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Bialik in the Ghettos

DAVID G. ROSKIES

ACITY OF SLAUGHTER? Even street peddlers recognized the Nazi ghettos as the historical embodiment of Bialik's terrible hyperbole: a metaphor made real. "With pale face and extinguished eyes," we read in an eyewitness account of the Warsaw ghetto, a peddler hawks Yiddish books at bargain prices:

"Hello my friend," he accosts someone. "You must buy the book *Hunger* [by Nobel Prize laureate Knut Hamsun], for just 50 groschen.

"And you there, without a home," he turns to someone else.

"You must be from Lublin or Slomatyecz, so why not buy 'The City of Slaughter'?" (Shaynkinder 1941: 99).

Great books were being sold for a song in the ghetto streets and later would be abandoned and recycled for toilet paper. A universal Jewish culture now lay in ruins. Yet a short list of titles might still appeal to those readers living within an unfolding situation of absolute extremity, readers who hungered for an accurate description of their own historical condition. How different were those fortunate Jews in Erets Israel, that tiny handful of Zionist youth who lived at the farthest possible remove from Bialik's poem. While they have been faulted for consistently misreading "Be'ir hahareigah" (Shapira 2005), the same poem was *reread* by the overwhelming majority of world Jewry, who saw themselves living *inside* the poem.

From his knowledge of Yiddish and world literature — his *spiel* includes eight titles and ends with a send-up of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* — one may assume

that the Warsaw book peddler was a member of the intelligentsia. In all the Nazi-occupied ghettos, intellectuals were a protected class, whether as direct recipients of extra food rations (as in Vilna), as staff members of the official ghetto archive (as in Lodz-Litzmannstadt), or as the clientele for a specially earmarked soup kitchen at Leszno 40 in the Warsaw ghetto, run by Rachel Auerbach. Active members of the ghetto intelligentsia were concerned not only with rescuing from destruction what little could be saved but were also preoccupied with trying to create some lasting testament or memorial for the future. Bialik was proof positive that such a creative endeavor was a cultural possibility.

Already in the third month of the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, Chaim Kaplan (ca. 1880–1942) was reminded of Bialik's monumental achievement. "Where is the folk poet of Polish Jewry," Kaplan was prompted to ask, adopting a high rhetorical mode, "who will gather all the tragedy in our lives and perpetuate and guard it in the reliquary of his tears? Poet of the people, where art thou?" (Kaplan 1981: November 30, 1939).

Something of a loner and misanthrope, Kaplan may have despaired of such a poet ever emerging from within the benighted ranks of Polish Jewry. Kaplan, however, penned these words when the war against the Jews had barely begun, when he was still living amid a vast multitude of Jews.

Three years later, after Luba and Ora Lewin were rounded up in the Umschlagplatz and shipped off to die in Treblinka, along with 235,741 Warsaw Jews—German statistics were always so reliable—the bereaved husband and father could still pose the same question.¹ "Will these terrible agonies of the spirit call up a literary response?" wrote Abraham Lewin in his diary on January 9, 1943. "Will there emerge a new Bialik able to write a new Book of Lamentations, a new 'In the City of Slaughter'?"² Lewin (1893–1943), a Hebrew pedagogue and popular historian, was caught a week later, and within days, if not hours, perished in a gas chamber.

Bialik was an obvious source of inspiration for such intellectuals as Kaplan and Lewin, both of whom had been instructors of the Hebrew Bible before the war and used modern Hebrew as their language of most intimate self-expression. (Lewin, it will be recalled, turned to writing Hebrew in the first days of the

Great Deportation.) Such was the unique demographic and cultural landscape of Nazi-occupied Europe, however, that when in the Warsaw, Lodz, and Vilna ghettos there did emerge a major poet who sought a poetic response commensurate with the unfolding catastrophe, he did so not in Hebrew, but in Yiddish. What's more, each of these poets did not set out consciously to emulate Bialik; rather, by reliving the specific historical conditions that had first given rise to Bialik's *Songs of Wrath*, they assumed Bialik's mantle of their own accord.

Through enforced ghettoization, Yiddish was re-territorialized. Never mind that the Judenrat was merely fulfilling the orders of the SS or filling orders for the Wehrmacht. Those who were ingathered inside ghetto walls or were fenced off from the Aryan side by barbed wire felt themselves to be back in the shtetl, where all politics were Jewish politics and the source of all corruption was the Jewish bigwigs. "Jews! Have I got bargains for you!" cries the street peddler of Warsaw. "A complete set of Mendele for next to nothing. Why waste a zloty to get through to [the Judenrat office on] Grzybowska or [the office of the Jewish self-help on] Tlomackie? For the same price, you can have [Mendele's satires] *The Parasite* or *The Communal Tax* in your own home library!" (Shaynkinder 1941: 97). Because radios were banned and typewriters were confiscated, because hunger raged and living conditions were intolerable, cultural life, from highbrow to low, became a form of resistance. Never before had the bond between the artists and the public been more direct and life-sustaining. Even when the repertoire was drawn from the universal fund of European culture and was designed merely as an escape from the surrounding squalor, all cultural life contributed to the survival of the collective (Roskies 1984: 196–224; Cohavi 2001).

The role of Yiddish varied from ghetto to ghetto. While Polish, German, Yiddish, and Hebrew coexisted within the records and writings of the Lodz ghetto archive (Dobroszycki 1984), Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski delivered all his speeches in Yiddish, affecting a high Lithuanian dialect, and the only writers' group within the ghetto were the Yiddish writers who met in the home of Miriam Ulinower. While the Warsaw ghetto was fiercely divided along class and linguistic lines and the Judenrat conducted all its business in Polish, the "Alternative Community," led by the indefatigable Emanuel Ringelblum and

funded by the JDC, championed the use of Yiddish. In Vilna, Yiddish reigned supreme (Kassow 1999). The Yiddish poets who rose to prominence and preeminence in the ghettos had every reason to see themselves as speaking in the name of the entire Jewish polity.

Contrariwise, the fierce divisions within the ghetto population—between rich and poor, old and young, Polonizers (the so-called *shmendrikes*) and Diaspora nationalists, the Judenrat and the underground, the Right and the Left—such divisiveness at such a time and place appeared obscene in the eyes of a poet who sought to affect the hearts and minds of the incarcerated Jews. It fueled a poetry of sorrow and rage that had not been heard since Bialik railed against his people in the language of biblical prophecy.

The third historical condition that gave rise to born-again Bialiks in the ghetto was the knowledge of the Final Solution. The chronology of destruction differed from ghetto to ghetto. In Warsaw, discerning intellectuals like Kaplan and Yitshak Katzenelson already saw the end time approach by mid-April 1942, when word reached Warsaw of the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto. “Jewish Lublin,” Kaplan recorded on April 17, 1942, “the city of sages and writers, of learning and piety, has been completely devastated. An entire community of 44,000 Jews was plucked out by the roots and slaughtered or dispersed.” The Lodz ghetto, in contrast, was never physically destroyed. It was bled dry, in successive waves of mass deportation: 10,000 in January 1942, another 34,000 in the spring, and so on. In Vilna, the ghetto was established for the saving remnant, a mere 20,000 who had survived the mass slaughter in the nearby killing field of Ponar. Yet until the spring of 1943, they, too, lived under the illusion that so long as they remained a productive workforce and did not break ranks, the destroyer would pass them by. Faced with a catastrophe of unprecedented scope, ubiquitous and inescapable, Jewish writers and chroniclers reached into the fund of Jewish collective memory for historical archetypes. However inadequate the analogy—was this another *ḥurban*, another *tokhefah*, another *kiddush hashem*, another megapogrom?—there had been a poet who confronted the destruction of an entire community of Jews and had emerged with both fists flailing—against

the apathy and corruption within, against the enemy without, and against the God above.

1

From the moment that Yitshak Katzenelson (1886–1944) arrived in Warsaw from his native Lodz, sometime between November 14 and 19, 1939, he was a man with a mission (Szeintuch 1984: 35). Even before he was adopted by the commune of Dror-Hechalutz, which included in its numbers such outspoken Yiddishists as Antek Zuckerman and Mordecai Tanenbaum, Katzenelson adopted the children of the ghetto, the orphans in particular, for whom he adapted stories and composed original works (Katzenelson 1984: 71–73).³ Virtually everything that he wrote in the ghetto—one-act and full-length plays, epic and lyric poems, literary criticism—he declaimed before a live audience. Private readings of his most controversial works he reserved either for such authority figures as Hillel Zeitlin and Emanuel Ringelblum or for the members of the Zionist underground.

Bialik's *yortsayt*, the anniversary of his death, was marked at least twice by the Jews of Nazi-occupied Warsaw, in 1940 and 1941, and each time the guest of honor was the veteran Hebrew-Yiddish poet Yitshak Katzenelson. In the summer 1940 issue of the underground periodical *Dror*, Katzenelson published a long and densely argued appreciation of Bialik's life and work (Katzenelson 1984: 125–30), prefaced by the “first-ever” translation of Bialik's “‘Al hasheḥitah” into Yiddish (*ibid.*: 124). Bialik, he claimed, was now more alive than ever; not the lion's share of Bialik's poetic *œuvre*, his lyric, epic, and neo-folk poetry, but his *Songs of Wrath*. The single most compelling aspect of Bialik's poetic legacy, in other words, was his rage; or, to put it in more literary terms, his romantic agony. Katzenelson coined an oxymoron to capture the ghoulish yet vital presence of Bialik in wartime. Bialik, he wrote, has returned to us from the grave in the guise of a “holy dybbuk” (Katzenelson 1984: 128).

A dybbuk is a dead spirit. So, too, the entire Jewish people, who for the first time in their history had been condemned to death. So, too, a people that had never yet in its history been so possessed of so many dybbuks, foreign cultures

that led them astray and that even in wartime continued to seduce them away. At precisely such a time of personal and communal crisis, the Jews needed something holy to act as a countermeasure, something comparable to the Psalmists, those ancient ventriloquists who gave voice to the otherwise inexpressible grief. Bialik, alone among modern poets, continued to fulfill that double purpose.

Stripped of its metaphysics, Katzenelson's argument went something like this: the poet's rage is the product of profound and radical self-confrontation. The dybbuk that blasphemes is the rage that cleanses.

Bialik's rage offers the only possible relief from the inner turmoil and dissociated pain, the inability of the victims to admit the inevitability of their fate, and to feel solidarity for others in pain. Paralyzed by the enormity of their grief and by its utter inexpressibility, the people can achieve catharsis not by reciting the ancient Psalms—a dead letter in such times as these—but by hearkening to the cry of anguish that emanates from Bialik's *Songs of Wrath*.

Katzenelson's eulogy might have remained little more than an exhortation, full of pathos yet somewhat obscure. Instead, over the next three years, it became his poetic manifesto, for translating and promoting Bialik was but one small piece of Katzenelson's extraordinary literary output. Katzenelson organized and presided over public readings of the Hebrew Bible in his own rhymed Yiddish translations, in which he sought to demonstrate that the Prophets were never more alive, never more relevant and current, than today (Katzenelson 1984: 145–89). The single most ambitious publication of the entire underground press was his *Job: A Biblical Tragedy in Three Acts*, published by Dror in about 150 copies on June 22, 1941, the day that Germany declared war on the Soviet Union (Katzenelson 1984: 497). The play came complete with an original cover illustration designed by the artist Shloyme Nusboym (*ibid.*: 499–609). While *Job* focused on the existential and erotic struggle of the Jewish individual in extremis, *By the Waters of Babylon: A Biblical Folk Drama in Four Acts* (1941?) described the plight of the nation and ended with a verse translation of Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (*ibid.*: 233–377).

However creative this feverish activity of adaptation, which included Katzenelson translating his own prewar Hebrew plays into Yiddish, it signaled

that as of yet, no radically new response was called for. By February 1942, however, the poet was already jotting down his angry thoughts about the self-betrayal “of apostates, Bundists, Left Labor Zionists and other *erev-meshumodim*, apostates-in-training” (ibid.: 617), and, by April, responding to the terrible news about the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto, he issued his first cry for revenge, “Pour Out Thy Wrath,” appropriately tied to the festival of Passover (ibid.: 626–28).

So rapidly was the poet’s consciousness radicalized by the new reality, that by the summer of 1942, when the Germans began the mass deportation of Warsaw Jewry, Dror had prepared for publication a volume of Katzenelson’s own *Tsorn-lider* (Songs of wrath), which was to have included his epic poem on contemporary Jewish martyrdom, “The Song about Shloyme Zhelikhovsky” (Katzenelson 1984: 642–48). “‘Be’ir hahareigah’ is an idyll,” proclaimed the book’s editor, the young Zionist fighter Mordecai Tanenbaum, when compared with these poems. Katzenelson was transformed in the ghetto, Tanenbaum informed his sister in a letter. “In the Warsaw ghetto, together with us, in sync with us, he wrote, he cursed, he cried for revenge—and he became our brother. He wrote only in Yiddish. Everything that we were thinking, feeling, dreaming. He rose in stature and raised himself as high as the heavens—even higher than Bialik” (Szeintuch 1984: 68).

On July 20, 1942, the completed manuscript of Katzenelson’s *Songs of Wrath* was buried by the members of Dror-Hehaluts in the basement of their commune, to be unearthed by a few surviving members after the war.

In the Vittel transit camp at the end of December 1943, just before he and his surviving son were shipped back to Poland, Katzenelson completed his jeremiad, his *Song of the Murdered Jewish People* (Katzenelson 1980), fifteen cantos of fifteen stanzas each, the most inclusive, original, and resolutely secular of his wartime poems. In this poem, structured in such a way as to encompass past, present, and future (Roskies 1989: 517), the poet-speaker addresses his rage not only against the people, possessed by foreign dybbuks, and against the heavens, in whose poetic mission he had once believed, but also—and most vehemently—against those who slaughtered the innocent without a blessing. In seeking a neoclassical form commensurate with the enormity of this crime, Katzenelson combined

everything he had learned in the four long years of Nazi occupation: how to reemploy the Yiddish language, once the language of the living and now the language of the murdered Jewish people; how to adapt the language of biblical prophecy for apocalyptic times; how to confront the myriad acts of Jewish self-betrayal; and how to channel his personal rage against the German aggressor. In short, the “holy dybbuk” of Hayyim Nahman Bialik had entered the body of Yitshak Katzenelson.

2

It is difficult to imagine any of this coming to expression in Katzenelson’s wartime writing had he remained in Lodz. Lodz, renamed Litzmannstadt, was annexed into the German Reich. The Lodz ghetto, hermetically sealed from the outside world, was run with an iron fist by the megomaniacal Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski. The tight and protected group of ghetto writers, meanwhile, many of whom worked for the ghetto archive, a branch of the Judenrat, congregated in the observant home of the retiring poet Miriam Ulinower (1890–1944). Needless to say, there was no underground press in the Lodz ghetto.

The main forms of artistic expression in the Lodz ghetto were panegyrics and class compositions; portraits in oil, tapestry, and celluloid; handmade greeting cards; satiric broadsides—all this and more for and about his eminence, Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski. His business card read “M. Ch. Rumkowski. Der Aelteste der Juden in Litzmannstadt-Geto” (Unger 1995: 167), a title that was itself the subject of many jokes. In this all-too-*hey mish* environment, Bialik would become a naturalized—and neutralized—citizen. There were at least three reasons, however, that even in Lodz, so cut off from the world, Bialik as the prophet of rage was suddenly recalled by a thirty-five-year-old Yiddish poet named Simkhe-Bunem Shayevitsh (1907–44).

1. In the spring of 1942, the mass deportations entered a second phase. Following the deportation of 10,000 Jews during January 16–29, Shayevitsh had written his first epic poem, with the elegiac-ironic title “Lekh-lekho” (“Go you forth”) (Shayevitsh 1942a). With poetic intuition, since all knowledge of the gas

chambers was withheld from the victims, Shayevitsh immediately understood that the mass deportations of men, women, and children, from the very old to the very young, could end only in death. Now, in the midst of the second wave, affecting 34,000 victims, he composed his mock ode to spring, “Friling taf-shin-beys” (“Spring 1942”) (Shayevitsh 1942b, 1946). By the spring of this Jewish calendar year of 5702, it was clear to the poet that the ghetto itself was a city of slaughter, designed not for survival, but only for death.

2. Once again, with the resumption of the mass deportations, God called up the slaughter and the spring together, exactly as had happened during the Kishinev pogrom. Quoting from the Yiddish version of “In the City of Slaughter,” Shayevitsh updated these famous lines and included them in his next to last canto (9:37–39).

גאָט האָט אונדז מיט מילדער האַנט
געשענקט אַ צווילינג
אַ טויטן-גירוש מיט אַ פֿרילינג —

(God with a mild hand / Also presented us with twins, / A death
expulsion and a spring —)

3. Exactly as in Kishinev, the bloodletting coincided with the celebration of the seder. With such an overwhelming sense of *déjà-vu*, of fatal inevitability; with the confluence of the expulsion, the coming of spring, and the celebration of the Exodus, is it any wonder that Shayevitsh begins his poem — and each of the poem’s ten cantos — with the same bitterly ironic refrain:

און אין אַ מזליקער שעה
איז שוין דער פֿרילינג דאָ —

(And in an hour of good fortune / Spring is here again —)

the *un* suggesting both the epic style of a biblical saga and the unstoppable of the present catastrophe? This evil had descended like a force of nature.

When the poet's diction, so reminiscent of Bialik's, suddenly waxes liturgical, it is in order to suggest the sacrilegious idea that the mass deportations enjoy divine sanction. The groups assemble at the round-up point *stadesvayz*, "in herds," *mekayem tsu zayn di mitsves geyrush*, "to fulfill the commandment of expulsion" (2:14).

For all the fearful symmetries, for all the heavy irony, the speaker in this poem is no prophet of wrath. Inasmuch as this poem is a parodic ode to spring, it is a point-by-point rebuttal of Bialik's romantic agony and of the modern prophet's sense of election.

Already in canto 1, the speaker refers to those condemned to leave as "my ghetto brothers," and in a moment of radical self-confrontation he asks:

But why does a branch, a bush
Crack and break when you step on it?
And poor cursed heart of mine,
Do you not break from the pain
When your brothers are driven like dogs? (7:7–11)

Bialik came to Kishinev after the fact. He came to record, report, and to reproach. Mimicking the reportorial role of the speaker in Bialik's poem, Shayevitsh also dutifully surveys the human wreckage of the ghetto (cantos 3–6), focusing on the plight of women, children, and one seventeen-year-old girl in particular (canto 5). But when at last, Shayevitsh summons Bialik from the grave ("So rise up, great poet, / Master of the 'City of Slaughter,'" 9:4), it is only after all past analogies have been rendered obsolete by the present calamity. The Spanish Expulsion? Mere "child's play when compared to today" (8:29). Only then is Bialik subjected to a point-by-point rebuttal, accompanied by direct quotations from the Yiddish.

So great is the universal ridicule and shame that no husband need bother petitioning the rabbi whether it is permitted to live under one roof with his ravaged wife. So ubiquitous the present calamity that there are no men left to recite dirges in their synagogues, "With wild horrible cries / With a burning sea of

tears” (quoting Bialik’s Yiddish, lines 270–71). So profound is the innocence of the victims that even the blaspheming poet will bow his head and pronounce upon them a threefold blessing: *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* (canto 9).

Bialik stands convicted for lack of empathy, for lack of historical imagination, and, most of all, for hubris, the hubris of a romantic poet who allows his own agonized voice to drown out the cries of the victims and the echoes from the hallowed past. This being Passover, the speaker’s sense of eternal pasthoods is especially keen. Addressing his daughter Blimele at the seder table, he instructs her to recite the *Shfokh khamoskha*, glossing every Hebrew phrase into Yiddish (canto 10).

For Shayevitsh, there came a radical change of perception in the spring of 1942—that the Jews of Lodz were all condemned to die alone. What was needed, then, was for Bialik to join with Mother Rachel and Reb Levi Yitshok of Berdichev to offer last words of consolation. As Bialik, in the face of Kishinev, repudiated the legacy of theodicy and passivity, so Shayevitsh, in the face of an infinitely greater and unfathomable catastrophe, repudiated the modernist subversion.

3

Bialik was not a natural soul brother for a poet like Shayevitsh. In “Lekh-lekho,” the other of Shayevitsh’s surviving ghetto poems, the speaker, addressing his daughter Blimele throughout, makes reference to H. Leivick. “Look, I’m packing the tallis,” he says to her. “And the *kitl* and the shroud / And also the small red Bible / And Leivick’s poems for times of rest” (161–64). And at the conclusion of this dramatic monologue, just as father and daughter are setting out into the unknown, he tries to strengthen her resolve by rehearsing all past instances of Jewish martyrdom, from Isaac on Mount Moriah to “our uncle’s stride on Siberian roads” (428), a reference to Leivick’s travails as a revolutionary in exile. The invocation of Bialik signaled for Shayevitsh a radical change of perception. As the deportations swallowed up ever larger numbers and as the circle of death was drawing ever tighter, the lyric voice had to give way to the epic, Yiddish

had to assume the national role of Hebrew, and the poetics of consolation had to accommodate the rage. Any Jewish poet who tried to take the measure of the present calamity had to measure up to Bialik.

Bialik was also very much alive for Abraham Sutzkever (b. 1913). Thanks to Sutzkever, the first theatrical revue in the Vilna ghetto, on January 18, 1942, opened with a recitation of Bialik's Yiddish lyric "Glust zikh mir veynen" ("I feel like crying") (Roskies 1984: 238). There was every reason to cry. Two-thirds of Vilna Jewry had just been slaughtered in Ponar. Yet seventeen days before, while the Germans and Lithuanians were ushering in the New Year, the Zionist youth of the ghetto heard Abba Kovner issue the first call—in Hebrew—for organized armed resistance. When the FPO, the United Partisans' Organization, was later called into being, Abrasha Sutzkever joined its ranks.

Like Katzenelson, Sutzkever was enormously prolific during the years of Nazi terror. His first epic poems were written in the ghetto—to universal acclaim. Even while they still lived, Sutzkever turned Zelig Kalmanovitsh into the prophet of the ghetto and Mira Bernshteyn into the teacher and shepherd of the ghetto children. Many of his poems were written to be declaimed, in the high rhetorical mode so beloved of Russian and Polish national poets. One of them, "Beneath the Whiteness of Your Stars" (Sutzkever 1943c), was set to music and assumed the status of a hymn. Then came a moment of reckoning.

In mid-winter 1943, the arrest and execution of Liza Magun, the main liaison and courier of the FPO, made it clear to Sutzkever that the partisans of Vilna were fated to fight alone, because the ghetto population was utterly indifferent. Standing before his fellow partisans, who were gathered legally at a memorial ceremony for Magun, Sutzkever declaimed "Song for the Last" (Sutzkever 1943a, 1943b), a thunderous poem of rage. *O brider mayne*, the poet addresses his "brothers," his fellow Jews incarcerated in the ghetto, directly. "Lift your heads, your sick / heads sinking / like the sun: I want to see you as you sink / hearing at least what I'm thinking" (lines 9–12). He is sickened by their apathy, appalled by their cowardice:

You aren't moths, moths have power
 enough to throw themselves into flame.
 And not threshed grain
 nor grass trampled underfoot. (lines 1–4)

Although these lines seem to echo the first of Bialik's neoprophetic poems, "Surely, the People Is Grass" (1897), and although, like Bialik, Sutzkever contrasts the moribund state of his people with the manifold, life-giving, blessings of nature, "Song for the Last" is sooner a reincarnation than an imitation of Bialik. For, if anything, Sutzkever's faith in the regenerative powers of poetry, beauty, and nature was further vindicated by the Nazi terror. Sutzkever revealed himself in the ghetto as the Romantic poet par excellence (Novershtern 1983: 194–95).

Thus, in "Song for the Last," nature represents what is vital and regenerative, in contradistinction to the people—passive, self-deluded, and doomed:

An animal in danger
 will tear its own flesh to get free:
 you never felt the trap close,
 you thought the arrow could no longer see. (lines 25–28)

Animals have a survival instinct—the people do not. A forest attacked by lightning and thunder responds with greater honesty and self-awareness than they.

With each successive metaphor, derived from the natural realm, the surviving ghetto folk are further reduced in stature until the poet delivers this thunderous, terrifying verdict, based on an untranslatable pun: *A dorn zayt ir itster, nit keyn dor*, "your nation's nettle are you, not its future generation" (line 47). Here, as elsewhere, rhyme is no mere wordplay; it is the source of ultimate meaning. The terrifying truth of this indictment, as it were, arises for Sutzkever out of the very rhyme, because rhyme—which is to say, the power of the poetic word—is the only force that can stand as a bulwark against radical evil.

Absent God, it is the poet who commands the survivors to lift up their heads, “your sick / heads sinking / like the sun”; who addresses them directly, in a crescendo of despair and disgust. For the people’s legacy, their dybbuks, as Katzenelson might have said, is a legacy of lies, a prewar existence totally mired in the here and now, a legacy of false gods and false hopes, of divisiveness, self-loathing, vulgar aping, with no premonition of what lay ahead.

Absent God, it is the poet who sees the present state of his people for what it is, a nation of sycophants who would pray for the enemy’s forgiveness if only they had the faith to pray.

Absent God, it is the poet who cries out for radical self-confrontation, who dares to stare down the condemned face in the mirror:

I beat my skull on stones to find consolation
for you in the fragments, you, the last,
for I, too, am a letter in your book,
my sun, too, is spring’s leprous outcast. (lines 61–64)

Absent God, it is the poet who reaches in for some augury of hope. It is the coming of spring, the regenerative cycle of nature, that finally severs the lines of communion between the poet and his people. For at the very moment when nature is about to be reborn, the ancient circle of this great people is about to be closed forever, with nary a word of protest from the “last of millions.”

4

In his brilliant synoptic study (Miron 2000), Dan Miron has demonstrated that with Bialik dead and Uri Zvi Greenberg withdrawing into silence, modern Hebrew poetry witnessed a retreat from the prophetic mode during the 1940s—the very years, one could argue, when the need for prophecy or some surrogate thereof could not have been greater. Yet, as we have seen, in three of the major Nazi-occupied ghettos, understood to be the literal embodiment of

cities of slaughter, three major Yiddish poets tried to take the measure of the new historical catastrophe by reappropriating and redefining Bialik's *Songs of Wrath*. Insofar as the ghettos represented the last Jewish collective presence in Europe and served as the ultimate arena of Jewish life and death—not merely as crucibles of destruction—all assumptions about the Jewish past, present, and imagined future were radically disturbed therein. And while for Bialik, having God's emissary speak in Yiddish, a "non-Hebraic and culturally nonsublime linguistic medium" (ibid.: 3), was but a tactical and temporary maneuver, the ghetto poets identified Yiddish as the language of the ghetto, the language of the saving remnant. Only in Yiddish, therefore, could they attempt a sweeping historical overview, an exorcism of the people's manifold dybbuks, both holy and profane.

To a lesser or greater degree, Katzenelson, Shayevitsh, and Sutzkever each re-created the pseudoprophetic genre of the *massa*, the "oracle." As defined by Miron (ibid.: 14), the *massa* (which he translates as "burden") adopts the following poetic conventions: (1) A covertly secularized speaker, (2) in a tone of highest spiritual authority, (3) addresses a recognizable group (4) on matters of momentous national and moral import; (5) urging the members of this group to be aware and active, (6) the speaker ends his poetic exhortation with a utopian or dystopian vision. The seventh criterion, implied by Miron but never spelled out, is that the *massa* is an aggressively male genre. Only a male poet can arrogate to himself the pathos of God.

At least three transformations occurred when the *massa* reemerged in modern Yiddish poetry in the place where Yiddish poetry mattered most:

1. The deeply engaged speaker, while standing apart and even distant from the group, confronts that group both as an individual and as a member of the Jewish people. "He became our brother," proclaimed the young Mordecai Tanenbaum of Katzenelson. "He wrote only in Yiddish. Everything that we were thinking, feeling, dreaming." "My ghetto brothers," says the speaker in Shayevitsh's poem, "for us in the ghetto. . . ." The speaker's deep identification with the fate of his fellow Jews reaches a climax when he addresses the ghost of Bialik:

So rise up, great poet,
 Master of the “City of Slaughter,”
 From your green-laureled grave.
 I invite you to walk with me.
 In our ghetto you will find everything to your liking. (9:4–8)

The main source of rhetorical power in Sutzkever’s poem is the interplay of I and you. When first apostrophizing the people (stanzas 1–2), he addresses them as *brider mayne*, “my brothers.” From that internal vantage point, he issues the core of his indictment (stanzas 3–7), which is grammatically relentless: the words *ir*, *aykh* (“you,” nominative and accusative), and *ayer* (“yours”) are repeated incessantly, twenty-two times in all, sometimes twice in a single line (line 48). All the more palpable, then, is the speaker’s radical self-confrontation in the concluding section (stanzas 8–9), when the first-person singular dissociates itself from the “you,” culminating in the thunderous last line: *Mikh eklt der geduld fun aykh, ir letste fun milyonen!* (“I am disgusted by your patience, you, last of millions!”).

2. Even as the speaker in these pseudoprophetic poems veers between rage and sorrow, loathing and lamentation, distance and intimacy, and even as his voice is unmistakably that of a man, through the inclusion of the other sex, the speaker signals his desire to break down the internal barriers. Katzenelson and Shayevitsh thematize gender; Sutzkever does not. In his opening canto, Katzenelson famously invokes the absent Muse and the absent Jewish people. Only after the pivotal ninth canto, the *tokheḥah*, or great rebuke, which he addresses “To the Heavens,” does the speaker return to his personal losses, at which point Hannah, his murdered wife, becomes the surrogate Muse. “I like to call your name, to call it aloud: Hannale!” he apostrophizes her dead spirit (11:1). “I ask: Do you remember?” “Remember the house on Twarda Street”; “Remember the day.” These intensely personal recollections allow the speaker to mourn and to release the psychic energy he needs in order to cry, at poem’s end, for revenge.

In surveying the human wreckage of the ghetto, the speaker in Shayevitsh’s ode to spring pays special attention to the plight of the women and children,

devoting one long canto (5) to chronicling the ten-day ordeal of an abandoned seventeen-year-old girl, which ends in her death. The desecrated spring is the aborted springtime of her youth.

The presence of women is nowhere mentioned in “Song for the Last,” yet a key to the speaker’s animus and alienation must surely be the specific historical moment. Sutzkever, we recall, declaimed this poem at a memorial gathering for Liza Magun, the chief liaison of the FPO. *Liza ruft!* “Liza is calling!” was soon to become the partisan’s *cri de guerre* (Sutzkever 1945: 197–200). That a few dozen fighters, led by the memory of a woman, had more courage, vitality, and determination than a Jewish collective 20,000-strong augured a ghetto in its death throes.

3. Only the pseudoprophetic mode could capture the tragedy of the present moment. For when all hope was lost, the great indictment, and the great lament, were the only thing left to stand in for the greatness of the people. “Millions at a time you were no one’s,” thunders the prophet-speaker in Sutzkever’s poem, “but believed in your individuality” (lines 29–30). Even “when a thousand years of enmity / has walled the light out completely” (lines 33–34), that millennium of darkness signified an ancient, sorely tested people. Bialik’s prophetic rage privileged the romantic agony of the poet. The voice of sorrow and rage that resonated anew in the Nazi cities of slaughter foregrounded the historical agony of the people.

Bialik’s “In the City of Slaughter” made literary history because it demonstrated that poetry before, during, and after Auschwitz is not only a cultural possibility. It is a moral imperative.

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NOTES

- 1 The statistic is from Antony Polonsky, introduction to Lewin 1988: 36.
- 2 Lewin 1988. In addition to specific references to Bialik's *Songs of Wrath* scattered throughout the diary (s.v. "Bialik" in the index), see also the entry for July 26, 1942. Memoirist Alexander Donat would have us believe that in the wake of the Great Deportation, when a mere 30,000 Jews remained, crowded into a tiny segment of the former ghetto, "there was only one book to read" in his one-room refuge at 44 Muranowska, and that was Bialik's "In the City of Slaughter." Quoting English lines 226–29 and 246–50, Donat updates Bialik's charge. "How could 300,000 people have let themselves be led to slaughter without putting up a fight?" See Donat 1978: 99. This is an example of postwar memory, heightened and enhanced. There was, of course, no "book" titled "In the City of Slaughter." And who would have left it there for the last remnant to find?
- 3 Yiddish remained the language of Zuckerman's intimate self-expression well into the postwar period. See Zuckerman 1982. On Tanenbaum's relationship to Yiddish, see the discussion that follows.