

From the Pages of Tradition

RABBI YEHIEL YAAKOV WEINBERG: IN PRAISE OF ESTHER RUBINSTEIN

Esther Rubinstein (1881-1924) was born in a small town in the Mariampol district of Lithuania.¹ She was the daughter of the Gaon R. Hayyim Yirmiyahu Flensberg (d. 1914), who would later become famous as the Chief Rabbi of Shaki in Lithuania.² He was the author of many works on Jewish law, philosophy, and aggadah.

As the only daughter of the Chief Rabbi, she was taught (by him) Bible, rabbinic literature, and Jewish philosophy. She mastered Jewish literature and would often startle audiences by reciting passages from the Talmud by heart. Tutors were hired to teach the precocious young girl European languages and literature. In 1905, she married Rabbi Isaac Rubinstein, a graduate of the Volozhin, Slabodka, and Shtetl yeshivot.³ When he was appointed “Crown” rabbi of Vilna in 1910 (after receiving the approval of R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski), Esther and her husband moved to Vilna, where they became leaders of the Jewish community. Esther was a Jewish educator, social worker, and activist. She founded several Jewish schools for girls, one of which—after her death—was named the Esther Rubinstein School for Girls. She was a religious Zionist leader who lectured widely on the central role women must play in reclaiming the land of Israel. She was an advocate of women’s suffrage, and published widely on the subject.⁴ She wrote and lectured in flawless Hebrew. During World War I, she ran soup kitchens and other social agencies on behalf of the needy.

Shortly after the War, she contracted a rare blood disease, went to Berlin for treatment, and ultimately to a Jewish hospital in Merano, Italy, where she died in 1924 at the age of 42.⁵ In Vilna, the entire Jewish population mourned her untimely death. A memorial service attended by thousands was held in the Great Synagogue of Vilna. She was the

only woman ever accorded this honor. Also, a memorial volume was published in her honor in Vilna in 1926. For a rabbi's wife (*Rebbetzin*), to be so honored was unheard of—and the eulogies and literary contributions were by distinguished rabbis, writers, and Zionist leaders. Her husband never remarried, was later elected Chief Rabbi of Vilna,⁶ survived the Holocaust, but died a broken man (having lost almost his entire family and Jewish community) in New York in 1945. He is buried at the Mt. Carmel cemetery in Queens, N.Y., and inscribed on his tombstone are the words: "Chief Rabbi of Vilna."



Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg (1884-1966), a graduate of the Slabodka Yeshiva, served as the last Rosh Yeshiva of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary.⁷ His *She'elot u-Teshuvot Seridei Esh* (Jerusalem, 1961-69, four volumes) is one of the great classics of twentieth century rabbinic literature. From 1906 to 1913 he served as Chief Rabbi of Pilvishki (southwest of Kovno, and near Shaki). Thus, he was on intimate terms with members of Esther Rubinstein's family, many of whom resided in Pilvishki and Shaki.⁸ R. Weinberg's eulogy, presented here in English translation, originally appeared in Hebrew in the 1926 memorial volume in honor of Esther Rubinstein.⁹



The passing of Rebbetzin Esther Rubinstein has left the Jewish world in a state of shock. The news of her death caused all hearts to tremble. The mourning was universal—all circles and parties joined in eulogizing her. Rabbinic scholars and yeshiva students as well mourned her death. Not for nothing did the eulogizers deliver their eulogies—the loss caused by her death is great indeed.

She was a truly great woman. It can be said about her unequivocally that she left no one comparable to her. All the characteristics of her greatness were extraordinary. Her broad and comprehensive knowledge of Torah would have enhanced even a male rabbinic scholar whose only occupation was the study of Torah. Her profound and broad mastery of general culture is rarely paralleled even among intellectuals with all the proper diplomas. She combined within herself unparalleled natural talent, intellectual brilliance, profound understanding, broad knowledge, impeccable memory, and literary flair, and was a gifted public speaker as well.

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When she was suddenly “discovered,” she was already in full bloom with all her talents at her disposal. Her first public appearance astounded her audience. Her reputation as a gifted public speaker spread far and wide. Her words were incendiary; her listeners were moved by her fiery words. Those who heard her speak from the dais, or read her essays in print, were astounded by what they heard and read. Men asked: Is it the way of women to perform such wondrous acts? But those who conversed with her in matters of Torah and general wisdom ceased to be amazed. They realized that she represented a unique category of human being, one that was not subject to the whims of gender. They saw her greatness, recognized that she surpassed all others, and acquiesced. Before long, she managed to allay the continued astonishment of her large circle of listeners. Her public appearances on the dais and in print became frequent and expected. Her views on contemporary issues were eagerly awaited. Her silence on a contemporary issue aroused more surprise than when she expressed her views openly.

We who knew her when she was still a youngster, knew that she was worthy of the task. She was armed with an abundance of spirit and excellent work habits. As a young girl, she combined Torah and good deeds. She studied Scripture and rabbinic literature. She was worthy of the task even before she made her first public appearance. We were not astonished when she made her first public appearance; we were astonished that she could contain herself for so long. Her ability to suppress her “prophecy” was, perhaps, her greatest talent. Those who knew her only from her speeches and essays knew only the half of her. She mastered the Torah, aggadic literature, poetry, and philosophic literature—and knew how to draw out from them their richness and beauty. Even her ordinary conversation was replete with wisdom.

It is with a pained heart that I recall my last visit with her. I accompanied her husband the Rabbi (may he live and be well) on a visit to her at the hospital. Death was already gleaming through her eyes; she sensed that her last day was approaching. Her husband, the Rabbi, began comforting her. But it was apparent that she was not receptive to his words of comfort. I was deeply saddened, and sat silently, as I shuddered from fright lest she fathom the true meaning of my silence. I decided to turn the conversation to words of Torah. She was engaged by the words of Torah and her eyes lit up. Thus, while the blade was to her neck, she spewed forth words of Torah, interpretations of Scripture and rabbinic passages, sharp and to the point. As long as I live, I shall never forget that scene.

In her few years in the public arena, Esther Rubinstein carved out for herself an important niche in the life of the Jewish community. The astonished community learned to accommodate itself to a scenario where a woman stood at its head. Her personality became a fixed star in the Jewish heavens. She became part of our national heritage; her name is included in the small lexicon of famous names that rests in the pocket of every Jew who retains an attachment to Jewish life. Her seat was included among those of the leaders of her city. We witnessed the fact that she sat among the first of the leaders in all community matters, and in matters pertaining to the Jewish nation at large, and we were proud. Through her, we experienced a national pride: she was the complete Hebrew woman, like those famous women who preceded her in ancient times. Alas, this shining star has been extinguished and is no more. In its absence, we have become poorer, and our national legacy has become poorer. Her seat shall remain empty for years to come, for who will provide us with her replacement?

In the preceding paragraphs, I attempted to record a short epitaph for her tombstone. I sense, however, that I have not fulfilled my obligation to eulogize her. So I will record a few more lines. Her most salient characteristic, it seems to me, was her strength of spirit. She recognized her obligations in life and fulfilled them with strength of spirit. Wherever one witnessed her greatness, one witnessed her modesty as well. This great and famous woman was also a modest woman. Her modesty did not derive from the weakness and softness of women. Rather, it was a modesty derived from spiritual strength, from a deep ethical commitment. She never appeared in the public arena for the sake of fame or in order to wield political power. As a youth, she never kept apart from the other girls her age, nor did she lord it over them. I once asked her before the War: "Why do you insist on maintaining such a low profile? Why don't you reveal to the world your literary prowess?" She answered me plainly: "The glory of a princess is indoors" (Psalm 45:14). (As an aside, I will mention her beautiful interpretation of this verse: The internalized world of a woman is her true glory and ornament.) With perfect simplicity and wholesomeness, she fulfilled her obligations as a daughter, wife, and mother. Her entire deportment was characterized by simplicity; and even the simplicity passed by largely unnoticed.

Especially touching was the mutual love between father and daughter. Her father, Rabbi Hayyim Yirmiyahu Flensberg of blessed memory, was Chief Rabbi of Shaki. He was a great scholar in Torah and general wisdom, and was one of the great preachers of his generation. How

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proud the old rabbi was of his daughter! It was his practice to call out—whenever a rabbinic passage came up in a discussion and no one could remember its source—“Let us call the girl and ask her what she thinks” (Gen. 24:57). His deceased daughter was expert in Torah; she could recite by heart all its passages. The father’s soul was bound up with his daughter. When she left her father in order to join her husband in Genitchesk (where R. Rubinstein had his first rabbinic appointment), he was much distraught. When I served as Rabbi of Pilvishki near Shaki, I heard that R. Flensberg in his last years refrained from preaching in public as often as he did in earlier years. When asked why he curtailed his preaching in public, he replied: “I no longer have the audience that I had in earlier years.” He was referring to his deceased daughter, who was also his only daughter.

It may be that the above episode is primarily a reflection of the father’s love for his daughter. But the daughter’s love for her father was no less intensive. She loved to tell over words of Torah in the name of “Abba.” Whenever she did so, she embellished them, explicated them, and added from her wisdom to his. It was as if she wanted to present a gift to “Abba” from her own spiritual largesse.

The exigencies of events during her lifetime pushed Esther Rubinstein into the public arena. Witnessing the destruction of her people, she was moved to action. She climbed onto the stage and cried out. Her words caught the attention of her listeners, for she was no ordinary speaker. Unlike eloquent European women speakers who knew how to beguile men with charming speech, she won the hearts of men by her spirit, i.e. by the strength of her conviction and by her fiery soul. If not for the World War, and if not for the suffering of her nation, she certainly would have remained hidden in the innermost chambers of her home. For concerning her private needs, she found personal fulfillment in serving her family and in educating her children. This sufficed fully for paying off her debt to her nation, for she was a most modest Hebrew woman indeed.

In her published essays, she undertook to spread the notion that the revival of the Jewish nation will occur only with the participation of the Jewish woman. The resuscitation of the Jewish nation rings hollow without “the Hebrew Mother.” Jewish education for women is perhaps the greatest problem we need to confront. In particular, we—the bearers of the flag of observant Jewry—need to wrestle with this issue openly as well as in the deepest recesses of our hearts. When I reflect on such issues, Esther Rubinstein’s image appears before my eyes. She serves as our model. Her well-ordered education, and her fulsome Jewish and

general education, serve as a model program for the education of our daughters. She railed against the mistaken notion (that has taken root among some light-minded women) that the enlightened woman and the religious woman are mutually exclusive categories of women. This mistaken notion is a reflection of a narrow-minded spirit and a constricted soul. Such spiritual poverty allows what is fashionable to take precedence over Torah teaching.

Had Esther Rubinstein been granted longevity, she would have aided us in solving the problem of Jewish education for women. For she regularly chastised Jewish women for their frivolity and for their poverty of Jewish education. She left an indelible impression on her listeners and readers, for all knew that she was the living embodiment of the complete Hebrew woman. How sad that this great woman, overflowing with profound ideas, and destined to be the educator of her generation, was cut off before her time! The song of her service ended at mid-point.

Your spiritual image will never leave us. Not merely because we honor your memory, and not merely because you were great in spirit and accomplished in deed, but because you stood at the top of the mountain—to which we all lifted our eyes—and bore our strivings and hopes. Your name will remain our symbol, our symbol for the strivings of the soul.

NOTES

1. For biographies of Esther Rubinstein, see "הרבנית אסתר רובינשטיין" in I. Klausner, ed., ספר היובל העשרים של הגמנסיה העברית בוילנה, Vilna, 1936, pp. 73-74; and the entry on her in הציונות הדתית של אנציקלופדיה, Jerusalem, 1983, vol. 5, columns 582-584. For her birthplace, cf. below, note 5.
2. See the biography of R. Flensberg appended to his ספר שמות: דברי ירמיהו: ספר שמות, Vilna, 1927 [reissued: Jerusalem, 2000], pp. III-X. The title "Chief Rabbi" in this essay, unless indicated otherwise, translates Hebrew: אב בית דין.
3. R. Isaac Rubinstein was a member of the "ייד החזקה," the 14 Slabodka graduates who were hand selected to study in 1897 under R. Isser Zalman Meltzer in the newly founded (Slabodka branch) yeshiva in Slutsk. See Y. Meltzer, בדרך עץ החיים, Jerusalem, 1986, vol. 1, pp. 91-92. On Rubinstein, see the biographical entries in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, 1971, vol. 14, column 376; and in הציונות הדתית של אנציקלופדיה, Jerusalem, 1983, vol. 5, columns 585-588.
4. See, e.g., her essay "העבריה, חנוכה וזכויותיה" in המזרחי 44(1919), pp. 6-7; 45(1919), p. 4; 48(1919), pp. 5-6; 49(1919), pp. 7-8.
5. Esther Rubinstein's biographers invariably list the wrong place and date of

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- her birth, and therefore mislead those who wish to calculate her age at her death. She was born shortly before the death of her mother, who died in Balbierishok, a small town in the Mariampol district of Lithuania, on 29 Heshvan, 5642 (= November 21, 1881). (R. Flensberg was serving at the time as Chief Rabbi of Balbierishok). Esther Rubenstein died in Merano on Shemini Atzeret (=22 Tishrei), 5685 (= October 20, 1924). Thus, she died just prior to her 43rd birthday. For the date of death of her mother, see R. Hayyim Yirmiyahu Flensberg, נזר הנצחון, Vilna, 1883 [reissued: Jerusalem, 2001], p. 9. That Esther Rubinstein was born shortly before her mother's death is a family tradition that I heard from her granddaughter, Esther Rubinstein Goldenberg of Jerusalem. That this is obviously the case is corroborated by the fact that although R. Flensberg remarried, he had no children from his second wife. The date of Esther Rubinstein's death is recorded on her tombstone in the Jewish cemetery at Merano.
6. After the death of R. Samuel b. Avigdor (d. 1793), last Chief Rabbi of Vilna, the title אב בית דין was no longer accorded to rabbis in Vilna. Cf. Hillel Noah Steinschneider, עיר ויילנא, Vilna, 1900, p. 102. In 1928, the Second Polish Republic—which had annexed much of Lithuanian territory, including Vilna—required the reconstituted Kehilla of Vilna to elect a Chief Rabbi. Two candidates were nominated by the Kehilla authorities (Rabbis Rubinstein and Grodzenski) and Rubinstein was elected Chief Rabbi. A major battle ensued between Vilna's entrenched rabbinate and the reconstituted Kehilla (now dominated by secular and left-wing political parties), which threatened to render asunder the Jewish community of Vilna. The battle was settled in 1932, when R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski was also elected Chief Rabbi, so that Vilna now had two Chief Rabbis. In fact, neither of the two Chief Rabbis was accorded the title אב בית דין, and—at least in the light of the documents I have seen—neither signed his name on any official document as אב בית דין of Vilna. In general, see Gershon Bacon, "Rubinstein vs. Grodzinski: The Dispute Over the Vilnius Rabbinate and the Religious Realignment of Vilnius Jewry 1928-1932," in I. Lempertas, ed., *The Gaon of Vilnius and the Annals of Jewish Culture*, Vilnius, 1998, pp. 295-304.
 7. On R. Weinberg, see Marc B. Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy*, London, 1999.
 8. See R. Weinberg's memoir on Pilvishki in R. Abraham Abba Reznick, כלי שרת, Netanyah, 1957, introductory pages, pp. 1-5.
 9. S.L. Citron, ed., ספר זכרון להרבנית רובנשטיין ז"ל, Vilna, 1926, pp. 9-12. R. Weinberg entitled the Hebrew version of the eulogy "אשת המופת," probably best rendered: "The Exemplary Woman."