

Multifaceted Otherness as a Source of Empowerment

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Abstract

This article examines the unique story of Miriam Bat Avraham. Born at the beginning of the 20th century, a period in which women were excluded from the pages of historiography, she left a rare treasury of documents describing her life, showing how she coped with her multifaceted “otherness” in a cooperative community. She was an orphan entering a community based on family networks, a Yemenite, ethnically and culturally different from a closed society of immigrants from Russia, and a woman in an organization characterized by conservative gender perspectives and exclusion of women from the public sphere.

Qualitative content analysis of her archive, cross-referenced with official documents and other testimonies, shows that through acquiring education and knowledge, considered in feminist literature as change agents, Miriam succeeded in turning the community vegetable garden into a central economic branch and broke through ethnic and gender boundaries.

Keywords: life story, Yemen, gender, collective settlement, otherness, vegetable garden

1. Multifaceted Otherness as a Source of Empowerment

1.1 The Treasure

A few years ago, I met Efrat Levitin-Blayberg, the librarian at Kibbutz Kfar Giladi. She told me about her mother, Miriam Levitin (1908-1998), a daughter of Rabbi Avraham Sharaby, who was orphaned in Yemen and lived at Kfar Giladi. Later, she gave me a carton with dozens of letters written by Miriam.

Most are letters to Eliyahu Levitin, Miriam’s partner, a Russian immigrant and member of the ‘*Noar Tzofi Halutzi*’ (*Netzach*) movement of the *HaShomer Hatzza’ir* movement. At a party in Tiberias celebrating the union of *Achdut ha’avoda* (a socialist Zionist party) and *Hapo’el Hatzza’ir* (a Zionist workers party) into Mapai, Miriam and Eliyahu met (Tivoni, 1994). In 1932, Kfar Giladi absorbed the *Netzach* group from Tiberias, but Eliyahu did not join them, instead working in building trades around the country. In 1933, at age 25, Miriam married Eliyahu at Kfar Giladi, but they continued to live separately until the birth of their daughter Tamar in 1934. This unique relationship partially explains the exceptional scope of Miriam’s writing.

The carton also contained autobiographical pages written in the early 1940s (Bat Avraham, 1944) as well as oral and written testimonies from later periods. The multiplicity of written material shows Miriam’s desire, perhaps unconscious, to document her life experiences. This archive is also a rare find among the Jews of Yemen, who did not tend to chronicle their experiences. The archive is a unique source about the period of the second *aliyah* (1904-1914) and afterwards, in which women wrote little, their silence explained by their exclusion from public discourse.

The history of women’s narratives is perceived as an appendix to the central Zionist narrative. A turning point began in the 1970s, with the introduction of new approaches to historiography focused on researching marginal groups and areas. Feminist research also claimed to correct the distortion of women’s absence from history (Kaminsky, 2012). Since the 1990s, the research emphasis has moved from women to gender, and from stories of women to genderization of society, completing the missing female narrative and illuminating the study of society as a whole (Bernstein, 2001).

1.2 Historical Background

HaShomer, a defense organization active in the Jewish *yishuv* from 1909 to 1920, was a secret, avant-garde, elitist organization whose members considered themselves revolutionary (Goldstein, 1994). *HaShomer* had a clear masculine, military identity, at its height numbering about 100 men out of 120 members, who immigrated during the second *aliyah*

to work in agriculture. Most had been active in underground movements and Jewish self-defense groups in Russia following the pogroms and belonged to the socialist-Zionist movement *Po'alei Tzion*.

Among the *HaShomer* settlements, Kfar Giladi was identified as 'the *HaShomer* Kibbutz'. Founded in 1916, it initially included a small group of three families and three single men who collectively shared field work and guarding. Kfar Giladi grew and by 1920 most *HaShomer* families were concentrated there. However, the settlement suffered from security problems and economic and social instability.

A prominent social characteristic of *HaShomer* was marriages within families, possibly an expression of desire to be a separate and unique society. Connections through marriage created a kind of large family, which developed at Kfar Giladi into a unique, multi-generational extended family structure. (Sinai, 2013).

Men in the community, although they had absorbed socialist ideas, still limited women to traditional service and caring roles (Goldstein, 1994). Two women, however, had special status as founders: Rachel Yana'it (1886-1979), editor of the *Po'alei Tzion* newspaper *Ha'Achdut* and married to Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, later president of Israel; and Manya Shochat (1879-1961), an activist in the revolutionary socialist movement in Russia, who joined Kfar Giladi in 1920 (Reinharz, Y., Reinharz, S. & Golani, 2005).

1.3 The "Other" – The Person and the Woman

In sociological conceptualization, the "other" is frequently the stranger, the unfamiliar, different one, but s/he is not necessarily distant and unknown (Ehrlich, 2001). S/He can be within the group, but s/he is not an integral part of it. In many aspects s/he is similar to the group members, but in other aspects perceived as significant, s/he is perceived as different. The stranger, according to sociologist Georg Simmel, is defined as a social type, that is as a category of relationship, characterized as a specific synthesis of closeness-distance. "Strangeness," according to Simmel's analysis, is a product of social relations, dependent on the definition of the "local" and relations between him/her and the "stranger." (Simmel, 1950). Otherness is directly connected with efforts to define individual and group identities. The "other" serves as the necessary characterization for defining and preserving collective identity. "Others" are perceived as inferiors (Schwalbe et al., 2000). However, many scholars agree that discourse about the identity of the other has no substantive basis, but is rather a product of the thoughts, desires and fears of those who create it (Kama & First, 2015). Each period or society creates its own "others." Through distinctions between members and "others," each society outlines its own cognitive and ethical map.

Boundaries enclose each identity, and enable society to build a world of us versus them. Thus, identity simultaneously includes components of negation and affirmation, inclusion and exclusion. (Lister, 2004). Sociologist Kai Erikson claimed society pushes those who deviate outside its boundaries and through them defines those boundaries. Social deviance thus creates "normativity" (Erikson, 1966). By defining people as "others," groups delineate symbolic boundaries (Hall, 1997). Lamont and Molnar (2002) claimed that symbolic and social boundaries create inequality and are important means of acquiring status and control over resources.

The subordinated other is the focus of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949. Analyzing sources from different fields, de Beauvoir exposed social mechanisms that bring about the subordination of women to men (De Beauvoir 2001, 2007). De Beauvoir showed that the defining characteristic of woman was as "eternal other," defined by man in relation to himself. Explaining how biological differences served throughout history to justify discrimination against women, de Beauvoir claimed women's status was similar to enslavement and minority groups. However, women did not have the option to organize around common subjectivity.

De Beauvoir noted a fundamental contradiction in the relations of women to themselves. Women aspire to express themselves and act as free subjects. On the other hand, women accept patterns and values of human (that is, male) society, which perceives woman as object. This situation of self-alienation and perpetual contradiction is the central characteristic of women's experience. De Beauvoir claimed that 'man' and 'woman' are not biological characteristics but rather cultural categories, and femininity like masculinity is a product of education; thus, her well-known statement that "a woman is not born a woman, she is made a woman."

Society is composed of endless processes of categorization, conceptualization, delineation and definition of social categories. However, in parallel, a process of crossing gender and ethnic boundaries occurs (Herzog, 2009). Likewise, in feminist thought the connection between women's empowerment and knowledge is emphasized as a generator of change (Hill-Collins, 2000).

In this article, I examine how Miriam coped with her multifaceted otherness at Kfar Giladi: alone without family, in a social network based on marital ties; ethnically-culturally-Yemenite, lacking in ideological background, in a close community of socialist Russian immigrants; a woman faced with conservative gender norms and exclusion of women from the public sphere. I claim that by acquiring knowledge, mainly about profitably growing vegetables, Miriam

turned her otherness into a source of empowerment. The fact that she was Manya Shochat's protégé greatly helped Miriam to challenge the limits of ethnicity and gender.

2. Materials and Methods

This study qualitatively analyzes Miriam's life story based on narrative research methodology that emphasizes the need to understand individuals' subjective experiences (Tuval-Mashiach & Spector-Marzel, 2010). Narrative researchers attribute great importance to the narrator's voice regarding his/her experience (Chase, 2005). Such an approach is widespread among feminist researchers focused on groups whose narratives have historically been silenced (Lieblich, 2003). In recent decades scholars have recognized that study of personal stories adds an important dimension to historical understanding (Narayan & George, 2001). Research on personal stories is vital to women's history, for women wrote little and their writing was not preserved.

Research based on life stories has an inherent problem, since the method reveals the interpretation that the individual gives to their own experiences. (Geertz, 1990). To avoid subjective bias, I researched information from diverse sources, basing this study on Miriam's interviews, letters and memoirs, cross-referenced with kibbutz archival material and other kibbutz members' memoirs from the period.

The paper introduces Miriam through a survey of the way-stations of her life. I then focus on Kfar Giladi and Miriam's lifework in the vegetable garden.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Early Stations in Miriam's Life

Miriam's family originated in the Sharab region in southwest Yemen. At age three, Miriam lost both her parents, Avraham and Nadra. In 1912, at age four, Miriam immigrated to Israel with her uncle's family and other Jews (Blayberg, 1993). They arrived in the framework of *Aliyat Yavni'eli*, named after Shmuel Yavni'eli, a leader of the *Hapo'el Hatza'ir* party, sent to Yemen in 1911 by the land of Israel office, an arm of the Zionist Federation, to convince Yemenite Jews to immigrate to Israel so that they could serve as cheap labor in the settlements (Druyan, 1982).

During this period most Yemenite immigrants were hired by farmers in the agricultural settlements, working in humiliating conditions with low salaries (Druyan, 1982). They were treated as "others," lacking in socialist ideology and culturally inferior, by the leaders of the *yishuv* (Ruppin, 1914). Therefore, Yemenite Jews were not integrated into the agricultural settlements and the *yishuv* did not establish an independent agricultural colony for them (Eraqi Klorman, 1997).

Miriam arrived in Rehovot with her uncle's family and lived in a stable. From a young age, Miriam was forced to work in farmers' homes, mopping floors, washing dishes, and caring for children (Bat Avraham, 1944). Miriam's statements support frequent descriptions in other studies about the widespread phenomenon of exploitative employment of young Yemenite girls (Margalit-Stern, 2006).

Miriam was not resigned to her fate and described in her memoirs frequent visits to a school for "the desire to learn beat in me 24 hours a day, awake and in dreams" (Bat Avraham, 1944). When she learned that her uncle intended to marry her off at an early age, she ran away to Tel Aviv in a cart. (Her undated story, on long folio pages, some of which are missing, is found in the Family Archive.)

In 1916, eight-year-old Miriam arrived in Tel Aviv alone. She remembered and turned to one of the Yavin family members from Rehovot. Miriam stayed with the family for about six months. The family cared for her basic needs, but did not give her a feeling of belonging. (Bat Avraham, 1944).

The Yavins found Miriam a permanent arrangement at the orphanage in Jaffa but in 1920, the orphanage was closed and the children, including Miriam who was about twelve years old, were transferred to Jerusalem. Because Miriam was considered a rebel, she moved from orphanage to orphanage (Bat Avraham, 1944). Finally, at age 14, Miriam moved to the Tushiya orphanage in Jerusalem. There she met Manya Shochat. Manya placed her daughter Anna, who was ill, in the care of her friend, the orphanage director. Of meeting Manya, Miriam recounted:

Here at Tushiya a great event in my life happened, I met Manya Shochat from Kfar Giladi. Manya's stories...were like legends to me. A decision grew in my heart, "when I grow up, I will go to Kfar Giladi, I must leave my dark world." When I revealed my plans to Manya, and she promised me that when I turned 16 she would take me to Kfar Giladi, there was no limit to my excitement and happiness (Bat Avraham, 1992).

Miriam's wish came true sooner than expected, following a rebellion she organized against a decision to fire the much-beloved director. In response, the board decided to move the institution to Shfeya. Miriam refused to go. Manya could not bear to see the suffering of the young woman "with the strong will" and decided, in 1923, to take Miriam to Kibbutz Kfar Giladi (Tivoni, 1994).

3.2 Finding a "Home"

Miriam, then about sixteen years old, received an unenthusiastic welcome at Kfar Giladi. Even after many decades, as a veteran, esteemed kibbutz member, Miriam still felt embarrassment and insult recollecting her arrival:

We arrived on Friday night, at 11 pm. Manya brought me into the dining room and she herself went to see her son... I stood by the door and looked at the members...everyone stared at me...two women members were standing by the bread cupboard and spoke to each other in Yiddish...“Why did Manya bring her here? She is so young...” In the morning Manya spoke with member Nahum Horowitz and I overheard some words. He, in Yiddish: “Who is this small black girl?” Manya: “A little Yemenite, I brought her to be educated... do you agree?” He: “Why not? Even ten like that” (Bat Avraham, 1944).

The Kfar Giladi community requested an explanation. One evening an emotional assembly was held. Miriam listened from the next room, overhearing members who spoke in Yiddish. There were shouts of “What will she do here? Why did she bring her here?” Manya explained her humanitarian and political reasons. Finally, Nahum Horowitz, one of the influential elders of HaShomer made a decisive speech saying, “When Miriam grows up, she will be one of our good members.” Miriam recounted: “...thus I had Nahum as a defense attorney, he defended me. The matter of my staying at Kfar Giladi was decided positively and I breathed a sigh of relief. This was the end of my wandering in orphanages...I will owe a debt...my whole life to Manya and to Nahum Horowitz” (Bat Avraham, 1944).

The embarrassing situation that Miriam found herself in immediately upon arrival at Kfar Giladi clarified her “otherness.” Her description is supported by testimony given by Anna, Manya Shochat's daughter:

My mother brought a young girl, black and thin ... She feared bringing her directly to the village, so she brought her to the vegetable garden...Before she came...and told people that she brought someone, she brought her through a ditch so that people would not see, that was basically your mother's entrance to the village (Levitin-Blayberg, 2002).

These testimonies show that Miriam's age was a consideration. However, the deciding factor for her rejection was her ethnic and ideological “otherness.”

From Miriam's point of view, as a foundling with no place to go, the public argument was of existential significance. Her daughter Efrat told me that because Nahum Horowitz was the one who effected the decision,

My mother felt grateful toward him her whole life, for because of him she was a member of the kibbutz; she received a home, for she had no home. ... She came to a kibbutz that was entirely made up of Ashkenazi, Russian, proud men of *HaShomer*, and suddenly they are arguing whether she should be here. ...Unconsciously, she thought, “I'll show you who I am.” She wanted to prove to the kibbutz society at Kfar Giladi that she was worthy.

For about two years, Miriam worked in different kibbutz branches, mainly in the vegetable garden. In 1926, with Manya's assistance, Miriam was accepted to the Agricultural School for Girls at Nahalal, established in 1923 by agronomist Hannah Maisel. There Miriam acquired agricultural training and also expanded her cultural horizons and social connections.

3.3 A Feminist in the Vegetable Garden

In 1928, Miriam returned to Kfar Giladi and managed the vegetable garden. It was small, about 25 dunams, with three women workers. The first goal they achieved was increasing the garden area to 75 dunams, thus making it a profitable kibbutz branch (Bat Avraham, 1944; Bat Avraham, undated).

Additional women joined the work, among them Fanya Astrachan who arrived in 1932 from the *Netzach* group in Tiberias and recounted, “From the beginning I worked in the vegetable garden. The group of workers was unique, while Miriam, the devoted director of the garden, welcomed people warmly” (Astrachan, 1984a). In later testimony Fanya added, “Miriam aroused great admiration, [she was] energetic, musical, had a sense of community and a talent for bringing together around her a group of women members for work in the vegetable garden. While working we talked about social and economic subjects, about art, etc.” (Astrachan, 1984b).

When the garden expanded, the problem of water shortage became more acute. According to letters Miriam wrote to Eliyahu (June 19 & November 29, 1933), as well as minutes from the Kibbutz Economics Committee meeting (January 14, 1935), the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association provided funds for internal piping. A sprinkler network was installed, and a water carrier was built to transport water from a spring. The piping system covered only 200 dunams; the rest was irrigated with natural methods.

The workers were concerned with the market and with growing vegetables out of season for higher prices and profit. They conducted experiments planting various seeds and seedlings in the summer, with instruction from the Jewish Agency. The work was difficult, but by 1933 the vegetable garden became an important factor in the kibbutz cash flow.

(Bat Avraham, M., 1931-1968, Bat Avraham, M., to E. Levitin, March 19, 1931 & January 11, 1934; *Vegetable Garden Survey*).

Documents show that in the following years the vegetable garden developed and produced profitable crops (Vegetable Garden Survey; Bat Avraham, M., 1931-1965, Bat Avraham to E. Levitin, November 22, 1933, June 22, 1937 & August 7, 1938). Until the Second World War, Kfar Giladi, like other *kibbutzim*, purchased vegetable seeds from overseas. The outbreak of war presented difficulties and prices rose. Therefore, several *kibbutzim* decided to experiment with producing seeds. With a larger number of workers in the Kfar Giladi garden, mostly women, they began experimenting with growing seed varieties (Vegetable Garden Survey).

In 1940, they succeeded in cultivating cauliflower and broccoli of late-ripening, disease-resistant strains not previously available locally. (Bat Avraham, M., 1931-1965, Bat Avraham to Volcani Center, August 19, 1961). The seeds, marketed through the Seed Company, were in demand in Israel and abroad. Miriam and her colleagues were pioneers in cultivating additional vegetable varieties, and they were the first in Israel to grow vegetables in the summer, 'Marimond' tomatoes (Galili, 1961). Kfar Giladi vegetables gained a reputation and were in demand overseas. Miriam thus succeeded in turning the vegetable garden to specialization in exports (Kibbutz financial reports 1945-1952; Vegetable Garden Survey).

Annual work plans Miriam submitted to the general assembly, and reports in the kibbutz journal '*Al Hagivah*', illustrate Miriam's professional development. She demonstrated expertise regarding seed varieties, planting and harvesting seasons, irrigation methods, fertilization, pest control, storage, markets, work force and pricing (Vegetable Garden Survey; General Assembly, undated).

Miriam became a recognized authority and Kfar Giladi a training ground for garden workers from other kibbutzim. Miriam also served as advisor to kibbutzim on behalf of the Seed Company (Vegetable Garden Survey). Miriam's achievements earned her the General Federation of Labor (*HaHistadrut HaClalit*) work prize in 1961 and 1971, and a prize from the Seed Company (Galili, 1961).

The success of the vegetable garden had gender significance. Women worked together on behalf of an important feminist agricultural enterprise and developed the revolutionary seed growing field. Cooperation, commitment and dedication created a kind of women's "unit pride" in the garden, also reflected in Miriam's letters.

Miriam explained her refusal to leave Kfar Giladi and join Eliyahu as based on her love for the kibbutz and her commitment to the vegetable garden and her career. On May 23, 1933, for example, she wrote:

I cannot even allow myself the thought of traveling away from the garden right now. I know that for me to miss even one day in the garden is very bad. And secondly Eliyahu, we have ambition here, and we want to prove that there can be a valuable garden here managed by young women.

Additional testimony comes from Eliyahu Levin, son of Tzafirra Levin, a garden worker from 1937-1957.

My mother worked in the vegetable garden...The branch manager was Miriam Bat Avraham, who set high standards. Most of the workers were women. They were very proud of their achievements and their contribution to the kibbutz. They fulfilled the idea of women's equality in work and society (Memorial Book, 2001)

Despite this, in Miriam's writing there is a sense of personal and female "otherness" on the kibbutz. In her 1944 autobiography, Miriam bravely remonstrated the kibbutz society that declared commitment to equality without implementing it:

I had great difficulty in my theoretical studies in the branch, because we don't have suitable books in Hebrew, and I do not know foreign languages...More than once I felt ridiculed for not knowing any language other than Hebrew. However, my will power and ambition gave me a constant incentive to prove to those around me that a person who has natural strengths and his social status has not given him the opportunity to develop them, a talented person like this can also create a lot in kibbutz life and rise (Bat Avraham, 1944).

Miriam also carried a feminist message about her difficulties and her abilities. She noted with pride the women members around her, who worked with the men in work considered "masculine" (Bat Avraham, 1944).

In interviews during the 1960s, Miriam emphasized the importance of women working in agriculture: "What will happen if women don't work in agriculture? We will be like regular housewives and nothing more...What is determinative now is economic life...the standard of living is rising because of women. If men think that it is because of them, they are mistaken" (Miriam Levitin – Worker's award winner, 1961, file of Eliyahu and Miriam Bat Avraham Levitin, Kfar Giladi Archives).

3.4 Absent-Present Mother

Agricultural work was the central value in Miriam's life; she was devoted to it at the expense of her husband and her children, Tamar (b. 1934), Avital and Efrat (b. 1937) and Emmanuel (b. 1950). In her early autobiography, Miriam acknowledged giving motherhood secondary priority. Her writing also clarifies that despite the sense of sisterhood, her colleagues did not hesitate to criticize her:

About motherhood. The opinion that it is difficult to unite devotion to children with devotion to the garden was widespread. I admit there are days in the intensive work season when it is hard for a mother to meet with her children in a meeting worthy of its name... when I couldn't be with my daughters, my motherly feeling suffered, and more than one tear was shed. But for the sake of the farm the matter was justified in my eyes (Bat Avraham, 1944).

In her later memoirs too, Miriam mentioned criticism by other mothers:

I remember one incident of many...we needed to stay about another half-hour. One of the women said to me: "I won't stay any longer. Miriam, you love your children less than I do and you don't care about working more." This hurt me. I knew there were members ... who did not understand my relationships and the responsibility for what I took upon myself... (Tivoni, 1994).

The criticism toward Miriam shows that women aspired to be part of the pioneering revolution but adopted the traditional *HaShomer* view of women as guarantors of continued national existence. Manya Shochat and Rachel Yana'it were exceptions who were influenced by the pattern of national motherhood of Russian women revolutionaries (Sinai, 2013). Miriam, Manya's protégée, viewed her as a role model. But in contrast to Manya, who belonged to the exclusive group of *HaShomer* leaders, Miriam, lacking such status, was exposed to criticism.

In later testimony, Miriam analyzed the reasons for her total devotion to work:

I am aware of the reasons for my being so tied to my work, that I did not grow up ... in an organized household, so I didn't know the meaning of family, and I didn't have an educating model in my childhood (Tivoni, 1994).

3.5 Public Activity

Miriam was involved in public activity on the kibbutz. She participated in meetings and expressed her opinions. She was likewise a member of different committees such as education and economy (See for example general assemblies from 1936-1937, Minutes file 1848, Kfar Giladi Archives). Singing was her beloved hobby. Known as the 'Yemenite Nightingale', Miriam sang at events and celebrations in Kfar Giladi and at other kibbutzim (Tivoni, 1994). It is evident that Miriam sought to actualize herself through public activities, although she felt qualms about neglecting her responsibilities as a mother:

Frequently I would think, where had I drawn my strength for so many roles in addition to the vegetable garden... that demanded time and patience and strength...It was impossible to control the compulsion for achievement ... these compulsions were also the reason...that I deprived my eldest daughter of attention (Tivoni, 1994).

Her daughter Efrat told me, "My mother took on roles, everything was very important to her. She was a feminist; she was at the assemblies; she was assertive. She had status, she was listened to; she was on this and that committee. She was a partner in decisions, an exceptional woman in her time period."

Research has shown that women participated in assemblies at Kfar Giladi and some took part in public life. However, women were excluded by the male majority from the managing bodies and from various kibbutz committees. (Goldstein, 1994). In spite of Miriam's "otherness", she paved her own way to the center of public achievement in the kibbutz, making her voice heard.

3.6 "Other in Her Own Home"

From Miriam's early autobiography, her difficulties adapting to the kibbutz in the first years are evident.

I was not easily absorbed into the community and work... In the kitchen and the laundry, I knew how to do all the work. In the vegetable garden, I worked like an adult, from dawn to dusk. A year went by, then two, the difficulties in my absorption passed, slowly I began to see the community as my own and it too saw me thus (Bat Avraham, 1944).

From her later memoirs, we learn that despite her acclimatization, there were people who mocked her for her ethnic "otherness." In a feminist retrospective glance, Miriam expressed her disappointment that women joined the mockers instead of supporting her. She chose not to respond, apparently because she felt insecure:

I remember when it was March, when it was still cold, and I worked barefoot in the vegetable garden. In the shoe

storage there were a male and female worker who did not know I understood Yiddish well...sometimes I regretted knowing Yiddish, because [if I had not] I would at least not have heard the slander from these two members and from others. The woman member in the storage said in Yiddish to the man, who was making an effort to find me suitable shoes: "Leave her alone, she is used to going barefoot in Yemen." I didn't respond (Blayberg, 1993).

Miriam's letters to Eliyahu from the 1930s (e.g. March 7, July 16 & August 16, 1933) give the impression that Miriam did integrate into kibbutz society. However, the letters also convey a sense of loneliness and even alienation, explained by her lack of a partner and family but also by her cultural and social differences from the *HaShomer* group, as she hinted in her letter from March 18, 1933: "They try to act elitist." Her criticism is reinforced in Fanya Astrachan's memoirs:

The members of Kfar Giladi received us well with a hint of doubt about whether we would be successfully absorbed. This was after the division between the veteran members and the members of the "leftist faction of *Po'alei Tzion*." The atmosphere was quite difficult. Our absorption at Kfar Giladi was accompanied by difficulties in adapting to the special atmosphere of the *HaShomer* group, who had created a special setting with an emphasis on matters of guarding and security, relationships with neighbors, etc. (Astrachan, 1984b).

Miriam's memoirs from the 1930s and following reveal her great pain from the contemptuous treatment she received. In contrast to her restrained responses in the early years, Miriam did not hesitate to answer back and fought for her place and her ideas. It appears that as Miriam developed personally and professionally and integrated into the kibbutz, her self-confidence increased. She wrote to Eliyahu on April 3, 1944, that in the members' meeting, when she expressed opposition on a subject discussed by one of the members:

[He] was on me like a parasite, and told me I would be ejected from the meeting. I was astonished and told him that he should be quiet, that he should not speak to me like that. Then he said yes, I will pick you up and throw you out and eject you etc. I wonder if he would dare say these things to someone else, to be so contemptuous...Of course no one else found it necessary to respond to this and they were all quiet.

Retrospectively, Miriam expressed criticism of the kibbutz society that carried the banners of socialism and equality but excluded the "other" who was different, including new immigrants. (Tivoni, 1994).

Her statements are reinforced by General Assembly minutes from March 17, 1935. The meeting discussed accepting a group of immigrants from Germany. Kibbutz members, led by the *HaShomer* group, opposed accepting them with the claim that "the German material is not suitable for us." Miriam supported accepting the group and claimed, "we need a new social stream among us" (General Assembly, 1935). Her brave response was perhaps due to her identification with the immigrants who were homeless as Miriam had been.

The impression gained is that the *HaShomer* group were a closed social core, crystallized socially and ideologically, who saw themselves as a select elite. Those who did not belong were perceived as "others" who were unsuitable to their unique community and possibly even perceived as a threat. Despite her integration into Kfar Giladi, Miriam was also considered "other."

Over the years Miriam testified with pain and even surprise about hurtful incidents based on her ethnic background, also presenting her idea of the solution:

To my great sorrow and to my surprise one day in the general assembly, at the beginning of the 1950s, I discovered that there was one of the members who opposed my opinions politically, and he said things related to my ethnic background. The things he said were hard and hurtful, that after all the years, the image was determined by ethnic criteria. Were not integration and cultural intermingling my guiding light, without the need to deny ethnic background, past and culture? And I fought for my opinions (Tivoni, 1994).

In an interview Miriam gave to the newspaper *Devar Hapo'elet* in 1961, her pain regarding the disparagement surfaced, and the solution she proposed to the problem of ethnicities made clear that she called for dialogue and compromise.

It is true that even here on the kibbutz, there is someone who would hurt me because of my ethnic background. I related to him with contempt and acquired a status for myself, absolutely...We will reach a solution. But not in this generation and only by mixing the ethnicities. Education is the main means, but the final goal is to be found in mixed marriages (Adiv, 1961).

Rachel Adiv, the interviewer, illuminated the problematic situation of "otherness" Miriam faced, stating: "Miriam speaks of this painful point with openness and understanding, based on constructive and difficult life experience: A Yemenite woman still has to be wiser, and more hard working than others."

4. Conclusion - An Exceptional Life Story of Multifaceted Otherness

Miriam Bat Avraham Levitin's life story is exceptional. At the age of four, she immigrated to Israel from Yemen, and

searched for a home through her early life. In 1923, at age 16, she found her home at Kfar Giladi, the flagship kibbutz of the *HaShomer* organization. Miriam was brought there by Manya Shochat, one of the leaders of the kibbutz and pre-state settlement in the land of Israel. Being “Manya’s orphan” made it possible for Miriam to integrate into Kfar Giladi.

Miriam loved Kfar Giladi, but from the moment of her arrival she experienced a sense of “otherness.” Groups form their identities through creating boundaries with “others,” who are usually perceived as inferior (Kama & First, 2015); this is how the elitist *HaShomer* group behaved. As different groups merged into Kfar Giladi over the years, *HaShomer* sought to preserve their unique identity, out of fear that the “others” would change the social and ideological fabric of the community. Miriam stood out in her “otherness” in all possible characteristics: as an orphan, a woman and someone from a different ethnical and cultural background.

At the kibbutz, work, mainly in agriculture, was the primary source of prestige and fulfillment. According to Davis (1978), role and activity in the kibbutz framework could be leverage for coping with and diminishing prejudice (Bijaoui & Egozi, 1986). Thus, Miriam attained entry into the community and overcame her “otherness” through filling many public roles, primarily through managing the vegetable garden where she worked for more than 60 years. By acquiring education and knowledge at the Agricultural Training School for Girls in Nahalal, considered in feminist literature to be change agents (Hill-Collins, 2000), Miriam and her co-workers were able to make the garden one of the most central kibbutz branches.

The community never let Miriam forget her ethnic background. For her talent at singing, she was nicknamed “the Yemenite nightingale”; years after her arrival at Kfar Giladi there were those who continued to cast aspersions on her due to her ethnicity. Yet, Miriam’s “otherness” also made it possible for her to stand outside conservative gender norms and to pursue her professional activities even when her actions defied conventions.

At a very early age Miriam expressed her nascent feminism and determination by running away from an arranged marriage in the Yemenite immigrant community. She left a community with strict gender norms, likely even more traditional than those at Kfar Giladi. Thus, she was a trailblazer in relation to traditional norms regarding women immigrants in the Yemenite Jewish community (Druyan, 1992). The fact of her being an orphan from a young age, without connection with relatives in Israel, was in my opinion the central factor in Miriam’s release from these traditional family boundaries. She herself understood that her early years bestowed a kind of freedom from traditional expectations and the ability to focus on her work.

Thus Miriam’s “otherness,” which was a source of loneliness and pain, was a strength of sorts, and gave her the ability to grow as a professional woman, as well as to support other women to become an important part of the economy at Kfar Giladi.

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