

Celebrating the life of the Maiden of Ludmir
By Debra Kolodny

On Shabbat afternoon, June 10th, 2004, hours before the beginning of her Yahrzeit on the 22nd of Tamuz, dozens of people inspired by the spirit of R' Hannah Rachel of Ludmir gathered in Jerusalem for Seuda Shlishit - the Third Meal - to give homage to this great woman. Hebrew and English speakers, secular and religious, men and women came to celebrate the kind of event R' Hanna Rachel held every Shabbat of her life. The group shared stories, sang niggunim, studied her Torah and basked in her light. The Third Meal continued with havdala and lighting of a yahrzeit candle.

On the next day people gathered at the Mount of Olives for the unveiling of a stone at her newly discovered gravesite. 116 years after her death those who see themselves as her talmidim (students) had the opportunity to follow the custom of saying kaddish at the grave of their rebbe. As people prayed and meditated, the sun set over the Temple Mount, coloring the stones gold. Just as God has promised our mother Rachel, so it was for Hanna Rachel: her children have returned.

Hannah Rachel Verbermacher, better known as "The Maiden of Ludmir," is popularly known as one of the few woman rebbes in the history of the Hasidic movement. Various authors have sought to describe her exploits: leading Sabbath "third meal" gatherings in her own study house, healing the ill, wearing tallit and tefillin, and studying Talmud. As an acclaimed scholar of Torah and mysticism, she was at odds with the rabbinate of her day and her activities aroused controversy within the Jewish community.

In the middle of the nineteenth century the Maiden of Ludmir left the shtetl of her birth and emigrated to Palestine, where she settled in Jerusalem, living out the remainder of her life unhindered as Rebbe of her own court. There, Hannah Rachel was known to pray daily at the Kotel ha-Ma'aravi (The Western Wall) in tallit and tefillin, to lead pilgrimages to holy sites, and to hold large teachings at her Shabbat tisch.

The stories about Hanna Rachel came to us shrouded in mystery. Did she really live or just a figment of someone's imagination? Nathaniel Deutsch,

a Jewish researcher from Pennsylvania spent a few years in search of the Maiden (Deutsch published "The Maiden of Ludmir: A Jewish Holy Woman and Her World," University of California Press), and found evidence that sheds light on her life both in Ludmir and in Jerusalem. After finding her in the census surveying the Hassidic community in the Old City of Jerusalem, he went further and identified her gravesite on the Mount of Olives using the old burial society maps.

When this discovery came to the attention of members of the Jewish Renewal movement it was a cause of great joy. For many years Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi would ask all who live in Israel, or who went for a visit, to try and find the Maiden's grave. Finally it was found! When Reb Zalman learned that the grave, like many others in this cemetery was unmarked (as most of the stones in this cemetery were broken in the years of Jordanian occupation) he initiated a fund to erect a new one.

Jewish Renewal rabbis, pastors and cantors and their families, and some Christian friends attending the OHaLaH conference in Colorado on January 2004 were touched by this story and donated over \$3,500 for the stone project. Rabbi Ruth Gan Kagan, a newly ordained rabbi and a native Israeli took upon herself the mitzvah of erecting the stone.

Rabbi Schachter hopes that in the wake of the book's publication and the unveiling of the headstone, lost writings of Verbermacher will also turn up.

Kagan, for her part, makes no secret of her hope that the grave will become a site of pilgrimage for women from various sectors--Haredi women as well as modern feminists: "I would be happy if Haredi women made pilgrimage to her grave, to pray in their way for their Jewish way of life, and I will make pilgrimage there to get a blessing for my way as a rabbi."