Ada Rapoport-Albert

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In June 1988 a cluster of students from Leo Baeck College made their way to University College London to attend a very special event, a conference entitled 'The Social Function of Mystical Ideas in Judaism: Hasidism Reappraised'. This conference, spearheaded and organised by the late Ada Rapoport-Albert, with assistance of Immanuel Etkes and Rachel Elior, generated excitement from all students of Jewish history and religion. It was an unprecedented event. For the first time in England (and indeed elsewhere in the scholarly world), the study of Hasidism in all its features was 'reappraised' by the greatest scholars of the generation. Ada's initiative was dedicated to her first doctoral supervisor and mentor Joseph Weiss, who had introduced her to the world of Hasidism and inspired her lifelong study of Jewish mysticism. In 1996 Ada produced more or less singlehandedly the volume now entitled *Hasidism Reappraised* that was to dictate the direction of the study of Hasidism for decades to come. Her own contribution to the volume, amounting to more than sixty pages, was path-breaking, probing and overturning conventional wisdom on essential questions of the structure of the Hasidic movement and its periodisation. The chapter exemplified Ada's meticulous scholarship; no stone was left unturned, and all evidence subjected to her sharp and insightful scrutiny. The infinitely long footnotes that accompanied the text were a hallmark of all her publications, yet another manifestation of her insistence that the record should be right.

Ada was born in Tel Aviv in 1945. Her Bulgarian mother had been a pianist of repute; her father, an agronomist by profession, came from Berditchev to Palestine in 1914. A born performer and singer, Ada spent her Israeli military service as a member of the Army Entertainment Troupe. In 1965 she found her way to London and eventually to the Hebrew department of UCL. Her brilliance was recognised by all her teachers, and in particular by the Hungarian scholar Joseph Weiss, one

of Gershom Scholem's most outstanding pupils. It was to Ada that Weiss turned when he wished to produce a long-awaited book on the history of Hasidism. As she wrote in the 'Afterword' to her volume of Hebrew papers entitled *Studies in Hasidism, Sabbatianism and Gender* (Jerusalem, 2015):

It occurred to him [Weiss] that he would be able to produce a first draft of the manuscript if he were to find a 'scribe' who could take down his dictation. I was the lucky one . . . twice or three times a week I would walk to Weiss's home in Belsize Park . . . I wrote down as best I could. Every so often, I found the courage to stop and ask simple questions. Weiss's answers that always digressed far from the original point and likewise, the books, different kinds of holy books ('sifrei qodesh') that he took off from his bookshelves in order to look for proofs to back up his statements, cast a spell on me that became more and more pronounced . . . Over time, the draft of the book (that never saw the light of day) was put to one side and our meetings became lessons in Hasidism: reading different editions of works that interested him at the time and examinations of literature that I read on his recommendation in order to fill some of the gaps in my limited knowledge of both the 'revealed' and 'hidden' . . . And even though I was unable to complete my doctorate in his lifetime [Chimen Abramsky took over the supervision of her doctorate after Weiss committed suicide in 1969] his holistic way of conceiving Hasidism as religious thought entwined in its social and historical expressions left its mark on my approach to the study of Hasidism.

In this extract we meet the essential Ada – a great raconteuse, who was unflinchingly honest and modest, and driven by a passionate desire to learn. These virtues she retained until her death.

Ada maintained close ties to the academic community in Israel, and often lectured and spent sabbaticals there, and was a much sought-after lecturer and teacher worldwide. Nevertheless, UCL remained Ada's institutional home until her retirement in 2012. Her unique presence made its impact not only on the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Department which she headed from 2002, but also on her colleagues in other disciplines who delighted in her scintillating company. One UCL luminary, whose office was on the same floor as that of the Hebrew Department, the great Italian Jewish historian Arnaldo Momigliano, held Ada in great esteem and affection, and shared her fascination with the sociology and history of religion. Fellow lecturers grew to depend on Ada, who was totally devoted to the Department and worked ceaselessly to ensure that it flourished. Countless students came under her supervision, and to each and every one she extended a helping hand, usually going beyond the call of duty to help them to understand what it means to study and to undertake

research. Her red pen was notorious, but generations of students (and colleagues) learned to appreciate her rigorous and forthright assessment of their work.

Each paper that Ada wrote was a gem, the fruit of deep immersion in the subject of her enquiry. In the last years of her life, many of these articles were collected into weighty volumes. The first of these, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi 1666–1816* (Littman Library, 2011), represented a fundamental stage in her research – it was on this topic that she first lectured at the conference held in Jerusalem in memory of Gershom Scholem in 1997. Having spent many years demonstrating that Hasidism, like other streams of Judaism, did not endow women with equality in religious life – and refuting, therefore, the much publicised views of Samuel Abba Horodetsky – she discovered the ‘unique and remarkable anomaly’ of the Sabbatian movement, which overturned the traditional norms that separated male from female. In her words, it brought about a ‘veritable gender revolution’ populated by female prophets and female religious activists. In her pioneering investigations into the world of another pseudo-Messiah, Jacob Frank, she was able to chart how Frank’s messianic doctrines were inextricably bound up with rituals that involved both men and women. Her arguments were never limited to Jewish sources. Rather, she made every effort to examine the heresies that she was studying in the context of the world in which they came to flourish. Thus, for example, she was able to chart Frank’s adoption of Muslim sectarian practices on the one hand and also how he was influenced by the Catholic cult of the Black Madonna on the other.

In 2015, Immanuel Etkes and David Assaf published a collection of Ada’s articles in Hebrew prefaced by the editors’ introduction to her scholarly work. This volume contained some of her main essays on Nahman of Bratslav and her studies on women, including her historiographical masterpiece about the Maid of Ludmir, ‘Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of Hasidism’. Yet another testimony to her significant contribution to the study of Hasidism was the 2018 volume *Hasidic Studies: Essays in History and Gender*. A fellow scholar of Hasidism, Moshe Rosman, composed an introduction to the book. His title, ‘Changing the Narrative of the History of Hasidism’, tells all.

Ada was possessed of an indomitable spirit. Though the shadow of death hovered over her, she continued to work to the end. Her last contribution to the world of scholarship was to co-edit (with Marcin Wodziński and François Guesnet) a volume of the journal *Polin* (issue 33) devoted to *Jewish Religious Life in Poland since 1750*. As her fellow editors would be the first to admit, her presence shines through the volume. Nothing less than perfect was allowed to go to press. The volume has now just been

published and launched, and become a memorial to this extraordinary woman, a bewitching personality, intensely humane and kind, loving and loved by all those who had the privilege to know her.

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