

Old Age, Death, Birth and Rebirth in Rivka Miriam's Children's Stories

by Nitsa Dori

In her works for adults, Rivka Miriam, an Israeli poet and author, focuses on the tension between destruction and revival, existence and lack of existence. Her poetry draws on traditional Jewish sources. For example, she writes in one of her poems: "That the man is a prayer and a thread, touching what does not exist", and elsewhere, "My God is breathing alongside me, may He not stop breathing", and in her poem "Ke'olah lehavano", she refers to the idea of spiritual devotion:¹

The old men said:/ The fire is a playful distance./
It is the sight that touches.

The old men said:/ The fire is the flesh that knows
itself.

And I said no./ And I said no.

In her children's stories, too, Rivka Miriam discusses the mystery of existence and the feelings it invokes. The stories talk about identity, the effect of time on the "ego", love and relationships, human attitudes towards nature and everything surrounding them, old age and death, contact with God, and dreams. The ability to see living things, plants, and inanimate objects as subjects is expressed in various ways in her stories. Most describe the encounter between two entities and the conversation that ensues between them. Many of the stories provide room for the perspective of both entities, alternately, and they discuss coping with old age and death, the question of finality and rebirth. In Rivka Miriam's stories, death has significance connected with growth. It is not identified with non-existence, but rather with continuity. This is Miriam's singularity in contrast to the few other authors who discussed this topic. Miriam wrestles with a "heavy" and serious issue, which is, in some ways, taboo, in an attempt to explain it to young children.

The goal of this article is to examine the significance and vitality of old age and end of life in contrast to their renewal and rebirth in Rivka Miriam's stories for children, while also analyzing the educational and literary messages they contain.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical background for this article focuses on the psychological aspect of loss, separation, and bereavement, so as to understand – in the

discussion section below – Miriam’s unique contribution in exposing children to the issue through literature.

Loss and separation are an inseparable part of our life from the moment we are born. Loss is loss—hard to swallow at every age or developmental stage when a person encounters it. Much has been written about adult grief processes but less about children’s encounters with the loss of a beloved person during the early stages of their life, up until the age of five.² The conceptualization of death is a developmental process that includes recognition of its components – irrevocability, finality, causativeness, inevitability, and old age as a partner of death. Emotional acceptance can only be achieved by accepting death as a fact, meaning that conceptualization of death allows appropriate processing of emotions, reduces anxiety levels, and aids proper mourning and re-organization. Kübler-Ross³ notes that it is impossible to shelter children and protect them from life’s storms. We can only share things with them so as to prepare them for life.

However, modern society does not prepare us for loss and death (Granot 1985).⁴ The ability to look at, recognize, and cope with death can offer someone the possibility of growth and living a fuller life.⁵ The encounter with death is universal – it is part of life in every culture.⁶ Interest in, and discussion of, issues connected to the concept of death are usually ambivalent – people are curious and want to explore the issue as a significant and inseparable part of the human experience, while the subject also arouses repulsion and reservation within many people, since it awakens unpleasant emotions such as fear, anxiety, and disgust;⁷ however death is a natural and inescapable part of our lives since it is inevitable and also something which cannot be controlled.⁸ Lily Pincus⁹ notes that fear of death clouds life, but knowing about it and making peace with that knowledge lights up this gloom and frees life from fears and anxieties. In this respect, discussing death is education for life, and the topic should be emphasized from an early age in line with the children’s age and level, because grieving runs like a thread through life and is scattered with thousands of day-to-day events.¹⁰ Even though it is easier to speak to children about the source, rather than the end, of life,¹¹ just as we prepare children to cope with other difficulties of life, they also need to be prepared for death and bereavement.¹² Shaulov¹³ believes society refers to death in three main ways – denial, magical thinking, and misleading conceptualization. Support and help throughout the various grieving periods, while addressing the issue in a better way, may be able to speed up adaptation, ease pain, and contribute to the quality of life following a loss.¹⁴ Based on observations of animal behavior, sorrow and grief occur even with a lack of cognitive and emotional maturity.¹⁵ Young children tend to intermittently express sadness and grief regarding death and repress it when they are involved and busy with other activities and thoughts. This phenomenon has been called¹⁶ “short sadness span” and reflects children’s limited ability to bear an ongoing negative effect. This is unlike adults, who

eventually conclude that they will ultimately succeed in living even without the attachment figure, and this is not so for a child.¹⁷

Adults, then, want to protect children and shield them from emotional pain, and therefore frequently avoid speaking about death and children's feelings following loss.¹⁸ When children experience loss, it is very important that the adults around them – parents, teachers, or counselors – are trained in diagnosing their situation so as to identify their distress and accompany them through the grief process. Adults frequently judge the visible behavior of these children too seriously. In most cases, they interpret such behavior as the child's way of expressing his difficulty.¹⁹

Researchers once believed that children lacked the strength for dealing with death, and that they were unable to grieve due to their limited understanding of the concept of death.²⁰ However, other researchers argued that children, even six-month old babies, can understand death and even real grief.²¹ Bowlby²² claims that the main difference between children's and adults' grieving processes is the child's dependency on the surrounding adult world. The child is more dependent than an adult on his environment to understand the whole concept of death, as well as its circumstances, comprehending and internalizing its finality, understanding the pain, searching for the deceased, and reshaping his own life and continued development. But despite understanding the importance of support from a mature and accessible social network and continuity in the child's life after loss for adaptation and coping,²³ it would seem some children's grief is not given support or recognition. The adults around them play down their ability to understand the significance of death and the depth of their loss.²⁴ Sometimes adults feel that children are too young and vulnerable to learn about death, and they thereby isolate children in their grief, causing them to feel shame and isolation. They are excluded from the family discourse and are not given the opportunity to grieve openly together with the family.²⁵ In a two-year study, Silverman and Worden²⁶ researched children's behavior and responses to the loss of a parent. The results demonstrated that most children showed sadness and shock when told, most cried extensively during the initial period after the death, but only eight percent cried daily four months after the loss, and these were mainly the young children. In general, the study discovered that most of the children returned to normal functioning at school. It was interesting that the study found that around eighty percent of the children thought about and remembered their deceased parent several times each week, dreamed about them, silently "spoke" with them, and visited the cemetery. The internal connection with the parent was common among the children, and it would seem that it helped the children return to regular daily functioning.²⁷

It is important to note that being told vague regarding understanding the full significance of death does not prevent the child from using the concept of "death" correctly – leading those around him to believe that he understood

more than what he actually did.²⁸ Providing the child with explanations, even if they are not fully understood, will make the concept of death less mysterious and therefore less frightening.²⁹

Hence, a safe “handle” is required – that allows “peeking” at death, and examining its different aspects. Such a “handle” is provided by the metaphors of literature, poetry, mythology, and legend. Death is given a richer range of expressions and descriptions in literature, from realistic to imaginative and mythological, which are sometimes even bound together. This is the power of a story – that can give us the unfamiliar and make it familiar.³⁰ The story enables us to overcome limits of time and space, and contains supernatural elements that can capture our imagination. It nullifies the dichotomy between life and death and is rich in motifs of immortality.³¹ The literary tool enables the child to project his fears onto the character in the story, and offers intervention, identification, and release – and allows him or her to gain a new perspective of the problem.³² The child is given a kind of “emotional immunization” that prepares him or her to cope with future losses and serves as preventative bibliotherapy.³³ Imagination and story therapy play an important role in marking the optimal emotional distance between severing the obligatory emotional connections with the deceased and remembering him or her.³⁴ Release from the links of reality with the dead creates a space in which memory can be maintained in the form of a story, whether it is the child’s personal – documentary story or the story reflected in the images and symbols that arise from his subconscious world.

DISCUSSION

Studying the Motifs of Old Age and Death Versus Rebirth in Rivka Miriam’s Anthology for Children, *Halonot Bahakitz*.³⁵

In “Sipur katan al geshem” [A little story about rain] the child sits the rain in his lap, sings it a lullaby, until “slowly, slowly, its drops closed their eyes. It dripped quietly, not to wake itself up – because it had fallen asleep”³⁶ “...And it was truly asleep, with its drops scattered. You could see that it was dreaming”.³⁷ When the baby elephant and the cypress wake him up, the rain is full of life once more. “The rain slowly stretched itself upon me. One drop after another opened its eyes”. And the child was also reborn: “And only after I left my house I felt that I had suddenly grown from all the rain”.³⁸ The water and rain in this story are the source of life from which the child draws his strength to grow. The child’s relationship with the rain is ambivalent. While the child provides support for the rain when it wants to stop, rest a little, and close its eyes (associated with a kind of death in miniature), the child himself is helped to grow by the rain. Rain has been in the world for a long time and it is reasonable to assume, in line with the story’s logic and anthropomorphism,

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that it wants to rest. The child is still at the beginning of his life and full of strength and therefore does not feel the need for a break. He makes sure the rain rests, sings it a lullaby so it will fall asleep and cease to exist, and even guards its sleep, respects it, and tells the baby elephant and tree not to wake it up. Despite his young age, the child understands that stopping should be respected. From the description of the rain's cessation that is gradually introduced here with the repetition of the words "slowly slowly" and "quietly", using writing that identifies with the feelings of the young person being addressed, Rivka Miriam well describes the ending of life as a slow, quiet process, so as to provide the child with the time to part from the cloud even for a short while, and allow him or her to internalize the process of ending the child's dialogue with the cloud. Beyond the feelings of compassion for the cloud, the child deeply understands the cloud's need to cease existing. The cloud's rebirth imparts hope of return to life after its cessation, as for every living being in nature.

"Sippur beli shem" [A story without a name] also includes cessation and death on a small scale, as embodied in the sleep and waking of Rabbi Shlimele:

At night, when he sleeps, the wind comes to cover him, and when he breathed deeply in his sleep, the cloud would breathe with him and dream his dreams with him"³⁹

The slipping into a deep sleep, with the wind covering him and the cloud breathing the rabbi's breaths, leads the reader to a figurative picture of death and cessation, with only the steady breaths testifying to a certain measure of life that still remains. Even happiness is not a reason to remain totally awake:

When Rabbi Shlimele was happy, he would always close his eyes, so that the happiness would not leave him... Rabbi Shlimele went and his eyes were closed and his ears were open"⁴⁰

Again the situations of semi-wakefulness and semi-sleep are embodied and reflected as a kind of small-scale death in the figure of the rabbi. It seems the rabbi is scared of living his life until the end and ceasing living, and he exists in a type of intermediate state of death – life. Even when speaking to Evyatar, the deer, he continues to close his eyes while asking Evyatar who he is. When Rabbi Shlimele reaches a stream he is amazed by the vitality of the water droplets, but his eyes are still closed. Now he uses his sense of hearing:

Rabbi Shlimele sat down by the stream and listened. The stream contains many drops; many, many drops. And every drop is a heart that beats.

And every drop is a heart and they are beating,
each at its own pace.⁴¹

Rabbi Shlimele “returns to life” only when he himself needs to help someone in a situation of cessation and loss that is worse than his own: “I lost all the people in the world,” he says to the man he meets. And Rabbi Shlimele helps him by dancing and singing. They sang and danced all night long, even the lost man, who only moved his toes, because he had no strength to dance and “Rabbi Shlimele had his eyes closed”.⁴² Despite exchanging a situation of conversation and listening for one in which he must move his entire body, Rabbi Shlimele is still just half-alive. Rabbi Shlimele opens his eyes only in the morning, not because he wants to, but because he is worried and must find out what happened to the lost man. And he sees the tears streaming down his face, “And Rabbi Shlimele knew that it was the sadness that was leaving him, and soon it wouldn’t be inside him anymore.” Eventually the lost man gets up, smiles a little, and says he now knows where the lost people are. He goes on his way. “And the cloud and Rabbi Shlimele looked so strongly at the heavens until they reached them. And they fell asleep. And the wind covered them silently, silently.” Rabbi Shlimele ends his mission, ascends to heaven, and returns to a state of cessation, a kind of death. Perhaps it is now final because there is no mention of his breathing and it as if the wind is covering his grave “silently, silently”. The repetition of the word characterizing the motif of death and cessation in Rivka Miriam’s stories for children (as also the repetition of the word “slowly”) imparts burial with a kind of beauty of majesty, holiness, and glory. The description of Rabbi Shlimele’s beard with the repetitiveness of the word “white” – “and his beard was white, white” – hints to the purity of his character and characteristics, and perhaps to the color of the shroud in which the deceased is wrapped. This tale clearly reflects the fantastic foundations of Rivka Miriam’s stories, in which the laws of nature give way to a world of magic and sorcery, such as the conversation with Evyatar the deer. These fantasy components in this story are closely linked to its religious components, and this is expressed first and foremost in the choice of hero – Rabbi Shlimele, who is directly connected to the spiritual (heaven) and the physical (earth). The story is told through the figure of an endearing and wondrous rabbi (a dwarf according to Rivka Miriam’s illustrations in the story) who possesses courage and humor, and who corresponds with similar figures from the world of the Sages, such as Rabbi Zeira [lit. tiny] the Talmudic rabbi who received his name due to his short stature. Rabbi Shlimele’s name is also symbolic – the rabbi is perfection (*shlemut*) between being awake and asleep, between life and death, and between heaven and earth.

In the story “Maaseh betsipor uvekolah” [A story about a bird and her voice], the bird loses her voice and goes to search for it. The bird losing her voice in essence symbolizes its death. Since the entire characteristic of the bird

and even the onomatopoeia of its name in Hebrew [*tsipor*] is its voice. And a bird with no voice has ceased to exist. No one in the story understands what she is trying to say – that she has lost her voice. The only one to understand her is a child sitting in a treetop, and he is the one to find her voice among the dozens of other voices that he listens to from the treetop, and he leads the bird to her voice: “One very lonely voice, a voice without a home, and without walls to lean against”.⁴³ When the child returns the voice to the bird, she sings him a special song and the child sprouts wings. The reward for reviving the bird, that was essentially dead, is wings for the child. Here the wings are a metaphor for the wings that can be used to fly and go far away to realize any wish. In her own way the bird grants the child who climbed to the treetop but could not climb any higher, the possibility of climbing even higher, up to the heavens. This story also expresses the fantastic basis of Rivka Miriam’s stories that blurs the border between reality (the child climbing the tree) and imagination (the child grows wings and flies).

“*Oriah be’erets hahafukhah*” (*Oriah in the Upside-Down Land*) is a deeply philosophical story about life and death from a child’s viewpoint. There is an upside-down land in the story where people are born old and slowly become children. To make sure the children reading the story understand, Rivka Miriam explains:

We know that in our lands tiny babies are born from women’s stomachs, and they get bigger and walk, grow hair and teeth, grow taller, become big and strong – and then they get old and gradually get weaker – right? But that’s not what happens in the Upside-Down Land. There people are born old and turn into children. And how is the old person born? He rises from the earth – there was a small mound of sand, a hillock. And an old man or old woman emerges from this small hill. They were wrinkled and weak, and everyone hurried to help them and take them out of the earth, and while doing so wished each other “Congratulations! Congratulations!”

Rivka Miriam describes a utopia of the revival of the dead. The dead arise from their graves and slowly get stronger and become young. But unlike our world, after they have become young which is the ideal in both worlds, they again become children and then babies who return to their mothers’ wombs. Meaning, even in the idyllic and utopian world with resurrection of the dead, there is eventually death and cessation. It should be noted in parenthesis that it would be interesting to have a deep philosophical discussion about which world we would prefer to live in and why – the world where people are born old and become babies, or that in which they are born

as babies and grow old. Rivka Miriam describes the joy of the old people who emerged from the dust and that of the babies who returned to their mothers' wombs. Meaning, in this story departure from life is joyous and lacks the sorrow, sadness, grief, and longing that we experience in our world when separating from someone who has passed away. Even our concept of "passed away" is foggy and unclear. Where is this world? What does it contain? In Rivka Miriam's stories, everything is clear. A boy from "our lands", Oriah, arrives in that Upside-Down Land, and he behaves differently from that Upside-Down Land – he grows instead of getting smaller. The people of that land crown him as their king. But Oriah feels that he does not belong and the wind carries him home to his own land:

Where there is a mother who is a grown woman
and a grandmother who is a little elderly and they
are so nice. And in the Upside-Down Land people
are born without a father and mother, without a
grandfather and grandmother.

The moral that emerges from this story is that despite the apparent advantages of the upside-down land, Oriah chooses to return to the place he feels he belongs, where there are a mother and grandmother who are so nice. Oriah chooses a life with a family, a life where old people die and are not resurrected, but he can spend his childhood years with his good, loving, and supportive family. The fantasy in this story leaves an impression on the theme of reincarnation and touches on Jewish mysticism and Cabbala in which material things change externally.

In the story "Maaseh be'ish shenolad min hayam" [The story of a man who was born from the sea], we again encounter the concept of resurrection of the previous story, but this time life emerges from the sea. As we know, the sea carries the danger of death, of drowning, and cessation of life. And it is specifically from the depths of the sea, that the character of a man born in the sea emerges in this story:

Once there was a great wave and fingertips and
eyes peeped out of the wave, until an entire man
emerged. Up until then, there had been no one like
that in the world. Then he was born."⁴⁴

This is a gradual description of birth or making a man, like during Creation. This man, who was born from the sea, made sand around him whenever he sat somewhere:

It seems, people said, that the man came from a
time before the second day of Creation, the day the
sea was divided from the dry land. But with him
they are still joined together.⁴⁵

Rivka Miriam makes a direct intertextual connection between the Creation of the world and that of the man from the sea, and incorporates the biblical account in her **story** to add validity to her own personal narrative of creation. This man gave life to those around him – when they were around him they could sing very deeply, feel the breath of summer and could not drown. The man from the sea gradually grew old, as is the fate of everyone, until he returned to the sea. And even though people wanted to see how he died, the man, who had been so quiet during his lifetime, asked to die alone and therefore sounded a loud voice from within him. It was only then that everyone understood that he wanted to be alone, and stepped back until they could no longer see him. They only heard, “a launching full of ricochets”.⁴⁶ In this story, Rivka Miriam touches on death from another angle. Not burial in the ground, but burial in water. And since in most of her stories, water is the source of life, the story ends with hope, that just like the water gave life and took life, it can also give new life back one day. The fantastic basis of the story “Maaseh be’ish shenolad min hayam” is the encounter with the stranger within us, who is essential for building our character and makes us struggle with the hidden parts of our character.

The final story in the anthology *Halonot Bahakitz* is “Maaseh bekohav” [The story of a star] where old age and childhood journey side by side throughout the story. The little star is always illuminated and cannot fall asleep because of all the light. In this story, light symbolizes life and the little star wants to always be lit up and make the most of life. There is an old star circling next to the little one that can always fall asleep and works while sleeping deeply. When the little star asks the old star what sleep is, the old star answers that it is like a home. The little star, who represents the child in the story, is actually asking the old one what death is. The old star gradually gets smaller and shrinks into itself, exactly like old age for people in which the aging process makes people “shrink”, be bent over, and withdraw into themselves. He asks the little star to help him gather the edges of the light into his stomach so as to sink into the dark, the symbol of death in the story and the opposite of light that symbolizes life. After that incident, the small star underwent two changes. First, he became very fearful of darkness and cessation, but also yearned to become familiar with the dark and grapple with his fear of it. Secondly, he stopped functioning normally. Thinking about cessation and death weakened him and he unconsciously slowly sunk into cessation and darkness: “The light of the little star became darker and denser, since now some of the darkness had been sucked into him. – ‘See, now I am an old star,’ he said to himself one day.” And then, suddenly, when he said that, he again wanted to light up with all his strength, to again disseminate rays of light around him, that almost touch far-off stars. To fall and stop and fall again. But he no longer had the strength to do so. His light began to dim: “Darkness, like a great blanket, now called to him.” There are three characteristics of old age and cessation of life approaching death in this

section – becoming physically weaker in old age, the old person’s helplessness in the face of his failing strength and how his body is betraying him, and the knowledge that he is no longer useful. The motif of “something that covers after death” that is repeated in most of Rivka Miriam’s stories in this anthology, features here too. After someone had completed their role in this world and passes over to the world of cessation of life, something covers the object of the story: cloud, waves, sand, or a blanket of darkness. Making death and rebirth visible is given visual expression in this story by the author (who drew black and white illustrations for all the stories in the anthology). A dark star with its eyes closed and a gloomy face appears on page 29. From inside it, in blurred grey tones, a new star emerges or is born, that is lighter with eyes open and a face that is smiling. Death and birth that are intertwined and produce each other in an endless circle.

CONCLUSION

Rivka Miriam’s stories are intrinsically different from other stories that discuss absolute death. The stories featured in the *Halonot Bahakitz* anthology show that death is not parting from life, but rather accompanies us throughout our lives. Everything that the heroes of the story do is always accompanied by its image, and when the conditions are ripe it simply answers them. The message is direct but also ambivalent – Rivka Miriam covertly and overtly emphasizes that there is life after death and every death heralds a rebirth and the converse. The fantasy components of her stories includes mystery and faith in hidden powers, and they correspond with psychological and theological beliefs from traditional cultures in general, and Jewish culture in particular. However, there are also unique nuances regarding the issue in each story, that distinguish them from each other:

In “Sippur beli shem”, Rabbi Shlimele ascends to heaven. His death is final. In “Maaseh bekokhav” the small star does not want to die, but eventually does anyway. The illustration that shows a smiling star may be indicating the birth of a new star, but not necessarily the rebirth of the small star that died. In “Maaseh betsipor”, the loss of the bird’s voice is a kind of metaphorical death (loss of identity, of the internal), but it is not characterized by the finiteness of living beings. Therefore the renewal (finding the voice) becomes probable. “Maaseh be’ish shenolad min hayam” relates the finality and irrevocability of death. In “Oriah be’erets hahafukhah”, the child prefers his familiar lifecycle, including living with a loving family and death accompanied by separation and grief, rather than the reverse in which death and separation are not sad. Meaning, alongside the stories that note finality, or the irreversibility of death and accepting it, there are stories that tell of the continuation of life alongside death but do not necessarily emerge from it.

In an interview by Asaf Shor with Rivka Miriam (*Kol Ha’ir*, 25 March 2005), she said:

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Many times in life, you think you have died and suddenly discover that you are alive. The power of renewal in the world, you know, is no less amazing than the power of cessation of life. Because cessation, you know... we all know that everything ends, but it is always amazing to feel how the world is really full of life.

In our society it is taboo to speak about anything related to death, because it serves as a reminder to every person of their own death, our future parting from our loved ones, and past losses that have left an aching void.⁴⁷

The adults, who control the sources of knowledge, do not usually share them with young people. Adulthood does not protect people from the fear of death, nor free them from taboos. Many adults confess that since it is difficult for them to cope with their children's sorrow and fears, they prefer to shield them from the depressing aspects of life, rather than help them acquire tools to cope with them. When adults evade questions and make futile attempts to soothe the children, those children lack trust in the adult, and are liable to be less willing to rely on the adult during a real crisis. In contrast, when the adult is open and willing to listen to the child's questions and provide real answers, while taking the child's level of understanding into account, the child will have greater faith in the adult and be prepared as to how to cope in a crisis.⁴⁸

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