

Paralysis and the Poet:

Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's "Zog ikh tsu mir" and Abraham Sutzkever's "Ot bin ikh dokh"

... the heart cannot go to the spring but remains facing it and yearns and cries out...:

—The Seven Beggars, By Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav

Moyshe-Leyb Halpern and Abraham Sutzkever developed as poets in distant spheres of Yiddish creative writing. Halpern, struggling to establish himself in the still-new world of early-20th century Yiddish-speaking New York, tried to preserve an individual identity within the pervasive reach of secular Yiddish culture. Sutzkever, during his years as a young man in pre-World War II Vilna, cultivated an inclination toward classical imagery that distanced him from other developing Yiddish writers in his immediate milieu. Given the rapid changes in Yiddish poetry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the 27 years separating their births also placed these two poets in separate generations of Yiddish poetry. Nonetheless, both men, though geographically and generationally at a distance, struggled with writing and with the meaning of the act of writing, and both men confronted this struggle explicitly within their poetry, though in very different forms. In the two poems under consideration here, Sutzkever's *Ot bin ikh dokh* and Halpern's *Zog ikh tsu mir*, the two poets express poignant and sometimes even desperate struggles with creative paralysis in the face of the ego-centric isolation of poetry. Despite the dramatic structural differences in the two poems, the identification of similarities in theme and symbolism illuminates important aspects of both poems, as well as of the poetic voices of the individual writers.

Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's *Zog ikh tsu mir*, published in 1919, presents a nuanced glimpse into the isolated world of a brilliant and rebellious poet. In this particular poem, two competing aspects of Halpern's poetic persona argue in an intimate tone that is ultimately rendered futile by fundamental and irreconcilable misunderstanding. The tension between the two voices in the

poem illuminates the paralysis which the super-ordinate speaker—the “poet” himself—experiences as a result of his overwhelming desire to create and find meaning. Torn between competing urges to connect with the physical world and to detach from it, the poet is rendered powerless.

The poem, consistent with much of Halpern’s work from this period, is structured simply, even primitively. As Hrushovski notes in his study *On Free Rhythms in Modern Yiddish Poetry*, “A whole series of poets [including Halpern] was aroused to writing in the linguistically immanent rhythms of the folksong (though not according to their external free forms)... Their poems were not intended to be folkloristic, but close to the folk in their linguistic expression.”¹

In *Zog ikh tsu mir*, the first voice, hereon referred to as the antagonist, pronounces one couplet in which he enjoins the protagonist to leave the house where he appears to be confined both by and against his own will. This is then followed by a set of five couplets spoken by the second voice, hereon referred to as the protagonist, the explicit “I” in the poem. By identifying the “I” with the reluctant, dissatisfied protagonist, Halpern sends a message to the reader that this voice is dominant in his poetic persona. It seems fair to assume that Halpern intended that the reader √ connect this protagonist with their image of Halpern himself.

The repetitive structure of the poem lulls the reader into a sense of familiarity. There are few conspicuous loan words from English or German, contributing to the intentionally unsophisticated quality of the poem. The rhyme scheme throughout the poem is ostentatiously simplistic, even banal; there are no truly unexpected or innovative end-of-line rhymes. Every line has three feet, though a few of them are metrically rough, with a pause instead of a spoken syllable. In general, what few imperfections there are in the rhyme and meter of the poem serve to emphasize the rustic, folksy feel of the poem, rather than to highlight certain words or images.

¹ Hrushovski 77

Exceptions to these generalizations will be discussed below, but it is important to recognize that, contestant with other poems in Halpern's oeuvre, this poem is structurally calculatedly unrefined. The very title of the poem, moreover, exemplifies the poet's (not the protagonist's) intentionality and studied lack of artifice. He, or at least his poetic persona, immediately informs the reader that the two voices in the poem are contained within the poet himself; right from the very title of the poem, he aggressively fights any possible pretensions toward mysticism or egoism in the presentation of the poem.

The poem begins with the antagonist reminding the protagonist that he should go out onto the street, gently, even pleadingly, chastising him for standing by the window. The protagonist has, it seems to the antagonist, forgotten that exit out into the world is an option. By beginning the poem with an image of the protagonist watching from the window, Halpern emphasizes the poet's distance from, yet hyper-awareness of, the trivialities of everyday life. The scene is placeless thus far; it could be set in a shtetl, or it could be in New York, and this placelessness helps to set the scene of the poem outside of time.

The protagonist responds discontentedly that the street is full of commoners—merchants, machines, children, animals, and drunkards. The image he creates is of the street as loud and raucous, unbeautiful, anti-aesthetic. The characters in the street are portrayed as immune to beauty—even nature itself seems crude and crass in this context. In the protagonist's vision, the train is no miracle of human innovation, but a gross perversion of natural flight. The children in the street are not angels of innocence, but dying animals, suffocating, trapped in the deceptive nets of social existence. The childish rhymes emphasize the noisy crudeness of the street—*kets* and *nets*, *teg* and *veg*. There is a slight hitch in the rhymes at *flien* and *ahin*, but this seems most like an intentional move toward anti-sophistry. I think, rather, that it demonstrates his imperfect grasp of metrics in the rough-and-tumble vernacular.

During the second exchange, the antagonist turns to the protagonist's external appearance, exhorting him to spruce up and to go out to the coffeehouse—presumably, where his friends and peers are waiting. The *kafehoyz* seems to represent the image, by then already famous, of the New York Yiddish poets mingling and consulting together in the coffeehouses of the Lower East Side. The antagonist's tone is less patient this time, turning to the imperative form and speaking more brusquely. In response, the protagonist's circle of disparagement expands. He again belittles the vulgar world of man, with its dirt and smells and pettiness. He is infuriated that these men are falling asleep at the table, presumably because he feels that they should be, like himself, suffering and creating rather than indulging themselves. The image in this stanza is of the bathhouse, and the poet it parodies this institution cruelly; its culture of male friendship is satirized until it becomes just another site where petty competition is enacted, another venue for the performance of base instincts. In fact, this metaphor is so important to the poet that he articulates it specifically twice in the single stanza. The men of the cosmopolitan American coffeehouse, whom the reader would most likely interpret as the poet's peers in the literary world, are intentionally desanctified; rather than fellow lovers of beauty and rhyme, they are portrayed as insensitive and primitive boors, consumed with the trivialities and frivolities of everyday life. Anti-erotic, the naked men lack refinement; they crawl about the bathhouse like animals or, even worse, sycophants, having lost touch with any potentially sanctified aspects of their physicality. They sit all in a row, indistinguishable and unthinking. Nevertheless, the protagonist seems more impatient than malicious, complaining: “*un redn oykh—zitst men un redt.*” The rhymes continue to be predictable; the only vaguely problematic rhyme is *heykh* and *oykh*, which rhymes smoothly if read in a Litvish dialect. In this stanza, the reader begins to

discern the protagonist's petulance—his resentment toward the world for his isolation is clear amid the condescending disparagement.

In the third stanza, the antagonist urges the protagonist to go visit old friends, to bring with him some flowers, perhaps as an offering of a bit of beauty (perhaps suggesting that he write a *pretty* poem?). The protagonist, again, responds bitterly, criticizing the animalistic and ignoble impulses of his fellow men. However, the tone changes abruptly in this section. The protagonist begins to expose his own unhappiness through repetitive rhetorical questions, almost begging to have his distaste for the human world proven wrong. The protagonist explicitly mentions *raykhkayt* twice in this stanza, thus emphasizing both his infamous lack of material wealth and his disgust with its overwhelming importance to the people around him, selling themselves for the sake of comfort. He yearns for there to be something bigger to yearn for other than garish riches. Yet his envy shines through his aversion, if not for their wealth, then for their blissful ignorance. He uses *yikhes* to describe their priorities, emphasizing the backwardness of their worldview. The antagonist points out that the protagonist is alone by choice, but the protagonist is consumed by wondering why they, those foolish people, should have each other when he is all alone. He thinks the others have become immune, desensitized to beauty, seduced by the shallowness of the American dream. Step by step, he punctures the illusion of everything that seems to him to be of highest value to other people—meaningless sensuality, fake luxury. In Halpern's poetic universe, *altsding trakht* and *raykhkayt lakht*, signaling the shameful omnipotence of wealth.

Finally, in the fourth section, the antagonist seems to have given up on drawing the protagonist into his immediate social world. He tells the protagonist to leave town, to go forth and wander. The protagonist, by now both desperate and unappeasable, acknowledges his own

paralysis, finally turning to *loshn-koydesh* to express yearnings for holiness as well its unattainability. He is trapped in his prison of indecision. He is alone, waiting for a poem to be his faith and comfort, his religion, his family, to save him from the vulgarity of his surroundings. Hebrew, religiosity, and faith, are the climax of the poem, but only in their absence. He affirms his faith in the word, waiting in the midst of the unformed world for the power of the word to bring forth light. He himself is in a primordial stage, outside of time and space, and the end of the poem is really a return to the pre-beginning. He, too, wants to create something out of nothing; but his designation of himself as a *mes* reminds us that he is a golem, conjured but powerless without divine intervention.

Why does the poet use two distinct voices to illustrate his paralysis, the incapacitating agony of creativity versus frozen stupefaction? The first speaker, the antagonist, is a nagging voice of conscience, the uninspiring anti-muse. The second speaker makes excuses, complaining about the world and its anti-aestheticism, its commonness, gaudiness. These two competing urges pin the essential, Janus-faced "I," to the ground. He indulges in supercilious judgment in order to distance himself from the world, but he is endlessly, unbreakably aware of the world. Within the crude limitations of raw materiality, both represented and parodied by the unsophisticated structure and rhyme schema of this poem, the poet struggles with his inherently egotistical desire to create something sublime, something sacred. The essential impossibility of his situation is perfectly expressed in the most anguished lines of the poem: *oykh do blaybn ken ikh nit mer, / vayl do blaybn iz mir tsu shver*. Nevertheless, the banality of the rhyme schema undermines the drama poem, highlighting the self-identified absurdity of his tragedy.

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Sutzkever's *Ot bin ikh dokh*, published in 1935 while the poet was living in Vilna, obliquely addresses the creative process and links together the poet's ideas about writing, faith, and love. Sutzkever utilizes tropes of nature and loneliness to render his isolating paralysis in poetic form, and by the end of this terribly moving poem, the reader is left with an unbearable sense of loss and abandonment.

As in Halpern's poem, there are two voices in *Ot bin ikh dokh*, an "I" and a "You." The division between the two voices, however, is less strict and the two speakers are not explicitly aspects of the same super-ordinate poetic voice. The poem is not structured stanzaically, though the rhyme scheme helps to break it up into fairly neat sections. Visually, the poem is divided into three length-sections, the first with the longest lines, and the last with the shortest. The length-based sectioning does not correspond with the rhyme-based sectioning.

The first four lines are rhymed A-B-B-A. In a brazen, almost foolhardy opening line, the speaker introduces himself and lays claim both to himself and to nature. No sooner is this done, than he indicates the agony of his position, placing himself within the complex system of nature's cruel callousness. In this poem, nature is active, frantic, all-powerful. The bees, the ultimate examples of the sublimation of the individual self, suck out the poet's essence for their own benefit, leaving him with nothing. Nature has turned against the poet, abandoning him, yet revealing to the poet that creation requires the sublimation of the self. The *dokh* is the hinge in this long opening line, indicating that he is blossoming *despite* the stinging songs, or perhaps even *because* of the pain the songs cause him. The next two lines introduce an amorphous "you," and here the reader might already sense an ethereal quality in the distant, disembodied voice. This serves to turn the poem into something of a mythic narrative—we are reminded of the over-gorgeous Sirens, or perhaps of Orpheus and Eurydice. The tension of yearning, evoking

imagery reminiscent of the Heart and the Spring in Rabbi Nachman of Bratslov's tale of the Seven Beggars, is presented in the opening in order to emphasize that this tension is the very essence of the poem.

The next five lines are structured C-D-E-D-C. This section concretizes the divine natural wilderness introduced in the first part, bringing it down to earth. In this second part, nature overcomes the materiality of the cities with a powerful storm. Structurally, this section centers around the middle line, the shortest and, up until now, only unrhymed line—*a regn hot farvisht di royte shpurn*—also the only line thus far that is exactly one complete sentence. These ambiguous *shpurn* seem to be the traces of the *alte, groe heym*, and only the storm is able to, through death, uncover that which was real and animate about the cities. After this structural break, from this scene of destruction, we are set up for the most important lines in the poem: “*un ikh bin geblibn far dayn nomen shteyn / vi farn bloen shpigl fun gevisn.*” These arresting lines conjure up the image of a lake, bright and blinding, unshaded, exposing the poet's vulnerability to an omniscient God.

The next section develops the theistic imagery further. Rhymed F-G-F-G, the motif becomes still more ethereal. The poet's hands are like branches, evoking Christological imagery of the crucifixion combined with the more intimate image of a house (haven/heaven) with a closed door. The poet's eyes, like the sails of a ship, signify the poet's wonder at his nearness to the divine *ruakh* hovering over the face of the deep. But still, his nearness to holiness is left unconsummated, just out of reach. Only his eyes can move, and no other limbs of his body. His feet, it seems, are glued to the floor in a desperate *amidah*. Thus, the tension between intimacy and isolation is extended, the familiar *du* juxtaposed with the grandiose image of a great Argo, of a Jason yearning for his Helen.

The next four lines are rhymed H-I-H-I, and the tension in the poem builds as the lines begin to shorten dramatically. The hostile door is suddenly opened by some unseen force. The rhymes in this section, *ofn* with *antlofn*, *nito* with *nito*, are almost absurdly simple as the poet tries to convey his infantilizing fear in the face of this sudden emptiness. The exact repetition of *bist nito* helps to convey the poet's shock and speechlessness. The reader senses that loneliness is rapidly descending, and the suddenness of the poet's stupefaction and blanched faced is delicately conveyed by the *mit a mol'* exposing the extent to which the poet is wrapped up in his awe and paralysis.

The final lines are rhymed J-K-K. The first line of the section, "*es blaybt a lid*," is unrhymed, emphasizing its isolation, its disconnection from the physical world, while the perfect rhyming of *geveyn* and *farshteyn* highlight the pain and finality of this detachment. The poet's journey, we have come to understand, has ultimately led to the negation of understanding. Now the reader understands how the poem is framed—the poet was chasing a formless voice, perhaps that of God or muse or conscience, or perhaps something else entirely. Perhaps his entire quest was illusory.

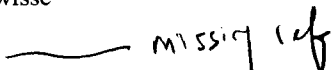
The imagery of poetic paralysis runs throughout this poem. It is a grandiose and tragic theme in this poet's portrayal. Returning to the pivotal lines—*un ikh bin geblibn far dayn nomen shteyn / vi farn bloen himl fun gevisn*—we see that loneliness is elevated yet higher in the face of the greatness of the Ineffable Name. Yearning for the sacred, barred from saying the name of God, the poet is wrestling with the idea of holiness. What can you do with a formless God? He is standing there, still, in the Holy of Holies, awestruck, speechless in the face of the greatness of an unseen, unreachable God. It is from this tension, like in Rabbi Nachman of Bratslov's tale of the Heart and the Spring, that the creative power of isolation is unleashed. But Sutzkever's

theistic imagery does not end here. Themes of Echo and Narcissus also resonate throughout this poem, the poet's persona embodying aspects of both mythological prototypes from the tragic tale. Through this analogy, we can see the poet fighting the egotism of poetry, like Echo, subverting his selfness until only his poetic voice remains. Echo's corporality disintegrates as Narcissus enters more and more into himself, until only the foolish cry remains of a thwarted love.

Published only sixteen years apart, these two poems reflect distinct trends in Yiddish poetry. The poems were written in relatively early stages of each man's poetic development. Both poets cultivated images of themselves as young (*Di Yunge*, *Yung Vilne*) but separate from the collective. Halpern, as Ruth Wisse has noted, though one of most celebrated of *Di Yunge*, "took pride in antagonizing his potential literary employers," and "encouraged this notion of himself as an uncompromising rebel."² Sutzkever also remained aloof from the surrounding artistic community, in part because "the leftist-oriented group looked askance at his poetry, lacking 'social' (that is, political and leftist) commitment."³ Because of their analogous approaches to developing an individualistic poetic persona, it is revealing to examine their poetry together.

The presentation of sound in these poems is a crucial element, but manifests very differently in each poem. Halpern, working from within the tumultuous immigrant world of the Lower East Side, uses sound to convey his imprisonment in the coarse din of his surroundings. This is an urban poem, a New York poem. He uses trite rhymes to show how he is trapped in a structure that is resistant to his talent. He places himself outside of his world, but is both

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disgusted and entranced by it. The rhymes, the very tone of the poem itself, mock the seriousness of his endeavor. The noise of the street drowns out his thoughts. The men talking in the bathhouse, the wealthy shrieking about satins and silks—Halpern uses these rhymes to show the dullness of their ceaseless, repetitive chatter.

Sutzkever's poem, in contrast, investigates silence. His muse calls, and her voice is muffled by distance. The *narishe geveyn* at the end of the poem, like the initial voice calling from afar, is disembodied. There is an ultimate disconnect between corporality and creativity that is reflected in the poetic writing of sound, its non-materiality underscoring the paralysis of the poet. The poet stands immobilized, trapped in front of the Name, that which can never be uttered, that which signifies omnipotence in its very unspokenness. At the conclusion of the poem, all that remains is a poem, but there is no one who can understand it, so it too, is silenced. The poet is mute, cannot answer his muse when she calls, and so must quest for her. Conscious of the symbolic greatness of the Jerusalem of Lithuania, the poet creates a vision of magnificent solitude to show his paralysis.

Both Halpern and Sutzkever explore religious motifs in their poetry in ways that reflect their respective personalities, biographies, artistic milieus, and discourses of spirituality. In *Ot bin ikh dokh*, Sutzkever, with his more complex theistic concept, invokes aspects of the Jewish liturgical tradition, Hellenistic mythological imagery, Christological parallels, and what Harshav has termed a pantheistic conceptualization of nature. This contrasts with Halpern, who, despite the religious vocabulary and messianic arc of the poem, shies away from overtones of spirituality. In both narratives, it is fairly clear that the speaker in the poem is presenting the creative process as the sacrifice of self for the sake of creating something new. Halpern withdraws from the community in the hope of finding inspiration from the divine. Sutzkever

evokes aspects of the Holy Trinity, suggesting a sort of paralyzed Jesus-Poet, unable to gain anything from his agony. In this retelling of the Jesus story, the rain has washed away the last traces of the Poet's tortured journey, but his suffering has not brought him close to God. Perhaps this is because the journey is taken passively, in the context of his paralysis: "*Es hobn shtet un un derfer zikh fun mir avekgerisn*" and "*s'iz alts antlofn.*" The world moves while he remains unmoving and pained.

Both poems can be read as creation narratives in which the poet presents himself as a creator impotent in comparison to God. Both poets express a thirst for some essential primordial savior. In *Ot bin ikh dokh*, the voice that the poet hears from the dawn recalls God creating the world with words. This is followed by a storm of creative destruction—the towns and villages are demolished, exposing the raw material of nature. Halpern also yearns for a new creation. He sees the unformed-void-chaos of the creation narrative in the world around him, but finds himself powerless to create through words in the face of it. He is not powerful enough to summon a miracle, and, in some way, prays that it will come from some external source. "God created once," the poet seems to cry, "can't he do it again?" The poet alone cannot create the miracle because he is mute, paralyzed.

Both of these poems avoid the overtly erotic. The explicit *ikh* in both titles indicates to the reader a male persona. However, the implied invocation of a muse in both poems suggests an additional complex feminine voice. In Halpern's poem, the antagonist is the muse, one which is explicitly contained within the protagonist himself. This feminine aspect of the poetic self is harassing rather than sensual, protective rather than exciting. She is not spiritual or otherworldly, but exceedingly, even excessively corporal. She, in her overwhelming concern for

the poet as a human *man*, keeps telling him what to *do*, but what he seems to need is something from the spiritual plane to elevate him to the role of creator.

In *Ot bin ikh dokh*, the muse takes on a more recognizable classical form, consistent with Sutzkever's pantheistic ideas. If you gender the "I" and the "You," to match the poet and muse respectively, this poem can indeed read erotically. The poet, in the prime of his youthful strength, hears a woman's voice, yearns for her, and ventures out on a quest to find her. She is perpetually out of reach—the muse has abandoned the poet. Like the evocative imagery in the Song of Songs, the roles of God and Lover are conflated, illuminating new poetic aspects of each. Her beauty, which draws his gaze, is rendered in a poem of unrequited love.

From looking at these poems together, we can see that the poets are talking both to themselves, to the world, and to some understanding of God, all at the same time. These poems present new and beautiful visions of creative paralysis. Halpern is trapped in a prison-like home of his own discontents, where Sutzkever is forbidden from entering the divine home of holy inspiration. Both poems turn to images of chaos to convey their sense of failure—Sutzkever ends his poem with *nit-farshteyn* and Halpern with *oylem-hatohu*. Most of all, we see that these poets have a constant sense of tension, and create poetry from within that tension. They have created these two brilliant poems from within their internal creative paralysis, demonstrating that, for these two men, the tension of yearning is really the essence of creativity and of poetry.

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