition and Sabbateanism, and to present them to other scholars, soon arose. The end of the decade in which the new volume on the study of Hasidism was published (December 1997) marked the centenary of the birth of Gershom Scholem. The Department of Jewish Studies at Hebrew University and the Scholem Collection at the National and University Library (which houses his library) in collaboration with the Israel Academy of Sciences initiated an international conference in Jerusalem on Sabbateanism dedicated to his memory. The conference proceedings were published in two volumes which I edited, *The Dream and its Shuttering: The Sabbatean Movement and its Aftermath – Messianism, Sabbateanism and Frankism*.[16] Ada's great study, "On the Status of Women in Sabbateanism", whose initial conception I helped to formulate, and had the privilege to accompany by publishing "'The Words of the Lord' to Jacob Frank" (Hebrew, 1997), and in whose editing and publication I facilitated, as an 184-page article that was the highlight of the first volume.[17] Now regarded as a milestone in gender history, a groundbreaking contribution

15 Thomas Coenen, "Vain Hopes of the Jews" [from *Ydele verwachtinge der Joden Getoont in den Persoon van Sabethai Zevi* (Amsterdam: Joannes van den Bergh, 1669)], in *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity*, ed. Pawel Maciejko (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 8–11.

16 Rachel Elior, ed., *The Dream and its Shuttering: The Sabbatean Movement and its Aftermath – Messianism, Sabbateanism and Frankism*, 2 vols (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2001).

17 Ada Rapoport-Albert, "On the Status of Women in Sabbateanism", in ibid., vol. 1, 143–327; Rachel Elior, "'The Words of the Lord' to Jacob Frank", in ibid., vol 2, 471–548.

to the study of Sabbateanism, the article became the basis for a book in English a decade later.[18]

This major work of Ada's was closely tied to the publication of a Hebrew version of the Polish text "The Words of the Lord", spoken by Jacob Frank in the late eighteenth century. This had been translated from a Polish-language manuscript by Fanya Scholem in the 1950s, at the request of her partner, Gershom Scholem, and remains in her handwritten notebooks. A photocopy of the Hebrew manuscript was provided to me by Yehudah Liebes, and I published a printed edition of the Hebrew manuscript translated by Fanya Scholem in 1997.[19]

When Ada read "The Words of the Lord", she was surprised by the irrational and paradoxical character of Frankist thought. She approached this with great enthusiasm, perceiving it as highly instructive about the unfamiliar fringes of Jewish society. Usually we learn about these only from literary and historical documents written by the educated elite, which represent the values of the mainstream. This Frankist text, in contrast, teaches us about the irrational, anarchic-antinomian way that a charismatic leader acts against all odds. She was interested in the social change brought about by Sabbatean mystical-Messianic thought and the new possibilities that opened to women in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. She was particularly interested in the Frankist movement, its founder and successors, who argued that "the core belief of the God of Jacob (Frank) is that one should not believe what one sees: this is the true belief . . . all beliefs of the God of Jacob (Frank) entail a belief in the opposite of what one sees . . . seeing smallness in what's big, and greatness in what's small". Its basic argument was that the essence of true faith is essentially contrary to reason; its truth is proved precisely by

18 Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi: 1666–1816*, trans. Deborah Greniman (Oxford and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011).

19 Jakob Frank, "The Words of the Lord: As Written by His Followers at the End of the 18th Century" (Polish), trans. Fanya Scholem from the Krakow manuscript by Zbiorslow Panskich, Bibl. Jagiellonska 68, 69/1/2/3/ (Jerusalem, 1997). Editor's note: Ada Rapoport-Albert and César Merchán-Hamann, in "'Something for the Female Sex': A Call for the Liberation of Women, and the Release of the Female Libido from the 'Shackles of Shame', in an Anonymous Frankist Manuscript from Prague c. 1800", note that this is a "typescript 'Interim Edition' by Rachel Elior, Jerusalem, 1997", and add "More recently, an English translation of the entire work was made available online by Harris Lenowitz", in *Gershom Scholem: In memoriam*, 2, Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 21 (2007), n. 2, 119. The citation here is from the offprint, which is slightly different from what appears below.

the fact that reality contradicts it. She searched for unfamiliar documents in many languages which reflected this paradoxical position, and found such a specimen in Judeo-German. In the middle of the decade in which her article "On the Status of Women in Sabbateanism" was published, Ada wrote another monumental contribution with César Merchán-Hamann, "'Something for the Female Sex': A Call for the Liberation of Women, and the Release of the Female Libido from the 'Shackles of Shame', in an Anonymous Frankist Manuscript from Prague c. 1800".[20] The article was first published in English; in the Hebrew version Ada added a translation.

Here she proposed a solution to the much-discussed controversy between Scholem and Jacob Katz regarding the influence of the Sabbatean movement on the Reformation (Scholem) and of the Reformation and the Haskalah on Sabbateanism (Katz). Ada scrupuously examined the relevant sources, and found that an educated Jew, say, in Prague, might simultaneously have been an educated man adopting a religion of reason whose main tenets are God, liberty, and immortality, as defined by Leibniz and Kant, and also a Sabbatean impressed by the resilience of the paradoxical religious faith of Frankism, as opposed to the weakness of theoretical reason.

Nine of Ada's Hebrew articles served as the basis for a collection edited in her honour by Immanuel Etkes and David Assaf (2014).[21] The editors' introduction reflected "On the Research Project of Ada Rapaport-Albert",[22] and the volume included a comprehensive name-index from her publications, comprising a timely compilation which enabled Ada to update her earlier scholarship.

Her essays in English from the last forty years, in various fields, have been published as *Hasidic Studies: Essays in History and Gender* (2018). Professor Moshe Rosman of Bar Ilan University provided an introduction. Its title succinctly expresses her massive contribution to the study of Hasidism: "Changing the Narrative of the History of Hasidism".[23]

20 Ada Rapoport-Albert, "'Something for the Female Sex': A Call for the Liberation of Women, and the Release of the Female Libido from the 'Shackles of Shame', in an Anonymous Frankist Manuscript from Prague c. 1800", in *Gershom Scholem (1897–1982): In Memoriam*, ed. Joseph Dan, 2 vols (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2009), vol. 2, English section, 77–135.

21 Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidim and Sabbateanism, Men and Women*, ed. Immanuel Etkes and David Assaf (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2014).

22 Ibid., 7–21.

23 Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidic Studies: Essays in History and Gender*, intro. Moshe Rosman (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2018).

Ada was a senior consultant at the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in Oxford for many years, as she was renowned for her expansive vision and excellent judgment. She eagerly read new books in diverse fields. She also gave special consideration to new voices, and seized on those that she sensed as truly original. She recommended the publication of works in Jewish history and culture in languages other than English, and devoted a great deal of her time to reading and commenting extensively on submissions to several journals.

Ada always loved the pursuit of language and discussing the mystical tradition that spawned new concepts. She was particularly taken by the Aramaic of the Zohar that emerged at the beginning of the 2nd millennium, and initiated a research project at UCL to explore, with linguists from around the world, Zoharic Aramaic and its relationship to other varieties of Aramaic and the Syriac of the Peshitta, which had been studied by her late colleague Michael Weitzman. She was involved in this project for nearly twenty years. The first fruits of the study were published in collaboration with Tuvia Kwasman,[24] and conclusions from two decades of research were published in the collection *Late Aramaic: The Linguistic and Literary Context of the Zohar*, co-edited with her colleague Willem Smelik.[25]

For many years Ada was the Head of the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at UCL, a position that involved great responsibility and bureaucratic wrangling, demanding that she produce Kafkaesque, detailed reports. Ada's friends heard about her frustration at the precious time wasted that might have been devoted to research and teaching. Ada, who loved to read, study, and teach, and to have inspiring conversations, combining research and Torah study with friends and colleagues, partners and students, who loved to write and edit and translate, and to initiate and conduct long-term research, found herself bedevilled by irksome tasks. But the abundant optimism with which she was blessed made it easier for her to confront the challenges that she had not chosen.

In addition to her contributions to the department at UCL and to other educational institutions in England, Europe, Israel, and the United States, Ada served for many years as the President of the Jewish Historical Society of England.

One can only marvel at the fact that Ada had so many academic roles,

24 Ada Rapoport-Albert and Tuvia Kwasman, "Late Aramaic: The Literary and Linguistic Context of the Zohar". *Aramaic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2006): 5–19.

25 Ada Rapoport-Albert and Willem F. Smelik, eds., *Late Aramaic: The Linguistic and Literary Context of the Zohar* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

engaged in the projects mentioned here and many others. She also advised and taught students at BA, MA, and PhD levels, mentored doctoral students other than her own, convened conferences, and initiated vast research enterprises. In the face of her own serious illness, including harrowing surgeries and exhausting treatments, and intermittent loss of health and independence, Ada's good spirits persisted. The support of her relatives, friends, and loved ones from all over the world made the daily struggle a bit easier.

Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert, known as Ada to her relatives, friends, students, and those who loved her, was a woman of broad horizons, full of wisdom, curiosity, and understanding, who did not stop learning throughout her life, and continued teaching and inspiring all who encountered her. She was in her life and in her death beautiful and noble, brilliant and original, loved and loving.

May her memory be a blessing.