

The Women Writers OF GUSH KATIF

By Toby Klein Greenwald

Gush Katif beach at sunset. Photo: Toby Klein Greenwald
Below: Ruhama Shapira and family. Photo courtesy of Ruhama Shapira

It is the spring of 2004, and I'm waiting for my weekly ride at the home of Michal, who sent her children to a neighbor who gave birth seven days ago. Michal's children, like the other children of Atzmona, will gather around

the crib of the newborn to say the Shema. Michal is in her forty-second week of pregnancy and will be checked by the doctor again tomorrow. But tonight, she has other plans.

drive is a blessed hiatus in a week that, like many weeks, has been marked by mortars and gunfire. Several months hence, a mortar will come through the roof of the caravan annex to Michal's home and shoot out the window—thankfully, when nobody is home. All of these women, at one point or another, have experienced—and written about—mortars.

I ride with Michal past two army posts—one near the exit in Atzmona, the other at the entrance to Neve Dekalim—and she pauses longer than necessary at each one to smile at the soldiers and say, "Shalom and thank you; thank you so much."

I received the assignment by default. There was no other writer or poet in Israel from among those registered with Omanut La'am, an organization

Buttercups

By Oshra Assis, Tel Katifa

The amber of buttercups
Giant mantles
Sparkling toward the sun
The good sun.
And you, wrapped now in white,
Walked in silence. In beauty.
And you planted in us pain and memory
Like a buttercup, scattered in the wind.

Adar 5762

Oshra wrote this in memory of Ahuva Emergi, a mother of two from Ganei Tal, who was murdered by terrorist gunfire on Adar 7, 2002. Oshra says, "This poem describes the day of the funeral. It was a glorious, warm spring day."

All poems translated from the Hebrew by Toby Klein Greenwald.

Toby Klein Greenwald is a writer and a community theater and film director. She lives in Efrat with her husband and children. She is a frequent contributor to Jewish Action.

We get into her car and drive to the library in Neve Dekalim, where Michal, Tami, Ruhama and a "minyán" of other women who live in various communities in Gush Katif come together every Tuesday night for a creative writing workshop. On the way we pass a petting zoo and a pizzeria. The



that sends writers to “the periphery,” who was willing to travel to Gush Katif. But the assignment was a blessed one for me, not only because of the interaction with the women I ended up meeting, but because it was a weekly opportunity to stay overnight with my daughter and granddaughters who live in Atzmona. It was a treat for me, and a help to my daughter, whose husband, an officer in the IDF, is away most of the week.

While in the car with Michal, I receive a call from our gardener, Elazar, a young man whose father was murdered by terrorists near Shechem. He explains that he is trying to save the diseased apple tree in our backyard, in Efrat. “Please do what you can to save it,” I implore him. “I love that tree so much.” We finish the conversation, and I think, *One tree*. How much more will be uprooted here, unless there is a miracle.

The women who come to write are as diverse as their names. National religious, secular and *Chardal* (*Chareidi-nationalist*), they are bonded not only by where they live but by their love of the pen. Tami, a reflexologist from Morag, a community situated so close to Rafiah and Khan Unis that Tami says, “We can see each of them from our window.” Ruhama, the granddaughter of Rav Eliyahu KiTov, pregnant and dressed in a modest headscarf and long skirt, arrives

At the army posts Michal pauses longer than necessary to smile at the soldiers and say, “Shalom and thank you; thank you so much.”

from her caravan on the beach at Shirat Hayam. She and her husband run a youth center for teenagers who are “seeking

band, Adi, in business with his father, grows geraniums and spices and exports them to Europe. Her husband’s family has lived in the nearby religious *moshav* of Ganei Tal for twenty years. Ruth, from Rafiah Yam, dressed in slacks, with black hair down her back and darkly polished nails, finishes her cigarette outside the library before entering. She has just completed a course in arbitra-

The Human Chain

By Tami Gilboa, Morag

They speak a great deal
about the human chain,
A petition of hope
Signed by the same joints of the body,
The same bony wrists,
Perhaps like staircases—
Rising toward singular understandings.
I spread out my hands toward you
My soul tired as the Land,
My eyes mournful,
The mountains echoing my voice
Back to me.
The mountains of Jerusalem are far,
And here are golden dunams
Returning light to me that is meant
For the World to Come,
Breaking crocodile tears within me.
Sitting in the sukkah of the skin
Of the Leviathan that threw up here
upon his shores

The prophet Jonah,
The dove of peace.
She is dead—thus are convinced
The forces of hope,
Dried up in the same forgetfulness.
I want a home without thinking,
I want to be without living
Like the mold of a demagogic vista.
After all, I am just one little settler,
Fearful of a road too long,
On a white donkey
Anointed by war,
And believing,
Always believing.

Tammuz 5764

*Appeared in Hebrew, in the winter 2004-2005
edition of Mashiv Haruach.*

God and trying to comfort the broken child within them[selves].” Oshra, also pregnant and wearing a head covering, is a history student at Ben-Gurion University; she travels from her large, beautiful home in Tel Katifa. Her hus-

tion. She will miss one of our sessions later in the season, when she is to be busy with the family of her brother, who will be injured in a mortar attack. A few minutes later we’re joined by Debby, an articulate, bilingual woman with bright eyes, from Neve Dekalim, who is the Hof Aza

Seeking My Father

By Debby Rosen, Neve Dekalim

On the highway that goes up toward
Jerusalem
I sought you
The tall fir trees
Hid you
On the highway that goes up to
Jerusalem
I lost you
In a bright field of headstones
Gathered about you.

Shevat 5764

Debby wrote this poem in memory of her father. It is about the ascent to the Har Hamenuhot cemetery on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

(Gush Katif) Regional Council liaison to foreign and local reporters. Dorit, an artist from Gan-Or, who, with her husband, exports strawberries and other produce, still has ceramic clay beneath her fingernails. And there are others too, Tzila, Bracha, Aliza, Efrat, Vered...

Within the library walls, like within the walls in Gush Katif, diversity breeds not animosity but empathy and unity, which are rare in Israel today. There are evenings during which we'll hear a noise outside that may be distant gunfire or a mortar. The women raise their heads for a second and then return to their writing.

From their perspective, a greater disturbance is a scratching sound that may indicate a mouse in the building; upon hear-

The women who come to write are bonded not only by where they live but by their love of the pen.

ing such a sound one evening, brave Tami is suddenly disconcerted.

I bring them "triggers"—poetry written by others about love and the Land, sagas of heartbreak and challenge. We experiment with metaphors, vocabulary and fantasy. One evening, after months of

Akeidah

By Ruhama (KiTov) Shapira, Shirat Hayam

Take your son, your only son
Your hope
Your dream
Whom you loved
And bring him up as a sacrifice
To one of the mountains that I will show you

All of the love in the Gush
All of the pain almost
stood in his throat ...
But no.
And he arose at dawn

And he saddled his donkey
And he restrained his tears and memories
Moments of kindness and laughter
In a land of sun and shore
The green garden
The home, the courtyard
The heart trembles—

God will show him the lamb for sacrifice
My son

He needs no explanation
He asks no justifications
Nor quotes of written promises—

And they walked, both of them, as one;
And he saw the place from afar
And he said to his young men who
rejoice in his sorrow
Sit you here
With the donkey who brays in all directions*
A stranger will not comprehend; we will
supplicate ourselves
And return to you

When the hope was sacrificed
And they were ready to do all for it
The voice will be heard
And then nevermore

A ram's shofar of the Messiah
Is clutched
In the brambles of the heart

And He said
Because you did not hold back
Your heart, your soul from Me
I will bless you
And I will plant you on this land
With all My heart and with all My soul.
Soon in our days
Amen

Shevat 5765

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*In the original Hebrew the words were "on all the channels," a play on words, meaning both "directions" and television channels, referring to the constant broadcasts on Israeli television relating to the expulsion of the Jews from Gaza.

Ruhama lives with her husband, Shmuel, and their children in Shirat Hayam (Song of the Sea), a community located on the seashore of Gush Katif. Her husband is the rabbi of the community.

Ruhama:

The poem Akeidah was born in the middle of the night, as I tossed, sleepless, in my bed. I suddenly understood the similarity between our situation and that of Avraham—that we have to be ready for the possibility that this is what God wants. And if we arrive at that internal understanding, we don't need for it to happen in actuality. Avraham accepted that he did not understand everything. And while he walked and thought about it, he felt so united with God that the act of the akeidah was no longer necessary. God did not want the sacrifice of Avraham, nor does he want our destruction [in Gush Katif], but rather the essence of the akeidah: "Nishma kol," "The voice will be heard," is a revelation.

“And I Say to You, in Your Blood Will You Live.”

By Michal Ashdot, Atzmona

I leave the gates of the hospital elated, a small treasure wrapped in my arms. A son. He joins the loving and vocal gang of three big sisters. We arrive home to a joyous welcome.

Thursday night is *mishmar* night in the yeshivah. The boys and the staff study till dawn. “I will be home early tonight,” you say. “No, better you stay and study,” I urge my husband. “But if the baby awakens and cries? You will surely need me here. I will be home early.”

Since then we think of you, my child, as “the baby who saved Abba.”

You returned from *mishmar* at 11:30 p.m., asked how I was feeling and went to shower. We had all had a full day, or so we thought.

A clap of thunder! Gunfire! This is not the first time we have heard these sounds

*from outside our windows, which face Rafiah. But this time it sounds closer. Through the window we see flames from the direction of the mechinah.**

You get ready quickly—gun, bullet-proof vest, helmet—and you run. I lock the door. On one arm is my child, like a little bird, who only today came home with me from the hospital. The other hand, shaking, clutches a gun.

I was born to nurture, not to chop down, a voice within me shrieks.

Fifteen eternities pass in the next fifteen minutes, until you call.

“There are wounded boys in the *mechinah*. Try to contact rescue forces.”

“We already know,” a tense voice replies when I call the emergency number. “We are on our way.”

Two days after birth, new life in

my arms.

We, who thirst only to live, on this homeland, inheritance of our fathers, tonight lost five students of Torah.

And at the *brit milah*, we wailed: “And I say to you, in your blood will you live. And I say to you, in your blood will you live.”

And this is a sign to us that the disaster will be overturned.

And we called your name Shmuel Mevasser—Shmuel who will bring good tidings.

Tammuz 5764

**pre-army yeshivah program*

Michal wrote this while she was pregnant with a daughter, whom she named Nahala (Inheritance).

imaginative assignments, I ask the group to write about the unrealistic scenario of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announcing that the communities of Gush Katif will be expelled.

They are stunned at the assignment and wonder what got into me. Some of them refuse to write about it; others write with depth and sensitivity.

Ten days later Prime Minister Sharon makes his announcement about the expulsion. This time, I am the one who is stunned. At our next session, my writers say to me in horror, “How eerie. What a shame you didn’t ask us to write about the coming of the Messiah.”

For the rest of our time together, our creative writing sessions morph into a support group. Through their poetry and prose, the women share their pain and their fears, their shock, their skepticism as well as their hope and incorrigible belief.

It is late summer and the second series of classes, funded by the One Israel Fund, has ended. I see “my women” only occasionally now, when

visiting my daughter’s family. I am gratified, some months later, to learn that several of my students have had their poetry published in *Mashiv Haruach*, a respected Israeli literary journal.

I miss the warm evenings in Atzmona and Neve Dekalim, spending two hours with women who have values, compassion and vision, who know how to spin words into creations of thoughtfulness and beauty. The writers of Gush Katif. **IA**

Palm Beach

By Dorit Fixler, Moshav Gan-Or

It is twilight on Palm Beach.
The ocean reflects drops of golden sun,
My bare foot is caressed by sand
As my deep footprints are filled by a
sapphire wave
And the sand forgives.

In the eastern gateways, as the light pales
I return home with song.
Suddenly, the whining tenor of a
mortar shrieks
And echoes
At the guard posts, the bearers of weapons
will respond
With their own measure of fire
“Roger, over...”

Like yesterday
The sand forgives.

Shevat 5764

Dorit, an artist, and her husband, Tzvika, grow fruits and vegetables for export. They have lived in Gan-Or with their family for eighteen years. “We are praying for a miracle,” says Dorit, “but as farmers, we have to be realistic. We will lose two seasons, and nobody will compensate us for that. I am writing a journal, and that helps me feel calmer and able to cope. I feel such a sadness ... we built this with our fingers. I came to Gush Katif when I was nineteen years old. I built my life, my family here. Perhaps a miracle will happen.”