

AN ANTHOLOGY
OF
MODERN
YIDDISH LITERATURE

Compiled and edited by

JOSEPH LEFTWICH

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Joseph Leftwich

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Jerusalem and Yiddish Literature

There never was such a need for the Jew as an individual to search his soul and to see where he stands in the world as now. Now, after that indescribable disaster of the Hitler period. After all the poetry and the prose works written about that disaster it has not yet been pictured or comprehended. Now after the establishment of the State of Israel, which is still forced to be armed, military, instead of being peaceful and Messianic, as we all ardently desire. Jews are building a State because they are both persecuted and just, and want to do justice. Now when we accept it as a historic and at times a mystic fact that it is against the six million Jews destroyed in Eastern Europe that we have the rise to-day of over six million Jews in America. It is something we must reckon with. Now, in face of all the circumstances, it is tremendously important for every individual Jew to search his soul and render an account to himself.

There isn't in the world to-day anyone who has like the individual Jew simultaneously stepped over the threshold of national redemption and yet has the feeling that the world around him is a gaping abyss luring him on to fling himself down and be lost in it. Yes, simultaneously redeemed and lost, confused, both a riddle to the world and a still greater riddle to himself. And this does not exclude the individual in Israel. For never has the Jew so felt the secret of his existence—both the wonder and the restlessness of his existence. And indeed, here on the soil of Jerusalem, on this earth where our foot touches this forever sanctified ground. The secret and the tragedy of our existence in the world. The secret and the tragedy of our contradictions, which need straightening out; the secret of our wonderful but blood-drenched millenia hovers over the face of the earth; the secret of our wanderings through so many exiles and dispersions; the secret of our struggles, our martyrdoms, our revolts, our Messianic uprisings and collapses; the secret of our frightening seclusions and God-visions; the secret of our wonder-men in darkest poverty; of our lowly water-carrier hidden saints, by whose merit the world exists; of our Gaonim, our great Rabbis and scholars, those of us who sit on the ground and mourn because of our Exile, who have raised this mourning to holiness; the secret of those of us who go to the barricades and to the gallows; the secret of our Shlomo Molkos and Hirsh Lekerts; of our Baal Shems and our Brenners; the secret of our Trumfeldors and Anilewiczses; our Vilnas and our history-transforming Ein Harods.

Here, on the soil of Jerusalem I say, as I have said it over and over again, that the Golus, the Exile, is bad, is ugly, and we must be redeemed from it. But the Jew in Golus was wonderful, glorious, and it is a pride to be descended from this glory. Poverty is dark, dismal, black, but the poor man is purity itself. Prison is darkness and gloom, but the prisoner, if he is guiltless is sublime. The Inquisition is criminal, murderous, blasphemy, but the Jew in the cells of the Inquisition was holy.

Why do I say this? To emphasize our unique worth through thousands of years, which must never in any situation be minimized or, God forbid, denied by ourselves.

What I am aiming at is to bring out the idea, my profoundest belief, that the basis of the life of every Jew, both in the State of Israel and outside is not negative but positive, not denial but affirmation. The foundation and the secret of our existence is always an intimate linking on and continuity. It must never be conceived in terms of a sharp commencement, a Genesis. Only once was the word Genesis used—when God created the world. Since then everything is in the process of flow, of lines that extend and bear within them the great desire to complete themselves in circles. The circle, as I see it, is the supreme achievement touched by the wings of God. I would like to hope that our Jewish history is now undergoing the process of completing itself within its circle, where every dot, every stroke is an essential ring in the circle, in this chain, where the smallest detail must not be profaned, must not drop out, for if you cast out the slightest stroke the whole circle breaks up.

I say this as a warning against the danger of the idea that would conceive the rise of the State of Israel as a Genesis, broken off from our whole yesterday, with all its characteristics, liberated completely from all yesterday's influences. A Genesis, a something sprung up out of itself, like a leap over the generations of two thousand years. And here I would like to take up the view that Ben Gurion expressed in his correspondence with Professor Nathan Rotenreich. With many of his judgments about our history and about Messianism I am in complete agreement. But I hold his idea of making a leap, jumping over two thousand years of Golus straight back into the three thousand years ago, what he calls the Bible atmosphere, I consider that dangerous. Not because I don't value the Bible, but on the contrary, because I hold that the true bond between our people, between the individual Jew and the Bible was made not in the days when the Bible was in process of creation, but precisely in the two thousand years of Golus, of Exile. It was in the Exile that our people moulded its grand image. The Prophets entered into the hearts of our people only in the generations of Exile. The same with the Psalms. The same with the whole Torah.

In general, when we say People of the Bible, what does it mean in concrete terms? We must see the individual Jew in this. I hold that the Golus figure Sarah Bath Tuvim is a more Biblical figure than Bath Sheba, for whom King David committed plain murder of an innocent man.

Yes, Bath Tuvim is a nobler figure than Bath Sheba. And the young Jewish generation, both in Israel and everywhere should know more about Bath Tuvim than about Bath Sheba. I hold that the stories of a Jew who is a martyr figure are more Biblical than the story of the concubine in Gibeah. I hold that the story of the young shoemaker's apprentice Hirsh Lekert who fired a bullet into the head of the Governor-General of Vilna for having Jewish workers flogged on the First of May, and went to the gallows for it is no less Biblical than the story of the young shepherd boy David who slung a stone at the head of the Philistine giant Goliath. Yes, that is something Jewish children should learn about, not making the leap over this and similar wonderful great Jewish events. They should see the living simple Jewish man with his full heroism. Not as the conception of some new thing, the rise of a new Genesis. It must all be brought within the process of continuity, back to the lap of its lawful mother, the past, to grow naturally into the future.

Every prolonged exploitation of the idea that is called New Beginning in relation to our Jewish national revolution must lead to both a national and a cultural tragedy, to decline.

We had a cruel, brutal lesson not only with German Fascism, with Hitlerism, which set itself up with the idea of a German New Beginning. We had the same cruel, brutal lesson with Bolshevism, in all its forms, from Lenin to Stalin and to its present representatives. We have seen how this mad idea of a supposed New Beginning worked, to change into the complete contrary of what had been hoped at first. The dreadful tragedy of that part of our people living in the Soviet Union began and developed there so fatally not only because of the hideous Stalinist dialectic alone, but because the Jewish Communist leaders and writers who became complete masters over Jewish culture and Jewish intellectual life in the Soviet Union and the other countries under Soviet Russia's influence had—even more so than the Russian leaders and writers—fallen into a terrible Genesis trauma—the idea that Jewish history started from 1917, and that everything which existed before was nothing but mustiness and mildew. The Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union didn't like it when we warned them of the danger of conceiving Jewish life as having begun with 1917. To-day they can't even admit their mistake, for they are all lying dead, slain by the slayer whom they deified. But even if this had not happened, and they had not been destroyed by the Stalin idol, they would have succumbed of themselves if they had clung to their mania of seeing the history of

our people only in the light of their own New Beginning.

I am dwelling on this point because it is necessary to emphasise again and again that it is a calamity for the world to adopt the theory that a man can create a yes out of a no, that in order to bring redemption, or to turn oneself into the image of a World Redeemer one may or one should walk arm in arm with Satan; that in order to bring love one may and should first get drunk with hate.

All this has a bearing on how we to-day value the tie between Israel and the Golus. How we value the concrete individual Jew in the State of Israel and the concrete individual Jew in Golus. What are they one to the other?

I use the word Golus, not the camouflage term Diaspora. Though I do not figure as a Zionist I hold that a Jew who for one reason or another is not in Israel, in the Land from which his people was driven out and to which it must return, that Jew lives in Golus, in Exile. Even America, as I believe, is on the banner of Jewish History Golus. I say it about myself. I am in Golus. Though I love America, both for herself, and because on her earth millions of our people have found freedom. But it is clear to me that as long as a Jew carries in an active form within himself the destiny of present-day Jewish history and his bond with the great unbroken Jewish past, then no matter where he is he longs and yearns for the return to the Land of Israel. A Jew who consciously discards this longing, consciously abandons it, denies and forfeits, loses the main essential of his national biography, which basically is also his own personal biography. He has thrown away one of the most obvious features of his Jewish image.

I go further. And I say it with the knowledge of my own life experience, that a Jew in America who really feels that he is no longer in Golus, loses the essential point of being a Jew. But I also say that a Jew in Israel who declares that every Jew outside Israel has no longer any fundamental relationship with himself, or is at best something inferior, such a Jew in Israel saying such a thing—such a Jew too has lost the essential of being a Jew.

A Jew in Israel should be and is nationally a happier man, spiritually more at peace with himself, at home. And that should be and is the chief reason for envying him, and being drawn towards him. That is the everlasting emotion which draws us towards the Land of Israel, and is always a living factor in us. It does not mean however that it gives the present-day Israeli Jew the right to the arrogant assumption that he is not only at rest in his own home, but that he is also morally better, more ethical than his brother-Jew in Golus. We must never forget that the longing for the Land of Israel was always linked with the desire for justice and righteousness, for the ethical perfection of the individual Jew. For true Messianism. For the celestial Jerusalem.

But this desire, this longing always went together in partnership with the idea of the Perfect Man, the Adam Elyon, over the entire wander-world. In the world of suffering and purified grief. This Messianic longing was never arrogant, egocentric, contemptuous with regard to any Jew living in some forsaken spot. Whoever introduces in the relationship of Jew and Jew the approach of superior and inferior, of one sort of Jew who is better and another sort of Jew who is worse, undermines the foundations of our people. At best he is creating a kind of 'co-existence' between the Israeli Jew and the Golus Jew.

I say this because the argument and the rating of superior Jews and inferior Jews still goes on in part of the Israeli Press and Literature. Sometimes openly, sometimes hidden. It has a definite bearing on our whole national-culture problem, our education problem, our literature problem, our language problem. We have here the tragedy reflected in our life between Yiddish and Hebrew and culture in Israel and culture outside Israel.

I confess I am tired of our culture and language tragedies. I am too proud to go about to-day demanding respect from Jews for Yiddish. I do my thing, as I am called upon to do it. I know too that whoever we may be we are all of us not the ultimate judges to make the final decisions. Not we—the party involved—are the full and absolute lords over our history, even if we are at certain moments its masters and builders. There is a higher Power above us. I must say it fills me with fear and grief that large sections of Jews in America are flinging out Yiddish and Hebrew from their spiritual life—the two languages that both gave us great national values, a great national literature, full of our own kind of people, with our own songs and art-forms and symbols. They are transferring completely to English, to an Anglo-Jewish literature, which must be without roots, without deep folk symbolism. And with few exceptions it must therefore be essentially empty. It can't be otherwise. Without Yiddish and without Hebrew it is impossible to-day to create in any other language any national Jewish culture worthy of the name.

I am also distressed when I hear people talk of Hebraising America at the cost of an ousted Yiddish—which means in effect completely Anglicising Jewish life in America. Before one Jewish house in America is Hebraised hundreds, thousands of Jewish houses will be Anglicised. There is a similar process at work in Israel in relation to the Yiddish language and to everything created by Jews in Golus. It affects not only the world of the writer, the poet, the novelist. It affects the world of every single individual Jew.

I know there have lately been big changes in certain circles in Hebrew literature in Israel in favour of Yiddish and in favour of our whole culture created in Golus, in favour of our entire Jewish existence, our Jewish life in

Golus. I am of course delighted with these changes. But then I read that a Hebrew writer in Israel has said in a public speech that with Yiddish the Golus Jew, the Ghetto Jew went to the gas chamber; and with Hebrew the Israeli Jew went to the Battle of Sinai. I know it was only one individual who uttered this nonsense. But I attach great importance to what is said by an individual, especially when he is speaking in public. I must add that I have heard from several others muttered undertones which are not far removed from this terrible nonsense, which goes together with a tendency to ignore, to go out of their way to avoid even mentioning the great Yiddish literature, which has played and is still playing a wonderful rôle to-day in the life of our people. It is only one remove from the speaker who can talk with contempt of the Jew who went with Yiddish to the gas chamber, thinking that in this way he was elevating the Israeli Jew who went to Sinai. He is mistaken. The affront to the Jew who went to the gas chamber is an affront also to the Jew who went to Sinai. For it is a lie to say that with Yiddish the Golus Jew went only to the gas chamber. With Yiddish the Golus Jew went also to the barricades and fought in the battles of the revolution. With Yiddish the Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto fought almost unarmed in the Rising against the powerful German army. The Baal Shem spoke Yiddish, this great Golus Jew who lit the fire of Chassidism. Rabbi Nachman Bratzlaver told his marvellous stories in Yiddish. Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Berditchever spoke in Yiddish direct to God. The Bratzlaver Chassidim in the Warsaw Ghetto Rising cried out in Yiddish, 'Jews, don't despair! Never despair! We have in Yiddish created a great literature. And even if it should be true that the Golus Jew went with Yiddish only to the gas chamber, I can only say this: Bow down before this Yiddish! Bow down before this Golus Jew! Bow down and kiss the ground on which this Golus Jew trod on his holy way to the gas chamber!

Our Yiddish poetry has elevated these Jews who went to the gas chambers, rightly so, with great love—these bright, radiant Jews. This term, radiant Jews applied to the Jews who went to the gas chambers belongs to a wonderful contemporary Yiddish poet in America, Jacob Glatstein. And in Yiddish too a wonderful Yiddish poet in Israel, Abraham Sutzkever has sung with radiant words the march to Sinai.