

**The Poetry of Jewish Memory, Session 3**

Drisha Institute for Jewish Education

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A Hasidic Tale via SY Agnon via Gershom Scholem:

“When the Baal Shem Tov had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire, and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the Maggid of Mezritch was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: we can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassow had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient: and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his chair and said: we cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.”

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

Yehuda Amichai, translated by Chana Bloch

### **The Real Hero**

The real hero of The Binding of Isaac was the ram,  
who didn't know about the collusion between the others.  
He was volunteered to die instead of Isaac.  
I want to sing a memorial song about him—  
about his curly wool and his human eyes,  
about the horns that were so silent on his living head,  
and how they made those horns into shofars when he was slaughtered  
to sound their battle cries  
or to blare out their obscene joy.

I want to remember the last frame  
like a photo in an elegant fashion magazine:  
the young man tanned and pampered in his jazzy suit  
and beside him the angel, dressed for a formal reception  
in a long silk gown,  
both of them looking with empty eyes  
at two empty places,

and behind them, like a colored backdrop, the ram,  
caught in the thicket before the slaughter,  
the thicket his last friend.

The angel went home.  
Isaac went home.  
Abraham and God had gone long before.  
But the real hero of The Binding of Isaac  
is the ram.

Stanley Moss

### **Letter to Noah**

Greetings, I hope you will not be disappointed I survived  
the flood riding the back of a giant turtle. Adrift  
in the waters of chaos, above the ice-covered mountain ranges  
that had become part of the deep,  
I saw the sun and moon embrace in terror.  
I kept my senses counting the days that had no name,  
I heard all manner of newborn things  
crying for their mothers—nearly the last living sounds.  
We swam through islands of angry faces, an ocean of rodents  
devouring each other, great serpents of children knotted  
together in whirlpools. I saw the beauty of jungle birds  
that in mid-afternoon filled the horizon like a sunset.  
Once I saw your vainglorious ark, three stories of lights,  
your windows filled with riches,  
a woman on the deck, her wet blouse  
clinging to her breasts—I was that close.  
If you had heard my call, saw me alive,  
would you have reached down to save me?  
It wouldn't have been the end of the world.  
But you of course were following orders, a tune as old  
as Adam's song to Eve before the serpent.  
Then after all the days of nights  
I heard my turtle gasp, "Hallelujah."  
I turned and saw the rainbow, the raven and the dove,  
in sunlight the waters that reflected nothing, receding,  
Noah, I think I am as grateful for the rainbow as you.  
I have survived, corrupt and unclean.

Shirley Kaufman

### **Job's Wife**

She has to pity him after what happened,  
rocking alone like that in the rubble,  
covered with boils. She's watched him scrape  
his sores with anything broken, half naked  
and bleeding, scraping his soul.

And if she staggers out of the dark  
to hound him when he is busy  
with his own grief, surely he'll speak  
for her too, three daughters, seven sons,  
aren't they in this together?

She's wearing the slip she had on  
when the house was blitzed and everything  
with it: children, donkeys, we know  
how many. And how, with nothing to lose,  
she begs him to damn God and die.

He's all that's left, beyond what they  
used to be for each other, abuse  
or solace. He scratches his scabs  
and tells her she's foolish. She stares  
at the rancid sky.

Rodger Kamenetz

## **Pilpul**

Rabbi, if a child is born with two heads  
which head should wear the *yarmulke*,  
on which head the *tefillin*?

Some say the right head and some  
say the left. All quote Torah.

Some say both heads, just in case.

But if a man is born with two heads  
he is always confused. He never knows  
on which head to wear the *yarmulke*.

Two heads and only two eyes.  
He walks toward himself  
in the old cemetery, where the rabbis  
are buried. There seems to be some  
disagreement: some are saying  
we are dead, others, we are alive,  
some say both, all quoting Torah.

Willis Barnstone

### **The Worm**

My fathers come to me in an old film:  
a peddler and tailor in the new world;  
in the old, the image blurs, unknown.  
I must be a bit like them. Old photos  
say, look, here you were with a white beard,  
black hat, a dark faith in the One God.  
But they stood dully in the light and were  
despised. They wandered here. It seems  
impossible—here where I work and now  
a plane hangs like a shiny wasp  
in the air. With no God or fear I am  
a free son: with the worm eating my heart.

Yehuda Amicha

### **Tourists**

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.  
They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,  
They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall  
And they laugh behind the heavy curtains  
In their hotels.  
They have their pictures taken  
Together with our famous dead  
At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb  
And on the top of Ammunition Hill.  
They weep over our sweet boys  
And lust over our tough girls  
And hang up their underwear  
To dry quickly  
In cool, blue bathrooms.

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower. I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!" I said to myself: "redemption will come only if their guide tells them, 'You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left down and a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family.'"



Yehuda Amichai, translated by Chana Bloch

### **Poem Without an End**

Inside the brand-new museum  
there's an old synagogue.

Inside the synagogue  
is me.

Inside me  
my heart.

Inside my heart  
a museum.

Inside the museum  
a synagogue,

inside it  
me,

inside me  
my heart,

inside my heart  
a museum.