

**The Poetry of Jewish Memory, Session 2**

Drisha Institute for Jewish Education

4/25/2023

Gershom Scholem, from a (perhaps unsent) letter to Franz Rosenzweig:

"This country is a volcano, and language is lodged within it. People here talk of many things that may lead to our ruin, and more than ever of the Arabs. But there is another danger, much more uncanny than the Arab nation, and it is a necessary result of the Zionist enterprise: what of the "actualization" of the Hebrew language? That sacred language on which we nurture our children, is it not an abyss that must open up one day? The people certainly don't know what they are doing. They think they have secularized the Hebrew language, have done away with its apocalyptic point. But that, of course, is not true: the secularization of the language is no more than a manner of speaking, a ready-made expression. It is impossible to empty the words so bursting with meaning, unless one sacrifices the language itself....

Language is name. The power of language is enclosed in the name; the abyss of language is sealed within it. Now that we have invoked the ancient names day after day, we can no longer hold off the forces they contain. Once awakened, they will appear, for we have summoned them...

Hebrew words, all that are not neologisms but have been taken from the treasure-house of our "good old language," *On Our Language* are full to bursting with meaning. A generation that takes over the most fruitful part of our tradition - its language - cannot, though it may ardently wish to, live without tradition. When the day finally comes and the force shored up in the Hebrew language is unleashed, when the "spoken/" the content of language, takes form once again, our people will find itself confronted anew with that sacred tradition, signifying the choice before them: either to submit or to perish. Because at the heart of such a language, in which we ceaselessly evoke God in a thousand ways, thus calling Him back into the reality of our life, He cannot keep silent."

A quick reminder: our animating question: what argument is this poem making about the nature and experience of Jewish memory?

Aviya Kushner:

### **Why Don't You Write in Hebrew?**

Because I'm afraid of you, Isaiah,  
afraid I'll hear the six wings:  
Two to cover the face  
and two to cover the legs  
and two to fly—

And I ask how can I praise  
wings that cover feet and face?  
And how can I curse  
when you have already cursed with your carcasses  
of sleazy financiers,  
with your ugly and public deaths for those who squeeze  
the poor, the widowed, the temporarily weak?

You ask me to compete  
head-on with you, and I can't because I cannot hear  
in your presence.

You thunder so, in the space inside my left ear,  
that I cannot forget you,  
even for the length of a line, the weight of a tear.

## **Ancient Hebrew**

How close the villain is to the harp!  
Two vowels separate them, just as two small  
letters separate the harp from the generous.

Of course no one learns languages like this,  
because it's considered wrong, ridiculous,  
but why is that—that's what I want to know.  
Yes the villain can be as mesmerizing as the harp,  
yes evil can seem generous, in clever disguise. Yes all  
of them have their own rhythms, and all are close:  
Oh who has not felt the tingling of mischief and crime,  
sweet music of generosity and still, the lingering pluck  
of am-I-evil, am-I-bad-beneath-it-all?

I am giving and villainous and musical.  
In my body I carry clarity and crime and the harp.

Yehuda Amichai, translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell:

### **Huleikat - The Third Poem about Dicky**

In these hills even the oil rigs  
are already a memory. Here Dicky fell  
who was four years older than I and like a father to me  
in times of anguish. Now that I'm older than him  
by forty years, I remember him like a young son,  
and I an old grieving father.

And you who remember only a face,  
don't forget the outstretched hands  
and the legs that run so easily  
and the words.

Remember that even the road to terrible battles  
always passes by gardens and windows  
and children playing and a barking dog.

Remember the fruit that fell and remind it  
of the leaves and the branch,  
remind the hard thorns  
that they were soft and green in springtime,  
and don't forget that the fist, too,  
was once the palm of an open hand, and fingers.

translated by Chana Bloch:

## **Jews in the Land of Israel**

We forget where we came from. Our Jewish  
names from the Exile give us away,  
bring back the memory of flower and fruit, medieval cities,  
metals, knights who turned to stone, roses,  
spices whose scent drifted away, precious stones, lots of red,  
handicrafts long gone from the world  
(the hands are gone too).

Circumcision does it to us,  
as in the Bible story of Shechem and the sons of Jacob,  
so that we go on hurting all our lives.

What are we doing, coming back here with this pain?  
Our longings were drained together with the swamps,  
the desert blooms for us, and our children are beautiful.  
Even the wrecks of ships that sank on the way  
reached this shore,  
even winds did. Not all the sails.

What are we doing  
in this dark land with its  
yellow shadows that pierce the eyes?  
(Every now and then someone says, even after forty  
or fifty years: "The sun is killing me.")

What are we doing with these souls of mist, with these names,  
with our eyes of forests, with our beautiful children,  
with our quick blood?

Spilled blood is not the roots of trees  
but it's the closest thing to roots  
we have.

## **Ruhama**

Here in this wadi we lived during the war.  
Many years have passed since then, many victories  
and many defeats. I have gathered many consolations in my life  
and squandered them, many sorrows  
that I spilled in vain. I've said many things, like the waves  
of the sea at Ashkelon in the West  
that always keep saying the same thing.  
But as long as I live, my soul remembers  
and my body slowly ripens in the fires of its life story.  
The evening sky lowers like a bugle call over us,  
and our lips move like the lips of men in prayer  
:before there was a god in the world.  
Here we would lie by day, and at night  
we would go to battle.  
The smell of the sand is as it was, and the smell  
of the eucalyptus leaves  
and the smell of the wind.  
And I do now what any memory dog does:  
I howl quietly  
and piss a boundary of remembrance around me  
so no one else can enter.



## from **I Wasn't One Of the Six Million: And What is My Life Span?**

3

And what is my life span? I'm like a man gone out of Egypt:  
the Red Sea parts, I cross on dry land,  
two walls of water, on my right hand and on my left.  
Pharaoh's army and his horsemen behind me. Before me the desert,  
perhaps the Promised Land, too. That is my life span.

6

I wasn't one of the six million who died in the Shoah,  
I wasn't even among the survivors.  
And I wasn't one of the six hundred thousand who went out of Egypt.  
I came to the Promised Land by sea.  
No, I was not in that number, though I still have the fire and the smoke  
within me, pillars of fire and pillars of smoke that guide me  
by night and by day. I still have inside me the mad search  
for emergency exits, for soft places, for the nakedness  
of the land, for the escape into weakness and hope,  
I still have within me the lust to search for living water  
with quiet talk to the rock or with frenzied blows.  
Afterwards, silence: no questions, no answers.  
Jewish history and world history  
grind me between them like two grindstones, sometimes  
to a powder. And the solar year and the lunar year  
get ahead of each other or fall behind,  
leaping, they set my life in perpetual motion.  
Sometimes I fall into the gap between them to hide,  
or to sink all the way down.

From **Military Funeral at High Noon** by T. Carmi  
translated by Grace Schulman

A new military cemetery,  
full of fragrance.  
The gardeners come and go  
in death's greenhouse.

Her face. Her sons. His parents. His sons—

The angel who made them forget  
all the womb's wisdom  
when they saw the light of day,  
strikes them again.

Everything is ground down, razed, forgotten.

A different forgetting alters  
the father's bone structure,  
the veins' routes,  
the whites of the eyes.

A different forgetting alters  
the composition of the mother's blood,  
her skin color,  
the blacks of her eyes.

They will have to replace  
all their documents.  
Today they become strangers  
in a new country.

Immigrants in the land of the living.

Shirley Kaufman:

### **Brest Litovsk**

My mother remembered how she sat  
in the cart beside her father  
when he rode through the lands  
of the absent landlord collecting the rents.

It was near Brest Litovsk,  
the names kept changing and the peasants  
would stare at them and pay.

Peasant to grandfather, Pole to Jew  
each greasing the other,  
steps that went nowhere  
like the road to the border.

When the Cossacks came charging through the town  
they bolted the doors and windows  
and hid under the beds. They put pillows  
over the children's mouths  
to stop their cries.

There was no summer in this landscape,  
even the language disappeared.  
Fifty years later all she remembered  
was her father's white shirt,  
that he was always clean.

## **Reasons**

Keep trying to tell them why I am here  
but none of it's true:  
fabric I cling to  
the way a child drags her torn blanket  
in the dark.

And the stray cats mew between my ankles  
as if they remembered me.

We know what we want  
before we know who we are.

That's why the angels  
go up and down the ladder all night  
with our petitions.

That's why a woman  
opens her legs  
with her eyes closed.

That's why I came down  
out of the air, unsure  
as each of us in the first  
departure, everyone telling me  
this is home.

Itzik Manger:

### **I've Wandered Foreign Lands for Years**

I've wandered foreign lands for years,  
now I'm off to wander through my home.  
One pair of shoes, one shirt on my back,  
the stick in my hand—without it, what would I be?

I will not kiss your dust, like that great poet,  
though my heart is also full of song and pain.  
What would it mean to kiss your dust? I am your dust.  
And who, I ask, can kiss himself?

I'll stand in awe before Galilee's blue,  
wearing my ragged clothes,  
like a wandering prince who finds his blue  
when blue has been his neverending dream.

I will not kiss your blue, but only like a silent  
shmoneh esreh will I stand—  
what would it mean to kiss your blue? I am your blue,  
and who, I ask, can kiss himself?

I'll stand before your vast desert in contemplation,  
and will hear the camel-clop of generations past  
cradling wares and Torah on their humps,  
along the sand; and the ancient wandering-song

that quivers over the white-hot sand,  
dies away, remembers itself, and never wants to fade.  
I will not kiss your sand. No, ten times no.  
What would it mean to kiss your sand? I am your sand,  
and who, I ask, can kiss himself?