

bs"D **From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles** <editor@ascentofsafed.com>

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“EACH ONE HAS A NAME”

Born in Ukraine in 1914, **Zelda Schneurson-Mishkovsky** was the daughter Rabbi **Sholom-Shlomo** and **Rachel Schneurson**. Her father was a brother of **Rabbi Levi-Yitzchak Schneerson**, father of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, **Rabbi Menachem-Mendel Schneerson**, making Zelda first cousins with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Her mother, Rachel, was the daughter of a distinguished Chabad chasid, **R. Meir-Shlomo Yanovsky**, the chief rabbi of Nikolayev.

In 1928, at age 14, she immigrated with her family to Israel. Her father and grandfather died shortly afterwards.

In Jerusalem, where the family had settled, Zelda attended a school for religious girls and later a teachers' college. It was during her years at the college that she began to write and publish poetry.

At the age of eighteen Zelda moved with her mother to Tel Aviv, where she took private painting lessons and befriended other young artists. When her mother remarried and relocated to Haifa in 1933, Zelda once again accompanied her. In Haifa she developed a love for the landscape of Mount Carmel, to which she paid homage in many poems.

Zelda left her mother's home for the first and only time in 1935, at age 21, to pursue her dream of studying painting at the Bezalel Art Academy in Jerusalem. She worked as a housepainter to earn money, but jobs were scarce and she was unable to save enough for tuition. When her mother became ill, she returned to Haifa to care for her, never having had the chance to study art formally. She continued to paint on her own, however, and to write poetry and teach in an elementary school.

In the early 1940s, after her mother was widowed again, the two women returned to Jerusalem, this time to stay. They settled in a small, dilapidated, ground-floor apartment in the religiously mixed neighborhood of Kerem Avraham (which later became part of Geulah), where Zelda taught school until 1950.

That year, at age thirty-six, she married **Chayim-Aryeh Mishkovsky**, and the couple made their home with Zelda's mother in the Kerem Avraham flat. It was there that Zelda ministered to her mother until her death in 1965 and also cared for Chayim, who fell ill shortly after their marriage.

Once married, Zelda gave up teaching and began writing more prolifically and intensely. Chayim encouraged her to publish, and in 1967 her first book of poems, *Penai* (Leisure), was released to great acclaim. Dedicated to her father and mother, it contained many poems about them and about her childhood.

Her second book, *Ha-Karmel ha-I-Nir'eh* (The Invisible Carmel), was published shortly after Chayim died, in 1971, and was dedicated to him. It was followed by four more volumes, each of them a critical and popular success: *Al Tirhak* (Be Not Far, 1974), *Ha-Lo Har Ha-Lo*

Esh (Surely a Mountain, Surely Fire, 1977), *Ha-Shoni ha-Marhiv* (The Spectacular Difference, 1981), and *She-Nivdelu mi-Kol Merhak* (Beyond All Distance, 1984). An only child, and childless herself, Zelda was broken by her husband's death, and would continue to grieve for him for the rest of her life. Her later books include many poems to him, giving voice to the deep sorrow and grief that remained with her until the end of her life. Especially poignant are the lyrics in which she calls out to her beloved across a chasm of silence to reach him in "the hidden world."

Five years after she was widowed, Zelda left Geula, which had become increasingly religious and insular, and moved to a street on the border between the Orthodox area known as Sha'arei Chesed and the religiously mixed neighborhood of Rehavia. Situated at the boundary between two worlds, Zelda's new location was more open to the many non-religious friends who were among her frequent guests. The change proved felicitous in another way as well: the new apartment let in more daylight, which, as the poems reveal, was a healing presence for her.

Zelda and Chayim had no children, but after Chayim's death Zelda began taking in boarders—young women, often students, whom she treated like daughters. She was extremely devoted to these companions, as they were to her, and supported them financially and in many other ways, even providing them with wedding celebrations. During her last years, when she suffered from cancer, she was surrounded by these women and their families, as well as by her many other friends. Her final book, completed not long before her death in 1984, was dedicated to "the friends of my soul."

Zelda's students, translators and critics of her work discerned influences of her Chasidic background in her poetry. Indeed, one reviewer described her work as "a poetic expression of the tenets of Chabad, to which the poet was linked by family ties and spiritual leanings."

Her poems, all in Hebrew and now widely translated in numerous languages, are filtered through a uniquely Chabad spiritual perspective that manages to startle readers—no matter their orientation. Contemplative as they are, they shatter fixed ideas yet find their footing at the kitchen table, making her—poet, woman, Chasidic Jew—an anomaly both within and outside of the literary world.

In her introduction to *The Spectacular Difference* (HUC PRESS), **Marcia Falk**, author and translator of Zelda's poems recalls her first visit to the author's Jerusalem home in the 1970s:

"I showed up at her doorstep in a knee-length skirt and a sleeveless blouse, a kerchief on my head. I had debated with myself about the skirt and blouse, knowing that the very religious do not approve of women revealing bare arms or legs; but the heat was oppressive that day and I had heard that Zelda was tolerant by nature. I didn't give a thought about the kerchief, which looked, I later realized, like the traditional *tikhil* worn by some Orthodox married women to cover their hair in public. I had worn it only as protection from the beating sun.

"When Zelda opened her door to me, a bemused smile spread across her face. 'You have a secular body,' she commented wryly, 'but a religious head.'

"Her poems had not prepared me for her sense of humor. Indeed, little about Zelda turned out to be predictable. In that first visit I found her to be soft spoken, unassuming and even shy. But more than anything else, she was utterly original. I'd never heard anyone speak quite the way she did."

Imagery and concepts from Jewish traditional and mystical sources abound in Zelda's work, prompting readers to linger over her lyrical allusions to the infinite, the supernal, the otherworldly, as in this excerpt from

"A SABBATH CANDLE"

(translated by Varda Koch Ocker):

*The candle's sparks are palaces,
and in the midst of the palaces
mothers sing to the heavens
to endless generations.*

*And she wanders in their midst
toward God, with a barefoot baby
and with the murdered.
Hurrah!*

*The soft of heart comes in dance
in the golden Holy of Holies,
inside a spark.*

She kept up a long correspondence with her cousin, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Some of his letters to her have been published in various volumes of his *Igrot Kodesh* correspondence. Though her letters to the Rebbe remain unpublished, it is possible to infer some of what she must have written by his responses to her.

In one particular letter to Zelda following the death of her husband, in the summer of 1970, the discussion turns to coping with loss, the ascent of the soul and the imperative upon the survivors for life. The Rebbe urges his cousin not to become resigned to loneliness, and insists that the experience of the death of a loved one should rather stir a desire to live more intensely in a social environment.

The Rebbe always addressed his letters, "To my cousin Shaina Zelda." He concluded this one with a postscript:

"Obviously, I hope you will let me know how you are faring, especially with respect to your finances, and I trust that you will tell me things as they are—being that we are family, and especially as only very few remain among our surviving relatives."

Appreciating her artistic achievements which no doubt derived largely from her identity with darkness, the Rebbe was nevertheless was pained by her angst, and often implored his cousin to turn her focus to the brighter side of life.

In one letter, dated 1974, he chides her good naturedly, saying, "From the spirit of your letters, I get the impression that though I keep writing you to take a more joyful perspective . . . my words have made no mark . . . But I will persist, and repeat myself even 100 times, and you will forgive me . . ."

Maybe, the Rebbe's words did leave their mark on his cousin's poetry. That same year, Zelda published this poem—one of the few in her volume, "*Be Not Far*" (in the collection translated by Marcia Falk) that ends on a brighter note:

ENCHANTED BIRD

*When the feeble body
is about to fall
and reveals its fear of death
to the soul
the lowly tree of routine,
devoured by dust,*

*suddenly sprouts green leaves.
For out of the scent of Nothingness—
the tree blossoms—
glorious, beautiful.
and in its crown—
an enchanted bird.*

Among the poets in Israel's literary circles, many quietly remember **Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky** every year on 27 Nissan. That she died (in 1984) on the same day designated by the state of Israel as "Holocaust Remembrance Day," is in itself poetic; her poetry, for which she received the Bialik and Brenner Prizes in literature, speaks of death and darkness but also of renewal and transcendence.

Zelda's reputation has only increased since her death, and today she is also appreciated beyond the borders of Israel. Her poems have appeared in translation in many journals and anthologies, and in 2004 the first book of her poems in English translation was published: *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda* (trans. Marcia Falk).

One of her poems, *L'khol Ish Yesh Shem* ("Each Person Has a Name") has achieved iconic status; it is recited on every Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel [and is also very appropriate for Yom Zicharon – "Israel Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers"].

EACH OF US HAS A NAME

*Each of us has a name
given by God
and given by our parents*

*Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors*

*Each of us has a name
given by our celebrations
and given by our work*

*Each of us has a name
given by our stature and our smile
and given by what we wear*

*Each of us has a name
given by our sins
and given by our longing*

*Each of us has a name
given by the seasons
and given by our blindness*

*Each of us has a name
given by the mountains
and given by our walls*

*Each of us has a name
given by our enemies
and given by our love*

*Each of us has a name
given by the sea
and given by
our death.*

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Source: Excerpted and compiled by Yerachmiel Tilles from two online articles:  
<https://www.lubavitch.com/zelda-remembering-an-israeli-poet/> by Baila Olidort and  
<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/zelda> by Marcia Falk. The final poem is from  
[https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-3275\\_EACH-OF-US-HAS-A-NAME](https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-3275_EACH-OF-US-HAS-A-NAME) © translation: from: *The Spectacular Difference* (see above, in article, on top of the poem)

Connection: Tuesday night, Wednesday is *Yom Zicharon* – "Israel Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers"].

*Biographical note:*

**Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky** [1914 - 27 Nissan 1984] was a first cousin of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, with whom she frequently corresponded. Born in Ukraine, at age 14 she immigrated with her family to Israel and settled in Jerusalem. Her six volumes of award-winning poems, all in Hebrew, are now widely translated in numerous languages. One of her poems, *L'khol Ish Yesh Shem* ("Each Person Has a Name") is recited annually throughout the world on **27 Nissan**, the date designated by the Israel government as Holocaust Memorial Day.