



THE TRANSFORMATIONAL NEHEMTA :  
AN ANALYSIS OF THIS MOTIF IN THE  
SHORT STORIES OF ISAAC LEIB PERETZ

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for Rabbinic Ordination

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## Introduction

The problem of seemingly meaningless suffering and the necessity of warding off despair has been the impetus behind much of Jewish storytelling. The destruction of the First and Second Temple, the recurring experience of exile, subjugation, violence, and expulsion all resulted in theological crises which threatened the survival of the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup> When fundamental religious beliefs are threatened, "cognitive disorientation"<sup>2</sup> ensues. We find a variety of literary responses to these crises.

Alongside bitter parodies of sacred texts<sup>3</sup> and elegies that glorify the martyr, prose and poetry that challenge both God and the reader, stories that demythologize suffering through humor<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This study does not mean to suggest that Israel's history should be understood as one long series of catastrophic events. This assertion is not born out by the facts. Rather, the subject of this thesis is limited to one type of literary response to periods of national and individual suffering.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Mintz, Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> For extended treatment of the "sacred parody", and the other types of literary response, see David G. Roskies, Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Alter, Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977), pp.155-167. Alter quotes Maurice Samuel who wrote:

There was nothing jolly and hilarious about the destitution that lay like a curse on millions of Jews in the Yiddish-speaking world; and it would be grotesque to speak of Sholom Aleichem's and Mendele's kaptsonim (paupers) and evyonim (indigents) as "poor and happy." They were miserable, and

and liturgical works, we find numerous examples of stories of consolation and hope (nehemtot). The goal of these parables, folktales, and short stories is not to engender passive acceptance but rather to insist that the suffering experienced either by the individual or by the Jewish people does have meaning.<sup>5</sup> The event which is causing theological crisis does not signify the termination of the covenant between God and Israel, nor does it mean that God has abandoned an individual. The task of these stories is to restore shattered myths and to construct new paradigms of meaning.<sup>6</sup> Slonimsky maintained that nehemta, consolation, is the primary purpose of midrash.<sup>7</sup> It can be argued that it is a primary motivating force behind many later folktales and short stories as well.

This study will examine a type of literary response which I am calling the transformational nehemta. Its particular focus is the transformational nehemta in the short stories of Isaac Leib

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knew it; but the question that haunts us historically is, why did they not disintegrate intellectually and morally? How were they able, under hideous oppression and corroding privation, under continuous starvation--the tail of a herring was a dish--to keep alive against a better day the spirit originally breathed into man? The answer lies in the self-mockery by which they rose above their condition to see afar off the hope of the future.

5 E. H. Slonimsky, "The Philosophy Implicit in the Midrash," in Hebrew Union College Annual, Vol. XXVII, 1956, p. 236.

6 A. Mintz, p. 21.

7 Slonimsky, pp. 235-236.



Peretz.<sup>8</sup> A transformational nehemta is a story or parable which transforms the listener's perception of a catastrophic event, thus resolving the "cognitive disorientation."<sup>9</sup> These stories share several basic themes. First, transformational nehemt never deny the reality of their listeners' experiences. They do, however, call upon these listeners to change the way they understand that reality. They help the listeners look at their situation from a different vantage point by focusing their attention on an aspect of their situation that had not been either relevant or apparent before. They admit that suffering is real but insist that it is neither capricious nor will it be interminable. They suggest that the pain generated by a particular event is caused, at least in part, by trying to understand it in isolation. They assert that meaning can be found by understanding the event as part of the entire sweep of history, by interpreting it through the correct reading of Scripture, or by imagining it from God's perspective. Second, the transformational nehemta assures the listener that the covenant between God and Israel will never be abrogated. Catastrophic events are horrible because they usually signify an end.<sup>10</sup> These stories insist that the event that has just taken place does not signify an end. Third, this genre of literature

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<sup>8</sup> Peretz wrote many different types of short story, some of which are quite bitter and sarcastic. This study will focus only on those stories which are transformational nehemt.

<sup>9</sup> Mintz, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



asks the listener to give up the notion that he or she is merely a victim of chance and accept a very different identity. Through the vehicle of a story the listener becomes an important participant in a meaningful--albeit difficult--drama. The transformational nehemta is a story that empowers the listener, asserting that human choice and action have significance and worth. These stories insist that every individual retains the ability to transcend those material circumstances that cannot be changed.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's classic essay on the purpose and structure of fairy tales, he explained that legends offer escape from the most profound of limitations. In this way these stories offer consolation.<sup>11</sup> But their most important source of consolation, wrote Tolkien, is "The Consolation of the Happy Ending," which he calls "the eucatastrophe."<sup>12</sup>

The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of the fairy-tale....The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn"...[cannot be] counted upon to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure; the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance: [but] it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat....<sup>13</sup>

What Tolkien said of the fairy tale is also applicable to the transformational nehemta. The fact that eventually there will be

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<sup>11</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in The Tolkien Reader, by J.R.R. Tolkien (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 83.

<sup>12</sup> Tolkien, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Tolkien, pp. 85-86. Underlining mine.

a "happy ending" and that current suffering does not indicate "final defeat" works to preserve the individual's structure of meaning.

Transformational nehemtot are found in great abundance in midrashic and hasidic literature. They also appear in medieval texts. Before proceeding to an analysis of the transformational nehemta in the short stories of I. L. Peretz (1852-1915) we will examine some of the precursors of these stories. We will begin with rabbinic texts. Their elements and techniques will be examined. These texts, taken primarily from Pesikta de-Rav Kahana<sup>14</sup> and Lamentations Rabbah<sup>15</sup>, have been chosen because they

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<sup>14</sup> Pesikta de-Rav Kahana is a compilation of discourses for special Sabbaths and festivals. While each piska has a theme specific to the tenor of the day and its Scriptural reading, the text as a whole is bound together by the theme of Israel's "spiritual journey from creation to the coming of the Messiah." Braude describes Pesikta de-Rav Kahana as "the narrative of Israel's journey through history to eternity, a narrative that begins with the creation of Adam and comes to its climax in the coming of the Messiah..." Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, trans. William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975), pp. ix, xv, xviii. Unless otherwise noted, citations from Pesikta de Rav Kahana will follow Braude's translation.

<sup>15</sup> Lamentations Rabbah, an exegetical midrash, interprets the text of Lamentations verse by verse. It focuses on the destruction of the Temple and the pain of subjugation and exile. It also contains a number of stories of hope and comfort. It seems to be a Palestinian text edited by one individual around the end of the fifth century. The redactor used Tannaitic literature, Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, and possibly Pesikta de-Rav Kahana as sources. "Lamentations Rabbah," Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971. Unless otherwise noted, citations from Lamentations Rabbah will follow the translation used in the Soncino edition.

represent the various types of transformational nehemta. Later texts - a parable by Yehuda Halevy, a story by the Dubno Maggid, and a variety of hasidic tales - will also be analyzed.

## Chapter 1

### Rabbinic Responses to Shattered Paradigms of Meaning

In former days when people had change in their pockets they liked to listen to some word from Mishnah and Talmud; but now that the money is gone, and especially since we are sick because of the ruling power, people want to hear something from the Bible and from Agada.  
Pesikta 101b<sup>1</sup>

In the past people had some change in their pocket and a man liked to listen to Mishnah and Halacha and Talmud; but now that the money is gone, and especially since we are sick through the oppression, nobody wants to hear anything but words of Benediction and Consolation.

Cant. R., ed. Wilna, Romm,  
15a, Col. 2<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Citation taken from Slonimsky's "The Philosophy Implicit in the Midrash," p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature,

Mintz defines "catastrophe" as:

a destructive event whose horror derives from its bursting of the available paradigms of explanation. The actual quantum of human misery is therefore not the only factor. The number of lives taken in the siege and sack of Jerusalem might fail to impress us today, nor in its own time did the scale of destruction dwarf the ruin of other great cities. It was the cognitive disorientation it provoked that made the fall of Jerusalem a catastrophe. It was a destruction that didn't make sense.<sup>3</sup>

What paradigm of meaning had been used to make sense out of suffering prior to the rabbinic period? Perhaps the most significant was the biblical concept of covenant. One of the most radical innovations in Scripture is the concept that treaties are made not only between rulers but between God and a people. According to the terms of the covenant, faithfulness to God's commandments will be rewarded. Rejection of these commandments will be punished. By accepting the terms of the covenant, Israel became God's chosen people. By virtue of the covenant, history becomes more than a chain of events. As record of the relationship between God and Israel, it is endowed with meaning. Periods during which Israel is independent and prosperous reflect the people's faithfulness to God. Wretchedness, poverty, and servitude are understood to be the result of Israel's rejection of their covenantal obligations.<sup>4</sup> This understanding of

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<sup>3</sup> Mintz, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Mintz, p. 19.



historical events had two results. It rendered national suffering intelligible and more importantly:

... in the depths of suffering there was a future basis of hope: God in his wrath would punish, but not destroy utterly. The relationship was at bottom unconditional and contained an element of hesed, "covenantal love," which insured that there would always be a remnant and always a restoration.<sup>5</sup>

Deuteronomic texts, written in anticipation of national catastrophe asserted that destruction had to be understood simply as the proper and necessary punishment for the people's transgressions. It was not a sign of God's abandonment of Israel nor did it signify that the God of Israel had been superseded by some other, more powerful deity. Destruction was to be understood as chastisement stemming from God's ongoing concern for Israel. Suffering served as expiation for sin. The enemy which would destroy Jerusalem was merely a tool used by God. After the destruction, the relationship between God and a repentant remnant would be restored.<sup>6</sup>

The Book of Lamentations reveals that the fall of Jerusalem in 587 caused massive trauma to the covenantal paradigm. The belief current among the people at that time was that no matter how grievously Israel sinned, the Davidic monarchy and the Temple Sanctuary would always remain in existence.<sup>7</sup> As God had promised

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mintz, p. 3

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

David four centuries earlier, "Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure....your throne shall be established forever."

(II Samuel 7:16) The Temple service through which the individual who sinned made atonement and through which Israel offered thanks and supplications would surely remain inviolable. God would never allow complete destruction.

The destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 was catastrophic not only because of the terrible physical devastation but due to the massive spiritual damage it caused. Zedekiah was blinded and led off captive to Babylon. Foreign armies first entered the Temple, profaned it, and then they destroyed it. Means of atonement no longer seemed to exist.<sup>8</sup> Mintz explains:

The events of 587 constituted no ordinary destruction explainable within the terms of the covenant and its periodic movements among sin, chastisement, and reconciliation....It was the despairing conclusion of the people that the fall of Jerusalem was more than an act of divine retribution. The fall, it was feared, was not a moment of strain in an eternal relationship but the end of that relationship. The abandonment of the Davidic line and the destruction of the Temple were taken as signs that God had indeed turned away, abdicated his protectorship, and returned Israel to the chaos of history. God, in sum, had unleashed a destruction that was more than a punishment.<sup>9</sup>

Lamentations testifies to the depths of the horror and shame experienced by those who survived the destruction of Jerusalem. Slonimsky has suggested that "it is an acute experience of suffering and of an agonizing perplexity which releases thought"

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<sup>8</sup> Mintz, p. 19 & 20.

<sup>9</sup> Mintz, p. 20.

for the people of Israel.<sup>10</sup> The destruction of Jerusalem compelled many to ask what kind of God could cause such a catastrophe. "What God, what no-God, what half-God, what man-God, what all-God? How is man to behave? What is the future and is there a future? And what ground is there for faith?"<sup>11</sup> Despite the lack of evidence concerning the people's sin, the speaker in Lamentations finds surcease from these painful questions only through "willed recollection of past truths," that is, by recalling God's goodness and by making the connection once more between suffering and sin.<sup>12</sup>

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and the terrible failure of the Bar Kochba rebellion in 135, the rabbis faced the all but impossible task of rebuilding paradigms of meaning. To all appearances, the covenant had been shattered, atonement (and thus reconciliation) was no longer possible, Israel was despised by the nations, and God, it seemed, was silent.<sup>13</sup> The paradox of understanding oneself as a member of the chosen people and the simultaneous experience of being the

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<sup>10</sup> Slonimsky, p. 237.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Mintz, pp. 4-5. Bettelheim has pointed out in The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), pp. 145-147, that according to psychoanalytic theory the most profound terror is the fear of being left alone. Thus, the "ultimate consolations that we shall never be deserted." The most difficult times can be transcended when we find out that we shall not be abandoned.

<sup>13</sup> Mintz, p. 49.

most afflicted of peoples challenged all prior assumptions about the nature of God and God's relationship to the world.<sup>14</sup>

The Rabbis understood themselves to be living in a post - prophetic period. They could not expect direct divine revelation.<sup>15</sup> Yet, unless the Rabbis could reestablish a basis for hope, the fall of Jerusalem would signify the end for the people of Israel rather than part of a "millennial covenantal drama."<sup>16</sup>

The Rabbis were able to respond to these shattered paradigms of meaning through their "willed recollection of God's revealed texts."<sup>17</sup> Though the Temple was destroyed, the text endured, and along with the written text was the oral Torah. Through their interpretations of the biblical text, the Rabbis succeeded in re-establishing the belief in the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. By describing God and Israel in relational terms they reconstructed the belief in an unalterable loving relationship.<sup>18</sup> Implicit in the texts they wrote was their understanding that God is both just and knowing. The goal of many of these texts is to assure the listener of God's

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14 Slonimsky, pp. 236-238.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Mintz, p. 5.

18 Solomon Schechter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology: Major Concepts of the Talmud. (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), pp. 46-52.

involvement and concern.<sup>19</sup> Another underlying belief was that God created humankind with the capacity to make moral distinctions and act on them.<sup>20</sup> Thus these texts reasserted that the events of history are not random. Many midrashim suggest that both the joys and the pains that Israel experiences are the consequence of Israel's obedience (or disobedience) to the religious and moral law given by God.<sup>21</sup> Many rabbinic texts took the position that the Destruction was corrective rather than indicative of abandonment. According to these texts, punishment (i.e. suffering) existed in order to lead Israel to repent. Ultimately, Israel's true repentance would lead to redemption.<sup>22</sup> The Rabbis taught that despite the Temple's destruction, a means of reconciliation did indeed exist: the study of Torah and the faithful observance of mitzvot would stand in the place of the Temple service.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, p. xi. See also E.E. Urbach, The Sages: Their Concepts and their Beliefs, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 515-516.

<sup>20</sup> Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, p. xviii.

<sup>21</sup> Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, pp. xx-xxi.

<sup>22</sup> Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, p. xxi.

<sup>23</sup> While this study is concerned with the way the Rabbis sought to refocus the listener's perception in order to engender hope, it is necessary to remember that the Aggadic work of the Sages went hand in hand with their Halachic work. It is well to note the work of Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai and his disciples who spent their lives creatively restructuring patterns of living. As Urbach has pointed out in The Sages (p. 667):

'When Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai saw that the Temple was destroyed, and the Hekhal was burnt, he rose and rent his garments, and took off his phylacteries, and sat and wept and his disciples with him.' [Avot de-R. Nathan, Version



Slonimsky maintains that the essential task of midrash is to offer comfort.

[Midrash] in its inner core and essence...is consolation, that is, a feeding of the life-impulse when harassed and threatened by tragic circumstance. Tragic circumstance was the special environment, unexampled suffering the special historic lot, of the Jew. And to guard against despair because of the unremitting enemy from without, and against the temptation to despair because of doubt and weakening faith from within, the Jewish genius prepared for itself, alongside of the code of law which governed its daily living, a great wellspring of assurance and re-assurance, of comfort and ground for faith.<sup>24</sup>

The most difficult biblical text and the one the Rabbis had to confront was the Book of Lamentations. One of the greatest difficulties presented by this text is the author's lack of conviction that Israel had sinned. The confession found at the end of the third chapter seems more a result of prayerful piety than a response to specifically identifiable sins.<sup>25</sup> The rabbis understood what a serious danger this presented:

...the illusiveness of the crimes could generate a sense of disproportion between felt culpability and the actual dimensions of the Destruction....If, in turn, the catas-

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II, vii, 11a] But already then he started the work of reconstructing the life of Torah and precept, and although he did this in the hope that the Sanctuary would be rebuilt and the people redeemed, he realized that these things could not happen in the near future. 'Once Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai was going forth from Jerusalem, followed by R. Joshua, when he saw the Sanctuary in ruins. Said R. Joshua: "Woe unto us that this place, where the iniquities of Israel were expiated, lies in ruins!" Said (Rabban Johanan) to him: "My son, be not grieved! We have a means of atonement that is its equal, namely the practice of benevolence, as it is said: 'For I desire lovingkindness, and not sacrifice.' (Hosea vi 6) [Ibid., Version I, iv, 11a]

<sup>24</sup> Slonimsky, p. 235.

<sup>25</sup> Mintz, p. 52.

trophe that God had wrought was held not to be a punishment, then there could be only the explanation of divine malice, divine impotence, or divine neglect. The last was the locus of danger, for if God had truly withdrawn from Israel and retracted His providential guidance, then the Destruction must be a sign of abandonment, the terminal moment in Israel's relations with God. In order to forestall a baleful fall into despair the Rabbis found it imperative to specify, enumerate, and catalogue Israel's sins. Because the text was unobliging in this regard, the Rabbis were compelled to dig into the narrowest footholds and erect elaborate structures of plausibility with their powerful exegetical tools so they could establish Israel's guilt for extravagant acts of idolatry, sexual licence, bloodshed, and other heinous offenses."<sup>26</sup>

### Merited Punishment Rather than Abrogation of Covenant

The following transformational nehemta from Pesikta de-Rav Kahana explains that the Destruction signifies correction of Israel's sin rather than termination of the covenant.

מה נאוו על הררי' רגלי מבשר (ישעיה נב:ו). ר' יהושע או' מה נשתנו הררי' מכל מעשה בראש' שהמבשרי' באין עליהם תחלה, אלא אבות העולם נמשלו להרי', שנ' שמעו הרי' את ריב יי' והציתני' מוסרי הארץ וגו' (סנה' זב.). ולמה מבשרי' תחלה לאבות העולם, לפי שבשר' שגלו יש' נתכנסו אבות העולם עם האיסורים ובאו להב"ה וקשרו שם מספר גדול, באותה שעה נזקק להם הב"ה ששם מרום ואם' להם מה ליריד בביתו (ירמיה יא:כו). מה לאהבי בביתו (עשר) מספר הסת', אמרו לפניו רבש"ע מה חטאו בנינו שבר עשית להם, אם' להם עשו המזמנה (שם) וכל אותה קדושה שהיתה בבשרם העבירו מהם, לפי' נתחייבו גלות. אמרו לפניו רבש"ע שמה אתה שוכן בין אלה, אם' להם נשבע אני בשם הגדול שאני שוכן בין אומות העולם אלא אני מיוחד למקדש, שנ' ויש תקוה לאדירתי נאם יי' ושבו בגים לגבולם (שם לא:כו). מיד נתם הב"ה את האבו' והלכו ושכבו לקבורותיהם, לפי' כשהמבשר בא תחלה יבא אל מערת הסכפלה.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> פסיקתא דרב כהנא (על פי כתב יד אוקספורד) מאת רוב מרגליות (טראנק: בית המדרש לרבנים שבאמריקה, תשכ"ב), נספח הב, דף 464.

This text begins with a clear expression of the way its listeners were most likely experiencing their lot. "Master of the universe, wherein have our children sinned that Thou hast done such a thing as to banish them?" The question concerning the cause of their exile leaves implicit the more terrible question: "is there a cause for their exile?" God responds by explaining that exile is a merited punishment for the people's attempt at wiping away a primary sign of the covenant. "Thereupon the Fathers asked Him: Master of the universe, is it possible that Thou wilt forget them in their punishment among the peoples of the earth?"--that is, will You wipe away the memory of the covenant? As they have abandoned You, will You abandon them? Does this punishment signify an end? God replies, "By My great name, I swear that I shall not forget them among the nations of the world but, instead will restore them to their place, as is said "And there is hope for thy future, saith the Lord; for thy children shall return to their own border." As the Fathers of the world are comforted, so too the listener is comforted.

#### Experiencing the Event from God's Perspective:

##### The Suffering of God

The Rabbis introduced the concept of God as an empathetic fellow sufferer.

...at the moment of the Destruction, the figure of God switches from the monitory enforcer of punishment to the dazed sufferer whose suffering derives in part from His own pain over the loss of His children and in part from His empathy with their affliction. The Destruction is a cosmic

event that is catastrophic for God as well as man. When in Jeremiah God utters: "Summon the dirge singers...Let them quickly start a wailing for us" (9:16), the midrash emphasizes "for them it is not written but for us" (p. 4)<sup>28</sup>

In the chapter of sermons from Pesikta de-Rav Kahana read during the second week of rebuke prior to Tisha b'Av, we find a number of transformational nehemtot describing God as a fellow sufferer.<sup>29</sup>

בר קפרא פתח וקרא יי אלוהים צבאות ביום ההוא לבני ולספד ולקדחה ולחנוד שק (ישעיה כב:יב). א' הקב"ה למלאכי השנית, סלך בשר ודם אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו תולה שק, על פתחו, א' להן אף אני עושה כן, אלביש שמים קדרות ונ' (ישעיה נג). ועוד שאל להם סלך בשר ודם אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו מכנה את הפנסים, אם' להם אף אני עושה כן, שמש וירח קדרו ונ' (זואל ר:סו). ועוד שאל להם סלך בשר ודם אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו סהלך יח, א' להם אף אני עושה כן, יי בסופה ובסעודה דרכו וענן ונ' (נחום א:ג). ועוד שאל להן סלך בשר ודם אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו יושב ודומם, א' להן אף אני עושה כן יושב ברד וידום כי נמל עליז (ארכה נ:כח). ועוד שאל להן, סלך בשר ברם אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו מכנה את המיסות, אם' להם אף אני עושה כן, חזה רות עד רי כרסון רסיו (דניאל ז:ט). ועוד שאל להם, סלך בשר ודם אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו מבוע פירפרין שלו, אם' להם אף אני עושה כן, עשה יי אשר וסם בצע אמרתו (ארכה כ:יז). מה הוא בצע אמרתו, ר' יעקב דכפר ונן א' מבוע פירפרית. ועוד שאל להם סלך בשר ודם אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו יושב ומקנן, אם' להם אף אני עושה כן, ארכה יושב ברד (שם א:א).

30

In this text, the reader encounters a description of God plunged into disoriented grief. By focusing on the pain of God, the Rabbis succeed in avoiding the above mentioned danger of inferring "divine malice, divine impotence, or divine neglect."<sup>31</sup> By imagining the situation from God's perspective, the listener

<sup>28</sup> Mintz, p. 58.

<sup>29</sup> Similar texts exist in Lamentations Rabbah.

<sup>30</sup> פסיקתא דרב כהנא, מהג, 250-1.

<sup>31</sup> Mintz, p. 52.

is freed from the terrible conviction that God is uncaring and completely absent. In a number of texts God becomes the gever,<sup>32</sup> the one who has experienced great affliction.

כה אמר יי צבאות ותבוננו וקראו למקוננות ותבוננות וט' (ירמיה ס:טז). ר' יוחנן ור"ש לקיש ורבנן. ר' יוחנן  
א' למלך שדחה לו שני בנים, וכעס על הראשון ונמל את הסקל וחבמו והגלוה, א' אר' לו לזה מאיזו שלוח נגלה,  
כעס על השני ונמל את הסקל וחבמו והגלוה, א' אגא הוא רתובותי בישא. כך גלו עשרת השבטים והתחיל הק'  
א' להם את הפסוק הזה, אר' להם כי גדרו סמני ונ' (ירמיה ו:יג), וכיון שגלו שבט יהודה ובנימין, כביכול א' הק',  
אר' לי על שברי (ירמיה י"ח).

33

A number of different concepts are at work in these texts. God, described as a king, punishes his sons for an unspecified crime and then regrets his actions. The focus of this parable is on "the inner experience from king to father and on the spirit of remorse and lost opportunity that follows."<sup>34</sup> God must ask for help due to the immensity of sorrow experienced. Though we are never told why the sons merited punishment, we are told that God mourns the fact that Israel refused to heed the warnings of the prophets, and wishes it were possible to take them back.<sup>35</sup> The fact that God seems to assume partial responsibility ("Woe is Me--the hurt is come from Me") is the most radical response.<sup>36</sup>

32 "Ani ha-gever" (Lamentations 3.1). According to the rabbis, God is often the unnamed speaker in Lamentations. See Mintz, pp. 59-60.

33 פסיקתא דרב כהנא, סדר: 251-252.

34 Mintz, pp. 59-60.

35 Ibid.

36 Another radical response is to insist that God has the the greatest cause for mourning. In Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, 16.9 (pp. 297-298) Isaiah 40:1 (Comfort ye, comfort ye, My people) is



It seems to have a comforting affect for several reasons. By stating aloud what some listeners may be silently thinking, it defuses without delegitimizing their anger. Those who are parents will recall that a parent who punishes a child remains nonetheless the parent. Even a parent who loses a child never ceases to be a parent. This radical statement, placed by the Rabbis in God's mouth, also serves to preserve the sense of relationship between God and Israel. By switching the focus of grief to God, the Rabbis were able to transform the listeners' perception of their situation.

אני ישנה ולבי עד קול דודי רועק פתח לי וג' (שה"ש ה:ב). אמרה כנסת ישר' לפני הקב"ה, רבון העולמים, אני ישנה מבית המקדש ולבי עד בבתי כנסיות ובבתי מדרשות, אני ישנה מן הקדבנות ולבי עד במצות וצדקות, אני ישנה מן המצות ולבי עד לעשותן, אני ישנה מן הקץ ולבי עד לנאולה, אני ישנה מן הנאולה ולבי של הקב"ה עד לנאולתי. אר' חייא בר אבא מאיכן מצאנו שנקרא הק' ליבן של ישר', מן הדא דכתיב צור לבבי וחלקי אלהים לעולם (תהלים עג:ו). קול דודי רועק (שה"ש שם), זה משה, ראשון משה כה אסר י"י כחצות הלילה אני וג'.

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reinterpreted by vocalizing ammi (My people) as immi (with Me). R. Abin posed two hypothetical questions. R. Abin asked this one first: If a king had a palace, and his enemies came into it and burned it down, who is to be comforted, the palace or the owner of the palace? Is it not the owner of the palace who should be comforted? Likewise, the Holy One saying, The Temple is My palace, "And it is My palace that lieth waste" (Haggai 1:9), went on to ask, Who then requires comforting? Is it not I? Hence Comfort, comfort My people (Isa. 40:1)--comfort Me, comfort Me, O My people.

R. Abin's other hypothetical question: If a king had a vineyard, and his enemies came in to it and hacked at it and cut it down, who is to be offered comfort? The vineyard or the vineyard's owner? Is not the vineyard's owner to be comforted? Likewise the Holy One saying, Israel is My vineyard, The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel (Isa. 5:7), went on to ask, Who then requires comforting? Is it not I? Hence Comfort, comfort, My people (Isa. 40.1)--comfort Me, comfort Me, O My people.

(שמות י"ד). פתח לי (ש"ש שם), א"י יסא א' הקב"ה פתח לי פתח בחירה של סתם ואני פותח לכם פתח  
 שיהו אלהים ונצחיות נכנסין בו. אחתי (שם), אחתי במצרים, שנתאחו לי בשתי מצות, ברם פסח וברם  
 סילת, רעיתי (שם), רעיתי בים, שנתרע לי בים ואסור יי יסלח לעולם ועד (שמות מ"ד). יזתי (ש"ש שם),  
 יזתי כבוד, שניצבתי לי כיונה במצות. תמתי (שם), תמתי בסני, שניחם לי בסני ואסור כל אשר דבר יי  
 נקשה ונשמע (שמות כ"ז). ר' ינא א' תוסיתי, לא אני נחל סמנה ולא היא נחלה ממני. ר' יודישע רסכנין  
 בשם ר' לוי סה רמאוסים הללו חשש אחד סתם את ראשו תבירו סרגיש, כך א' הקב"ה קסו אנכי בצורה (תהלים  
 צא:מו).

37

Again, in this text, the focus on God as fellow sufferer preserves the sense of connection between Israel and God. The idea that God, like a twin, experiences the pain of its twin, Israel, rejects the notion that God has truly and ultimately turned away from Israel. The Destruction is emphatically recast as a painful and tragic punishment rather than the end of the covenantal relationship. This is true of the texts which deal with the female persona of God as well. (God's presence is split into both male and female personae. God is the grief stricken father who needs advice on how to mourn and the Shekinah, God's feminine indwelling presence.)

### God's Indwelling Presence In Exile

There are a great many texts in which the Shekinah, in love, goes into exile with Israel.<sup>38</sup>

37 פסיקתא דרב נחמן, ח"א, 87-8. 37

38 According to Urbach, this name of God initially designated a specific place in which a theophany occurred. Following the Temple's destruction, this epithet was used to denote God's intimate presence not in a specific place but among the people. It is likely that when the Temple stood, this name signified the divine presence. To emphasize God's continued presence, the name continued to be used in this sense. Midrashim describing a division between God and Israel caused by the

תניא ר"ש בן יוחי אומר בוא וראה כמה חביבין ישראל לפני הקב"ה שבכל מקום שגלו שכניה עמוק גלו למצרים  
שכניה עמוק שנאמר הנגלה נלית <sup>לכבוד</sup> אביך בהיותם במצרים וגו' גלו לבבל שכניה עמוק שנאמר למענכם  
שלחתי בבלה ואף כשחזר אתידן ליגאל שכניה עמוק שנאמר ושב ה' אלהיך את שבותך והשיב לא נאמר אלא ושב  
מלמד שהקב"ה שב עמוק.

39

וכן את מוצא בכל מקום שגלו ישראל כביכול נלחם שכניה עמוק, גלו למצרים שכניה עמוק שנ' הנגלה נלית אל  
בית אביך בהיותם במצרים (ש"א כ כו), גלו לבבל שכניה עמוק שנ' למענכם שלחתי בבלה (ישעיה סג ד), גלו  
לעילם שכניה עמוק שנ' ושפתי כסאי בעילם (ירמיה סג לח), גלו לארצם שכניה עמוק שנ' כי זה בא מארצם וסוף  
נגרים מבצרה (ישעיה סג א). וכשחזר אתידן לחזור כביכול שכניה חזרת עמוק שנ' ושב יי' אלהיך את שבותך  
(דברים ל ג) אינו אומר והשיב אלא ושב, ואומר אתי מלבנן כלה, (הש"ש ד ח) וכי מלבנן היא באה והלא מלבנן  
היא עולה וסוף ת"ל אתי מלבנן כלה כביכול >אני ואת מלבנן גליט< אני ואת מלבנן עולים.  
מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל

40

### Recovery

The twenty fourth proem of Lamentations Rabbah deals with God's response to the Destruction. In a sense it is the account of God's "recovery" from grief which invites the listener's recovery from grief. It is based on Isa. 22:12, "In that day did the Lord, the God of hosts, call to weeping and to lamentation, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth." In this text, God, seized by remorse, returns to the place where the Temple once stood to "see what the enemy has done."<sup>41</sup> Jeremiah serves as God's guide.

people's sin also use this epithet. (The Sages, pp. 43,44, 55)

39 מעילה כד.

40 מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל, מאת חיים שאול האראוויטץ וישראל אברהם רבין (ירושלים: חסד, 1970) מסכת רוממות  
ד, 51-52.

<sup>41</sup> Midrash Rabbah: Lamentations, trans. A. Cohen (London and Bournemouth: Soncino Press, 1951), p. 41. (Unless otherwise noted, citations of Lamentations will use this translation.)

כשראה הקב"ה את בית המקדש. אמר בודאי זה ביתי וזה מנוחתי שבאו אבותי ועשו בו כרצונם. באותה שעה היה הקב"ה בוכה ואמר אי לי על ביתי. בני היכן אתם. בני היכן אתם. אחבי היכן אתם. מה אעשה לכם התריתי בכם ולא חזרתם בתשובה. אמר הקב"ה לירמיה אני רומה היום לאדם שיהיה לו בן יחיד ועשה לו חפה וסת בתוך חפתו. ואין לו כאב לא עלי ולא על בני.

42

The familial and intimate relationship between God and Israel is established immediately as well as the fact that God is inconsolable. In need of assistance, God sends Jeremiah to bring Moses and the Patriarchs "for they know how to mourn."<sup>43</sup> Jeremiah finds himself unable to break the terrible news to them.

מיד הלך ירמיה למערת הסכפלה ואמר לאבות העולם. עמדו השנים וכן שארם מתבקשין לפני הקב"ה. אמרו לו למה. אמר להם איני יודע. ספני שהיה מתירא שלא יאסרו ביסוד היתה לכנינו זאת. הגיעו ירמיה ועמד על שפת הירדן וקרא בן עמרם בן עמרם עמר הגיע וכן שארם מתבקש לפני הקב"ה. אמר לו מה היום מיומים שאני מבקש לפני הקב"ה. אמר לו ירמיה איני יודע. הגיעו משה ואלה אצל מלאכי השרת. שהיה סביב אותן משעת מתן תורה. אמר להם משהי עליונים כלום אתם יודעים ספני מה אני מתבקש לפני הקב"ה. אמרו לו בן עמרם אי אתה יודע שבית המקדש רוב וישראל גלו. והיה צעק וכוונה עד שהגיע לאבות העולם. מיד אף הם קרעו בגדיהם והגיעו ירמיה על ראשיהם והיו צועקים וכוזין עד שער בית הקדש.

Together, God and they begin to lament:

<sup>41</sup> Midrash Rabbah: Lamentations, trans. A. Cohen (London and Bournemouth: Soncino Press, 1951), p. 41. (Unless otherwise noted, citations of Lamentations will use this translation.)

<sup>42</sup> מדרש רבה חלק שני: איכה רבה, ווילנא (ירושלים: מ.פ. פרעסס אינק) פתחמא כר, דף 12.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

כיון שראה אותם הקב"ה מיד ויקרא ה' אלהים צבאות ביום ההוא לבני ולמספר ולקדחה ולחורו שק. ואלמלא  
 סקרא שכתוב אי אפשר לאומרו והיו בוכין והולכין עשר זה לשער זה. כאשר שפחו סוסל לפניו. וזה הקב"ה  
 סופר ואומר אי לו לסל שבקטתו הצליח ובוקטתו לא הצליח.

Later in this proem, Abraham challenges God:

אמר אברהם לפני הקב"ה רבונו של עולם מפני מה הצליח את בני ומסרתן בידי האומות והדנים ככל סתות  
 משונות והדחת את בית המקדש מקום שהעליתי את יצחק בני עולה לפניך. אמר לו הקב"ה לאברהם. בגד  
 תסאו ועברו על כל התורה (מכ) ועל כ"ב אותיות שבה הה"ר (רניאל ס') וכל ישראל עברו את תורתך.

From the start of this text we know that the cause of the  
 Destruction and the exile is Israel's sin. But even the listener  
 who can accept this answer finds the punishment out of  
 proportions to the crime. So does Abraham who challenges the  
 Torah and its letters to testify against Israel. He easily  
 dismisses their testimony. One by one, they all fall silent.  
 Then Moses and the patriarchs begin to speak movingly on Israel's  
 behalf.

מיד פתח אברהם לפני הקב"ה ואמר רבש"ע למאן שנה נתת לי בן וכשעמר על רעתו וזה בחר בן שלשים ושבע  
 שנים אמרת לי העלה עולה לפני ונעשיתי עליו כאבדור ולא רחמתי אליו. אלא אני בעצמי כפתתי אותו. ולא  
 תזכור לי זאת ולא תרחם על בני. פתח יצחק ואמר רבש"ע כשאמר לי אבא (כ"ב) אלהים יאה לו השה  
 לעולה בני. לא עכבתי על רברד ונעקדתי ברצון לבי על נבי המזבח ופשמתי את צוארי תחת הסכין. ולא תזכור  
 לי זאת ולא תרחם על בני. פתח יעקב ואמר כבש"ע לא עשיתי שנה עמדתי בבית לבן וכשיצאתי מביתו פגע בי  
 עשו הישע ובקש נדח את בני סמתי עצמי לסתת עליהם. ועכשיו נסמך ביד ארביהם כצאן למכרת. ואני  
 שגדלתי כאפוחים של תרגולים וסבלתי עליהם צער נידול בגים. כי רוב ים הייתי בצער נידול בעבודתם. ועתה  
 לא תזכור לי זאת לרחם על בני. פתח משה ואמר רבש"ע לא רעתה נאמן הייתי על ישראל ארבעים שנה ורצתי  
 לפניך כמס במדבר. וכשצוית וכן שרנסו לארץ גורתי עלי במדבר יצאו עצמותי. ועכשיו שגלו שלחת לי לספור  
 ולכבות עליהם. וזה המשל שאומרים בני אדם מסוב אדוני לא טוב לי וסרעתי רע לי.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses remind God of how each of  
 them acted with great faithfulness toward God even in extreme



situations. God remains silent. Moses and Jeremiah then go forth to offer comfort to the people. The sight they see is horrifying. The comfort they can give is limited.

באותה שעה אמר משה ליהוה אלהי ישראל (לה) אמר לו יהוה אלהי ישראל  
ללך בדרך סעני והרונים. אל אעפ"כ. מיד הלך משה ויהוה לפגיו. עד שיעצו לנחלת בבל ראודו למשה  
ואמר זה לזה בא בן עשרים מקבר לפדותו מיד צרנו יצתה בת קל ואמרה נודה היא סלפני. מיד אמר להם  
משה בני להחזיר אתכם אל ארצכם. שכן נעודה נודה אלא הסקס יחזיר אתכם במדה ודעה אותם. באותה שעה  
היו קולם בבניה גדולה עד שעלתה בנייתם למדן הדר (תהלים קל"ז) על נחלת בבל שם ישבנו גם כנינו.  
כיון שבא משה אצל אבות העולם. אמר לו מה עשו האנשים כבנינו. אמר להם מהם ודעו וספרו כפתו ידיהם  
ואחזיקוהו וספרו אמרים בבבלי ברזל וספרו נפשות עושים ומהם (ספר) בדרך ונבלתם לעוף השמים ולבהמת הארץ  
וספרו משלמים לחם רעבים וצמאים. מיד פתו בלם ובנו וקנו בקנות וי על רמסא לבגן היכי הייתן ביתם  
כלא אבא.

Moses fluctuates between grief and fury on behalf of Israel. In spite of the fact that God has decreed this devastating event and will not rescind it, he attempts to ease its harshness.

היכי רמיתון במידתו ובקריסא בלא לכושא ובלא כס. היכי מיתון במודי ובחפצי הליצי סמאני ובלא סגולא.  
היכי מעניתון סבלי מעוני וחלא. היכי הו דרכו כפיתין לאחוריתון. היכי לא בלעתון חוקא בפוסיתון. פתח  
משה ואמר ליטא שמשא אמאי לא חשבת בשעה רעאל שגאח לבית מקדשא. אחרד ליה שמשא בודי משה רעא  
מדימנא היכי אדרי חשוכא ולא שבקין לי ולא רשו לי רנקסין לי בשיתין שמי דנדא ואמרין לי פוק ונר נודיד.  
תוב פתח משה ואמר וי על יוד מקדשא היכי חשך וי כי סמא זמניה ריחב וזיכלא סבלי ודדק רבי רב  
סתקמלין ואבודין אולין בשביה ונלותא ובחרכא. תוב פתח משה ואמר שבא אי בדיכון אתון קסולי לא תקמלון  
קסולא אכזרוא ולא תשח. כלאה נמדא ולא תקמלון ברא באנפודי ראבא ובחרא באנפא ראבא רמסא וסמא  
דמי שמיא וזשכנא השיב סבון. וכשרא רשעיא לא עברין רבי אלא סתבין ליה לברא בכנפיה ראסיה ואמרין  
ליה לאבות קם נכסה בבא אסיה ותרין רמקתא עלוהי ואבודי תלה ליה רישת.  
קוד אמר לפגיו רכשע כתבת בתורתך (ויקרא כ"ב) ושור או שה אותו ואת בנו לא תשחטו כיום אחד. וחלא  
כבר דעו בניס ואסותיהם כסה וכסה ואתה שותק.

44

44 Ostensibly, the crisis to which this text is responding is the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile. But we find that the depths of despair are reached with this report

In the end, it is the Matriarch Rachel who challenges God to act with mercy.

באותה שעה קפצה רחל אמת לפני הקב"ה ואמרה רבש"ע גלוי לפניך שיעקב עבדך ארבע יתידה ועבד בשבילי לאבא שבע שנים וכשהשלימו אותן שבע שנים והגיע זמן נשואי לבעלי יעקב אבי להחליפני לבעלי בשביל אחותי והקשה עלי הרבה עד מאוד כי נדעה לי העצה והדעת לבעלי ומסרתי לו סימן שכידי בני ובין אחותי כר שלא יוכל אבי להחליפני ולאחד בן נוסף בעצמי ומכלתי את תאומתי ורחמתי על אחותי שלא תצא להרפת. ולקרב חלפו אחותי לבעלי בשבילי ומסרתי לאחותי כל היסודין שמסרתי לבעלי כר שהוא מבור שיהא רחל. ולא עוד אלא שנבנסתי תחת המטה שהיה שוכב עם אחותי והיה מדבר מה והיא שותקת ואני משיבת על כל דבר ודבר כר שלא יכיר לקל אחותי ונמלתי חסד עמה. ולא קנאתי בה ולא הצאתיה להרפת. ומה אני שאני כשר

of murder of a child and the intense grief and humiliation of parents unable to act to save its life. We find a similar situation in the Book of Lamentations. Mintz (p. 28) has pointed out that the speaker undergoes a breakdown which makes it impossible to proceed with lamentation in response to the sight of children dying in the streets, not the destruction of the Temple. (Lam. 2:11-12) This theme continues in response to later catastrophic events. This fragment from Kovner's Scroll of Fire is a parallel text written in response to the Holocaust:

The rounding-up of the children went on from Tuesday to Saturday. Mothers tried to protect their babies. They were beaten until they bled, and the children were taken away. The children were thrown on to freight cars. A mother, whose three children were brutally torn from her arms, screamed out, beside herself. She did not weep; it was a great howl that pierced the wind from one end of the platform to the other. Silencing all other voices by its terror, it was like the cry of a wounded animal. Even the Germans were shocked, and the officer told her: "Climb quickly into the wagon and take out your child--" "Our breath stopped for a moment, and the officer added: "But you have to choose one, do you hear, Jew, only one!" When the mother climbed up to the freight car, the children stretched out their arms and held her. Three of them cried, "Mother, save us, mother!" The mother froze. Everything blurred, and she was taken out of the car with empty hands.

Abba Kovner, The Scroll of Fire: A Nation Fighting for its Life. Fifty-two Chapters of Jewish Martyrology (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1981), p. 43.

ודם עפר ואפר לא קנאתי לצרה שלי ולא הצנאתיה לבושה ולחרפת. ואמה סלך דז וקיים רחמן מפני מה קנאת  
 תעבורה כוכבים שאין בה סמך והגלית בני ונדרט בדרך ועשו אימים כם ברצונם. מיד נתגלגלו רחמיו של הקדוש  
 ברחק הוא ואמר בשבילך רחל אני מחזיר את ישראל למקום הראה הוא רחמיב (ירמיה ל"ח) כה אומר ה' קול ברפה  
 נשמע נחבבי תסודים רחל מבכה על בניה מאנה להנחם על בניה כי איננו. וכתוב (עם) כה אומר ה' מנע קולך  
 מבני ועיניך מרמקה כי יש שבר לפעולתך וגו' וכתוב (עם) ויש תקה לאדיתך נאם ה' ושבו בניה לגבולם.

45

This poem, examined in its entirety, expresses aloud many of the emotions and potentially dangerous theological conclusions that could be drawn from the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile. God's great sorrow gives voice to the sorrow the people were experiencing. Jeremiah's shame that this catastrophe could have occurred during his generation, the difficulty he experienced when it was necessary to speak of it<sup>46</sup>,

45 אברהם רבה, תלמודא בר, 12-14.

<sup>46</sup> Mintz, pp. 50-51, suggests that the closer one is to an event, the more difficult it is to respond to it. The following midrash expresses this issue:

Rabbi used to expound the verse "The Lord laid waste without pity" in twenty-four ways. R. Yohanan could expound it in sixty. Could it be that R. Yohanan was greater than Rabbi! Rather, because Rabbi was closer in time to the Destruction of the Temple he would remember as he expounded and stop to weep and console himself; he would begin again only to weep and console himself; he would begin again only to weep, console himself, and halt. R. Yohanan, because he was not close in time to the Destruction of the Temple, was able to continue to expound without pause. (p. 100)

Rabbi lived in the 2nd century, and though not an eye witness to the Bar Kohkba rebellion, was close enough in time to hear accounts of eye witnesses. Yohanan lived a generation later. According to this midrash, personal experience and memory actually impede the interpretive power. "Reading and interpreting are activities that are distinct from lamentation and consolation. They depend not upon the authenticity of

and his horror of going out and viewing "the slain" is shared by the listener. The listener could most certainly relate to the enraged grief expressed by Moses, whose challenge falls into the category of response that Roskies calls "sacred parody."<sup>47</sup> The listener could find in Moses (and in the others) a defender and comforter speaking from within tradition.<sup>48</sup>

Recalling aloud the incident of the child who was put to death in the presence of his parents not only captures the shame and humiliation experienced at the time of the Destruction, but

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experience but upon will and imagination, the will to recover meaning from the text and the imagination of exegetical ingenuity, which in turn depend for their success upon time and distance."

<sup>47</sup> D.G. Roskies, Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 17-20.

The survivor of a catastrophic event, at risk of becoming cut off from God, inverts a sacred text as a means of keeping faith. It is a parody in two senses: The text itself is parodied, and God's action is symbolically parodied. If God can "mutilate"--that is, cause terrible destruction--then the survivor can do something "equally grotesque on a human level," i.e., mutilate the text. Ultimately, instead of leading to despair or heresy, the text is re-understood "as a song of defiant affirmation." Another example of sacred parody:

Who is a mighty One like You, O Lord (Ps. 89:7)? [Rather one should proclaim] "Who is like You, mighty in self-restraint? You heard the blasphemy and the insults of that wicked man, but You kept silent! In the school of Rabbi Ishmael it was taught: Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty (elim)(Exod. 15:11)? [Read rather] "Who is like You among the mute" (illemim)--since He sees the suffering of His children and remains silent! (B. Gittin 56b and Mekhilta 42b)

<sup>48</sup> The popularity of the hasidic stories concerning Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev and other hasidic rebbes who publicly took God to task for seemingly abandoning the people bespeak the importance of challenging God from within tradition.

it articulates a most terrible scenario, one parallel to the event that led Elisha ben Abuya to become Aher, the apostate.

He further spake before Him: 'Sovereign of the Universe, Thou hast written in Thy Torah, Whether it be a cow or ewe, ye shall not kill it and its young both in one day (Lev. 22:28); but have they not killed many, many mothers and sons, and Thou art silent!'

By stating the issue and immediately following it with Rachel's challenge and God's response, this transformational nehemta utterly rejects the dangerous conclusion "Leit din v'leit dayan." *Hebrew!*

In the Book of Lamentations as well as in this text, recovery from the catastrophe occurs at the point of complete despair. In the Book of Lamentations, the speaker feels a deep sense of isolation from God. The desire to break out of this aloneness and communicate with God becomes increasingly intense. Recovery takes place in two stages. First the speaker recalls that since God is the source of all--both bad and good--and that since one of the divine attributes is mercy, that at some point, the suffering must end. The speaker begins to believe that good must come eventually. Second, the listener recalls that God is just and that divine punishment is never capricious.<sup>49</sup>

"In opposition to the palpable realities of his situation, the sufferer imagines a different sort of beginning. The propositions he adduces about God's nature unfold a process that is cognitive in essence; it is based not on what is experienced to be true--that is persecution and alienation ... but on what is known to be true and can be reasoned to be true."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Mintz, pp. 34-35.

<sup>50</sup> Mintz, p.35.



Once this occurs, God no longer seems cruel. Events make sense. A breakthrough has occurred.<sup>51)</sup>

In the twenty-fourth proem of Lamentations Rabbah, it is God who goes through a process of recovery. Mintz explains that it is by virtue of the words of the Patriarchs, of Moses, and especially of Rachel that "God is urged to emerge from His own grief and turn to the misery of His children, to pass from being a rapt object of pathos to becoming a source of pathos to His creatures."<sup>52</sup>

Through this text the listeners too are invited to go through the process of recovery: recovery from grief and recovery of vision.<sup>53</sup> It would seem that the listener not only relates to the pained experiences of the human participants in this transformational nehemta but to God's experience of the Destruction. As God moves from the disoriented and grief-stricken parent to the One who could promise ultimate redemption (and thus offer hope and consolation), the listener too moves from disconsolate mourning toward the hope of ultimate redemption. As Roskies has written:

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<sup>51</sup> Mintz, p. 36.

<sup>52</sup> Mintz, p. 62.

<sup>53</sup> Tolkien, p. 77, has written that an essential aspect of fairy stories is "Recovery." Recovery, to Tolkien, signifies "a regaining of a clear view...seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them..." One of the critical elements of the transformational nehemta is that it offers a new perspective on the situation which is causing a crisis in the life of the listener.

Through this brilliant sermon, the congregants were reminded of their inexorable bond to the Torah, each letter of which carried the full weight of tradition. They were put back into a more benign universe where the past reverberated, the written word literally came alive, and the harsh sentence of history promised to come to an end.<sup>54</sup>

### Imagery Versus Reality

While the Rabbis used metaphor to change the listener's perspective on a catastrophic event, they also exploited the existence of metaphors in the biblical text by stressing the "saving difference" between literary imagery and actual reality. We find midrashim that explain that many of the descriptions found in Lamentations are figures of speech that cannot be taken literally.<sup>55</sup>

God behaves like an enemy but He in his essence, argues the midrash, is not an enemy. What is true of the victimizer can also be true of the victim. "She that was great among the nations/ Is become like a widow" (1:1) Like a widow, yes, but a widow in fact, no. "She is like a woman," asserts the midrash, "whose husband went to a distant country but with the intention of returning to her" ...This maneuver resembles the conception of figurative language given in Lamentations 2:13 ("What can I... liken to you, O Fair Jerusalem?"), in which the function of metaphor is to defuse and thus mitigate the horror.<sup>56</sup>

This technique was used by the Rabbis to soften the harshness and extremity of the Destruction, thus bringing the event back into the bounds of the covenantal paradigm.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Roskies, p. 34. Underlining mine.

<sup>55</sup> Mintz, p. 71.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

### Delininations of What is Lost and Celebration of What Remains

We find transformational nehemtot which seek to demonstrate that as real and terrible as the Destruction was, it was limited. It was real but not complete. In this way, the Rabbis convince the listener that the Destruction (or other catastrophic event) did not shatter the provisions of the covenant.<sup>58</sup>

העמידה על נחליה ריקה. 63 אמר רבי אלעזר אלו נאמר שבורה לא היה לה חקנה לעולם. וכשנאמר אמר ריקה כל כלי שירא ריקן סופו להתמלאות.

59

In this midrash from Lamentations Rabbah, the cauldron represents the covenant. The listener suddenly realizes what a profound difference there is between an empty vessel and one that is shattered. Were we to believe that the covenant itself had been broken, that all the ties between God and Israel had been nullified, then we would be forced to admit that the situation after the Destruction was hopeless.<sup>60</sup> But, explains this midrash, the structure of the vessel remains intact. That which is empty now, can in time be filled. While the loss is terrible, it is not total. Emptiness can be remedied. This is another transformational nehemta which gives the listener reason to

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<sup>58</sup> Mintz, p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> ערכה רבה, פתחתא ת, דף 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

believe that the Destruction is an episode in the covenantal history between God and Israel, not the end.<sup>61</sup>

We find similar texts in both Lamentations Rabbah and Pesikta de-Rav Kahana with respect to prayer. Lamentations 3:44 says, Thou hast covered Thyself with a cloud, so that no prayer can pass through. One must ask: if human prayer can no longer reach God, what can possibly be done now that the Temple has been destroyed? The Rabbis offer the following transformational nehemtot:

סכתה באף ותרדפנו ורדת ולא חסלת סכותה בענן לך. ר' חלבו שאל את ר' שמואל בר נחמן אמר לו ספני  
ששבעתי עליך שאמרת בעל אגדה סוף דין דכתיב סכותה בענן לך, מעבוד תפלה. אמר לו נמשלה תפלה כמקד  
ונמשלה תשובה כים. (כו) מה מקד זה פקדים פתוחה פקדים נעולה. כך (א) שער תפלה פקדים נעולים פקדים  
פתוחין. אבל הים הזה לעולם פתוח כך שער תשובה לעולם פתוחין. אמר רב ענן אף שער תפלה אינו ננעלים  
לעולם. והרד (דברים ד') כה' אלהינו בכל קראנו אליו. ואין קריאה אלא תפלה. שנא' (ישעיה ס"ב) וזה סוף  
יקרא ואני אענה.

62

Again the Rabbis admit that there has been a real loss. At times it seems that our prayers can no longer reach God. They then immediately help the listener understand that the loss is not total. Once a connection is made between the apparent distance of God and Israel's sin, the Rabbis can remind the listeners of the efficacy of repentance. The gates of prayer may at times be shut, but the possibility of return is constant. The emphasis in

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> אבות דרבי נתן, דף 53. cf. similar text in Pesikta de Rav Kahana, 24:2.

these texts is on "what need not be taken away by the catastrophe."<sup>63</sup>

Mintz has stated: "the Rabbis show themselves not only willing to stipulate the loss of what is truly lost but also actually to celebrate the creative durability of what remains."<sup>64</sup> The transformational nehemta below begins with a vivid description of loss combined with a shift in focus which brilliantly highlights the significance of that which remains.<sup>65</sup> The midrash takes as its starting point the beginning of Psalm 79. The author of this text asks how the superscription A Psalm (mizmor) of Assaph can immediately be followed by the verse Lord! The heathen have invaded Your inheritance. (Ps. 79:1) How can a dirge concerning the destruction of the Temple be called a psalm?

(תהלים ע"ט) מזמור לאסף אלהים באו גוים בנהלתו. לא היה קרא צדק למישר אלא בני לאסף נח לאסף קנה לאסף. ומה אמר (כב) מזמור לאסף. אלא משל למלך שקשה בית חופה לבנו וסידרה וניירה וציירה ורצא בנו לתרבות רעה. מיד עלה המלך לחופה וקדק את הילאות ושיבר את הקנים ונמל פרענו שלו איבוב של קנים וזה מזמור. אמרו לו המלך הפך חופתו של בנו ואת יושב ומזמר. אמר להם מזמור אני שרפך חופתו של בנו ולא שפך חסותו על בנו. כך אמרו לאסף הקב"ה הדיב היכל ומקדש ואותה יושב ומזמר. אמר להם מזמור אני ששפך הקב"ה חסותו על העצים ועל האבנים ולא שפך חסותו על ישראל. הריא הוא דכתיב רצת אש בציון ותאכל יסודותיה:

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63 Mintz, p. 72.

64 Mintz, p. 73. Underlining mine.

65 Ibid.

66 מכתב רבנא, ר"ד, דף 56.



The person listening to this midrash, like the king, wonders how there can be any song--any hope--after the fall of the Temple. Having heard this parable, the listener suddenly realizes that what was destroyed was a sacred place, not God's chosen people. This transformational nehemta has acknowledged real loss and then focuses on an aspect of the event which had not seemed relevant before. The distinction made by this story of hope between the Temple and the people is critical.<sup>67</sup>

The son's tutor plays the same role after the destruction of the Temple as the Rabbis do. It is he who makes meaning out of the events which have just taken place, as Mintz has explained:

their creative scriptural exegesis is the tutor's song; the necessity and propriety of their intervention in the lamentation literature corresponds to the situation of the tutor among the ruins. The Rabbis pipe a tune of reassurance because not to do so would be to concede the finality of the Destruction, and like the tutor, they can continue to play because they alone can comprehend the full story, which the principals, the king and the son, by definition, cannot. The full story is the world of Scripture in its entirety, the vast but finite expanse of the divine word in which Lamentations is only one station; within this closed epic world, the Rabbis can potentially rescue any individual element by making it resonate with other elements.<sup>68</sup>

#### Through the Lenses of Scripture and History

Close to the end of Lamentations Rabbah we find a transformational nehemta based on Lamentations 5:18. This midrash suggests to the listener that the grief experienced after

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Mintz, pp. 73-74.

the Temple's destruction becomes unbearable only when understood in isolation. By taking into account the entire sweep of history and corpus of Scripture one discovers reason for hope.

על דר ציון ששם (כת) (ג) וכבר היה רבן גמליאל ור"א בן עזריה ור"ע יודיע ור"ע נבטמן לרובי ושמוע קל הסנה של רובי ספולילוס עד מאה ועשרים סל. והתולו הם בוכים ור"ע משחק. אמר עקיבא אנו בוכים ואמה משחק. אמר להם ואמה למה בכיתם אמרו לו לא נבנה שתיים עובדים עבודת כוכבים להוון משתחיים לעצביתון ורשכין במח ושגנן ושלות. ובית הדום רגלי אלוהינו היה לשירית אש וסרוד לחדת השדה ולא נבנה. אמר להם לכך אני משחק. אם כן למכעיסו ק"ו תעשי רצונ. פעם אחת היו עולין לירושלים תיעו לצופים וקיעו בגרמם תיעו להר הברית וראו שעל אחד יצא מבית קדש הקדשים והתולו הם בוכים ור"ע עקיבא משחק. אמרו לו עקיבא לעולם אתה מתמה עליו אנו בוכים ואמה משחק. אמר להם אתם למה אתם בוכים אמרו לו ולא נבנה מקום שכתוב בו (במדבר ח') והור הקרב יספת ודרי שעל יצא מתוכו ועליו נתקיים הפסוק על דר ציון ששם שעלים חלכו בן. אמר להם אף אני לכך אני משחק דרי הוא אמר (צ"ח) ואעידה לי קדים נאמנים את אוריה הבקן ואת זכריה בן יברכיה וכי מה ענין אוריה אצל זכריה במקדש ראשון חזריה במקדש שני. אלא מה אמר אוריה (ירמיה) (א) כה אמר ה' צבאות ציון שרה תודש וירושלים עייס תחת. ומה אמר זכריה (זכריה ח') עוד ישבו וקנים חקנות ברחובת ירושלים ואיש משקענו בידו סבכ יסם וכתיב בתריה (שם) ורחבות העיר ילאו ילדים וילדות משחקים ברחבתיה. אמר הקב"ה דרי לי שני קדים אלו ואם קיסם דברי אוריה יהו קיסם דברי זכריה ואם יבמלו דברי אוריה יבמלו דברי זכריה. ושמותי שנתקיסו דברי אוריה ולבסוף דברי זכריה עתידין להתקיים. ובלשון הזה אמרו לו עקיבא נחמנו תתנחם ברנלי מבשר:

2:15:16

כ"ח  
כ"ח

69

For the Rabbis, the horror of recent historical events- epitomized by the fox they see making its home where the Holy of Holies once stood-is cause for despair. History has made real the words found at the end of Lamentations. Akiva, viewing the scene, laughs with joy. If Uriah's terrible vision has come to pass, Akiva can rejoice in expectation that Zechariah's vision will also come to pass.<sup>70</sup>

69 אבות רבות תחת דף 61.

70 Mintz, pp. 76-77.

The difference between Akiva and the Rabbis lies in the fact that they see a part and he sees the whole, and, further, that he believes in the power of his hermeneutical instruments to manipulate the elements of the whole. To see the whole is to see in Scripture the full dialectical sequence of sin, punishment, and restoration, rather than one moment in the dialectic; it is to understand that for the vision of Zechariah to come true, the dire prophecies of Uriah, must of necessity come true as well.... For the reader or listener, the story of Akiva's comforting of his colleagues is charged with dramatic irony because of what we know about Akiva's life. In opposition to the majority of his contemporaries, Akiva gave legitimacy to the rebellion against Rome by proclaiming Bar Kochba the messiah. For this support he was martyred by the Romans; his flesh was torn with iron combs. History hardly fulfilled the Rabbis' wish that Akiva be consoled by the coming of the redemption. The point of the story is just that: the immediacies of history are the wrong place to look for a source of true consolation. Though history is not illusory, it still cannot be understood on its own terms. The meaning of history is guaranteed by Scripture...<sup>71</sup>

#### From Victim to Decisive Participant in Redemptive History

As noted in the introduction, the role of the transformational nehemta is not to pacify but to rebuild shattered paradigms of meaning. Through these nehemtot, the listeners find reason to believe that the covenant between God and themselves still stands. This being so, it is possible for Israel to challenge God. How could God have allowed so many Jews to be slaughtered and to lie unburied when even an animal that is killed must have its blood covered by the earth? How, as Moses asked, could God have allowed both children and parents to be put to death on the same day when in the Torah teaches, "No animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

day with its young" (Lev. 22:28)?<sup>72</sup> The fact that the people could rail against God, making covenantal claims on God, testifies to the degree to which the Rabbis succeeded in rescuing the covenantal paradigm.

One of the most powerful transformational nehemtot in rabbinical literature is based on Lamentations 3:21. In the Book of Lamentations this is the part at which the speaker begins to move from despair to hope. The speaker says, This I recall to mind, therefore I have hope. Since it is unclear what the speaker has called to mind, the Rabbis are free to "clarify" the text with the following transformational nehemta:

וְזֶה אֲשֶׁר אֵל לִבִּי עַל כֵּן אֶהְדֵּל (א) ר' אבא בר כהנא בשם ר' יוחנן אמר משל, למדך לסלך ששנא מסרונה  
 וכתב לה כתובה סדורה ואמר לה כך (ב) הוצת אני עושה לך. כך וכך ארעונות מוכות אני נתן לך. נקחת  
 הסלך והלך לו למדינת הים ואיך לשם. נכנסו שכנותיה אצלה (מו) והיו מקנימות אותה ואומרות לה הניחך הסלך  
 והלך לו למדינת הים ושוב אינו חוזר עליך והיתה בוכה ומתאנחת. וכיון שנכנסה לתוך ביתה פותחת ומציאה  
 כתובתה וקראת ורואה בכתובתה כך וכך הוצת אני עושה כך וכך ארעונות מוכות אני נתן לך. מיד היתה  
 מתנחמת. ליסים בא הסלך אמר לה בתי אני תמה אך הסתנת לי כל אותן השנים. אמרה לו אדוני הסלך  
 אלמלא כתובה סדורה שכתבת ונתת לי כבר אברוני שכנותי. כך עוברי כוכבים מניין את ישראל ואומרים להם  
 אלהיכם הסתיר פניו מכם ופילק שכינתו מכם. עוד אינו חוזר עליכם. והן בוכין ומתאנחין. וכיון שנכנסו לבתי  
 (ג) כנסו ולבתי מדרשות וקורין בתורה ומצאין שכתוב (דקרא כ"ו) ופגיתי אליכם והפירתי אתכם ונתתי משכני  
 בתוככם והתהלכתי בתוכם והן מתנחמין. לסלך בשיבא קץ הגאולה אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל בני אני תמה מכם  
 הלא הסתנעם לי כל אותן השנים והן אומרים לפני רבש"ע אלולי תורתך שנתת לנו כבר אברנו האומות. לכך  
 נאמר זאת אשר אל לבי. ואין זאת אלא תורה שנא' (דברים ר') זאת תורה. וכן דוד אמר (תהלים ק"ט)  
 לולי תורתך שעשיתי אז אברתי (מו) בעניי. על כן אהדיל לו וסחרים שבו שתי פעמים ביום ואומרים (דברים ו')  
 שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד:

<sup>72</sup> Mintz, pp. 77-78.

<sup>75</sup> אבות דרבנן נח דף 51.

cf. parallel text in Pesikta Rabbati, 21.15.

This text, unlike many others, does not speak of a wife or sons who have been punished due to the anger of the king. The painful starting point of this transformational nehemta is the fact that the king has apparently abandoned his wife. Her pain is exacerbated by the fact that his absence is unexplained and its length is unknown. The wife's neighbors interpret the husband's absence as desertion and both mock her and invite her to marry someone else. She suffers because what her neighbors suggest cannot be refuted. Her husband is gone and she doesn't know why.<sup>74</sup> Ultimately she finds consolation by rereading her ketubah.<sup>75</sup> We learn how extraordinary her steadfastness is from the reaction of her husband: "My daughter, I wonder how you waited for me all these years!" We learn that the place to look for consolation is the ketubah, which we learn from the nimshal is the Torah.

74 The pain of not knowing the reason for one's suffering and the relief that comes from finding the cause is evident in the following midrash:

כבר היה רבי ישמעאל ורבי שמעון יוצאין ליהרג, אמר לו רבי שמעון לרבי ישמעאל, רבי, לבי יצא שאני יודע  
 על מה אני נהרג, אמר לו רבי ישמעאל לרבי שמעון, מיסוד לא בא אדם אצלך לדין או לשאלה ועכברו עד  
 שתתא נוסע, כיס או עד שתתא נעל סנדלך או עד שתתא עומק מליחך ואמרה תידה אם ענה תענה, אחרי עני  
 מרובה ואחרי עני מועט, ובדבר הזה אמר לו, נחמתי רבי:

כילתא דרבי ישמעאל, סוכת משפטים יח, דף 313.

These two men were among the ten martyrs put to death during the Hadrianic persecutions. R. Simeon's concern was what he had done that God was allowing him to suffer martyrdom. God's involvement and justice were preserved by R. Ishmael's answer, and thus he was comforted. (The Sages, p. 442)

75 Mintz, pp. 82-83.



One can assume that the listeners, having experienced God's seeming desertion and familiar with the taunts of the nations, empathized with the woman. The suggestion the text is making is clear: if Israel refuses to listen to either the taunts or invitations of the neighboring nations and instead turns to the ketubah given to them by God with love, the Torah, they will find the strength to remain faithful to the covenant. God, who will return, will rejoice in their steadfastness.

The text chosen by the Rabbis is significant because it is one of the two places in the Torah which formally lays out the terms of the covenant. These verses speak of Israel's reward for their faithfulness to the covenant, and indicate that Israel is loyal to the laws of the Torah.<sup>76</sup> While the reward in the biblical text will occur within historical time, the Rabbis suggest that redemption will occur outside the bounds of history.<sup>77</sup> As Mintz explains:

With the words, "In the future when the redemption comes," the time frame of the nimshal suddenly switches from history to the eschaton, a jump that was not made in the mashal proper. The move is one of great importance. It indicates that there is no escape from Israel's bereft condition as long as history lasts. During that time, in the absence of God and His Shekhinah, Israel will subsist without direction, tormented all the while by the mockery of the Nations, who will be forever offering the protection of their leaders and gods. God the King will indeed return to His people, but not within history. In the long meantime that stretches between the present and the Redemption, Israel is not entirely alone. If they lack God, they

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<sup>76</sup> Mintz, p. 83.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

possess His word, the document, the text which, if read with imagination and faith, can be their solace.<sup>78</sup>

This rather sober nehemta has a ring of truth to it. The text does not propose any quick or easy solutions to the problems Israel faces. Israel's situation may remain painful for a long time. The reason for God's absence may remain unknown throughout Israel's long period of waiting, but this text promises that the absence will not be interminable. It does not signify rejection. This transformational nehemta suggests that holding fast to the Torah is the way that leads to redemption. It implies that this response is, in a sense, heroic. Most importantly, this transformational nehemta reminds the listeners that they need not be helpless victims. They have a choice. They have the ability to hold on until the King's return. With the help of the Torah, this is within their power.

The transformational nehemtut examined thus far were written primarily in response to destructive events that effected the entire people. These crises threatened Israel's beliefs and assumptions concerning its destiny. In response, the Rabbis described the events as experienced by their listeners and then reconstructed critical paradigms of meaning.<sup>79</sup> These transformational nehemtut held out several promises: current times of suffering are not without meaning and will not last forever; the covenantal relationship between God and Israel has

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Mintz, p.2.

למה לנצח תשכחנו. אך יהושע בר אבין (ר) ארכיקה דברים אמר ידמה מאיסה ונעילה עדינה ושכחת. מאיסה ונעילה דכתיב (ידמה יד) המאוס מאיסה את יהודה אם כציון נעלה נפשו והושב על ידי משה דכתיב (ויקרא כ"ז) לא מאיסים ולא נעלים. עדינה ושכחת. דכתיב למה לנצח תשכחנו לקובנו לאורך ימים. (כו) והושב על יד ישיעה דכתיב (ישיעה ס"ט) גם אלה תשכחנו ואנכי לא אשכח....

השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה. (א) אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע שלך הוא השיבנו. אמר להם שלכם הוא שנאמר (זכריה ב') שובו אלי ואשובה אליכם נאם ה'. אמרה לפני רבש"ע (כה) שלך הוא שנא' (תהלים פ"ה) שובנו אלהי ישענו לכה נאמר השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה. חרש ימינו כקדם....

כי אם מאוס מאיסתו קצפת עלינו עד מאוד. (ג) אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש אם (לא) מאיסה היא לית סבר. ואם קצפתה היא אית סבר. רכל מאן רבקים סופיה לאיתרביא:

80

### Consolation for the Individual

We also find transformational nehemtot which respond to crises suffered by individuals.<sup>81</sup> Among the people of Israel there have been many who have felt broken by events in their lives. The Rabbis went to great lengths to assure their listeners that brokenness does not signify God's rejection.<sup>82</sup>

80 אבת רבה, ה"ב-כב, 61-62. 80

81 See: מבילתא דרבי יוחנן, מסכת דמסא, יד, ק"ה 51

וכה"א ויהי בעצם היום הזה יצאו כל צבאות יי' אלו מלאכי השבת וכן אתה סוצא כל זמן שישאל משועבדין כביכול שכינה משועבדת עמיהם שג' וידאו את אלו ישראל וחתו רגליו כמעשה לבנת הספיר (שמות כ"ד). וכשנגאלו מה הוא אמר ובעצם השמים לסודר ונאמר בכל צרתם לו צד (ישיעה ס"ט). אין לי אלא צרת ציבור צרת יחיד מנין ת"ל יקראני ואענה עמו אנכי בצרה (תלים צ"א סו). ואומר ויקח ארני יוסף אותו, ואומר ויהי יי' את יוסף (בראשית ל"ב-כ"א).

82 Rabbi Akiva, who formulated the watchword "suffering is precious," held that there was an inherent good in suffering. That which appears from the perspective of the individual to be punishment or the consequence of divine neglect has been done, according to Akiva, for the benefit of the individual. (The Sages, pp. 416, 454, 455.)

there have been many who have felt broken by events in their lives. The Rabbis went to great lengths to assure their listeners that brokenness does not signify God's rejection.<sup>82</sup>

ובר אלהים רח נשברה לב נשבר וג' (תהלים נא:ט)....

א"ר אבא בר יודן מה שפסל כנרמה הכשר באדם, כנרמה פסל עוונת או שבור או חרוץ או יבלת (ויקרא כב:כב), הכשר באדם, לב נשבר ונרכא וג' (תהלים נא:ט). א"ר אלכסנדר רהריום אם משתמש הוא בכלי שבור גיי הוא לו, אבל הק' אינו כן, כל שימוש כלים שבורים, קרוב יי' לנשבר לב (תהלים לד:ט), הרופא לשבור לב (שם קצו:ג), לב נשבר ונרכא אלהים לא תבוז וג' (שם נא:ט). לפיכך הישק מוהר אהרן ישר' וא' להם שבה ישראל (יהושע יד:ב).

83

Chastisements of love (יסורין *se* אהבה) was another Rabbinic concept used to explain suffering. Suffering that was not due to iniquity was explained as a sign of God's love. Through this radical reinterpretation, suffering could be made bearable.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Rabbi Akiva, who formulated the watchword "suffering is precious," held that there was an inherent good in suffering. That which appears from the perspective of the individual to be punishment or the consequence of divine neglect has been done, according to Akiva, for the benefit of the individual. (*The Sages*, pp. 416, 454, 455.)

<sup>83</sup> *פסיקתא דרב כהנא* כהנא, 352-354.

cf. *Midrash Gadol* on Gen. 38:1.

<sup>84</sup> *The Sages*, p. 446.

These explanations also served to justify God. As mentioned above, it was absolutely necessary for the Rabbis to rescue the belief in both divine justice and faithfulness. Thus we find texts like the following: (from *The Sages*, 515-516)

When a child died in the house of R. Abbahu, R. Jonah and R. Yassa came to comfort him and they asked him to tell them a Torah teaching. On the basis of the Mishna ruling that after the burial of those who were executed by the court. 'The relatives come to greet the witnesses and the judges, as though to say: Know that we bear you no grudge for you have delivered a true judgement', R. Abbahu said to them: 'If now in the case of the earthly judiciary, in which

אמר רבא ואיתימא רב חסדא אם רואה אדם שיסדיו באין עליו יפספס במעשיו שנאמר נחפשה דרכיו ונחקרה  
 "ונשבה עד ה'" פספס ולא מצא יתלה בבטול תורה שני' אשרי הנבר אשר תיסרטו יח וסתודתו תלמדנו ואם תלה  
 ולא מצא בידוע שיסדיו של אהבה הם שנאמר כי את אשר יאהב ה' יזכיר.

85

We also find the origins of the concept of martyrdom as the sanctification of God's name ( קדוש השם ) in rabbinic literature. This belief maintains that by publicly refusing to abandon the commandments, one "adds slowly to the area and substance of the kingdom of God and to the stature of God."<sup>86</sup>

על דעת רבנן עברו ישראל עבודת כוכבים בימי נבוכדנצר. על דעת ר' שמעון בן יוחאי לא עברו ישראל עבודת  
 כוכבים בימי נבוכדנצר. על דעת רבנן עברו ישראל עבודת כוכבים כיצד. נבוכדנצר העמיד צלם והפריש (1)  
 עשרים ושלושה סבל ואומה. ועשרים ושלושה סבל ישראל. על דעת ר' שמעון לא עברו ישראל עבודת  
 כוכבים הא כיצד. נבוכדנצר העמיד צלם והפריש סבל (2) ואומה ואומה שלשה שלשה. ושלושה סבל ישראל.  
 והנגיה מישאל ועזריה שהיו השלושה מישראל עמדו וסידו על עצמן ולא עברו עבודת כוכבים. הלכו להם אצל  
 דניאל. אמר לו רבינו דניאל. נבוכדנצר העמיד צלם והפריש סבל ואומה ואומה שלשה שלשה ולנו הפריש סבל  
 ישראל מה אתה אומר לנו נמנע ליה או לא. (ח) אמר להם הנה הנביא לפניכם לנו אצלנו. הלכו להם סיד אצל

are to be found falsehood, lying, deception, partiality, and bribery, and they are here today and gone tomorrow, it is ordained: The relatives come and greet the judges and the witnesses, as though to say: We bear you no grudge, for you have delivered a true judgement, then how much more, in the case of the Heavenly Judiciary, where there is to be found neither falsehood, nor lying, nor deception, nor partiality, nor bribery, and He lives unto all eternity, are we duty bound to accept the judgement meted out....

T.P. Sanhedrin vi 12

85 ברכות ה.

86 Slonimsky, p. 251.



יחזקאל. אמרו לו כמו שאמר לרניאל (ט) נסעו ליה או לא. אמר להם כבר מקובל אני מיעשה רבי (יעשה כ"ו) חבי כמעט רנע עד יעבור ועם. אמרו ליה מה את בעי ריהן אמרין הרין צלמא סגין ליה כל אמיא. אמר לון ומה איתון אמרין. אמרו ליה אנן בעינן נתון ביה פנא רניאד תמן ולא נסעו ליה. בנין ריהן אמרין הרין צלמא כל אמיא סגין ליה לבר מיראל. אמר להם אם כדעתבם הסתיו לי עד שאסלך בגבורה והרד (יחזקאל כ') באו אנשים מזקי ישראל ולדרוש את ה' וישבו לפני. ופי' היו אלו תגיה מיראל ועזריה. אמר לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע תגיה מיראל ועזריה מבקשים ליתן נפשו על קדושת שמי. מתקים את עליהן או לא. אמר לו אני מתקים עליהם והרד (שם) בן אדם רבר את זקי ישראל ואמרת אליהם ופי' ולדרוש אתי אתם באים. מאד שגרתם לי להתריב בתי ולשרוף היכלי ולהגלות בני לבין האומות ואחד כך אתם באים לדרשני. (שם) ה' אני אם אדרש לכם. באותה שעה בבה יחזקאל וקנן ודילל בעצמו ואמר ופי' לשונא ישראל אברה שארית יחדת. שלא נשתייר מיהודה אלא אלו בלבד שנא' (רניאל א') ויהי ברם מבני יהודה רניאל תגיה מיראל ועזריה וזו תשובה באה להם והיא בני ואיל. כיון דאיתא אמרו ליה מה אמר לך הקב"ה. אמר להם איט מתקים עליהם. (י) אמרו לו בין מתקים בין שאין מתקים אנו נותנין נפשותינן על קדושת שמי. תרע לך שרוא כן. שער שלא באו אצל יחזקאל מה אמרו לו לנבוכדנצר (ג') לא חשדון אנתא על דנה פתגם להתבותר הן איתי אלהנא די אנתא פלחין יכל לשוברתנא. לאדרי שבאו אל יחזקאל ושמעו התשובה אמרו לנבוכדנצר (שם) והן לא ידע ליהוא לך סלכא. בין מציל בין לא מציל ידע ליהוא לך סלכא די לאלהד לא איתנא פלחין ולצלם דהבא די הקיסר לא נסגר. מן דנפקין מן נביה ריחזקאל נגלה הקב"ה ואמר לו יחזקאל מה את סבור שאני מתקים עליהם מתקים אני עליהם בורא יהרד (יחזקאל ל"ו) כה אמר ה' אלהים עוד זאת אדרש לבית ישראל. אלא שביק לתון ולא תיסר לתון מיד. אשבוך לתון סלכין על תוספ יהרד (משלי י') הולך בתום ילך בטח ופי'. מה עשו (יא) הלכו ופוזרו עצמן בין האוכלוסין והיון אמרין והן לא מציל ידע ליהוא לך. הוא הוא רבריתא משתבעין ואמרין במאן ראקים עלמא על תלתא עמודים. אית ראמי אברום יצחק ויעקב אינד (יב) ואית ראמרין אלו הן תגיה מיראל ועזריה.

87

The central desire of these three martyrs is to discredit idolatry and bring credit to Israel and the God of Israel. While the listeners know that God will stand by them, at the time that Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah act in defiance of Nebuchadnezzar, they do not. There is a powerful message to the listener implicit in this fact. The listener realizes that in their lives, they too must live without the sure knowledge that

God is standing by them during their times of trial. This text holds out the promise that if they could see things from God's perspective, they would know that their suffering has meaning, and that God stands by them at these times.

לאהבתי ולשמוע מצותי. לאהבתי, זה אברהם אבינו ונחמא בן; ולשמוע מצותי, אלו הנביאים והזקנים. רבי נתן אומר, לאהבתי ולשמוע במצותי, אלו ישראל שהם יושבין בארץ ישראל ונתנין נפשם על המצות. מה לך יצא לידרג, על שמעתי את בני, מה לך יצא לישף, על שקראתי בתעודת, מה לך יצא ליצלב, על שאכלתי המצות, מה לך לוקה מאפרגל, על שגמלתי את הלולב; ואומר אשר הוכיח בית מאהבי, סבת אלו נטו לי ליאהב ואבי שבשמים.

88

The individual listening to such texts ceases to see him or herself as a helpless victim. It suddenly becomes apparent that it is within the power of the listener to make God's sanctity more (or less) manifest in this world.

In the texts concerning R. Akiva's response to the fox on the Temple Mount and in the text concerning the absent king who gave his wife a ketubah, we find the concept that redemption will take place beyond the bounds of history. Many nehemtot about the coming of the messiah and what will occur in the end of days (הקף) help the listener struggle through the difficult times he or she lives in.<sup>89</sup> There is a natural desire on the

88 מכלתא דרבי יסמאל, סכתא רבנא, דף 227.

89 Urbach has explained that the terms "End," "end of days," "world to come," "days of the Messiah," "future to come," "resurrection," and "new world," all are close to the idea of redemption but are not necessarily identical to it or to each other. Their development is based on different historical phenomena. (*The Sages* pp. 649-650) He suggests that the "existence, on the one hand, of separate terms, and their fusion, on the other, into a single term through semantic blurring, show

part of the listener to know when the Messiah will arrive. A number of texts make the point that knowing the date of the end is not necessary.

אֲרִי חַיָּא בִּר אַבָּא אֲרִי יְהוֹנָן כֵּן תַּחֲלַת מַסְפָּכָה מַחֲלָה לֵב וְעַץ חַיִּים תֵּאֵדָה בָּאָה (מְשַׁלִּי יִגְיֵב), בּוֹסוּ שְׂמָדָם  
 מַצָּה לְרֹבֵר וְאֵין עוֹשִׁין לוֹ צִדְקָתָא יְהֵא עֲצֵב לְבוֹ, וּבּוֹסוּן שְׂעוּרִי לוֹ צִדְקָתָא רּוֹמָה כְּמִי שְׂנֵתָנוּ לוֹ חַיִּים, כִּי כֹנֶסֶת יִשְׁ  
 אֹמֶרֶת, רַבִּי הַעֲוֹלָם כֵּן תַּחֲלַת שְׂבָעוֹלָם יְהֵא לֵה קִצְבָּא וְתַחֲלַת מִשְׁחָ אֵין לֵה קִצְבָּא, אִם לֵה הִבֵּיָה בָּא  
 וְאַנְתְּרָ, שֶׁנִּי כִי נָטַם יִי צִדְקָתָא כֵּן חֲדָתָהּ (יִשְׁעִיהָ נִגְנֵב), וְסָה אֲרִי לֵה, קִסְפִּי אֲרִי כִי בָּא אֲרִי וְכִבּוֹד יִי  
 קִלְדִּי וְחָה (שֶׁסֶּה מֵא), וְהוּא אֹמֶרֶת לוֹ, רַבָּן הַעֲוֹלָם קִיָּם אֵתָה בְּרָאשִׁית וְאַנְתְּנוּ אֲרִי, בְּאֵתָהּ שְׁעָה יָקָם הִבֵּיָה  
 שֶׁנִּי עֵתָה אִקְסָם יִאֵם יִי עֵתָה אִרְוֹסָם עֵתָה אֲנִשָּׁא (שֶׁסֶּה לִּנִּי), וְאֲרִי עֵתָה אִקְסָם יִאֵם יִי אֵשֶׁת בִּישָׁע יִפִּיָּה לוֹ  
 (תַּהֲלִים יִבִּי), וְכִסָּה עֵתִיד הִבֵּיָה לְנַחֲמָה, בְּקִבּוּךְ בְּנִיָּה לְתוֹכָהּ בְּשִׁמְחָה, שֶׁנִּי שָׂא מְכִיב עֵינֵיךְ וְרָאִי כּוֹלָם נִתְקַבְּצוּ  
 בָּאָה לִךְ וְנִי (יִשְׁעִיהָ מִסִּיחִ), לִכְךָ נָאִם חֹזֶק רִאשֹׁן לְבַבְכֶּם (תַּהֲלִים לֵאמֹר).

90

Messianic texts, like other transformational nehemtot stress the concept that suffering does not indicate God's rejection or the abandonment of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Some of these texts suggest that times are terrible because they are part of the birth pangs of the messiah

( חֲבָלֵי מָוֶת ).

אֲרִי חַיָּא בִּר אַבָּא סָסֵךְ לִיסָהּ הַמְשִׁיחָ רַבִּי גִדְּלָה בָּא וְהִשְׁעִים כֵּלִים בּוֹ, וְהַנְּפִיָּם סָסֵדֵי נָתַן רִיחַ (שֶׁסֶּה), אֵילוֹ  
 הַנְּשָׂאִים, וְהִיא הַנְּשָׂאִי בְּצִדְקָתָא בִּיהִשְׁלָם קִדְשָׁ וְנִי (יִשְׁעִיהָ רִיחִי), וְכִבְּנִי אֲסִיָּן שְׂבָעָ שְׁבָן רִיחִי בָּא בּוֹ, הַשְׁנָה  
 רִאשֹׁנָה, וְהַמְּסִרָתִי עַל עֵיד אֵתָה וְנִי (עִסָּסֵי רִיחִי), בְּשָׁנִיָּה, וְהִיא רַעֲבָ מִשְׁחָה, בְּשָׁלִישִׁתָּהּ, רַעֲבָ גִדְּלָה וְסָתִים בָּהּ  
 אֲנִשָּׁם וְנִשָּׁם וְסָף וְהַתּוֹרָה מִשְׁחָהּ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, בְּרִבִּיעִתָּהּ, רַעֲבָ לֵא רַעֲבָ שְׂבָעָ לֵא שְׂבָעָ, בְּחִמְשִׁיתָּהּ, שְׂבָעָ גִדְּלָה  
 וְאַנְתְּנוּ וְסָתִים וְסָסֵדֵי וְהַתּוֹרָה חֲתִרָה לְחִדְשָׁהּ, בְּשִׁשִּׁיתָּהּ קִלּוֹת, וּבְשִׁבְעִיתָּהּ מִלְּחָמָה, בְּמִצְוָה שְׂבִיעִית בִּן רִיחִי  
 בָּא, אֲרִי אֲבִיָּה כְּמִן שְׂבָעִין אֵינֵן כְּתוּרִין לֵא אֵתָה, וְלֵא אֵתִיָּה אֵלֵא כִי דִסִּר רִי יְהוֹנָן, רִיחִי שְׂבָן רִיחִי בָּא בּוֹ  
 תַּלְמִידֵי וְכִסְפִּים סָתִים, וְהַנְּשָׂאִים עֵינֵיהֶם כִּלּוֹת בִּיעוֹן וְאַנְתְּנוּ, וְצִדְקָתָא רַעֲבָה עַל הַצִּיבּוֹר, וְסִדְרָתָא קִשָּׁת

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 מתחשבות, עד השראש' קימת מביא אהדת ונסמכה לה. אר' אבון דוד שבן דוד בא בו, בית וועד יהיה לזנות, ונגליל ידב, והגבלן יום, ואנשי הגליל יסבבו סעוד לעיד ולא יתחננו, אנשי אמת נאמנים והאמת נעדרת והולכת לה. לאיכן היא הולכת לה, רביה ר' יני' אמרין הולכת ויושבת עדרים עדרים במדבר, כמה ראת אמ' וחד האמת נעדרת ו' (שעיה נט:טז). אר' עטודא דוד שבן דוד בא בו, נקרים ילבינו פני וקנים, חקנים עמוד ספני נקרים, בת כמה באמת, כלה בחסותה, איבי איש אנשי ביתו, בן לא יבוש מאביו, וזכמת סופרים חסות, והנפן תתן פריה וזין ביוקר. אר' אבא בר כהנא אין בן דוד בא אלא כדוד שהיה חייב כלית. אר' יני' אין בן דוד בא אלא כדוד שפניו דומין לכלב. אר' לר' אם ראת דוד אדור דוד סדף, צפה לרגליו של מלך המשיח, ומה סעם, אשר חרשו ארביד יי' אשר חרשו עיקבות משיח (תהלים פט:גב), מה כת' בתריה כרוך יי' לעולם אמן ואמן (שם ג).

91

The idea that the messiah will come in the midst of the darkest time gives the listener the strength necessary to make it through difficult times. This text, through Abaye's comment, rejects the notion that humankind can calculate when the messiah will arrive. ("How many such seven-year periods have come and yet the son of David has not come.")<sup>92</sup> It allows the individual to see disastrous events as part of a cycle, as part of the Divine plan which is promised to culminate with the coming of the messiah. Legends of the messiah's ancestry also remind the listener that through the ages, even when Israel endured terrible trials, God planned for his arrival.

ויהי בעת ההוא. רבי שמואל בר נחמן פתח (ירמיה כט) כי אנכי ידעתי את המחשבות. שבמים היו עמוקין המבירות של יוסף. ויוסף היה עמוק בשקן ובתעניתו. ראובן היה עמוק בשקן ובתעניתו. ויעקב היה עמוק בשקן ובתעניתו. ויהודה היה עמוק ליקח לו אשה. והקב"ה היה עמוק ברא אדור של מלך המשיח.

93

<sup>91</sup> מסכתא דרב כהנא כ"ט, 8-97, 91

<sup>92</sup> According to Rav, "All the (calculated) dates of redemption have passed, and the matter now depends upon repentance and good deeds." The Sages, p. 683.

<sup>93</sup> בראשית רבה פ"א, דף 318, 93

Some messianic texts focus on God's desire for the coming of the messiah.

קל צויד נשאר קל ידיו ידנו (שם שמה). ושה חזק ראצן ולבבם כל הסחלי' ליי' (תהלים לא:כה). כנגד  
 מי אמ' דוד מק' זה, לא אמר אלא כנגד יש' שהיה מצפה וסמכות איסתי יחוד לביתו ומשפט בתורתו נאם  
 מב' סמך ומצפה איסתי יחוד לביתו ומשפט את בנה יש'. ואיסתי, כשפרק מאדום הישקה, באותה שעה  
 אמר', יש', רבש'ע היכה צער ציערה אותו וחרס את מקדשנו והנה את חמנו שיעברה אותו אכלה יניענו,  
 ועכשו אני יושבת ומצפה רעבה וצמאה לאותו יום שתבוא ותפרע לי סמנה, שנ' מצאה נפשי לאלהים לאל דוד (שם  
 מב:ג).

94

Due to the Holy One's intense desire for Israel's redemption, God is willing to contract the period of time set before redemption and to disregard Israel's idolatrous deeds and focus on the righteous in their midst.

קל דודי הנה זה בא מרלג על הדרים סקפז על הנבעות (שה' ש ביה). ר' יהוד' דר' נחמ' ורבנין. ר' יודה א'  
 קל דודי הנה זה בא, זה משה. בשעה שבא משה וא' ליש' בחרש הזה אתם נגאלין אמרו לו, רבינו משה, היאך  
 אנו נגאלין, לא כר אמ' הקב"ה לאבינו אברהם ועברום וענו אותם ארבע מאות שנה (בראשית מו:יג), והלא אין  
 בידנו אלא מאתים ועשר. א' להם, והאל והוא תפן בנאולתכם אינו מכים בחובותיכם, אלא מרלג על הדרים  
 סקפז. על הנבעות (הש' ש שם), מרלג על הקיצים ועל חשבונות ועל העיבורים, ובחרש הזה אתם נגאלין. החרש  
 הזה לכם ראש חרשים (שמות יב:ב). דר' נחמיה א' קל דודי הנה זה בא (שה' ש שם), זה משה, בשעה שבא ואמ'  
 ליש' בחרש הזה אתם נגאלים אמרו לו, רבינו משה, היאך אנו נגאלין ואין מצ' מלאה סמנופת ע"ז שלנו. א'  
 להם, והאל והוא תפן בנאולתכם אינו מכים בע"ז שלכם, אלא מרלג על הדרים סקפז על הנבעות. ואין הרים  
 אלא בתי ע"ז, הך מה ראת א' על ראשי הדרים יזבח ועל הנבעות יקטרו (השע ר:ג). ורבנין אמרין קל דודי  
 הנה זה בא שה' ש שם), זה משה, בשעה שבא ואמר ליש' בחרש הזה אתם נגאלין אמרו לו, רבינו משה, היאך  
 אנו נגאלין ואין בידנו מעשים טובים. א' להם, והאל והוא תפן בנאולתכם אינו מכים במעשיכם הרעים, ובס'  
 הוא מכים, בצדיקים שבכם כגון עמרם ובית דין. ואין הרים ונבעות אלא בתי דינין, הך מה ראת אמר אלכנה  
 וירדתי אל הדרים (שופטים יא:לו).

95

פסיקתא דרב כהנא, נספח הג, דף 465. 94

פסיקתא דרב כהנא, הו, דף 88-90. 95



It seems that while God desires Israel's redemption, its time is not completely in God's hands.<sup>96</sup> In part redemption is dependent on Israel's faithfulness or lack thereof. Had Israel seen a shattered vessel and despaired (Lam. Rabbah, proem 5), had Israel, seemingly abandoned by the King and taunted by the nations, decided to forsake the Torah (Lam. Rabbah, 3.7) there would have been no people to redeem.

### The Consequences of Israel's Failure of Vision

The sermon in Pesikta de-Rav Kahana for Rosh Hashanah contains what might be called an "inverse transformational nehemta." It is a stinging reproof of Israel's refusal to be transformed by God's promises. This midrash spells out the consequences of our forefather Jacob's inability to have faith and to take action on that faith. The distance we feel from God, according to this text, is a result of Jacob's lack of faith.

ר' נחמן פתח ואתה אל תירא עבדי יעקב ואל תחת וג' (ירמיה לז). מדבר ביעקב, רבת' ביה ויחלום והנה מלך  
וג' (בראשית כתיב). א"ר שמואל בר' נחמן אילו שר' ארמית העולם, ר' (סוף ר') שמואל בר' נחמן מלמד שיראה  
הקב"ה לאבינו יעקב שיה' של בבל עולה עוקים ויורד, ושל מדי' חסדי' ושנים, ושל זון מאה ושמונים,  
והל' ארדום עלה ולא ידע כמות. באותה שעה נתיירא אבינו יעקב ואס', תאמר שמא לזה אין ירדה, א' לו  
הקב"ה אל תחת ישראל (ירמיה שם), כניכול אפילו את רואה אותו יושב אצלי משם אני מדידה, הרה' רבת' אם  
תגביה כנשר ואם בין כוכבים שם קגר משם אורידך נאם יי' וג' (עובדיה אר').

2 163  
? 163  
? 163

ר' ברכיה ר' חלבו ר' שמע' בר' יוסי בשם ר' מאיר מלמד שיראה הקב"ה לאבינו יעקב שיה' של בבל עולה  
ויורד, ושל מדי' עולה ויורד, ושל זון עולה ויורד, ושל ארדום עולה ויורד, א' לו הק' יעקב אף אתה עלה, באותה  
שעה נתיירא אבינו יעקב וא' תאמר שכשם שיש לאילו ירדה אף אני יש לי ירדה, א' לו הקב"ה אל תחת ישראל

96 C.f. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 17.5.

(דמיון שם), אתה אם אתה עולה אין לך ירידה לעולם, ולא האמין ולא עלת. ר' ברכיה ר' חלבו בשם ר' שמעון בר' יוסנה, ר' מאיר היה רודף ככל זאת ופאז עוד ולא האמינו בנפלאותיו (תהלים עזלכ), זה יעקב אבינו שלא האמין ולא עלת. א' לו הקב"ה אילו האמנתה ועליתך עוד לא הייתה יורד לעולם, עכשיו שלא האמנתה ולא עלית הרי בניך משתעבדים בארבע מלכיות בעולם הזה, בפסים ובתעניות ובוסיות ובנגלות. יכול לעולם, ארל אל תחת ישראל כי הנני משיעך מרחוק (דמיון ל:), מבבל. ואת ודעך מארץ שבנים (שם), מגליא ומאספסמא ומתברותיה. ושב יעקב (שם), מבבל. ושקר (שם), סמרי. ושגנו (שם), מיוון. ואין מרדד (שם), מאדום. כי אעשה כלה בכל הגוים אשר הפצותיך שם (שם שם יא), אומות העולם השם כליל את שדותיהם עליהם הוא אם' כי אעשה כלה, אבל יש' שגנו מכלי' את שדותיה, אך אחת לא אעשה כלה וסמך למשפט נקה לא אנק' (שם), מייסד אני בייסדים בעולם הזה בשביל לנקות משניות בעולם הזה. איסתי, בחדש השביעי (ויקרא כגכד).

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The editor of Pesikta de-Rav Kahana not only collected various midrashim for each special Sabbath and holiday. It was his task to choose which were to be included and it was he who determined their order. The editor chose as the first interpretation of Jeremiah 30:10 a text which begins with the experience and concerns of the listener, ("Is one to suppose this prince will have no come-down?") and concluded with a promise of hope given through the prophecy of Obadiah. The editor placed the second interpretation -- one which called upon Jacob to take actions based on faith in God's promises -- directly after this prophecy. Jacob is unable to disregard evidence from history and the situation in which his people will find themselves. He is unable to live his life "climbing up", as it were, based on God's promise. (We must note that his fear is not that he can't climb up but that he too will in time lose his special closeness with

God.) According to this text, the listener is experiencing the consequences of Jacob's response.

This midrash, explaining the suffering of Israel not as a result of God's abandonment but as a result of Israel's lack of faith, contains nehemta as well as critique. The listener can still choose transformative actions. Every generation has the opportunity to act with faith, to "climb up." The fact is that Israel will never lose its special closeness to God. By following the precepts of the Torah, the listener brings nearer the day when God will gather the people of Israel from the four corners of the earth. The chastisements Israel suffers prior to redemption must be understood as a means of purification.

One might suppose that God was declaring that this subjection would last forever. But not so, for He went on at once to say [words that were addressed to Israel as well as to Jacob]: Thou wilt not suffer a come-down, O Israel; for lo, I will save thee from afar (Jer. 30:10)--from Babylon; and thy seed from the land beyond the sea (ibid.)--from Gaul, from Spain, and from the lands adjoining them; and Jacob shall return (ibid.) from Babylon; and be quiet [in his heart (ibid.) with regard to Media; and at ease (ibid.) with regard to Greece; and none shall make him afraid (ibid.) because of Edom.<sup>98</sup>

### Conclusion

All of the texts discussed in this chapter seek to rescue suffering from meaninglessness. The authors of these transformational nehemtot insisted that events which devastated the people as a whole and the suffering of individuals had to be understood as episodes in their covenantal history rather than

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<sup>98</sup> Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, trans. Braude, p. 354.

the end of history.<sup>99</sup> The Rabbis responded with חב"בן היסטוריה, that suffering is inherently precious to God, יסורין של אהבה, that there are sufferings, born of God's love, which instruct and purify, אש ויציבה, that martyrdom expands knowledge of God's sanctity among humankind, and the concept of the קץ, i.e. that there will be a time of promise or fulfillment in a time beyond history. The authors of these transformational nehemtot understood that one can more readily accept suffering that is consequent on growth, that is compensated by the reward of a deeper and richer life, and suffering that is understood as fit punishment.<sup>100</sup> Slonimsky has explained that when the destructive event is out of proportion to the "spiritual results" or falls on the good or the innocent that it "becomes the most stunning and paralyzing experience of the human soul, the most awesome paradox of the whole spiritual life."<sup>101</sup>

Transformational nehemtot have been written throughout Jewish history, especially during times of national disaster, to avoid such spiritual paralysis.

Slonimsky has posited that throughout history Israel has suffered due to the fact that Israel has had the unique task of bringing Torah from God into the world. Torah, for Slonimsky, signifies goodness and ideal wholeness. As the power for

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<sup>99</sup> Mintz, p. 70.

<sup>100</sup> Slonimsky, pp. 250-251.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

goodness in the world currently is small, it is Israel's task, by means of Torah, to increase it. The world resists God, Torah, and Israel, and as a consequence, Israel suffers.<sup>102</sup>

God and man are a polarity. They are both heroes in the same drama. They need each other, they grow together, but they also suffer together. Hence they need consolation, Benedictions and Consolations. That the Midrash is designed to supply. The Midrash is a vast post-Biblical Bible written on the margin of the Bible to account for the sufferings of God and man in their efforts to reclaim and uplift an unfinished and emerging world. It furnishes the faith which by generating strength helps to create the object of its faith. Its eyes are on the future, on the realized kingdom of God....That the Torah will be made real in the end, and that all men will accept it in the end, that there is a far-off goal towards which all history converges, and that time and event are no mere welter or chaos but a meaningful process, and that the protagonist in that progress is a tragic-heroic figure, wounded and smitten but undismayed: that is the theology and the philosophy of history implicit in Midrash and Bible. Man needs reassurance on double grounds. He must be saved from despairing that there is meaning in history. He must be saved from despairing over the fact that the good must suffer.<sup>103</sup>

In order to console, to furnish a basis for faith, the transformational nehemta helps the listener go through four stages.<sup>104</sup> The first stage is a metaphoric description of the

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<sup>102</sup> Slonimsky, pp. 236-238.

<sup>103</sup> Slonimsky, p. 238.

<sup>104</sup> The effect of the story on listeners in crisis has been dealt with in general terms in the folklore studies of Heda Jason and in the new school of psychology known as Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP).

In Studies in Jewish Ethnopoetry (pp. 68-72), Heda Jason suggests that one function of the genre she calls "sacred legend" is to help individuals deal with the problems they are facing. Sacred legends do so by providing solutions which reaffirm the values and structure of the particular cultural value system.

NLP, "a school of psychology that has developed a body of skills for understanding patterns of human behavior and influencing behavioral change in the context of a useful



listeners' experience which validates that experience. The listeners know that this is their story. Second, the transformational nehemta recasts the situation, enabling listeners to understand the situation in a different way, or, as Tolkien would say, the author helps the listeners regain a clear view, to see things as they were meant to be seen.<sup>105</sup> Third, the threatened fundamental belief is restored or adapted so that it once more becomes acceptable. In particular, the listeners come to see that the covenantal relationship between God and Israel will never be abandoned. Finally, the listeners are asked to take a new stance, based on their reconstructed beliefs. This is of ultimate importance as the covenant, the cosmic drama in which Israel participates, depends not only upon God but on Israel.

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therapeutic model of linguistics," (Howard W. Polsky and Yaella Wozner, Everyday Miracles: The Healing Wisdom of Hasidic Stories (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, inc., 1989), pp. 29, 61-62) has done significant research into a process they call "reframing" and what they call "the healing metaphor." Their focus, however, is on therapeutic intervention rather than theological reconstruction.

The category "transformational nehemta" could be considered one type of "sacred legend" or a theological "healing metaphor."

For more information concerning NLP, see Everyday Miracles, chapters two and seven, and John Grinder and Richard Bandler, Reframing: Neurolinguistic Programming and the Transformation of Meaning (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1982).

<sup>105</sup> Tolkien, p. 77.

## Chapter 2

### Parables of Comfort: Judah Halevi , the Dubno Maggid and Several Hasidic Texts.

The Gerer Rabbi said: "Exile contains redemption within itself, as seed contains the fruit. Right work and real diligence will bring out the hidden reward.

#### Siach Sarfei Kodesh<sup>1</sup>

When he was asked which was the right way, that of sorrow or that of joy, the Rabbi of Berditchev said, "There are two kinds of sorrow and two kinds of joy. When a man broods over the misfortunes that have come upon him, cowers in a corner, and despairs of help, that is a bad kind of sorrow, concerning which it is said, 'The Divine Presence does not dwell in a place of dejection.' The other kind is the honest grief of a man who knows what he lacks.

"The same is true of joy. He is a fool who is devoid of inner substance but consumed with empty pleasures and who neither feels nor tries to fill his lack. But the truly joyful man is like one whose house has burned down; struck by his loss, he begins to build anew. Over every stone that is laid, his heart rejoices."

#### The World of a Hasidic Master: Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Louis I. Newman, The Hasidic Anthology: Tales and Teachings of the Hasidim (Northvale, New Jersey/London: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1987), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel H. Dresner, The World of a Hasidic Master: Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (New York: Shapolsky Publishers, Inc., 1986), pp. 175-176.

A people's myths, their laws, customs, rituals, beliefs, and institutions are expressed and validated through their folklore. Moreover, through story and song, groups seek to explain natural phenomena and difficult socio-cultural situations.<sup>3</sup> Throughout history Jewish folklore has utilized motifs current in its environment after "judaizing" them. Motifs particular to Jewish parables and folk tales can be explained in part by the fact that the Jewish people has so frequently lived as a minority in lands often hostile to them.<sup>4</sup> As Shenhar has written:

A study of the contents of Jewish legends leads to an essential, basic conclusion: both narrators and listeners are involved in an existential environment common to them both as well as to that of another nation of different religious beliefs. The stories describe the many facets of an international, interreligious contact predominantly fraught with conflict and tension.<sup>5</sup>

The problem of galut, the terrible sense of being uprooted, homeless, subject to the rule of others, and without a national center, has profoundly affected the individual and national consciousness of the Jewish people.<sup>6</sup> This sense of alienation and the desire for the restoration of the national and political past has led to ongoing questioning about the causes and meaning

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<sup>3</sup> Raphael Patai, On Jewish Folklore (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), pp. 45-46.

<sup>4</sup> Aliza Shenhar, Jewish and Israeli Folklore (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1987), pp. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Shenhar, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> "Galut," Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972, p. 275.

of exile.<sup>7</sup>

The problem of living in exile grew more severe in the course of the Middle Ages. While the circumstances under which Jews lived varied considerably from period to period and from land to land, the experience was very often characterized by degradation, servitude, physical danger, and the ever present possibility of expulsion.<sup>8</sup> These experiences gave rise to various systems of thought. According to one, exile was a means of expiation of sin; according to another, it was a way of purifying the spirit; a third understood exile as a means of preparing for redemption. Different Jewish thinkers recast the experience of exile so that it was understood to display the majesty of God's action in the world.<sup>9</sup>

During these difficult periods, we find a wide variety of transformational nehemtot<sup>10</sup> composed by philosophers,

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7 Ibid.

8 "Galut," pp. 281-282.

9 "Galut," p. 282.

10 In the comparative study of folklore, the criterion used to classify stories into genres devolves on the question, "What is this story about?". This approach is used in the Stith Thompson Motif Index of Folk Literature and by scholars like Dan Ben Amos.

Heda Jason has suggested that it is not theme but mode ("the existential medium relationship between man and the world, as manifested in ethnopoeetry. Mode is one of the most important formative elements of ethno poetic genres and each genter is "set" in a particular mode.") which is definitive in classifying stories into genres. (Shenhar, pp. 6-8.)

C.f. Dan Ben Amos, "Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres," Genre 2, no. 3 (1969): 275-301.

Heda Jason, Ethnopoetics-A Multilingual Terminology (Jerusalem, 1975) pp. 36-40.

storytellers, and charismatic leaders. The transformational nehemt that will be examined in this chapter are some of the more beautiful. The first we shall look at is Jehudah Halevi's parable of the seed.

#### Halevi's Parable of the Seed:

Jehuda Halevi was born some time before 1075 in either the city of Toledo or Tudela which at that time was under Muslim rule.<sup>11</sup> His family was both wealthy and learned, and he received a thorough education in Hebrew and Arabic. In his youth he traveled throughout Islamic Andalusia, making a name for himself as a poet.<sup>12</sup>

After the Almoravides began their conquest of Muslim Spain in the years following 1090, the position of the Jews began to deteriorate. Halevi spent the next twenty years traveling from city to city, practicing medicine and engaging in trade to support himself. His fame as a poet continued to grow.<sup>13</sup>

In 1140, Jehuda Halevi began the hazardous journey to the land of Israel. He conceived of this journey as a redemptive act, believing that only in the Land could the Jewish people fulfill their destiny. It appears that in 1141 Halevi died in

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Using the thematic approach, this study postulates that there is a genre of Jewish literature called "the transformational nehemta."

11 "Judah Halevi," Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972, p. 355.

12 Ibid.

13 "Judah Halevi," pp. 355-6.



Egypt before he could complete his journey. 14

Jehuda Halevi was second only to Solomon ibn Gabirol as the greatest Hebrew poet of the Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup> According to Guttman:

His greatness lies mainly in his religious poetry; no other Jewish poet expresses with such depth of feeling and in such moving tones his pride of Israel's election, his grief at its suffering, and his longing for redemption. The same emotions also permeate his philosophy, which seeks to show that Judaism was the sole carrier of religious truth and the sole source of religious life, and that the Jewish people was the core of humanity, capable of realizing the religious life.<sup>16</sup>

He wrote approximately 800 poems among which were love poems, personal lyric poetry, eulogies and laments. He wrote a series of piyyutim concerning the suffering of the Jewish people and their yearning for redemption, as well as his famous shirei Ziyon.<sup>17</sup>

Halevi's philosophy, contained in Kitāb al-Hujja waal-Dahl fī Naṣr al-Dīn al-Dhalīl<sup>18</sup>, deals with many of the same themes as are found in his religious poetry. This book, more commonly known by the title given to its Hebrew translation, Sefer ha-Kuzari ("The Book of the Kuzari"), was written for the cultured

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14 "Judah Halevi," p. 355.

15 Julius Guttman, Philosophies of Judaism: A History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig, trans. David W. Silverman (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), p. 136.

16 Guttman, pp. 136-7.

17 "Judah Halevi," pp. 358-360.

18 "Judah Halevi," p. 362.

reader, rather than the philosopher.<sup>19</sup> He belonged to no philosophical school.<sup>20</sup> The Kuzari is an apologetic work written in response to the challenge of faith posed by Aristotelian philosophy, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>21</sup> One of his major concerns was the suffering and degradation of his people. As Heinemann has written:

"...the impotence of his people in worldly affairs is not only a burning wound in his side; it becomes a consuming problem, which he attacks with all the weapons that the culture of his time affords him."<sup>22</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this study to address the many issues discussed in the Kuzari. It is sufficient to focus on his view concerning the issues of suffering and exile.

Halevi believed that Israel's exile had three purposes: it was a penalty for sin; it was meant to train the Jewish people in humility; and it existed to foster a deep yearning for return to the land of Israel. He maintained that we misunderstand the meaning of our fate when we settle too comfortably in the Diaspora.<sup>23</sup> He certainly did not deny the pain of exile. He described it vividly in both his poetry and his philosophy. The full title of the Kuzari, "The Book of Argument and Proof in Defense of the Despised Faith," shows his sense that for Jews,

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<sup>19</sup> Heinemann, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Guttman, p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> "Judah Halevi," p. 363.

<sup>22</sup> Heinemann, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Heinemann, p. 23.

unlike Christians and Muslims, it was necessary to fight for one's honor.<sup>24</sup> Halevi asserted that the fact that Israel has been the most persecuted of peoples did not imply rejection. On the contrary, he explained that the Jewish people is the bearer of the highest and most absolute religious truth.<sup>25</sup>

According to Jehuda Halevi, only Judaism is an "absolute religion." Both Christianity and Islam are "devitalized imitations."<sup>26</sup> He asserted that Judaism is not only rationally superior; Jews are physiologically superior. Only they have a unique faculty beyond that of other human beings which allows them a special nearness to God.<sup>27</sup> While all other nations are governed by general providence, "a supernatural divine providence, manifesting itself in reward and punishment, exists only for Israel, not only in the biblical past but continuing into the present and governing the scattered members of the Jewish people."<sup>28</sup> To those who argued that Israel's demeaned status in this world foreshadowed the suffering and humiliation they would experience in the world to come, he argued that the pain Israel experiences is actually a sign of its superiority to the nations.

It is in the context of these beliefs that we must interpret

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<sup>24</sup> Heinemann, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Heinemann, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Guttmann, p. 144.

"...שם לאלהים בנו סוד וחכמה נחכמה נגיד חורק אשר יעול בארץ והוא משתנה ומתחלף בנראה אל הארץ ואל  
המים ואל הובל ולא יראו לו שם רשם מוחש כפי מה שירדוהו למבים אליו והנה הוא אשר תשנה הארץ והמים אל  
מבעה ותעתיקם מדרגה אחר מדרגה שתריק היסודות ותשיבם אל רמות קצמה ותוריה קלפותיה ועליה חולת זה  
ואשר יורכז חלב ויהיה ראוי לחל בו הענין תאלה וצורת חורק הראשון עושה העץ והוא פרי כפרי אשר היה ויען  
ממנו וכן תורת משה כל אשר בא אחריו ישתנה אליה באמתת ענינו ואם הוא בנראה רוחה אותה ואלה האמות  
הם הצעה והקדמה למשיח המדונה אשר הוא הפרי וישבו כלם פריו כאשר יורו לו וישב העץ אחד ואם יראו  
ויוקדו השורש אשר היו מבים אותו..."

In the very first sentence of this parable, Halevi says that God has a secret and wise design concerning the people of Israel. He tells the reader immediately that Israel's history and current circumstances are guided by divine providence. History is not made up of random occurrences. His first assertion is that the sufferings that Israel experiences are not due to a withdrawal of God's presence nor do they indicate a deficiency in God's

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29 Isaak Heinemann et al., eds., Three Jewish Philosophers: Philo: Saadya Gaon: Jehuda Halevi (Atheneum, New York: A Temple Book, 1985), Kuzari, IV.23, p. 121.

God, it is true, has a secret and wise design concerning us. It should be compared to the wisdom hidden in the seed which falls into the ground and apparently is transformed into earth, water and dung without leaving a trace--so it seems to the contemplator. But really this seed transforms earth and water into its own substance, carrying them from one degree to another, until it refines the elements and makes them like unto itself, casting off husks, leaves, etc., in order that the 'heart' (of the plant) may appear in purity and become fit to receive this power and the form of the first seed: then the tree bears fruit resembling that from which it had been produced. So it is concerning the religion of Moses: all later religions are transformed into it, though externally they may reject it. They merely serve to introduce and pave the way for the expected Messiah: he is the fruit; all will be his fruit, if they acknowledge him, and will become one tree. Then they will revere the root they formerly despised ....

awareness. They are part of a secret and wise design. He warns that the way circumstances appear to the contemplator (the person reading this parable) does not necessarily correspond with reality. Halevi's parable will reveal the true meaning of Israel's experience.

This transformational nehemta begins by describing the reader's experience of galut. It appears to the reader that the fate of Israel among the nations is akin to that of a seed which has fallen to the ground. In the darkness, despite the wisdom inherent in the seed, it seems that the seed has begun to decompose. Soon, not a trace will remain.

Actually, however, the seed is not in the process of falling apart. On the contrary, what we are witnessing is simply the process through which a seed must go in order to sprout forth, blossom, and bear fruit. Halevi explains (and one assumes that this is the best knowledge of his day) that the seed is not transformed by the earth. Instead, it is having a transformative effect on the ground which surrounds it. Using the elements which surround it, the seed is actually in the process of growing. And as such, it purifies these elements, transforming them into its own substance. In the end, the seed will sprout forth and bear fruit.

So it is with Israel. Israel has not been scattered purposelessly among the nations. It is not slowly falling apart in their midst, soon to disappear entirely. Rather, Israel is purifying the nations. Eventually they, by becoming like Israel,



will be part of the great drama which will culminate with the coming of the Messiah. The nations may not understand what is happening. To them it may seem that the Jewish people has been deserted by God, slowly coming to the end of its history in degradation. But the reader is to understand that this is an illusion. Israel is living out a wise and secret design. In time, all the nations "will revere the root they formerly despised."

As was the case in the rabbinic texts, Halevi's transformational nehemta began with a situation experienced by the reader. Life is dark. Things seem to be falling apart. The readers know that Halevi understands their situation and is metaphorically telling their story. Then Halevi refocuses the reader's attention by describing the generative, vital aspect of growing things which he compares to Israel. He also asks the reader to focus on the ultimate fate of the people rather than the individual at a specific moment of history. It is the cosmic drama which is of ultimate concern. Halevi conveys a second message as well. We see that Israel's future is dependent on two factors: divine providence and on the wisdom within the seed, that is on the Torah given to Israel.<sup>30</sup> It seems that Halevi is suggesting that it is critical that Israel hold fast to the Torah, so that cosmic drama does indeed end with the coming of the Messiah.

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<sup>30</sup> The interpretation of wisdom as Torah was made by Dr. Barry Kogan in classroom discussion.

### Selected Hasidic Texts:

In the eighteenth century, Jews of eastern Europe experienced two kinds of suffering: physical and spiritual.<sup>31</sup> It was a time of great tension in southeast Poland-Lithuania. During this period the area was partitioned into three areas. Memory of the terrible Chmielnicki and Haidamak massacres was not yet distant.<sup>32</sup> Many lived in poverty, and all were subject to persecution.<sup>33</sup> The leadership was shaken by the messianic movements of the false messiahs, Sabbetai Zevi and Jacob Frank.<sup>34</sup> In many cases the communal and rabbinic leadership was corrupt. Torah study had often degenerated to casuistry, the observance of ritual had frequently become routine. Internally the Jewish community suffered from "decay, debasement, and despair."<sup>35</sup>

After the collapse of the Sabbetian movement three options existed. Some orthodox kabbalists pretended that nothing had occurred. Some renounced all attempts to again create a mass movement. (This way led to the "mystic's semi-monastic cell.")<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel Dresner, The World of a Hasidic Master: Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (New York: Shapolsky Publishers, Inc., 1986), p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> "Hasidism," Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972, p. 1391.

<sup>33</sup> Dresner, pp.22-23.

<sup>34</sup> "Hasidism," p. 1391.

<sup>35</sup> Dresner, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 328.

The third possibility, "a typical revivalist movement...aimed at the widest possible sphere of influence"<sup>37</sup> came into being as Hasidism. In response to the flawed messianism of Sabbetai Zevi, we find in Hasidism a "neutralization of the Messianic element."<sup>38</sup> Hasidism preserved those kabbalistic elements that would evoke popular response but stripped them of their "messianic flavor."<sup>39</sup> While in Hasidism, yearning for redemption certainly had a place, it was not the central issue.<sup>40</sup> During the first fifty years of the Hasidic movement the emphasis was on God's immanence rather than chiliastic expectations.<sup>41</sup>

The "revelation" of the Baal Shem Tov took place in 1730. He became known as a popular healer, and many came to him for cures and to join him in ecstatic prayer. His outlook and teachings attracted both the learned and the simple. He and his followers were convinced that this charismatic man possessed supernatural powers.<sup>42</sup>

After the death of the Baal Shem Tov in 1760, Dov Baer of Mezritch, also known as the Maggid of Mezritch, assumed

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<sup>37</sup> Scholem, p.329.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> We do find numerous tales of second and third generation Hasidic masters joining forces to hasten the coming of the messiah. Significantly however, these are all stories of flawed attempts which do not enjoy God's favor.

<sup>41</sup> Scholem, p.336.

<sup>42</sup> "Hasidism," pp. 1291-2.

leadership of the Hasidic movement. His great contribution to the movement was to its organization, expansion, and consolidation. The majority of the great leaders of Hasidism's second generation were his disciples.<sup>43</sup>

During this period, Hasidism was vigorously opposed by those who wanted to maintain Jewish life as it was and who were dismayed by Hasidism's enthusiastic practices. This group came to be known as the mitnagdim. They were very concerned about the priority Hasidism gave to prayer over the study of Torah and by the populist nature of the mysticism it espoused. Their new type of leader, the Zaddik<sup>44</sup>, disturbed the status quo. In 1772 the Vilna Gaon issued a herem against the hasidim. This led to a

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<sup>43</sup> Dresner, pp. 15-16.

<sup>44</sup> Scholem, pp. 333-334, explains that according to Rabbinic Judaism, the ideal leader was the scholar. The leader needed this knowledge in order to teach and rule on the proper way of living one's life. No inner revival was expected. The hasidim demanded their leader to follow the model of the prophet, they wanted "the illuminate, the man whose heart has been touched and changed by God. They sought charisma in their leader and the gift of renewal.

Dresner (The Zaddik, pp. 240-1) describes the Zaddik as: "...one who was both dedicated and selfless, strong in conviction, humble in character and fearless in action...He is the "foundation of the world," for around him the ruins of the time could be rebuilt into a dedicated community of the faithful. The zaddik stands between heaven and earth. He is the "channel" which brings heaven to earth and the means (through devekut) for earth reaching heaven.... He moves between two poles: God and Israel. To the Shechinah he owes all his powers, for the root of his soul is in the Shechinah...to Israel he belongs, since it is only for their sake that he lives...His task is to heal the breach, to make whole the broken...The doctrine of the zaddik is in its most profound sense a doctrine of concern. He is willing to suffer for them, since they are "the limbs of the Shechinah; his life is bound up with theirs..."

series of bans and counter-bans, boycotts of businesses, and a breakdown of personal relations between the hasidim and the mitnagdim.<sup>45</sup> Despite the strong opposition of the mitnagdim, hasidism spread into Byelorussia and Lithuania, to Galicia and central Poland, even to Vilna, a center of opposition to Hasidism during this period. A few groups went to Eretz Yisrael.<sup>46</sup>

The hasidim opened separate prayerhouses or shtiblekh and worshipped from their own siddur. They taught that simha, joy, was more pleasing to God than asceticism. Song, dance, the ma'aseh played a powerful role in binding hasidic communities together. Hasidism grew under their varied and decentralized leadership. By the 1830s, its main surge of growth had come to an end. It had become an accepted way of life for many.<sup>47</sup> In a short amount of time, Hasidism gave rise to "a whole galaxy of saint-mystics, each of them a startling individuality." According to Scholem, the movement's great creativity lay not in the development of doctrine but in "the experience of inner revival."<sup>48</sup>

Hasidism was panentheistic. God was, in its view, not only unique, but the only true existent. The world in which we live is "a garment for God."<sup>49</sup> Many hasidic views and practices

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<sup>45</sup> Dresner, pp. 15-16.

<sup>46</sup> "Hasidism," pp. 1392-3.

<sup>47</sup> "Hasidism," pp. 1393-4.

<sup>48</sup> Scholem, pp. 337-8.

<sup>49</sup> "Hasidism," pp. 1403-4.



derive from these beliefs. One of them was that nothing is random. Another was that since God was the Self of the universe, bittul hayesh, annihilation of the self, becomes an important value. Melancholy, too, becomes something of an anathema in Hasidism. If all is God and the world and its sorrows are not fundamental existants, what room can there be for despondency or sorrow? (Some made a distinction between the sorrow that arises from a sense of distance from God<sup>50</sup> or sorrow on God's behalf<sup>51</sup>,

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<sup>50</sup> Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1973), p. 65:

A disciple asked the Baal Shem: "Why is it that one who clings to God and knows he is close to him, sometimes experiences a sense of interruption and remoteness?"

The Baal Shem explained: "When a father sets out to teach his little son to walk, he stands in front of him and holds his two hands on either side of the child, so that he cannot fall, and the boy goes toward his father between his father's hands. But the moment he is close to his father, he moves away a little, and holds his hands farther apart, and he does this over and over, so that the child may learn to walk.

~ <sup>51</sup> An example from Buber's Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters:

On one of his journeys, as night was falling, Levi Yitzhak came to a little town where he knew no one at all, nor could he find a lodging until finally a tanner took him home with him. He wanted to say the Evening Prayer, but the smell of the hides was so penetrating that he could not utter a word. So he left and went to the House of Study which was quite empty, and there he prayed. And then, suddenly, he understood how the Divine Presence had descended to exile and now--with bowed head--stood in Tanners' Alley. He burst into tears and wept and wept until he had cried his heart out over the sorrow of the Divine Presence, and he fell in a faint. And then he saw the glory of God in all its splendor, a dazzling light ranged in four-and-twenty rungs of divers colors, and heard the words: "Be strong, my son! Great suffering will come upon you, but have no fear, for I shall be with you." (p. 204)

as it were, and the sorrow that arises from material causes.<sup>52</sup>) Melancholy came to be seen as a barrier between God and the individual.

The most well known from hasidic literatures is the ma'aseh, the hasidic story. The first group of hasidic tales published, Shivhei haBesht, focused on the life and teachings of the Baal Shem Tov. By the middle of the nineteenth century, numerous anthologies of short stories had been published. The ma'aseh functions as a homily, a lesson expressed in story form. In these tales, the time element is insignificant; the social and historical elements are sketched out very briefly. Their true object of concern is the spiritual situation of the characters, and thus the spiritual condition of their listeners.<sup>53</sup> Many of these tales are transformational nehemtot.

Through the ma'aseh (told either by the zaddik or about the zaddik in subsequent generations), we find poignant responses to the issues of suffering and exile. Some of these stories take a very traditional stances, for example that suffering is one of God's ways of drawing us near.

Said the Radomsker: "We read (Song of Songs 1:4): 'O draw me; we will run after Thee.' A shepherd employs two methods to draw his sheep to him. He either whistles and they come, or he drives them with his staff, and they move forward. In the first instance, they follow him; in the second, he follows them. We petition that the Lord should draw us nigh

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<sup>52</sup> While this was the philosophical stance of many hasidic leaders, their stories reveal that they certainly took the suffering of their hasidim seriously and made efforts to offer both spiritual and material assistance.

<sup>53</sup> "Hasidism," pp. 1415-6.

unto Him by His voice, and we promise to follow after Him. But we do not desire that He should drive us to godliness with the staff of misfortunes."

Ohel Shelomoh, p.3054

Some are variants of Rabbinic texts:

The Rabbi of Rozniatov, Rabbi Eliezer Lippmann, persistently inquired from Rabbi Mendel of Kossov why the Messiah has not come, and why the Redemption promised by the Prophets and Sages has not been fulfilled.

Rabbi Mendel answered: "It is written: 'Why has the son of Jesse not come, either today or yesterday?' [I Sam. 20:27] The answer lies in the question itself: 'Why has he not come? Because we are today, just as we were yesterday.'"

Esser Tzachtzochoth, p. 6555

Some remind the listener that God's merciful presence is active and near even when it is quite difficult to experience that nearness. According to the following text, it is the responsibility of the individual to remove the barriers that stand in the way of the experience of God's nearness.

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54 Louis I. Newman, The Hasidic Anthology: Tales and Teachings of the Hasidim (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1944), p. 245.

55 Newman, p. 247. This text calls to mind the midrash found in Sanhedrin 98 that explains why the messiah tarries. R. Joshua b. Levi asks Elijah when the messiah will come and Elijah sends him to ask the messiah himself at the gates of Rome. The messiah tells R. Joshua b. Levi that he is coming "Today." The rabbi complains to Elijah that the messiah has not spoken the truth. "Elijah answered: 'He meant 'Today, if you would only listen to His voice!' (Ps. 95:7).

Said the Koretzer: "When a man is in a state of tribulation, God's mercies emanate from Him, but they remain on high. It requires the effort of repentance, prayer, tears and good deeds to bring them down God's mercy on behalf of the suppliant."

Midrash Pinchas, p.1756

Many Hasidic texts, like the earlier texts studied, make it evident that it is easier to live through periods of suffering which are understood to have some meaning, some purpose.

Whenever Rabbi Levi Yitzhak came to that passage in the Haggadah of Passover which deals with the four sons, and in it read about the fourth son, about him who "knows not how to ask," he said: "'The one who knows not how to ask,' that is myself, Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. I do not know how to ask you, Lord of the world, and even if I did know, I could not bear to do it. How could I venture to ask you why everything happens as it does, why we are driven from one exile into another, why our foes are allowed to torment us so. But in the Haggadah, the father of him 'who knows not how to ask,' is told: 'It is for you to disclose it to him.' And the Haggadah refers to the Scriptures, in which it is written: 'And thou shalt tell thy son.' And, Lord of the world, am I not your son? I do not beg you to reveal to me the secret of your ways--I could not bear it! But show me one thing; show it to me more clearly and more deeply: show me what this, which is happening at this very moment, means to me, what it demands of me, what you, Lord of the world, are telling me by way of it. Ah, it is not why I suffer, that I wish to know, but only whether I suffer for your sake."57

Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev has remained one of the most popular and beloved of the Hasidic masters, passing into the

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56 Newman, p. 245.

57 Martin Buber, pp. 212-213.

general folklore of the Jewish people.<sup>58</sup> He was one of the few Hasidic masters to serve as Rav for the entire town and to write his own work, Kedushat Levi.<sup>59</sup> It is said that he was beloved by the simple, the destitute, and those who did not fit into society because he gave them what they needed the most: dignity.<sup>60</sup> He is famous for his love of God and his willingness to challenge God on behalf of Israel.<sup>61</sup> When a decree was issued that Jews had to take on family names, Levi Yitzhak wrote down "derbarmdiger" ("the merciful"), explaining, "Are we not told by the Talmudic sages to follow after the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He? 'As He is merciful, so you be merciful.' Therefore let my name be called 'Derbarmdiger'".<sup>62</sup>

According to Levi Yitzhak, exile involves more than Israel's wandering and affliction; it involves the suffering of the Shekinah as well. He believed that the Messiah's arrival depended on human actions as well as God's will.<sup>63</sup>

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58 Louis Jacobs, Hasidic Thought (New York: Behrman House Inc., 1967), p. 115.

59 Dresner, The World of a Hasidic Master p. 43.

60 Elie Weisel, Souls on Fire (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 99.

61 Jacobs, p.115.

62 Dresner, The World of a Hasidic Master, p. 40.

63 Dresner, The World of a Hasidic Master, p.138.



Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev died in 1810.64

This transformational nehemta is one of Levi Yitzhak's most powerful.

Once Rabbi Levi Yitzhak held the seder of the first night of Passover so devoutly, that every word and every rite glowed at the zaddik's table, with all the holiness of its secret significance. In the dawn after the celebration Rabbi Levi Yitzhak sat in his room, joyful and proud that he had performed so successful a service. But, all of a sudden, he heard a voice, saying: "More pleasing to me than your seder is that of Hayyim, the water-carrier."

The rabbi summoned the people in his house and his disciples, and inquired about the man whose name he had heard. Nobody knew him. At the zaddik's bidding some of his disciples went in search of him. They had to ask around for a long time before--at the outskirts of the city, where only poor people live--they were shown the house of Hayyim, the water-carrier. They knocked at the door. A woman came out and asked what they wanted. When they told her she was amazed. "Yes," she said, "Hayyim, the water-carrier, is my husband. But he cannot go with you because he drank a lot yesterday and is sleeping it off now. If you wake him you will find that he cannot manage to lift his feet."

All they said in reply was: "It is the rabbi's orders." They went and shook him from his sleep. He only blinked at them, could not understand what they wanted him for, and attempted to turn over and go on sleeping. But they raised him from his bed, took hold of him, and between them brought him to the zaddik, all but carrying him on their shoulders. The rabbi had him put in a chair near him. When he was seated, silent and bewildered, Levi Yitzhak leaned toward him and said: "Rabbi Hayyim, dear heart, what mystic intention was in your mind when you gathered what was leavened?"

The water-carrier looked at him dully, shook his head, and replied: "Master, I just looked into every corner, and gathered it together."

The astonished zaddik continued questioning him: "And what consecration did you think upon in the burning of it?"

The man pondered, looked distressed, and said hesitatingly: "Master, I forgot to burn it. And now I remember--it is all still lying on the shelf."

When Rabbi Levi Yitzhak heard this, he grew more and more uncertain, but he continued asking. "And tell me, Rabbi Hayyim, how did you celebrate the seder?"

Then something seemed to quicken in the eyes and limbs

of the man, and he replied in humble tones: "Rabbi, I shall tell you the truth. You see, I always heard that it is forbidden to drink brandy the eight days of the festival, so yesterday morning I drank enough to last me eight days. And so I got tired and fell asleep. Then my wife woke me, and it was evening, and she said to me: 'Why don't you celebrate the seder like all other Jews?' said I: 'What do you want with me? I am an ignorant man, and my father was an ignorant man, and I don't know what to do and what not to do. But one thing I know: Our fathers and mothers were in captivity in the land of the Gypsies, and we have a God, and he led them out, and into freedom. And see: now we are again in captivity and I know, and I tell you that God will lead us to freedom too.' And then I saw before me a table, and the cloth gleamed like the sun, and on it were platters with matzot and eggs and other dishes, and bottles of red wine. I ate of the matzot and eggs and drank of the wine, and gave my wife to eat and to drink. And then I was overcome with joy, and lifted my cup to God, and said: 'See, God, I drink this cup to you! And do you lean down to us and make us free!' So we sat and drank and rejoiced before God. And then I felt tired, lay down, and fell asleep."<sup>65</sup>

This story is told for anyone whose ever felt like Hayyim the water carrier, for all those who live without wealth or fame, for all those who get little credit for what they do and who do their best to live as good Jews and praise God. (It is for anyone who has ever gathered leaven and forgotten to burn it.) This story is also told for those who live in the spot light, whose deeds are lauded by society, and who do their best to live as good Jews and praise God. (It is for anyone who knows his or her piety is remarkable.) This story asks listeners to reexamine their assumptions about what kind of service is most pleasing to God.

It is significant that Levi Yitzhak takes no note of Hayyim's lowly position in society nor of his condition when he

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<sup>65</sup> Buber, Tales of the Hasidim : Early Masters, pp. 219-21.

is brought to the zaddik's home. ("Nobody knew him. At the zaddik's bidding some of his disciples went in search of him. They had to ask around for a long time before--at the outskirts of the city, where only poor people live--they were shown the house of Hayyim, the water-carrier.....Rabbi Hayyim, dear heart, what mystic intention was in your mind....") Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev is surprised by Hayyim's initial answers - especially by the fact that Hayyim failed to burn his hametz - but he continues to treat him with the utmost respect.

As Levi Yitzhak disregards society's view of the water-carrier, so the listener begins to disregard his status. At this point, the listener is ready to hear Hayyim's account.

Hayyim, though an "ignorant man," has a rudimentary knowledge of what is required in preparation for the holiday. Due to forgetfulness, however, he does not do an adequate job of observing the specifics of the law. Moreover, due to his anxiety about the prohibition against brandy during the festival, he drinks so much that he almost sleeps through the Seder. (One of the messages of this story is that the specifics of the law, though important, are not the essence of the holiday.) We learn that when the time comes, Hayyim is able to recite his own maggid which captures the essence of the observance. He speaks of both spiritual and physical servitude. ("I am an ignorant man, and my father was an ignorant man, and I don't know what to do...our fathers and mothers were in captivity in the land of the Gypsies...") He begins with the people's degradation and

concludes with redemption.

Ḥayyim goes further: "And see: now we are again in captivity, and I tell you that God will lead us to freedom too." Those who are listening to this tale find themselves, like Akiva's companions<sup>66</sup>, comforted by his words. If God is the one who has always redeemed Israel from servitude, then the servitude experienced by this generation must end in redemption as well.

There is nothing miraculous about a table beautifully set for the seder upon which are matzot, eggs, and wine. But as we view the table along with Ḥayyim, it is experienced as a gift from God, a sign of God's ongoing care. As Ḥayyim lifted his cup to God in joy, the listener too feels joy. The listener too participates in Ḥayyim's challenge: "See God, I drink this cup to you! And do you lean down and make us free."

If Ḥayyim can see the possibility of redemption in the circumstances of his life and if he, in love and faith, can challenge God, then so can the listener.

This is the service that is most pleasing to God.

Phinehas Shapiro of Koretz, known as Reb Pinḥas Koretzer, lived during the early years of the movement. He was born in 1726 and died in 1791. While he was strongly influenced by the e

Baal Shem Tov, he is better called an associate than a disciple. He differed in many matters from Dov Baer of Mezritch, often

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See analysis of Lamentations Rabbah 5:18 in chapter 1, pp. 28-30.

pursuing his own line.<sup>67</sup>

The following transformational nehemta builds on two earlier texts, the midrash from Lamentations Rabbah which explains that the Messiah will be born on the anniversary of the Temple's destruction<sup>68</sup> and Jehuda Halevi's parable of the seed.

Said the Koretzer: "When seed is sown, it must decay and its elements decompose until it becomes naught to the eye, before the power of rebirth hidden within it begins to function. At the very moment of complete decomposition, this power comes into immediate action. It demonstrates the formula of the Kabbalah: 'putting off form and putting on form,' teaching that everything in both the material and the spiritual worlds is constantly changing form.

"This is the meaning of the allegory that the Messiah was born on the day when the Holy Temple was destroyed. Since the holiness which had existed had fallen into naught, the hidden holiness immediately began to sprout forth. to symbolize this idea, we sit on the ground on the 9th Day of Ab to demonstrate how we have fallen to earth. Then we go to the cemetery where our forefathers lie buried underground. After showing symbolically that we have sunk to the utmost depths, we await the emergence of the force which revives and redeems."<sup>69</sup>

Nofeth Tzufim, p. 14

According to this text, it is the moment of total decomposition which is the most pregnant with the possibility of rebirth. One source of great holiness is transformed into another. In hasidic thought this period of time is known as the "between stage."<sup>70</sup> Before a thing or a being can change from one state to another, it must pass through a moment of nothingness.

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<sup>67</sup> Jacobs, pp. 21-22.

<sup>68</sup> See Lamentations Rabbah 1:57, on Lam. 1:16.

<sup>69</sup> Newman, p. 317.

<sup>70</sup> Maurice Friedman, A Dialogue with Hasidic Tales: Hallowing the Everyday (San Diego: Human Sciences Press, 1988), p. 147.



"In this sense despondency might be seen as the fruitful darkness between the light of past and future hope."<sup>71</sup> The listener, who may feel that his or her life is falling apart or that the Jewish people is in a dangerous state of decay, is comforted by the idea that there is no moment of total destruction. The message of this nehemta is that moments of utter darkness are to be understood simply as the moment before rebirth.

Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin was among the later generation of hasidic masters. He was born in 1823 in Courland and was educated in the Lithuanian, anti-Hasidic tradition. He was a great Talmudic scholar, a prolific author, and an astute religious thinker.<sup>72</sup> He was subsequently won over to Hasidism and became a disciple of Mordecai Joseph of Izbica and later of Judah Leib Eger. In time he became a hasidic master in Lublin. He died in 1900.<sup>73</sup>

The following transformational nehemta is from one of his works, Divrey Soferim.

Come what may, a Jew must never yield to despair, whether in matters appertaining to the body, as the Rabbis say (Berakhot 10a); even if a sharp sword rests upon a man's neck he should not give up hoping for mercy, or in matters appertaining to the soul. Even if he has sunk very low and has committed that sin of which the Rabbis of blessed memory say (the holy Zohar 1:219b) that repentance is of no avail, God forbid, or if it is hard for him to repent or if he sees himself becoming ever more immersed in worldly things, he should never despair and imagine that he will never be successful in separating from worldly things. For the Jew

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Jacobs, p. 227.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

must never yield to despair, and he should realize that God, blessed be He, can help, whatever the circumstances.

The very beginnings of the Jewish people only took place after all hope had been abandoned. Abraham and Sarah were old, and "Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should give children suck?" (Genesis 21:7). For no one would have believed such a thing to be possible. And even after the angel had promised her a child and Sarah, being a righteous woman, certainly believed that God's power is limitless, yet she laughed within herself (Genesis 18:12), for it seemed so remote to her that this should happen, since she was fully aware that Abraham was incapable of being a father and that she herself was so old. She thought to herself that if God wanted them to have children they would have had them before now, since the less a miracle is obvious the better, and no miracle is performed where there is no need for it. But the truth is that it was all planned by God that the Jewish people should only come into being after there had been complete despair, so that no one, not even Sarah herself, could believe that it would ever happen. For this is the whole duty of the Israelite, to believe that one must never despair; for God can help in all circumstances, and nothing is too difficult for Him and one should not ask why God did it so.<sup>74</sup>

Zadok Ha-Kohen states his lesson prior to the parable: Come what may, a Jew must never yield to despair, whether this issue is physical or spiritual. Despair, in a sense, is a denial of God's power and willingness to help.

He then turns to a text from the Torah as the basis of his nehemta. The reason God chose to keep Abraham and Sarah childless for so long was to set up a situation which appears to be without hope. A miracle at this point would teach future generations that God can and will do that which seems impossible.

But the truth is that it was all planned by God that the Jewish people should only come into being after there had been complete despair, so that no one, not even Sarah herself, could believe that it would ever happen. For this is the whole duty of the Israelite, to believe that one must never despair; for God can help in all circumstances, and

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<sup>74</sup> Jacobs, pp. 227-228.

nothing is too difficult for Him and one should not ask why God did it so.

So it is with Israel's hope for future redemption. On the basis of the listener's life experience, this seems a vain hope. Such moments of impossibility hint at future redemption. The listener must know that Jews must not give up hope.

#### Jacob b. Wolf, the Dubno Maggid: A Parable

The role of the maggid or popular preacher came into existence on account of the fact that not all of those who are learned are able to communicate those ideas and texts they have learned to the masses. Some maggidim held official positions as part of local synagogal organizations. Others wandered from town to town working as itinerant preachers.<sup>75</sup> In Jacob b. Wolf Kranz known as the Maggid of Dubno, were combined scholarship, personal piety, and great homiletic artistry.

Kranz lived from 1741-1804. He had studied in yeshiva in Mezritch. While still a young man he became known as an excellent preacher. At the age of twenty, he became darshan of the city.<sup>76</sup> In time he became well known by many of the greatest thinkers of his day. He developed a special relationship with the Vilna Gaon and Moses Mendelssohn called him "the Jewish

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<sup>75</sup> Israel Bettan, "The Dubno Maggid" Hebrew Union College Annual, 23 pt. 2 (1950-1951), p. 268.

<sup>76</sup> "Kranz, Jacob b. Wolf," Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972, p. 1239.

Aesop."<sup>77</sup> His strengths lay in his personal power as a speaker and in his skillful use of texts, illustrations, and religious ideas. Bettan describes his exegetical skills by saying it was always:

...fresh, striking and significant. Rarely does he toy with a text, or attempt to distort its true meaning. He is ever bent on making biblical verses and rabbinic statements luminous and impressive by disclosing their true import.<sup>78</sup> When he departed from the usual interpretation of the text, it was always to deepen its meaning without doing violence to the simple meaning of the text.<sup>79</sup>

Kranz's true genius lay in his creative use of the parable. Some of his parables were quite short while others were quite lengthy. Some were derived from the realm of the imagination but the majority were based on the life experiences of his listeners. According to Bettan, the Dubno Maggid's essential aim was to define the requirements of religious life.<sup>80</sup> For him, religion could best be defined as:

a vital personal experience and not the perfunctory compliance with a fixed set of requirements. Therein lies the difference between a secular assignment and a holy task: in the one instance, it is imperative that the work be done, and done with diligence and dexterity; in the other, since the act involved is a form of dedication to God, it is not the completion of the task that is of paramount importance, but the disposition, the spirit of the doer that accompanies the act and pervades the thing done.<sup>81</sup>

The Maggid of Dubno taught that the human being is the crown of

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<sup>77</sup> Bettan, p. 270.

<sup>78</sup> Bettan, p. 273.

<sup>79</sup> Bettan, p. 277.

<sup>80</sup> Bettan, pp. 285-288.

<sup>81</sup> Bettan, p. 288.

creation due to the qualities of free will and intellect. Through sin or wickedness, however, the human being could fall to a position lower than the most humble creature.<sup>82</sup> He believed that the primary causes of sin were vanity, weakness, and lack of understanding. The essential problem was the individual's inability to comprehend what was right or act in accordance with what was known to be right. For this reason, he sought to persuade his listeners to treat each other with kindness. Love of God was to be shown by love of one's fellows. Like Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, he was known to defend Israel before God.<sup>83</sup>

While Dubno Maggid maintained that the world is basically good and guided by a God from whom all good proceeds, he could not help but be concerned with the problem of individual suffering and the persistence of exile and persecution. He remained firm in his conviction that suffering derives from God's attribute of mercy rather than judgement.<sup>84</sup> God permits suffering because suffering causes Israel's improvement.<sup>85</sup> He

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<sup>82</sup> Herman Glatt, He Spoke in Parables: The Life and Works of the Dubno Maggid (New York: A Jay Bithmar Publication, 1957), p.102.

<sup>83</sup> Glatt, pp. 103-104.

<sup>84</sup> Glatt, pp. 101-102.

<sup>85</sup> We find a variety of parables that convey this concept. For example:

Said the Dubner: "A small boy saw some woodcutters chopping down trees. He asked his father: 'why are they destroying perfectly fine trees?' The father replied: 'The lumber will be made into furniture which is finer still.'

"From this we learn that many a tribulation which overtakes us becomes the cause of an improvement in our



maintained that everything that occurred was purposeful, and that the meaning of the trials which Israel endured would one day be made clear.<sup>86</sup> He took the traditional positions that suffering purifies from sin and that it serves to turn Jews back to God and causes them to implore God to put an end to exile.<sup>87</sup> In response to the question of why the chosen people endures such terrible afflictions the Dubno Maggid explained that it was not possible to comprehend ultimate purposes from a specific point in history. He taught:

...man is limited both in the years he lives and in the understanding he possesses, he is unable to comprehend the pattern which God weaves, generation by generation, in His guidance of the world. In a particular age, a particular man can see a particular strand of God's design but he is unable to perceive the strands together, the pattern in its totality, the picture painted, the purpose fulfilled, the means and the ends combined.<sup>88</sup>

Glatt called the Dubno Maggid "one of the greatest consolers of our people among the preachers of the last generations." He described him as an individual who was aware not only of Israel's tribulations but of "Israel's hidden grace, lofty designations, aspirations and hopes for a bright future."<sup>89</sup>

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circumstances."

(from) Louis I. Newman, Maggidim and Hasidim: Their Wisdom (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1962), p. 229.

<sup>86</sup> Glatt, pp. 107-9.

<sup>87</sup> Glatt, p. 107.

<sup>88</sup> Glatt, pp. 107-108. We find similar teachings in Hasidic literature as well.

<sup>89</sup> Glatt, p. 103.

The following transformational nehemta is attributed to the

Dubner Maggid:

The king once owned a precious diamond of which he was very proud. Once, for some reason, the diamond developed something like a scratch. The king consulted a number of diamond cutters who were great experts in their art to see whether the stone could be repaired. They said to him that the gem could be trimmed but that it would never have the same value as it had before. The defect would still be visible.

Later, a greater, more expert craftsman undertook to make the diamond even more beautiful than it had been. What did he do? He engraved around the scratch flowers and blossoms and made the scratch into the stem for the flowers. All the other artisans marvelled when they saw what this craftsman had done.

#### Moral

Through diligence, every person can turn the worst defects into fine qualities.<sup>90</sup>

The generation that initially listened to the homilies of the Dubno Maggid lived in a world that was far from whole. At best, their lives could be compared to a gem whose beauty had

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90 Israel J. Zevin, Alle Meshalim fon Dubner Maggid (New York: Tashrak Publishing Company, 1925), p. 130; the English translation was prepared for this study by Dr. Herbert H. Paper.

#### דורך פלייט דערנאכט סען אלעס

א סלך האט ביי וך נעהאט א סייטען בריליאנט, איה וועלכען ער איז געווען דער שטאלק. איינמאל, דורך א סיבה, האט דער בריליאנט געקומען א פגיסה, אזוי ווי א קיין. דער סלך האט וך געזאגטען סייט פערשידענע שטיינשלייפער, וואס זיינען קינסטלער אין זייער פאר, אריב סען קען דעם שטיין פערדייכען. האבען זיי איהם געזאגט, אז סען קען דעם שטיין ארויסשלייפן, אבער ער וועט קיינמאל נישט האבען דעם ווערסאן וואס ער האט פריער געהאט, רי פגיסה וועט וך אלץ אנזעהן. נאכדעם איז געקומען א גרעסערער קינסטלער און ער האט וך אנטקעגענטען צו מאכען דעם בריליאנט נאך שטערקער ווי געווען. וואס האט ער געזאגט? ער האט איהם דעם קיין אריבערקייט בלייבען און בלייבען און פון דעם גרייסען האט ער געמאכט א שטענעל פאר רי בלוסען. און ווען רי אנדערע קינסטלער האבען זיין אריינס געזען, האבען זיי דאס געזאגטערעם.

נמשל

דורך פלייט קען יעדער מענטש זינען ערנסטע פערלערען פערזאנלעך אין סעלות.

(seemingly) been irrevocably marred by a deep scratch. Their problems were so deep that no cosmetic change--no polishing--could repair the damage. It was the position of the king's finest artisans. This was probably the feeling of those who were listening to this parable.

One individual in this parable, the greatest craftsman of them all, focused on the inherent wholeness of the jewel and, using its natural lines as well as the scratch, began to carve. Soon the jewel is more beautiful than it ever was before. The Dubno Maggid concludes by saying that "through diligence every person can turn the worst defects into fine qualities." We learn that one who is willing to use radical and unconventional means can not only rediscover the beauty in life but can transform a tragedy into a work of art.

This story, like the Koretzer's parable of the seed, teaches the listener how important perspective is. This story, more powerfully than most, invites the listener to creatively alter his or her point of view.

This transformational nehemta continues to be told because every generation struggles in some way with that which compromises wholeness. This story reminds the listener that both beauty and flaw are real and can be used to make art.

Maurice Friedman, in his recent book A Dialogue with Hasidic Tales, examines some of the psychological aspects of the ma'aseh. One issue he deals with is hope and despondency. He wrote:

Hope and despondency are related to the "courage to address and the courage to respond." Hope implies the presence of

that courage, despondency its absence...false despondency is related to our failure to accept the creative possibility of the new moment....To forget gladness and fall into a depression is to forget God, said another Hasidic rebbe. "A broken heart prepares man for the service of God, but dejection corrodes service." What is called for, clearly, is to walk a narrow ridge between true and false despondency.... A "narrow ridge" is what we must also walk if we are to distinguish between true and false hope. One form of false hope is that stoicism that leads us to settle down in an intolerable situation rather than try to change it. "The real exile of Israel in Egypt is that they had learned to endure it," said Rabbi Hanokh....True hope is not to resign oneself to the will of God but to take courage and strength. One need not see the medicine life dispenses as sweet. If it is bitter, it should be recognized as such. Yet to say it is bitter is not to say it is bad.<sup>91</sup>

The role of the transformational nehemta in the Middle Ages, as well as the rabbinic period, was to help listeners actively respond to their situation. They helped these listeners have some understanding of the "between stages" that it was sometimes necessary to go through. They helped listeners change their perspective on situations that could not be changed and invited them to take damaged lives and transform them into works of art. These transformational nehemtot helped their listeners understand their own times as part of the journey from servitude to redemption.

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<sup>91</sup> Friedman, pp. 147-150.

### Chapter 3

#### I.L. Peretz: The World He Lived In The Issues That Concerned Him

Once, when he was a child, a visitor came to their house in Zamoshch; evidently a very pious visitor, for when he had to wash his hands ritually he picked up the large jug, filled it at the barrel, and emptied it over his left hand and his right! This he repeated three times, using a jugful each time--which was quite unnecessary for a ritual washing. Now, water in Zamoshch had to be brought from the well, as everybody knew--including the visitor. The water-carrier to the house of the Peretzes was a sick little Jew called Eizikel. When the pious visitor had finished his extravagant demonstration, young Peretz heard his mother murmur to herself: "Pious at Eizikel's expense."

And once, when there was much excitement in Zamoshch about a call for recruits, and the Jews--who naturally had little inclination to fight for the Czar--were greatly perturbed, Peretz's father calmly advised complete mass abstention: "Don't worry! They can't put a whole world in prison."

And Peretz, writing as an old man, says: "My father's 'They can't put a whole world in prison,' and my mother's 'Pious at Eizikel's expense'--these two seeds which were thrown into my young soul were not lost. They remained there forever. Quietly and secretly they have sprouted in everything I have written." <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Samuel, Prince of the Ghetto (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1959), p. 172.



In an essay written on the fourth anniversary of I. L. Peretz's death, Hersh D. Nomberg wrote:

Peretz was the leader of this era-- more correctly, its midpoint, a center of influences. Everything was reflected in him and refracted as by a prism. He was not a founder of a literary school, for until the last day of his life he was a seeker and a striver, always springing from style to style. The literary generation around him, his disciples, did not walk in his steps. Nearly everyone had his own trodden path, his domain, and his style. Peretz was a father of a literary family. His living interest for literature, his urge to create, his deep love for everything beautiful and sublime which ruled all the passions of his stormy nature--these acted magnetically upon all that was alive and creative in this world.<sup>2</sup>

To fully appreciate Peretz's work, and in particular the significance of the transformational nebemtot found among his short stories, it is necessary to briefly examine the period of history during which he lived as well as the literary trends of his time. This chapter will begin with a brief historical overview. Particular attention will be given to the effect of the pogroms of the early 1880s on the writers of the time. We will then examine the issues about which Peretz wrote.

### Historical Overview

During the eighteenth century, shifts of power took place in Poland which had a significant impact on the Jewish community. The status and influence of the Jews of Poland declined, in large part, as a result of the beginning of the slow growth of the

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The Golden Tradition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 287. (from: H.D. Nomberg, Y.L. Peretz, Buenos Aires, 1946, pp. 57-72; trans. from Yiddish by Dawidowicz.)

absolutist state.<sup>3</sup> Jews were subjected to new residential restrictions after Czarist Russia seized most of the old Kingdom of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century. The goal of Czar Nicholas the I was to decrease the corporate power of Jews and to place them under the authority of the state. To accomplish this goal, the Czar attempted to modernize and Russify Jews by establishing government schools. He also initiated his cantonist legislation.<sup>4</sup> In 1844, the Russian government dissolved the Kahal, substituting its own Jewish agents in its stead. Even when the original leaders assumed the new positions, a perception was created that traditional autonomy had been drastically curtailed.<sup>5</sup>

The authority of the kahal began to decline not only due to external factors but because of internal factors as well. During the seventeenth century, the Sabbetian movement had divided entire communities, creating an opposition force to the existing

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<sup>3</sup> David Biale, Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 87-88.

Biale explains that the fragmentation of power between, the king, the Church, and the nobility was beneficial to the Jews during the Middle Ages. In time the concentration of secular authority would lead to the destruction of Jewish communal autonomy. (pp. 88-89)

Biale defines absolutism as "the political system in which all power is concentrated in the hands of a monarch and his bureaucracy." (Its goal:) "to dismantle the medieval corporations as independent centers of power and concentrate all political authority in the hands of the sovereign." (pp. 89-91)

<sup>4</sup> Biale, pp. 92-3.

<sup>5</sup> Biale, pp. 94-5.

rabbinic leadership.<sup>6</sup> New movements arose<sup>7</sup>, competing to fill the power vacuum.<sup>8</sup> Zaddikim attracted their followers from a wide geographical area, diminishing the authority of local rabbis. The challenge to authority made by the hasidim was in some ways similar to the challenge raised by the maskilim.<sup>9</sup> The maskilim formed their own counter group with its own newspapers and periodicals, its own clubs and societies. They developed a new flowery style of Hebrew which differed significantly from medieval Hebrew. Despite the fact that they remained a small minority in eastern Europe, they claimed to be the authentic leaders of Judaism. Their goal: to educate the masses who had been misled for so long by obscurantist rabbis. They saw themselves as allies with the government, seeking the improvement and modernization of their people.<sup>10</sup>

For this counter-intelligentsia, western thought and mores were at least as important as the teachings of the Jewish tradition.<sup>11</sup> They believed that a good education should include the western sciences, the language of the land and a revitalization of Hebrew. They spoke of the "productivization of

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<sup>6</sup> Jacob Katz, Tradition and Crisis (New York: Glencoe Free Press, 1961), pp. 213-24.

<sup>7</sup> The Hasidim and Mitnagdim and the Musar Movement and the Haskalah.

<sup>8</sup> Biale, p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> Biale, pp. 100-1.

<sup>10</sup> Biale, pp. 101-2.

<sup>11</sup> Roskies, p. 57.

the Jews", i.e. moving Jews from the "useless" professions of money lending and commerce to the trades and agriculture.<sup>12</sup> They were concerned with women's lack of equality,<sup>13</sup> and they advocated religious reform.<sup>14</sup> They believed the western concept of progress.

The Kahal began to disintegrate under the threat of conscription. Many Jews were angry at the kahal which had collaborated with the Russian government and decried the community's leadership which had been willing to hire individuals to kidnap the children of the poor in order to protect the well-to-do.<sup>15</sup>

In 1856, at the beginning of the reign of Alexander the II, cantonism was abolished. A period of great optimism ensued. There were many new freedoms: some Jews were allowed to settle in Russia's interior, censorship was eased and Jewish periodicals in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian began to flourish. The critique of the maskilim grew harsher, and political activity increased.

#### Literary Trends

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<sup>12</sup> Biale, p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Adler, Women of the Shtetl--Through the Eyes of Y. L. Peretz (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1980), p. 23. The social injustice experienced by women was taken up by J. L. Gordon, Mendele Mokher Sforim, and later I. L. Peretz.

<sup>14</sup> Biale, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> Roskies, p. 60.

The literary history of the Haskalah (1781-1881) is generally divided into three periods. During the "period of rationalism", from 1781 to 1830, Hebrew writers championed the cause of the Enlightenment. They wrote articles and fictional works promoting their new secular ideals and defended their position against the challenges raised by orthodox thinkers.<sup>16</sup> From 1830 to 1850, the "period of romanticism," Hebrew writers took renewed interest in the Jewish past and its literature. They made efforts to harmonize their ideology with "the spirit" of traditional Judaism.<sup>17</sup> 1850 through 1881 is known as the "period of realism." Authors developed a "ruthlessly sober sense of the anomalies of Jewish life in the ghetto."<sup>18</sup> They wrote stinging critiques against Jewish traditionalism which they saw as the source of all that was unwholesome in Jewish life.

Halkin has suggested that these periods cannot be so neatly divided:

There can be no doubt that Haskalah literature ... was at all times a peculiar blending of rationalism, romanticism, and realism. (Rational examination dominated though it never ceased to be romantic) because it was always inspired by a naive faith, faith in the essential nobility of human life, faith in man, faith in the Jew's own power to survive as a Jew, as a distinct ethnic being even when he had lost much of his ghetto otherworldliness.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Simon Halkin, Modern Hebrew Literature: Trends and Values (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1950), p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Halkin, p. 35.



For the most part, the leading maskilim, influenced by German maskilim, took a dim view of Yiddish. Some hoped that eventually Yiddish as a spoken language would die out and be replaced by the language of the land. They were nearly unanimous in considering Hebrew as the appropriate language for their literary pursuits.<sup>20</sup> Judah Leib Gordon, author of poetry, short stories, and a journalist, dominated the literary scene until 1880. He was committed to realistic Haskalah, and criticized not only rabbinic but biblical conceptions of spirituality. He called for "a more vital materialist commitment to life."<sup>21</sup> R. A. Braudes, an early novelist, first wrote about the struggle of a young maskil to liberate himself from the narrow world of his childhood and later wrote a second novel about a character who succeeds in liberating himself only to find that the secular world does not offer him the peace of mind the traditional world did.<sup>22</sup>

Yiddish was considered the language of the uneducated masses and Yiddish literature was, for the most part, written for their

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<sup>20</sup> Meyer Waxman, A History of Jewish Literature Vol. IV. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff Ltd., 1941), pp. 65-66.

<sup>21</sup> "Hebrew Literature," Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972, p. 187.

<sup>22</sup> "Hebrew Literature," pp. 187-8. Braudes had a significant impact on Peretz when he first came to Warsaw. We find similar movement in Peretz's work. Prior to the 1880s, Peretz embraced Haskalah ideology. By the end of the decade he was turning to the rich folk lore and literary heritage of the Jewish people. ("I.L. Peretz," pp. 279-80.)

tastes and capabilities.<sup>23</sup> Some maskilim, however, considered it their duty to educate the masses. The only way they could reach them was to introduce ideas of the Haskalah into Yiddish texts.<sup>24</sup> Some, like Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788-1860), Aksenfeld (1787-1866), and Abraham Baer Gottlober (1811-1899) began using Yiddish literature as a way of condemning the existing communal leadership. They wrote bitter satires about the traffic in poor children brought about by Nicholas I's policy of conscription, about the unfair concentration and use of power among the wealthy, and about the educational and philosophic goals of the Haskalah.<sup>25</sup>

Both Mendele Mokher Sforim (born Shalom Jacob Abramowitch) and Sholom Aleichem (born Sholom Rabinowitch) had been writing for a long time before Peretz made his literary debut. Mendele, known as "the grandfather of Yiddish literature," had been writing for twenty five years and Sholom Aleichem had long been a

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23 S.C. Nigger wrote that early Yiddish literature was a literature of readers not writers, "inspired and dictated by those for whom it was created, not by those who created it. That tradition persisted...till nearly the end of the nineteenth century." ("Di Yidishe literatur un der yidisher lezer,") (Dawidowicz, p. 64.)

Early Yiddish books were meant to serve as ethical guides for women and the uneducated. The three most popular were the Maase Bukh, Tseno-Ureno, and Brantspiegel. (Sol Liptzin, A History of Yiddish Literature (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1972), pp. 10, 11, 13.)

In the 1880s the two most popular Yiddish works were adaptations of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Heinrich Campe's Columbus. (Liptzin, pp. 30-32.)

24 Waxman, pp. 66-67.

25 Liptzin, pp. 26-35.

favorite among the masses.<sup>26</sup>

Mendele, born in 1836, is considered the father of both modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Though sociologically he represents the Russian Haskalah, aesthetically he introduced a new period with his stress on "realism and artistic discipline."<sup>27</sup> He strove to enrich the language "with the oral treasures he learned from the lips of simple people."<sup>28</sup> In 1864 he left off writing in biblical Hebrew in favor of the more folkish Yiddish. When Mendele returned to Hebrew in 1886, he turned to a simpler style based on mishnaic and prayer book Hebrew.<sup>29</sup>

His early works are satires. The Little Man castigates Jewish communal leaders for becoming wealthy from the religious taxes they impose on the community. The Nag, his most successful satire, is an allegory describing the Jew as the world's scape goat.<sup>30</sup> In his later years his satire grew more mild. "His attacks on heartless Jewish patricians yielded to compassionate treatment of their victims, men with crippled bodies and tortured souls."<sup>31</sup> For over half a century he worked on his longest novel, The Wishing Ring. It concerns the experiences, hopes, and

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26 Peretz, My Memoirs, p. 15.

27 "Hebrew Literature," pp. 191-2.

28 Liptzin, p. 39.

29 "Hebrew Literature," pp. 191-2.

30 Liptzin, pp. 40, 42.

31 Liptzin, p. 43. See Fishke the Lame.

dreams--as well as the disillusionment--of the pioneering maskilim of his generation.<sup>32</sup>

Sholom Aleichem was born in 1859. His early work was written in Hebrew; after 1883 Yiddish became his literary medium. From 1888-1889 he financed, edited, and published Folksbibliotek which had a major beneficial impact on Yiddish as a literary language.

During the 1890s, he worked on sketches of Tevye, the Jewish dairyman, and Menahem Mendle, a schlemiel constantly dreaming of fortunes that eluded him. After experiencing a pogrom in Kiev, he left Russia, and after traveling in Europe, he settled in the United States. His final years were a time of intense creativity and growing fame.<sup>33</sup>

Liptzin describes Sholom Aleichem's work as follows:

Sholom Aleichem is unique in his combining an awareness of a tragic substratum that underpins the structure of human life with an indestructible will to extract somehow fragments of joy out of every happening. His is a laughter through tears, a stoic humor that surmounts all obstacles and disappointments<sup>34</sup>...He depicted them (the Jewish people) living like members of one large family, gossiping and quarreling, but without venom, possessing a deep sense of responsibility and always ready to help each other in emergencies. They feel the pain of all mankind even though mankind is not interested in them. They wear gray shabby clothes but their souls are colorful and alert, and Sholom Aleichem loved them with all their weaknesses and follies.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Liptzin, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> Liptzin, pp. 66-69.

<sup>34</sup> Liptzin, p. 68.

<sup>35</sup> Liptzin, p. 70.

By the 1870s, some maskilim began to break faith with earlier Haskalah ideas. Some writers were influenced by Russian positivism. Many began to give up hope in "the enlightened despotism" of the Czar and in Russian liberals.<sup>36</sup> Many developed a greater interest in the cultural and spiritual values of the people.<sup>37</sup> The Haskalah had produced a counter-intelligentsia who found themselves with no alternative but to return to their roots. Unfortunately, emotionally and spiritually it was difficult for them to return. They found themselves estranged from both the world they left and the world they had tried to enter.<sup>38</sup>

#### The Pogroms of 1881

There were different responses to the pogroms of 1881. Among the masses they merely accelerated an ongoing process. Economic conditions had led to serious decline in the small

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36 Roskies, p. 64.

38 Waxman, p. 489.

Halkin wrote that when the goals of the Haskalah were realized, a terrible dilemma developed.

"Insofar as its humanistic ideals are realized, the emergent individual Jew tends to find his fulfillment in the non-Jewish civilization...(yet) those Jews who are emancipated, who do become enlightened and embrace the brave new world, very soon are absorbed by that larger world and tend to disappear as Jews...(the critical question:) How can the Jew survive as a Jew, distinct and distinctive, once he comes to share fully the cultural non-Jewish environment of the country in which he lives."

38 Roskies, p. 64.



villages.<sup>39</sup> In the decade prior to 1881, over 40,000 Jews had already emigrated to America.<sup>40</sup> The pogrom confirmed what the masses already knew: the situation for Jews in eastern Europe was worsening. It was time to leave.

For the intellectuals the pogroms came as a much greater shock. Except for local disturbances in 1744, 1768, and 1871, there had been no large scale pogroms since 1648.<sup>41</sup> The liberalism of Alexander II during the 1850s and 1860s had led many Jewish intellectuals to believe that Russian society would lift some of the restrictions on Jews if they were only willing to undergo a process of westernization. However, during the late 1860s and 1870s, xenophobic sentiments again rose to the surface, and those who weren't distracted by ideology noticed the antisemitic reaction to Alexander II's liberalism.<sup>42</sup> Mintz explains:

...the significance of 1881 lay not in the absolute quantum of destruction. The waves of pogroms of 1903-1905 and 1917-1920 resulted in loss of life on a far, far greater scale. The paradigm-shattering power of 1881 lay in the reinterpretation of Russian Jewish history suddenly forced upon Jewish intellectuals. The so-called liberalization of the 1850s could no longer be regarded as a harbinger of things to come but had to be reinterpreted as a surface aberration. Instead, it was the pogroms that revealed the true conditions of Russian-Jewish relations and promised to be the dark precursor of their future as well. If the Jews improved themselves, educated themselves, made themselves productive, prettified themselves, it would make no

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39 Adler, p. 21.

40 Mintz, p. 111.

41 Mintz, p. 1111-12.

42 Mintz, p. 113.

difference.<sup>43</sup>...Belief in the very tenability of Jewish life in Russia suddenly and irreversibly had to be given up.<sup>44</sup>

The response of the intellectuals was vigorous and varied. Zionism, Socialism, and a number of other political alternatives were espoused. There were two major literary responses: many turned to traditional works, using biblical texts of lamentation and consolation.<sup>45</sup> As was the case with the prophets before them, after the catastrophic event, these authors turned from messages of rebuke to consolation.<sup>46</sup>

Mendele's first response to the pogroms was silence. Then, he began to recast traditional texts,<sup>47</sup> turning them into works

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<sup>43</sup> Underline mine.

<sup>44</sup> Mintz, pp. 114-15.

<sup>45</sup> In Modern Midrash, Jacobson explains: "Myths of the past are useful as a means to analyze present crises and to explore alternative approaches that might help to resolve these crises." (p. 5.)

<sup>46</sup> Mintz, p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> Northop Frye and Harry Slochower have offered two reasons why modern authors turned to traditional texts.

(According to Frye) One may discover in the myths of the past a set of cultural values superior to the currently accepted ones. Mythopoetic writers therefore see the mythic world of the past as a source of revolutionary values more appropriate to the cultural needs of their time than are the values of the present (Jacobson, p.5).

Slochower suggested:

In the re-creation of the myth by outstanding individual artists, the hero's quest becomes a critique of the existing social norms and points to a futuristic order which is envisioned as integrating the valuable residues of the past and the present. (Thus this retelling) involves the creation of counterhistories that reinterpret the myths of the past in an effort to interpret the crisis of Jewish modernity and often to justify the kind of radical changes in Jewish culture which they believe to be necessary.

(Harry Slochower, Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the

of sacred parody.<sup>48</sup> He<sup>49</sup> disagreed strongly with the modern martyrological works that were being written.<sup>50</sup> Later he began writing works more sympathetic toward those who suffered poverty and persecution.<sup>51</sup>

After the pogroms of the early 1880s, one notes a revolution in attitude toward ghetto Judaism by many writers. Suddenly "Jewish ghettoism...shines forth in its basic, deeply moving human worth."<sup>52</sup> Authors such as Ansky, Peretz, Berdyczewski, and Bialik began a search for personal transcendence, using traditional texts to hold up a heroic ideal different from the one touted by a society they saw as corrupt.<sup>53</sup>

A shift from universalism to particularism took place which led to the discovery of the individual. In Warsaw, a neoromantic, impressionist center began to develop. The leading authors of this group, David Frischmann, I.L. Peretz, and Micha Josef Berdyczewski, stressed form and beauty over realism. They were influenced not only by Russian utilitarianism but by

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Literary Classics (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), p. 34.)

(See entire discussion in Jacobson's Modern Midrash, pp. 4-7.)

48 Roskies, p. 65.

49 Bialik and Tchernichewski took a similar stance.

50 Mintz, p. 118.

51 Mintz, p. 122.

52 Halkin, p. 71.

53 Roskies, p. 78.

European aestheticism.<sup>54</sup> We find in their work, and in the work of others, the desire to create new literary values and raise the spiritual level of their readers.<sup>55</sup>

### PERETZ'S BIOGRAPHY

#### Early Years:

Peretz was born in Zamosc, Poland on May 18, 1952.<sup>56</sup> Zamosc was a bustling town of 12,000 inhabitants. It was known as "little Paris" because of its tempo.<sup>57</sup> Due to the Russian troops stationed there and the German merchants who regularly passed through, the culture was multi-lingual.<sup>58</sup> The town was decidedly anti-hasidic. Fanaticism was not tolerated. While Zamosc became a center for the Enlightenment, it made little impact on the masses. There were few assimilationists in town, because, as Peretz explained, "no one from the gentile world has appeared to

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<sup>54</sup> "Hebrew Literature," p. 192.

<sup>55</sup> Waxman, p. 489.

<sup>56</sup> A. A. Roback, I. L. Peretz: Psychologist of Literature (Cambridge, Mass.: Sci-Art Publishers, 1935), p. 58.

Orenstein, (in I.L. Peretz's Bontche Shweig and V.G. Korolenko's Makar's Dream: A Comparative Literary Study (Montreal: Jewish Cultural Club, 1965), pp. 7-8) writes that there is some debate about the date of Peretz's birth. A number of scholars believe that he was born in 1858. 1852 is the date listed on his birth certificate, but the dating on birth certificates in Poland during this period is not always accurate. 1852 is the date given in a number of credible sources including the Encyclopedia Judaica.

<sup>57</sup> Roback, pp. 58-9.

<sup>58</sup> I. Howe and E. Greenberg, Selected Stories: I.L. Peretz (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1974), Introduction, p. 8.

us who is worth a second chance."<sup>59</sup> A number of celebrated rabbis, scholars, and writers came from Zamosc within a century of Peretz.<sup>60</sup>

Several authors who have written about Peretz suggest that he is descended from a Marrano family. Peretz himself makes no mention of this fact. His immediate forebears were respected merchants and scholars from Frankfort and Danzig.<sup>61</sup>

Peretz's father, Judah, was a timber merchant. He was well versed in traditional texts and yet liberal in his outlook. His mother, Rebecca, was an affectionate mother and a pious woman.<sup>62</sup> Due to her traditionalism, Peretz was prevented from receiving a systematic secular education. He did receive lessons in Hebrew grammar, German and Russian.<sup>63</sup>

Peretz was considered an ilui. He began to study humash at the age of three and Talmud at 6. He had an excellent memory.<sup>64</sup> He also enjoyed playing pranks on his teachers and he ran about town in ways considered very odd.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> I.L. Peretz, My Memoirs, trans. Fred Goldberg (New York: The Citadel Press, 1964), pp. 99, 132. See Chapter 5.

<sup>60</sup> Roback, p. 59.

<sup>61</sup> Roback, pp. 59-60.

<sup>62</sup> Roback, p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> "I. L. Peretz," Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972, p. 279.

<sup>64</sup> Roback, pp. 65-7.

<sup>65</sup> Adler, pp. 31-2:

"Peretz tells of his idiosyncratic behavior which earned him the appellation of "the crazy Leibush." Recurrent reference is made to the taunts of adults and



Having outgrown the local teachers, his father was advised to allow him to study alone in the bet midrash. Despite promises that he would apply himself, Peretz spent his time pouring over mystical and philosophic works, running around outside, and listening to stories.<sup>66</sup> After his behavior had thoroughly exasperated his parents when he was about twelve, he was sent to study with Reb Pinkhusl in Szczecbrzeszny about fourteen miles away. He was considered unusual there as well, and his dreaminess and preoccupation were considered an aberration.<sup>67</sup> Reb Pinkhusl himself taught Peretz very little. He did teach him to be independent in his studies and found him a study partner in the bet midrash.<sup>68</sup> Peretz returned home due to illness.<sup>69</sup>

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youthful peers who often referred to him as "the crazy one." His madcap reputation apparently followed him in his sojourns from one town to another. "Everybody in Shebreshin soon heard of my insanity, of my dreamy nature, of my doing things topsy-turvy, of every oddity of my nature," he wrote in his memoirs. Sokolow indicates that this reputation pursued him even in his later years as an established writer in Warsaw. In several of his narratives Peretz clearly identifies with the half-crazed town recluse who is ignored and maligned by the "respectable" elements of the shtetl, but he is seen by Peretz as the only vestige of saintly in a world gone awry. Hence the role of outsider was a familiar one to Peretz. His own idiosyncratic needs inclined him to assert his right to be different, and in this role he encountered the ridicule and consternation of the underdog quite early in life. He could thus be expected to empathize readily with the aggrieved."

<sup>66</sup> Roback, pp. 65-70.

<sup>67</sup> Roback, pp. 71, 73, 77, 76-7.

<sup>68</sup> Roback, pp. 80-1.

<sup>69</sup> Roback, p. 80.

From his memoirs one gets the clear impression that Peretz did not think highly of the series of teachers his father arranged for him. Some were traditionalists, others secularists. None seemed to respond to the kinds of questions that interested him.<sup>70</sup>

### Adolescence

Peretz says very little about his adolescent years. We know that he studied Rambam and Kabbalah in the bet midrash. We also know that for all his intelligence, he himself was astounded by how little he had learned. And we know he loved stories far more than the study of Talmud. (See Appendix B: The Importance of the Folk-tale and Folksong, p. 3 and Peretz - His Early Love of Stories, pp. 3-4.)

We do know something about his concerns and interests in this period. During puberty he became more and more preoccupied with existential questions. Why had God chosen to create the world? What was the meaning of life and the purpose of death? What reward could possibly recompense humanity for the suffering they experienced?<sup>71</sup> (See Appendix B: Peretz's Theological and Emotional Struggle During Adolescence, pp. 4-7.)

I am already suffering alienation, the "Exile in the Divine Presence." Why does falsehood triumph over truth? Why do mistakes determine Fate? Why does God Almighty "keep ashes in his mouth and remain silent"?

I am personally in exile, too!<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Roback, pp. 81-2.

<sup>71</sup> See My Memoirs, chapter 8.

<sup>72</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, p. 163.

### Introduction to the Haskalah

One evening, Peretz walked to the edge of town. He found himself standing by the gate of Michael the fiddler who, during his earlier years, had accumulated an extensive library of secular works. Suddenly Michael appeared at the door.<sup>73</sup>

"People say," he observed, "that you're a genius. Can you interpret a plain text?"

Holding up the book in his hand, he pointed to a passage where the author deals with transfiguration. I read the passage, understood it, and interpreted it for him.

"You are certainly a genius! Wait!"

He disappeared into the house...

...Michael Fiddler came out with his lantern in one hand but, in the other hand, instead of the book, he held out a big, rusty key. It was the key to his library in town.

Handing the key to me, he said: "Here is the key to my store of books. You've earned it. It is yours from now on!"

Peretz approached the library with some excitement and anxiety. He felt sure that the decision to go in would mark a decisive point in his life.<sup>74</sup> (See Appendix B: Peretz's Introduction to the Enlightenment, pp. 7-10.)

I turned the key, and the rusty lock emitted rasping sounds. My heart palpitated, yet I found the courage to open the door. I hastily threw the shutters wide open. I was in "their" academy--a storehouse of gentile learning...

So many books! All four walls were lined with them! And many were heaped on the floor, strewn under my very feet.

"I will read everything!"...<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, p. 179.

<sup>74</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, See Chapter 9.

<sup>75</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, p. 183.

Peretz didn't read everything, but he read volumes. He began with the books written in Polish, reading novels, legal codes, and histories.

Books containing dialogue held a particularly powerful attraction for me--"the dots and dashes," as I called them then, of people's conversation. Every "dash" appeared to me a crack through which a human soul could be glimpsed...I likened that library to a market, where many people, from all walks of life, engage in all kinds of trades and undertakings. They do all kinds of work. They form groups and talk among themselves. Each group is preoccupied with its own problems. And I stroll around in this market (the library), walking from group to group. I listen. I catch snatches of talk here and there, which I piece together in my imagination.<sup>76</sup>

Peretz began writing his own poetry in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish. These works did not meet his approval and he destroyed them.<sup>77</sup>

Peretz also read scientific works, skipping the mathematical symbols and formulas. The order in which he read the volumes didn't matter to him.<sup>78</sup> He read and read with great excitement.

But suddenly: "Everything, after all," as Hartmann said, "is matter."

"No free will!" (There were dozens of pamphlets on this subject.) And to top it off, Karl Vogt said: "The brain produces thought as if it were another limb." How amazing!

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<sup>76</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, pp. 184-5.

<sup>77</sup> Charles A. Maddison, Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), p. 100.

<sup>78</sup> Throughout his life Peretz was a man of diverse interests. He read through the library of a sympathetic maskil and, in a town where hasidism was opposed, used to visit the local shteibl. (Howe and Greenberg, Selected Stories, p. 8).

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Something in me congealed, and something within me died. I didn't believe anymore...<sup>79</sup>

Peretz suffered terribly from his crisis of faith. He turned to S. Khodak, a graduate of a Government Rabbinical College in Zhitomer, who taught biblical narrative in Zamosc.<sup>80</sup> Khodak advised him to leave home and enter the rabbinic school in Zhitomer or at least in Vilna. Khodak even pledged his assistance and pawned his watch to finance the trip.

Peretz, in a state of confusion, approached a woman he'd always loved, and despite the fact that she was preparing to marry someone else, told her how he felt about her. In a sisterly fashion she listened to all he had to say, including his ideological confusion, and promised to see him off. Peretz secretly prepared to leave home.<sup>81</sup>

I went to bed early the night before, my pack under my pillow. I was sure I wouldn't fall asleep. A whistle in the street was to be the signal for me to come down. I put out my kerosene lamp, whispered goodbye to everybody and to everything in the dark house. My heart was laden with grief and sorrow. Yet, I felt I must go.

Suddenly, I heard a slight noise in the adjoining room. I listened. Silently, the door opened, and my mother, barefoot, softly came in. It was so dark that, if it were not for the weak moonlight filtering into my room, I'd never have recognized her. She walked to my bed quietly, sat down at the foot, and looked me straight in the eyes. I couldn't avert my glance. I must see her! I must look at her! I saw tears in her eyes. She said goodbye to me, and yet she remained sitting on the edge of my bed.

My mother waited at my bedside, watching me, her tears streaming down her cheeks.

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<sup>79</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, p. 187. See Appendix B, pp. 9-10. Underlining mine.

<sup>80</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, p. 188.

<sup>81</sup> Roback, pp. 99-100.



Who had betrayed my secret?  
I didn't leave home.<sup>82</sup>

Several days later, Peretz's father returned from a journey, announcing that he had made arrangements for Peretz to marry Gabriel Yehuda Lichtenfeld's daughter Sarah.<sup>83</sup> Lichtenfeld was known as a liberal and an intellectual. He was a mathematician who had an interest in poetry. He was impressed with his future son-in-law's literary aspirations, and Peretz was glad to have a sympathetic maskil as his father-in-law.<sup>84</sup> Sarah and I. L. Peretz married when he was about 20 years of age.<sup>85</sup> It appears that he had a very cordial relationship with his father-in-law but not with his wife.<sup>86</sup>

The cause of their marital discord is unclear. Madison suggests that Sarah had been given a good secular education and looked down on the self-educated Peretz. She also had disdain for his writing.<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately, Peretz's memoirs end with his

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<sup>82</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, pp. 190-1.

<sup>83</sup> It is not clear exactly when this took place. Madison says that Peretz was 18 at the time (p. 100); according to others he was older. The date of his marriage, his divorce, and his move to Warsaw are also a matter of debate.

<sup>84</sup> Madison, p. 100.

<sup>85</sup> Roback, p. 113.

<sup>86</sup> Roback, pp. 103-105.

<sup>87</sup> Madison, p. 100.

wedding day; he himself is silent on the issue. The unhappy marriage ended in divorce.<sup>88</sup>

During the marriage, Peretz tried a number of business ventures. None of these ventures were successful.<sup>89</sup>

Peretz and Lichtenfeld wrote a collection of poems called "Sipurim be-Shir ve-Shirim Shonim me'et Shenei Ba'alei Asufot," which was published in 1877. It is not clear whether they were written earlier, whether the divorce took place later, or whether their relationship continued to be friendly.<sup>90</sup>

Sarah and Peretz had two children. The first died in infancy. The second, Lucian, was peculiar in many ways. He had fits of temper and lived a solitary existence. Though he began as a medical student, in the end he became a high school mathematics instructor. Peretz and his son never had a good relationship. After the divorce, Lucian was raised by assimilated relatives. He remained unfamiliar with Yiddish.<sup>91</sup> Roback writes:

His reaction toward his father was far more contemptible. Not only did he consider him mediocre, but looked upon the admiration and recognition which Peretz was receiving on all hands as called forth by "tricks" and effects. To him his father was a poseur, insincere and lacking spontaneity.

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<sup>88</sup> Madison, p. 100.

Roback, p. 113, is of the opinion that they were divorced after four years.

The divorce took place either in 1875 or 1876.

<sup>89</sup> Roback, p. 113.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Roback, pp. 107-8.

Lucian seemed a walking contradiction. Although frugal in monetary affairs he never shirked his duties to relatives. He even gave private lessons without charge and assisted people financially whenever possible. As he grew older, however, his avarice knew no bounds, and his meanness toward his...father<sup>92</sup> went to the extent of extorting some insurance policies from him just prior to his death, and putting them into the hands of an attorney. This action so wrought up Peretz that he ordered him, through Dinezon, to leave the house. In a tantrum, following this order, Lucian destroyed and trampled upon some of the most valuable belongings in Peretz's home, amongst them a bust of the writer.<sup>93</sup>

Lucian married into a Polonized family. Peretz's grandson, though quite devoted to him, had his father's antipathy to things Jewish. He scarcely understood Yiddish, and after his mother's death he converted to Christianity.<sup>94</sup>

#### Early Warsaw Years

In 1876, at the age of twenty four, Peretz went to Warsaw. To support himself he gave private hebrew lessons. He spent much of his free time preparing to take a law exam. Since he had attended neither high school or university, this was not an easy matter.<sup>95</sup> During this difficult transitional period, Peretz came under the influence of the novelist R. A. Braudes. In 1877, he passed the exam and became a successful lawyer. He won case

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<sup>92</sup> One wonders how much this relationship is reflected in Peretz's short stories, "The Messenger" and "Bontche Schweig."

<sup>93</sup> Roback, pp. 108-9.

<sup>94</sup> Roback, p. 109.

<sup>95</sup> Roback, pp. 116-18.

after case, and both his financial and social situation improved.<sup>96</sup>

Also in 1877, Peretz met Helena Rigelheim at a fair in Leczna. According to Dinezon, Peretz proposed immediately. Helena initially rebuffed him but within a few days, Peretz had won her over. Their marriage, if not happy, was amicable.<sup>97</sup>

Between 1878 and 1886, his attention was focused on his legal work. As his practice grew, he engaged several assistants. He did not publish very much during these years,<sup>98</sup> but what he wrote was well accepted. He was influenced by the democratic tendencies in liberal Russian literature.<sup>99</sup> Literary critics and writers such as Sokolow and later Klausner were excited by his Hebrew poetry, ballads, and fiction.<sup>100</sup>

In 1888, whether due to the libel of some jealous attorney or because of another unexplained reason<sup>101</sup> Peretz lost his right to practice law. When he appealed to have the ruling reversed in St. Petersburg, the Minister of Justice arbitrarily refused.<sup>102</sup>

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96 "I. L. Peretz" , pp. 279-80.

97 Roback, pp. 113-14.

98 Roback, pp. 117-18.

99 Waxman, p. 490.

100 Roback, p. 220.

101 Some suggest that Peretz was charged with a "tendency to favor the rebellious Polish interests." He often spoke Polish publically which was frowned on. (Roback, p. 119)

102 Roback, pp. 119-120.

Peretz now had time to become part of the Jewish intellectual circles in Warsaw. On Saturdays he lectured at the synagogue, attracting students with his energetic personality. He was in his element at the salon meetings and the soirees of the Jewish intelligentsia. Sokolow, the "dean of the Jewish publicists" gathered around him individuals who were interested in politics.<sup>103</sup>

In 1888 Peretz turned to writing. While at one time he, like many others of his generation, had become intoxicated with the dreams and promises of the Haskalah,<sup>104</sup> Peretz now turned his attention back to his people. He gave up writing in Polish and turned to Yiddish. This was, of course, part of the general literary response to the pogroms of the early 1880s. Peretz heard that in Kiev a man named Sholom Rabinovitch (Sholom Aleichem) was preparing to publish Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek.<sup>105</sup> In 1888, he sent him "Monish" a work that was to become a milestone in Yiddish literature.<sup>106</sup> Sholom Aleichem paid him the generous fee of 150 rubles. Though Peretz gave Sholom Aleichem

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<sup>103</sup> Roback, pp. 121-22.

<sup>104</sup> Sol Liptzin, Peretz (New York: Yiddish Scientific Institute YIVO, 1947), pp.12-14.

<sup>105</sup> Madison, p. 101.

<sup>106</sup> "I.L. Peretz" p. 280.



permission to make revisions, he was very disturbed by the emendations he made.<sup>107</sup>

Liptzin described "Monish" as follows:

In verses often reminiscent of Heine, in cadences ranging from the pathetic to the satiric, this first major poem in Yiddish by the former Hebrew writer of Zamosc portrayed the tragedy of man engaged in a desperate struggle with demonic forces within himself; a struggle between his earthbound ego and his heaven aspiring soul. The pure pious youth Monish put up strong resistance against the lure of the demonic temptress Lilith...who appeared to him in the figure of a golden-haired maiden with a joyous, melodious, seductive voice. In the long run, however, she brought about his downfall when his fettered flesh revolted against the tyranny of his ascetic soul.<sup>108</sup>

During this period, Peretz's financial situation deteriorated. It was impossible to earn a living as a writer, and soon Peretz was penniless and in debt.

In 1890 Jan Block, a convert to Christianity, organized a statistical survey at his own expense. His goal was to make an inquiry into the occupational status of the Jewish masses. His hope was that with this data he could persuade governmental officials to ease the burden (financial and political) on the Jewish communities. He hired Peretz and Sokolow<sup>109</sup> as his

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<sup>107</sup> Madison, p. 101.

When Peretz wrote to Sholom Aleichem about "Monish," he did so in Hebrew. He felt that Yiddish was not distinguished enough for such purposes.

It is interesting to note that Peretz was unfamiliar with the writing of Sholom Aleichem and Mendele. Apparently he did not read works in "the Jargon" yet. (Ibid)

<sup>108</sup> Liptzin, History of Yiddish Literature, p. 57.

<sup>109</sup> Both Peretz and Sokolow understood the futility of the expedition. Realizing that this effort could do nothing to secure emancipation for the masses of the Jewish people, Peretz was furious. He calmed down when he realized that this job was

surveyors.<sup>110</sup> Peretz was able to visit a significant number of small villages in the province of Tomaszow.<sup>111</sup>

The result of this journey was Peretz's Bilder fun a Provints Rayze ('Pictures of a Provincial Journey'), published in 1891 in Di Yidishe Bibliotek.<sup>112</sup>

Most of the Jewish intellectuals had moved away from the small rural communities. Many of those who wrote about the small towns wrote highly nostalgic stories which said very little about the reality of life. Others wrote melancholy tales about their collapse. Many intellectuals simply ignored the villages.

The Jewish village and township, with its rich religious and cultural traditions and its specific way of life, was allowed to die in isolation. No realistic writer arose to rescue it from oblivion, to record in epic style the rise and fall of the community, and to depict the characters deeply rooted in its soil.<sup>113</sup>

Peretz and Mendele exploded the myth of the shtetl. In Peretz's accounts of the villages he visited, he described the disintegration of social and religious life. These accounts made it clear that a once great Polish Jewry was being threatened by poverty.<sup>114</sup> He also wrote beautiful descriptions of the types of

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an opportunity for him to research the small villages. (Roback, p. 125)

<sup>110</sup> Roback, pp. 122-5.

<sup>111</sup> "I.L. Peretz," p. 280.

<sup>112</sup> Roback, p. 124. These sketches were reprinted in 1894.

<sup>113</sup> Rabinovich, Isaiah, Major Trends in Modern Hebrew Fiction (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 24-5.

<sup>114</sup> Roskies, pp. 109-10.

individuals he met on his journey. Weiner has pointed out that one of the more interesting features of Peretz's accounts was that he wrote them so that they would be of interest to the very people about whom he wrote.<sup>115</sup>

Peretz was deeply impressed by the sights he saw on this journey. While life was dreary, he found that:

...amongst these starved souls, leading precarious lives, true acts of heroism self-sacrifice and devotion could be found aplenty. If Mendele saw the objectionable side...and Sholom Aleichem its humorous side, Peretz grasped its pathetic and sublime aspect...<sup>116</sup>

When the Bloch expedition came to an end, Peretz returned once again to Warsaw. He became active in the cultural and social life among Jewish intellectuals and workers. He also wrote and lectured. However, Peretz was once again unemployed.<sup>117</sup>

In 1891, with the help of friends, he obtained work with the Jewish community, a position which he retained until his death in 1915. He worked as a bookkeeper and comptroller in the department responsible for burials. The salary was very modest, and Peretz was thirty eight years old with two dependents. (His starting salary was 500 rubles a year.) He also complained of the drudgery of his work. Sokolow, who had been instrumental in helping him obtain the job, saw the situation differently. As an

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<sup>115</sup> Leo Weiner, History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Hermon Press, 1972), p. 208.

<sup>116</sup> Roback, p. 135.

<sup>117</sup> "I.L. Peretz," p. 281.

official of the Jewish community, Peretz had the opportunity to meet the kind of characters that peopled his stories and plays. The work itself was not taxing, and it provided him with sufficient leisure time to write and lecture.<sup>118</sup>

Peretz's return to Warsaw marked the beginning of a very creative period of his life. In 1890, he published Bekante Bilder (Familiar Scenes), a book of short stories. In 1891 he edited the first two issues of Di Yidishe Bibliotek (The Jewish Library), a periodical devoted to popular articles of general interest and belles lettres.<sup>119</sup>

As a young maskil during the 1870s, Peretz had looked down on "the Jargon." It is clear that his attitude toward Yiddish changed in the years following the 1881 pogroms.<sup>120</sup> In "Bildung," the introductory article of Di Yidishe Bibliotek,

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<sup>118</sup> Though it was not strenuous work and did not have long hours, there could be no interruptions. Peretz was not able to take a vacation for ten years. During the next decade, he took several vacations during the summer months. This was considered a great luxury and was only possible because Peretz had doctor's orders to take a break. (Roback, pp. 138-9)

On a number of occasions, Peretz's work schedule prevented him from participating in conferences and lectures. When asked to speak in Lemberg, he replied:

I am a completely occupied, sold man. I want so much to go to the small Jewish towns, but I can't move from this place. I must be back at my desk in Warsaw early on Sunday morning...

(I.L. Peretz, The Book of Fire, trans. Joseph Leftwich (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc. 1960), Introduction, p. 48.)

<sup>119</sup> "I.L. Peretz," p. 281. (After a brief interruption, the third issue was published in 1895.)

<sup>120</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 9.

Peretz wrote that, given the fact that three million Jews understood Yiddish, a Yiddish literature was needed.<sup>121</sup>

A new level of cultural activity began to stir among the Jewish workers of Warsaw. "Jargonist committees"<sup>122</sup> began to meet for study groups. David Pinski, a dramatist, short story writer and a staunch Bundist invited Peretz to read his work to working class audiences. Their appreciation of his stories and poetry led Peretz to begin publishing Yomtov-bletlekh.<sup>123</sup> Seventeen issues were published between 1894 and 1896. In this periodical, Peretz expressed his concern and support for the working classes and advocated socialist and Haskalah ideology.<sup>124</sup>

Real differences existed between Yidishe Bibliotek and Yomtov-bletlekh. In substance, the former was committed to the ideals of the Haskalah. Its goal was education. Using "Jargon" was simply a method of reaching a large readership. Stylistically it was significant, but in content, it was not

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<sup>121</sup> "I.L. Peretz," p. 281.

<sup>122</sup> Dawidowicz, p. 66.  
"To Yiddishists and Hebraists, the cultivation of their language and the enrichment of their literature became matters of transcendent national importance. Language and literature became surrogates for land and state, and even an alternative for religion." The Bund was the heir of the Jargonist committees.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> "I.L. Peretz," p. 281.  
According to Nomberg, during this period, Peretz became "intoxicated" with socialist ideology (Dawidowicz, p. 289). (from: H.D. Nomberg, Y.L. Peretz, Buenos Aires, 1946, pp. 57-72; trans. from Yiddish by Dawidowicz.)



original. Peretz's tone changed radically in Yomtov-bletlekh.<sup>125</sup> As Nomberg explained, "Inwardly, Peretz broke with the ideas of the Warsaw maskilim. He became alienated from the generation of writers among whom he lived and stood...<sup>126</sup>

Nigger, a prominent literary critic, wrote:

This house, Tzigliana No. 1, became a center for Jewish radical thought. There the foundation was laid for Yiddish literature not as a means, but as an end in itself. Out of that house came forth the thought of Yiddish, the poetic rebirth of Hasidism, the love of the folksong and the folktale.<sup>127</sup>

In the early 1900s, Peretz participated actively in the Czernowitz Yiddish Conference, a gathering of intellectuals in Rumania. The goal of the conference was to give status and dignity to the Yiddish language.

Despite his prominence at the Czernowitz Conference and despite the fact that Yiddish was Peretz's literary language, Peretz refused to affirm either Yiddish or Hebrew as the national language of the Jewish people.<sup>128</sup> As Melech Ravitch has written:

According to Peretz Jewish content was eternal. Only Jewish forms and the Jewish language changed. Hence the Yiddish tongue without Jewish content was an empty, worthless vessel. The truly valuable component of Yiddish was its

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<sup>125</sup> Dawidowicz, p. 289. (from: H.D. Nomberg, Y.L. Peretz, Buenos Aires, 1946, pp. 57-72; trans. from Yiddish by Dawidowicz.)

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Madison, p. 103.

<sup>128</sup> "I.L. Peretz," pp. 281-2.

literature. It was an integral part of an eternal Jewish content, which it must ever deepen and refine.<sup>129</sup>

Peretz wrote significant works in Hebrew as well. In 1894 Peretz wrote Ha-Ugav (The Harp), a volume of love poems and Ha-Hetz (The Arrow), a collection of articles similar to those found in Yomtov-bletlekh.<sup>130</sup>

Jewish workers enjoyed Peretz's sense of social justice, his use of Yiddish, and his satire. According to Pinski, however, they were somewhat disappointed by his lack of enthusiasm for socialism as a political movement.<sup>131</sup> Peretz expressed his concerns about Jewish participation in revolutionary movements in no uncertain terms. (See Appendix B: On Resolution and Revolutionary Movements, pp. 20-22.)

Just the same, Peretz began to develop a bad reputation with the official censor. His pamphlets were found along with illegal literature during government raids of secret meetings. The censor warned Peretz that if he did not stop writing suspicious articles and stories, publication of Peretz's work would be prohibited entirely. Not long after the censor's warning, Peretz gave a reading at an illegal meeting. Secret police raided the meeting and Peretz was arrested.

Mikhelzohn, who had invited Peretz to the meeting, in an

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<sup>129</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, Introduction, p. 19. (See Peretz's full essay "On Education," in which he discusses the importance of knowing Yiddish, Hebrew, and the language of the land.)

<sup>130</sup> "I.L. Peretz," pp. 281-2.

<sup>131</sup> Roback, pp. 164-5.

article concerning Peretz's radical period, relates that in August of 1899, several days before the meeting, Mikhelzohn learned that the hosting organization was not all that it appeared to be. Moreover he learned that members of the secret police had purchased tickets to the meeting. He immediately contacted Peretz and urged him not to attend. Peretz deliberated for a moment and asked Mikhelzohn whether he intended to participate. The latter answered that he was obligated to attend. "Then I go too," Peretz responded.<sup>132</sup> Peretz was imprisoned in the Tenth Pavilion of the Warsaw Citadel for three months.<sup>133</sup>

Communal officials were disturbed by Peretz's political activity. Some years later, in 1912, Adolf Perec, a man who had recently run for political office and lost, sent a letter urging the community administration to prohibit political activity on the part of employees. Perec cited Peretz's activities in particular. Peretz responded to official reprimand with an indignant letter. He explained that the terms of his contract with the Warsaw Gemeinde were similar to those of an employee of a business. It was therefore, he asserted, improper for the Jewish community to ask him to restrict his activities. On that note, the case was closed. Though the assimilationists of the

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<sup>132</sup> Roback, pp. 165-7.

<sup>133</sup> Roback, p. 209.

Gemeinde disliked Peretz's political positions, they respected him and the excellence of his work.<sup>134</sup>

#### Peretz's Admirers and Critics

Peretz had a powerful influence on the younger generation of writers who came to Warsaw. He willingly read through their manuscripts and explained how they could be improved. His home was always open to aspiring writers, and when he could, he gave financial assistance to those in need.<sup>135</sup> Almi, one of these young authors, recalled:

...if Peretz saw a spark of talent in a young writer he did everything to encourage him, like a father, interested himself in his private life, helped him with money, if he suspected he needed it--advance payment, he said, for future publications... I came to him for the first time, a lad of fifteen, with three of my poems. Peretz spoke to me as an equal, asked me if I needed my help, and made me free of his library.<sup>136</sup>

Among those whom he touched were David Pinski, Sholem Asch, Abraham Reisen, Yehoash, H.D. Nomberg, Peretz Hershbein, I.J. Trunk, I.M. Weissenberg, Menahem Boraisha, Der Nister, Joseph Opatoshul<sup>137</sup>, Baal-Makhshoves, Bergelson, Melech Ravitch, and Mark

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<sup>134</sup> Roback, pp. 140-1.

(It is important to note that the ambivalence of communal officials never disappeared. This was glaringly evident at Peretz's funeral. Nearly every organization and society - from the most radical to the most orthodox - was represented at the funeral with the exception of the leaders of the Warsaw Gemeinde. (Roback, pp. 141-2))

<sup>135</sup> Roback, pp. 200-1.

<sup>136</sup> Peretz, The Book of Fire, p. 21.

<sup>137</sup> Liptzin, A History of Yiddish Literature, 58-62.

Schweid.<sup>138</sup> Nomberg explained that to his generation Peretz was their "literary rebbe." These young authors saw in Peretz a man with a progressive spirit who had an attitude of faith and trust.<sup>139</sup>

Reisen wrote:

I was a shy, timid young man but the Peretz atmosphere made me bold. He was the only man in Yiddish literature who not only himself created but made others create. He was a teacher, a writer, a friend, a colleague. That is why we shall speak of him till our last breath with real veneration. May his name be blessed forever, through all generations.<sup>140</sup>

While Peretz was surrounded and admired by young writers, the majority of authors of his generation never warmed to him. Some exceptions were Jacob Dinezon, his closest friend, and S. Ansky, who shared the folklore he gathered with Peretz and H.N.

Bialik.<sup>141</sup>

Peretz's critics were displeased by his use of symbolism<sup>142</sup> and because his work seemed so abstract. Leo Kenig criticized Peretz for being a "writer of ideas, not of living people."<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Sol Liptzin, The Maturing of Yiddish Literature (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1970), pp. 67, 84, 143, 198-9.

<sup>139</sup> Dawidowicz, p. 288. (from: H.D. Nomberg, Y.L. Peretz, Buenos Aires, 1946, pp. 57-72; trans. from Yiddish by Dawidowicz.)

<sup>140</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 23.

<sup>141</sup> A. Mukdoni, "How I.L. Peretz Wrote His Folk Tales," The Jewish Times, 27 September, 1946, p. 15.

<sup>142</sup> Weiner, p. 201.

<sup>143</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 13.



His major critic, David Frischmann wrote that "his symbolism is inaccessible to the masses for whom he pretends to write."<sup>144</sup>

His admirers too had criticisms. Aba Gordon found fault with his romanticism. He felt that Peretz's revolt against the way the maskilim had denigrated religious tradition had gone too far. He felt that Peretz had over-idealized traditional ways, and he said that Peretz "poured too much sugar into our blood, so that Yiddish literature became diabetic."<sup>145</sup> Opatoshu did not favor "the piety and dust that was gathering on Peretz."<sup>146</sup> Roback suggests that Peretz was limited by the fact that he'd never attended university and by his lack of contact with non-Jewish authors.<sup>147</sup>

#### Peretz's Personality

Roback wrote that Peretz had an unforgettable and picturesque look. His gestures were vivacious; his voice was animated. He looked paternal and understanding, yet he had a "roguish glance." He was an extrovert with a magnetic and demanding personality.<sup>148</sup> Among his major character traits were his generosity, his kindness, (Appendix B: Peretz's Character, pp. 1-2) and his courage. More than once Peretz dared to stand

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<sup>144</sup> Weiner, p. 203.

<sup>145</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 16.

<sup>146</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 15.

<sup>147</sup> Roback, p. 282.

<sup>148</sup> Roback, pp. 183-8.

up for unpopular causes and for those who were oppressed or maligned.<sup>149</sup> He hated sham and snobbishness.<sup>150</sup> In a letter to his son, Peretz explained his popularity as follows:

One who runs away from people (chiding his son) is in reality running away from himself. He who is not master of his own will, lacks the strength to inspire and comfort others. The reason people like me is because I try my utmost to show them that I like them and that I wish them well. Nor do I withhold gratitude or appreciation from them for the good that they do. I learned to love everybody. Perhaps this is the reason why people respect me. Besides, I never suppress my own individuality under any circumstances. That is another reason why people take to me.<sup>151</sup>

While in many ways Peretz was very self-confident, he was sensitive to criticism about his work.<sup>152</sup> According to Roback, Peretz experienced periods of great productivity and enthusiasm followed by periods of dejection.<sup>153</sup> In 1893, not long after his fortieth birthday, he wrote a letter to Dinezon saying:

During the period we have not seen each other, I have aged considerably. My brow has become furrowed. My eyesight is poor. My hair is graying. For a long time I was an invalid: all summer and in the beginning of the winter. Several days I lay abed like a log, in excruciating pain. My spine was aching all over...and when I got up, I had to support myself on a cane.<sup>154</sup>

For awhile Peretz felt gloomy and thought a great deal about

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<sup>149</sup> Roback, p. 208.

<sup>150</sup> Roback, pp. 213-14.

<sup>151</sup> Peretz, Memoirs, Intro. p. 14.

<sup>152</sup> Roback, p. 192.

<sup>153</sup> Roback, p. 146.

<sup>154</sup> Roback, pp. 145-6.

death. Then he recovered both his health and his hopeful mood.<sup>155</sup>

The period between 1894 and 1905 was a time of great achievements in a variety of areas. In 1901 his collected works in Hebrew and Yiddish appeared for the first time, and in 1904 his periodical Di Yidishe Bibliotek resumed publication.<sup>156</sup> The pace at which he worked and the large number of activities in which he was involved seem to begun to wear on him. As mentioned above, after 1901 Peretz began taking vacations during the summer in order to protect his health.<sup>157</sup>

The Russian Revolution of 1905 raised the hopes of many of Peretz's compatriots. Peretz called their attention to the pogroms which accompanied them. Though Peretz had no fondness for the Czarist government and was pleased by the revolution, he was not convinced that the liberators would not themselves become oppressors. He questioned the impact of the revolution on the human spirit. Peretz warned his fellow Jews that though they might join with the revolutionaries, they, as the eternal non-conformists, would be the last to know equality.<sup>158</sup> (See Appendix B: On Revolution and Revolutionary Movements, pp. 20-22.)

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<sup>155</sup> Roback, p. 146.

<sup>156</sup> "I.L. Peretz," pp. 281-2.

<sup>157</sup> Roback, p. 146.

<sup>158</sup> Liptzin, A History of Yiddish Literature, pp. 65-6.

### "Back to the Synagogue"

Dawidowicz wrote:

Jewish folklore, steeped in ancient Jewish religious traditions in which rabbinic, hasidic, and secular motifs were intermingled, helped to enrich secular Yiddish and Hebrew literature and culture. By way of folklore, some modernist writers and scholars were able to bridge the old world and the new, to embellish their Jewish cultural equipment and to authenticate their credentials as Jewish survivalists.<sup>159</sup>

During 1912 and 1913 Peretz put a great deal of energy into communal cultural work. He turned to the nearly defunct organization Hazamir, a society primarily devoted to Jewish music. Its chairman, Dr. Gershon Levin, had been trying to involve Peretz for some time, knowing that he could revive the organization. In 1912 Peretz became an active member of his own accord, and he brought many of his followers along with him. Not long after, he accepted its chairmanship.<sup>160</sup>

On Saturdays a group would gather to sing folk songs at Peretz's home. Among those who assembled there was Judah Leib Cahan, a watchmaker who was so enamored with folk songs that he went into Warsaw barrooms and other such places to collect these songs first hand. He was an expert in the Yiddish folksong and was able to share the subtle beauty of many of these melodies.<sup>161</sup> Nomberg recalls:

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<sup>159</sup> Dawidowicz, p. 69.

<sup>160</sup> A. Mukdoni, "How I.L. Peretz Wrote His Folk Tales," The Jewish Times, 27 September, 1946, p. 15.

<sup>161</sup> Dawidowicz, p. 295. (from: H.D. Nomberg, Y.L. Peretz, Buenos Aires, 1946, pp. 57-72; trans. from Yiddish by Dawidowicz.)

On Peretz and on his circle these songs acted like prophecy, revelation. We all felt that a fresh spring had been tapped, lively and bubbling. The songs appealed not only with their artless poetry, their inner truth, and their deep feeling, but they also evoked and beckoned to a world utterly unknown to Jewish intellectuals, the old-style ones--the traditional, religious scholars, and the new-style--the maskilim and worldly educated. Behold, a people lives and sings! Sings of love and longing, of joy and pain! A people that knows nothing of the zigzags and dilemmas and hairsplittings of our traditional and modern intellectuals. This revelation set off an easily imagined revolution in thought and outlook. One need only remember how widespread was (and perhaps still is?) the conviction that Jews were, on one hand, a Chosen People, elected, pure spirit, and on the other, crippled, without feeling for nature, for simplicity, for love, beauty and poetry.<sup>162</sup>

One result of these Shabbat gatherings was Peretz's

Folkstimlekhe geshikhtn. According to Nomberg, two aspects of Peretz's personality were combined in these tales:

...the hasidic fervor which was in his very nature, and the return to his people, the striving for openheartedness and artlessness, which he attained only after searching long and wandering about on his own and others' ways and paths.<sup>163</sup>

By combining these two aspects of his personality, traditional texts were transformed into a new and original literature.<sup>164</sup>

S. Ansky, who toured around the country on behalf of the Jewish Historic-Ethnographical Society in St. Petersburg collecting folklore, stories, songs, and legends, regularly visited Peretz in Warsaw. He would share the stories he'd

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<sup>162</sup> Dawidowicz, pp. 295-6. (from: H.D. Nomberg, Y.L. Peretz, Buenos Aires, 1946, pp. 57-72; trans. from Yiddish by Dawidowicz.)

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.



collected and Peretz would recast them with great artistry.<sup>165</sup>

Peretz explained his method as follows:

Now that I have learned what should always have been obvious to me," he added, "I take my time in writing down a folk story that I hear from a collector of folklore or directly from a man of the people. I first fashion it as an oral narrative. I bear in mind, too, that every folk story is told differently by every narrator, depending for one thing on the degree of narrative skill that he possesses. When I hear several version of a story, I can tell the true and the beautiful from the false and the ugly. Poor dear Ansky, for example, kills the stories that he hears, by trying to give them a literary polish. I get them from him in that vitiated form. All he thinks about is the moral of the story, as if ordinary folk were constantly in search of wisdom and considered the plot as of secondary importance. Ansky's stories give me a lot of trouble. I first have to peel off their literary rind, and restore them to their oral version.<sup>166</sup>

In folk and hasidic tales, Peretz found a source both firmly rooted in tradition and "still quick with the breath and passion of life."<sup>167</sup> He reworked these texts

in a way that appears to be folklike but is actually the product of a sophisticated literary intellect.. The old properties, in their naivete and charm, remain...(but there is also) an additional dimension of mind.<sup>168</sup>

After 1912, Peretz became "imbued with the religious spirit which permeated so many of his folktales." He was not in favor of a return to the orthodoxy of his childhood but rather a return

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<sup>165</sup> Mukdoni, pp. 15-17.

Orenstein, pp. 40-1, relates that in S. Ansky's Gesamelete Shriften he wrote that the resemblance between the stories he gave Peretz and the stories Peretz retold was similar to that of a rough gem to a carefully cut diamond.

<sup>166</sup> Mukdoni, p. 17.

<sup>167</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, pp. 9-10.

<sup>168</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 14.

to the Jewish heritage and folk literature.<sup>169</sup> In Peretz's essay, "What's Missing in Our Literature?" he wrote:

I don't want to be misunderstood...I am not talking of shutting ourselves up in a spiritual ghetto. We want to get out of the ghetto, but with our own spirit, our own spiritual treasure, and exchange - give and take, not beg... Our road is back...back to our past, back to the Bible. Speaking for myself, what we have to do is to find in Jewish life what has been created by and belongs to the folk, what the folk relates about itself - the Chassidic, and the rest. The Jewish writer has to take all this rich material and work it up in his own spirit. That is Jewish literature.<sup>170</sup>

The slogan "Back to the Synagogue" was coined to describe this period of Peretz's life. Many began to look askance at Peretz's religious perspectives. Some suggested that he was becoming a conservative and called him as a turn coat. Many of his earlier admirers turned away from him. Peretz began to feel isolated. Roback wrote that Peretz

"was only following the impulse of his own development. It was only natural for him to rise above the din of political manifestos and catchwords. The interests of his people and their culture weighed more heavily with him than the bitter class struggles which were dividing his people...If he became more conservative in the last few years of his life he could easily have afforded it, but at no time did he play up to the community leaders, the assimilationists. It was his aim to effect a rapprochement between the two camps, not that he was a man of compromise, but because he happened to possess a balanced judgment and knew the foibles of both sides."<sup>171</sup>

After anti Jewish outbreaks in Poland, Peretz condemned the submissive response of Jewish Polonists. He never stopped

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<sup>169</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, pp. 10-11.

<sup>170</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 11.

<sup>171</sup> Roback, p. 170.

fighting on behalf of those causes he considered just.<sup>172</sup> Peretz did not allow himself to be disturbed by raised eyebrows, critique, or even potential danger, as this recollection by Sholom Asch makes clear.<sup>173</sup>

I want to mention just one more incident. On the day of the anniversary, when there were assembled at his house, the most noteworthy people of the city, and the members of the community came to congratulate Peretz, the two young men entered. They were dressed in the garb of workingmen. They begged Peretz to step into another room with them. Peretz excused himself from the committee and went in with the two workers. Soon he came out again, his eyes sparkling, his face flushed, holding a book in his hand. He called out in an inspired voice:

"Do you know who they were? A delegation from the 'Bund.' They sent me an official greeting, with this gift," and he proudly held up the book.

The respectable citizens and delegates grew pale with fear. They looked around for the door. The word 'Bund' savored of Siberia and the gallows.

Dinezon immediately burnt off the official greeting that was inscribed on the book. He did not wish the police to find such a document in Peretz's house. The book, however, Peretz kept tucked away among his most precious manuscripts, and it was sacred to him all his life.

The volume was a copy of his Yidishe Bibliotek, which had been kept in Pavilion Ten of the Warsaw prison, where it had secretly been passed around from one political prisoner to the other. The pages of the book were greasy, soiled, torn. Many of the lines were underscored with pencil. The underscored lines represented secret messages which one prisoner would send to another.<sup>174</sup>

#### Peretz's Final Years

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172 Roback, pp. 171-2.

173 This event took place on Peretz's twenty fifth anniversary in 1901. The attitude he manifested on this occasion did not change significantly in later years.

174 Roback, pp. 171-2.

Peretz suffered deeply at the outbreak of World War I. Mark Schweid wrote in his biography of Peretz:

The building of the Jewish Community had become the vital nerve center of Polish Jewry. Carts brought whole Jewish communities to Warsaw, with bedding, furniture, old people, and children. The others trudged for miles behind the carts. The courtyard of the Community Building was transformed into a refugee camp. People did all they could to alleviate the distress. Peretz's great heart broke,<sup>175</sup> seeing the misery and the suffering. The last evening, the night he died, he poured out his heart to his friend Dr. Gershon Levin. He spoke to him of the children and the old people homeless in the courtyard. 'It breaks my heart!' he cried out to Dr. Levin. In the early hours of the morning his heart broke.<sup>176</sup>

On March 21, 1915, I.L. Peretz was found dead at his desk, pen in hand, with a smile on his face. Before him was a poem that he had just begun to compose<sup>177</sup>:

Softly, softly,  
About to thank, he

The shock of his passing was felt throughout the Jewish world. It was front page news in the Jewish press from Warsaw to New York City. His body lay in a ordinary casket at his home for the next forty eight hours. His disciples, in shifts, took turns remaining in the simple mourning chamber with the body. A Yiddish Daily in Warsaw recorded:<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Peretz was known to have a heart condition at this time. The emotional stress only exacerbated the condition.

<sup>176</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, pp. 49-50.

<sup>177</sup> Roback, pp. 148-9.

<sup>178</sup> Roback, pp. 148-150.



During these two days, a constant stream of people kept pouring in and out. The door did not remain shut for an instant. Among the visitors were authors, journalists, acquaintances, religious Jews, working men, young students. In fact, everyone whom the mighty word of the deceased had reached came to bid him farewell for the last time....

The endless stream of visitors made it impossible for one to linger more than just a minute.

The people kept changing but the stream of quiet tears never ceased. The well-known writer, Dinezon, the dearest friend of the deceased, never for a moment left the dead body..."<sup>179</sup>

Newspapers reported that over 100,000 people accompanied the coffin to the cemetery.<sup>180</sup> This was the largest crowd that ever gathered in the history of Warsaw.<sup>181</sup>

In an article written in the New York Jewish Frontier, Jacob Sloan wrote:

"In 1941, when the Nazis had already concentrated more than 400,000 Jews behind the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto, the doomed youth of the Ghetto made their last pilgrimage to the grave of Isaac Leib Peretz, who had died in 1915. The Jewish graveyard marked the western boundary of the Ghetto. During the two and a half years of the Ghetto's existence it was to serve several clandestine purposes. Here Jewish smugglers met Christian smugglers who came via the Christian graveyard that adjoined it, and the two groups exchanged their illegal but vital contraband. Here, too, Jews who had themselves smuggled out of the Ghetto in coffins crawled out and fled to the dubious safety of the other side of the Ghetto wall.

"But these young people came to Peretz's that spring day in 1941 with no ulterior purposes. Wearing the four-inch-wide yellow armbands with the Star of David, hungry, racked by pain, they stood before Peretz's gravestone and read the inscription from Peretz's play The Golden Chain--

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<sup>179</sup> Roback, pp. 150-1.

<sup>180</sup> Roback, p. 152.

<sup>181</sup> Madison, p. 103.

Due to the high level of Polish animosity for Jews, no mention of Peretz's death appeared in the Polish press.



and allusion to the unbroken continuity of the Jewish tradition. The first line reads: 'We are proud to be Jews.' That was the key to the visit to Peretz's grave. It was an act of affirmation. Despite everything they had gone through, despite everything they were going to endure, the young Jews of Warsaw paid their respects to Peretz's memory because like him they were proud to be Jews.<sup>182</sup>

While Peretz had abandoned "strict faith"<sup>183</sup> and did not observe kashruth, wear tefillin, or observe other such rituals, he realized<sup>184</sup> "that faith abandoned could still be a far more imperious presence than new creeds adopted."<sup>185</sup> Through his actions, his lectures, and most of all, through his writings, Peretz conveyed a love of things Jewish to a generation of maskilim who had become estranged from their traditions.

#### The Values that Underlie Peretz's Writings

The major ideological movements of his era left their mark on Peretz. As a creative and pensive child he absorbed the traditions and stories of his forebears. He greeted the ideas of the Enlightenment with great excitement. Like many of his generation, he could not give lip service to ancient rituals and customs that seemed meaningless and only served to maintain the

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<sup>182</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, pp. 23-4.

<sup>183</sup> Howe and Greenberg, Selected Stories, Introduction, p. 10.

<sup>184</sup> Samuel, pp. 178-9.

<sup>185</sup> Howe and Greenberg, Selected Stories, Introduction, p. 10.

distance between the Jewish world and the rest of humanity.<sup>186</sup> Socialism, nationalism and Zionism made their impact on him, as did the major literary movements of his time.<sup>187</sup> He participated in the rejuvenation and elevation of both Yiddish and Hebrew and was part of the cultural revival of the Jews of eastern Europe.<sup>188</sup> His outlook was humanistic, yet he had a profound appreciation for what he understood to be the essence of Hasidism.

Nomberg described Peretz as "a Don Juan in the world of ideas":

He had little attachment to ideas--he was indeed free as a bird, a Don Juan in the world of ideas, living with the latest and loveliest idea that captivated his heart. The reason he treated ideas like pretty women came from the depths of his world outlook. He demanded of ideas what one wants of a woman--that she be seductive, radiant and amusing, yet not insist on a wedding canopy or a marriage certificate or union forever. In this sense he was doubtless the most ardent advocate of free love with regard to all sorts of political, moral, and aesthetic credos. But under one condition--that it not be only lust but real love, which captures, enchants and dazzles, makes the eyes glow and the blood throb quicker in the veins.<sup>189</sup>

Peretz was a great synthesizer of ideas. He was able to redefine his own ties with tradition, but only after he had tasted the homelessness experienced by those who found themselves shut out of two worlds. He brought together the humanist

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<sup>186</sup> Sol Liptzin, The Flowering of Yiddish Literature (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Ltd., 1963), pp 98-9.

<sup>187</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>188</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, p. 12.

<sup>189</sup> Dawidowicz, p. 289. (from: H.D. Nomberg, Y.L. Peretz, Buenos Aires, 1946, pp. 57-72; trans. from Yiddish by Dawidowicz.)

ideology of the Enlightenment with the values of the prophets and the faith and joy of Hasidism. Because he could understand Jews who had become estranged from Judaism, Peretz treated them with great solicitude. He welcomed them back with warmth and kindness and encouraged them to participate in Jewish cultural life.<sup>190</sup> He not only welcomed them back; he offered them a perspective on Jewishness that they could accept. (See Appendix B: Jewishness: Journey Toward Redemption, pp. 29-34.)

Peretz spoke for a Yiddish version of that liberal humanism and secular idealism which characterized the best minds of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century....That restlessness, that fever, that coil of problems which we associate with the nineteenth century, Peretz brought into Yiddish life and literature....(but he didn't bring these tendencies from the secular world but) by going backward into the East European past...<sup>191</sup>

Peretz believed in self-emancipation but strongly opposed assimilation. He rejected the notion that liberal Christian forces, socialist or democratic parties would help or ultimately accept Jews as Jews. He warned that first Jews would be asked to give up their religion and then they would be asked to be among the first to die in bloody revolutions.<sup>192</sup> (Appendix B: On Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements, pp. 20-22. He warned young assimilationists to desist from their critique of Judaism. (See Appendix B: Advice to the Estranged, pp. 16-20.)

Take equivalents for your comparative evaluation!...  
Do you have more winged ideals!

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<sup>190</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, p. 14.

<sup>191</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 13.

<sup>192</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, pp. 17-18.

Did you ever compare our folksongs with those of others? Or, our folktales with those, for example, of the Grimm Brothers? Do you find among us, as you find among them, songs and tales of robber-heroes, sly deceivers, and seven-league boots?

Do want to compare laws?

Do compare our Sabbath, our day of rest for all. God and man, lord and slave and cattle, with their religious equivalent, their Sunday. Do compare our ancient laws on how to treat strangers with the laws in force today, in your vaunted twentieth century, among the freest and most humanitarian peoples, whom you are holding up as models.

I have stressed those cultural items which you ask us to discard and which we rather select for further development, those cornerstones which we put down as a foundation for our cultural sanctuary, those sparks which we gather and fan into a brilliant fire...

Worlds are not built or destroyed by talk like yours.

Preach what you will. The wind carries sound. But preach with respect!

If you do not want to suffer with our people, you need not do so. If you cannot love our people, it can get along without your love. But don't fail to respect it!<sup>193</sup>

In his Yomtov-bletlekh, Peretz attacked secularized Yiddish culture which borrowed from European culture and ignored Jewish texts. He insisted that real emancipation and modernization could only be accomplished by using materials from Jewish culture. A Yiddish culture cut off from its historic roots would wither away and die.<sup>194</sup> David Pinski relates that at the age of thirty-five, Peretz reproached Hebrew poets for using empty rhetoric:

...which led nowhere, and did nothing for the Jewish masses. He insisted that words had a purpose, to uplift the soul of the reader, stir him, lead him on.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, pp. 348, 350.

<sup>194</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 10.

<sup>195</sup> David Pinski, "I.L. Peretz...The Man and the Writer" The Jewish Times, 27 September 1946, p. 13.

He reports that Peretz told these authors that the Haskalah "tore down much in Jewish life, but created little...it came from without."<sup>196</sup> In his Memoirs Peretz asserted that the Haskalah was cut off from reality and led nowhere.

It is already long past the Haskalah era. We have renounced it. We regard it as a hoop skirt when slim skirts are in style. We accuse it: it did not convey water and minerals to the roots, nor air and light to the branches, but merely broke off twigs and grafted them on foreign trunks. No one knows exactly how to have done otherwise. But that was not the way.<sup>197</sup>

Zionism was another modern ideology about which Peretz was ambivalent. Peretz never joined the Zionist movement nor did he write much about it.<sup>198</sup> He did express sympathy for the ideal of the return to Zion.<sup>199</sup> He spoke, on occasion, of Herzl's movement and of the Zionist Congress in Basle.

The Basle Program says (that) 'the aim of Zionism is to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law.' Will anyone oppose that?<sup>200</sup>

His reservations about Zionism were both practical and ideological. He believed that the high cost of buying land would be prohibitive, and he doubted that the Jews would be able to fight for the state unilaterally.<sup>201</sup> He doubted that the Zionism

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Dawidowicz, p. 27.

<sup>198</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 46.

<sup>199</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 9.

<sup>200</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 46.

<sup>201</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, pp. 46-7.



dream could really be of benefit to the masses. He also believed that Judaism had evolved in the Diaspora.

Zionism cannot be the solution for the whole Jewish people. We can't return to the cradle. We have grown in the Diaspora. And the Diaspora is our battlefield. We do not run away from the battlefield.<sup>202</sup>

Peretz held that Judaism needed to fight for self-determination and self-preservation in the Diaspora. He believed that the central task of sovereign states was to protect minorities from aggressive majority groups. When states did not live up to this task, it was necessary for the Jewish people to draw inward and develop their own cultural institutions. He was convinced that one day Jews would find larger cultural groups welcoming their participation as Jews, though he did not expect this time to come in the near future. While he didn't minimize the difficulties ahead, he never compromised his messianic vision.<sup>203</sup>

There has been much debate about whether or not Peretz was really a socialist. He certainly despised bigotry, excessive acquisitiveness, and arrogance--all qualities found more frequently among the ruling class.<sup>204</sup> His writings remained a source of inspiration to the intelligentsia among the workers. Many of the young writers he inspired and many scholars believed that Peretz was a socialist. Roback, Samuel and others however,

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, p. 16.

<sup>204</sup> Roback, p. 287.

maintain that Peretz's positions on social justice had less to do with political ideology than with Peretz's religiosity.<sup>205</sup> At best, asserts Roback, Peretz could be described as a "Fabian socialist in principle."<sup>206</sup>

According to Roback, Peretz's life is better described as a life of service than a life committed to political action. The reason he never became a revolutionary:

Peretz was not politically-minded, and despite all that has been said to the contrary, especially in Soviet Russia, he was not a proletarian in spirit or mental outlook. His sympathies were with the workman because he was in a miserable plight, because he was exploited by the employers. He pleaded the cause of the untutored, the humble, even the moron for the same reason...<sup>207</sup>

Leftwich wrote that to the end, Peretz considered himself a socialist but that his socialism sprung from the Hebrew prophets.<sup>208</sup> It is clear that for Peretz issues of social justice grew out of his religious convictions.

#### Peretz: Champion of Those with the Least Power

Adler described Peretz as "the humanist concerned for the 'outsider.'"<sup>209</sup> Throughout his life, Peretz championed the cause

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<sup>205</sup> Samuel, pp. 172-3.

See page one of this chapter.

<sup>206</sup> Roback, p. 168.

<sup>207</sup> Roback, pp. 162-4.

<sup>208</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 46.

<sup>209</sup> Adler, p. 28.

of those who are most frequently robbed of their dignity: the simple laborer, the woman, the child, and the disenfranchised.

He consistently affirmed the worth of labor. We find that in his short stories concerning the idyllic marriage<sup>210</sup>, for example, the protagonist is a simple individual who does manual labor.<sup>211</sup> According to Adler:

Peretz was partial to earthy endeavors and regarded labor with intrinsic worth and dignity. Labor was not only respectable, it cleansed and purified man's spirits. The simple man and the laborer, spared the corrupting influences of a spoiled society, were more in touch with their own humanness. They could, in Peretz's view, be better and more considerate husbands and fathers than their bourgeois counterparts.<sup>212</sup>

Peretz wrote many stories about individuals who suffer poverty and oppression, and despite it all, never succumbed to despair.<sup>213</sup> Although these individuals never knew why they suffered, they maintained their faith with God and with the world. Peretz rewards these "silent souls" with a visit from Elijah the prophet."<sup>214</sup>

(These "silent souls") try to extract a glimmer of light out of the murky grayness all about them. They dream of the sun that must break through the thick clouds somehow, somewhere, at some time. And Peretz rewards their faith, their hope, their dream. He lets a dazzling ray beam upon them and warm them. Elijah is the penetrating ray. He, the precursor of the Messiah, is the symbol of the unexpected help that may come to those who are worthy of extraordinary assistance

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<sup>210</sup> See Hayim the Porter in "Shalom Bayit."

<sup>211</sup> Adler, p. 64.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> See "The Magician" and "Seven Good Years."

<sup>214</sup> Liptzin, A History of Yiddish Literature, p. 62.

because they retain faith in the fundamental justice that must prevail in heaven and on earth, in the realm of God and the destiny of man.<sup>215</sup>

Peretz also praises the simple folk who, based on their religious convictions, dare to challenge not only the teachings of earthly authorities but God.<sup>216</sup> These stories are filled with Peretz's admiration for those who maintain their sense of dignity in the most extreme of situations.<sup>217</sup>

While Peretz admired those who endured much without a loss of faith, he decried passivity. This was part of the zeitgeist of the era.<sup>218</sup> As we shall see in the analysis of "Bontche Shweig,"<sup>219</sup> simple passive endurance signified failure. Peretz makes the reader weep for those who fail to understand that they can call out for help. However, his overriding message to his readers is to refuse to accept insult and degradation in silence.<sup>220</sup>

Peretz raised the issue of passivity in connection with women in several stories. The lot of women was generally more difficult than that of men. A woman suffered whatever her husband did, and in addition, had to contend with his mastery

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid

<sup>216</sup> See "Shalom Bayit" and "The Fast."

<sup>217</sup> See "How He was Revealed" and "The Messenger."

<sup>218</sup> Adler, p. 41.

Both the Bundists and the Zionists harshly criticized passivity.

<sup>219</sup> See Chapter 4 and Appendix A.

<sup>220</sup> Adler, p. 39.

over her and take responsibility for the maintenance of the home. In addition, poor girls generally received no schooling. As a result, they did not even have the comfort of a religious tradition that was comprehensible and meaningful to them.<sup>221</sup> In "Mendel Braynes," a woman's willing self-sacrifice on behalf of her oblivious husband leads to her death. "A Woman's Wrath" is the story of a woman who almost succeeds in improving an unbearable situation by throwing aside passivity. Unfortunately she underestimates her power to initiate change.<sup>222</sup>

Peretz does not portray these husbands as sadistic villains but as "tragic little people."<sup>223</sup>

Their tragedy is that they fail to assert full humanness in transcending the poverty and social anachronisms of the shtetl. In failing to elevate themselves, they remain insensitive to the fate of the more vulnerable member of the shtetl hierarchy--the woman...As a result, Peretz's women are subjected to a continuum of malaise--neglect, rejection, exploitation, degradation--seldom with Machiavellian malice yet hardly via noblesse oblige.<sup>224</sup>

Peretz condemns littleness of spirit. His heroes are individuals like Hayim the Porter<sup>225</sup> who, when told by scholars that his wife

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<sup>221</sup> Madison, pp. 109, and 111.  
See "The Outcast," "In the Basement," "Mendel Braynes," and "A Woman's Wrath."

<sup>222</sup> Adler, p. 38.

<sup>223</sup> Adler, p. 34.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> See "Shalom Bayit."



will be his footstool in Paradise, eloquently rejects this possibility.<sup>226</sup>

Hayim returned to his home to make Havdalah, and Hannah sat reciting "Elohei Avraham"

Hayim told her what the teacher had said, but suddenly his words filled with compassion for her, and he exclaimed:

--And I tell you, Hannah, I don't want this! In no way is it acceptable, that you, you should be my footstool...I will lift you up and seat you on my right side, and we will sit together! There's enough room for both of us on one chair! And I am absolutely certain--he continued boldly--that the Holy One Blessed Be He will agree to this, certainly He will agree, against His will, He will agree.<sup>227</sup>

"The Fast," one of Peretz's most powerful stories, is a story of faith and challenge.

The story takes place on a bitterly cold winter night in a small house. A mother watches her four children sleeping on a bare mattress covered only with old clothes. No one has eaten a hot meal for quite some time. Periodically one of them wakes up, crying with hunger. Sarah, their mother, comforts them with the promise that soon their father will return with something hot to eat.

She knows she is lying and begins to cry. Yet when she hears her husband at the door, she looks up hopefully.

The pale and bent man lifts two empty cans off his shoulders. He has brought nothing. No one has paid him all day.

Sarah bursts into tears. She weeps for her cold and hungry children, and she weeps for the child that died of cold and

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<sup>226</sup> Adler, p. 28.

<sup>227</sup> Final paragraph of "Shalom Bayit"

hunger the year before. Mendel, her husband, begs her not to cry, calling her tears a sin against God. They each recall how beautiful and handsome the other once looked, and they see the changes that hunger and hardship wrought.

The children wake up. They are hungry. They cry.

Mendel's tone suddenly changes.

"No one eats today," he says solemnly. "It's a fast day." He explains that a Sefer Torah was dropped and that at sunset, a fast began. No one, not even the youngest children, would eat for the next twenty four hours.

The children are filled with excitement. They can take part in a communal religious duty. They forget their hunger and begin dancing around the room filled with pride. One begins to sing.

Her father admonishes them. They are not to sing or dance on a fast day. Soon the children fall into a peaceful sleep. The oldest, a nine year old, begins to talk with his father about his bar mitzvah. He tells his father that after his bar mitzvah he will observe all the fast days. The father proudly affirms his son's dreams.

But under his breath he whispers, "But no more fast days like this, please God."

By transforming lack of food into a meaningful religious act, Mendel transforms the experience. Mendel's action itself serves as a transformational nehemta. In this way he is able to help his children avoid despair and keep faith with God. His own

faith in God enables him to remind God that such "fast days" are almost unbearable.

This story expresses the suffering caused by poverty and affirms the dignity of the individual who transcends this suffering. It demonstrates the importance of the creative response, and it affirms the right of an individual to challenge his or her lot.

Peretz had a special feeling for children and was concerned with their well-being. Though he did not want to abandon the heder, he did want to improve this institution.<sup>228</sup> Citron relates<sup>229</sup> that despite Peretz's prominence in the community, he knew that he couldn't induce the melamdim to permit summer vacation. Therefore, he made it his practice to take individual children out on outings with him every week. When a teacher argued that it was a sin to waste a child's time with such foolishness and that he should be studying Rashi, Peretz helped the child learn and memorize the assigned text as they rode through the fields outside of town.<sup>230</sup> No doubt Peretz's feelings about children and heder were influenced by his own experiences as a child.<sup>231</sup>

#### The Essentials of Peretz's Faith

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228 Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 37.

229 Der Yiddisher Kempfer, 17 August, 1917.

230 Roback, pp. 202-5.

231 Peretz, My Memoirs, See chapters two and four.

In part, Peretz's return to the language of faith was a result of his disappointment in the promises of the modern world.

...His desire to conserve the traditional moral values of the Jewish teachers was founded in a partial distrust of the modern world and modern methods. He could not see how mankind could be made moral by means of amoral scientific adjustments; he understood the value of statistics, but he could not accept them as the exclusive instruments of man's salvation. The peculiarly modern belief that the perfect society will be produced by an intelligent balance of mutually antagonistic moral imperfections, egotism competing with egotism, outraged him. It had been the nemesis of capitalism; it would be the nemesis of any other system conceived in the same spirit. For him there was hope only in one combination: the humility, self-effacement, and love preached by the old teachers, and the social-economic principles formulated by the new.<sup>232</sup>

In 1912, at the start of Peretz's "Back to the Synagogue" period, Peretz asserted that Jews need to return to the Bible as a living and dynamic source of religious faith. He decried "blind religious practice" and "frozen Judaism" and called for a renewal of religious spirit.<sup>233</sup> He asserted:

If you have no God, you look for idols, and these give no Torah. Our road is back, back to our past, back to the Bible. Speaking for myself what we have to do is to find in Jewish life what has been created by and belong to the people, what the people relate about themselves--the Hasidim and the rest. The Yiddish writer has to take all this rich material and work it up in his own spirit. That is Yiddish literature.<sup>234</sup>

Between 1912 and 1913 Peretz started to invite members of Hazamir over to his home for "box evenings." Each person who attended could write a question and place it in a box. Peretz

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<sup>232</sup> Samuel, p. 10.

<sup>233</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 11.

<sup>234</sup> Madison, p. 116.

and others would read these questions and answer. Mukdoni, who served as secretary for these evenings, relates:

On one occasion somebody asked if there was a God and, if so, what were his attributes. Peretz replied in a speech that lasted all evening. He revealed himself as an intensely faithful Jew. He also betrayed the mystic, not the other-worldly type but one deeply rooted in reality--the creator or reinterpreter of folk and hasidic tales.

This was the first time that Peretz had championed the Jewish religion and religious mysticism, to the chagrin of the Jewish radicals. He had done so before in writing, but his spoken words carried greater conviction and proved more offensive to the agnostically-minded. One Saturday afternoon, shortly after this address, as Peretz was strolling through the Sacksische Garten, he was accosted by two young workers who handed him a little psalter with the remark, "That's all you need now." Peretz accepted the psalter, thanked the young men and advised them to procure a similar book of Psalms for themselves. "You will learn something from this book," he added, "something that you don't seem to know yet."<sup>235</sup>

Max W. Grafstein, in his biography of Peretz, records his memories of that evening. He remembers Peretz's statement of theology:

From the theological point of view, God is eternal and unchangeable; but man changes, develops and grows. To live is to have divine conception and, to some degree, a divine will, to change the world about us in accordance with this conception, idea, and will; to bring forth ever new forms; to become a partner in the act of creation. I live ergo I possess a divine spark. All who live possess it, and I feel that everything lives.<sup>236</sup>

He continued to satirize excessive shows of piety, and he rejected the denial of worldly pleasures.<sup>237</sup> It was his opinion that "the old rabbinic bat had spread its wings over the confused

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<sup>235</sup> Mukdoni, p. 17.

<sup>236</sup> Orenstein, p. 45.

<sup>237</sup> Liptzin, A Flowering of Yiddish Literature, p. 103.



populace," and saw the orthodox rabbinate as an obstacle of progress.<sup>238</sup> However, he certainly had a strong belief in God, and his belief had serious ramifications on the way he lived his life.

The following poem by Peretz articulates several of the essential principles of his faith: events are not random, God is knowing and caring, the world was not created for the benefit of the wicked, and ultimately the Judge of all will insure that justice is done.<sup>239</sup>

### **Believe Not**

Believe not that the world is for naught, made  
For the wolf and the fox, for murderer and cheat;  
That the sky is blind to keep God from perceiving  
The fog that thy hands not be seen  
And the wind just to drown bitter wails.  
The world is not a hovel, market or cast-off.

All will be measured, all will be weighed  
Not a fear nor a blood drop will fade,  
Nor the spark in one soul be extinguished uncharged.  
Tears gather in streams, and streams into oceans,  
Oceans will swell to a flood.  
And sparks burst into thunder...  
Oh, think not there is no judgement or judge!<sup>240</sup>

### **Peretz and Hasidism**

Peretz was not the only Jewish author who sought a solution to "the Jewish problem" outside of both rabbinic Judaism and

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<sup>238</sup> Madison, p. 103.

<sup>239</sup> Note the similarity between these affirmations and those of the rabbis in their nehemtot.

<sup>240</sup> Philip Goodman, Isaac Loeb Peretz: A Source Book for Programming (New York: National Jewish Welfare Board, 1951), p.6.

Haskalah ideology. Some turned to Zionism. Others, like Berdyczewski and Peretz, looked to Hasidism as a way of integrating old teachings with the new.<sup>241</sup> Renewed interest in Hasidism began during the romantic period with the work of Eliezer Zweifel. There was a resurgence of interest during the 1890s.<sup>242</sup>

The telling of tales appears to be, for Peretz, a religious act. Using the Hasidic story, Peretz struggled to reestablish connections between heaven and earth. According to Jacobson, he saw these stories as the "basis for the creation of a myth of modern Jewish existence that would suggest a solution to the crises of that existence at the turn of the century."<sup>243</sup>

Many individuals who were concerned with spiritual renewal were fascinated by the intuitive and joyful world of Hasidism.<sup>244</sup> Silberschlag points out that the return to Hasidic tales and folklore on the part of writers like Peretz was:

more than an act of romanticism on the part of some writers and scholars: it filled a deeply felt need for religious regeneration...The rationalist bias of the "enlightened" had blinded them to the virtues of Hasidism. They had lost faith in religious regeneration from within, they had committed themselves to secular transformation from without...The psychic void, left by the deterioration of religion, had to be filled by nonrational movements: intuitionism, mysticism, Jungian archetypes, and the whole

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<sup>241</sup> Adler, pp. 93-4.

<sup>242</sup> Jacobson, p. 19.

<sup>243</sup> Jacobson, p. 20.

<sup>244</sup> Scholem, p. 326.

angelology and demonology of men, uncovered by psychoanalysis.<sup>245</sup>

Peretz believed that Jewish revival could only be accomplished by using Jewish sources, and he turned to the Hasidic tale. Hasidut was his first collection of neo-Hasidic tales.<sup>246</sup> He continued to use Hasidic tales and themes in his work for the rest of his life.

To understand why Peretz turned to the Hasidic story it is important to appreciate the place of story telling in Hasidism. Scholem maintains that the tale is a most significant creative expression of Hasidism.

In place of the theoretical disquisition, or at least side by side with it, you get the Hasidic tale... To tell a story of the deeds of the saints has become a new religious value, and there is something of the celebration of a religious rite about it. Not a few great zaddikim... have laid down the whole treasure of their ideas in such tales. Their Torah took the form of an inexhaustible fountain of story-telling. Nothing at all has remained theory, everything has become story.<sup>247</sup>

In Hasidism the tale was not an illustration of abstract theory or a reflection of a past event. Rather, the story functioned as "the concrete preservation of the dramatic, dialogical reality of the event."<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Eisig Silberschlag, From Renaissance to Renaissance II: Hebrew Literature in the Land of Israel. 1870-1970 (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1977), p. 178.

<sup>246</sup> Jacobson, p. 19.

<sup>247</sup> Scholem, p. 349.

<sup>248</sup> M. Friedman, p. 29.

Peretz understood that through story and song the Hasidim infused poetry into the everyday and comforted those who suffered persecution, poverty, and scorn.<sup>249</sup> Peretz used these tales to "transmit the essential Jewish spirit."<sup>250</sup>

There has been much debate over whether Peretz wrote his Hasidic tales "from without" or "from within." Nigger believed that the tale was primarily a stylistic device.<sup>251</sup> Nigger maintained that if he did in some sense become a Hasid, "it was only after having transformed Hasidism according to his own vision."<sup>252</sup> Roback, on the other hand, felt that Peretz had to have had "a mystic streak" in him to have written about Hasidism so sympathetically.<sup>253</sup>

According to Isaac Rosenfeld, Peretz stood "outside."

The pragmatic stamp is on every word. The tone of wonder is given by the intelligence and not by the Hasidic awe it represents. Peretz shares the faith of which he writes but at a considerable remove, and it does not rest for him in the objects or efficacies of the Hasidic mystique, nor does it express a natural piety of utterance, as with prayer; his is a borrowed piety, taken from the intelligence...<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Liptzin, A History of Yiddish Literature, pp. 62-3.

<sup>250</sup> Howard Schwartz, Gates to the New City (New York: Avon Books, 1983), p. 53.

<sup>251</sup> Roback, pp. 413-4.

<sup>252</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 15.  
(It was Nigger's view that Peretz's writings weren't hasidut but rather hasidisch.)

<sup>253</sup> Roback, p. 414.

<sup>254</sup> Howe and Greenberg, pp. 14-5.

Writing "from the outside" characterized much of Peretz's work. Meisel<sup>255</sup> suggested that Peretz consistently deemphasized his description of the external environment due to his outsiders view of the shtetl. Perhaps it was due to Peretz's experience of being known as "that crazy Leibush," the adolescent who knew that he stood outside the norm.<sup>256</sup> Perhaps it was a result of Peretz's years as a census taker observing communities from which he stood apart.<sup>257</sup> It seems that generally Peretz stood outside the scene he described.

Kahn wrote that Peretz used Hasidic stories as a vehicle for his "refined and purified humanism."<sup>258</sup> I believe this is true. But based on his theological response at the "box-evening," it also seems that Peretz genuinely shared many of Hasidism's essential beliefs.

Glatstein wrote that Peretz found in Hasidism:

...what Christianity often claims for itself: sympathy for the lowest classes, for the silent and abject--the spirit of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. He did not need to read anything into Judaism, he read it out, from the depths of our moral

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255 In Y.L. Peretz: Zayn Lebn un Shafn.

256 Adler, p.31-2.

257 Ibid. While Peretz grew up in Zamosc, he went into the small villages as an enlightened European. On his visits he insisted on wearing his city clothes. Sokolow recalls that he advised Peretz to dress less formally as he was creating an artificial distance between himself and those he was interviewing. Peretz would not listen to him. "It is as if this is precisely what Peretz sought to do -- separate himself, the cultured man of letters, from the narrowness of the 'old ways'." (Ibid., see also Roback, p. 125.)

258 Yitzhak Kahn, Portraits of Yiddish Writers (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1979), p. 18.



existence." He wanted, in short, to discover in Hasidism unbreakable qualities in Jewish strength, and he did so with enough ironic self-awareness to recognize that even if his attempt was doomed to intellectual failure, precisely in that failure might lie its literary reward.<sup>259</sup>

### Conclusion

Even as a young child, Peretz had a deep love of beauty, folk lore, and stories. He had already begun to manifest his concern for those in need and was willing to compromise his own comfort on their behalf. (See Appendix B: Peretz's Character, pp. 1-2) He developed sympathy for the "outsiders" of his community because he himself was an outsider of sorts. In his early adolescence existential questions began to trouble him. He found little support for either his aesthetic sense or for his intellectual curiosity.

As a young man, Peretz looked for an openness of thought that was not evident in Zamosc. The books he read in Michael Fiddler's library answered his aesthetic and intellectual needs but only fueled the intensity of the existential questions that were never far from mind. He found only one person with whom he could discuss his crisis of faith, and Peretz was not able to follow his suggestion.

As Peretz grew older, he found that he could not find ultimate answers in secular or political ideologies. He came to believe that those who gave their energies to movements that claimed to be of benefit for humanity-at-large were wasting their strength. Not only was humanity-at-large unwilling to accept

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<sup>259</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 16.

Jews as Jews, but the loss of their strength was detrimental to the Jewish community. In his later years, Peretz turned to the great teachings of the prophets and to the literature of the hasidim. As a modern writer, he molded these rich teachings into a form of art intelligible to modern readers. Through the stories he wrote, Peretz offered estranged Jews a way back to their heritage. To those traditionalists who read his stories, he offered a taste "rarified humanism."<sup>260</sup>

Nigger characterized Peretz and his work saying:

He belonged to no one section of Jewish life. He embraced them all. He tried every trend and experimented with every form. He was a realist, a maskil; a scoffer at the shtreimel. And he became the romantic of Chassidism; he was a believer in the language of the country, an adherent of Hebrew, and an architect of the new Yiddish literature. He is a master in Hebrew. He fought for the workers and had his socialist period. Yet he united them all by the magic of his literary personality. Till the last day of his life he was a searcher, a seeker, full of love for humanity, the greatest personality in our literature, the father of our literature.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Kahn writes (p. 25):

"Chassidic" incorporates the individual ethical consciousness of people with will power. Not the divine, but the human shines out from their souls. It is Peretz's medium for his ethical-philosophical way of thought and for his world of thought, with the stress on the humane. He had tried democratism and placed himself on the side of the folk...."

<sup>261</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 20.

## Chapter 4

### Peretz's Reality and Artistry

The truth is that, as far as everyday data are concerned, especially those of a private nature, I interest myself very little in them, or ignore them altogether. I find data, as data, inconsequential. More often than not, the more significant motives behind them are many, different, and intertwined. Of data, as such, the colors are gray; the tone blaring; the lines vulgar!

But in memory, they become refined, purified. I ask of life only this much: let each of its streams flow quickly over the dam. I mix a big dose of mystical resignation and elemental philosophy for each fact of life before it goes over the dam. I do not allow anything to overcome me. I guard my feelings from the least harassment. Outwardly, torrents of evil may pour, but, internally, I remain untouched. After the facts of life have been softened and transformed in the flow of time, and emerge anew in memory, I love them. They have passed through their purification in the "depths of the unconscious," they are refined and shining, cleansed of the dust and the stars.<sup>1</sup>

...the eye of the artist sees reality not as it is, but rather in a much more realistic way, for he sees its inner content, he sees its relationship to the world and its dependence on the souls of the world, and on that which transpires beyond the surface of the world...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, pp. 64-5.

<sup>2</sup> David C. Jacobson, Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth Century Hebrew Writers (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), p. 30

Peretz was a prolific author, writing in a every genre except the novel. He wrote poetry, plays, sketches, essays and a novelette. He also wrote popular scientific articles, newspaper columns, and worked on translations.<sup>3</sup> He is best known for his short stories and his use of hasidic tales and folk lore. His work has been translated into over twenty languages.<sup>4</sup>

It is not easy to characterize Peretz's style. He did not abandon realistic description, yet he refused to be limited to that which is called realistic. Facts and logic were not sacrosanct to him. He was not afraid of the irrational and he "sought to set imaginations astir with visions of Messianic possibilities."<sup>5</sup> In his writings one finds elements of romanticism, symbolism, and impressionism. Leftwich asserts:

Peretz would have said that he didn't want to write in any other genre than his own even if he could. "Realism needs no heaven," he objected. "It needs no love and no hate. It only has to paint, to depict, to set people in motion." He needed a heaven, and to express through his work love and hate, to make people love the good and hate the bad. His way of writing was for him the only way. He had a mission - through his stories to make people do things, to make them better, to make them feel ashamed of hypocrisy, and angry with cruelty, and indignant with poverty.<sup>6</sup>

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3 "The Days of Isaac Leibush Peretz," The Jewish Times, 27 September, 1946, pp. 9-11.

4 Jacob Shatzky, "Peretz: His Place in World Literature," The Jewish Times, 27 September, 1946, p. 32.

5 Liptzin, A History of Yiddish Literature, p. 66.

6 Peretz, Book of Fire, pp. 14-15.

### Poetry

Peretz wrote poetry in Yiddish and Hebrew throughout his life. In 1874, Peretz circulated a manuscript of his first literary attempt, a series of poems written in Polish. These poems were, for the most part, satirical. His first printed poems were written with his father-in-law. However, many consider "Negiel," published in Gottlieb's Ha-boker Or in 1876, to be his literary debut.<sup>7</sup> Peretz was primarily an epic poet. His most famous poem, "Monish," is a ballad. The tempo of his poetry is crisp; the last lines often consist of only two feet.<sup>8</sup>

In his final years, Peretz concentrated on juvenile poetry. He had founded a children's home in 1914, and these poems were probably written for its residents and for his young grandson.<sup>9</sup> Peretz's goal was to instill in these young people a love and respect for their own language and culture.<sup>10</sup>

As a Hebrew poet Peretz cannot be compared to Bialik. However his Hebrew poetry compared favorably with other Hebrew poets of the period. Peretz stood among the foremost Yiddish poets his generation..<sup>11</sup>

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7 "The Days of Isaac Leibush Peretz," The Jewish Times 27 September, 1946, pp. 9-11.

8 Roback, p. 234.

9 Ibid.

10 Roback, pp. 253-5.

11 Roback, pp. 228-9.



### Drama

Peretz took great pride in his dramatic works. More than once, however, he was forced to face the fact that others were not as impressed with these works as he was. The majority of his plays are essentially dramatized short stories.<sup>12</sup> Strangely enough, though his short stories were filled with action, his plays, for the most part, lacked plot and action.<sup>13</sup> They are primarily reflective works.<sup>14</sup>

The two plays that exhibit true artistry are Di Goldene Keit (The Golden Chain)<sup>15</sup> and Bei nakht oifn Altn Mark (Night in the Old Market).<sup>16</sup> Di Goldene Keit is the story of a hasidic rebbe's determination to extend the Sabbath throughout the week in order to "make all life a sacred celebration."<sup>17</sup> Bei nakht oifn Altn Mark is a symbolic tale bringing together the living and the dead, the past and the present. This work is one of Peretz's rare expressions of disillusionment and despair.<sup>18</sup> According to Kahn:

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<sup>12</sup> Roback, p. 245.

<sup>13</sup> Roback, p. 246.

<sup>14</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> The first version of this play was written in 1903. Peretz revised the play a number of times. The final version was completed in 1913. ("The Days of Isaac Leibush Peretz," pp. 10-11.)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. This play was written in 1907.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Kahn, pp. 26-27.

...this is more a universal play than specifically Jewish. The tragedy is that of the whole world rather than of Jewish life. It is the timeless tragedy of human life--and death, played out in grotesque color....

...the idol who reigns is not just the old Greek Fatum, ruling on right and left. There are the living political leaders of the world...

The poet went looking for people with will power ("If only you want it, you have blood like steel") looking for people who might want to destroy the idol with their strength, and with acts of violence ("You take life with violence"). But he has found only powerlessness everywhere. Therefore this tragic night mystery has no living characters, only shadows of people. The noises they make, voices...tinny sounds of the dead who can only ring bells.

Peretz's dialogue, the sharp things he says, but only about his problem, which is throbbingly alive and fresh and real, with all the despair that the play emits, Peretz's seeking and asking: "Where is the purpose? Where is the aim?"

Yet he does not despair of belief in life, belief in man, in the future. ("Something in the heart still blooms. Something still drives, and something draws.")<sup>19</sup>

#### Essays, Allegories, and Articles

Peretz developed a distinctive form in his essays. They are "brief, pungent, stripped to the essence of the matter, totally different from the slow footed winding pace of early Yiddish writing."<sup>20</sup> Many seem as pertinent today as they did when Peretz first wrote them. (See Appendix B: On Education, pp. 11-12; Our Platform, pp. 15-16; and Advice to the Estranged, pp. 28-9.) As an educator he wrote popular scientific articles. In 1893, at the time of the cholera epidemic, Peretz wrote a pamphlet called, "Those Who Want to Live--Need Not Die of Cholera."<sup>21</sup> In Di

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<sup>19</sup> Kahn, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 11-12.

<sup>21</sup> "The Days of Isaac Leibush Peretz," p. 9.

Yidishe Bibliotek he wrote essays on a variety of issues including the importance of education and the value of Yiddish. In Yomtov bletlekh he wrote numerous articles devoted to issues of concern to the working class. He also wrote essays concerning cultural regeneration and about the dangers of assimilation. In 1900, Peretz was a regular contributor to Der Yud, published in Cracow. In 1902 he devoted himself exclusively to publicist writings.<sup>22</sup> "The Author, the Book, and the Reader," and "What's Wrong with our Literature," as well as other significant essays were written in 1910.<sup>23</sup> In 1912 Peretz transferred his column "In Mein Vinkele" ("In My Corner") from the Fraint to the Haint. He continued to condemn assimilation and to write about spiritual and cultural revival during these years.<sup>24</sup> Peretz made skillful use of the allegory and symbol in his polemical writings.

Frischmann and other critics maintain that his allegories were unintelligible. The prevailing opinion, however, is that the allegory was one of his most important literary devices. By means of allegory, Peretz could critique repressive Czarist measures and write about male and female relationships.<sup>25</sup>

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22 "The Days of Isaac Leibush Peretz," pp. 9-10.

23 Ibid.

24 "The Days of Isaac Leibush Peretz," pp. 10-11.

25 Roback, p. 252.

### Other Writings

In 1897, the year that the Bund was founded, Peretz wrote a proletarian novelette entitled Vebber-Leebe (Weaver's Love). It was published in the New York Ovent-Blat in the form of a series of letters.<sup>26</sup> Peretz responded to the Kishenev pogrom in 1903 first with silence and then by translating Bialik's "Ir Ha-haregah" into Yiddish. In 1910, Peretz began work on the Five Megillot.<sup>27</sup>

### Short Stories

Peretz's greatest artistry is displayed in his short stories. Their tone and style vary enormously. Peretz concentrated on the little and the great events of ordinary life. Although great sages, famous hasidic rebbes, and Elijah the prophet make their appearance in some of his tales, more often than not the stories are about the heroism (or lack thereof) of porters, water carriers, apparent simpletons, pious wives and widows, and hungry children. Liptzin describes Peretz's short stories saying:

These (stories) combined clear observations of real life with flights into romantic, mystic heavens. In his tales, visible phenomena were overtopped by higher strata of eternal truths to which one ascended via the ladder of faith or through the medium of dreams. His humble characters... were not crushed by their hard tasks and endless dull routines, because they had faith in a higher reality, a more

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26 "The Days of the Life of Isaac Leibush Peretz," p. 10.

27 "The Days of the Life of Isaac Leibush Peretz," pp. 10-11.

just existence awaiting them at the end of their earthly journey.<sup>28</sup>

As was the case in the hasidic tale, Peretz places little emphasis on the social scene or the physical world.<sup>29</sup> He concentrates the reader's attention on the inner essence of the events that take place and the secret motivations that govern relationships. What matters to Peretz is the spiritual journey, the ethical choice, an individual's hidden weaknesses and unknown strengths.<sup>30</sup> In his Memoirs Peretz explained:

You are under no obligation to believe my description of her is exact. I don't describe people as they really are, but only their reflections, refracted from my memory. My description of people is rarely realistic. What I mean is this: I see things subjectively. For example: take a photograph of a person. What may remain in my mind's eye is only the black image of, say a blond person, who communicated dark thoughts to me. On the other hand, I see a swarthy person who sent a ray of light to my soul as a blond. The colors and lines of the soul overlay for me the visible lines and colors of the body...<sup>31</sup>

Rabinovich explains that Peretz's style tends to be allusive. He often writes in broken phrases which end in a row of dots.<sup>32</sup> Peretz uses this style, wrote Rabinovich:

...to break up the more direct, concrete style of writing, which seems to him to have exhausted itself, so that his words can convey more effectively the subtlety of variegated emotions. The hushed style of his writing, the musical pause at the close of phrases and sentences - a pause that

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28 Liptzin, A History of Yiddish Literature, p. 58.

29 Howe and Greenberg, p. 17.

30 Ibid.

31 Peretz, My Memoirs, p. 80.

32 Isaiah Rabinovich, Major Trends in Modern Hebrew Fiction. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968, p. 26.



seems to be listening to itself as it slows down the spoken dialogue...suggest to the reader some divine inspiration hovering above... It recalls the reader to himself; he hears it, wonders for a moment, and then succumbs to emotions that have no questions and no answers in the silence of the twilight. This impressionistic tendency pervades nearly all of Peretz's work...(and) transcends realism.<sup>33</sup>

Peretz also relies on suggestion to make the reader aware of what is going on in the mind of the protagonist. From his hints, we are to formulate our own opinions.<sup>34</sup>

Peretz disliked verbosity and wrote and rewrote his stories until he found the most effective imagery.<sup>35</sup> He urged his followers to write simply, to avoid paragraphs when sentences would do, and to choose their words carefully.<sup>36</sup> Nigger wrote that Peretz brought "impact and hurriedness" into the structure of the Yiddish story.<sup>37</sup> His tempo was fast paced and "staccato."<sup>38</sup>

In place of description, Peretz frequently used dialogue to convey emotions, relationships and events. He had a great love for dialogue. Peretz often used contrasting qualities and relationships sharply juxtaposed against one another to make his points more vividly.<sup>39</sup> Peretz's own stance toward the scenes he

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33 Rabinovich, p. 27.

34 Roback, p. 343.

35 Peretz wrote and rewrote much of his work. Apparently Peretz revised his translation of Ecclesiastes seventy times in 1914. ("The Days of Isaac Leibush Peretz," p. 11.)

36 Madison, p. 131-2.

37 Howe and Greenberg, p. 13.

38 Ibid.

39 Roback, pp. 333-5.

described adds to the reader's sense of contrast. According to Adler, "His style represents a blend of familiarity and objectivity, combining empathy with caustic criticism."<sup>40</sup>

Peretz began writing sketches and stories while participating in Bloch's statistical survey in 1890.<sup>41</sup> The sentimentalism of German-Jewish writers had a powerful influence on Peretz's earliest short stories. Their emphasis was on the individual's rebellion against traditionalism.<sup>42</sup> One of his earliest stories remains one of his most famous: Bontche Shweig. He published his stories in journals and later in book form.<sup>43</sup> Peretz wrote the stories in Yiddish and later translated most of them into Hebrew. In 1947, all of Peretz's short stories were published in Kol Kitvei I.L. Peretz.<sup>44</sup>

Some critics maintain that Peretz's best works are his simplest ones, which are devoid of aesthetic or didactic purpose."<sup>45</sup> In my opinion, however, not even the simplest of Peretz's stories are without aesthetic or didactic purpose. One finds an overriding concern for justice in his work. According to Leftwich:

Peretz was essentially a moralist. His satire was that of

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<sup>40</sup> Adler, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> "The Days of Isaac Leibush Peretz," pp. 9-11.

<sup>42</sup> "Modern Hebrew Literature," p. 193.

<sup>43</sup> "The Days of Isaac Leibush Peretz," pp. 9-11.

<sup>44</sup> "Modern Hebrew Literature," p. 194.

<sup>45</sup> Rabinovich, p. 42ff.

the moralist, and his fairy tales were those of the moralist, using his stories as Tolstoy did to convey his message--that human happiness hangs on the moral law, that promises and vows must be kept, and elementary human kindnesses are fundamental, and that man must always be on guard against temptation, even a tiny, insignificant temptation. As he says in "A Pinch of Snuff," "You don't stumble over a mountain. You trip over a molehill."<sup>46</sup>

Within the boundaries of a short story the reader has the rare opportunity of seeing justice done, or at very least, injustice challenged.

In a number of his stories and folk-tales he makes flying trips to Heaven where he seems to be quite at home. This intermundane traffic merely helps him to carry out the pivotal point of his conception. He is not content to depict life on earth. Not only must he reveal the decisions of the Supreme Court above, but he is also at pains to describe what goes on in the eighth compartment of Hell.<sup>47</sup>

By showing the reader the world from the point of view of the celestial court<sup>48</sup> Peretz informs the reader that there is indeed a Judge and in the end there will be justice.

Peretz was a master of the story with the God-given happy ending, and he sometimes disliked himself for it. Now and again he wrote a short story in which goodness did not get its reward on this earth. He even has a sketch that shows a saintly soul refusing the offer of heaven with the remark: "I would rather go to hell, where I can be of some use." Predominantly, however, the good triumphs in his tales, and he knew that from one point of view this is not true to life. For that matter, he knew also that the function of good is not to be rewarded; it is, simply, to be good. He knew that the innocent must suffer with the guilty, if only by definition; for if they did not, they would not be innocent, they would be merely shrewd.

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<sup>46</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Roback, p. 237.

<sup>48</sup> See the analysis of The Three Gifts and Bontshe Shweig in the next chapter.

...Now there is a curious streak in some artists which on the surface resembles a venal defect. Just as there are some writers who produce pot-boiler for money and are later disgusted with themselves, so there are writers who make the good triumph out of love for the good--and they are also disgusted with themselves. Perhaps they plan a story with an "honest" sad ending; then a bitter protest rises in them. They simply will not give evil the satisfaction of triumphing. Also, they have an irrational feeling that evil cannot triumph in the long run. So their seeming venality is really another kind of intellectual integrity; being true to another aspect of themselves, they revert to the happy ending. This has nothing to do with the ordinary commercial motives for the happy ending. But the revulsion from this concession can be as violent as from the other, the worldly one.

But is that feeling of the ultimate triumph of good irrational? Were the Hebrew Prophets sentimentalist when they preached that goodness alone can save the world?<sup>49</sup>

### PERETZ'S STYLE AND TENDENCIES

#### Neo-Romanticism

Romanticism, is a literary movement rooted in the spirit of the times. According to Orenstein:

The social conditions of man, the political status of the nation, the abolition of personal servitude, forced labor and similar institutions, they all were both the root and nourishing soil to literary creativeness of the century. The Romantic movement, as such, is primarily a revolt against institutions, authority and government by a single and powerful ruler.<sup>50</sup>

Peretz was influenced by the romanticism of Polish literature. Poland had once extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea and from the heart of Prussia to Russia. Now it only existed on the maps as a province of Russia.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Samuel, pp. 125-6.

<sup>50</sup> Orenstein, p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> Orenstein, p. 31.

Stanislaw Brzozowski, the well known Polish literary critic and writer says:

"Polish romanticism is an act of faith in the spirit of a nation which had lost her physical reality of existence."<sup>52</sup>

Peretz's neo-romanticism was likewise an act of faith.

Peretz was also responding to the "individualistic impressionism and mystic symbolism that spilled over from French poetry in the 1880s."<sup>53</sup> He hoped to see younger authors introduce these elements into their writing, thus creating a new type of modern Jewish literature.<sup>54</sup>

The texts that served as sources for Jewish neo-romanticism in Peretz's time were medieval and modern mystical texts, kabbalistic doctrine and hasidic tales."<sup>55</sup>

Until Peretz, artistic romanticism had been a foreign way of dress in Yiddish narrative, which had been heart and soul in the grip of realism. Peretz was not only the first expression of romanticism in Yiddish literature, who could show us romantic figures in folk-poetry in a new light, a new conception; he was also the first who really appreciated the gems of Yiddish folklore.<sup>56</sup>

### Realism

Facts, to Peretz, were trivial in relation to the essence of a thing.<sup>57</sup> Having experimented with a variety of literary

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<sup>52</sup> Orenstein, p. 32.

<sup>53</sup> Rabinovich, p.26.

<sup>54</sup> Rabinovich, pp. 25-26.

<sup>55</sup> Orenstein, p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> Kahn, pp. 24-25.

<sup>57</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, pp. 65-6.



trends, he rejected the realism of the Odessa school, calling it anachronistic. (Ha-Hetz, 1884)<sup>58</sup> He found it unsatisfactory because it portrayed only what appeared on the surface. Moreover, he felt that realism was short sighted and ultimately harmful. "It (realism) did not lead to oneself but away from oneself, or against oneself, even against one's own soul."<sup>59</sup>

Peretz, like the other authors of his time, was touched by modernism. He was aware of Nietzsche's views about the self, power, and glory. As the latest literary trend, and one that many chose, it had to be reckoned with. As soon as Peretz was able, he threw it off.

"He saw how it "tore and fragmented the personality, and was imbued with the deepest pessimism....In the depths of his soul he could not endure the breath of death and demolition which the movement exhaled. Inwardly it was foreign to him and remote...<sup>60</sup>

Because of his concern for "the moral absolute," he turned to the fable. According to Samuel, the artist in him as well as "the thinker," drove him to the fable.<sup>61</sup>

With all his admiration for the moderns, all his longing to be European, all his socialistic leanings, he did not believe that science had probed as deep into the heart of man as had the Chassidic rabbis. He could not accept the moral interpretation of economic determinism. He would not let the sinner plead: "I'm not to blame--it's the capitalistic system." He felt profoundly that in the secret places of the heart there are small but decisive freedoms,

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<sup>58</sup> "I. L. Peretz," p. 193.

<sup>59</sup> Kahn, p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Dawidowicz, pp. 291-2. (from: H.D. Nomberg, Y.L. Peretz, Buenos Aires, 1946; pp. 57-72; trans. from Yiddish by Dawidowicz.)

<sup>61</sup> Samuel, pp. 53-4.

tiny possibilities. What we do with these possibilities depends on our awareness of them. And so, when he probed into the mysteries of man's behavior, he turned from Buckle and Mill and Marx to the Baal Shem Tov and the Rabbi of Kotzk and the Rabbi of Nemirov and the Rabbi of Berditchev.<sup>62</sup>

It is important to understand that Peretz was not opposed to the realistic description. There are many stark descriptions in his stories. What Peretz opposed was the notion that describing the material or surface reality of a situation is sufficient. The beauty of his work lies in the fact that he did not abandon reality. Rather, he brought to light those aspects of reality that so often go unnoticed. This includes the cry of a poor child, the knowledge of a pious water carrier, and the song of the universe. He chose these as the subjects of his stories because he knew them to be true. Peretz's aesthetic and moral sense together were the source of his unique style.

Peretz, the master artist of the Jewish soul, is able to discover the inner beauty of character and soul even beneath the mass of ugliness and chaos in the external life of his personages...His romanticism originated, very naturally, in his striving towards the transcendent values in life. Artistically, it was the search for the unknown, the love of the imaginary vision to fashion a universe more enticing than the prosaic writers. Yet, he never suppressed his strong sense of realism either... His occasional breakthrough the bonds of reality (and into the realm of visions) do not strike us as a forfeit of the reality of life. Maybe, because Peretz never quite loses the realistic touch or because we realize, in reading, that this apparently romantic, mystic striving of the human soul towards something much higher (and at the same time more real than) the earthly misery of the body, is something as inherently human as the earthly sufferings are real.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Orenstein, pp. 30-1.

## Satire

Peretz used satire to fight on behalf of his people. He mocked anti-Jewish polemics, insisted on Jewish rights, and fought hypocrisy, fanaticism, and intolerance within the Jewish community. He poked fun at extreme pietists who believed that western dress would undermine the values of their children, and he satirized false miracle workers who took advantage of their followers.<sup>64</sup> He, like other authors, used satire to bring about social reform.<sup>65</sup>

Peretz also satirized those urbanized Jews who described themselves as "Poles of the Mosaic faith."<sup>66</sup> In 1907, he wrote Yehoash:<sup>67</sup>

"There was a time," he wrote, "when all the Yiddish writers imitated Heine, and it was bad for them. It was sentiment without strength, yearning without love, impotence, sour grapes. I was myself one of those who danced round this same idol, like the rest, even before all the others did. We must not scoff and ridicule, Not even when the scoffer is a genius. If we ever feel like pulling faces and grimacing we should do it at home, in private, in front of the mirror, not in front of the public. We should strive to be prophets and leaders, not jesters."<sup>68</sup>

One must note that Peretz's irony, sarcasm, and parody were reserved for the powerful, not the powerless.

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<sup>64</sup> Madison, pp. 105-6.

<sup>65</sup> Roback, p. 291.

<sup>66</sup> Madison, p. 107.

<sup>67</sup> Madison, pp. 130-1.

<sup>68</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, pp. 20-1.

### Symbolism

Symbolism became prevalent in Russia and Poland at the beginning of the twentieth century. This tendency is evident in a number of Peretz's short stories. It is particularly clear in Shema Yisrael,<sup>69</sup> the story of a poor young man who appears to be a simpleton. This man lives a life of seclusion, approaching others only when he must beg for bread. He remembers nothing, not his own name, not his father's. He calls himself "Abraham," and refers to his father as "my father," pointing heavenwards. He is unable to carry the simplest message.

When the musician who played the double bass dies in a snow storm, Abraham inherits both the instrument and the job. He plays along with the other musicians in town at joyful occasions. The other musicians, of course, harmonize with each other. Abraham simply draws his bow across the strings, paying no heed to the sounds that come forth. He is oblivious when the others finish playing. He becomes the source of much amusement to all who hear him play in this strange manner.

A wedding takes place between the families of the rabbi of Cracow and the president of the synagogue of Lublin in Tomashav, the town in which Abraham lives. (It is half way between these two cities.) As usual, Abraham's "music" amuses the crowd.

Suddenly a mysterious beggar enters, walks right up to the rabbi of Cracow, and with a voice of authority announces, "Midnight!" The stranger explains that Abraham plays the "true

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<sup>69</sup> Rabinovich, pp. 27-8.

music of midnight." This wedding was arranged on high in order to insure that the rabbi will hear his music. The stranger points to the ceiling which suddenly opens up as do the skies above, revealing the full host of heaven listening to Abraham. The world trembles in awe.

The sky closes and the ceiling returns to its place. Abraham drops his instrument, begins singing the Shema and faints. The next morning he dies. His music, the reader is told, is required in the higher worlds. The stranger disappears.

In world folk lore one frequently finds primitive (and inferior) characters who are able to express themselves through music. Magic instruments abound in such stories. Peretz's story differs from these tales in significant ways: the reader learns that Abraham's primitiveness does not indicate inferiority. His instrument is an ordinary double bass. Yet:

Under our very eyes, as it were, the author removes his hero from the category of a creature of flesh and blood in the concrete world of the wedding at Tomashov and magically transforms him into a mysterious figure transcending the world of actuality, transcending the world of lucid thought and expression, transcending even the inner struggles of the hero himself.

...Though Peretz does in fact provide us with a detailed account to the course of events, he makes every effort to desert formal realism, giving his prose the conversational tone of an older man reminiscing with friends of his own age. The carefully modulated tone, the rhythmic pauses suggestive of a person listening both to the story and his own soul, the overt and subtle allusions--all these combine the hasidic folklore with a modernistic symbolism...70



However one can only say that elements of symbolism exist in Peretz's writings. Peretz is unwilling to ignore the problems of his people and always interrupts these tales with a moral.<sup>71</sup>

Peretz: "A Dynamist Artist"

Roback has characterized Peretz as "mentally impressionistic." In his work one finds a dynamic interplay between a complex of ideas.<sup>72</sup> While he believed in the importance and power of the individual, he believed that the individual was "a reflection of the collective."<sup>73</sup> Throughout his work, we find that Peretz is primarily interested in the mixture of emotions that take place inside an individual and the relationships between these individuals.<sup>74</sup>

In these stories, Peretz portrays psychic conflict masterfully. He focuses on conflicts of identity and belief and is sensitive to the psychic conflict caused by social dynamics. Peretz was cognizant of many of the forces to lead to inter and intra-personal conflict.<sup>75</sup> Peretz focused his attention primarily on the normal individual living under difficult circumstances.<sup>76</sup> It is important to note that Peretz had a keen

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Roback, pp. 272-3.

<sup>73</sup> Roback, pp. 191.

<sup>74</sup> Roback, pp. 331-2, 356-7.

<sup>75</sup> Adler, p. 13.

<sup>76</sup> Roback, p. 330.

interest in psychology. He was a contemporary of Freud and Jung, and at one time he discussed the possibility of preparing a popular psychology text in Yiddish with Sholom Aleichem.<sup>77</sup>

According to Roback:

To Peretz, the character is constantly in flux. He is ever becoming a personality. For this reason I should be inclined to call his type of art--dynamic. While the dramatist, pure and simple, sketches the tree in its full length, Peretz takes a cross section and examines the grains, layers and rings of the slice which he has cut out, leaving the bark for others to inspect and report on. In all his works, there is scarcely one ugly character, nor can we point to a perfectly ideal figure. We get a glimpse of the wicked, the stupid and the absurd, just as we receive the rays of the bright, the good, the noble and the sublime...

Peretz does not view personality as if it were a pole firmly entrenched in the ground. His conception of personality reminds one rather of a skein of wool, all balled up, which is almost impossible to disentangle. He sees no purpose in straightening out the knots, so long as the colors are discernible and the loose ends can be manipulated. In any case, such is life to him. No one can live a purely individual life and we may even go further and set forth the thesis that no one lives his own life.<sup>78</sup>

### Conclusion

Around 1900, Peretz wrote I.J. Propus:

And now for some sound advice. Symbolism is a good thing; decadence is very often appetizing like verminous Swiss cheese... Sometimes we ourselves have no clearly conceived ideas, and before we grasp them we visualize them imaginably. Frequently we feel tired and seem to be in darkness, as if night has overtaken us, with but a few rays, forgotten by the sun, groping about. All that is very well, but there is one evil and that is the school. No good can come out of a school. At any rate, poetry emanates from the heart and not from any school.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Roback, pp. 375-6,

<sup>79</sup> Roback, p. 274.

Roskies characterizes Peretz as one of those authors who created a new norm "by bringing together the sum of all past possibilities and showing that sum to be the beginning of a radical countertradition."<sup>80</sup> Peretz is best understood as an amalgam of a variety of contrasting tendencies, beliefs, and literary styles.

Peretz's commitment to the humanly holy, to activating the divine spark which he saw in every living being, led him to concentrate on the inner experience. It fostered his belief that human beings could - and must - refuse to be diminished by circumstance. This was a basis for his conviction that the transcendent dimension is as real as the streets through which his readers walk.

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<sup>80</sup> Roskies, p. 183.

## Chapter 5

### The Transformational Nehemtot of I. L. Peretz

P.G.'s son excelled him in notoriety. All kinds of stories were circulated about him. There was much falsehood in them, and much exaggeration even in reports with some factual basis. Of course, I could have questioned my cheder comrade Isaac, now a doctor in Zamoscz. No doubt, he would have told me the facts. But I didn't want to, because the fable is also a truth, and may reveal more reality than the mere facts. Man conceals his will and hides his true identity; in his actions, he is governed by convenience and propriety. But people understand the hidden essence of Man, and the fable they construct about him narrates what he would do, if he were true to his own self. In the fable, what actually has happened to him, if not for accidental interventions, would emerge in vivid colors.

The accidental, the nonessentials, the rationalizations, the things conditioned by business, necessity, or anger, or the elation of a moment of triumph, all fade away and are forgotten. In their place emerges a soul, a naked soul. And this is clothed anew, but now in suitable garments, in harmony with its true nature. Thus people are reborn in their native reality. They are made whole and strong, and are no longer the confused, shadowy, doddering selves they were in the so-called "reality."

This is also the magic and the truth of folk tales, and especially the magic and truth of art.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, pp. 69-70.

Peretz has been called "a liberal with conservative moorings and a spokesman for Jewish identity devoid of religious content."<sup>2</sup> Many see Peretz as a secularist who used traditional sources much as an artist uses paint, as a medium for ethical truths. Among Peretz's short stories, however, we find transformational nehemtot which are surprisingly similar to those told from the rabbinic period through his day.

Peretz wants his readers to know that the suffering they endure is not meaningless, and that they can refuse to be diminished by it. His stories express the belief that if only we could see our own situations or that of others, from God's perspective, they would look very different from the way they usually appear to us. If only we knew "the end of the story" in which we live, we would find out that there is an ongoing relationship between God and ourselves, that God is aware of our needs, that God is just, and that no deed passes unnoticed. The trials we experience in no way signify rejection. Peretz asserts that the situation is not as significant as the individual's response to the situation.

In this chapter, we will examine Peretz's method of refocusing the reader's attention and the way he deals with the issue of reward and punishment. We will then examine three of Peretz's short stories in detail: "Three Gifts," "The Widow's

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<sup>2</sup> Adler, p. 118.



Case Against the Wind," and "Bontche Shweig."<sup>3</sup> The first, "The Three Gifts," was chosen because it exemplifies how different things look from the point of view of heaven. The second, "The Widow's Case Against the Wind," is the finest example of the transformational nehemta in Peretz's work, and the third, "Bontche Shweig," is an inverse transformational nehemta.

### Appearance Versus Inner Reality

"Between Two Mountains" is the account of a confrontation between a zaddik and a mitnaged rabbi.<sup>4</sup> The zaddik had once been the rabbi's student but left the world of this cold and emotionless scholar for the warmth and emotion of the Hasidim.

The mitnaged comes to visit his former student. Through his eyes Peretz offers his readers two different views of Hasidism. Looking down from the top of the mountain where the rebbe lives, the mitnaged initially sees a meadow sparkling with group after group of hasidim, strolling on the hill dressed in their holiday garments of silk and cotton. As they stroll the hasidim gaze toward their rebbe, and their eyes drink in the light of his face. The more they draw forth his light, the stronger their song grows. The higher it reaches toward the heavens.

Every group sang its own melody, the melody that was unique to it, according to the light that had flowed down upon them, that they had been able to receive. And every melody combined together and joined as one single melody, a most exalted melody. And it grew stronger and stronger and ever more holy; it had no end, no stopping point--and

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<sup>3</sup> All three appear in translation in Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> Jacobson, pp. 30-32.

everything sang, the heavens sang, the celestial spheres sang, the earth below sang--the entire world sang--the soul of the universe sang -- -- --

Suddenly the mitnaged calls a halt to the events below, announcing that the time has arrived for the afternoon prayer. Suddenly the scene below looks different.

And I fell from the heavens earthward, a veil fell over my eyes...and I saw groups of hasidim dressed in tattered caftans, and I heard fragments of melodies, torn and unconnected. And the lights were extinguished. And the sparks were no more...And I looked at the rebbe and his face no longer shown with light...

By presenting both perspectives through the eyes of the mitnaged rabbi, the second one preceded by the words "a veil fell over my eyes," Peretz indicates to his readers that while the hasidim may externally appear tattered and uninspiring, they are "in fact a source of great spiritual exaltation."<sup>5</sup>

This technique of showing things as the reader is accustomed to see them and also as Peretz claims they really are allows the reader to make the journey from his or her current perspective to the one Peretz's offers. A mitnaged scholar sees these two visions above. If he can see both possibilities, it is possible that the reader might see beyond what he or she ordinarily sees. Peretz asks the reader to judge which perspective has more worth. This is the kind of story that permits what Tolkien describes as a "regaining of a clear view"

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<sup>5</sup> Jacobson, p. 31.

or "recovery."<sup>6</sup> This is not an alternative perspective, asserts Peretz, but a glimpse at the way things should be seen.

Peretz uses this technique in "Shema Yisrael," "A Chapter of Psalms," "Beside the Dying," and many other tales. The distinction is made most vividly in the story, "Downcast Eyes."

"Downcast Eyes" is the story of two sisters, Neḥama and Malka, whose inner and outer worlds differ radically. Each sister is very beautiful and, as the daughters of a village innkeeper, are in danger of falling prey to the lusts of the local noblemen. Malka the younger sister, develops a great love for the song and dance of the inn, and a local nobleman becomes interested in her. On the advice of the rabbi, she is quickly married to a young man from a respectable family in Prague.

On the surface, Malka lives an exemplary life. Though overly pale, she is very beautiful, demure, and well-behaved. She eats what she is given and dresses as the family desires. She attends the synagogue with every indication of piety and never walks through the streets of the city alone. Her beauty is compared to a polished crystal.

She has one curious habit. Her eyes are always cast down, and when her husband makes love to her, they are shut fast. Though her husband wishes it were otherwise, he comes to believe that it is simply an aspect of her modesty, a trait befitting a virtuous Jewish woman like his wife.

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<sup>6</sup> Tolkien, p. 77.

Underneath her polished surface, however, lies the singing and the dancing of the inn. In her own private world, Malka dances and rides with the young Polish nobleman. As her husband embraces her, she makes love with this other young man. In truth, Malka lives in a world far removed from her husband's. No one, not even he, ever suspects.

Neḥama, her older sister, should have been married first to some young scholar. But due to the danger posed to Malka, her wedding was put off until another dowry could be arranged. In the mean time a series of calamities befall her father. Everything is lost, he is imprisoned, and not long afterwards, he dies. Neḥama's mother dies shortly thereafter. Neḥama is left an orphan. She is teased mercilessly by the local peasants for her noble bearing.

Neḥama decides she must go to her sister for help. Carrying only a crust of bread, she makes her way through the forest. At nightfall she climbs into a tree for safety. Two Polish noblemen hunting in the forest find her and bring her down. They are both taken by her beauty and cast lots to determine which one of them will take her. Neḥama faints in terror.

When she awakens she finds herself in the home of one of the hunters. She knows that her body is already his. She tells the nobleman that she knows she cannot overpower him and that she realizes that he has already caused her body to sin. She begs him to leave her soul pure and allow her to retain her religion. Though he doesn't quite understand the meaning of her words, he

has begun to fall in love with her and agrees to her request. He even buys her a prayerbook which she feels unable to use in her defiled state.

When the nobleman makes love to her, she does not resist him. But in her mind she is embracing her mother. The words that she mutters are the prayers her mother taught her.

The story concludes saying:

The time allotted to all is short...  
Neither sister was granted a long life...  
When the souls departed from the bodies, the soul of Neḥama went forth in purity like a blameless dove, and it winged its way upward, higher and higher...and when it reached the gates of heaven - it trembled, for the fear of Divine judgement fell upon it...but the Attribute of Mercy transfixed it, the gates of heaven were opened and the tears of this wretched one found consolation...

The soul of Malka departed like a black raven. Though it wanted to spread its wings heavenwards, it fell below and was cast into the pit, disappearing into the darkness...

For God judges not by appearances...

It is not so among humankind:

Malka was given a fine funeral in Prague... Multitude upon multitude flowed after her bier and many eulogies were spoken. The widower paid generously for a place on the eastern side of the cemetery among the most humble and righteous of women. And he set up a tall, heavy marker of stone, its letters of gold declaring her praises...

But when the nobleman brought the dead body of Neḥamele to Prague, no one from the Hevra Kadisha would approach the sinful body to prepare it. With the nobleman's money day workers were hired to make the preparations. Her body was wrapped in an old sack and cast into a hole behind the fence...

Even there it found no rest for many days...

Some time later, when the old Prague cemetery was adjoined to the city and the graves were exhumed, Malka's body was found whole and nearly unchanged. The gravedigger took this as a sign of her great righteousness. Only the skull remained in Neḥama's



grave. The gravedigger carelessly kicked it, and it rolled away, never again to be found.

This story portrays in most striking colors the vast difference between appearance and reality. Through such stories, Peretz encouraged his readers to make the critical distinction between surface beauty and piety and that which, though hidden, is true beauty and piety. Moreover, Peretz reminded the reader that God certainly does not consider appearances. God judges that which is true.

#### Reward and Punishment

According to the terms of the covenant between God and Israel, those who faithfully observe the mitzvot will be rewarded and those who turn away shall be punished. It was no easier to reconcile this doctrine with the realities of life in Peretz's day than it was in earlier generations. We know that the problem of why the innocent suffer troubled Peretz even during his childhood.

Why has God created death? What comes after it? The soul is supposed to fly to the other world, to paradise or hell. According to Maimonides, part of the dead person's mind continues to exist at the highest level his soul had reached on earth. But, what about my little brother who died so young, whose brain hadn't had time to develop? What about children who died in their cradles, or children who were born dead--what about them? God tells us to continue to live our life as before: in joy or in sorrow, as the case may be. The rich remains rich, the landowner remains a landowner, and the porter a porter.

One feels let down; one feels taken in. God imagines it as a sort of reward and punishment game.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, p. 167. (underlining mine)

Peretz uses the short story to respond to this issue in a variety of ways. Within the parameter of the tale, Peretz is able to show us the whole picture, as it were. The actions of those who go unrewarded in this world, his stories assert, are held precious in the higher worlds. Apparently unjust or meaningless events are shown to have meaning. These are the messages of "The Widow's Case Against the Wind" and "Three Gifts."

Peretz also draws upon the popular belief that Elijah, herald of the Messiah, wanders the world disguised as a beggar rewarding the worthy and assisting those in need. Some of the more famous stories of this sort are "The Magician," "Seven Years of Plenty," and "The Treasure." A story that is less well known but just as beautiful is called "How He Was Revealed."

"How He Was Revealed" is the story of a couple who exhibited extraordinary faith and piety. Lemech and Genendel, a poor and elderly couple, arrived in a new town and found a small apartment on the street where the poorest people lived. After unpacking their few belongings they began to look for work. Lemech, a small quiet man with misty eyes was hired by the community to recite psalms. Genendel, a big woman with a loud voice, found work in the market place. Lemech spent the day alone, sitting in his alcove, softly reciting psalms while Genendel's voice could be heard from one end of the market to the other. These two opposites were the source of much amusement to their neighbors. The walls of their building were thin and filled with cracks.

Beilka, "the soldier" in particular, enjoyed making fun of this oddly matched pair.

Actually, at home Genendel became a quiet, meek woman. She readied dinner and then softly tapped on the door to the room where Lemech sat with his holy books. Quietly they washed, ate, and recited birkat ha-mazon. Their love was expressed through quiet smiles.

When Genendel had nothing with which to prepare for Shabbat, she would tap on the alcove door. Lemech would check his pockets, and finding nothing, remind her that there is "a Father in heaven." She took this as a sign that she would have luck in the market place, and invariably she did.

One week, she tapped on the door several times. There was no response. Quietly she opened the door and peered in. The windowless room was filled with a great light. Her husband sat in its midst, studying a holy book. Quietly she shut the door and resolved to make do with candles and challah.

She knew that their simple preparations would be sufficient for the two of them, but she felt sick with shame when she thought about what her neighbors would say. She decided to light the fire and pretend to prepare a Sabbath meal. But they didn't even have wood for the stove; Genendel used the straw from the sack on which she slept. She filled pots with water and busied herself at the stove.

That night, as she lay on her empty sack, she heard the neighbors' whispers and laughter. They knew.

Beilka was at the door the next morning wishing her a "good Shabbes." She reminded Genendel that since her husband had disappeared she'd taken her Sabbath meals with neighbors. She had heard Genendel preparing a splendid meal, she said, certainly they could spare something for her.

At that moment Lemech came in followed by a stranger with a full white beard and beautiful eyes. "Good Shabbes," they said in sweet voices. Lemech explained that the stranger had stayed with a miser the night before and needed their hospitality.

Suddenly the neighbors burst in, and with them the "Sabbath Goy" to open the stove. Everyone was waiting and laughing. This was too much for Genendel.

--Get out, get out, Goy, -- cried Genendel in fear -- Don't come near the stove.

Suddenly Lemech's face changed; his stature grew, and his eyes began to glow with the light of the stars; his voice rang with kindness:

--Please let him open it, let him open it Genendel...Surely you know there's a Father in heaven, and if not for our sake, let him do it for the sake of the guest...

Suddenly the neighbors disappeared, embarrassed before his light-filled face. Beilka "the soldier" also wanted to slip away, but Lemech held her back.

--Stay, poor wretch. The Lord's blessing will sustain you too...

Genendel shrunk back behind the pots, and the door was opened. Hot steam shot forth...and the odor of Sabbath dishes...the smell of a rich pudding in honor of the Sabbath--the scent of the Garden of Eden!

The story concludes with the stranger telling Beilka that he knows where her husband can be found and the narrator explains:

The key point: that little Lemech became Lemech, and after that, when the event became known, he became Rabbi Lemech...Thus he was revealed...

This story focuses on the dignified piety of this couple, the lot of a woman married to a poor and pious husband, Lemech's great faith, and the horrible shame that accompanies poverty. It is at the height of Genendel's fear and embarrassment that it becomes evident that Lemech is more than he appears. While Peretz never makes explicit the identity of the stranger, it is clear that he represents the intervention of the miraculous into the lives of people of faith. By describing individuals who are able to maintain true piety and dignity in the midst of poverty and even humiliation, Peretz plants the notion that every individual can do so. Moreover he reawakens belief in the possibility that God rewards the faithful at the moment when the situation becomes most unbearable. Finally, Peretz reminds the reader that he or she may have inner strengths that have as yet gone unrecognized.

#### Transformational Nehemtot

In the following stories, Peretz describes situations of seemingly meaningless suffering, and shows the reader that meaning exists. Some readers certainly recognized reflections of their own circumstances in these tales. To others they express those haunting questions that often lead to a crisis of faith. In real life, we are never given the sure knowledge of how our deeds look from God's perspective, nor can we be sure of the outcome of "the story." But as we join the protagonists within



the bounds of their stories, we are granted this knowledge and thus offered consolation and hope.

### "Three Gifts"

A certain Jew dies and is given a proper burial. Like every other soul, his soul comes before the Heavenly Court. Something happens, however, at this soul's trial that has not occurred since the creation of the world. The man's deeds, both good and bad, had been petty. Neither sins nor mitzvot push the scale very far in either direction. At this most unusual trial, the two sides of the scale stand perfectly balanced. (See Appendix A) The poor soul merits neither heaven or hell and is doomed to wander forever in between worlds.

As the attendant led the soul out, it wept bitterly...  
-- What's the matter, O soul, that you are moaning so?  
-- the angel spoke consolingly -- While you can't have the joy of Paradise, well, you've been saved from the fires of Gehenna. You won't taste the honey, neither will you face the sting!

But the soul wouldn't accept his words of comfort:  
better all the chastisements in the world than nothing.  
"Isn't nothing -- it said -- the worst of all."<sup>8</sup>

The attendant tells the soul that if it can bring three gifts of extraordinary beauty for the zaddikim, they will plead its cause on high, and the soul will thus gain entry into Paradise.

Generations pass before the soul finds the first gift, and it grows discouraged. The soul realizes that there is something horrible about smallness of spirit.

The gifts found by the soul represent the essence of faithful acts. The first act takes place during a robbery.

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8 Underlining mine.

Thieves ransack the home of a wealthy Jew. They warn him that if he makes a move or a sound, they will kill him. He parts with his possessions calmly until they find a small packet. When he objects, one of the robbers stabs him. They are sure that they have found the greatest treasure of all. When they open it they find a small packet of earth from the holy land. The first gift, a bit of earth spattered with blood, is accepted.

The second act of self-sacrifice is performed by a beautiful young woman. She is tried for leaving the ghetto and walking through the streets of a city on a Christian holiday. She is accused of being part of Satan's plot to steal pure souls in the midst of the celebration. The judges declare her punishment: she is to be tied by her hair to a wild horse's tail and dragged through the streets of the city until "the blood from her wounds wash the cobblestones that her impure eyes soiled."

The young girl makes a final request. She asks for a few pins. No one but the wandering soul notices that before she is tied to the horse, she pins the hem of her skirt to her feet to prevent her body from being exposed as she dies. The soul removes a bloodied pin from her corpse. The second gift, a young girl's final act of dignity and modesty in the face of unreasonable violence and cruelty, is accepted.

The last act of faithfulness takes place in a prison yard in a time and place unknown to the wandering soul. A group of soldiers have been summoned to administer punishment to a Jewish prisoner. This frail man is condemned to walk between two rows

of soldiers as they whip him. It is clear that he will never make it to the end of the row.

As the man walked between the soldiers, one of the soldiers aimed too high. His whip knocked the man's yarmulke from his head. The man walks on, unaware of what happened. When he realizes that he is bareheaded, he pauses, turns back, places the yarmulke back on his head. He continues walking with quiet dignity until he dies. The soul carries a blood soaked thread from the yarmulke up to the gates of heaven. The third gift too is accepted.

The story concludes with a rejection of utilitarianism.<sup>9</sup>

The third gift was accepted...the soul was at last redeemed...

And in Paradise joy was great:

The gifts are beautiful, beautiful...

The "Urim and Tumim" added:

--And the essential point is that they have no practical purpose at all, they are only decorative...only decorative...as it should be.

These acts of self-sacrifice which go unnoticed and unrewarded on earth are understood to be truly beautiful in the higher spheres. Along with the wandering soul, who typifies the "kleyne mentchele", "the little man"<sup>10</sup> ("He was a simple Jew without any great "spitefulness," without any great "self-sacrifice." And his deeds were petty, both the good and the bad: grains and droplets; dust, almost invisible to the eye."), the reader comes to appreciate the terrible danger of littleness as

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<sup>9</sup> Roback, p. 433.

<sup>10</sup> Howe and Greenberg, p. 18.

well as the constant possibility of acting with greatness, even under the most extreme of circumstances. These three individuals transformed situations of meaningless violence into opportunities for piety. Along with the wandering soul, we travel beyond death and learn that these actions are highly prized.

At a certain point, the soul despairs of the possibility of finding the beautiful in the world of the living. Its faith is renewed by the acts that it sees.

I'm not certain that this story as a whole can be called a transformational nehemta, but it does contain elements of this genre.

#### "The Widow's Case Against the Wind,"

"The Widow's Case Against the Wind" is the story of a pious widow's crisis in faith brought about by the apparent lack of divine justice in the world. Peretz places this tale in Israel during the reign of King Solomon. The language he uses is simple, and one feels as though one is reading an ancient legend. The story itself, however, is timeless, as applicable in the modern era as any time in history. (See Appendix A)

The widow Shunamit lived in a poor fishing village, maintaining herself by weaving and repairing nets. Due to an extended period of stormy weather, the fishermen are unable to go out to sea. As a consequence, Shunamit has no work. Shunamit begins to starve. No one in the village is in any position to

help her, but there is a wealthy Jew who lives several hours away. She walks to his home and asks for help.

He explains that he has just returned from King Solomon's palace where he listened to the king's great wisdom. He refuses to help her, piously quoting King Solomon:

And this is what King Solomon said: "The one who hates gifts shall live." (Prov. 15:27)

The one who desires life does not ask for gifts. He who accepts gifts of charity shortens his own life. You are talking about sinning against your own soul, but you will not do it through me, because God, the Judge of widows will not forgive me for helping you shorten own life. I will not give you anything for nothing."

He also refuses to lend her anything with another burst of pious language. He does offer her some advice. He tells her that she may take anything that is ownerless and that there is ownerless "flour dust" in his granary.

From the flour dust, Shunamit bakes three small loaves of bread. As she's about to take her first bite, a stranger comes to her door. He has just escaped a terrible fire and has been running for several days. He's very hungry and asks for a bit of bread. Shunamit willingly gives him the first loaf of bread, asking only that he leave the house. She is alone and his presence there is improper according to Jewish law. After he leaves, Shunamit thanks God for enabling her to perform this deed.

As she is about to taste the second loaf of bread another stranger comes to her door with another tale of woe. She gives him the second loaf, again asking only that he leave. Once again she praises God.



Just as she's about to take her first bite of bread, a fierce wind rushes in and demolishes her hut.

One wall fell in on the other and the thatching was blown far into the distance...the wind snatched the last loaf of bread out of the widow's hand and cast it into the sea.

Suddenly the wind is gone. The weather changes. Soon the fishermen will return to their nets. Soon there will be work for Shunamit. But the widow is unable to think about the future.

But the widow was not concerned with this now, another thought occupied her mind: what has God done to me and why did He do it, to me, a poor widow?

...why snatch the third loaf from the mouth of a widow and cast it into the sea?

This matter was incomprehensible to her. The thought crept into her mind that maybe this had not come from God, rather the wind had done this evil thing on its own accord against the will of the Most High, the One who sustains widows and provides for orphans.

It couldn't be otherwise.<sup>11</sup>

Shunamit decides to bring her case to King Solomon. Fueled by anger, she makes the long journey and lodges her complaint before the king. The king urges her to refresh herself while he decides what should be done.

A group of Arabian traders come before the king carrying sacks of gold and silver. They explain that they were caught in a storm at sea and their ship sprung a leak. After calling upon every other god, they called on the God of Israel to save them, vowing that they would gladly give God their gold and silver as ransom for their lives. The might of the wind suddenly increases. An object is cast into the hole in the boat, saving

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<sup>11</sup> Underlining mine.

their lives. They have come to make good their vow.

Solomon asks what kind of object stopped the leak. They tell him it was a small loaf of bread.

The king turned to the widow Shunamit and said: ---  
Take the silver and gold! It is yours. God has recompensed  
you for your bread; but know that nothing is done against  
the will of God. The wind only carried out the task given  
it by the Master of the universe.

This story masterfully portrays the kind of suffering that becomes intolerable and creates a crisis in faith. Shunamit was able to tolerate hunger and even the easy "piety" of the wealthy Jew. She is able to share what little she has even before she has satisfied her own hunger because she is convinced that her actions are the fulfillment of a divine command. She praises God for giving her the means to help save life. Her situation becomes intolerable when her last loaf of bread - made from flour dust - is suddenly swept away by the wind and cast into the sea. This loss which appears to serve no purpose constitutes a "catastrophe" for the widow. It leads her to ask why the God who is supposed to have special concern for the widow and orphan is treating her in this manner. The crisis worsens when she begins to think that the wind acted on its own accord without God's knowledge. When the connection between herself and God seems severed, her situation became intolerable.

Her crisis is resolved when she learns that her last loaf of bread wasn't randomly lost or wasted in the depths of the sea. Once she learns that it went to save life, just as the other

loaves saved life, and once she is assured that God is knowing and does govern all events, her crisis of faith is averted.

The reader who faces apparently meaningless loss understands the widow's predicament. Unlike the widow, however, the reader is rarely shown the whole picture. By accompanying the widow on her journey, the reader finds comfort in the suggestion that were he or she to know the entire story, his or her own theological crisis would also be averted.

### "Bontche Be Silent"

Bontche was a man who lived and died silently, never uttering a complaint against humanity or God. (See Appendix A) The mohel who performed his brit milah was no expert, his mother died when he was young, his step-mother acted abusively toward him, and while drunk, his father threw him out of his home. Bontche worked as a porter carrying heavy burdens. He did not demand his pay, asking only in the mildest of terms. He was rarely paid what he deserved.

A change occurred in his life when he stopped a runaway carriage and saved a man's life. The man hired him as his driver and arranged a marriage for him. His wife, however, turned out to be a shrew, and she ran off leaving him with an unweaned infant. When the child grew up, he threw his father out of their home. The man Bontche worked for went bankrupt. Though he ultimately paid off the rest of his debts, he never paid Bontche.

Bontche was run over by the same man whose life he was saved.

He was silent even in the hospital, a place where it's permitted to cry out! He was silent even when the doctor refused to approach his bed unless he was paid fifteen kopeks, and the attendant wouldn't change his linens without being paid five kopeks!

He was silent--as he lay dying--He was silent at the moment of his death.

Not one word against God; not one word against humankind.

When Bontche is brought before the Heavenly Court, he is so frightened that he doesn't understand that the praises the angels are singing his praises. He doesn't realize until the trial is half finished that the defending angel is speaking about him. His terror mounts as the prosecuting angel begins his testimony.

The prosecuting angel said only: "Gentlemen! He kept silent! I too will keep silent."

The presiding judge called out to Bontche in the sweetest voice he'd heard since his mother died.

There they didn't understand the nature of this matter. Perhaps you yourself didn't understand that you could have cried out and that the sound of your cry would have shaken the walls of Jericho and caused them to collapse. You yourself didn't realize the greatness of the power that lay dormant within you...

In the world you were given no reward for your silence, but that is the world of illusion; here, in the world of truth, you shall receive your reward.

Bontche is told that the court will not choose his portion; everything is heaven is his. Bontche has a hard time believing this, but after much convincing, he finally says:

--Nu, if this is so--smiles Bontche--what I really want is a soft roll with fresh butter every morning!

The judges and angels lowered their heads in shame; the adversary burst out laughing.<sup>12</sup>

"Bontche Be Silent" continues to be one of Peretz's most well known stories. It is among the most frequently translated, interpreted, and criticized of his tales. Weiner described this story as Peretz's clearest expression of "his faith that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the lowly,"<sup>13</sup> Roback, on the other hand, described Bontche as a "ne'er-do-well"<sup>14</sup>

It is true we cannot suppress a snicker on our lips at Bontzye's naivete, but at the same time it must be recognized that the snicker is not one of contempt or scorn...We do not lose our sympathy for poor Bontzye in spite of his embarrassing request...(When we realize the cause of his request) the smile dies on our lips. The humor is converted to tragedy...<sup>15</sup>

Madison sees this tale as a warning against meekness.

Bontche's fatalistic attitude irritated Peretz because it symbolized the pious Jew's complete credence in life after death, his belief that suffering on earth would be compensated by pleasures in Paradise. Peretz knew only too well that the resulting meekness and self abnegation were suicidal in an unconscionable world, especially as the faith that had kept the Jews alive for centuries was losing its hold upon them...<sup>16</sup>

Orenstein sees this story as a parable about class struggle and injustice in an autocratic state.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix C for possible Hasidic sources of this story.

<sup>13</sup> Weiner, pp. 210-11.

<sup>14</sup> Roback, p. 292.

<sup>15</sup> Roback, p. 296.

<sup>16</sup> Madison, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Orenstein, pp. 38-9.



There are many ways to understand this story. One may assume that Bontche had the power to bring the messiah, to insure that there would be no more Bontche Shweigs. But he lacked the vision to do so; hence the shame of the angels and the prosecutor's bitter laugh. In this sense, "Bontche Shweig" is not the story of one man's failure of vision alone. It is an account of the world's loss. As long as we the readers permit a world that crushes the spirit, every Bontche what stands before the Heavenly Court will ask only for a soft roll with butter. As such, this story is a stinging social critique.

But this story should also be read as an inverse transformational nehemta. While it is true that in life Bontche did not experience love and did not understand that it was possible to cry out, now he is told that uncomplaining silence was never required. He is offered anything and everything. He is told of his power. Bontche is unable to act on this knowledge.

By comparing Bontche to Mendel of "The Fast," Neḥama of "Downcast Eyes," or the anonymous prisoner in "Three Gifts," we see that this story goes beyond the issue of class struggle or social critique. Peretz will not allow his sympathy for the Bontche Shweigs of the world to overcome the message that there is no reason for a life of stoic and passive endurance. Peretz asserted that those who are in pain should cry out. They are to expect that a cognizant and sympathetic God will hear their cries. Like Neḥama and Mendel, every individual is able to

transform the most dire circumstances into moments of enduring worth and meaning. One may not allow one's vision to become so limited that one's dream becomes a soft roll and butter. When this occurs, personal tragedy has cosmic ramifications.

### Conclusion

Peretz explored many ideologies in the course of his life. He knew the heady excitement experienced by maskilim during the 1870s. He was touched by the events of 1881 and later, the Russian Revolution. During his final years he witnessed the suffering that accompanied the first World War. He knew what it was like to discover that one is an unwanted stranger in the world at large and at the same time to find oneself estranged from one's heritage.

Peretz's stories forged a link between old and new. They were his way of offering a basis for hope and faith. His transformational nehemtot contain many of the same elements as earlier nehemtot. They begin with an unapologetic expression of pain or loss, thus validating the reader's experience. They then point out the radical difference between appearance and reality. By showing us scenes through the eyes of skeptics, by showing the reader the entire picture, and through his use of the mysterious stranger and the Heavenly Court, Peretz refocused the readers' view of their own situations. In this manner, Peretz was able to work to restore the shaky relationship between Heaven and earth. Finally, Peretz consistently insisted on the

individual's ability to chose to take actions that have true beauty. He asked his readers to look beyond the roll and butter and participate in the drama that leads toward redemption.

All will be measured, all will be weighed  
Not a fear nor a blood drop will fade,  
Nor the spark in one soul be extinguished uncharged.  
Tears gather in streams, and streams into oceans,  
Oceans will swell to a flood.  
And sparks burst into thunder...  
Oh, think not there is no judgement or judge!<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Goodman, I.L. Peretz: Source Book, p. 6.

## Conclusion

"God manages a strange world; at times it is difficult to comprehend," the rabbi reflected as if to himself as he told the story some thirty years later in his Brooklyn home. "Yet it is our duty to tell the story over and over again. Telling the tales is an attempt to understand and come to terms with a most difficult reality."<sup>1</sup>

Between the self and the terrible world comes poetry with its minute redemptions, its lyrical insurgencies, its willing suspension of disbelief in tomorrow. These ministrations, I take it, compose our chances. I don't mean that poems can have a say in nuclear matters, or that through poetry we may expect a general change of heart. Power listens to none but itself; and the myth of progress through enlightenment, in my view, died in 1914. What I mean to say is that the right language can help us, as it always helps in hard moments, with our private struggles to keep whole, can be a stay against confusion, can start the healing fountains. And whatever helps us repossess our humanity, able again to take place and speak forth, frees us for work in the world. This is imagination's special task, as Wallace Stevens would say, because this contrary force, by pitching itself against external pressures, pushes back and makes space for liberty of spirit.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jaffa Eliach, Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust (New York: Avon Books, 1982) p. 114. "Based on a conversation of the Grand Rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spira, with Aaron Frankel, January, 1974."

<sup>2</sup> Terrence Des Pres, Praises and Dispraises: Poetry and Politics, the Twentieth Century (Viking Press, 1988).

In Heda Jason's Studies in Jewish Ethnopoetry, she describes the structure and purpose of a genre she calls "sacred legend." Jason explains that a people tells and retells certain stories because they like them. They like them because they have a meaningful place in their culture.<sup>3</sup>

(Sacred legends) are "meaningful" to their bearers insofar as they deal with the problems and conflicts that arise in regard to the most crucial points of the social structure and the cultural value system, and which present a solution to them in a way which expedites the functioning of the society and affirms its order and values.

In describing their structure she explains that the contextual elements are always symbolic, deeds and consequences are compressed and intensified, and that individual protagonists represent more than themselves.<sup>4</sup>

According to this definition, Peretz was engaged in the creation of sacred legends for his time. He used as his source materials from tradition, stories that he brought to life for his readers. Peretz told stories that dealt with "the problems and conflicts" that his readers experienced in ways that affirmed "the order and values" long held as true by Jewish communities.

If one compares "The Widow's Case Against the Wind" with the text from Lamentations Rabbah about Akiva's response to the foxes living where the Holy of Holies once stood, one sees a long tradition of nehemta which asserts that those who see the whole picture need not believe that God has abandoned them.

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<sup>3</sup> Heda Jason, Studies in Jewish Ethnopoetry (Taipei: The Chinese Association For Folklore, 1975), pp. 67-8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



Similarly, if one compares Mendel's assertion that there is a "Father in heaven," or the final request of a few pins by a young woman about to be martyred with the text from Lamentations Rabbah concerning the faithfulness of the woman who was seemingly abandoned by the king and yet maintained her faith in their relationship and his return, one sees a long literary tradition of affirming the humanly holy.

Peretz was a teller of sacred legends, a writer of transformational nehemtot. He was able to touch the hearts of Jews of diverse backgrounds with his tales. He showed them the critical importance of hope; he described the greatness of the human spirit; and he affirmed the reality of the transcendent dimension.

The Yiddish author Menes wrote:

Peretz is one of those writers in whom you always find something new that you had not previously noticed. Peretz has not aged. He is no less real to us today than he was thirty and forty years ago. I found the same magic in his stories and his people. We have got into the habit of thinking that all criticism, all condemnation is realism, and all positive description of life is romanticism, escapism into a world of dreams and fantasy. It isn't true. In Peretz's work you see how the positive side of life is real, more real than the harsh, ugly bleak side. There is also joy and love and holiness in life. The truth is that the presentations of the ugly side of life are often untrue, invented, distorted, caricatures to fit a disgruntled mind. They are not true pictures, because life is never all shadow. Life has also light, much light.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Peretz, Book of Fire, p. 27. From Menes's article, "When You Read Peretz Today."

## Appendix A: Three Stories by I. L. Peretz

### "The Widow's Case Against the Wind" from Folk Stories

In the days of King Solomon there was a woman, a very poor widow, whose name was Shunamit. The widow Shunamit dwelt in a hut of worn-out planks thatched with palm branches in a fishing village on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. There she lived, keeping herself alive by the labor of her own hands, weaving nets for the fishermen who lived in the village.

Days of winds and storms ensued. No boat could sail the sea nor could anyone cast a net; the widow sat without work, without food, and without means of livelihood.

To whom could she turn in her time of need? Could she go to the impoverished homes of the fishermen for bread? There too the lack was great; the fishermen also had nothing.

So she looked beyond the village. Not far, a three-hour walk from the village, there lived a wealthy man in a large house that stood inside a spacious yard. God had blessed the man with everything, giving him fields and gardens, vineyards and orchards, and many flocks of sheep, cattle, donkeys, and camels.

One morning, Shunamit arose from her sleep and saw that the skies were still angry and that the winds continued to storm. She knew that her only hope was to ask for charity, so she wrapped herself in the old sheet that was her garment by day and her covering by night, and went to call on the rich man.

At noon she reached his yard and found the rich man standing before his house. She drew near, bowing to the ground three times before him.

The wealthy man asked her: "Why are you bowing before me, woman? Get up and tell me who you are and what you want?"

The woman answered, "I am the widow Shunamit from the fishing village by the sea. Several days have passed since I've tasted a bite of food, now I've come to ask my lord for a loaf of bread so I may be revived."

The rich man showed her everything in his yard and said:

-- "Look woman. Look at my servants untying my camels and donkeys. I have just returned from Jerusalem. I saw King Solomon's palace. Nothing compares to the beauty of that palace, and it's open to anyone! I entered the palace. King Solomon sat on a golden throne with a crown of gold on his head with nobles, elders, and many people surrounding him, and he spoke words of wisdom before them -- milk and honey under his tongue. And this is what King Solomon said: "The one who hates gifts shall live."  
(Prov. 15:27)

The one who desires life does not ask for gifts. He who accepts gifts of charity shortens his own life. You are talking about sinning against your own soul, but you will not do it through me, because God, the Judge of widows will not forgive me for helping you shorten your own life. I will not give you anything for nothing.

-- If so -- said the woman -- don't give me something for nothing. Lend me a loaf of bread or a little flour which I can bring home and bake that I might be revived -- and I will bless you and pray that you may have a long life.

-- I will not do this for you either -- said the wealthy man calmly. "The borrower is slave to the lender" (Prov. 22:7), said King Solomon. The man who lends acquires a slave for himself, and I only buy slaves from among the Gentiles, not from the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Shall I take as slaves my own flesh and blood, how much more so a widow like yourself? I will neither lend you money nor goods.

The woman asked: Shall I die of hunger before your eyes? Will this find favor in the eyes of God, the Judge of widows?

-- No, you shall not die before my eyes, O Widow Shunamit -- said the rich man, completely at ease -- As God lives I will not withhold my deliverance from you. But how shall I help? With advice. Go and take possession of ownerless property.

-- What do the words of my lord mean? Nothing's ownerless except in the wilderness. And the wilderness is three days away. And what would I find there? Dry grass. Will you mock a poor widow, without God noticing, God the Lord of all, Shield of orphans and Refuge of widows?

-- Pay attention, woman, and listen:

My granary is empty now. In it there were one hundred sacks filled with flour white as snow. I brought all of them to Jerusalem, to the palace of King Solomon. Now all that remains

in the granary are the boards which were under the sacks. These boards are white -- white as white can be -- covered with flour dust which seeped through from the sacks. Flour dust belongs to no one; it's not mine.

So get up and go to the granary and take the white flour dust from off the boards, gather it up, carry it to your home, gather sticks on the way, kindle a fire, and bake yourself some little loaves, and God will send His blessing to you by means of the flour dust that which you shall find; then you shall eat, revive yourself, and bless God...

The widow woman did as the rich and pious man advised her: she gathered the flour dust from off the boards in the granary. On the way back, she searched and found twigs that had been scattered by the storm.

She returned home at nightfall, lit the fire with the twigs, mixed the flour and water, kneaded the dough and made three small loaves of bread.

She praised God for His mercies and sat down to eat. She had not quite brought the first bit of bread to her lips when the door opened suddenly and a man burst into her hut shouting:

-- Who will save me from death? These past three days and nights I haven't tasted a bite -- and the man told his story with great anxiety and haste:

-- A great fire broke out in the village where I lived. At midnight, while everyone was still asleep, the fire spread. From the heavens the fire came down... A stormin wind blew it from



one end of town to the other; everything was burned. Everyone was consumed by fire: men, women, and children, sheep, cattle, and all the rest of the possessions. Only I alone escaped from the flames of fire. I've been running these past three days and nights and no food has passed my lips.

The widow gave him a loaf of bread and said to him:

-- Go out from this place, for I'm alone in my hut. Eat and revive yourself.

The man went out and disappeared into the darkness of the night.

The woman praised the name of God who had given her bread to satisfy his hunger and had also made her worthy of fulfilling this mitzvah: to save a soul from death. She took the second loaf of bread and was about to break off a bit and eat. At that moment the door once again opened with great noise. A second man burst into the widow's hut, also shouting:

-- Who will save me from death?

And he told his story: I was a rich man, a herder of flocks of sheep and cattle in the desert plains; I lived in sumptuous tents with my wife and children, and strong servants kept watch over my sheep and cattle. Suddenly Bedouins, riding on horses with bows in hand fell upon us. Like hornets they surrounded us. They rained arrows upon us. They put to death all the servants, the women and the children; they took the flocks as spoil and disappeared into the open spaces of the desert.

When the last echo of their hoofbeats faded away, I alone got up, from among the dead; and I've been wandering about these past three days and nights; I have tasted no bread until I came to this hut. Please, have pity on me, and give me a bit of bread, for if you do not -- I will fall down dead at your feet.

The widow Shunamit generously gave him the second loaf of bread, and she praised God on account of the mitzvah He'd allowed her to do.

She asked him too to go and eat outside as she was alone. The second fugitive did so, and he too disappeared into the darkness of the night.

The widow Shunamit took up the third and last loaf, and was about to bring it to her lips.

Suddenly an immensely forceful north wind rushed in and demolished the hut. One wall fell in on the other and the thatching was blown far into the distance...the wind snatched the last loaf of bread out of the widow's hand and cast it into the sea.

The wind grew still. The widow stood amazed and silent.

The wind stopped and the furious sea grew calm. The sun began to shine and rays of light glided on the surface of the mirror-like water. Soon the people of the village would awaken and joyfully come and untie the boats and cast their nets into the sea. Every child would go out, accompany the fishermen, and shout with joy: No more hunger! May God's name be blessed! We'll have bread!

But the widow was not concerned with this now. Another thought occupied her mind: What has God done to me and why did He do it, to me, a poor widow?

He took one loaf of bread from me to give it to a man delivered from fire -- may God's name be praised. The second loaf went to a man saved from robbers. For this too may God's name be blessed. The Lord gave and the Lord took away for those needier than I.

But why steal the third loaf from the mouth of a widow and cast it into the sea?

This matter was incomprehensible to her. The thought crept into her mind that maybe this had not come from God, rather the wind had done this evil thing of its own accord against the will of the Most High, the One who sustains widows and provides for orphans.

It couldn't be otherwise.

She would certainly not forgive him, this marauding wind. She'd bring charges against him.

Before whom? Before King Solomon.

She would bring her case against the wind before him. She would go to Jerusalem.

The widow didn't delay but wrapped herself in the tattered sheet and went on her way.

She was hungry and faint but her righteous anger gave her the strength to make the long journey.

When she reached Jerusalem she asked for directions to King Solomon's palace. They showed her the way and the gate keepers gave her leave to enter. King Solomon's home was open to all, especially to widows. When the woman entered she prostrated herself before the king who was seated on his throne.

-- Please, my lord king, -- she said -- please judge between me and my adversary.

-- Who is he? It seems that you've come alone.

-- The wind -- answered the widow, and she looked up at the king and told him about her case.

-- Your words are honest -- replied King Solomon -- and I can see by your face that you are tired and that your eyes are burning with hunger.

But first, however, you must refresh yourself. Sit down woman, here in a corner; wine and bread will be brought for you. Eat and drink and regain your strength and after that I will decide your case.

The woman sat down in one of the corners, and they brought her bread and wine.

At that time, three foreigners came to the palace of King Solomon, carrying full sacks on their shoulders. They said, "We have a matter to discuss with the king."

-- What do you want, strangers? And what are in those heavy bags that you carry on your shoulders? -- asked King Solomon.

The men answered King Solomon saying:

-- We are Arabs; we trade in precious stones and jewels, articles of gold and silver and precious spices. The sacks on our shoulders are filled with our goods. It happened that the three of us were sailing in a ship in the sea. Suddenly winds began to blow and the sea became agitated. But we'd been know of the ways of the sea since our youths, and the storm did not frighten us, and we continued sailing. We went up and down with every wave, up and down. Once towards evening we noticed that water had begun to leak into the ship. There was a hole in the bottom of the ship and we had nothing with which to plug it. We cried out, perhaps our voices would reach the shore and help would be forthcoming -- but no one heard. The wind carried away our shouts and scattered them in every direction, the winds snatched away our cries and they disappeared into the darkness of the night. More and more water filled the ship, and it was about to sink. We called out to our gods but they did not hear. We called out to the gods of all the other peoples: the gods of the Moabites, the Philistines, and the gods of others -- no one heard. Then we remembered that there was yet another God, the God of Israel, so we tried calling out to Him:

-- O God of Israel, answer us in our time of trouble!

We made a vow:

-- O God of Israel, if you will rescue us today from our



misfortunes, then all the gold and silver in our sacks will be given to You as ransom for our lives. Only save us, O God of Israel, save us!

At that moment the wind grew much stronger, and something was suddenly cast with great force from the shore and it fell into the boat, right into the hole plugging it up.

That very moment the wind grew still and we came to shore in peace; we sought out the house of the God of Israel. We wanted to make good our vows. People directed us to Jerusalem. We came with our sacks toward Jerusalem and once we reached the outskirts we asked other travelers: where is your God? We want to see Him.

They said to us: No human being can see the God of Israel.

-- It's our duty to thank Him -- we said -- we have brought Him gifts.

Those who heard us were astonished, and there were others who mocked us. We met a group of elders and asked their advice about how we might fulfill our vows and to whom we should give our sacks of gold and silver so that God might take pleasure in our gifts -- they too had no answer. Only one of them, the eldest of them all, advised us to come before you, O great king, that you might instruct us as to what to do, for you are the wisest of men. And now, we've come before you and we will do whatever you tell us with our silver and gold; we shall repay the vows which we have vowed to the God of Israel.

So the men spoke, and they bowed down before the king.

King Solomon asked the men:

-- Strangers, did you see what the wind hurled at you? With what was the hole plugged?

-- Yes we saw, our lord king! We took it out of the hole and examined it. A small soft loaf of bread was hurled at us. Here, it is lord King.

One of them, the eldest took the loaf from his pocket and presented it to King Solomon.

King Solomon then called to the widow Shunamit and asked her:

-- Do you recognize this bread, is it yours?

-- Yes, it's my bread! -- responded the woman.

Then King Solomon gave his verdict: the widow Shunamit would receive the three sacks of silver and gold.

The men did as the king had said; they blessed the king and went on their way.

The king turned to the widow Shunamit and said: -- Take the silver and gold! It's yours. God has recompensed you for your bread; but know that nothing is done against the will of God. The wind only carried out the task given to it by the Master of the universe.

## **"Bontche Be Silent" in The Dwellings of the Poor**

Here, in this world, the death of Bontche Be Silent made no impression at all! Ask whomever you will: ask who Bontche was, how he lived, and what manner of death he died! Whether his heart burst within him, whether his strength gave out, or whether his spine broke under a heavy load...who knows? Perhaps he died of hunger!

Had a horse drawing a cart died, there certainly would have been more interest. The newspapers would have written about it, hundreds of people from every part of town would have gathered and stared in horror; they'd even stare at the spot where the fall occurred...

But a dray horse would not have merited this if there were as many horses in the world as there are people -- thousand millions!

Bontche lived in silence and died in silence; like a shadow he vanished and was gone -- in this world of ours.

No wine was drunk at Bontche's brit milah<sup>1</sup>, the glasses were not clicked! He made no stirring speech at his bar mitzvah...His life was like a small, drab grain of sand on the shore of the sea. Among millions of others all alike; when the wind lifted

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<sup>1</sup> The ritual by which a male child is brought into the covenant between God and Israel. The mitzvah of circumcising one's son on his eighth day is based on Gen. 17:9-10. Through this procedure and prayer, the child symbolically becomes part of the covenant community.

him up and hurriedly carried him across the sea, not one living soul was aware of it.

During his life the wet mud retained no impression of his footprints. After his death -- the wind toppled the small, wooden slab over his grave. The gravedigger's wife found it some distance away from the grave and boiled a pot of potatoes over it. Three days after Bontche's death, they already had to ask the gravedigger, under strict oath, if he knew where he had laid Bontche to rest!

Had Bontche been given a gravestone, it is possible that a hundred years hence some archeologist might have discovered it, and the name "Bontche Be Silent" would once again have echoed in the air of this world.

A passing shadow! His image remained engraved in no one's brain, in no one's heart; no memory of him remained whatsoever!

He had no heir nor anyone to ask about him; alone in his life -- alone in his death!

Were it not for the bustle made by the living, it's possible that someone might have heard on occasion, how Bontche's spine snapped under its load. Had the world been a little less busy, it's possible that someone might have paid attention to the fact that Bontche (a human being after all) had extinguished eyes and fearfully fallen cheeks; even when he carried no load on his back, even then his head was bowed over toward the ground as though, while still living, he was looking for his grave. Were there as few men as there are horses pulling carts trams, it's

possible that someone might have asked some time: where did Bontche disappear to!

After they brought Bontche to the hospital and admitted him, his place in the basement apartment didn't remain vacant -- ten others just like him were waiting for it and they sold the vacated corner in the alleyway at public auction; when they carried him from the hospital bed and brought him to the morgue, there were twenty poor sick people waiting for his bed... When they took him out of the morgue, they brought in twenty bodies from under a collapsed building -- -- Who knows how long he would rest in peace? Who knows how many were already waiting for the same four cubits...

He was born quietly, he lived quietly, he died quietly, and had an even quieter burial.

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But it was not so in the other world! There Bontche's death made a great impression!

The sound of the great shofar preserved for the days of the Messiah resounded throughout the seven heavens: Bontche Be Silent has departed from his world! The greatest angels with the broadest wings flew about informing one another: Bontche has been summoned to the Heavenly Academy! In Paradise there was great tumult and joy: "Bontche Be Silent! No minor event! Bontche Be Silent!"



Young angels with eyes like diamonds, wings thin and light as butterflies, and silver slippers ran trippingly to great Bontche with joy! The rustle of wings, the tapping of their slippers, the joyful laughter of their young, fresh, rosy mouths filled every heaven and reached the Throne of Glory, and the Holy One blessed be He Himself and in His glory also knew that Bontche Be Silent was on his way!

Abraham our father appeared at the gateway to heaven, his right hand outstretched in hearty greeting, a sweet smile his aged face.

What was that noise made by wheels rolling through the heavens?

Two angels had moved an armchair of pure gold on wheels, and that's the sound of the wheels.

What flashed so brightly?

Look, they are bringing a crown of pure gold inlaid with the most precious stones! Everything for Bontche!

-- Even before the Heavenly Court has rendered its judgement? -- asked the Tzaddikim<sup>2</sup> in surprise and not without a touch of jealousy.

-- Oh! -- reply the angels --that's a mere formality. The prosecutor won't find a single word to say against Bontche! The entire matter won't last longer than five minutes.

This is no laughing matter; Bontche Be Silent!

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2 The righteous, the saintly.

When the angels grabbed Bontche midair and sang him a song; when Abraham our father shook his hand like a dear old friend; when he heard that a chair stood waiting for him in Paradise; and that a golden crown awaited him; (when he heard that) there would be no lengthy discussion in the Heavenly Court -- immediately Bontche, as was his way in the other world, was struck dumb with terror! His heart stood still! He was certain that it was only a dream or a simple error!

He was accustomed to both! More than once did he dream in that world that he was gathering coins off the floor, complete treasures scattered before him...and when he awoke he found himself a poorer beggar than he ever had been... More than once had someone cast a smile his way by accident, or some sort of friendly word, and then turned away and spat...

-- That's the way it is -- thought Bontche -- just my luck!

He was afraid to look up, lest his dream vanish; lest he wake up inside some cave among snakes and scorpions! He felt terrified that some word might come out of his mouth, afraid to move a muscle, lest they recognize him and cast him down to hell...

He trembles, not hearing the angel's words of praise, he doesn't see the dances they are doing all about him, he doesn't answer our father Abraham's hearty greeting -- and when they lead him before the Heavenly Court -- doesn't even say "good morning"...

He is scared out of his wits!

And his fear increases when he unintentionally notices the floor of the Heavenly Courtroom. It is entirely made of alabaster and diamonds! "My feet are standing on such a floor!" -- and he freezes, turning completely to stone! "Who knows which rich man, which tzaddik they intend this for...ultimately he'll arrive and that will mean my end, they will find me out!"

His fear was such that he didn't even hear the presiding judge of the Heavenly Court call out clearly: "The trial of Bontche Be Silent!", adding, as he handed the papers to the advocate: "Read, but keep it short!"

The entire hall began to spin around before Bontche. There was a great rushing in his ears. From time to time, even through the rushing, he hears more and more clearly the voice of the advocate, sweet as the sound of a harp:

-- His name -- he hears -- fit him like a cloak made by a master-tailor for a tall erect figure.

-- What is he saying -- asks Bontche, and he hears a voice interrupt the speaker and say impatiently:

-- No commentary!

-- He never -- the advocate begins again -- complained against anyone, not against God, not against any one; not a glimmer of hatred ever flashed in his eyes, he never raised his eyes in complaint toward heaven.

Bontche still doesn't understand a single word, and the grave voice interrupts a second time:

-- No rhetoric!

--Job was unable to restrain himself. This one was even more wretched -- --

--Facts, stick to the facts! -- pronounced the presiding judge with increasing impatience.

-- On the eighth day, when they circumcised him -- --

-- No unnecessarily graphic descriptions!

--The mohel who circumcised him was no expert and didn't prevent the bleeding -- --

-- Proceed --

-- And he remained silent the entire time (the advocate added), even when his mother died and, when he was thirteen, he was given a step-mother like a cruel serpent...

-- Is it possible that they mean me after all? --wondered Bontche -- --

-- Without allusions to individuals not relevant to this case! -- thundered the presiding judge.

-- She begrudged him every bit of bread...dried out old bread...bones rather than meat... and she herself -- drank coffee with cream -- --

-- Get to the point -- shouted the presiding judge.

-- She was stingy with everything except her fingernails, and his black and blue body showed through the holes of his torn and mouldy clothing...During the winter, during the coldest period, he would stand barefoot in the yard chopping wood, his hands too young and weak, the logs too thick and the ax too

dull...more than once he loosened the bone from the joint, more than once his feet froze, still he remained absolutely silent, even before his father --

-- Before that drunk! -- the adversary broke in with a scornful laugh, and Bontche felt a chill creep over every limb --

-- He never complained, -- the advocate finished his sentence.

-- And always alone -- he continued saying -- no friends, no schooling, no heder<sup>3</sup>... not one whole garment...not one free moment -- --

-- Facts! -- called out the presiding judge once again.

-- He kept silent even later, when his father grabbed him by the hair while drunk, and in the midst of a winter night, fiercely threw him out of the house. He quickly got up out of the snow and ran away, fleeing aimlessly...

He remained silent the entire way...even when he was terribly hungry -- only with his eyes did he ask for pity!

Only on a stormy wet spring night did he reach a large city, and he fell like a drop into the sea, and with all this, he spent that night in prison...He remained silent, he didn't ask how come, he didn't ask why. He left, and looked for the hardest labor. And still he kept silent.

Harder than the work itself was finding it -- and he was silent!

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<sup>3</sup> He did not receive the Jewish education most boys received.



Completely bathed in cold sweat bent over and pressed down under the heaviest loads, his empty stomach contracted with spasms of hunger -- and he kept silent!

Spattered with the mud of strangers, spat upon by strangers, driven off the pavement with his heavy load into the streets among the wagons, cabs, and carts, staring moment by moment into the eyes of death, he was silent!

He never asked how many pounds were coming to him for one groschen, how many times he fell on an errand for which he got paid a kopek, how many times people put him off when he asked for his pay. He never kept count, comparing his luck with that of others, he simply kept silent!

He never asked for his wages with words! He'd appear at the doorway like a beggar, he pleaded with his eyes like a dog. "Come back later." And he'd slip away quickly like a shadow, only to come back later to ask even more quietly for his wage, like he was begging for alms."

He was silent even when they underpaid him or threw him a worthless token in place of the coins he was owed!...

He always remained silent...

-- If this is so, they actually mean me! -- thought Bontche calming himself.

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-- Once -- the advocate continued after a sip of water -- a change came into his life; a carriage with rubber tires came

flying past drawn by runaway horses... The driver was already lying some distance away and his head was crushed against the cobblestones... The frightened horses are frothing at the mouth, sparks leap out from under their hoofs, and their eyes gleam like burning torches on a dark night -- and inside the carriage sits a half-dead man!

And Bontche grabbed the reins!

The Jew he rescued was a charitable man, and he didn't forget the favor Bontche did him!

He handed him the dead man's whip; Bontche became a driver! And more than that -- he married him off -- and even more, he encouraged him to have a child...

And Bontche was still silent!

-- They mean me, me! --Bontche grew more sure of himself, yet despite this he didn't have the courage to look up at the Heavenly Court...

He continued to listen to the words of the angel advocate.

He was silent -- even when his benefactor suddenly went bankrupt and didn't pay him his wages...

He even kept silent when his wife ran out on him leaving him with an unweaned infant...

He remained silent fifteen years later when the boy grew strong enough to throw Bontche out of the house...

-- Me! They mean me! -- rejoiced Bontche.

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-- He kept silent -- the angel advocate began in a softer and sadder tone -- when that same benefactor settled with everybody except Bontche, refusing to pay him a single cent. He kept silent even when he ran over Bontche while riding in that same carriage with the rubber wheels and lion-like horses, wounding him fatally...

He still remained silent! He didn't even tell the police, who did this to him...

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He was silent even in the hospital, a place where it's permitted to cry out! He was silent even when the doctor refused to approach his bed unless he was paid fifteen kopeks, and the attendant wouldn't change his linens without being paid five kopeks!

He was silent -- as he lay dying -- He was silent at the moment of his death...

Not one word against God not one word against humankind.

--Dixie!

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Once again Bontche's entire body began to tremble. He knew that after the advocate comes the adversary! Who knows what he might say! Bontche himself barely remembered his life. While still in that world each moment caused him to forget the moment that preceded it... The advocate reminded him of everything...Who knows what the adversary would remind him of!

-- Gentlemen! -- he begins in a sharp, piercing, burning voice-- -- but he stops short.

-- Gentlemen! -- he begins a second time, his voice already softening a bit, and stops short again.

Finally, out of the same throat is heard a voice that is almost entirely gentle:

-- Gentlemen! He kept silent! I too will keep silent.

Silence reigned -- and up front a new voice is heard, soft and tremulous:

--Bontche, my own son Bontche! -- he called out in a voice like a harp -- Bontche my beloved son.

Bontche's heart grows warm within him and he weeps... Now he'd like to open his eyes, but they are dimmed by tears.... He had never experienced such a sweet feeling, moving him to tears... "My son," "My Bontche." Since his mother's death he's never heard a voice like this or words like these -- --

-- My son! -- continues the presiding Judge -- You endured everything and kept silent! There is no uninjured place anywhere on your body, no whole bones, no place without a wound, without a bruise, without a bleeding wound, there is not one corner hidden in your soul that has not dripped with blood... and you maintained your silence...

There they didn't understand the nature of this matter. Perhaps you yourself didn't understand that you could have cried out and that the sound of your cry would have shaken the walls of

Jericho and caused them to collapse. You yourself didn't realize the greatness of the power that lay dormant within you...

In that world you were given no reward for your silence, but that is the world of illusion; here, in the world of truth, you shall receive your reward.

The Heavenly Court will not judge you, it will not pass sentence on you.

It will not allot a portion for you nor will it limit your portion: take whatever you like! Everything is yours.

Bontche looks up for the first time! He is like one who is blinded by the light streaming from every side. Everything shines, everything sparkles, from all the rays of light: from the walls, from the vessels, from the angels, from the judges! All angels!

He lowered his weary eyes.

-- Really? -- he asks dubiously and with some embarrassment.

-- Really! -- answered the presiding Judge firmly --really. I'm telling you, everything is yours. Everything in heaven belongs to you! Chose and take what you wish. Whatever you take is already yours!

-- Really? -- Bontche asks again, this time his voice is more certain.

-- Really! Really! Really! -- they answer firmly from every side.

-- Nu, if this is so -- smiles Bontche -- what I really want is a soft roll with fresh butter every morning!



The judges and angels lowered their heads in shame; the adversary burst out laughing.

## "Three Gifts" in Folk Stories

### I. By the Heavenly Scales

Many years ago, a Jew died.

That's the way it is -- nobody lives forever! -- They did him the final kindness of a proper Jewish burial.

The man returned to his dust.

The grave was filled. The orphaned son says "Kaddish". Those who take part in the funeral pluck some grass, toss it behind them and return home...And the soul -- the God-given portion -- flew upward to the high heavens to stand for judgement before the Judge of all the earth.

The soul appeared before the heavenly court. The scales in which both the mitzvot and the transgressions would be weighed stood perfectly balanced.

The advocate for the deceased, who had been his Good Inclination below, came forward, a luminous snow white bag in hand. He took his place beside the scales -- on the right side.

The adversary of the deceased, who had once been his Evil Inclination, the Seducer, came forward, and in his hand was a filthy black bag, and he took his place beside the scales -- on the left.

A signal was given --

And the advocate began to empty mitzvot from the white bag into the right-hand scale, they sparkled like precious stones and their fragrance spread like sweet-smelling spices...

The adversary spilled transgressions from his black bag into the left scale, they were black as coal and their smell was like burning pitch...

And the soul stared in amazement.

Down there it never occurred to it that things were so different. There, it was often unable to distinguish between good and evil. Sometimes it interchanged one for the other... The two sides of the scale barely moved.

They ascended, first one side then the other; one rose a hairsbreadth, one descended a hairsbreadth...

Only a hairsbreadth:

He was a simple Jew without any great "acts of spitefulness", without any great "acts of self-sacrifice."

And his deeds were petty, both the good and the bad: grains and droplets; dust, almost invisible to the eye...

Nevertheless, when the right side outweighed the other, the highest heavens rang with joy; but when the left outweighed the right, a mist of sorrow rose and enveloped, as it were, the Throne of Glory, and the moaning voice of the Shekinah penetrated the deep darkness of the lower heavens and traveled from one end of the world to the other.

-- My head! My head!

And they stand gravely and pour. One "smidgen" after the other, slowly and purposefully, like simple householders raising the bids on "atah hereita"<sup>4</sup> they added penny to penny, penny to penny...

But even a well runs dry in the end; the bags are emptied!

From his place the presiding Judge asked:

Finished?

The adversary and the advocate, at once turn over their bags, saying:

-- Empty!

The court attendant approached the scales, he too was one of the angels, and he saw something that had not occurred since the day God created the heavens and the earth, and he stood amazed.

-- Why is he taking so long there? -- the presiding Judge asked impatiently.

The attendant, his eyes fixed on the scale's pointer, answered in an odd tone:

-- Smack in the middle!

-- Look again and be precise.

So he looked a second time: the scale's pointer stood dead center, motionless.

After long discussion and a great deal of give and take, judgement was handed down from the heavenly court, worded as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> Part of the Simhat Torah liturgy. This was an honor that people bid for.

"Being that the side of the scale filled with wicked deeds did not rise above the side filled with good deeds -- it would not be just for the defendant go down to Gehenna!"

On the other hand:

"Being that the mitzvot and good deeds did not outweigh the transgressions and wicked deeds -- the gates of Paradise are closed and shut before him!

Therefore: "he will be fugitive and a wanderer!"

"The soul shall flutter through the air between heaven above and Sheol below -- until its memory ascends to its Maker who shall remember it for good and take pity on it."...

As the attendant led the soul out, it wept bitterly...

-- What's the matter, O soul, that you are moaning so? -- the angel spoke consolingly -- While you can't have the joy of Paradise, well, you've been saved from the fires of Gehenna. You won't taste the honey, but neither will you face the sting!

But the soul wouldn't accept his words of comfort: better all the chastisements in the world than nothing. "Isn't nothing -- it said -- the worst of all."

The sympathetic angel took pity on the soul, and said with great compassion:

-- "Listen to me, sorrowful soul, and perhaps in the end things will be better for you. Go down and fly low around the world below.

"Do not lift your eyes to the heavens, for what would you see looking from that side? Stars, nothing but stars! And stars



are cold creatures. They see everything. They scan everything -- and are silent... They will not remind God of you, they will make no efforts on your behalf before the throne... They are luminaries, and their light is frozen...

"The only ones who exert themselves, on occasion, and bring the memory of unfortunate souls before the Throne are one's contemporaries -- the tzaddikim<sup>5</sup> dwelling in Paradise...

"They dwell in Paradise, washed with light, enjoying the splendor of the Shekinah... Once in awhile they are reminded of one of their contemporaries, and they are filled with compassion for the tortured and exiled souls. And they ascend and attempt to remind God...

"But the tzaddikim of your generation, these newcomers -- if truth be told! -- they love gifts...

"This is what you should do, O wretched soul:

"Fly down, circle, as I said, the earth, keep your eyes open and consider everything you see done there among the living. If you see a good deed, a beautiful deed, one which is extraordinary, catch it and bring it immediately as a gift for the tzaddikim in Paradise... Knock for the gate keeper in my name and he will accept it...

"If you bring three gifts, trust me, the gates of Paradise shall be opened to you"...

And with great compassion the attendant cast the soul out of heaven and closed the gate behind it...

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5 "the righteous".

## II. The First Gift

The soul took courage, stretched its wings, flew downward and circled the earth, hovering over cities and every kind of human habitation...

In the fierce dry heat of the summer's sun and during the light showers of the rainy season; through cobwebs hanging in the air at the end of summer, through the many flakes of snow that fall from above at winter time...

A Jew is walking; the soul is concerned about him and gazes into his eyes; perhaps he is going to sanctify God's name...<sup>6</sup>

During the night the soul considers every ray of light that penetrates the cracks in the shutters -- perhaps there, hidden in this dwelling, God's flowers are growing and giving forth their fragrance: good deeds done in secret?

But in vain! She drew back time after time in fear -- from human eyes, like from the slats of the shutters...

Seasons changed, time passed, centuries went by; cities were ploughed under becoming fields; forests cut down and settlements built; boulders on the sea shore were smashed into rocks and they were ground down into dust; thousands of stars fell from the heavens, thousands of weary souls rose toward the heavens -- nothing of any consequence occurred, nothing "extraordinary"!

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<sup>6</sup> The soul wonders if he is choosing martyrdom.

The soul moaned:

Life is so impoverished, souls so mediocre and grey... Man is so dejected and lowly -- There are no exalted or beautiful acts! I am exiled forever! ...

And as she continued to brood, her eyes caught sight of flame...in the darkness of the night, in the deep darkness, a flame leaping out of a high window...

Robbers had attacked a rich man's home.

One holds a burning torch -- lighting up the room. The second flashes a knife at the rich man's chest: "If you dare move a hand or open your mouth -- this knife will come right out your other side!" The others ransack the place.

The Jew stands silently facing the knife. Not an eyelash moved, not one hair of his white beard, that reaches to his belt stirs. He thinks:

-- The Eternal gave and the Eternal has taken, blessed be the name of the Eternal!

And his lips moved whispering:

-- I didn't go forth to the light of day from my mother's womb with wealth, and I will not take it with me when I return to the earth...

And perhaps he renounced title to all his wealth ... He is completely calm as the robbers open boxes and chests, removing gold, silver, and all sorts of jewelry... Then, at the bottom of the chest, they find a hiding place and are filled with joy:

here's the greatest treasure of all! They take out a small bundle from the hiding place to untie it...

Suddenly the rich man reaches out his hand and opens his mouth -- --

But instead of words a red jet spurts from his chest -- hot blood... The knife did what it was meant to do; the rich man fell...

But the robbers had made a terrible mistake, spilling his blood needlessly.

There were no articles of silver or gold, no pearls or gems of any sort in the bundle, only a bit of earth from the Holy Land, to be placed under his head when his time would come...

It was this bundle of earth that he wanted to save...

The soul swooped down and caught a tiny bit of the earth soaked in the rich man's blood and ascended, flying upward toward heaven... knocked on the gate, and the first gift was accepted...

### III. The Second Gift

The soul returned, fluttering downward...

-- Only two more gifts! -- the gate keeper called after her.

And she flew off, filled with hope -- --

But once again times and seasons passed and nothing of significance happened.

The soul was once again filled with sorrow, and it thought:

Like a clear fountain the world broke forth from the will of God into a torrent of time, on and on it flows...And to the degree that it moves away from its pure source, the more it absorbs into itself the materialism of the profane. The pure waters become muddied and foul...Mankind grow smaller and smaller and both their good deeds and bad become less and less, and gifts for heaven become fewer and fewer.

The soul thought:

If God were to bring the entire world to trial judgement at once, to weigh all of humanity's deeds in the balance together...the pointer would certainly move for a long long time. Its movement would last generations -- a hairsbreadth to the right, a hairsbreadth to the left...

Just a hairsbreadth!

As it is -- the world neither rises nor descends; like me, the world wanders like a fugitive between the pure heavens above and the foul depths below...

On and on the adversary and the advocate would wrestle, as light and darkness wrestle, as heat and cold, as life and death...

The pointer doesn't...weddings and divorces, brises and funerals, times of religious celebration and mourners' meals will never cease...

Suddenly the soul was wakened by the sound of a trumpet.

The soul glanced down; below her was a venerable old German city. The roofs, quaint in their appearance and structure,



circled the market place which surrounded the town hall. The market place teemed with masses of people dressed in their finest, dimming the eye with their blaze of color. Heads crowded out the windows, many are on the balconies, many lie on the beams protruding from the walls under the roofs...

Before town hall stands a table readied for trial, covered with a green cloth with fringes and tassels of gold. The counselors -- officials dressed in satin with buttons of gold, sit at the table. White feathers fastened to buttons of onyx flutter above sealskin bonnets -- --

The mayor presided -- --

Above his head hovers a falcon...

To the side a Jewish young woman is bound to the pillory. Near her ten servants are holding fast to a wild and unruly horse...

He rises and read the sentence of the young woman bound to the pillory in a loud voice from a book:

"This Jewess committed an unforgivable crime! Even the Lord Himself, the source of mercy and compassion would not forgive her...

"On the day of our holy festival she stole out of the ghetto to trample through the pure streets of our city. This insolent wench with her defiling eyes desecrated the sacred procession. With her impure glances she profaned the statues of our Lord and Lady and the holy icons carried by the multitude with song and praise. Her accursed ears drank in songs from the mouths of our

pure children, our young men and women dressed in white and the sounds of our sacred drums...

"Who knows whether Satan dressed in the likeness of this Jewess, in the likeness of the accursed rabbi's daughter, did not put forth his hand and touch one of our sacred objects, thus desecrating it!

What could Satan want, clothed in the likeness of this beautiful Jewish maiden?

"For she is beautiful, as anyone with eyes can see. The Devil has cast the attribute of grace over her; she's adorned with all the charms of hell.

"Look well at her eyes shining under those long lashes. They have not darkened during her imprisonment. Look at her face, pale from her confinement; but it has not lost its grace. lost its grace] [but not less fair]. Look at her long, white, and thin fingers, how the rays of light glow through them -- --

"What does Satan want?

"To rip pure souls from the ranks, to cause them to stray from the sacred procession! And he almost succeeded in his purpose... Two knights saw her, and one interrupted his prayer and led his squire into sin with his question: who is this pretty one?

"The guards of the procession noticed her and seized her!

"Satan didn't even try to defend himself; he has no dominion over the pure; they had just made confession that very morning, and the sanctity of the procession shielded them -- --

"And this is the sentence of the young woman:

"She shall be tied to the horse's tail by her tresses of hair; the horse shall be let loose, and it shall drag her along, running along the same streets she tread on with her impure feet on our holy day... Let the blood from her wounds wash the cobblestones that her impure eyes soiled" -- --

Thus the official decree.

-- So let it be! Thundered the crowd outside, from the beams, the windows, and the balconies.

After the wave of voices died down the young woman is asked, what her final wish is before she goes to her death?

She has a small request: a few pins...

-- She's gone mad!

-- No! -- the accused answers calmly -- this is my last wish.

It is granted.

The mayor gives the order:

-- Bind her!

The executioner approaches and with trembling hands ties the young woman's tresses to the horse's tail...

-- Make room!

A great roaring breaks out like the sound of pounding of waves. Those standing outside pushed against those behind them and they split to the right and to the left, to make way for the horse...

The hands of all are raised, and whips and handkerchiefs are raised high to frighten the horse...

In the midst of all the noise no one saw, except the wandering soul, that the accused bends down and fastens the hem of her dress to the flesh of her feet with the pins, so that her body will not be exposed as the horse drags her along...

The horse is let loose, those who held it withdrew, backing away, and the horse leaps forward from his place; a wild shout bursts from thousands of mouths, from outside, from the windows, from the beams and the balconies, from the judge's bench, and thousands of whips and handkerchiefs slash and whistle through the air... The horse goes mad with terror and rushes on like a storm...

And the young woman is dragged after it... dragged, turning over and over...

The wandering soul went down to her and removed a blood-red pin from the flesh of her foot, and she flew upwards...

The second gift was cordially accepted...

#### IV. The Third Gift

-- Only one more gift!

But the soul was already weary.

Once again ages passed, times and seasons went by and nothing!

Humanity degenerated further, man has declined, souls grew dull, their deeds diminished...

The soul grew melancholy as it considered the way of the world...

"The sacks are emptied, and for another hundred years the pointer of the scale would tremble -- knowing no rest...and when it finally stops -- it stops right in the middle...

"Nothing would tip the scale...not the "smidgen," not the trivialities!

"What would the Holy One, blessed be He do?

"Would he return the world to chaos -- He could not: the transgressions hadn't outweighed the mitzvot...

"Would He redeem this miserable world? -- impossible, the mitzvot hadn't outweighed the transgressions!

"So what would He decree?

-- "Let her go on!

" The world shall wander now and for all time between Gehenna and Eden, between love and hate, compassionate tears and innocent blood -- between stones and graves...and so forever, forever and ever..."

But, so it seems, the Divine quality of mercy prevailed, and the soul was roused by the sound of a drum.

When?

Where is it?

The soul no longer knew the time or recognized the place.

A field outside the city, and before it a prison.



The walls are black, the small windows impenetrable. But the rays of sun dance on the iron gridwork. They glide and are caught among the spears and bayonets standing like sheaves along the walls. In the hands of the soldiers -- whips!

The soldiers, whips in hand, are lined up in two rows; the two rows are close together and between them shall pass the condemned.

Who is the condemned?

A Jewish man, a tattered shirt covering his emaciated body and his half-shaved head lowered wearing an old yarmulke.

Why was the wretch imprisoned?

Who knows, perhaps he stole, or robbed, or murdered... maybe he was framed by false witnesses; it happened long ago...

Here he is!...The soldiers look and laugh to themselves. Why were they brought here and lined up in such number? Could he make it even half-way before dying?

The victim is pushed between the two rows -- --

He walks between the blows of the whips and does not fall, he walks without stumbling...The whips lash and he continues like a shadow -- what is this? Is it possible? The soldiers are filled with anger. He's still walking? Does he want to infuriate them?

The whips whistle through the air, lashing at him, winding themselves around his flesh like snakes, fountains of blood spurt forth, pour out -- and he walks on, he is still walking!

-- Look at him!

And he's still walking.

Then it happened: one soldier didn't aim properly, his whip knocked the yarmulke off the condemned man's head...

Still he continued. But after a few seconds he felt its loss and stopped, as if debating with himself, and he decides: come what may, he will not go on bare headed. So he retraced his steps back to the yarmulke, lifted it up, recovered his head, turned back, and walked on...

Thus he walked, his yarmulke on his head -- until he fell...

The wandering soul came down and snatched one thread from the yarmulke soaked in the blood of victim, and he flew off with it...

#### V. Rejoicing in Paradise

The third gift was accepted...the soul was at last redeemed...

And in Paradise the joy was great:

The gifts are beautiful, beautiful...

The "Urim and Tumim" added:

-- And the essential point is that they have no practical purpose at all, they are only decorative...only decorative...as it should be.

בימי המלך שלמה היתה אשה אלמנה עניה מאד ושמה שונמית. והאלמנה שונמית גרה בסוכה של נמרים בלים סוכה לולבי תמרים בכפר הדיינים על שפת הים הגדול. שם ישבה והדיתה נפשה מיניע כפיה, מארג רשתות לדיינים יושבי הכפר.

והנה באו ימי רוחות וסערות. אין סדה שמה על פני הים ואין פורש רשת, ותושב האלמנה בלי עבודה וכלי מזון וסחורה.

ולמי חפנה בצר לה? התבוא אל הבתים הרלים של הדיינים לבקש לחם? גם שם גדול המחסור, גם לדיינים אין כל.

ותשא עניה אל מחץ לכפר. לא הרוח, מחץ שלוש שעות כן הכפר, בבית גדול העומד בתוך חצר רחבת-ידיים, גר איש עשיר. ואלהים ברך את האיש בכל יתן לו שדות וגנים, כרמים ופרדסים, ערדי צאן ובקר וחמורים וגמלים לרוב.

ובאחד הימים בבוקר קמה שונמית משנתה ותרא כי פני השמים ערש וזעפים והרוח עודנו סוער. ידעה כי אין לה תקוה אחרת מלבד מתנת בשר-ודם, ותתעטף בסרינה הישן, הוא שמלתה ביום וכמותה בלילה, ותצא ללכת אל האיש העשיר.

לעת הצהרים הגיעה אל החצר והמצא את העשיר לפני פתח ביתו, ותקרב ותשתחוה לפניו שלוש פעמים ארצה. וישאל אותה העשיר: למה תשתחוי לפני, אשה? קום והצירי מי את ומה בקשתך? ותען האשה: שונמית האלמנה אנכי בכפר הדיינים אשר על שפת הים. זה כמה ימים לא בא אוכל אל פי, ותתה באתי לשאול מעם אדוני כבר לחם להשיב נפשי.

הראה לה העשיר על כל אשר בתצרו ואמר:

— ראי, אשה, הנה עבדי מתידים את גמלי וחמורי. מירושלים אני שב, את ארמון המלך שלמה ראיתי, יפה הוא הארמון מאין כמותו ותתחן לכל איש. באתי אל הארמון פנימה. על כסא זהב ישב המלך שלמה, כתר זהב על ראשו, ושירים חזקים ועם רב מסביב לו, והוא אסר לפניו דברי חכמתו — רבש וחלב תחת לשונו. וכה אסר שלמה: „שונא מתנת ידח“.

מי האיש החפץ חיים לא יבקש מתנת. המקבל מתנת-חסד את ימיו הוא ספקר. לחסוא כנפשי את אומרת, אבל ידי לא תחי בדבר הזה, כי ריין אלמנות אלהים ולא ישא לי בתתי ידי לקצר יסר. מתנת-חנם לא אתן. — אם כן — אמרה האשה — אל תתן חנם. השאילני כבר לחם או מעט קמה והבאתי אל ביתי ואפיתי, ואשיבה נפשי — וברכתך ותתפללתי לאורך יסר.

— גם את זאת לא אעשה לך — אמר העשיר הנח — עבד לוח לאיש מלוח אמר שלמה המלך. האיש המלוח קונה לו עבד, ואני רק מן העבדים אקנה לי עבדים, ולא מזרע אברהם יצחק ויעקב. האקף לעבדים את עצמי וכשרי, אף כי אשה אלמנה כמך? לא אשאיל ולא אלוה.

ותשאל האשה: האמות ברעב לעיניך? הוה ייסב בעיני אלהים ריין אלמנות?

— לא תמותי ברעב לעיני, אלמנה שונמית — אמר העשיר במנוחה שלימה — וי אלהים כי לא אסנע ישועתי סקר. ובמה? בעצת. לכי וחי מן החפץ!

— מה פשר דברי אדוני? אין דבר הפקר כי אם במדבר. ועד המדבר מחץ שלושה ימים. ומה אמצא שם? עשבים יבשים. התרתל באלמנה עניה, ולא יראת את האלהים ארון כל, מן יתוסים ומחמה אלמנות? — הכי אונק, אשה, ושמעי:

אמרי ריק הוא עתה. מאה שקים מלאים קמה לכן כשלג היו בו. את כולם הבאתי לירושלים, אל ארמון המלך שלמה. חתנה נשארו באסם רק הגמרים שהיו מונחים תחת השקים. לבנים הם הגמרים האלה, לבנים-לבנים, מבוסים הם אבק-קמה, שעלה עליהם מיעת השקים. אבק-הקמה הפקר הוא, האבק לא לי הוא. על-כן קוסי לכי אל האסם, הסירי מעל הגמרים את אבק-הקמה הלבן כשלג, אספי אותו, שאי אל ביתי, קששי בדרך עצים, הבעירי אש ואפי לך עונת, ואלהים ישלח את ברכתו באבק-הקמה, אשר תמצא, ואכלת והשיבות נפשי וברכת לאלהים...

ותעס האשה האלמנה בכל אשר יעץ אותה העשיר החסיד: אספה את אבק הקמה מעל הגמרים אשר באסם. בדרך שובה חפשה ותמצא על הארץ ענפי עץ גדוד הסערת.

ותבוא הביתה עם חשכה ותבער אש בעצים, ותיצק מים בקמה ותלש בצק, ויעלו בידה שלוש ככרות-לחם

קמנות.

ותברך את אלהים על חסדו ותשב לאכול. כמעט הגישה את פרוסת-הלחם הראשונה אל פיה — והנה נפתחה הדלת פתאום, ואל הסוכה התפרץ איש בקול צעקה:

— מי יצילני ממות? זה שלושה ימים ושלושה לילות לא בא אוכל אל פִּי! — והאיש מספר בבהלה וחפזון: — דליקה נפלה בכפר מושבי. בחצות הלילה, בעוד הכל ישנם את שנתם, פרצה הדליקה. מן השמים ירדה האש... רוח סערה נשאה את האש לכל קצות הכפר: הכל נשרף. הכל היה למאכלת אש: אנשים ונשים וסוּף, צאן ובקר וכל יתר הרכוש. רק אני לבדי נמלטתי מתוך להבות-האש ועמדתי-האש. זה שלושה ימים ושלושה לילות אני רץ ואוכל לא בא אל פִּי.

ותתן לו האלמנה את ככר-לחמה ותאמר לו:

— צא מזה, כי אני לבדי במדבר, ואכול והשיבה את נפשי. והאיש יצא ויעלם בחשכת הלילה. ותברך האלמנה את שם אלהים, אשר נתן לה לחם לשבור רעבונה וגם זכה אותה בדבר מצוה: להציל נפש איש ממות. ותקח את הככר השנית ותאמר לפרוס ממנה ולאכול. וברגע הזה שוב נפתחה הדלת ברעש, ואיש שני התפרץ אל סוכת האלמנה בקול צעקה גם הוא:

— מי יצילני ממות?

והוא מספר: איש עשיר הייתי, רועה עדרי צאני ובקרי בערבות המדבר; באהלים יקרים נחתי עם אשתי וילדי, ונערים בני-חל שומרים את צאני ובקרי. פתאום נפלו עלינו ערביאים רוכבים על סוסים וקשתות בידיהם, כרכורים סבבנו ומסר-חצים שלחו בנו. את הנערים והנשים וחמף המיתו, את העדרים בזזו להם ויעלמו אחם במרחבי הערבה.

ובתאלם הר פעמיהם בערבה קמתי אני לבדי מבין המתים והנני הולך ותועה זה שלושה ימים ושלושה לילות; לחם לא אכלתי, עד אשר באתי אל הסוכה הזאת. אנא, חסי נא, תני לי פת לחם, ואם אין — אפול מת ורגלד. האלמנה שונמית נתנה לו בעין יפה את ככר-הלחם השנית, ותברך את אלהים על דבר-המצוה שהביא לידה, ותבקש גם מעט לצאת מן הסוכה ולאכול בתוך. כי לבדה היא. ויעש כן הפלים השני, וגם הוא נעלם בחשכת הלילה.

ותקח האלמנה שונמית את הככר השלישית, האחרונה, ותאמר להביא ממנה אל פיה. והנה רוח-צפון גרול וחוק פרץ פתאום ויהרוס את הסוכה: הקירות נפלו מזה וסזה והסכך התעופף למרחוק... והרוח חטף את הככר האחרונה מיד האלמנה וישליכה היסד.

או שקם הרוח. ותעמד האלמנה משתאה ומדחשת.

הרוח חרל. הים נח מועפו. השמש זרחה וקרני אורה החליקו על-פני ראי המים. עוד מעט והקיפו בני הכפר ובואו בשמחה והחידו את הסירות והשליכו כים את הסכמרות. כל הטף יצא ללוות את הדיינים ויקראו בששון: הם הרעב! יהי שם אלהים מבורך! לחם יהיה לנו!

ואולם לא אל זה לב האלמנה עתה; מחשבה אחרת נקרה בלבה: מה עשה לי האלהים, ועל-מה עשה לי, האלמנה הענייה, ככה? את ככר-הלחם האחת הוציא מירי לבוא ליד איש מוצל מאש — יהי שם ה' מבורך! הככר השנית באה ליד איש נמלם מיד שורדים. יהי גם על זה שמו מבורך! ה' נתן וה' לקח לתת לנצרך יותר ממני.

אכל את הככר השלישית למה חסס מפני אלמנה וישלך אל הים?

הדבר הזה נשגב מבינתה, ובלבה באה מחשבה כי לא מאת אלהים היתה זאת, כי רק מנפשו עשה הרוח כדבר הרע הזה נגד רצון עליון, הון אלמנות ומכלכל יתומים.

אחרת לא תוכל היות.

והיא נשוא לא תשא לו, לרוח הרעס הזה, למשפט תועידתו.

לפני מי? לפני המלך שלמה.

לפניו תבוא להשפט עם הרוח. לירושלים תלך.

ולא התמחמה האלמנה ותתעסף בסדינה הקדוע ותצא לדרך.

רעב וחלשה היא, אולם קנאת צדקתה נתנה לה כוח לעשות את דרכה הרחוקה.

ותבוא ירושלימה ותשאל לארמון המלך שלמה. ויראוהו לה. ושומרי הסף הגיחוה לבוא פנימה: בית המלך

שלמה פתוח לכל, אף כי לאלמנות. ותבוא האשה ותפול אפים ארצה לפני המלך ויושב על כסאו.

— אנא, אדוני המלך — אמרה — שפטה נא ביני ובין בעל-דברי.

— מי הוא זה! הן לכרד באת.

— הרוח — ענתה האלמנה, ותשא אליו את ראשה ותגד לפניו את דבר משפחה.

— דברך נכוחים — ענה המלך שלמה — מראה פניך יענו בך כי עיפה את ובעיניך קדחת אש הערב. השיבי אפוא את נפשך תהלה. שבי לך, אשה, פה באחת הפנות, והביאו לפניך לחם ויין. אכלי ושתי וסעדי לבר, ואחרי-כן אשפוט את משפטך.

ותשב האשה באחת הפנות וביאו לפניו לחם ויין.

בעת ההיא באו אל ארמון המלך שלמה שלושה אנשים נברים ושקים מלאים על שכמם, ויאמרו: דבר לנו אל המלך.

— מה בקשתכם, בני-נבר? ומה השקים האלה העומדים על שכמיכם? — שאל המלך שלמה.

ויענו האנשים את המלך ויאמרו:

— אנשים ישמעאלים אנחנו; מחרים באבנים יקרות ובעדיים, בכלי זהב ובכסף ובשמים יקרים. ואלה השקים המלאים. אשר על שכמנו, רכושנו הם. ויהי היום ושלשנו שמים בספינה על פני הים. פתאום התחולל הרוח והים סער. ואולם אנחנו למודי-ים מנעורינו, ולא יראנו את הסערה, ונוסף לשוט על פני הגלים. עולים ויורדים עם כל גל וגל, עלה וירד. לפנות ערב אחד ראינו והנה מים החלו לבקוע אל הספינה. נקב נבעה בתחתיתה ובידינו במה לסתמו אין. צעקנו, אולי יגיע קולנו לשפת הים ובאה לנו עזרה משם — ואין שומע. את צעקותינו נשא הרוח ופציץ לכל עבר, והגלים חוטפים את הקולות עםם אל אופל הלילה. והספינה הולכת ומתמלאת מים, הולכת וטובעת. קראנו לאלהינו — ולא שמעו. קראנו לאלהי עמים אחרים: לאלהי מואב, לאלהי פלשתים, לאלהים אחרים — ואין שומע. אז זכרנו כי יש עוד אלהים, אלהי ישראל, וננס לקרוא אליו: — אלהי ישראל ענו בעת צרתנו!

ונגד נדרנו לאמור:

— אלהי ישראל, אם תצילנו היום הזה מצרתנו, והיה כל הכסף והזהב אשר בשקינו נתן אותו כופר נפשותינו, אך תושע נא, אלהי ישראל, והשיענו! ברנע ההוא נבר הרוח מאד, ודבר-מה השלך פתאום בכוח גדול מן החוף ויפול אל הספינה, אל פי הנקב, ויסתמרו.

וכרנע שקט הרוח. ונבוא בשלום אל החוף, ונגרדש לבית אלהי ישראל: רוצים אנו לשלם את נדרנו. וירדו לנו אנשים את הדרך לירושלים. ונבוא בשקינו ירושלימה, ונשאל בחוצות העיר את העוברים: איה אלהיכם? רצוננו לראות את פניו.

ויאמרו לנו: את פני אלהי ישראל לא יראה האדם.

— עליתו להודות לו — אמרו — מתנה הבאנו לו.

וישתוממו לנו השומעים, ויש אשר לענו לנו. ונפגשו בחבורת זקנים ונשאל בעצתם מה לעשות לנדרנו, ולמי לתת את שקי הזהב והכסף ואלהים ירצה את מתנתו — וגם בפיהם לא היה מענה. רק אחד מהם, והוא חזקן מכולם, יעץ אותנו לבוא לפניך, המלך הגדול, ואתה תודנו מה לעשות, כי אתה תחכם מכל אדם. ועתה הנה באנו לפניך, ובכל אשר תאמר לנו כן נעשה ככספנו וזהבנו, ושלמנו את הנדר, אשר נדרנו לאלהי ישראל.

כן דברו האנשים וישתחוו לפני המלך.

והמלך שלמה שאל את האנשים לאמור:

— הראיתם, בני-נבר, את אשר השליך לכם הרוח? ובמה נתתם פי הנקב?

— ראינו, אדוננו המלך! הוצאנו מן הנקב והתבוננו. ככר-לחם קטנה ודכה היא אשר השלכת אלינו, והנה גם היא בזה לפניך, אדוננו המלך.

ואחר מהם, הגדול מכולם, הציא מתיקן את הכבר וישם אותה לפני המלך שלמה.

והמלך שלמה קרא לשונות האלמנה וישאל אותה לאמור:

— הסבירה את את הלחם, האם שלך הוא?

— זה לחמי! — קראה האשה.

אז הציא המלך שלמה את משפטו: לתת להאלמנה שונות את שלושת שקי הכסף והזהב. והאנשים עשו כדבר המלך, ויברכו את המלך וילכו לדרךם.



ואל האלמנה שונמית פנה שלמה ויאמר:  
— קחי את הבסקה והזהבי! שלך הוא. אלהים שילם לך תחת לחםך, ודעי כי אין רבך נעשה נגר רצון אלהים,  
ורק את שליחותו של ארון העולם עשה תרוח.

### בונצי שתוק

כאן, בעולם הזה, לא עשה מותו של בונצי שתוק שום רושם כלל! שאלו את מי שתשאלו: מי היה בונצי, כיצד חי, ובאיזו מיתה מת! אם הלב נתפקע בתוכו, אם כוחותיו אפסו וכלו, או שעמוד-השררה נשבר לו מתחת למשא כבר ... מי יודע! אפשר שלא מת אלא מיתת רעב! סוס מושך במראם אילו מת, וראי שהיו מתענינים בו יותר. העתונים היו כותבים על כך, מאות אנשים מכל הרחובות היו מתאספים ומסתכלים בנבלה; והיו מסתכלים אפילו במקום, שבו אירעה הנפילה ... אך הסוס מן המראם אף הוא לא היה זוכה לכך, אילו היו בעולם מוסים רבים כמו אנשים — אלה מיליונים! בונצי חי בחשאי ומת בחשאי; כמו צל חלף עבר — בעולם הזה שלנו! בברית-המילה של בונצי יין לא שת, כוסות לא צלצלו! לבר-מצוה דרשה מצלצלת לא אמר ... חי היה כמו גרניר-חול קטן ואפור על שפת הים. בתוך מיליונים של אחרים הרומים לו; וכשהגביהה אותו הרוח והעבידה אותו ביעף אל עבר הים האחר, לא הרגישה בכך שום נפש חיה! בחייו לא שמר הבוק הלח את סביבת גליו. לאחר מותו — הרוח הפילה את לוח-העץ הקטן שעל קברו; אשתו של הקברן מצאה אותו הרחק מן הקבר וכישלה בו מיד תפוח-אדמה ... מלאו שלושה ימים למותו של בונצי, שאלו את הקברן בשמחא, אם יודע הוא היכן הניח! אילו הייתה לו לבונצי מצבת, אפשר שאחרי מאה שנים היה חוקר-קדמוניות מוצא אותה, והשם "בונצי שתוק" היה מצמצל שנית בחלל העולם הזה. צל חלף דמות-דיוקנו לא נשארה חקוקה אצל שום אדם במח, אצל שום אדם בלב; לא נשאר ממנו זכר כלשהו!

לא יושר ולא דורש; גלמוד בחייו — גלמוד במותו! אילמלא רעש הבריות, אפשר שהיה מישור שומע לפעמים, אף עמוד-השררה של בונצי מתפקק מתחת למשא; אילו היה לו לעולם פנאי יותר, אפשר שהיה מישור נותן דעתו על-כך, שבונצי (אף הוא אדם) יש לו בעורו בחיים שתי עינים כבירות ולחיים נפולות עד כרי מורא; שאפילו בזמן שאין לו עוד כלל משא על גבו, גם אז ראשו כפוף כלפי האדמה, כאילו בחייו עוד את קברו הוא מבקש. אילו היו האנשים מעטים כמו הסוסים המושכים במראם, אפשר שהיה מישור שואל לפעמים: בונצי זה להיכן נעלם! כשהוליכו את בונצי והבניסוהו אל בית-החולים, לא נשארה פנינתו ברידת-המרתף פניה — צפו לה עשרה אחרים ביוצא בו, ואת הפינה ב"פלוש" מכרו במכירה פומבית; כשנשארו אותו מן המטה של בית-החולים והבניסוהו לחדר-המתים, הסתינו למסותו עשרים חולים עניים ... כשהוציאו אותו מחדר המתים — הביאו לשם עשרים הרוגים מתחת מפולת של בית — מי יודע כמה זמן ינוח שלום בקברו? מי יודע כמה אחרים כבר מצפים לאותן דלתות אמות ...

בחשאי נולד, בחשאי חי, בחשאי מת ובחשאי עוד יותר נקבר.

אך לא כך היה הדבר בעולם הזה! שם עשה מותו של בונצי רושם גדול! השופר הגדול, השמור לימות המשיח קולו הלך בכל שבועת הרקיעים: בונצי שתוק נפטר לעולמו! המלאכים הגדולים ביותר, שכנפיהם רחבות ביותר, התעופפו וזה לזה מסרו ואמרו: בונצי נתבקש לישיבה של מעלה! בתנן-ערן רעש, שמחה, המולה: "בונצי שתוק! מילתא זוטרתא, בונצי שתוק!" אראלים צעירונים, שעניניהם ילומים, כנפיהם דקיקות וקלילות ואנפיליותיהם של כסף, טפפו חיש-חיש לקבל את פניו של בונצי בשמחה! איזשהו הכנפים, טפחית האנפיליות ושחוקם בעליז של הפיות הצעירים, הרענגים, והורדים, מילאו את כל הרקיעים ועד אל כסא-הכבוד הגיעו, והקדוש ברוך הוא בכבודו ובקצצו גם הוא כבר ידע, כי בונצי שתוק הולך ובא! אברהם אבינו התייצב בשער השמים, היר הימנית שלוחה ל"שלום עליכם" רחב ובת-שחוק מתוקה על פניו הזקנים!

מה קול הגלגלים המתגלגלים ברקיע?  
שני מלאכים הובילו אל תנן-ערן בשביל בונצי כורסה של זהב סתור על-גבי גלגלים, וזהו הקול המתגלגל!  
מה הבריק ברק בחד כל כך?  
הנה העבירו כאן עסרה של זהב סתור משוכצת אבנים יקרות ביותר! הכול בשביל בונצי!  
— עוד קודם הפסק של הבית-דין של מעלה! — שואלים הצדיקים בתמיחה ולא בלי קורטוב של קנאה.

— הו! — משיבים המלאכים — זה יהיה דבר פורמאלי בלבד! כנגד בונצי שתוק לא ימצא אפילו הקמיטור  
דבור בפיו! כל הענין הזה לא יספיק אלא חמש דקות!  
וכי צחוק הוא, בונצי שתוק?

כשתפסו המלאכים לבונצי באויר וניגנו לו זמר; כשהגיע לו אברהם אבינו את היר כמו לידיד ישן-נושן; כשרוא  
שמע שכסאו עומד מוכן ומוזמן בתגן-ערן; ולראש מצפה עטרת של זהב; ובהבית-דין של מעלה לא יאריכו עליו  
בדבור כלל — מיד התחיל בונצי, ברומה לדרכו בעולם הזה, שותק מתוך פחד! לבו עמד בו מלדפוק! במוח  
הוא, שאין זה אלא חלום, או סעות פשוטה!  
ובשניהם באחד רגיל הוא! לא פעם חלם בעולם הזה, שהוא מלקט מטבעות מעל-גבי הרצפה, אוצרות שלמים  
מפוזרים לפניו ... ומשהתעורר ראה והנה הוא קבצן גדול יותר משהיה אתמול ... לא פעם זרק לו מישור מתוך  
סעות בת-שתוק, אמר לו דבור טוב כלשהו, ומיד פנה מעליו וזקק ...  
— כזה הוא — מדרדר בונצי — מזלי שלי!

והוא מפתח להנבית את עיניו, והחלום לא יעלה; שלא יתעורר באיזה מקום בתוך מערה בין נחשים ועקרבים!  
הוא מתירא להוציא מתוך פיו הנה, אבר, להגיע — שלא יכירו אותו ויקלעו אותו בכף-הקלע ...  
הוא רועד ואינו שומע את דברי התושבתה של המלאכים, אינו רואה את כרכוריהם שרם מכורכים מסביבו,  
אינו עונה לאברהם אבינו ל"שלוש עלידים" הנלכב שלו, וגם — כשפולכים אותו ומביאים לפני הבית-דין של מעלה  
— אינו אומר שם "בוקר טוב" ...  
כולו מבולבל מרוב פחד!

ותפרו גרל עוד יותר משראה, שלא במתכוון, את הרצפה בחדר הבית-דין של מעלה, כולה ברג ויהלומים!  
"על רצפה בזאת עומדות רגלי!" — והוא קופא כולו והופך לאבן! "מי יודע לאיזה נביר, לאיזה צדיק מתכוונים ...  
הוא יבוא — ויבוא מפי ריגלה קלוגי!"

מתוך פחד לא שמע אפילו, שאב-בית-הדין הכריז בפידוש: "משפמו של בונצי שתוק!" וגם, במסרו  
למליץ-ישר את הגידות, אמר: "קרא, אך בהקצור!"  
כל האולם כולו מסתחרר מסביב לבונצי, ורעש-רעש באוזניו. אך בתוך הרעש הוא שומע אף-על-פי-כן מפעם  
בפעם ברור יותר ויותר את קולו של המלאך המליץ, המתוק כקול הכנור:  
— השם שלו — שומע הוא — היה יאה לו ונאה לו כגליסה נאה מיד חיים-אמן לטף גבוה ותמיר,  
— מה הוא אומר? — שואל בונצי, והוא שומע קול מפסיק את הרובר בקוצר-רוח ואומר:  
— רק בלי משלים!

— מעולם — מתחיל שוב המליץ-ישר — לא קבל על זולתו, לא על אלהים, לא על אדם; בעיני לא התלקח  
מעולם זיק של שנאה, הוא לא נשא מעולם את עיניו במרונה כלפי שמים.  
בונצי שוב אינו מבין אף דבור אחר, והקול החמור מפסיק שנית:  
— בלי מליצות!

— איוב לא יכול להתאפק, הוא היה אומלל יותר — —  
— עובדות, עובדות מסש! — מכריז ואומר בקוצר-רוח יתיר את-בית-הדין.  
— ביום השמיני שלו אותו — —  
— רק בלי תיאודיות יתירה!  
— מוחל שאינו בקי במלאכתו היה לו, לא עצר את הרם — —  
— הלאה!

והוא שתק כל הזמן (מסמך וקורא המליץ-ישר), אפילו כשמתה עליו אמו ובשנה השלוש-עשרה לחייו קבל אם  
חרגת ... אשה רומה לנחש, מרשעת ...

— אפשר מתכוונים אף-על-פי-כן אלי? — מדרדר בונצי — —  
— בלי רמיזות לאנשים שאינם שייכים לכאן — מתרעם אב-בית-הדין.  
היא היתה מקצצת לו פת-לחם ... לחם מעובש משלושם ... עצמות תחת בשר ... והיא עצמה — קדוה  
בשמת היתה שותה — —

-- לנף הענין! -- צועק אב-בית-הדין.  
-- כנגד זה לא היתה מקמצת לו בצערניה, וגופו השחום-הבחול היה מציץ מבקד לכל הצורים של בגדיו  
המעופשים והקרועים ... בחורף, בזמן הקור הגדול ביותר, היה עומד יחף בתצר וחוטב לה עצים, והידים היו  
צעירות וחלשות מדי, העצים עבים מדי,  
והגרון קרה מדי ... לא פעם נתפקקה עצם מפרקה, לא פעם קפאו אצלו הרגלים, אך שתוק שותק היה, ואפילו  
לפני אביו --

-- לפני השכור! -- מתערב בלעג הקטיוור, ובונצי מרגיש קוד עובר ככל איבריו -- --  
-- לא התאונן, -- מסיים המליץ-ישר את הפסוק,  
-- ותמיד גלמוד -- ממשיך הוא ואומר -- לא חבר, לא תלמוד-תורה, לא חדר ... לא בנר שלם ... לא  
רנע פגיו -- --

-- עוברות! -- קורא שוב אב-בית-הדין.  
-- הוא שתק אפילו אחד-כר, בשעה שאביו, בהיותו שכור, תפסו פעם בשערותיו ובאמצעותו של ליל-חורף  
לוחט מקור השליכו מתוך הבית! הוא קם במהירות מעל-גבי השלג וברח למקום שעניו נשאורו ...  
בכל אותה הדרך שתק ... בזמן שהיה רעב ביותר -- בעינים בלכד היה מבקש רחמים!  
ודק בליל-אביב רטוב ומסחרר בא אל כרד גדול, הוא נפל כשטפה אל תוך הים, ואף-על-פי-כן בילה עוד  
אותו הלילה בבית-הבלא ... הוא שתק, לא שאל מפני מה, מדוע? הוא יצא, וחפש את העבודה הקשה ביותר,  
אך הוא שתק!

קשה מן העבודה היה למצוא אותה -- והוא שתק!  
רוחץ כולו בדיעה קרה, כפוף ולחץ תחת המשא הכבד ביותר, וקיבתו הריקה מתכווצת בעזית של רעב -- שתק!  
מותו בבזק של זרים, מרוקק מפיות זרים, מגורש מעל המדרגה עם המשא הכבד אל הכביש בין עגלות, כרכרות  
וקרונות-מראם, מציץ כל רנע ורנע אל תוך עיניו של המות -- שתק!  
הוא לא שאל מעולם, כמה פור משא יוצאים לו לירוש אחד, כמה פעמים נפל ככל שליחות בקר פרומת, כמה  
פעמים רחצו בלד-ושוב כשתבע את שכרו; הוא לא חשב, לא מזול שלו ולא מולם של אחרים, רק שתק!  
את שכרו שלו גם כן לא תבע בקל! כפושט-יד היה מתייצב בפתח, ובתוך העינים נצטיידה בקשה של כלב,  
"תבוא אחד-כר", והוא נעלם בחשאי בצל, כשביל לחזור אחד-כר בחשאי עוד יותר ולבקש את שכרו כנרבת!  
הוא שתק אפילו, כשהיו מפחיתים לו משכרו, או ממילים לו אסימון במקום מטבע! ...  
תמיד היה שותק ...  
אם כן, מתכוונים באמת אלי! -- מרגיע בונצי את עצמו.

פעם אחת -- מוסף ומספר המליץ-ישר לאחד לביטת מים -- בא שני בחיו ... חרפה-עברה כרכרה על  
גלגלים של נזם, עם מוסים שנתבהלו המצליף כבר מזמן היה, מטל מרחק וראשו מתוך אל אבני הבביו ... מתוך  
פיתויהם של המוסים והמבוהלים נתו הקצף, מתחת לפרסות מתלמלים ניצים, העינים מתנוצצות כמו לפידים בוערים  
כליל-חשכה -- ובתוך הכרכרה יושב, ספק חי ספק מת, אדם!  
ובונצי עצר את המוסים!

והיחודי הניצל היה יחודי בעל-צדקה, ולא שכן לבונצי את המוכנה!  
הוא מסר לא את שוטו של החרגו; בונצי נעשה מצליף! ויותר מזה -- הוא השיא לא אשה, ויתר על כן --  
-- הוא ראג אפילו לכר שיהיה לו ילד ...  
ובונצי עדיין שתק!

-- אלי מתכוונים, אלי! -- מתחזק בונצי ברעתו, ואין בו אף-על-פי-כן התעוזה לחיים עין אל הבית-דין של  
מעלה ...

הוא מקשיב שוב לרבריו של המלאך המליץ:  
-- הוא שתק אפילו בשעה שתבעל-מוכה פשט בקרוב את הרגל ולא שילם לו את שכרו ...  
הוא שתק אפילו בשעה שתאשה ברחו ממנו והשאירה לו תינוק שלא נגמל ...  
הוא שתק אפילו חמש-עשרה שנה לאחר-מכן, כשהילד גדל והיה חזק למדי -- כשביל להשליך את בונצי מתוך

הבית ...

— אלי מתכוננים, אלי! — שמח בונצי.

— הוא שתק — פותח בנעימה רכה יותר ועצבה יותר הסלאך-הסליץ — בשעה שאותו בעל-טובה עצמו השתנה והתפזר עם כולם. ורק לו לא החזיר אף פרוטה אחת מן השכירות, ואפילו בשעה שעבר על בונצי (בנסעו שוב בכרכרה עם גלגלי גומי ועם סוסים כאריות) ופצעו פצעים אנושים ... הוא עדיין שתק! הוא לא אמר אפילו למשמרה, מי הוא זה שסדר אותו כך ...

הוא שתק אפילו בבית-החולים, במקום שכבר מותר לצעוק!  
הוא שתק אפילו בשעה השרופא לא רצה בלי חמש-עשרה קופיקות לנשית של מנתו, והשוטר לא רצה בלי חמש קופיקות להחליף לו את בלי-הלבן!  
הוא שתק בשעת גסיסה — הוא שתק בשעת מיתה ...  
לא רבווד כנגד המקום, לא רבווד כנגד הבריות.  
— ריבס!

בונצי מתחיל שוב רועד ככל נופפו. הוא יודע, שלאחר מליץ-היושר בא הקמיטור! מי יודע מה זה יאמר!  
בונצי עצמו לא זכר את חיו. עוד, בעולם שהוא היה כל רגע משכיה את הרגע שקדם לו הסלאך-הסליץ הוביד לו הכול ... מי יודע, מה הקמיטור יזכיר לו!  
— רבותי! — מתחיל קול חד-דוקרני-לוהט —  
אך הוא מפסיק.

— רבותי, מתחיל הוא שנית, אך הקול כבר נחרב במקצת, ומפסיק שוב.  
לבסוף נשמע, מתוך אותו גרון עצמו, קול שהוא כמעט כולו רוך:  
— רבותי! הוא שתק! וגם אני אשתק!  
משלטת רסמה — ומקדם נשמע קול חרש, רך ומרמט:  
— בונצי, בני שלי בונצי! — קורא אליו הקול כקול העונב — בונצי בני שלי הגלגב!  
ולבו של בונצי נבסר בקרבו ובוכה ... כבר היה רוצה עכשיו לפקוח את העיניים, אך הן מעומטות מן הרסעות ... כל-כך מתוק-ער-כרי-בכיה לא היה לו מעולם ... "בני שלי", "בונצי שלי" — מוזן שמתה אמו לא שמע קול כזה ומלים כאלה —

— בני שלי! — מוסיף ואומר אב-בית-הדין — הכול נשאת ושתקת! אין מתוס בנפך ולא עצם שלימה, אין מקום בלא מכה, בלא חבורה, בלא פצע שחתה-דם, אין פינה חבירה אחת בתוך נשמתך, שאינה נטפת דם ... ואתה שתקת ושתקת ...

שם לא הבינו במיבו של הרבר הזה! אתה עצמך אפשר לא ידעת כלל שאינה יכול לצעוק ומקל צעקתך ידעו ויתפוררו חומותיה של ירושלים! אתה עצמך לא ידעת, מה גורל הכוח הגרם כך ...  
בעולם שהוא לא נתנו לך שבר על שתיקתך, אך העולם שהוא עולם-השקד הוא, כאן, בעולם-האמת, תקבל את שכרך!

אותך לא ישפוט הבית-דין של מעלה, עליך לא יוציא פסק-דין.  
לך לא יקציב חלק ולא יגביל חלק: קח לך כל מה שאינך רוצה! הכול שלך!  
בונצי נושא זו הפעם כראשונה את העיניים! והוא כמסמור מן האור השופע מכל הצדדים! הכול מבהיק, הכול מתנוצץ, מרחול קדנח קרני-אור: מן הבתלים, מן הכלים, מן הסלאכים, מן הריינים! הכול מלאכים!  
הוא משפיל את עיניו העייפות!



-- באמת? -- שואל הוא מסתפק ומברש.  
 -- באמת! -- משיב בתוקף אב-בית-הדין -- באמת, אני אומר לך, הכל שלך. כל מה שבשמים שייך לך!  
 בחר לך וקח מה שאתה רוצה, אין אתה לוקח אלא משלך!  
 -- באמת? -- שואל בונצי עוד פעם, אך הפעם כבר בקול בוטח.  
 -- באמת! באמת! באמת! -- עונים לו בתקיפות מכל הצדדים.  
 -- נו, אם כך -- מחייך בונצי -- רוצה אני באמת בכל יום בבוקר גלוסקה חמה עם חמאה טרדה!  
 הדיינים והמלאכים השפילו ראשיהם מברשים; הקמינור פרץ בצחוק.

שלוש מתנות  
א. על-יד המאזנים של סעלה

לפני שנים ודורות נפטר יהודי.  
סילא, יהודי נפטר — לעולם לא יחיה נבר! — נוסליו אתו את החסד האחרון: מביאים אותו לקבר ישראל.  
שב האדם לעפרו.  
נפתם הגלגל. היותם אומר „קדיש“, המלרים תולשים עשבים, זורקים לאחריהם ושבים... והגשמה — חלק  
אלוה מסעל — עפה למרומים, לעמוד למשפט לפני הבית-דין של סעלה...  
ותתייבב לפני הבית-דין של-סעלה, והמאזנים לשקול ברם את העבירות והמצוות תלויים ועומדים...  
ובא הקסינדר של הבר-מגן, זה שהיה שם יצרו הרע, הסתית והסדרה, ובירו תרמיל שחור ועקב וותי ייצב על-יד  
המאזנים — לצד שמאל.  
ונתן אות —  
ומתחיל הקסינדר לשפוף מן התרמיל הלבן, אל כף המאזנים הימנית — מצוות, והן נוצצות באבני-החן, וריחן  
נודף כריח הבשמים הטובים...  
ושופר הקסינדר מן התרמיל השחור לתוך הכף משמאל — עבירות, והן שחורות כפתם ורחן כריח הופת הבערה...  
והגשמה רואה ומשתוממת.  
לא עלה שם על דעתה, שכך נשותנו פני המעשים. שם לא יכלה להבחין לפעמים בין טוב ורע, לפרקים  
החליפה זה בזה...  
והכפות מתנועעות אמ, אמ.  
עולות הן, זו אחד זו, כחום-השקרה למעלה, כמלוא-הנימה למטה...  
רק כמלוא-הנימה:  
יהודי פשוט היה: בלי „להבעים“ וכלי „מסירות-נפש“.  
והמעשים פשוטים, גם הטובים וגם הרעים: נרגים, רסיסים, לפעמים אבק — העין אינה תופסת...  
ואף-על-פי-כן, כשימין מבריקה, העולמות העליונים מתמלאים רנה; וכששמאל מבריקה, אר של עצבות עולה  
ועומק בביבול, את כמט-הבבור, וקול השכינה המנומנת תודר מתוך הערפל והולך מסוף העולם ועד סופו:  
— קלני מראש, קלני!  
והללו עומדים בבובד-ראש ושופכים „בל-שוא“ אחד „בל-שוא“, לאט ובכונה, בבעלי-בתים פשוטים.  
העומדים על הסף של „אתה הראית“, ומסיפים פרוטה אחד פרוטה, פרוטה אחד פרוטה...  
אבל גם לששאיבה מן הבאר יש קץ: הורקו התרמילים!  
האב-בית-דין שואל מסקמו:  
— נמר?  
והקסינדר עם הקסינדר העפים בבית-אחת את התרמילים, לאמר:  
— תורקו!  
ונגש אל המאזנים השמש, וגם הוא מלאך בתוך שאר המלאכים, וירא רבר, אשר לא היה מיום ברוא אלהים  
שמים וארץ, ועמוד משתא.  
— למה הוא בושש שם? — שואל האב-בית-דין בקוצר-רוח.  
— והשמש, בעינים צמודות אל לשון הפלס, עונה בקול משונה:  
— באמצע!  
— המתכל שנית ודוק!  
והמתכל שנית: לשון הפלס עומדת באמצע, כלי נטע.  
ומאת הבית-דין של-סעלה, אחרי משא-ומתן ארוך, ורוב שקלא-ומריא, יצא פסק-דין כהא לישנא:  
„היות שלא עלה משקל המעשים הרעים על משקל המעשים הטובים — לא מן הדין הוא, שידר הגדון לניהלם!“  
ולאידך גיסא:  
„היות שהמצוות והמעשים הטובים לא הכריעו את העבירות והמעשים הרעים — מנדים ומסוגרים לפניו שער  
הגן-עדן!“  
על כן: גע ונר יהיה!

...תרחף לה הנשמה באויר העולם, בין השמים מסעל ובין השאול מתחת — עד אשר יעלה זכרונה לפני הוצר ויפקדנה לטוב, ויחננה!...

ומליך השמש את הנשמה לתוך, והיא מתייפחת...

— מה לך, נשמה, כי תהמי? — דובר על לבה המלאך — אם אין לך משמחת הגן-ערן, הלא נצלת גם מאשו של ניהנום. לא מן הרבש ולא מן העוקץ!

אבל הנשמה אינה מקבלת תנחומים: טובים כל היסורים שבקולם מן האפס. הלא-כלום — אומרת היא — נווד מכל!.

ונכמרו עליה נחומי המלאך, ויאמר אליה ברחמים רבים:

— „שמעי בקולי, נשמה ענומה, ואולי ייטב לך בארדית היסים. רדי השפילי לרחף, טובי את האדמה מלמטה. אל השמים אל תשאיי עין, כי מה תחוי שם בשמים מעבר משם? כוכבים, אין כל זולתי כוכבים! והכוכבים בריות קרות הם. הם רוגזים הכל, מוקדים הכל — ומחשים... הם לא יעלו זכרונך לפני האלהים, ולא ישתדלו בעבורך לפני הכסא... מאדחת הם, ואורם — אור קצאן... „משתדלים לפעמים ומוכירים נשמות אוסללות לפני הכסא רק בני דורם — הצדיקים היושבים בגן-ערן... „בגן-ערן יושבים, רוחצים באור, נהנים מזיו השכינה... ולעתים עולה לפניהם זכר בני דורם, ומתמלאים הם רחמים על נשמות נענות וגרורות, ועולים הם ומוכירים ומשתדלים... „צדיק דורך, אלה שמקדוב באו — האמת נתנה להאמר! — אהבים מתנות... „ואת איפוא עושי, נשמה אוסללה:

„עופי למטה, טובי, כאשר אמרתי, את האדמה, התבונני בעינים פקוחות לכל הנעשה שם בין החיים. ואם תראי דבר טוב, דבר יפה, יוצא מן הכלל, חספי וביאי אותו תיכף ומיד סתנה לצדיקים בגן-ערן... דפק אל השוער בשמי ויקבל... „ואם שלוש מתנות תביאי, בסוד בי, שיעתו לך שערי הגן-ערן... „וברחמים גדולים הציא השמש את הנשמה אל מחוז לשמים ויסגור את השער אחריה...

### ב. המתנה הראשונה

ותתעורר הנשמה, ותפרוש כנף, ותעף למטה, ותשוב את האדמה, ותרחף על פני ערים וכל מיני טושב... כשרב החמה הלוככת בקיץ; בתוך הרביבים בימות הנשמים: בין קוד-העכביש, התלויים באויר בסוף הקיץ; בתוך המון קשקשי השלג, היורדים מלמעלה בחורף...

איש יזריי הולר, והיא חדרה אליו ומסתכלת לתוך עיניו: אפשר הולר הוא לקדש את השם... „ובלילות מתבוננת היא אל כל קרן אור החדרת מבעד לסדקי התריסין, — אפשר גדלים שם בסתר האוהל פרחי-שמים נחתי רית: מעשים טובים בצנעא?

אך לשוא! נרתעת היא פעם בפעם לאחריה מפחד — מעיני האדם, כמסדקי התריסין... עתים נשתנו, ומנים נתחלפו, יוכל אחרי יובל עבר; ערים נחששו והיו לשרות; נברתו יערות ונבנו מושבות; סלעים על שפת-הים ניתצו ואבניהם נשחקו והיו לאבק; רבואות כוכבים נפלו ממרומים, רבואות נשמות עיפות עלו למסם — ואין דבר, אין „יוצא מן הכלל! „ותריד הנשמה:

החיים עניים הם כל-כך, הנשמות כל-כך כינוניות ואפורות... ותאדם שח ושפל — אין מעשים נעלים ויפים! נדחת אני לעולם...

ובעודה הונה כסרי-שיחה, ובעיניה ננעה שלהבת... באישון לילה, בחשכת האפלה, פורץ להב סתור חלון גבוה... שורדים ותנפלו על מעונו של „גביר“.

כירי האחד אבוקה דולקת — הוא מאיר. משנהו שולח מכין אל חזה הגביר: „אם תגיע יד ואם תפצה פה — מעברך השני יצא להלכה! „והנותרים בחיים.

והיזריי עומד כנגד הסכין שוקם. לא ינד עפעף, גם שיערה אחת מוקטו הלבן, היורד עד אכנסו, לא תודע. הוא חושב:

— ה' נתן וה' לקח, יחי שם ה' מבורך!

ושפתיו רובבות בלחש:

— עם עשרי לא יצאתי מרחם אמי לאויר-העולם, ואותו לא אקח עמי בשובי אל ארמתי...  
ואולי ספקד הוא את אשר לו...

ומנחתו שלימה. והשורדים פותחים תיבות וארגונים. מציאים מהם כסף וזהב וכל מיני-תכשיטין... ומקום סתר  
מצאו בתחתית הארגון, ונמלאו שמחה: פה הוא היקר מכל! וצורד קבן הציאו מן המסתור וביקשו להתירו...

ותתאם הנביר הישיב יד, פצה פה — — —

אך תחת קול דברים פרץ מחוזו סילון אדום — רם רוחה... הסבין עשה את שלון נפל הנביר...

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לא כלי כסף וזהב ולא אבנים טובות ומרגליות היו בצדור, כי אם קוצץ עפר מאדמת-הקודש, למראשותיו  
בתניע יום פקדתו...

את צדור-העפר ביקש להציל...

ותעט הנשמה ותחמץ רסס מאבק העפר הרוח מהם הנביר ותעל, ותעף למרום... דפקק על השער, והסתנה  
הראשונה נתקבלה...

## ג. הסתנה השניה

ותשב הנשמה, ותעף למטה...

— רק עוד שתי מנעות! — קרא אחריה השוער.

והיא עפה וסייחלה — — —

אבל עוד הפעם עברו זמנים ומעדים ואין דבר יפה.

ושבה הנשמה ליגונה, והיא חושבת:

כמעין וך פרץ העולם מרצון האלהים אל תוך שטף הזמן, והוא תולך חורם, תולך חורם... וכל שהוא מתרחק  
ממקדור המזרח, כן מוסף הוא לספוג לתוכו את תגשמות מאת העולין. והמים המזדדים נעשים רלוחים ועכורים...  
ותולך האדם הלך וקבן, ומתמעטים המעשים הטובים והרעים, והסתנות בשביל השמים תולכות ופוזחות.  
ועולה על לבת:

לו העמיד האלהים למשפט את כל העולם כולו בבת-אחת, לשקול בפלס את כל מעשי בני האדם יחדיו... נוע  
תנוע לשון הפלס ימים רבים, ימים רבים. תנועה לרדודת — כמלוא-השערה ליסין, כמלוא-השערה לשמאל...  
רק כמלוא-השערה!

כמו שהוא — אין העולם עולה ואינו יורד, כמוני נע הוא ונר בין השמים הזכים סמפל ובין הרתום העכורה  
מתחת...

וימים רבים יתגוששו הקטיגור עם המניגוד, כחתגושש אור וחושך, חום וקור, חיים ומות...  
לא תעמד לשון הפלס... ונישואים וגיטין, בריאות-סילה וחלויות-מתים, שמחות-מצוא וסעודות-הבראה — לא  
ישבותו...

ותתאם, ותתעורר הנשמה לקל הצוצרת.

ותשקף למטה, והנה תחתה עיר אשכנזית עתיקה. גנות משונים במראיהם ותבניתם מקיפים את השוק אשר  
מסביב לבית-הפקידות. והשוק רומה מהמוני אדם, לבושי מכלול, מכהים עץ כשלל צבעיהם. ובחלונות ראשים  
צפופים, ואדם רב על המעקות, ודבים רובבים על הקירות, והוצאות מן הבתלים תחת הגגות...  
ולפני בית-הפקידות שולחן ערוך למשפט, ועליו מפה ירוקה, שוליה זהב וציציותיה זהב. ויועצי בית-הפקידות  
— שרים, עמתי סמוט, מרוכסי זהב, מסובים אל השולחן; ונוצות לבנות, אוחזות בכפתורי-שורם מרחפות מעל  
למצנפות תחש — — —

וישב בראש — שר העיר.

מעל לראשו מרחף הפרס...

ומן הצד אל עמוד-הקלון אמורה עלמה עברית. סמוך לה אחוים עשרה עברים סוס פרא, משתובב...

ושר העיר התגושש ויקרא מעל הספר בקול רם את פסק-דינה של תנועה האמורה:

הטא גרול מנשוא תטאה הידוריה הזאת! גם האדון כבבורו ובעצמו, מקור החסר והרחמים, לא יסלה לת...

..ביום חג הקדוש התגבה רצאה מן הגיסו לרמוס את חצות עירנו המהורה...  
 והטמא החצות בעיניה הממאות את תהלוכת-הקדוש. ותהלל צמבני מומאמה אל פסילי הארון והגברת ואת  
 המנות הקדושים שנישאו בהמון רב, כשר ושבת. ותספוג אל תוך אזניה האורות את הוסדות ספיות ילדינו  
 התמימים, נערינו  
 וסי יורע אם לא השמן, שלבש דמות היהודה, דמות בת הרב האדור, השיט יד ונע באחד מקרשינו לחלול!  
 ומה ביקש השמן ברמות היהודה היפהיה?  
 ..בי יפה היא, הלא עיניכם הרואות. הן הסמרא-אחרא מתוח עליה; נתקשמה בכל קסמי שאול!  
 ..התבוננו אל עיניה המבריקות מתחת לריסה הארוכים. לא חשבו במאסר! ראו את פניה, שחזרו בכלא, אך  
 לא נפלו. ראו את אצבעותיה הזכות, הרקת והארוכות, הלא חדרות בערן קיני-השמש --  
 מה ביקש השמן?  
 ..לקרוע נפשות מחרות מן הסר, להתקת אותן מתהלוכת-הקדוש! וחצו כמעט שהצליח... ראוה שני פרשים,  
 והאחד הפסיק את תפלו והציא את משנהו בשאלתו: מי היא היפה הזאת?  
 ..והדישו בה שומרי התהלוכה, ותפשו!  
 ..וגם לא ניסה השמן לעמוד על נפשו, שליטה לא היה לו של המואים, השתדו ביום הוא בבוקר, וקדושת  
 הסר תעפת עליהם --  
 ..הוא הוא פסק הנערה:  
 ..במחלפת ראשה תקשר אל זנב הסוס, וזוהר הסוס, וסרוב יסתבנה במרוצתו על פני הרוח, שדרכה עליו כרגל  
 ממאה ביום קדשנו... לכבס ברם פצעה את המרצפת השכתימה בעיניה הממאות" --  
 כן נורה הפקירות.  
 -- כן יקום! הרעים ההמון בחץ, על הקורות, בחלונות ועל המעקות.  
 וכעבור גל הקולות, נשאלה הנערה, מה חצתה האדון ומה תבקש בסרם תצא ליהוד?  
 שאלה קטנה יש לה: סיכות מספר...  
 -- השתעקה!  
 -- לא! -- ענתה הדונה במנוחה -- זאת היא בקשתי האחרונה.  
 ונתנה לה  
 ושר העיר נתן צו:  
 -- אסרו!  
 ויגש תליון, ויקשור בידים וזעדות את מחלפת הנערה בזנב הסוס...  
 -- פנו מקום!  
 ופרוץ שאון כהמות סים רבים. העומדים בחץ נרחקו לאחוריהם ויחצו, יסו ושמאל, לפנות למס דר...  
 ודי הכל נשאוא, ושומים ומספחות הורמו לאיים על הסוס...  
 ובשעת החמלה לא ראה איש, מלבד הגשמה הנרתת, שהגרונה נחנת ורוכסת אל כשר רגליה בסיכות את שפת  
 שמתלת, לבל יגלה בשרה, בסרוב אותה הסוס...  
 והתר הסוס, המחזיקים בו נמוגו, נפלו אחורנית, וקפץ מסקמו הסוס, וצעקה פרועה פרצה מאלפי פיות, בחץ,  
 בחלונות, על הקורות והמעקות, ומעל שולחן הפקירות, ומשוממים ושורקים באויר אלפי שומים ומספחות... וישתולל  
 הסוס מסחר, ויעה כסער...  
 והנערה נסחבת אחרי... נסחבת ומתגלגלת...  
 והגשמה הנרתת ידרה אליה, ותוצא מבשר רגליה סיכה מאדירה, ותעף למעלה...  
 ובסבר פנים יפות נתקבלה המתנה השניה..



ד. המתנה השלישית

— רק עוד מתנה אחת!  
אבל הנשמה כבר עיפה.  
עוד הפעם נשתנו עתים, נתחלפו זמנים ואין רב!  
עוד יותר שח האדם, שפל האיש, כרו הנשמות, קטנו המעשים...  
ושבה הנשמה ליגונה ולמחשבותיה על-דבר משפט העולם...  
השקים הודק, ועוד מאות בשנים תרעד לשון הפלס ולא תרע מנוח... וסוף-כל-סוף בשתעמור — תעמור  
באמצע...  
..לא יכריע כלום... לא יכריע תבל-שהוא את תמה-בכר!  
ומה יעשה הקדוש-ברוך-הוא?  
..החידד את העולם לתועה ובוהה? — אינו יכול: העבירות לא הבריעו את המצוות...  
הינאל את תבל התבל? — אי-אפשר, המצוות לא הבריעו את העבירות!  
ומה יגזור עליה?  
..תלך לה!  
וטע תנוע גם מכאן ולהבא בין גיהנום וגן-עדן, אהבה ושנאה, רמעות של רחמים ודמי-נקיים — בין אבנים  
וקברים... וכה לעולם, לעולם-עולמים...  
אך, כנראה, נברה מרת-הרחמים, והנשמה התעוררה לקול התוף.  
אימת?  
איפוא היא?  
איננה יודעת עוד את הזמן ואינה מכרת את המקום.  
מגרש, מחץ לעיר, ובית-כלא לפניו.  
שחורות הן החצמות, אטומים החלונות הקטנים. אך בשכבות הברזל ספוחות קרני-השמש. וסחליקות הן ונאחזות  
בתנודות שבקני-הדוכים, העומדים כאלומות על-יד החצות. בירי הדיילים — שוטים!  
ובשתי שורות העמדות הדיילים מחזיק השוטים, וקרובות הן השורות זו לזו, ובתווך יעבור הגידון.  
מי הוא הגידון?  
איש יחיד, כתונת קדושה על בשרו הרל, על ראשו השפל והמגולח למחצה יארמולק"ה ישנה.  
על מה נתפש האומלל?  
מי יודע, אפשר נגב, נול, רצח... אולי — עלילת שוא ועדי שקר: לפניו היה הרבר...  
הנה הוא!... ועיני הדיילים רואות וצוחקות בלאט. למה הובאו הנה והעמרו בסספר רב? היעבור את החצי  
ולא ימות?  
והקיבו נודח לבין השורות — —  
וזנה הוא הולך בין השוטים המכים ואינו נופל, הולך ואינו כושל... השוטים מצליפים והוא הולך כצל — מה  
זאת? היתכן? ומתמלאים הדיילים חמה. עודו הולך? להכעיסם הוא אומר?  
והשוטים שורקים באידי, מצליפים ולותפים את הבשר כנחשים, וסילוני-דם, ניתוס, פורצים — והוא הולך,  
עודו הולך!  
— זה-הא, זה-הא!  
והוא עודו הולך.  
וזנה סקרת: חיל אחד לא כיוון כראוי, ופיל בשוטו את היארמולק"ה מעל ראשו הגידון...  
והוא הולך. אך אחרי רגעים מספר הריגש באבירותו ועמד, כאילו נמלך ברעתו, וחללים: יד מה ולא יד  
בגלוי-הראש. והוא שב על עקביו ונגש אל היארמולק"ה מרים אותה ומכסה את ראשו ותונוה והולך...  
וככה הוא הולך והיארמולק"ה בראשו — עד אשר נפל...  
ותרד הנשמה הנודת אל הגופל, ותחמוץ מן היארמולק"ה חום אחד רווח דם המוכה, ותעק לה...

ה. השמחה בגן-עדן

המתנה השלישית נתקבלה... הנשמה תנאל, תנאל...

ובגן-עדן רבה השמחה:

יפות, יפות הן המתנות...

וח"אורים ותומים" מוסיף:

-- והעיקר שאין לתשמיש כלל, אלא לנוי בלבד... רק לנוי... בדבקי למחזי...

## Appendix B: Excerpts from Peretz's Essays

### Memories from Peretz's Childhood (from My Memoirs)

#### The Real Versus the Accidental

My history shall neither tell lies, nor tell everything, for to tell everything is the biggest lie. Because Man is not everything. All that should be recorded are the characteristics of a person, the genuine features, not the accidentals that do not truly belong to the man.

And something else. Most of a man's memories are submerged deep in his unconscious self. I shall raise mine out of the depths to the light of day. But don't expect to see them neatly stacked like a row of frozen ravens, lying front to back. My memories fly and roam freely, singly and lightly, like particles of dust. The magnetic power that can pull them up and group them together is not chronology but the ordering power of reality--the most important facts or the general facts, ideas, and moods. I don't trust my memory for a single accurate date. If someone can later add them to these random memories, well and good. I cannot!<sup>1</sup>

#### Peretz's Character:

My father, too (he isn't among the living any more), would allow no one to hit me. He himself slapped me only twice, the first time on account of a piece of cake.

Ever since I may claim to have come to my senses, I have disliked sweets. People would tease me: "You want to be regarded as clever, hey?"--for the proverb has it: "fools eat sweets." My grandmother would bake sponge cake, honey cake, tarts, and strudel and make jams and preserves for her own family and also to distribute to the sick in the poorhouse. Her other grandchildren would invariably stuff themselves sick on what they stole from her pantry. I was the sole exception, never eating even the sweets offered to me.

But at the party given to celebrate my infant brother's circumcision, the poor people of the town, as was the custom, came to partake of brandy and cake. They gathered in the central section of the house. In the wing to the right lay my mother in confinement. In the wing to the left were the prominent guests.

We had a waiter--may I be forgiven for recalling it--who was so stupid that everybody called him "dumb dog." He was (I see him now in memory) a tall, white-haired, decrepit man, with a

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<sup>1</sup> I.L. Peretz, My Memoirs, trans. from Yiddish by Fred Goldberg (New York: Citadel Press, 1964), pp. 24-25.

sallow, lifeless face. He had married several times, but was childless, and was now a widower. When his last wife died, he was so heartbroken that he didn't want to live. He had shroud linen sewn for him and wore the garments of death in the yard at night, scaring people to fits. He resented the poor even more than death.

On the day of the celebration, "dumb dog" was carrying a tray of cakes from the wing of the house where my mother lay to the wing of the house where the prominent guests were assembled. To get there, he had to go through the crowd of poor guests in the center room. He carried the tray high over his head, as if denying the poor even the sight of the cakes. Noticing a sickly girl staring hungrily at the cakes, I jumped up, snatched a slice and gave it to her. My father, standing in the doorway of the right wing, saw me jump up and grab the cake, but not what I did with it. He walked up to me and slapped me on the cheek. The next day, when everybody was sitting at the table, he told my mother: "This goody-goody doesn't eat sweets, ha? Yet he grabs cake off the tray!"

The maid was just then carrying in a tureen of soup. She told my parents what she had seen me do with the piece of cake.

My mother cast her eyes down, trying to control her emotions, as she always did in the presence of others. My father grew pale, his eyes were moist with tears. He rose and left the room. I felt guilty that I hadn't told them before and wanted to follow my father to ask his forgiveness. To this day, I cannot bring my self to make exculpating explanations or ask forgiveness of others.

The second time my father slapped me was when I was already a "young man," about 14. I had developed philosophical inclinations, studying Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed. How I happened to get hold of that book, I'll tell you later. I was a melancholy dreamer, with my head in the clouds, lost in contemplation over the tragedy of the world. I was perturbed by questions: What is the goal of man? What is the purpose of life? Is there free will? Why should there be so much pain, anxiety, and suffering in man's existence? No doubt, my pessimism is an extension of this adolescent anguish; for the process of sexual maturity comes early to Jewish children. For me, at that time, dark and sinister spirits were lurking everywhere. The tormenting questions caused me spiritual agonies and I sought seclusion so that my sufferings should not be noticed.

One Friday I wandered off for the whole day. I returned too late to go home and change my clothes and I went straight to the synagogue for the Sabbath services. I was in a shabby coat and my boots were stained with mud. My father's eyes darted fire when he saw me in that slovenly condition, but out of respect for his fellow worshippers he said nothing in the synagogue. But, when we came home, he slapped my cheek, shouting: "What shame and disgrace you cause me on the Holy Sabbath!"

He left the room and my mother said: "It's a good thing a child doesn't suffer too deeply!"

How little adults know of the intensity of an adolescent's suffering!<sup>2</sup>

### The Importance of the Folk-Tale and the Folk Song

The nurse was a frail old peasant woman whose white hair was thinning out, and whose lean face was seamed with wrinkles. Her eyes were small and dim and damp from drinking. Liquor dissipated her melancholia and made her tender, loving, and gay. With some spirit in her, she was ready to embrace anyone and everyone--the whole world. She had a husband in the village. When she got lonesome for him, she would steal away to see him. She would return beaten black and blue, and her clothes torn. Then she would become still more attached to us and shower far more tender attentions on my sick little brother, carrying and fondling him. She would tell him stories and sing him songs. I hadn't yet learned Polish, but I could understand enough words to follow her tales. Some evenings, I came into the house early and retired to bed immediately, pretending I had a headache. And I would listen absorbedly to her stories and songs, and was annoyed when my mother disturbed me by bringing me some supper.

When I thought of this poor old woman, it was with disdain. Yet I was enchanted by her tales and songs. These songs were plaintive and melancholy, with a long-drawn out refrain, "Kolendo! Ko--len--do!"

They brought pitying tears to my eyes for the poor, distressed, deserted, pock-marked old woman. I somehow understood that in these songs she was bewailing her own plight, expressing her sorrowful, empty life.

These were more than cradle songs. They were her plea, her prayer.<sup>3</sup>

### Peretz - His Early Love of Stories

Zamoszcz has always been a city of sages and scribes, and, as the saying has it: "Wherever there is Torah [learning] there also dwells wisdom and understanding."

Today, even a prodigy is not a prodigy. We have too many of them.

The beth hamidrash was filled, rather I should say overcrowded, with bright students. In fact, there was no room for all of them in the halls, and many had to stand in the corridors and on the stairs. I repeat: "Wherever there is Torah there also dwells wisdom and understanding." But I had to get at it by myself. There was no direct communication of this wisdom

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2 Peretz, My Memoirs, pp. 30-33.

3 Peretz, My Memoirs, pp. 54-5.



and understanding. It was only by eavesdropping that I learned what was going on. As the students said about me: "Where he is not wanted, there he pops up!"

I sat like an idiot with my mouth wide open. For all anyone could see, I knew nothing. I just listened. The adults wondered how it came about that I, the prodigy, should now idle away my time listening to stories, rather than studying the Gemara; that I should prefer a swim in the river to study, etc. I myself didn't understand the inner compulsion that drove me to listen to stories. Yet, they had a compelling power and drew me like a magnet. In fact, I'd give anything to hear tales and stories. For a chance to hear a story, I readily gave up my favorite game of bride and groom.<sup>4</sup>

#### Peretz's Theological and Emotional Struggle During Adolescence

Jewish children ripen physically at an early age. I wish they would mature as rapidly mentally.

If I had an artist's crayon in my hand, instead of a writer's pen, I would draw the following caricature of myself as a youth: small, frail, thin hands, legs like sticks, a big head, and a questioning look in my large, gray, sad, searching eyes. I am sitting in a rowboat. It is tied to a small balloon that lifts the boat three inches above the waters of the Enlightenment. My poor little craft is at the mercy of the winds. I hold a net in my hands with which to snare a nightingale. I wave it to and fro in the air, but instead of nightingales, I catch problems. Against my knowledge, and contrary to my will, they come, and fall in heavy lumps into my boat; and they--the problems--burden my adolescent awakening...

As for me, I was preoccupied with the very important problems of creation, and the existence of God.

Why did God create the world?

Despite the opinion of Aristotle and all the other Greek sages that the world had no beginning and no end, I can prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the world has been created, and out of nothing, to boot, as only God could create; and it is true that it required no mass of earthly matter, either. And so there it must have been a beginning, as recorded in Genesis, when God spoke the words: "Let there be light!"

So far, so good. But why did God create the world? So that man's purpose on earth and his goal in life would be solely to serve Him? What does God need man's services for, anyway? "In order," said Rabbenu Yakov Ben Mayer, "to reward man for doing good, and not to receive free gifts--gifts he hasn't earned." Such rewards, I understand, can apply only to man's relations to man, but not to God. And the further comment by this sage that "if I take from man that which he hasn't earned, he has less,"

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<sup>4</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, pp. 121-2.

makes the mystery of the radiation of the heavenly spheres, by comparison, comprehensible.

It seems to me, however, that in fact God's will is curtailed by His relations with man. That's too bad! Although the vastness of God's power is beyond comprehension, nevertheless it has its limitations too. God Himself cannot make a square with three corners. Nor will He change one iota the fear of sin, once it crops up. What is life on earth? And what does it mean to pass beyond? What is death? As mentioned before, such problems came piling upon me. They grew like fungus, in the restless deep abyss, "in the depths of the unconsciousness," where the animal, sexual instinct develops. Without my knowledge, and much against my will, that instinct came forth. The sexual desires come and change black and white to rainbow colors--mostly blood-red and purple.

I sank into melancholy. I brooded over my humiliation at the hands of my father who, one Friday evening, after Kiddush, had slapped me. And my spirit still throbbed with the anguish I had experienced when my mother, in her irritation, accused me of insensitivity, of being incapable of suffering deep pain. I was solitary and lonely. I had no one in whom I could confide. I moved alone in the misty web of people and things. I fitted loosely and precariously, in time and space. Either I felt smothered in gray, slow-moving clouds, or I soared in pillars of sun-dust, tremblingly, dizzily scaling heights where dream and reality melt and merge...

I, the pure, good-natured child or youth, who religiously carried out the precepts of the famous book, The Duties of the Heart; I, who willingly sacrificed myself for others; I, who shared my breakfast with hungry classmates in cheder--I have only two demands: A green onion from my father on earth, and my Father in heaven to repair the damage to the moon...

On my innocent child's heart, there hangs a locket with disarranged letters. When, or by what hand, will they be straightened out? Who knows? Who will kindle a fire, holy or mysterious, on the altar of sacrifice? I am still a girl, my "bride of the ruins," a boy (it makes no difference which is which). In my big head, swollen-with-grief, I have already lived through economic, Jewish, and sexual entanglements, involving the relationship of Adam and Eve...

I am already suffering alienation, the "Exile in the Divine Presence." Why does falsehood triumph over truth? Why do mistakes determine Fate? Why does God Almighty "keep ashes in his mouth and remain silent"?

I am personally in exile, too!

In colorful uniforms, with bayonets glittering in the bright sun, a detachment of soldiers marched from the castle, where the officers lived, along the paved street, to the barracks near the Shebreshin road-gate. This holiday parade was led by a band of musicians in white uniforms. Aside from the druggist and his three ugly daughters, everybody turned out to watch the pompous show and hear the brassy music. People at home rushed to the

windows, people in the stores raced to the doors to hear the victorious marchers. And my young heart ached painfully and asked sadly: "Where is my military detachment? Where are my victorious marchers?"

And my eyes were wet with tears...

...I walked along the narrow, dark lane, and was lost in thought--about death!

Why has God created death? What comes after it?

The soul is supposed to fly to the other world, to paradise or hell. According to Maimonides, part of the dead person's mind continues to exist at the highest level his soul had reached on earth. But, what about my little brother who died so young, whose brain hadn't had time to develop? What about children who died in their cradles, or children who were born dead--what about them? God tells us to continue to live our life as before: in joy or in sorrow, as the case may be. The rich remains rich, the landowner remains a landowner, and the porter a porter.

One feels let down; one feels taken in. God imagines it as a sort of reward and punishment game.

For example, one of the town characters was a middle-aged, insane woman. Whether after a divorce or not, her husband had put her out of his house, with a miserable bundle of her clothes and trinkets. She carried these through the streets. Where she spent the night, I don't know. Often, she would stop in the market, open her bundle, spread out her wardrobe and jewels, in the street, examine them, smile over them, try on the jewelry again and again and again. She would remove her married woman's wig and replace it with another. She had to be stopped from changing her clothes right there in the street as well. She may have thought the day a holiday, a holiday in the middle of the week. Her shrunken cheeks and hungry eyes beamed with happiness. Will there be, up there in heaven, such a paradise as she found on the street? True, when she sought to enjoy this paradise, by returning to Eve's condition, the police dragged her to the station. But up there, where there are no police stations, could she change her clothes ten times a day as she wished?

And what about the body?

As the Bible states: "from dust to dust." "Two spirits speak," says the legend. It is a fable, a "symbol." In my spiritual-nightingale net, I had captured that word somewhere: fable. The dead don't know that they are dead. Moreover, I cannot imagine how a human being, lying in his grave, shouldn't feel crowded, shouldn't feel the damp, and the dark, and that the worms are eating him. What if he does know? Well, if there remains a speck of the mind, God forbid, then naturally, it contains a moist drop of feeling. That thought often froze my limbs.

And why die? What is the justice of that? Because the first man sinned? Because he tasted of the tree of life? Is knowledge a sin? It's true that God forbade Adam that taste; but why had God forbidden it? And suppose Adam hadn't sinned, isn't it enough that "He visited (the sins) of the fathers upon the



children unto the third and fourth generation?" Does Adam's seed deserve punishment for still further generation, for eternity? Why should not Adam be immortal? Why withhold the fruit that might enable him to achieve immortality? Why should he not live forever? Because "they will be like Me"? But what's wrong with that? Since later God did demand, "I am Holy, thou must be Holy too," and "that thou be merciful also"? Then He did want man to be like Him!

In any case, how harsh the punishment--suffering, and Death!

Now comes Maimonides again, the wise one, the profound philosopher, who divided the world in two: (1) from the earth to the heavenly spheres, the law according to Aristotle applies; (2) from the lower spheres to the higher the law according to Moses: "He is true and his Torah is true."

There is no pain, says Maimonides, and no suffering; no grief and no death. They simply do not exist! Nor does darkness exist! The only thing that does exist is light. And the expression: "He who creates light, forms also darkness," is only a figure of speech. God created light. Darkness is only the rind that is peeled from the light. And when God takes away light, it becomes dark. And He has a right to take it away, if He wants to. For He didn't have to give it, if He didn't want to. According to the same reasoning, there is no sickness, only health. For health has a sound foundation, being the gift of God, and is the negation of sickness, which has no sound foundation or positive value.

God created life, and His taking it away is called death. And you have no right to complain. For He didn't create death, which is only a taking away of what He gave, which remained His. Reb Meyer was correct when he said: "Don't weep, Meyer, your two sons didn't die. God, Blessed be His Name, took back what He lent you." As Job said, "The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken away." Only Job understood it so clearly! Let me repeat what I wrote in my drama The Golden Chain: "Clear is snow, clear is ice. Everything is clear--everything except life."

My young heart rejected this crystal clear, rational logic! A revolt within me was brewing, by which I was driven to distraction. My brain kept on storming violently: "What is death? And why die?"<sup>5</sup>

Peretz's Introduction to the Enlightenment  
(from Memoirs, chapters 8 and 9)

I was standing at the gate of the secluded house of Michael Fidler, who, in his vanished days of prosperity, had accumulated a large and varied library. Suddenly, this unhappy, silent man, appeared at the door, looked at me with sad, watery eyes, and

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<sup>5</sup> Peretz, My Memoirs, pp. 157-159, 162, 163, 167-170.

then approached me, holding a book in one hand and a lantern in the other.

"People say," he observed, "that you're a genius. Can you interpret a plain text?"

Holding up the book in his hand, he pointed to a passage where the author deals with transfiguration. I read the passage, understood it, and interpreted it for him.

"You are certainly a genius! Wait!"

He disappeared into the house.

At that very moment, I began to weave a thought in my mind: Maybe that author, whose meaning I had penetrated, had the right answer to all my questions? However, that idea didn't develop further. Michael Fidler came out with his lantern in one hand but, in the other hand, instead of the book, he held out a big, rusty key. It was the key to his library in town.

Handing the key to me, he said: "Here is the key to my store of books. You've earned it. It is yours from now on!"

With trembling hand, I took the key. I could not even voice the gratitude I felt. I lifted my eyes up to him, yearning to say something. But my lips seem sewn together. I couldn't speak. By the light of the lantern, I saw that his face was like that of a corpse: ashen, pale as death.

A corpse handed me the key.

I took the key and walked away silently. That key was to open a new world of books for me, and for you, dear editor, a new chapter.

When and how Michael Fidler actually died, I don't remember!

### "Their Beth Hamidrash"

It isn't easy for a Jew--whose heart beats to the rhythmic tune of Jewishness, whose every fiber, in a thousand knots, is tied to his ancient heritage, who is destined at birth to follow the religious way of life--to pick himself up suddenly and go to a gentile academy, which, to me, was Michael Fidler's store of books. I felt, though not clearly, that I was tearing myself away from something and from somebody--from somebody I knew, from something dear to me. I didn't sleep nights, and for days on end, I wandered around and beyond the highway gates. I had an inner feeling of guilt, as if I were breaking a social code. True, I had already discarded many old beliefs; true, much that was once holy to me disappeared in thin air. But, all that had taken place within my family, in my house, in my beth hamidrash. In a word, on home territory!

...I ascended the white, clean, new stairs. White, lighted stairs are a good sign! Lightness and brightness followed me to the second floor, to the third floor, to the landing of the attic steps. The light of day waned--the end of the trip. Now it was dark and I felt uneasy. I had a momentary impulse to retreat, to descend the stairs to safety. As I groped for the door, my hand



trembled. Like a blind person, I felt for the keyhole. "I'll look in first," I said to myself. I saw only darkness, for the shutters were closed. However, through the cracks, beams of light filtered into the library, illuminating the books heaped on the floor.

"The pillar of Smoke! The pillar of Fire! Both lead to the wilderness!"

I turned the key, and the rusty lock emitted rasping sounds. My heart palpitated, yet I found the courage to open the door. I hastily threw the shutters wide open. I was in "their" academy--a storehouse of gentile learning.

That we can claim a share also in "their" temples, I never thought of at that time. Judaism is the mother religion of both Christianity and Islam.

So many books! All four walls were lined with them! And many were heaped on the floor, strewn under my very feet.

"I will read everything" ...

... I began with the Polish Books, searching them out in the clutter. The books had been placed on the shelves at random. Serious novels, romances, scientific works--all were mixed together on the shelves. What chaos! Among the novels were translations from the French romancers, Dumas, Sue, Victor Hugo. But these, too, were haphazardly arranged. I would come across the tenth volume of a collected edition of Eugene Sue, then the ninth of a collected edition of Dumas, then the third in an edition of Hugo. I read incessantly.

...I likened that library to a market, where many people, from all walks of life, engage in all kinds of trades and undertakings. They do all kinds of work. They form groups and talk among themselves. Each group is preoccupied with its own problems. And I stroll around in this market (the library), walking from group to group. I listen. I catch snatches of talk here and there, which I piece together in my imagination.

Accidentally, I came across the Code Napoleon, in Zavatsky's translation. I did not find it difficult to grasp the general principles. I understood them. That was a pleasure! Perhaps I am wrong to use the term "pleasure." The word "amazed" would express it better. Not even Maimonides had reached such sublime heights! I also came across Buckle's History of English Civilization. Before I began to understand this book, its style reminded me of a book I had read in Hebrew, dealing with philosophy and mysticism in the Cabala. I also came upon a book of physics. That knocked me over completely! How remarkable! We can make our own snow! We can also create thunder! Lacking knowledge of mathematics, I skipped over the figures and the other algebraic symbols just as a Polish melamed skips the grammar in the commentaries of the medieval Rabbi Rashi.

...Oh, God, how infinite the world is! And how infinitely varied! How much spirit! How much wisdom there is in this world of ours!

But, suddenly: "Everything, after all," as Hartmann said, "is matter."

"No free will!" (There were dozens of pamphlets on this subject.) And to top it all, Karl Vogt said: "The brain produces thought as if it were another limb." How amazing!

Something in me congealed, and something within me died. I didn't believe any more "In the beginning, God created the Heaven and the Earth." I didn't believe any longer in Divine metaphysics. I didn't believe any longer that there was a heaven. The blue that we see is only one of the limits of human vision. There is no reward and no punishment for one's acts in life. Man has no free will; he has no way out!

But, with whom could I talk about such things? To whom could I lay bare my astounded heart? In whose ear could I pour my cries of anguish over the disturbance of my mind and the desert in my soul? With the people around me? I was speechless in their presence. And, for what I had read, I had no words in Yiddish to express. I attempted to talk to myself, but this didn't succeed.<sup>6</sup>

#### On Education:

(Also: About the value of Hebrew and Yiddish and the vernacular)

(From "Education")

Our program is education. We want to educate our people. We want to transform fools into sages, fanatics into enlightened human beings, idlers into useful, decent workers, who live by labor and thereby benefit the entire community.

Our enemies speak of all Jews as parasites, criminals, rascals. Our detractors say that the Jewish brain is a rotten weed, the Jewish heart is made of flint, the Jewish skin is in a state of decay, and all our limbs are crooked and lame.

Our chauvinists, on the other hand, maintain that Israel is God's only beloved child, that his cradle is faith, his pillow is trust, his swaddling-clothes are parchments from Solomon's Temple.

We simply say: Jews are human beings just like all others. We have our good qualities and we also have our faults. We are not Gods and we are not devils, but merely human beings. We hold

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<sup>6</sup> I.L. Peretz, My Memoirs, trans. Fred Goldberg (New York: Citadel Press, 1964), pp. 179-187.

that human beings need education, need to learn unceasingly, need to grow daily in wisdom, goodness, and refinement....<sup>7</sup>

We need education. Education means light and clarity. We want to sift our cultural treasures and distinguish between what is ours and what is alien to us and, above all, what is good and what is bad.

It is not our aim to educate the few and to call upon all the others to accept them as authorities. We want to educate the entire people, men, women, and children. Let each person see, feel, and understand.

Our God is close to everything. Our Torah is no longer in heaven, waiting for a Moses to bring it down to earth. Learning must be open and easily available to all.

We want to educate the people. We write Yiddish because we have about three million people who understand Yiddish only, but we do not regard Yiddish as sacrosanct.

We do not want to shut ourselves up in a ghetto voluntarily. Assuming the greatest possible emigration, subsidized on the grandest scale, several million Jews will still have to continue living among other peoples and will still have to engage in business and social relations with them. These millions of Jews must be citizens in the lands of their domicile; they must participate in the life of the people in whose midst they remain.

We have strong sympathy with the adherents of the Hebrew revival, insofar as they aim to spread a knowledge of Hebrew literature and to encourage Hebrew writers, etc.

We want every Jew to know Hebrew, so that he does not forget the Bible. The Bible is the treasure of our faith, of our nationality, of our ethics. We must see to it that every Jew has the Bible not only on his book-shelf but also in his hand, heart, and mind. We want to live on forever, but we cannot foresee what will happen unto all eternity. Times change, days and nights alternate. Tomorrow we may be facing new and greater tragedies. We shall then need the Bible to give us strength and courage.

It is not enough that our ethics have stood on a higher plane for thousands of years. Each one of us must feel and know why and in what respect our ethics are superior. It is not enough for us to remain Jews because we were born Jews, because we were reared as Jews, or because our rabbis and religious leaders tell us that it is good to be a Jew. We want everyone to act on the basis of firm convictions, not on the basis of hearsay... We want everyone of us to know what the lofty ideals, the concept of humanity, the ethical doctrines are for which we are sacrificing ourselves.

Hebrew has an additional value for us:

An individual is not a free single dot in the universe. He is a ringlet in the net which is spread over a certain spot on the earth. The net is his generation. A human being is also a

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<sup>7</sup> Sol Liptzin, Peretz (New York: Yiddish Scientific Institute YIVO, 1947), p. 328.

ringlet in the infinite chain of generations which reaches back to the Patriarch Abraham and extends onward to the end of time.

The Hebrew language, which Jews in all lands understand, is the belt which holds together all the ringlets and prevents their falling apart. It is the cement which binds together our scattered units.

The Hebrew language also holds together the ringlets in the chain of time. It links us with Moses and the Prophets of old, with the creators of the Talmud and with all the great luminaries that once shone in our firmament.

The Hebrew language knits us with the pyramid-builders, with the warriors who shed their blood in defense of Jerusalem's walls, with the martyrs whose last words at the stake were Shma Yisroel.

To forget the Hebrew language means to forget the Books of Moses, the Prophets, our history. It means to tear ourselves away, a solitary branch, from the trunk of Judaism, to rot a while, and to disappear.

We cannot, however, get along solely with Hebrew...

As Jews we must know Hebrew, but as educated people, as living active human beings, we must also know the language of the land. Hebrew is the tongue of our religion and nationality but we also need the tongue of the state we dwell in, the tongue of our general education and of our daily affairs.

To conduct business in Hebrew and to study the Bible in the vernacular are both equally stupid procedures. We must know two languages; such is our fate in exile; such is our need as long as we are scattered and dispersed among other nations. Why then do we need Yiddish as a third language?

This question is answered by the reality about us. The third language exists. Three million people speak it. If we want to educate these three million Jews, we cannot wait until they acquire a thorough knowledge of other tongues...Whosoever wants to understand the Jewish people, whosoever wants to teach them, must be able to read and write Yiddish... No language is holy per se; no language is good or bad in itself. Language is a means whereby human beings communicate with each other and whereby the educated influence the uneducated.<sup>8</sup>

#### On Galuth:

(From "Education")

Although we Jews are, by nature, like other peoples, nevertheless we do somehow behave differently, because our historic experience has made us different. We have had as our schoolmaster--the Galuth.

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<sup>8</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, pp. 330, 332, 334.

We owe a great deal to the Galuth, a great many virtues but also a great many defects. In the millennial struggle for survival, especially in former ages when all other peoples expended their strength on murder, destruction, and oppression, we concentrated our forces on the one objective of survival: to hold out, to endure beyond the temporary hardships. Every force grows and expands to the point where it comes up against a greater force and then it bursts like a bubble. Our force will not encounter any force greater than it has already encountered in the past. This explains why so many peoples perished, while we survive and will continue to live on and on.

Through our exile, our conscience has been clear, our Jewish conscience has not been responsible for a single drop of other people's blood. If the fanaticism of other groups bespattered with mud our flag, we washed it clean with our own blood.

But just because we are in Galuth, just because we are eternally unhappy guests forced to eat at the tables of other peoples, we aspire all the more toward one world, humanity is our holiest ideal, and sheer egoism compels us to the purest love of mankind as a whole. For, we rightly feel that as long as universal love does not triumph over envy, hatred, discord, and war, we shall not prosper. Hence, our constant prayer is for peace on earth; our hearts are like a sponge, receptive to all the newest humanitarian ideas; and our sympathy goes out to all the unfortunate, all the exiled, all the oppressed. We have been truly dubbed apostles of mercy.

Moreover, since nobody wants to care for our interests and we ourselves have always had to provide for our needs, since we have constantly lived among enemies and were never sure of the morrow, and since our means of sustenance were ever scanty, we gradually became accustomed to worrying, thinking, and saving, we learned to keep a clear head, to husband our resources, and to grow on cliffs without rain or dew.

Besides, since we had to battle with our minds, solely with our minds, and never with our hands, we have become more spiritualized and more delicate...<sup>9</sup>

#### Call to Intellectuals: Now and in the Future Assimilation is not the Way

(From "Education")

Wherever Providence may place us, wherever in the wide world we may have to live and work, education is the basis, the only source from which better years can flow for us. We must, therefore, go to the masses of our people. We must educate them. We must enlighten them. We must warm the heart of every Jew and put into his hands the means to live as a thinking human being.

Education has no foes save fools.

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<sup>9</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, pp. 328, 330.



Education is our goal, and we ask all truly cultured persons to help us educate the masses.

Don't assume, Jewish intellectuals, that you are doing your duty, by working for a greater entity, for so-called humanity-at-large.

Humanity-at-large does not exist. Cultural groups, distinct peoples, differing civilizations are now the actors on the stage of the world.

We do not believe in Volapuk or Esperanto. We too hope for a common humanity but we shall never attain to it your way. We shall never get to it by destroying individual languages, or by annihilating separate peoples, or by extirpating differing civilizations. We want rather to enrich languages, national traits, civilizations by additional common treasures until there shall evolve out of these various units one world-culture, a universal tongue, the larger humanity.

The future is a crucible in which all metals will melt and a Golden Age will emerge. Not the Golden Age of the original Garden of Eden, before man ate of the Tree of Knowledge and of which Rousseau dreamed, but rather the Golden Age of which Isaiah prophesied: "And the whole world will be filled with the knowledge of God, as the seas is filled with water. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation nor shall man know war any longer."

We Jews have not suffered these thousands of years in order now to forget our own civilization. We want to and we have to continue our way of life, so that we may later unite with the company of mankind as equal partners with equal rights and equal shares.

We have our ideas, our concepts, our peculiar humor, our distinct approach to universal problems--help us in our growth!

In exile we have become congealed, frozen, petrified. Our culture needs thawing and revivifying.

You intellectuals, who have worked hitherto in foreign fields, you are to blame if our own acres are overgrown with weeds and thorns. There is no lack of hands elsewhere, but we, alas!, are sorely in need of hands. You have until now been active under foreign masks and hence many a person is unaware of our role in the world of science and scholarship. Our people had to become intellectually bankrupt because our intellectuals labored solely for foreign peoples but no foreigner labored for us.

You are flowers that came to bloom too soon on the field of humanity. Before the season for flowers of your species arrives, the frost will have nipped you, the snow covered you, the wind uprooted you.

Individuals cannot flow into the ocean of humanity--only peoples!

Come back to your own people; be for it a pillar of clouds by day and a pillar of flame by night; lead it and guide it but do not run ahead and do not abandon it in the desert.

You are lighting a fire beneath the open sky, while your own family in your own house is freezing or is suffocating with smoke.

As long as there is no universal system of education for mankind-in-general, then each individual is the product of his specific national entity. Though he be removed from his ethnic group as a suckling babe, his brain already contains in embryonic dormant form the hereditary talents which will afterwards awaken and be developed. He will bear the traces of his former origin unto the tenth generation.

No matter what language you speak, no matter what pearls stream from your lips, no matter what ideas you propound, your eloquence is Jewish eloquence, your wit is essentially Galuth-wit, your intellectual acumen is reminiscent of Talmudic sagacity.

Meyerbeer cannot escape the Kol Nidre melody. It meanders through his music. Heine and Borne are Jews in their every expression, in their every jest, and in their earnestness.

You belong to us. Why not tend our vineyard?

Humanity is still in its cradle. What you whisper in its ear today, it will not remember later on, for it will then be speaking a different vocabulary.

Help to educate your own poor, unhappy people!...Don't cast them aside! The Jewish people have tremendous vitality, a wealth of energy. They are the bearer of a civilization which the world can neglect only to its own hurt, of ideas which can greatly enrich mankind.

The Jewish people are an eternal flower. By day, when the sun shines, when the human spirit progresses, this flower revives and unfolds its petals. When dark night comes, however, it shuts its petals, folds up, and is hardly distinguishable from the common weed. The sun, on reappearing, needs along time to recognize the flower; and the flower needs an equally long time to become aware of the shining orb. Overnight the flower has become covered with dust and dirt and the light rays do not penetrate so easily.

Help the people to recognize the sun's rays as early as possible!<sup>10</sup>

(From "Our Platform")

The time has come for our intellectuals to realize their responsibility to our people. Working for one's own hearth and kinsmen does not mean abandoning the banner of humanity-at-large. Today everybody must plow, sow, and cultivate his own bit of land, although--or rather because--we hope for a morrow in which there will be a common granary for mankind. To this granary all will bring their grain, their entire produce, and form this

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<sup>10</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, pp. 334, 336, 338.

granary each person will be fed alike, without regard to his ancestry or the color of his skin...

We believe that the thunderstorms will pass away and the time will come when the earth will give us its strength and the heaven its warmth and light. We do not want our people to stand aside at harvest time and to weep over lost years on the day of rejoicing our to beg for alien bread to which will cling the sweat and toil of alien peoples.

We also want to bring a bit of corn and wheat into the common granary. We also want to be partners, junior partners, but not beggars.

We want the Jew to feel that he is a human being, participating in all common human activities, living and striving like a human being, and --if insulted, reacting to insults like a human being!

This is our objective. For this goal we ask help of the genuine intellectuals!<sup>11</sup>

(From "Advice to the Estranged")

## I

### Times Change

...There are alternating periods of attraction, of pushing towards each other, and periods of retreat, of mutual repulsion.

There are alternating historical periods: thesis and antithesis.

In periods of attraction, general humanitarian feelings develop. Hearts spin the golden threads of common human ideals and weave the web of common human interests.

In periods of repulsion each people retreats into itself, seeks solitude, takes stock of its own spiritual resources, digs into the deepest layers of its soul for buried treasures, works on its own internal growth, develops its own specific traits, spins and weaves the garment of its own intimate national life.

Thesis and antithesis! What is the synthesis?

Humanity of the future, consisting of free, independent, and culturally differentiated peoples.

This future is remote. The historic process of mutual attraction and repulsion will last a long time. The cycles are speeding up but, even so, they are still of considerable duration and human life is brief, so very brief.

A human being, whose short life with its short memories is contained within a single moment of history, regards such a moment as eternal. If this period comes to an end during his lifetime and if he himself is incapable of changing his modes of thought and his habits of reacting, then this fossilized individual wants to prolong the existing historic moment by force. He cannot succeed! Human hands are too weak to arrest the wheel of time. Such a person, therefore, sits down, closes

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<sup>11</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, p. 340.

his eyes, and refuses to look at the changes that, despite his own will, take place all around him. He sits with folded hands and dreams the dream of his generation with its obsolete thesis.

This is the position in which you, assimilationists, find yourselves. Now it is rumored that you have at last awakened and opened your eyes. Now you want to work with us.

This is our triumph!

We have been aware for some time that the springtide in the relations between peoples is over and gone, and that winter is in the air. Evil winds are its harbingers. And so we have hastened home.

The gusts of winter will soon be in full blast and there is work for all hands. Walls must be sealed, the roof repaired, windows inspected, fuel stored, lights held in reserve, and -- bread! We have been active for some time in our own workshop.

You remained in the houses of others; you tarried in the halls of strangers; you followed in the footsteps of foreigners.

You found their homes so bright, so rich, and our home so dark, so poor.

You, therefore, lived for them, worked for them, until they hinted to you that you were not welcome and that they did not need your help. You thereupon dispersed, in the hope that the fewer there were of you in one spot, the more likelihood was there of your being tolerated.

If two of you found yourself in the same place, one got away from the other. Two in one spot at one time might be more than the others would welcome. If one of you happened to look into a mirror and to see his own face there, he jumped aside, he did not recognize his own mask, he thought there was another person in his way.

But even the single individual was felt to be superfluous and no knives or forks were set for him at the table of the others. Coughing failed to attract their attention. Then you moved to one side, sat down in an obscure corner, closed your eyes, dreamed your day-dreams, and drowsed off.

Now you have awakened!

You want to come back! You want to work with us!

This is our triumph. But we, the victors, shall not put our foot on your necks; we shall not close our doors to you. There is no lack of work for you in our workshop. We shall admit you as one of us, but we shall watch you carefully. We shall make sure that you do not sow the wrong seed-mixture, that you do not spin and weave threads of diverse qualities, that you do not introduce into our midst foreign contraband.

With us this is now a time for spiritual accounting and stock-taking, for holy work; and all hands that participate must be clean.

Times change! Formerly there was jubilation when one of our estranged returned to our midst. We pointed to him with pride and we held him up for all to see.

We are no longer so poor!



If you want to take from us, we shall gladly let you have of our own, our warmth, our intimacy.

If you want to give to us, however, we should like to know what you are giving. Is it gold or is it spurious currency? Times change!

## II HOME-COMING

Are we correct in assuming that you are coming back because of homesickness, because you have become conscious of your duties to the people of your origin, because you want to renew your severed bonds with your relatives, brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers? If you really want to return, then do so in all honesty....

Come, see, hear, learn, study, and, until you have amassed knowledge of our ways, maintain silence!...

Don't come back to preach to us the ideas of others and to plant in our midst the culture of others. We say, all roads lead to the ideal man, but each people has its own specific road. You say, let us change roads, let us exchange cultural values? We want to develop our own hearth and worship at our altar in our own way. You ask us to throw out our own hearths and to borrow the fire of strangers for our altar.

We shall not stop up your loud mouths. But we should like to give you the following advice:

If you compare, do so honestly. If you talk of exchanging, then use honest weights and measures and place comparable goods on the two sides of the scale.

Take equivalents for your comparative evaluation!...

If you speak of superstitions, compare our Kaddish and our religious provisions for the souls of the dead with the methods in use among others.

Or take our Gehenna, our post-mortem penal institution, with its maximum sentence of twelve months, and compare it with the eternal hell that others hold out as a possible prospect.

Perhaps, you don't like our Prayer-Book? Let us see what is in it.

"May awe of Thee, O God, cover over all Thy works and fear of Thee over all that Thou hast created! May all join in unison to do Thy will with all their heart!:

These are the prayers of a Jew. Have you more beautiful prayers to offer?

What does a Jew ask for when he recites his daily prayers? Peace, and may there be no shedding of human blood! Justice, and may evil pass away like smoke and the rule of wantonness disappear from the earth!

Are your prayers better?

A Jew waits for Messiah to come and to redeem the world from fear and pain, from the cataclysmic conflicts between rich and poor. All shall enjoy the earth. This means, in popular



imagination, that bread and clothes shall grow, ready-made, on trees.

Do you have more winged ideals?

Did you ever compare our folksongs with those of others? Or, our folktales with those, for example, of the Grimm Brothers? Do you find among us, as you do find among them, songs and tales of robber-heroes, sly deceivers, and seven-league boots?

You want to compare laws?

Do compare our Sabbath, our day of rest for all. God and man, lord and slave and cattle, with their religious equivalent, their Sunday. Do compare our ancient laws on how to treat strangers with the laws in force today, in your vaunted twentieth century, among the freest and most humanitarian peoples, whom you are holding up as models.

I have stressed those cultural items which you ask us to discard and which we rather select for further development, those cornerstones which we put down as a foundation for our cultural sanctuary, those sparks which we gather and fan into a brilliant fire.

Are you serious about an exchange? Will we not be getting the poorer bargain?...

A final bit of advice to all assimilationists:

If you want to talk to our people, talk with less arrogance!

Respect for an ancient people, yes, respect for the most ancient of peoples! No less than others was this people able to conquer and govern a land and defend it to the last drop of blood against the heroic armies of world-powers. Yes, it could do so better and more gloriously than all of them. And even afterwards, it produced a long, long chain of generations of warriors who continued to battle for holy convictions to the last drop of blood.

Respect for a people whose history is the only tragedy of world-wide, heroic proportions, a history of unceasing self-sacrifice and of extreme martyrdom for an idea!

No wonder that you, frivolous worldly individuals, left us: you deserted those who preach the joy of living and are forced to endure suffering and you escaped to those who preach suffering and live a life of joyous abandon....

Like black ravens, you now come and croak to us or our decline, but you do not terrify us.

We heard your kind in Egypt, Persia, Assyria, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, and ever since. We are accustomed to such talk.

Preach what you will. The wind carries sound. But preach with respect!

If you do not want to suffer with our people, you need not do so. If you cannot love our people, it can get along without your love. But don't fail to respect it!

Bow your frivolous heads before the eternal warrior, the eternal people!

Bow your heads deep, deep, to the very ground!<sup>12</sup>

On Revolution and Revolutionary Movements  
and the Jewish People:<sup>13</sup>

(From "Hope and Fear")

My heart is with you.

My eye cannot have its fill of your flaming flag. My ear never tires of listening to your sonorous song.

My heart is with you. Sated should every man be and his home flooded with light. Free should every man be, free to fashion his life, free to choose his work.

When you clench your fists at those who would stifle the free word in your throat and still the burning protests on your lips--I rejoice; I pray to God to sharpen your teeth. Yea, when you march upon Sodom ready to rend and tear, my soul is with you. Sureness of your victory fills me with warmth and makes me drunk as with old wine.

And yet...

And yet I have my fear of you.

I fear the oppressed who are victorious lest they turn into oppressors, and every oppressor sins against the human spirit.

Is there not already talk among you that humanity must march like an army at the front and that you will beat for it the drum to keep it in step and pace?

And yet, humanity is not an army.

The stronger forge to the van, the more sensitive feel more deeply, the prouder wax taller--will you not, I ask, cut down the cedars lest they outgrow the grass?

Will you not spread your wings to enfold the mediocre? Will you not shield with your arms the indifferent? Will you not protect merely the gray, equally shorn herd?

\*

I have my fear of you.

As victors, you could turn into bureaucrats, doling out to each his bit as to the poor in a poorhouse, apportioning to each his work as to the imprisoned in a prison-pen. Then you would annihilate the creator of new worlds--the free human will; you

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<sup>12</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, pp. 342, 344, 346, 348, 350.

<sup>13</sup> Both essays that follow were written after the Russian Revolution of 1905, which aroused great enthusiasm among many Jews. Liptzin, Peretz, p. 18.

would stop up the purest well of human happiness--individual initiative--the power of the one to face thousands, to stand up to people and generations. You would mechanize, yea macadamize life.

You would be busy with regimenting, recording, filing, and estimating, with prescribing how often the human pulse may beat, how far the human eye may see, how much the human ear may hear, and what dreams the longing heart may indulge in.

\*

With real joy I see you tear down the walls of Sodom. But my heart trembles lest you build on its ruins a new, worse Sodom--more cold, more gloomy!

True, there will be no homes without windows but the souls will be shrouded in mist.

True, all bodies will be well-fed, but spirits will go hungry.

True, no wail of woe will be audible, but the eagle--the human spirit--will stand with clipped wings at the same trough beside the cow and ox.

Justice, which led you on the thorny bloody road to victory, will leave you and you will not even notice it: in that respect victors and rulers are blind and you will be victors and rulers; you will sink into injustice and you will not even feel the morass under your feet, for every ruler feels sure of his footing as long as he has not fallen.

You will build prisons for those who will stretch out their hand to point out the pit into which you are sinking. You will cut from the mouths the tongues that warn you of those who will come after you in order to annihilate you and your injustice.

Cruelly will you defend the equal rights of the herd to the grass under their feet and to the salt above their heads, and your foes will be the free individual, the savior, the poet, the artists, and all who strive to ascend beyond man.

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Whatever happens, happens in space and time.

Space is filled with what has already happened, the existing, the firmly established, and therefore the fossilized and the petrified, the now that should and must perish.

Time is change, transformation, evolution. Time is eternal birth, eternal sprouting, eternal blossoming, eternal tomorrow.

And when the morrow, toward which you all aspire, will have become no longer the morrow but the now, you will be the defenders of what is, the defenders of what was, the defenders of the withered past, of the lifeless forms of yesteryear. You will tread under foot the buds of the dawning morrow, you will destroy its blossoms, you will pour streams of icy water upon the flowering heads of prophecy, vision, and new hope.

Today is reluctant to die. Every sunset is bloody red.

I hope, I pray for your victory, but I fear and tremble at your victory.

You are my hope; you are my fear.<sup>14</sup>

(From "The Day")

My people have been chosen for shame and scorn, wounds and suffering, beatings and pain. But thereby, they are driven to the outermost bounds of human justice, to the last milepost on the road to human freedom, to the final victory over physical power and physical oppression. The so-called majority, on the other hand, in whose name you speak and which you want to make happy, is only another of the many forms of oppression. My people's brow has been branded with the mark of Cain and thereby my people are cursed to wander eternally, cursed but also blessed. In the hands of the Jew, the reddest of all flags has been placed forcibly and he has been told: 'Go, go on and on, with all liberators, with all fighters for a better tomorrow, with all destroyers of Sodoms. But never may you rest with them. The earth will burn under your feet. Pay everywhere the bloodiest costs of the process of liberation, but be unnamed in all emancipation proclamations, or be rarely or scarcely mentioned. Go and bleed further! You are the weakest and the least of the nations and you will be the last for redemption. As long as a single stone of the old walls is left standing, it will rest on your shoulder and weigh you down. As long as blood is shed anywhere or a will suppressed or a wing clipped, it will be your blood, your will, your wing. You will be the last to be freed, on the day when man will rise above the earthly, all-to-earthly, when human worms will be transformed into human eagles.' Don't be so proud of your red flag, revolutionists, it is but a weak reflection of the bloody flag in the hands of the Chosen People--of the people, cursed, and blessed to be the last of the redeemed, to be the eternally bleeding, highest souring expression of the divine in life. I go with my people. My soul is inflamed by the glory of their flag and I cry out: 'Jews of all lands and states, unite! Long and dangerous is the road. Close ranks!'"<sup>15</sup>

On Suffering/ On Finding Meaning in Existence:

(From "Poets, Books, and Readers")

I

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<sup>14</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, pp. 278, 280, 282.

<sup>15</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, pp. 18-19.



We want to speak about poets, about the tragedy of man, and about the last act of this tragedy: death or salvation....

Other peoples have the sun behind them; they proceed from evening into the night. The ancient Greeks and Romans tell of a golden age in the past, which was followed by one of copper and one of iron. Modern peoples also look back to a savior who redeemed them. Our Messiah alone belongs to the future. He still has to make his appearance, and not solely for the benefit of his own people. The whole world must be judged and redeemed. The entire world must be liberated from the tragedy that now inheres in human existence.

## II

The tragedy of human existence is to be found in Koheleth.

After experiencing everything, he still lives on without knowing why. He can no longer love; he has lost all desire for wines and ointments. His palate no longer craves aught, his eye has nothing new to see, his ear nothing new to hear; and still he lives on. Life is drawing to a close, and all that he has gathered and accumulated he will leave behind him...

Moreover, he has lived not because he wanted to and is departing not because he wants to die. The will which brought him here and leads him away is beyond his control. In his heart was implanted desire for the world, the urge to build, beautify, increase. But it was not for his own benefit nor advantage, since he goes away and leaves all behind for others. He is forgotten and those others, who will come after him, will again desire, again work, build, beautify, increase, and again go away. Their successors, in turn, will make use of everything and then they too will depart and be forgotten...

All that was will be. All that departed will return. Man alone departs and never returns. He alone pursues a mirage, beautiful when hoped for, valueless when attained. Life without a goal or purpose is horrible. There must be some goal, purpose, or logic to whatever is eternal but this is known only to the Ruler of the Universe and not to mere man. Man is exploited. Man is deceived. On the threshold between being and non-being, during the transition, after having experienced everything and before entering on death. Koheleth-Solomon is overcome by an overwhelming fear of the Eternal, fear of the Ruler, fear of the Exploiter, fear of the Deceiver, fear of the Mater whom, despite his own will, he has had to serve and obey, in the mistaken belief that he was following his own free choice. Man is a slave living in fear of the Eternal!--this is the final terrible conclusion of one who lived for himself, who avoided committing himself to any cause, who had no goal outside of himself, and therefore ended with nothing.

This is the man who loved women but reared no family, because he failed to see in reproduction an aspect of



immortality. He did not believe in reincarnation. He was certain that he was not his father and that he would not be reborn in his son. Sulamith was his amusement, his worldly pleasure, and not his wife, not the mother of his children...

Koheleth is even unlike the earlier Solomon who prayed to God nor for wealth or personal happiness but for the wisdom and the integrity to dispense justice to his people. Such goals are not attained and certainly not outlived. Human beings with such far-reaching objectives do not feel that they have accomplished everything and do not ask why? Koheleth-Solomon is the tragedy of the person who stands alone and has no thought outside of his own desires. He must outlive himself and must end as a brood of winged desires which have bitten into worms and perish together with the worms. Koheleth is the tragedy of the self-centered person. Such a life spells enslavement to fleeting desires and evanescent goals.

### III

If I am a slave born without my will, compelled to live, and doomed to depart upon command, leaving everything behind, why then should I also be condemned to suffering during my brief stay on earth?

"Because you sin!" answers the moralist.

The last words of Koheleth are: "Fear God and keep his commandments!" -- there is a lord above you whom you must serve and who punishes if he is not obeyed.

Job obeyed. Why then did he not escape punishment?

Job obeyed. He had a wife and children, sheep and kine. He led a quiet honest life. Suddenly this life was destroyed.

The Book of Job depicts for us a happy prosperous person, who had seven sons and three daughters, seventy thousand sheep, thirty thousand camels, five hundred pair of oxen, five hundred asses, etc. It depicts a man greater than all the great of his land, and withal a modest, pious, god-fearing man who eschewed evil, and yet...this man loses everything and, in addition, is stricken from head to foot with boils and sores. The great, famous, pious Job becomes the smallest, poorest, most unfortunate of human beings.

Why does Job suffer?

Koheleth is the tragedy of life. Job is the tragedy of suffering in life.

Why do we suffer?

Man is a reasoning creature. He sees that his own acts are purposeful. He tries to be honest and moral. He cannot attribute his own insufficiencies to the deity who created him and the entire world. God must be just. If God created pain and suffering, then these must be just and well-deserved. Pain and suffering are possible only as punishment for sin. The Hebrew mind cannot view them in any other light. The Greeks see in the phenomena of life the effects of gods disporting themselves or

quarreling. The Persians have Ormuzd and Ahriman, the former a god of light, life, and happiness, and the latter a god of darkness, death, and suffering. The world is an arena for the struggle between two deities and therefore a conglomeration of light and shade, life and death, joy and pain, love and hate...

The Hebrews did not merge or mingle. Eliezer undertook a distant journey to bring to Isaac a wife of kindred flesh and blood. In Egypt the Hebrews lived in Goshen segregated from others. In Palestine all foreign peoples were to be destroyed and the Hebrews were to have no contacts with these outsiders. While the Second Temple was being built, all the foreign women brought from exile and all the children born of them were banished. Minute infiltrations of foreign blood, as in the case of Delila or a beautiful captive now and then, were unimportant. Single drops of foreign blood were assimilated. On the whole the Hebraic tribe retained its purity. The children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were a people that lived apart, a people of unmixed breed, adhering to a single God, who evolved from a deity of a family, a tribe, a nation, into a universal God.

A conflict between divinities thus became an impossibility. A single God is the source of good and evil, light and darkness, joy and pain, love and hate, life and death. Since the one and only God blesses and curses, he must bless the good and curse the wicked. Since the same God rewards and punishes, he must reward the pious and punish the sinners. Since the same God bestows life and death, he must bestow life upon the righteous and death upon the blasphemers. The Hebrew God is moral. He expelled from Eden because of sin, because of transgressions against his commands. He toppled the tower of Babel and destroyed those who wanted to storm his heaven by force. He flooded with a deluge the entire world when it was steeped in sin. Man is sinful, so sinful that God often regrets that he created man and the world. He regrets that he has to punish. He has to, because he is a righteous God. He would not have destroyed Sodom, if it had contained a single just person. He taught Noah, the most righteous of men, to build an ark in which to survive the deluge. "I do not desire the death of the sinner," he says through the mouth of Ezekiel, "I punish him so that he repent and remain alive." A person satisfied with life reads logic into it. If a person, on the other hand, looks for justice in life and fails to find it, if he sees suffering without sin, pain which he cannot justify as punishment, then he experiences the tragedy of Job.

Koheleth is the tragedy of life, so-called happy life. Job is the tragedy of undeserved, purposeless suffering in life. The final reaction of Koheleth to the problem of existence is unmitigated fear of death, falling on his face before God, and concluding: man knows nothing; he must live and he must die; and as long as he lives, he must obey God's command, because this is all there is to man, this is the purpose for which he was created.

Job's conclusions are not more satisfactory. In Job's dispute with his friends, who seek for some sin in him and do not

find it, who want to justify his suffering as punishment and cannot, God's voice interrupts and God's own answer comes out of the whirlwind. It is an answer which clarifies nothing. It can be summarized as follows: God is great, strong, and eternal. Man is dust in comparison, and dust is all human reasoning. Who was present when God created the world, measured the earth, spread the canopy of heaven and set the stars therein? Who feeds the birds beneath the sky and who provides for the wild beasts in the forests and on the rocks? God must know what he is doing. Hence, fall on your knees before the great Unknown, whose justice is undiscernible and whose wisdom is unfathomable, who may be punishing for sins we know naught of or who may be testing us. If we endure the test, we shall be higher in his grace. Job received back doubly all that he possessed.

The problem of life and suffering is, nevertheless, still unsolved.

#### IV

One generation passes away and another generation comes but the earth abides forever. If man wants to be of the eternal, he must be of the earth. Out of the dust was he fashioned and unto the dust does he return. If he seeks to go beyond the earth, if he builds a tower to scale the heavens, the languages are confused and the builders scattered over the earth. For man must find his fulfillment on earth. He can do so by reproducing himself, by being reborn in his children and children's children. This is his eternity.

To rule over a bit of earth, over a land, is therefore the greatest happiness. To have children and grandchildren, to hope that tribes and peoples will spring from one's loins -- this is the most beautiful dream of eternity....

A person lives not for himself but for his people, for his descendants. Immortality for him means that his family, his tribe, his people, can live eternally here on earth.

Moses, who at God's behest, led the Hebrew people out of Egypt and liberated them from slavery, guided them across the desert to the blessed land and envisaged for them a paradise on earth:

The blessed land of Palestine is to be their Paradise. It will be a land flowing with milk and honey. Man must work on this land but work is not to be a curse for him. He is to have Sabbaths and holidays on which to rest. Not the master alone shall rest but his household as well, the servants, the cattle, and the earth. The earth is, in addition, to have a Sabbatical year. Every seventh year shall it be free.

Every man is to do his own work and have his share of the soil, which is to be divided equally among all. For, the earth is God's earth. God sets the boundaries between peoples. The land flowing with milk and honey he has assigned to his chosen people and no person can cede his share of God's earth to



another. Every Jubilee-Year it must return to its rightful owner, to whom it was originally allotted by God's hand.

God's people shall be free, owing allegiance solely to their deity and to the laws proclaimed by him. Between God and his people the tribe of Levi shall act as intermediary. The Levites shall serve the Priests and the Priest shall serve God in the Temple and interpret the Law unto the people. He shall teach the people, answer their questions, conduct their sacrifices, intercede for the, and pronounce forgiveness for their sins--but only their sins against God. A priest may not forgive sins of man against man, unless the person who has been injured, robbed, or deceived receives full restitution and compensation. The tribe of Levi, which is to act as intermediary between God and his people, is therefore to have no right to own property.

The earth belongs to those who work it. The spiritual aristocracy, unlike the Egyptian upper class, will be unable to despoil the people of its property. Nor will any ruler, king, or court be able to enslave the populace.

God is the supreme ruler. No abyss between rich and poor can develop because every fiftieth year the land reverts to its original owner, every seventh year all granaries are open for the entire people, and during the intervening years provision is made for the poor and needy. Even if a person's fortunes decline so that he must hire himself out for work, he may serve only six years and on the seventh is again free of servitude.

All are equal, all are brothers.

The original inhabitants, who sinned before God, are to be expelled. Amalek, the worst of these, is to be exterminated.

One God, one Law, one people, and one land. The stranger is also to enjoy liberty and fraternity. Love your neighbor as yourself and love the stranger. Remember that you were once a stranger in Egypt. Let there be the same law for all. The stranger is to be excluded only from the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb, for he was not redeemed from Egypt.

Thou shalt not steal, kill, covet, avenge, or hate. If your brother becomes impoverished, assist him. If your friend's donkey strays, lead it back to him. Be merciful to widows and orphans. "I am the God of widows and orphans," saith the Lord.

Earth, yes -- but on earth justice, holiness, brotherhood! The curse is to be removed from work. Suffering is to be reduced to a minimum. Life is to be sanctified and irradiated by love.

Eden on earth!

## V

Thus did Moses dream his dream of an earthly paradise for his people.

He never set foot thereon.

For forty years he led his people in the wilderness, so that the servile generation that toiled in Egypt might die out and he could bring a free people into this land. But only in the dim

distance could he discern this land that he envisaged in his Utopian dream.

All of his dream was not realized. The part that was realized did not long endure.

Amalek was not exterminated. The seven original Canaanite peoples were not all expelled. The chosen people did not live separate and apart.

God was not their sole ruler and the priest did not long function solely as intermediary between him and his people.

All did not obtain a share of the earth.

There was no end to the wars against the Philistines and the other tribal groups in the land.

The Hebraic people demanded a king to conduct their wars. The king brought in his wake a royal court, military heads, civil war, and other social ills: poverty, servility, hunger, distress.

The boundaries between properties were shifted and the larger estates swallowed up the smaller ones. Families were deprived of land and divorced from the soil. The priests became fat and dissolute. Barterers found their way into the Temple. Holiness was desecrated. Unity was dissolved. Blood and disgrace covered the Palestinian earth.

Meanwhile, surrounding nations waxed strong by the power of the sword and little Palestine became a bloody thoroughfare between warring armies of foreign nations and, before long, the arena for their battles. The Hebraic people were driven forth, exiled from their earthly paradise.

## VI

It is not only individually--peoples too cannot live merely for themselves. The whole world must be redeemed. If justice means redemption from suffering and pain, then justice must come to reign over the entire world. The prophet replaces the effeminate king and the fat priest as the leader of the people's soul. The prophet undertakes to preach to the whole world in the name of God and his justice. The amulet that was once the God of a family, the God of Abraham, and that afterwards rose to the rank of a people's God, evolving from a God merely of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to a God of Israel, now loses his own name, whereby he was distinguished from other Gods of other peoples and other lands. Human lips are forbidden to utter his name, for he has been elevated and enthroned as the deity of the universe. Such a deity is in no need of a name, since he is the only God and his rule extends not alone to a single land. His law applies not merely to one people. The prophet speaks in his name not to a single tribe but to all tribes. If the prophet refuses to go to far off Nineveh in order to warn a foreign people of impending punishment, if he flees from God in a ship, God's wrath pursues him, endangers the ship, causes the prophet to be thrown overboard and the fish to swallow him.



"All who speak in the name of the Lord are chosen," says the prophet. Chosen is the Hebraic people for the one purpose of proclaiming God's word to the world. Chosen is Zion so that from there the Law shall go forth unto the world. Chosen is Jerusalem so that from it shall spread God's word unto the nations.

If, therefore, the Hebraic people are scattered and dispersed, if they suffer in exile, the Divine Presence accompanies them and suffers everywhere with them. Canaan is too small for God's children. The Hebraic land is to spread through all lands!

If God is the God of the universe and his people a world people, dispersed to all ends, then the Redeemer must come not to one land alone but to all lands, the Messiah must come for the entire world.

Here ends the dream of mere earth, of blessings and curses on earth. Here we verge on heaven itself.

Here begins the greater dream of everlasting life, heavenly paradise, resurrection.<sup>16</sup>

#### Jewishness: Journey Toward Redemption:

(From "Escaping Jewishness")

Jewishness is the Jewish way of looking at things.

More precisely, Jewishness is the universal spirit as it is embodied in the Jewish soul.

Jewishness is that which makes the Jews, in eras of national independence, feel free and enables them to fashion institutions as embodiment of their national creative will. Jewishness is, in such times, joy, ecstasy, zestful living.

Jewishness is that which creates, in troubled eras, institutions for defense, for prevention of danger, for protecting itself and its members. Jewishness is, in such times, a call to battle and a challenge to heroism.

Jewishness is that which must, in times of dependence and weakness, retreat into its shell, conserve its resources, endure in silence, and wait for better days. Then Jewishness is hope and pain, messianic dreams and other-worldliness. Then it demands real sacrifice.

This Jewishness, for which we demand sacrifices, must be clearly and precisely defined.

Formerly people thought that a person was born as a tabula rasa, a blank slate on which life with its stylus made imprints. Today we know that the individual participates actively in the learning process, that man enters upon the struggle with his environment equipped with a certain heritage, with a certain

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<sup>16</sup> Peretz, On Suffering, pp. 310, 312, 314, 316, 318, 320, 322, 324, 326.

psychic configuration, with a certain will-power, with traits that determine his success or failure in the struggle to existence.

What is true of the individual also holds for the nation.

With what did we enter upon the world arena? What do we want? What cultural thread do we weave into the web of the world? What is our tone in the universal harmony? What will be lacking, if we were lacking?

What is Jewish and what is non-Jewish? In what way do we differ from others?

What must we protect? For what must we sacrifice ourselves? For what must we battle?

What does our life stand for and what would our death signify?

### The Jewish Way

Nomadic blood. A wandering clan in the desert.

Implanted in its blood--honesty and justice. Of these qualities does it fashion its God, a God who accompanies it on all its wanderings and is therefore not formed of wood or stone, a God who moves and lives.

A sublime concept of the deity, a free and breath-taking concept of a boundless, limitless universe.

When the desert is left behind and inhabited lands are traversed, this clan of wanderers cannot mingle with the peoples settled in those lands. There is mutual repulsion. The nomadic clan, therefore, lives apart. Finally, it seeks to escape from tensions and pressures by obtaining a territory of its own.

It has not the art to exterminate the native inhabitants. Honesty, implanted in its blood, does not permit it to erect a fence against outsiders or to make their life difficult. Justice, implanted in its blood, does not permit it to attack and to subjugate other peoples. Hence, it remains a little people in a separate state--a state of priests, a holy people.

In the course of time it succumbed.

This people was, however, the creator of its state and not a mere product of a state. It was the builder of the temple for its God and not a group gathered together haphazardly for common worship at a shrine. It was the architect of the social, cultural, and economic forms in the land and not the product of a land's melting-pot. Hence, this people survives the loss of its independence, its state, its language, its temple, and all its cultural and economic forms. It again sets out on its wanderings over the face of the globe and its God continues to wander with it.

Its former instinctive apprehending of God and the world now becomes a conscious concept of greater clarity. Israel becomes a universal people. The God, who does not abandon it and who suffers exile along with it, becomes a God of the universe. The lands of the diaspora, the entire world, becomes the arena of conflict between the one God and the many gods. The one God will triumph!

The world is not yet free of war and bloodshed, of servitude, exploitation, pain, and oppression, since God is still above the world and has not yet entered into its essence.

The time will come, however, the time must come, God will judge all peoples and cleanse the world, Messiah will appear. We will bring him. We the weakest of peoples! We, God's martyred people! Imprisoned in diverse economic systems, encased in all kinds of social and political structures, suffering under the domination of manifold provincial codes of law, differing local patriotism, foreign arrogance, and superior force, enduring all the disabilities of minority-status and all the torture imposed upon the weak in a world where might is dominant--our people still persists and still remains true to itself.

It retains the remembrance of its ancient state as a golden memory of its youth and it still has as its guiding-star its vision of the messianic world-state of the future. Out of past memories and future hopes it spins its legends and weaves its symbols. Irradiated by unswerving confidence and by holy faith, it never succumbs to despair. When surging billows loom ahead, it bows its head to let them pass and then it raises its head again up to heaven, to its God. If trouble comes, it endures and then forgets easily and quickly. It wants to carry on, to survive its tortures. It wants to experience Messiah or at least the travails foreboding his approach.

Thus does this people live, hope, and keep faith...

Jewish life must burst into blossom again. With the Bible as germinating seed and with folk symbols and folk legends as dew and rain, the field will sprout again, the people will revive, the Jews will rise once more to suffer anew for their truth and will reaffirm their faith in ultimate victory.

The flag of a Jewish renaissance must be raised again, the banner of Messiah, world-judgement, and world-liberation, the symbol of a future free humanity.

This is the mission of the eternal people, the world-people, a mission to be carried through in all phases of Jewish life, by the Jewish home, the Jewish school, the Jewish theatre, the Jewish book, and everything Jewish....

If I enquire into my Jewishness, I do so for my own sake. I seek its goal in the future on the basis of the material in its creative past.

The present, with its formalism and its ossification, I leave out of account. The present is our decadence, our moment of decline.

Just as the judge of the individual man is his ideal of the man-to-come, so the judge of the individual nation is its ideal of its own national future, when its specific stream will flow into the sea of common humanity.

I confront my unique people with its ideal of its national future and I ask: Am I of greater value or of lesser value than others? I know that I am different.

My past tells me: Serve no other Gods save the one and only God. Erect your temple in the midst of your land, in Jerusalem.



Thrice yearly shall you come to the temple to show yourself before God, to offer up your sacrifice, to thank him, to pray to him, and to serve him.

One people, one land, one temple, one law, one God.

Unity everywhere, in every breath and atom of the universe.

No temple and no altar may be erected at any other place and no sacrifices may be made elsewhere even to the one God--upon penalty of death.

The temple is, however, to serve all, all.

The stranger may come and pray. God will listen and accept the sacrifice. Whosoever calls on the name of the one God is numbered among his children. From Zion the law is to go out to all the peoples.

The Jewish national ideal--a world idea.

Do other peoples have it?

Do the Germans, French, English, Russians, and other European peoples have a national world-ideology, a national world-religion, or national world-ideals?

We do have German philosophy, meaning philosophic books written in German for Germans, but not a German philosophic idea for world-happiness.

There are French ideals, but for the French nation only: France is to be great, powerful, adored, and to bask in glory.

There are ideals for England: "I am to be the factory and the whole world my market."

Other nations have similar ideals, every one of the European nations.

They are all so-called Christian nations, but they have neither produced Christianity nor have they been united by it. Christianity was either imposed upon them by force or they may have accepted it voluntarily. It did not spring from their brain. It did not sprout from their blood.

They are peoples who have been subjugated by the church. This superimposed religion, Christianity, swims about on the surface and does not penetrate into the core of their souls. It has no real relation to their daily existence. It is not a social experience. It is merely a faith. It is a key to open up a heaven after death and not a key with which to force open the portals of this life. It is an affair of the other world and does not apply to this earth and to earthly conduct. It is a negation of work and progress here and now.

Christianity is a creed and not an inner urge. It is a denial of this world, a severance from reality, an abdication, a means of redemption from life and not of salvation in life.

It is therefore carried aloft, like a cloak covering the surface of existence. Below this Christian covering, there dominate Roman law, Greek art, European technology.

To these four streams of culture, a fifth is added: the specific nationality, which justifies all crimes against other nationalities in the name of patriotism.

Hence, if a European nation seriously wants to liberate itself, it must first get rid of the clerical covering, the

international church. If such a nation is to progress in its world, it must first renounce the superimposed heaven and the superimposed religion.

We Jews, on the other hand, a people without territory, without a common language, with an urge for culture, yes, even when deprived of culture, we as "a nation--and nothing more" would amount to nothing.

And how easy it is to go away from nothing!

## VI OTHER WAYS

The struggle between us and the others is not academic. It is real.

Only a superficial person can fail to see the connection between cultural eras and a world-ideology.

The world, seen through Jewish eyes, is an organic unity bound together by a common force. It is, therefore, a morally responsible world.

The world, seen through heathen eyes, consists of epileptic, accidental, mysterious, or revealed forces. These forces are not subject to a universal will and are therefore without any moral responsibility.

On the road from heathendom to Judaism, there is much debating and generalizing, until mankind conceives of gods and demi-gods, with the world as a battleground of conflicting divinities. The strongest of these is Jupiter. He emerges as the victor. Nevertheless, each of the other deities retains a voice; each interferes, each in his own time and place, in his own temple and on his special day, lays down the law and his own moral system.

The nearer one comes to Judaism, the more does idolatry disappear outwardly. The divine symbols, carved on wood or cut into stone or painted on walls and on canvas, are destroyed and reduced to dust. The world, however, continues to be ruled by hundreds of legal and moral codes. Not a single national philosophy except the Jewish has attained to unity in all aspects of life.

Not a single other national submits at heart to the one and only God.

Compared to the Jewish concept of the world, all other philosophies are provincial, local, for domestic use only, restricted to home consumption.

Our slogan today is, therefore, renaissance!

Let me utter my word freely, let me work and create cultural values in harmony with my world-view. I, the Jew, gave you so much formerly, let me give you of myself once more.

The battle between us is not restricted to any one place. It is a long time since we left the cradle of our national life. Willingly or unwilling, we became a world-people. The conflict



does not hence rage within any one boundary but is worldwide in scope.

We do not wage war against this people or that or against a coalition of several peoples. We face each other as Jews and Gentiles, Jewish will and Gentile will.

Jews, monotheistic by religion and monistic in their thinking, cannot mingle with others who have not yet attained this level of feeling and thinking. Jewishness cannot submit to a less advanced form of civilization. It must struggle for the right to create a world-culture according to its light.

Scholars, whose training lies outside of the Jewish orb, come to us and offer us gratuitous advice.

For along time our mouths were shut and our hands tied. We could neither talk nor work. We were advised to go to others and to beg crumbs of others. We were told to assimilate. Why set up our own workshop?

If I have my own evaluation of good and evil, they advise me to change my standard of values.

If I fight for my concept of truth, they laugh at my so-called mission.

But the greatest danger to our people now accrues from two groups: those who are too rash in promising and those who succumb too easily to exaggerated pessimism.

The former told us: "Your home is open, tomorrow I'll give it to you!" And when the morrow came and the home was not opened up to us, many fled in despair from our midst, having lost their hope for salvation.

The latter tell us: "What you build in the diaspora is built on quicksand and water, the wind carries it away." Hence, many give up building and turn to foreign cultures and foreign values. When the foreign nationality insists that, as condition of admittance, you acknowledge that the Messiah and Redeemer has already come, you ponder: "Perhaps it would be wiser to abdicate."

## VII CONCLUSION

Now, I am not advocating that we shut ourselves up in a spiritual ghetto. On the contrary, we should get out of such a ghetto. But we should get out as Jews, with our own spiritual resources. We should interchange, give and take, but not beg.

Ghetto is impotence. Cultural cross-fertilization is the only possibility for human development. Humanity must be the synthesis, the sum, the quintessence of all national cultural forms and philosophies.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Liptzin, Peretz, pp. 356, 358, 360, 362, 370, 372, 374, 376, 378.

## Appendix C: Possible Sources of Bontche Shveig

A poor woman came crying to Rabbi Yudele Greidinger and pleaded that the Rabbi visit her husband who is gravely ill and has an important thing to discuss with him. The Rabbi took his two assistants (Shames) and went to see the sick man. But when he opened the door to the room where the man was lying, he started to tremble and started to move away from the entrance. When the Rabbi finally did enter the room, the sick man started to apologize for having called the Rabbi in. But as his life is coming to an end and knowing himself to be a man without learning and who had not done sufficiently good deeds in his lifetime (Myzvehs), he would beg the Rabbi to please -- after his death -- commend him to heaven for some possible good that he might have done... The Rabbi asked the dying man to think hard and remember any good deed he had performed. But the poor man answered that he could not have possibly done any at all, as he was so uncouth that he didn't even know how to pray properly, having been employed all his life as a laborer, a skinner at that, and there never was an opportunity to do good deeds.

"Try and exert your memory," the Rabbi said again, "maybe you still did a good deed without remembering it."

"I do recall a very small one, indeed," the sick man now said, "once when I was going to work -- early in the morning -- I saw a waggon, full with men, women and children going home from a wedding. The driver was obviously drunk and did not hold the reins properly. When they came to the place on the mountain where it starts going down, the horses went into a trot. There was no way to stop them. The people on the waggon saw that they were in danger and started to scream for help. So I decided to do something to help them. And although my life was just as much in danger, I caught the reins and with my shoulder I was holding back the wagon so that the people riding in it could jump off. A minute later the horses gone wild had wrecked the wagon into splinters.

The Rabbi after having heard the dying man's story, asked him -- to come back to him, the Rabbi, in a dream; after he had found out what happened in the "other world" after he, the sick man, had actually died.

Going home with his assistants, the latter asked the Rabbi why he had trembled when he opened the door to the sick man?

"I saw the seven-arm chandelier lighted," the Rabbi answered, "which means that one of the truly pious men, a Tzaddik, is in there..."

The sick man passed away in his due time. And shortly afterwards, he came to the Rabbi in a dream to report to him what had happened at the last Judgment: "His good deeds and his sins were put in the bowls of a huge scale. And the side where his sins were, was just going up, much higher than the one with his good deeds, when -- a horse drawn wagon suddenly came, making straight for the bowl with the good deeds and outweighed, by far,

the bowl with his sins."<sup>1</sup>

(from: J. Berger, "Tzu di Mekorim fun di Folkstimliche Geschichtn" Yivo Bleter (Autumn 1946), vol.28, no.1, pp. 109-110)

Coming back once more to the final episode in the story of Bontche Shweig who had asked (as the ultimate reward) for a 'hot roll with fresh butter'. Menashe Unger has another explanation for its basis in traditional, Hassidic lore: there is a story ascribed to the founder of the Hassidic movement, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov -- who had been telling it for the "moral lesson" it conveyed; according to this story a rich and mighty king instructed his servants to give everyone passing the gates of his palace whatever he desired most ('Whatever his heart will desire'...). Once a poor man passed the palace gates and the servants asked him what his heart desires? "A large loaf of bread and a pot of cooked potatoes", the beggar answered.

This rather modest wish perplexed the servants who went to ask the king what they should do? "Whatever a man enjoys should be given to him", was the king's answer.<sup>2</sup>

(from: Menashe Unger, "Mekorim fun Peretz's Shafin" Yiddish Kultur (March-April 1945), no.3-4, pp. 54-59)

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1 Orenstein, pp. 35-36.

2 Orenstein, p. 37.

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תלמוד בבלי.

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