

A Meeting 38 Years in the Making: My Conversation with Israeli songstress Ruchama Raz



May 2023
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On May 7th, at a small café in Ra'nana, it was my privilege to sit down with famous Israeli songstress Ruchama Raz. We spent about an hour discussing her life and music. For me, it was a meeting 38 years in the making, as Ruchama had been my mother's very first Hebrew teacher on Kibbutz Gal On, a kibbutz in southern Israel, in 1985. My mother had arrived on the kibbutz at nineteen years old with a group of young volunteers from the American *aliyah* desk in New York, for the purpose of working on the kibbutz and learning Hebrew. Unbeknownst to them, they would be Ruchama's first Hebrew students. Of course, none of them realized that their *ulpan* teacher was a famous singer. Only after my mother

finished her time at the kibbutz and shared with Israelis the name of her *ulpan* teacher did she become aware of Ruchama's fame in Israel. This little story is the reason why, growing up, I always felt a special connection to Ruchama's music. When I saw that she was performing at the local arts centre in Ra'nana in honour of Naomi Shemer, I decided to reach out to her on the off chance I could meet with her and learn more about my mother's famous Hebrew teacher. I was beyond excited when she agreed to speak with me, and I admit I was more than a little nervous. My interview with Ruchama was conducted in both Hebrew and English, and in the transcript that follows I have endeavored to keep Ruchama in her own words making edits only where absolutely necessary for the purposes of clarification. I hope readers enjoy some of the highlights from our conversation!¹

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Noa: Hi Ruchama. I wanted to tell you a small story because I think it is important and special. I grew up in Canada, and my mother always told me about her Hebrew teacher, Ruchama Raz.

Ruchama: Oh, from the *ulpan* on the kibbutz!

Noa: Yes, my mother was at Kibbutz Galon in 1985! She was in your first Hebrew class on the kibbutz, and she remembers that you were a very good teacher. She also remembers that at the end of the *ulpan* you gave each student one of your records, and, to this day, your record is still in my house in Canada. This is the reason why I know and love your music, and also why I am so excited that I am able to speak with you today in Hebrew so many years after you taught my mom in *Kita Aleph*.

Ruchama: What a great story!

Noa: You grew up in Jerusalem, in a religious home. Please tell me a bit about your family and what it was like in Jerusalem at that time.

Ruchama: I grew up in a family with many children. Six daughters and only one brother. And, you know, my name is Ruchama, because the Rabbi, the uncle of my mother, was the Rabbi of the community in Iran, and he made *Aliya*. And when I was born, after five daughters, one after one, in a religious family, my parents wanted a boy to continue the family name. The Rabbi told my mother: "Call her Ruchama, in order to bring pity". My brother David was born after. And so, we were six daughters and one brother. I had a wonderful childhood, I had my sisters to play with and we didn't have computers or phones, just the outdoors. There were not so many cars in the streets, and we could play [freely]. We were very happy, even if the time was not so easy – we didn't have hot water. My mother had to boil it in a big pot. I didn't have a shower every day, and I was very upset about that, but I understood that despite everything, I could learn music. I studied guitar and voice training in the Jerusalem music academy. And all [my parents] had was given for their children's education, and I am very

¹ The transcript of the interview here is a translation from Hebrew to English and any translation errors are my own.

grateful to them. They worked very hard to make money, it was not so easy, but we did not feel the difficulties. We were very happy, always.



Photo credit: Ruchama Raz Portfolio

Noa: When you were in the army, you were in *Lahaqa Tsva'it*, the military band. What was your role? Which songs do you remember? You drafted to the army close to the start of the Yom Kippur War. What was the situation in Israel? Which places were you in?

Ruchama: I drafted a bit before the Yom Kippur War. And then the war began, and they assigned me to the military band. I was singing songs like the ones I had been singing at home, not their (the army's) program. And they heard that I was successful, and that all the soldiers would love my voice. We had a big notebook, and they had to record everything after the show. We were an entertainment group. And they always wrote about this little girl, Ruchama, with the voice. And three times a day we were performing in Sinai, in the south. One week we [performed] in the Jordan Valley, one week we [performed] in the north, and one week we [performed] all over the country. This was our schedule. And you know, three times a day in the south, [going] from base to base, it was fun because we made them (the soldiers) happy, we caused them to feel better, and not exactly to forget, but to feel better. There was one time in the south that we [arrived] to such a difficult situation; one of the soldiers in the unit that we came to had been killed. [The soldiers] were so upset, and we didn't know what to do. But

after ten minutes the soldiers said to us “You came! You came to sing”, and they were all crying and excited because we sang Israeli songs. After the war, I was a soloist in the unit and the composer gave me the solos and most of the songs I was singing, like *L’chol Echad Yerushalyim*. This was the reason I became famous in Israel. The songs were published and played on the army radio, in many new places. In the army many soldiers requested me to sing for them, the “songstress who sings *Be’Eretz Ahavati*”. That was my breakthrough.



Ruchama during her military service. (Photo credit: Ruchama Raz Portfolio)

Noa: After you finished army service, you moved to Kibbutz Gal On.

Ruchama: After the army and before the Kibbutz, I moved to Tel Aviv and I lived there for three years to study how to teach music, voice training and piano. I was also in a music festival there (*Festival HaZemer V’Pizmon*). I studied in the morning and performed in the evening. After I finished my studies, I returned to Jerusalem and there I met my husband, Yigal. He was a widower and he had three children. And I met him, and I knew that I would have to be with him in the Kibbutz because his children were living there. Yigal worked in Jerusalem because a man who is single or a widower is allowed to work outside of the Kibbutz so that he can meet someone. He attended one of my performances in Jerusalem and he was very excited, and I don’t know, he found my phone number and he called me. The first time he called me I thought I don’t know, you know, and then as soon as I saw him, I thought: okay! It was [around the time] that I had broken up with my boyfriend, and it was a bit difficult, but I thought it’s good to meet someone new. And he sounded very nice on the phone, so we met. I lived on the Kibbutz for seven years and had two daughters.

Noa: How was life on the kibbutz?

Ruchama: The people on the kibbutz are very kind. They were very nice to me, they heard I'm coming to the kibbutz, the singer, to be with Yigal. But for me it was very hard because my daughter lived not in our house but in the children's home. My daughter was six weeks old, and she had to go to children's house.

Noa: Yes, my mother remembers that this was difficult for you.

Ruchama: Yes, and I also came from a religious family and the kibbutz was part of the *Hashomer Hatzair* movement. And this was also difficult for me, everything together was difficult. And [afterwards] we moved to Ra'nana and it's so wonderful, it's close to Tel Aviv and my work.

Noa: Did living on the kibbutz change or inspire your music?

Ruchama: No, I think that people knew my style, Israeli folk songs. I tried a bit of rock music, but it didn't work because people know me, and they know me for lyrical songs.

Noa: Do you remember teaching Hebrew on the kibbutz? How was this job? Was it difficult? How long did you teach Hebrew?

Ruchama: Yes, I remember it well. I didn't teach for long, only a year or two, because they moved me to work in the children's house. At the same time, I was performing to make money for the Kibbutz. The money from the performances went to the kibbutz. A part of my time was spent performing, and part was spent working in the children's house.

Noa: Last week, you sang in concerts in Ra'nana in honour of Naomi Shemer. Today in Israel, many young Israeli musicians want to sing like foreign performers. What do you think is the future of Hebrew music?

Ruchama: Listen, I accept everything. There is an audience which loves Hebrew singers and sometimes, I see if I have a show in the morning, for Kabbalat Shabbat, many families come with their children to listen to the songs of shabbat. They learn some of my songs like *Sheleg Al Iri* and *Be'Eretz Ahavati*, and they love *Halomot*. I told someone who invited me to a show to please tell the parents to bring their children and prepare them for the songs, and it was so nice that the children sang with me. I invited some children to the stage to sing some of Naomi Shemer's children's' songs, for example *Aleph Bet*. I know my granddaughter knows all the songs of Naomi Shemer, and also my songs, because I am her grandmother. I was very happy to see the young generation [know these songs]. But I know that for the teenagers and young adults, they like Noa Kirel and all this, and it has a place too. There is room for everyone – and I have nothing bad to say about this. I pray that Noa Kirel will win Eurovision, I think she's great. I have performances next week in Jerusalem and I will share stories about my childhood and family history in Jerusalem. I also prepared a big performance with the Andalusian Orchestra in the north in Maa'alot and together we're doing songs about Jerusalem in the style of both East and West. We are changing the accompaniment, and I like

it. I'm open to doing new things. I love to sing, and you know that I heard that when people sing it's very healthy for the whole body. Both body and feelings – the mood, to be happy, not to be depressed. And this is why people like to sing.

Noa: In Israel we have many female songwriters and poets, for example Naomi Shemer and Rachel Shapira. Do you have a most loved poet?

Ruchama: I don't want to say, each is special in their own way! Naomi Shemer was amazing and much loved, and today Rachel Shapira is fantastic. I love performing with her.



Some of my favourite Ruchama Raz albums.

Noa: In previous interviews, you have talked about the difficulties you have had in your life. Do you believe that music has the ability to help people cope with or overcome difficult things in their lives? Not only listening to music, but also singing songs?

Ruchama: Yes. I was ill six years ago; I had a brain tumour. I had a cancer in my brain, and I was very ill. And I thought I was going to die. I was in the hospital for treatment, and my husband was taking care of me and helping me. [I received] many prayers, all of the children and my family prayed for me, and friends helped me. Until I went onto the stage, I didn't feel healthy. After two and half years, I did my first concert, and the composer came to accompany me, and I felt suddenly completely healthy. When I performed and sang, I returned to myself. Songs healed me, and I really feel that I am a happy person. I studied how to teach music, how to sing, and so I also want to help others start to sing, as well as the younger generation. I am also a yoga teacher. I have worked with yoga for three years, two years in yoga and one in yoga therapy. Today I am able to say that I am healthy, and happy and I have a propensity for life. I am very grateful to G-d for protecting me and healing me; you saw me on the stage, how I sing and dance. It is unbelievable. Yesterday was my third performance here [in Ra'nana] and I told the audience that six years ago I was very ill and so on, and if it helps to even one person here, I want to share my story so that someone sick can believe and begin to feel better. The support of the family is very important, as is to continue to live and believe that even in bad periods you can create and do things. I didn't believe that, but now I can say to people who are in the same situation I was in six years ago that it can be better, and that healing can begin, that medicine is working. And the audience clapped and cheered and after the show someone came and said, "I want to hug you, G-d bless you and you give me

inspiration". I hadn't been sure about telling the story, but I found in the same minute that I am happy – even if a single person there was ill, and there are many people who suffer from very bad illnesses – that one person could feel better after hearing the story.

Noa: It is important, especially after the past three years when so many people have been very ill, and it has been very challenging. I think it is important to hear stories that make people feel good.

Ruchama: Yes, and you know that thirty-two years ago my sister was killed in a bus bombing. She was forty years old and had three children – 6, 9, and 12 years old. And it was very hard. My mother was so ill after that, she had cancer. From the sadness. She became ill.



Photo credit: Ruchama Raz Portfolio

Noa: At the start of your musical life, there was a strong connection between music and religion. Do you feel that this connection has changed? Or, for you, has music remained something with a strong and large connection to religion?

Ruchama: I think that because I came from a religious family, there is something in my songs connected to tradition. I love *tefillot* (prayers), I really love them. And I love religion, but I am not a fanatic. You know, we come to the family and sit together, men and women. I like the way my parents educated us. There is a Hebrew sentence from the Torah: "Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace." Not so strict, and this I like. Spending shabbat with my family and singing the songs of shabbat and the holidays like Shavuot, which is coming soon, and Pesach. I like it!



Photo credit: Ruchama Raz Portfolio

Noa: What is the message of your music?

Ruchama: Love each other, love the country, love the language. I like to sing songs of the poets; they speak to me. They are written with language which is art. It's okay to listen to dance music and *balagan* for weddings it's fine, it's okay. But if you want to sit down and [take the time to] listen to the music and listen to the words, then the words say something. They say: we have a wonderful language, and we have a wonderful country – even though it's very hard now. And I don't want to tell the people what I [believe] because my job is to hug people, not tell them what to think. We all have a place here, everyone and his beliefs. I have to bring the beauty, love, empathy, and compassion [to them] in my songs.



Ruchama Raz and Yitzhak Rabin (Photo credit: Ruchama Raz Portfolio)

Noa: Your family made *aliya* from Iran. Do the Jews from Iran have special melodies or songs?

Ruchama: There are, but when we got to Israel, my father had a tape recorder with Persian songs, but we told him “*Aba* no, we only want Hebrew songs!” and so it’s a bit sad. Sometimes he listened quietly but we wanted to be *Sabraim*, Israeli. Today I regret it a bit, I hear [Persian] songs and they are beautiful, and I want to embrace my father. But it was a time that everyone spoke Hebrew and wanted to be Israeli. And so, from a young age, I listened to Hebrew songs, sitting next to the radio. I loved it, and I felt that I loved music and that music suited me.

Noa: In your house with your family did you sing only in Hebrew?

Ruchama: Yes, only in Hebrew. Now, the language that my mother and father spoke with my grandmother was Aramaic. And this language I also know. [My grandmother] didn’t speak Hebrew at all. They used to speak with her in Aramaic. My siblings and I learned it, we understand everything, but we don’t speak it [amongst ourselves]. It is a beautiful language. When I was a child learning Torah, I knew the Aramaic and I understood everything. My mother and father also knew Persian, this was the regular language of Iran, but the Jewish community there also spoke Aramaic.

Noa: Is it possible for you to explain the story of your song “*Halomot*”?

Ruchama: Someone has a dream; everything awakens for him to fulfill it. Even if there are difficulties or someone telling you you cannot achieve it, if you have a strong and serious desire to fulfill your dream, you will. This is the message. If you have a dream, fulfill it. I love the message of this song.

Noa: Which Israeli singers do you love? You can pick from both the past and the present.

Ruchama: From the older generation I really love Rivka Zohar and Yoni Rechter. From the younger generation I love Miri Mesika, Chava Alberstein, and Riki Gal – here, I gave you a few.



Photo credit: Ruchama Raz Portfolio

Noa: Did you have difficulties at the start of your career as a result of your being a woman? How was the situation in the past for female singers in Israel, and do you feel today that the situation for women is better?

Ruchama: There were not any difficulties for me in the past. However, there are instances of there being an audience or a Rabbi not being able to hear *kol isha* (a woman's voice). It has happened a few times, and it is very difficult. In Jerusalem, for example, there was an event, and Teddy Kollek, who loved me, invited me to sing. And so I started to sing, and everything was normal, but I saw that the religious people left. Teddy told me, "Don't pay them any mind, keep singing!". He didn't give in, and I loved it. But [sometime after], I was invited to an event in a school named in honour of Teddy Kollek; they invited me because they knew that Teddy had loved me. Later, they called us and cancelled. They apologized and told us that the Mayor of Jerusalem was a religious man who would not listen to a woman's voice, in that moment, I

was bothered. I understood that their apology was not sincere and I thought that he can cover his ears. I was bothered not because of him, but because [the children] were also being affected, that is something different. The Mayor of Jerusalem, not allowing me to perform at the school named after Teddy Kollek, who loved my songs? It got to the newspapers. I told them I don't want to argue, it is what it is, but I didn't agree. There are ceremonies now that are men-only, only men sing. For example, some ceremonies for *Yom Hazikaron*. I find it unpleasant.

Noa: I think it is something very problematic, it is difficult for me.

Ruchama: Yes, for me also it is difficult.

Noa: Are you currently working on new music or projects?

Ruchama: I'm recording new songs, and I recorded a new song with Rachel Shapira. Today you know that the official channels are through the internet, through YouTube. Sometimes more people are aware, sometimes less, but occasionally I send songs to the radio close to when the song is released. I am always working on something, I don't rest.

Noa: If there are possibilities, do you want to sing in concerts abroad, for example in Canada?

Ruchama: I was very happy to perform in the United States twelve or thirteen years ago with Rachel Shapira, we did three performances in Washington, Miami and Boston and it was simply amazing. An audience of both Jews and Israelis, I would be so happy to do it again, even in Canada!

Noa: Thank you so much Ruchama!



Me and Ruchama.

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Ruchama's official website can be accessed [here](#).