Moyshe-Leyb Halpern
A Modernist Yiddish Poet in New York

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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 (continued on page 66)
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)
Yawning 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 grovel: 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.

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 Shmonех 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 Shmonех Esrey
All make a big commotion, scurrying 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.

—Neyshle Leib 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-shaynkeyt
For abeym.
Un er, tsoynungemish!
Fun koytik leytn mit tifus-gelkeyt
Port di velt baaron mit zayn pratse.
Shoklen mir zikh beyde
In dem hoyz dem ayzernem,
Vos fit mit undz af redlek
Durkh dem maynlanqen lokh, dem vistn,
Uner shteyn un erd.
Kukn mir zikh on,
Ikh--mit oygn shlof farkholem durkh briln,
Un er--mit shpares tvey azoy in zaya punim,
Vos moln oys far mir a bod a vaybertish,
Vuhin ikh hob amol
Farganevet (durkh a lekh bloyz)
Arayngekukt.

Shoklen mir zikh beyde ot-azoy.
Ze ikh im (vi af a kino-laynt)
A ferd aroyshlep fun shtal
Un aynahpanen.
Ze ikh in der hoykh
Af ot-dem fun ogepakim Vogt
An ayngheykert menshlc zitn.
Freg ikh durkhin fentster:
—Tatele,
Vu forstu in a regn ot aza fartog?
Entfert er mir: Af yarid, mayn zundl.
Af yarid, mayn zundl.
Her ikh vi di redar skripeyn shoym,
Shray ikh mtt mitz tsgupfrest tsurn 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 farshelt
Hot zikh mayn tatele.
Makh ikh: Boo-Boo-Itoo.

Shoklen mir zikh beyde ot-azoy,
Er—dos dorf mit ferd un shtal,
Un ikh—dos shiet lbn dorf
Mit shul un bod un mit a hamefr
Vos ruft tsu dien got fartog
In ale lodns.
Bakukt er mayne shikch.
Batroyet er dabray dos kibel efshar,
Vos f'hot amol farkoyt—

Aher tsu kumen.
Bakuk ikh af zayn shoy
Dos pekl, vos er halt.
Her ikh, vi ikh daven gikh un gikher
Tsuo koren ofesem di pozshimkes mit smetene,
Vos vartn shoyn af mir.
Dakht zikh mir a shikli khazir-fleyst
Fun pekl zayns krifkh aros
Un krikht arayn in mayn shema yisroel, vos ikh zog
Shuert zikh oykh arayn
A shikli kez, vos shtinkt,
Inceymem mit a shikli broyt a hartn.
Vekn zey vi fun a boyzn kholom af
Di shimen-esrey oykh
Farshart zin in a vinkl zikh un veyst.
Boygt zikh tsu dos khazir-fleyst
Un shrayt arayn in oyct ir a lid
Vos ikh hob in der opere geber amol
Tsik zikh der shema-yisroel oys
Vi yezus afn teleson
Un heybt on yornem zayn eli, eli.
Nemen zikh baym hant
Dos broyt inceynem mitz kez vos shtinkt
Un reven heyerik, vi goyim tsvey batrunkene,
Di marneliece un nokh epes azoyne lider—
Dakht zikh mir, az ale odern
In mit tsebpringen.
Vitik zikh mir antloyfn—
Oysbahaltn zikh vu ergets—
Shlaydert mikh a hant a harte, vi fun ayzn,
Af a dakh aroyf a shvindldkhn hoykhn.
Her ikh, vi dos broyt mit kez
Un der shema-yisroel un dos khazir-fleyst
Inceynem mit der shimen-esrey untin
Makhn a gevald men zol a leyter brengen,
Ikh zol tsurik aropgyn
Iz nishto aza min leyter.
Lakh ikh fun der hoykh arunter,
Bisz se hengt aros di tsung bay mir fun pakbed.
Meynen zey, ikh bin a shed gevorn,
Vos vayzt zey gehemem-kuntsn vi a klon in tsirk.
Shrekyn zikh untin ilbcher
Azoy vi ikh do oybn
Tsvishn erd un volkn.
Tsehpzn zey zikh in di vinklen untin
Itlelker far zikh un veyst,
Azoy vi ikh do oybn,
Tsvishn erd un volkn.—

—Moyshe-Levy Halpern

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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 generation 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 Younge (“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

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

helf mir, Got. / Az oklen zol fun mayne reyd. / Vi fun a toyer kats 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 proletarishe dikhner (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 shitet of his youth, he encounters his father inexplicably bidding him farewell. The poem’s middle section unravels a surrealistic 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 of Jesus in American solitude 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

