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A PRAYER OF HOMECOMING
by ABRAHAM SUTZKEVER

Shehekhiyonu

Were I not at one with you
here, breathing joy and woe,
were I not ablaze with the Land,
volcanic Land in its birth-throes,
after being sacrificed, there,
were I not reborn with the Land
whose every pebble is my ancestor—
no bread would nourish me,
no water cool my gums,
till I would perish, turned gentile,
and my longing would come on its own...

The opening poem of Abraham Sutzkever's "In fayervogn" ("In the Chariot of Fire," 1952) and of volume 2 of his Collected Poems is an untitled lyric of eleven lines that stands out, even from among Sutzkever's remarkable opus, for its compressed thought and feeling. First published in 1948, it appears in his books dated 1947, the year the Sutzkevers and their infant daughter arrived in the Land of Israel aboard the Patria, the ship carrying refugees who had survived the war. The dating of a work, whether historically accurate or not, is a way of demonstrating intentionality. Sutzkever had dated this work not on the precise day of its composition, as in the case of some of his ghetto poems, but to mark the year of his aliyah. From his beginnings as a poet in Vilna in the mid-1930s, Sutzkever had thought of himself in legendary terms. In 1915, two years after his birth, his parents had fled with him from their native Smorgon to Omsk in Western Siberia, and there they lived for almost seven years until his mother, by then a widow, took the family to live in Vilna, the city nearest her former home. Sutzkever's maiden poems cast Siberia as a snowbound birthplace of poetry as though the child of imagination had been formed by nature itself; the powers of poetry had harnessed some

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1 I am grateful to Billy Wisse for his help in composing this literal translation.
greater force within the universe that, in turn, protected the poet who could do justice to the natural world. Sutzkever retained this knowledge of himself through the 1930s and into the ghetto, where his poetry withstood the leveling humiliation of Nazi rule. In the ghetto, he and his wife Freydke were both members of the FPO, the United Partisan Organization, and before the liquidation of the ghetto they escaped through the sewers to join the Soviet partisans in the forests. When some of Sutzkever’s verse reached the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee through a partisan courier, a small plane was sent to bring him and his wife to Moscow. Ilyà Ehrenburg’s article welcoming the Jewish survivor in Pravda of March 1944 was the Soviet Union’s first public disclosure about the Final Solution, and it turned the poet into a living symbol of Jewish resistance. Thus, Sutzkever’s experience of poetry as saving grace could only have been strengthened by the war that left him alive to speak for the voiceless. He was chosen to testify for Russian Jewry at the Nuremberg Trials. As repatriated Poles, the Sutzkevers were allowed to leave the Soviet Union in 1946, and having made their way via Vilna and Lodz to Paris, came to the Land of Israel the following year.

One of the first things Sutzkever did upon his arrival was to convince the Histadrut (Israel’s Trade Union Federation) to sponsor a quarterly of Yiddish literature called Di golde keyt (The Golden Chain [of Jewish continuity]). The poem before us was published just prior to this in a Munich weekly of the Displaced Person Camps, Af der vach, an organ of Hashomer Hatzair, that was trying to inspire immigration to Palestine and affiliation with its kibbutz movement. The poem appeared as one of a trio of short lyrics on the same theme of arriving in the Land of Israel and was designated “specially for” the paper, although it was republished shortly after in other literary journals. Sutzkever was exceptionally prolific after the war, publishing in Yiddish papers and periodicals of various political and apolitical hues, sometimes sending the same work to different publications in different countries. This same lyric appeared, still untitled, in the Tel Aviv Undzers (1949) as part of the cycle, “Erets Yisroel erd” (“Soil of the Land of Israel”). When Sutzkever published it, slightly altered, in book form, he placed it under the section heading, “Shehekhiyonu.”

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4 This poem first appeared in Af der vakh (On Guard) 50 (November 25, 1948). Ayelet Kupe r Margolioth provides background for the topic in “Yiddish Periodicals Published by Displaced Persons 1946–1949” (Ph.D. diss., Magdalen College, Oxford, 1997).

Although Jewish law prescribes no benediction for the occasion, Jews had adopted the custom of offering up the Shehekhiyonu prayer of thanksgiving upon first reaching the Land of Israel. The prayer turns on three verbs of sustenance: Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has kept us in life (shehekhiyonu), and has preserved us (vekiymonu), and has enabled us to reach this season (vehigiyonu lazman haze). The tripled verbs make this benediction that much more emphatic, while leaving open the occasion on which it is uttered. Sutzkever’s poem, in the first-person singular rather than plural, maintains the tripled structure of the Shehekhiyonu in three parallel clauses but renders its verbs negatively, in the conditional tense. The adverb nit (not) appears once in each of the first three lines, twice at the start of a line, and six times in all, turning each expression of relief into a qualifying clause and lending improbability to the whole experience of survival that the poet extols. Three times the supplicant says “If I were not...,“ and each time the registered intensity of breathing, blazing, and being reborn are placed in jeopardy and the odds tipped so sharply to the side of what-might-not-have-been that we are made to feel the precariousness rather than the certainty of this moment of resurrection. To be sure, the newcomer has arrived. He is there with the Land; he is sated and restored and able to give praise. But nothing is left of the simple declarative experience of the Shehekhiyonu Jew who thanks his God and counts his blessings. The grammatical structure of this poem informs us that its author is engaged in a double reckoning of being simultaneously where he is and where he is not, of having—yet not having—survived. The poem is written from the perspective of someone for whom the conditional tense has become the condition of existence, who cannot take for granted what he has come to bless.

To whom is this poem addressed? In its original version, the poet is clearly speaking as one of a group of newly landed immigrants: “Ven kvoilt nit zayn mit aykh baynand, / nit filn zelbn glik un vey do (Were I not here with you [plural], not feeling the same joy and pain).”6 The shift to a singular “thou” and deletion of zelbn (the same) constitute the most significant changes Sutzkever made to the poem, substituting an intimate and perhaps even divine partnership for the original social cohort. The unnamed addressee is precious and familiar to the poet in only one capacity, for its presence there with him in the Land, as a cohabitant, a co-celebrant, and for no other known

6 Though technically, aykh could be the formal second-person singular, it would make no sense in this context.
faculty or power. In fact, the final version veers away from the second-person singular to the objectified subject the way a husband sings the praises of the *eyshes khayil* (Woman of Valor) indirectly, referring to her in the third person, although the object of his adoration is right there before him. This reading of the poem as an address to the Land of Israel is borne out by the rhyme of *baynand* with *land* in lines three and six, each time following the identical conjunction “with you,” “with (you) the Land,” “with (you) the Land.” The Land here occupies the lexical position usually held by the beloved human or divine presence. Yiddish has no capital letters: I have capitalized the Land to indicate that it stands throughout for the Land of Israel.

The firm yet irregular rhyming pattern of the first seven lines conveys both the ecstasy of being at one with the Land, *baynand/mitn land*, and the complications of this arrangement. The rhyme turns irregular (not ababab but ababbab), and the rhythm and phrasing also change after the first quatrain. While the *a* rhyme makes its point through repetition, the *b* rhyme is dazzlingly intricate, demonstrating the rich heritage of language and reference that the poet offers up in thanks. Yet the understated simplicity of the opening rhyme anchors all the rest. While all the clauses that build to the climax of the final lines are conditional, everything else in this poem is subordinate to the fateful pairing of *baynand* with the Land that is never called by its name. The complexity of the rest of the poem sets off the plain necessity and wondrous mystery of having been reunited with the beloved, complementary object.

It was the brilliant *b* rhyme that first drew critical attention to this lyric. In his pioneering study of Yiddish rhyme, Uriel Weinreich singled out the four linked end rhymes—*dos glik un vey do* (the happiness and pain here), *khevle-leyde* (birth pangs), *akeyde* (reference to the binding of Isaac), and *zeyde* (grandfather)—as an example of the “unprecedented subtlety” of Yiddish verse. Commenting on the way the composite rhyme *ey do* brings out the “Hebrewness” of the following two rhyme words, which in Ashkenazic Hebrew likewise end in *eydo* (pronounced *eyde* in Yiddish), Weinreich writes:

This “Hebrewness” which would not be apparent in a phonetically exact rime scheme, is kept from going out of control by the incontrovertible

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7 I will use the term “the poet” rather than “the speaker” to represent the voice of the poem. By “the poet” I do not mean the person Abraham Sutzkever—though the biographical details dovetail with the facts of his life—but rather “the poet” as one might say “the *paytan,*” as he appears in the poem: the speaker in the poem is clearly a poet.
Yiddish e of the last rime word, zeyde. But once the two middle rime words are viewed, under the pressure of the rime, as genetically Hebrew, the -e note of the same rime scheme in turn underscores their Yiddishness; more generally, it suggests the "mergedness" of the Hebrew component in Yiddish and, symbolically, of the Zion theme in Diaspora culture. Now this unity of Zion and the Diaspora is precisely the burden of Sutzkever's book! To render it so completely by a single rime chord of the overture is a stroke of genius.8

Weinreich notes how the etymology of Yiddish thickens the historical weight of the theme. To the same end, he might also have pointed out that the link of vey do, from the Germanic source weh da, with zeyde, from the Slavic word for grandfather, dzipadek, further demonstrates the creative amalgamation that constitutes the Yiddish language. Playing off the componental features of a language, which is many a great poet's stock in trade, Sutzkever reinforces the thematic substance of the poem itself. These rhymes are part of the process through which the poem is transformed from private into national utterance, reintegrating the whole geographic and developmental reach of Yiddish into this poem about national homecoming.

The semantic trail of these rhymed words is equally rewarding. The destruction of the First and Second Temples, khurbn bayis rishon and khurbn bayis sheyni, drove the Jews into exile, but the poet in 1947 had been driven by the khurbn of European Jewry back to the homeland. How in any morally tenable scheme could an individual survivor express thanksgiving for having been restored to Zion under such circumstances? How could the greatest of all Jewish catastrophes be interpreted in the light of God's unfulfilled but still potent promise to Abraham? Already in the Vilna Ghetto (February 14, 1943), Sutzkever had asked how and with what a man might fill his cup on the day of liberation. "Are you prepared, in your joy, to endure / The dark keening you have heard / Where skulls of days glitter / In a bottomless pit?"9 The ghetto poet knows in advance that should he outlive the others, he will keep burrowing, like a mole, into the "ancient buried town" of his memory. In the lyric before us Sutzkever bridges the distance between the buried European town and the Land being reclaimed from the rubble. The phrase glik un vey do links

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joy and woe to being here in a way that remained characteristic of Sutzkever thereafter. It accompanies the khevle-leyde, a term that applies equally to the natural process of giving birth and to the birth pangs of the Messiah. Poet and Land are joined in the bloody ecstasy of renaissance. The contrarieties are further pursued through the continuing rhyme with akeyde, the occasion that almost deprives the father of his son, the son of his life, and with zeyde, intimate ancestor. The aqedah of Isaac in Genesis 22:9 became in Jewish thought the primary symbol of martyrdom and of self-sacrifice in obedience to God’s will. The subject of this poem is not merely, as Weinreich suggested, the unity of Diaspora with Zion, but the impossible tension between the Jews’ metaphysical promise of redemption and the enormity of destruction they have undergone. Sutzkever’s tender rhyme reestablishes the connection between the steelily biblical Abraham at the moment of his testing and the Diaspora zeydes who wouldn’t hurt a fly.

Poetry accustoms us to figurative language. The poet breaks with reality when he speaks of being reborn after his own martyrdom and even leaves ambiguous whether he is sacrificer or victim in that image. But the Nazi genocide of the Jews shifted the boundaries between realism and surrealism by actualizing what few had ever dared to imagine, so that we have to beware our normal assumptions about what is figurative and what is real. Sutzkever alluded to the strain that his life had placed on figurative language when he later wrote, “Inside me, rivers of blood are not a metaphor.” In biographical fact, the poet had survived his own akeyde: the son born to the Sutzkevers in the ghetto hospital of Vilna was put to death in obedience to Nazi orders. God did not intervene to prevent this horror, so it is quite precise to speak of “my akeyde” as a completed rather than an interrupted process; the Jewish poet endured

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11 Benjamin Harshav quotes this poem in his introduction to A. Sutzkever, Selected Poetry and Prose, 3.

12 In the poem “Tsum kind,” dated Vilna Ghetto, January 18, 1943, the poet writes,

I wanted to swallow you, my child,
to feel the taste
of my anticipated future.
Perhaps in my blood
You will blossom as before.

what the biblical patriarch was spared, both in his capacity of father and as a child of his people.

This biographical background, though by no means essential to the poem, points to the pressure of literal truth against the expectations of poetry. On the redemptive side of the poem, the metaphor of the pebble-grandfather ("vu yeder shtoyndl iz mayn zeyde") asks to be taken literally as well, the "land of our fathers" having become concretized as the most reliable part of the biblical promise: the bones of Joseph had been brought back to the Land of Israel and were now part of the soil. Not the living God, nor the mighty stones of the Western Wall where the Jews have prayed through millennia, but the rocky pebbles underfoot are invoked here as the progenitor of Jewish faith. This is the source to which the returning Jews trace their roots, making possible their restoration to human form.

The eleven lines of this poem form a single sentence, or what would have been a single sentence had it not been interrupted, in defiance of grammatical rules, by a full stop before the final two lines. Opening with the three conditional clauses that constitute the first seven lines, the poem turns at the start of line eight to the hypothetical consequences of not being at one with the Land. The natural division of the poem into these two parts is reinforced by a volte as firm as that of a sonnet, with the rhyme scheme following the thought into a concluding cdcd quatrain, and the style growing suddenly more terse and compressed. But because the whole poem is set in the conditional tense, the dire consequence also remains conditional, within the realm of negative possibility.

Sutzkever’s mastery of rhyme acquired ever greater depth through the years, as if through the matching and the reshaping of words the poet were not so much inventing but rather uncovering harmonies and discords in the universe. To cite only one of the many critics who have made this point, the Yiddish essayist Shlomo Bickel speaks of Sutzkever’s rhymes as verbal pairings whose rhyme was proclaimed (according to Midrash, in the manner of preordained brides and grooms) “forty days before their birth.” Bickel remarks that in addition to delight, this virtuosity sometimes inspires a discomfiting awe, as before flawless perfection in nature. The climactic rhyme of the poem before us exceeds mere aesthetic gratification in just the way that Bickel describes. Simultaneously a neologism and the last masculine rhyme of the poem, it strikes at the end of the penultimate line, leaving one last surprise for the coda.

The poet’s emblems of freedom are bread and water, the staples of the biblical Exodus and of life itself. The poem never moves beyond these

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elemental requirements into fancier expectations of milk and honey. Bread is also one of the staple rhymes of Yiddish verse. Poets from David Edelshtat through I. L. Peretz have drawn attention to the essential pairing of *broyt*, *noyt*, and *toyt* (bread, want, and death). The expectations aroused here by the word *broyt* in the rhyming position are almost certainly of *toyt*, since the alternative to lacking bread is dying of hunger, and the poem has been warning of some dubious outcome from its opening words, “Were I not...” Sutzkever both satisfies and explodes this expectation by his invention of the verb “to expire-into-the-condition-of-gentile,” which he renders through the past participle *fargoyt*. Grammatically, the word follows the pattern of such past participles as *farshklaf* (enslaved) and *farmater* (fatigued). Acoustically, it evokes *fargeyn*, as in *di zun fargeyt* (the sun sets), or *di tsayt fargeyt* (time passes). Through the merest change of a diphthong, there is now a term for passing away into gentileness, a form of Jewish dying that is philologically exclusive to Yiddish, but applicable to all Jews alike, and experientially dependent on the Land of Israel. The whole Zionist discourse on assimilation has been compressed into a single ominous term.

Rhymed with bread, the term *fargoyt* is utterly concrete, as obvious and defined as living or dying. As opposed to vaguer cultural or anthropological considerations of what it means for Jews to disappear among the nations, this description conveys the sense of a material fate, like that of Lot’s wife who is turned into a pillar of salt. The poem creates the illusion of substantiveness for the notoriously imprecise condition of passing into the majority. The word conveys the full emotive weight of such a death, without its cognitive content. Although the term “goy” is morally neutral and refers to other peoples without any necessarily pejorative connotation, here it carries the menace of expiration. The instrumentality of death is unclear, suggesting that the alternative to Zion is disappearance into the embrace of gentiles rather than murder at their hands.

Although this is not the place for a full discussion of the translation of Jewish literature, this lyric brings us up against some of its thorniest problems. Citing aesthetic considerations or other cultural constraints, anthologists who serve up Yiddish in English translation tend to omit from their collections poems like Chaim Grade’s curse on the pogrom-city Kielce (dated Lodz, 1946) that pleads: “Do not forgive, if God Himself on His knees / Entreats you in the grave to grant forgiveness to the world.”¹⁴ They do not like to bring into other languages the hostility of the Jewish author. While the Polish scholar Monika Garbowska

suggests that such accommodation to gentile readers may be simply
good manners, the self-imposed censorship distorts the record of Yiddish
writing. Translators may also excise what seems to them uncomfortably
Jewish, as, for example, in Grade's best-known story, "My Quarrel with
Hersh Rasseyner," the extreme point of view of a student who has
absolutely no tolerance for secular Jews. Cosmopolitan translators serve
up the well-tempered Jew of their own preference. Hence, Benjamin and
Barbara Harshav omitted from their selection of Sutzkever's work his
most overtly "national" utterances, including the poet who proudly fol-
lowed the victorious Israel Defense Forces into Sinai in 1956. But as this
poem forges a new term to convey the disaster of becoming gentiled, it
challenges translation by definition. There is no way of translating this
poem without offending the gentiles, since its purpose, after the khurbn,
is to warn against this second form of death. The poet has built in the
difficulty of rendering this verse in another language through a term created
expressly for that purpose.

But however dramatic and forceful the weight of fargoyt in the penul-
timate line, it is subordinate to the ending, which trails off in a manner
that is wholly at odds with the earlier firmness. The survivor avers that
even had he not reached the Land, his yearning would have come on its
own. God is not alone in having metaphysical powers. The Jew's longing
for his promised Land has equally become a metaphysical force, recogn-
izing no earthly impediments to its will. The psalmist's cry by the rivers
of Babylon, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem," outlived over a hundred gen-
erations of Jews who voiced it; the modern Yiddish poet who joins that
invincible intention knows that this confidence rests on no idle vow. One
could say that yearning, being the domain of the wordsmith, trump the
existential arrival of the person of action. But I believe that the final
emphasis of the poem on transcendence over immanence derives from
the contingency with which it began.

This prayer of homecoming is as much a testimony for those who did
not reach the Land as for those who did. It reminds us that the likelihood
of not having arrived was ever so much greater than the fact of having
arrived. The poet's Shehekhiyonu concretizes his absolute need for a
substantial land, yet he cannot accept a personal redemption that aban-
dons the dead Jews to their fate. He might easily have lain with them in

15 See Herbert H. Paper's translation of the complete story, "My Quarrel with
Hersh Rasseyner," with acknowledgment to Milton Himmelfarb. Private publi-
cation, February 1982. Himmelfarb had translated an edited version in Irving
Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., A Treasury of Yiddish Stories (New York:
perpetual exile. Thus, the release of yearning as a separate force introduces in the poem’s final moment a vehicle through which the missing part of the Jewish people may keep reaching for what is beyond its grasp. Without invoking the language of God and the shekhinah, the poet empowers the spirit to carry on independently of its human vessel. The alliterative softness of the final line, with its emphasis on benkshaft (yearning) in place of the original baynand, admits both the historical energy that impelled Jews to return to Israel and the poet’s ongoing faith in that metaphysical force. The poem that comes to bless the moment of reunion readmits the breakage that cannot be repaired.

Composed as one of a cycle, this lyric was given pride of place in Sutzkever’s opus as a benediction for homecoming. Paradoxically, it was by eliminating from the poem the traces of its historical occasion—arrival as part of cohort—that Sutzkever extended its national resonance. One can hardly do this poem justice without considering it in the tradition of liturgy, and it is hard to imagine a modern Jewish liturgy that would not include this poem.