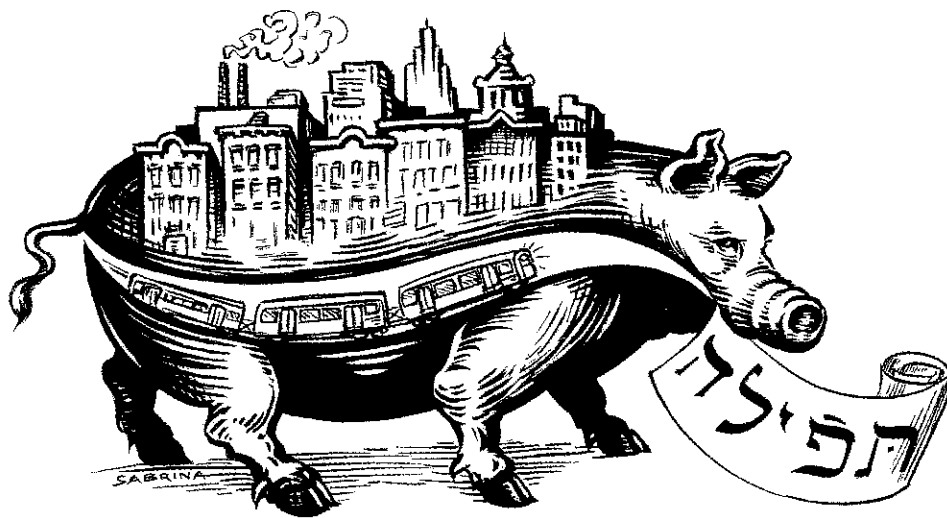


# Moyshe-Leyb Halpern

## A Modernist Yiddish Poet in New York

Julian Levinson



This is the first in a series of articles dedicated to key Yiddish poets. These are writers who have remained unfamiliar to many readers, not only because poetry is inherently difficult to translate, but because of the lingering bias that Yiddish is a language of humor rather than serious art. As we sift through the multiple meanings of Jewish culture and identity, however, there are good reasons to pay particular attention to these poets today.

To be a Yiddish poet, it must be remembered, is to enter a curiously ambiguous position between tradition and private experience. All of these poets were, in one way or another, on the run from traditional Judaism, lured by the call of literature rather than Torah. Yet they refused to abandon the language of their youth, even though many had wandered far from home and were more than competent in other languages. The decision to write in Yiddish was fraught with some peril for anybody wishing to be wholly modern. After all, Yiddish carried along with it powerful associations from the Jewish past. What we discover in their writing, then, is an urgent striving to articulate idiosyncratic personal visions without erasing or forgetting the collective experience of East European Jews. In the best of their writing, they demonstrate that the borders surrounding "Jewish culture" can be redrawn to admit the radically new without reducing it to the already-known. Reading these poets today, we are reminded that we are not the first generation to experience Jewishness as an overwhelming question rather than a fixed set of responses to the world. We are also reminded that a question need not demand a quick and ready solution, but—if experienced in its entirety—can push through to a genuinely new awareness of ourselves and our world.

From the turn of the century through the 1930s—the period in American Jewish history associated with pushcart entrepreneurs and labor unionists—there appeared in New York City a great number of ambitious, energetic, and restlessly innovative Yiddish poets. Among the notable figures were Mani Leib, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, Celia Dropkin, H. Leivick,

Anna Margolin, A. Leyeles, and Jacob Glatstein. Gathering in coffee shops in Manhattan and the Bronx and publishing in tiny literary journals, they brought Yiddish poetry to a level of achievement unparalleled, perhaps, in the history of Yiddish literature.

There are several ways to explain this surge of literary creativity. On one hand there were sociological factors unique to Jewish life in America. The

massive influx of new immigrants had made New York by 1910 the most populous and diverse Jewish community in the world. Jews from regions as far-flung as Bessarabia and Lithuania suddenly found themselves living in the very same neighborhoods. This concentration of Yiddish speakers assured the writers an audience and encouraged the sharing of viewpoints, experiences, and literary influences. On the other hand, there were trends in the broader cultural scene that inspired Yiddish writers. These were years of heady experimentation in the culture at large, a period known as the moment of High Modernism. Individual expression was given free rein in all of the arts; traditional forms became the playthings for a newly insurgent avant-garde. Numbered amongst the new movements were the Harlem Renaissance, the "Lost Generation," Italian and Russian Futurism, Imagism, and Cubism. Yiddish writers, too, responded to this moment of cultural innovation. Within a remarkably short span of time they cycled through a variety of literary schools and trends, ranging from neo-romanticism to imagism to surrealism.

But why was poetry the most vital literary form for American Yiddish writers rather than, say, the novel or drama? Here we must consider the peculiar set of challenges facing Jewish immigrant writers. Even as they found themselves in highly concentrated

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## AMERICAN YIDDISH POETS

### In the Subway

Daybreak.  
Worn out from a night with wine  
And womanly beauty,  
I travel homeward.  
While he, as if molded  
From dirty clay and typhus-stained yellowness,  
Travels the world, giving of his labor.  
We sway, the two of us  
In this house of iron,  
Which carries us on tiny wheels,  
Miles upon miles through the ground, a bleak portal  
Beneath stones and earth.  
We look at each other,  
I—my eyes glazed over with sleep, through glasses,  
And he—with tiny slits where eyes should be,  
They evoke for me a bathhouse for women  
Where once I stole (through the tiniest crack)  
A peak inside.

We sway like this, the two of us.  
I see him (as on a movie screen)  
Yanking a horse from its stall,  
Putting on a harness.  
And riding above  
An overfilled wagon,  
I see a hunchbacked little man, sitting.  
I ask him through the window:  
—Dear father.  
Where are you traveling, in this rain, at break of day?  
He answers me: To the fair, my son.  
To the fair.  
I listen as the wheels begin to creak and rattle,  
I am shouting, my nose pressed against the glass:  
Go in peace, dear father.  
He answers: Be well, my son.  
His voice is muffled, as by a wall in the rain.  
It seems my father is disguised  
As a bear.  
And I growl: Grrrrrrrr!

We sway like this, the two of us,  
He—the village with horse and stall,  
And I—the town near the village  
With a shul, a bath, and a tiny hammer  
Which calls on shutters at break of day  
Announcing the time to serve God.  
He looks over my shoes,  
Regretting, perhaps, the calf  
He once sold  
To buy his way here.

*(no stanza break)*

I look over the tiny bag  
He clutches in his lap.  
I hear my own voice  
Praying faster and faster  
So I may eat the wild strawberries with cream  
Which stand waiting for me.  
I glimpse a piece of pig's-meat  
Crawling out of his bag  
Crawling into my Shema Yisroel, as I recite,  
And also a slice of cheese, which stinks,  
And a stale piece of bread.  
They rouse—as from a nightmare,  
The Shmoneh Esrey  
Which cowers in a corner and weeps.  
The pig's-meat tilts wildly  
Shouting into the prayers a song  
Which I heard during a visit to the opera—  
My prayers stretch apart  
Like Jesus on the cross  
And they begin their great lament: "My Lord, my Lord,  
why..."  
Into their hands they take  
The bread and the stinking cheese.  
And all let out a howl in a chorus of hoarse voices  
Like a pair of drunken peasants  
Singing the Marseillaise and other songs of land and kin—  
I realize that my veins are bursting.  
A hand as hard and cold as iron  
Hurls me upon a roof, where I stagger.  
I listen below  
As the bread, the cheese,  
My Shema Yisroel, the pig's-meat,  
And the Shmoneh Esrey  
All make a big commotion, hunting down a ladder  
So I can return to the world below—  
But no such ladder is found.  
I laugh from these heights  
Until my tongue falls from my mouth in terror.  
They think I've become a ghost  
Doing devilish tricks like a circus clown  
And each one down below is just as fearful  
As I above  
Between earth and clouds.  
They squeeze themselves into corners,  
Each alone, and they cry  
Like me, up here,  
Between earth and clouds.

—Moyshe-Leyb Halpern  
(Translated by Julian Levinson)

## In Sobvey

(Note: Yiddish is written in Hebrew characters. What follows is the poem transliterated into Latin script.)

Fartog.  
Ikh, a mider fun a nakht mit vayn  
Un vayber-sheynkeyt  
For aheym.  
Un er, tsunoyfgemisht  
Fun koytik leym mit tifus-gelkeyt  
Fort di velt bazorn mit zayn pratse.  
Shoklen mir zikh beyde  
In dem hoyz dem ayzernem,  
Vos flit mit undz af redlekh  
Durkh dem maynlangn lokh, dem vistn,  
Unter shteyn un erd.  
Kukn mir zikh on,  
Ikh—mit oygn shlof-farkholemt durkh briln,  
Un er—mit shpares tzvey azoy in zayn punim,  
Vos moln oys far mir a bod a vayberish,  
Vuhin ikh hob amol  
Farganevet (durkh a lekhl bloyz)  
Arayngelukht.

Shoklen mir zikh beyde ot-azoy.  
Ze ikh im (vi af a kino-layvnt)  
A ferd aroysshlepn fun shtal  
Un aynshpanen.  
Ze ikh in der hoykh  
Af ot-dem fuln ongapaktn vogn  
An ayngeloykert mentshl zitsn.  
Freg ikh durkhn fenster:  
—Tatele,  
Vu forstu in a regn ot aza fartog?  
Entfert er mir: Af yarid, mayn zundl,  
Af yarid, mayn zundl.  
Her ikh vi di reder skripen shoyn,  
Shray ikh mitn nezl tsugeprest tsum shoyb  
For gezunt, mayn tatele  
Entfert er mir: Zay gezunt, mayn zundl.  
Klingt zayn kol vi durkh a vant in regn.  
Dakht zikh mir, az far a berele farshtelt  
Hot zikh mayn tatele.  
Makh ikh: Boo-Boo-Hoo.

Shoklen mir zikh beyde ot-azoy,  
Er—dos dorf mit ferd un shtal,  
Un ikh—dos shtetl lebn dorf  
Mit shul un bod un mit a hamerl  
Vos ruft tsu dinen got fartog  
In ale lodns.  
Bakukt er mayne shikh,  
Batroyert er dabay dos kelbl efsher,  
Vos r'hot amol farkoyft—

(no stanza break)

Aher tsu kumen.  
Bakuk ikh af zayn shoys  
Dos pekl, vos er halt.  
Her ikh, vi ikh daven gikh un gikher  
Tsu konen oyfesn di pozshimkes mit smetene,  
Vos vartn shoyn af mir.  
Dakht zikh mir a shtikl khazir-fleysh  
Fun pekl zayns krikht aroys  
Un krikht arayn in mayn shema yisroel, vos ikh zog  
Shtupt zikh oykh arayn  
A shtikl kez, vos shtinkt,  
Ineynem mit a shtikl broyt a hartn.  
Vekn zey vi fun a beyzn kholem af  
Di shimen-esrey oykh  
Farshart zi in a vinkl zikh un veynt.  
Boygt zikh tsu dos khazir-fleysh  
Un shrayt arayn in oyer ir a lid  
Vos ikh hob in der opere gehert amol  
Tsit zikh der shema-yisroel oys  
Vi yezus afn tselem  
Un heybt on yomern zayn eli, eli.  
Nemen zikh baym hant  
Dos broyt ineynem mitn kez vos shtinkt  
Un reven heyzerik, vi goyim tsvey batrunkene,  
Di marselieze un nokh epes azoyne lider—  
Dakht zikh mir, az ale odern  
In mir tseshpringen.  
Vilt zikh mir antloyfn—  
Oysbahaltu zikh vu ergets—  
Shlaydert mikh a hant a harte, vi fun ayzn,  
Af a dakh aroyf a shvindldikn hoykhn.  
Her ikh, vi dos broyt mit kez  
Un der shema-yisroel un dos khazir-fleysh  
Ineynem mit der shimen-esrey untu  
Makhn a gevald men zol a leyter brengen,  
Ikh zol tsurik aropgeyn  
Iz nishto aza min leyter.  
Lakh ikh fun der hoykh arunter,  
Biz se hengt aroys di tsung bay mir fun pakhed.  
Meynen zey, ikh bin a shed gevorn,  
Vos vayzt zey gehenem-kuntsn vi a kloun in tsirk.  
Shrekn zey zikh untu itlekher  
Azoy vi ikh do oybn  
Tsvishn erd un volkns.  
Tsesharn zey zikh in di vinklen untu  
Itlekher far zikh un veynen,  
Azoy vi ikh do oybn,  
Tsvishn erd un volkns.—

—Moyshe-Leyb Halpern

## AMERICAN YIDDISH POETS

(continued from page 63)

Jewish neighborhoods, these writers could not avoid a sense of isolation from America as a whole. Their language set them apart, as did their cultural background, their memories of the Old Country, and their sense of belonging to an international Jewish community more than a national American one. Even more to the point, perhaps, they were stranded somewhere between the East European shtetl and an America that already seemed a land of false promises. Such an experience made writers more attuned to their own yearnings, confusions, and fantasies. The inner mind became a waystation, so to speak, between more stable communal structures. An important literary journal published from 1921 to 1940 was in fact called *In Zikh (Inside the Self)*, as if the world outside the self was no longer of particular interest. So whereas the previous generation of Yiddish writers featured masters of prose fiction—the classic triad of Mendele, I.L. Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem—the new generations included poets of great sensitivity, introspection, and individuality. Yiddish prose flourished in more or less intact Jewish communities in Eastern Europe; poetry flourished in the confusion and disarray of New York.

Perhaps the most idiosyncratic (and certainly the most notorious) of the new young poets was Moyshe-Leyb Halpern. Born in the Galitzian shtetl of Zlochev in 1886, he attended a traditional *cheder* (Hebrew school) and was sent by his parents to Vienna at the age of thirteen to learn sign painting. In Vienna he moved in modernist circles and published his first poems in German. On his return to his hometown, he was inspired by the local poets to dedicate himself to Yiddish literature, which was then gaining prestige among socialists and Yiddishists as the authentic voice of the Jewish diaspora. Finally, to avoid the draft, Halpern moved to America in 1908, where he associated with a group of poets known as *Di Yunge* ("The Young

Ones"). But while other members of this group reached toward the purity of beauty, embracing the notion of art for art's sake, Halpern sought to open his poems to the brutal realities of poverty and psychological pain. His ideal was an anti-aesthetic poetry, a style that would speak directly to the reader and pierce the illusions of art. As he once wrote in a mock invocation to God: "O

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*For us Halpern's  
poetry offers a close-up  
of the Jewish  
immigrant free falling  
into the maelstrom of  
New York.*

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*helf mir, Got, / Az eklen zol fun mayne reyd, / Vi fun a toyter katz in mist* ("Oh, help me, God, / Let my speech be disgusting / As a dead cat rotting in garbage." Trans. Kathryn Hellerstein.)

In 1922, Halpern was hired by the newly-formed Communist daily *The Freiheit* as a contributing editor. Sympathetic to the paper's criticisms of capitalist society, he wrote poems that cried out against the degrading conditions of modern life. As for his colleagues' political solutions, he was somewhat more skeptical. Though he went on speaking tours throughout the Northeast and Midwest, billed as *der groyser proletarisher dikbter* ("the great proletarian writer"), Halpern ultimately found more solace in poetry itself than in plans for revolution. Eventually he left the newspaper, after being criticized for the obscurity of his poetry and the coarseness of his language.

For us Halpern's poetry offers a close-up of the Jewish immigrant free falling into the maelstrom of New York. The poem on pages 62 and 63, "In the Subway," was first published in *The Freiheit* in 1923 and reprinted in Halpern's 1924 collection *The Golden Peacock*; it appears here in English

translation for the first time. The poem focuses on a figure in extremis, searching for moorings in the turbulence of modern life. While traveling in a New York subway (a popular motif among the New York Yiddish poets), the poet studies his fellow passenger, whose foreignness brings on an internal crisis. Memories of home fail to provide an antidote: returning in his mind to the shtetl of his youth, he encounters his father inexplicably bidding him farewell. The poem's middle section unravels a surrealist meditation on cultural and personal loss and on the corrupting effects of American life. The most surprising moment comes midway through the final stanza, when the poet compares the prayer he utters to Jesus on the cross. References to Jesus were not uncommon in Yiddish poetry of the time, but Halpern's image is particularly jolting. At a moment of ostensible Jewish piety, we discover a heretical image, as if the poet were imagining some new hybrid identity beyond the polarities of Jew and Christian. Finally, the poem concludes with a mournful (and certainly not beatific) vision of lonely souls retreating into solitude. □

### Further Reading

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