

Susan Nanus
Intro to Hasidut Final Paper
Spring Trimester 2007

THE WOMAN REBBE

Chana Rochel Werbermacher, the Maid of Ludomir

Their names are few and far between. One of the earliest is Beruriah, wife of Rabbi Meir, and quoted as a sage in the Talmud in her own right. Beruriah was greatly admired for her breadth of knowledge in matters pertaining to both halachah and aggadah. She is said to have learned 300 halachot from the rabbis in one day. Though her end was tragic, she was thought by some to be wiser and more perceptive than her famous husband.

Three more were Rashi's daughters, Yocheved, Miriam and Rachel. They all put on tefillin and studied Talmud with their famous father. Yocheved's four sons became the authors of *Tosafot*.

Another was Aidel, daughter of the Baal Shem Tov. Considered a learned and holy woman, she followed in her father's footsteps after his death, giving advice and blessings to the public. Aidel transmitted her vision of piety and scholarship to her daughter, Feiga, also a holy woman in her

right, who gave birth and raised the child who would grow up to be Reb Nachman of Breslov.

Francesca Sarah lived in Safed in the 16th century and was a contemporary of Rabbi Chaim Vital, the Ari's foremost disciple. She is the only Jewish woman ever known to have communication with angelic spirits. Francesca Sarah was able to communicate with a "*maggid*" and foretell the future, which she did many times for the sages and rabbis of the Safed mystic community.

In 17th century Italy, Fioretta of Modena raised and educated her grandson who became the scholar and kabbalist, Rabbi Aaron Berechiah of Modena. Fioretta herself studied Tanach, Talmud, and the Zohar as she traveled from city to city in search of the best teachers to educate her grandson. Rabbi Aaron later stated that it was incumbent upon him to give her the respect due to a rabbi.

Jewish women scholars and mystics. Logic tells me that there must have been so many more that we never heard of. And ten times more that who wanted to study and teach and were never allowed the opportunity. Perhaps those women poured their thwarted passion for study and scholarship into their sons and grandsons. Perhaps behind every great Torah

scholar is a Jewish wife or mother whose love of learning was equally as great.

That is what makes Chana Rochel Werbermacher such a unique and fascinating character. Not only did she become a great Torah and Talmud scholar, but she penetrated the male bastion of 19th century Hasidism to become an actual rebbe with her own followers and a small court. Furthermore, she embodied all the qualities of a Hasidic “Tzaddik,” as well as gaining fame as a wise and holy woman who had the ability to perform miracles.

Chana Rochel was born in 1805 in the town of Ludomir in Ukraine to Hasidic parents. Her father, Manish Werbermacher, was a devout follower of Rabbi Mordecai Twerski, the “Maggid of Chernobyl.” According to legend, before Chana Rochel was born, Reb Yakov Yitzchak HaLevi Horowitz, the Seer of Lublin, predicted that Manish’s barren wife would give birth to a child that would become a great rabbi. This child would be filled with the power of healing, guidance and teaching. Upon hearing this, Manish Werbermacher vowed to raise his child in the most sacred manner and prepare him to become the greatest rabbi of his generation.

Imagine his surprise when his wife gave birth to a baby girl! Her father immediately reinterpreted the prophesy to mean that his child would

marry a great rabbi, but he was mistaken. At the age of six, Chana Rochel was studying Torah and a year later, she begged her father to teach her Talmud, which he did, albeit reluctantly. Her aptitude and understanding were astonishing, even a little frightening. Reb Werbermacher decided that it was wrong for a girl to study the holy books and refused to continue. Chana Rochel was supposed to be learning how to run a household and raise children; she was supposed to be preparing herself to become a good Jewish wife.

But Chana Rochel was not like other girls. If her father refused to study with her, she would study by herself. At age nine, she was teaching herself the Talmud. By the time she was twelve, she had gained a reputation as being “strange.” Not only did she spend hours in the forest, studying the Talmud, but when she was in the synagogue, she prayed with a fervor unmatched by any of the other girls, or grown women, for that matter.

Worried and at his wit’s end, Chana’s father sought the advice of his rebbe, the Maggid of Chernobyl. The Maggid offered to speak to Chana Rochel himself, but when he did, he was stunned to discover how learned and knowledgeable the young girl was. He forced to admit that perhaps Chana Rochel had the soul of a great rebbe who had returned to the world to implement some repairs. This idea is based on the Kabbalistic concept of

“ibbur,” which believes that an elevated soul may enter the body of another in order to repair some minor flaws by participating in the positive actions of the host soul.

Even so, it was unacceptable to the Maggid that a female should be a great scholar. He advised Reb Werbermacher to find his daughter a husband as soon as possible. As is customary in the Hasidic world, Reb Webermacher arranged a marriage for his daughter to a childhood friend she had known for many years and was willing to marry. Apparently, this young man admired Chana Rochel’s love of learning and was happy to accept it.

However, as was customary, the young man was sent away to study in a Yeshiva for several years before the marriage could take place. This separation increased Chana Rochel’s isolation and pushed her further into her studies.

It is interesting to note that like the Baal Shem Tov, Chana Rochel spent a great deal of time alone in the forests, meditating and communing with nature. She personally came to understand the Baal Shem’s conception that everything in the universe, both mind and matter, is a manifestation of the Divine Being. It was during this time, when Chana Rochel was about eighteen, that she began to wish to share everything she had learned and discovered with others. She started to envision herself sharing her

knowledge and insights with those who needed healing, or who were confused, perplexed, and wrestling with issues of everyday life on both the mundane and holy planes.

It was the death of Chana Rochel's father that transformed her life. Overcome with grief, Chana Rochel visited her mother's grave where she spent the night, and had a transformational mystical experience. The next morning, she returned home, and embarked on the path that she would follow for the rest of her life. She cancelled her engagement, declaring that she had been given a "new and elevated soul," and would never marry. From then on, she began to fulfill all the commandments that are obligatory only for men, wearing a *tallit* and *tefillin*, and absorbing herself, like a male pietist, in intense study and prayer.

She began to live the life of a true Hasid, focusing on elevated sincerity and *devekut* (cleaving to God) in her spiritual and ritual practices and her dealing with people in everyday life. She gained a reputation as a learned and holy woman, and soon people came to her door, seeking advice and spiritual direction. Chana Rochel finally had people with whom she could share her learning.

The core of Chana Rochel's teaching was directed at the eternal gift of self, which few dared to open during a lifetime. She reasoned that if you

cannot love yourself and who you are, then how can you love another? And if you cannot accept yourself and the gift of God that is within you, then how will you accept it in others? Many people came to her to pour out their problems because she was not condemning or judgmental. Instead Chana Rochel gave them the benefit of the doubt, reminding them that everyone is human and fallible, and motivating them to improve for tomorrow rather than mourn over yesterday. She used stories, parables, teachings and quotations from the Torah and Talmud to instruct and inspire those who sought her out.

In time, Chana Rochel became as revered as any other Hasidic rebbe. She bought a little house in the forest which became known as the “Green Shul,” where she began to conduct Sabbath prayer services and give sermons. She received audiences, accepted *kvitlach* (prayer request notes), and presided over a *tish* (the traditional Sabbath meal in the company of one’s Hasidim), at which she’d offer Torah teachings and pass out *shirayim* (leftovers from a Rebbe’s meal). There are some accounts that Chana Rochel did all of this from behind a screen in order to preserve her modesty, but we cannot be sure. Because she had never married, she was called “The Maid of Ludomir.”

As her reputation grew, people flocked to Ludomir from all over the region to procure Chana Rochel's blessings, healings and teachings. Some say she even performed miracles. Chana Rochel seemed to embody all the qualities of Hasidic *Tzaddik*, acting as a bridge between God and the people, bringing God's love to the people and lifting them up to a higher spiritual plane. In her little Green Shul in the forest, she was an inspirational leader, a brilliant teacher, a healer, and a channel to the Upper Worlds.

At first, Chana Rochel was tolerated as an eccentric and an oddity, but as her following expanded, the fiercely traditional male leadership of the Hasidic community became alarmed. They viewed her activities as a pathological manifestation of the powers of evil and impurity. They began to pressure Chana Rochel to abandon the life she had created for herself and resume her rightful female role and get married. Under the threat of excommunication, Chana Rochel capitulated, but her marriage lasted less than a week and was never consummated. After her divorce, Chana Rochel tried to resume her old life, but the Hasidic leadership had stirred up animosity against her and her followers dwindled.

Finding her situation untenable, Chana Rochel decided to emigrate to the Holy Land sometime in the 1850's. First she moved to Jerusalem where she began to teach and preach again, and acquired a small group of

followers. On Sabbath afternoons, they would come to hear her give a lesson about the Torah, and on Rosh Chodesh, she would accompany them to Rachel's Tomb for prayer. Eventually, she moved to Safed where she gained the respect of many rabbis there. She died in 1888 and is buried on the Mount of Olives. In recent years, people have become aware of who she was, and have begin to visit her grave to recite prayers.

Chana Rochel Werbermacher was exceptional among the small number of women who are reputed to have exercised a charismatic authority within the Hasidic world of their day. Unlike most of them, she was not related by family ties – as mother, daughter, sister or widow – to any of the famous male *Tzaddikim*. She could not draw on the associative authority from which some Jewish women were able to derive from their distinguished male relatives. Her powers were entirely her own.

Despite fierce personal and societal opposition, Chana Rochel's connection with the Divine guided her life and her choices. In my opinion, she embodied the ideal Hasid, believing, teaching and practicing the concepts that God is omnipresent in all things, no matter how humble, and that there is an unbroken relationship between the world of God and the world of humanity.

Bibliography

Books

Aron, Dr. Milton. Ideas and Ideals of the Hassidim. Citadel Press. Secaucus, N.J. 1969

Dressner, Samuel H. The Zaddik. Jason Aronson, Inc. New Jersey, London. 1994.

Mintz, Jerome R. Legends of the Hasidim, An Introduction of Hasidic Culture and Oral Tradition in the New World. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 1968.

Winkler, Gershon. They Called Her Rebbe, The Maiden of Ludomir. Judaica Press, Inc. New York. 1991

Articles on the Internet

“*Baal Shem Tov*.” Wikipedia.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baal_Shem_Tov.

“*Hasidism*.” Jewish Virtual Library. The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. 2009. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Hasidism.html>.

“*Ludomir, Maid of*.” By Ada Rapoport-Albert. Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia. March 1, 2009. Jewish Women’s Archive. <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ludomir-maid-of>.

“*Maiden of Ludomir*.” Facts, Discussion Forum and Encyclopedia Article. http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Maiden_of_Ludomir.

“*Maiden of Ludomir*.” Wikipedia.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maiden_of_Ludomir.

“*Mystical Zefat Women*.” By Yael Levine Katz. Ascent of Safed – In the City of Kabbalah. <http://www.ascentofsafed.com/cgi-bin/ascent.cgi?Name=women>.

“Jewish Museum of Vienna presents “Best of All Women.” Art Knowledge News online. November, 2007.

http://www.artknowledge.com/Jewish_Museum_Vienna.html.