On the Retirement of Rahel Meshoulam

When I came to Tufts some 31 years ago, the Hebrew program consisted of some five or six courses, a full-time Hebrew instructor (at that point, me), and a T. A. named Rahel Meshoulam, who had a reputation as a popular and respected teacher. I was at first afraid to meet Rahel because I was reluctant to reveal how rusty my spoken Hebrew had become, but when we did meet, I quickly found her a gracious and tolerant individual, and she and her husband Uri soon repeatedly opened up their home in hospitality to me, and later, when Carol came into my life, to both of us, and I fairly quickly came to think of Rahel and Uri as friends and kindred spirits.

Rahel and I tended in general to see eye-to-eye about Israel, both its blessings and its problems. And while this like-mindedness might seem a bit too uniform for encouraging a range of opinion in students (which, however, I think we did anyway), we could at least take comfort in the fact that it reflected the views of much or most of American Jewry outside of Jewish officialdom, and that, one way or another, we cared deeply about Israel—the State of Israel—and its future. Rahel, anyhow, was continually immersed in the ongoing life and culture of Israeli Jews and their neighbors, and her vision encompassed a diversity of peoples and faiths, a diversity present even within those two broad communities, Palestinian Arabs and Jews, that we identify with the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan, whatever its struggles toward a two-state solution and whatever names we give it. The reality for both peoples has been a tough one, especially since 1967, a reality commonly called in Hebrew, ha-Matsav, “the Situation,” but Rahel always encouraged me and our students to view the situation with compassion, skepticism, critical acumen, and lucidity, and as a domain alive with cultural and intercultural ferment. And that is an Israel I feel proud to represent, when dealing with this otherwise very troubled land and its issues. I can genuinely say that Rahel helped me to find my own voice in confronting modern Israel. My field was originally ancient Israel, but she brought me into the present.

I’ll come back to this subject in a moment, but first let me say a bit about how the Hebrew program grew, with the encouragement of our department and with my stepping out of the picture as a Hebrew instructor—and thus, how it flourished under Rahel’s wise leadership. We were soon able to enable Rahel to become a full-time faculty member and head of the Hebrew program. She was able to hire a staff of instructors and expanded our Hebrew language offerings to a full four years of language instruction, the upper levels of which Rahel was determined to make into more than instruction in grammar, speaking, and writing, but rather into genuine courses in the literature and arts of Israel. She taught poetry, fiction, film, and television, and supplemented her work in the classroom with lively extracurricular programming, bringing in writers, artists, and performers who represented some of the best in Israeli culture. Her activity on behalf of the Hebrew program freed me up to concentrate on what I considered my real reason for being at Tufts, namely to help develop an interdisciplinary Judaic Studies program, which began to come into its own from the mid-‘80s onward. Rahel was also a full member of the Judaic Studies program’s core faculty, and I continually found her judgments affecting our life as a program to be trustworthy, creative, and eminently thoughtful, and meanwhile she was active on campus committees, including chairing the Ex-College Board, and serving on the board of EPIIC, and on the Foreign Language Programs committee, and being involved, as well, in faculty advising.
In 1999, Rahel came to me with a proposal that at first made me very nervous, more from distrust of myself than of her. She suggested our co-teaching a course on Israeli film. By this time, I had been doing scholarship on the cinema of Jewish experience for some six years, and teaching the subject for about a decade. But my knowledge of Israeli cinema had been limited mainly to those few films that had made it into American theaters or the even fewer films I’d been fortunate enough to see on my visits to Israel. But Rahel’s confidence in the subject, and her strong motivation for exploring it, inspired confidence in me, and I decided to give it a try. I was deeply impressed with her ability to turn up titles, old and new, and to build up this domain for the Tisch Media collection, and out of this small treasure trove, now still growing, we were able to put together a reasonably coherent picture of Israel through its films, including, as well, Palestinian film, and the course, offered in 2000 and 2004, turned out, to my great pleasure, to be a success. The amount of devotion Rahel put into the course, including one-on-one meetings with each student after reading their papers, was truly intense, and her ability to bring to bear her own experience of coming of age in Israel gave us a vital part of the subject. This was far and away the most enjoyable experience I’ve had in co-teaching in all my time at Tufts. It got me deeper into Israeli and Palestinian film, and expanded my knowledge in general of life in this tiny sliver of land at the juncture of three continents, in ways that have deepened my commitment to the subjects I teach, both ancient and modern.

I asked Rahel what were some of the things she was most proud of in her time at Tufts, and she said: “Learning from my students . . . little by little, growing the same age as the parents of my students . . . trying to give a taste of Israeli culture, literature, and society, trying to give a voice to everyone in Israel, including Arabs, and including foreigners . . . teaching life there from a humanistic perspective. It’s too much for some. Some think of me as extreme. Many are comfortable where they are. They don’t have to think like me. But I wanted them to study what students in Israel study.” This has led Rahel into writers as diverse as Etgar Keret, who writes in contemporary streetwise slang, and literary Nobelist S. Y. Agnon, who wrote in rabbinical Hebrew, a Jewish language of antiquity, about indelibly modern problems. It included writers I’ve never read, like Savyon Liebrecht and Ida Finek, and the otherwise well-known Shulamit Hareven, and the poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch, Yehuda Amihai, and Zelda, writers whom I have read, as well as Palestinian journalist Sayed Kashua, who writes in Hebrew, and Hebrew translations of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. I will continue to think of Rahel not just as a teacher in the Hebrew program but as my teacher on the immense range of life in the Land.

So, I myself will have to be carried kicking and screaming into a post-Rahel era. I will miss most of all her quick-witted presence in our department hallway, radiant as always, looking not a day older than when I first came to work at Tufts, and always ready to share a moment of conversation about the latest film or cultural event in town. In her retirement, Rahel plans to travel, to take art courses, to do volunteer work in areas she has yet to discover, and, as she puts it, “to enjoy being a grandmother in proximity.” Summing up what her time here has been like for her, she said, not intending it to be about herself: “It’s an era.” But from our perspective on her accomplishment, I would heartily agree. A post-Rahel era will be difficult indeed. And so (since this is officially a “resolution”), be it resolved that this department (GRALL) deeply appreciates Rahel Meshoulam’s longtime service to it and to this University, and that the University emphatically concurs.

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