

Abraham Shlonsky

TOIL · ÁMAL* · עָמַל

- הַלְבִּישִׁנִּי, אִמָּא כְּשָׁרָה, כְּתַנֵּת-פָּסִים לְתַפְאֶרֶת
וְעַם שְׁחָרִית הוֹבִילִנִי אֵלַי עָמַל.
- עוֹטְפָה אֶרֶצִי אוֹר כְּסֻלִּית.
בָּתִּים נִצְבּוּ כְּטוֹטָפוֹת.
וְכַרְצוּעוֹת-תְּפִילִין גּוֹלְשִׁים כְּבִישִׁים, סָלְלוּ בִּפְּנֵים.
- תְּפִילַת שְׁחָרִית פֹּה תִּתְּפֹלֵל קִרְיָה נָאָה אֵלַי בּוֹרְאָה.
וּבְבוֹרָאִים
בְּנֶה אַבְרָהָם,
פִּיטָן סוֹלֵל בִּישְׂרָאֵל.
- וּבַעֲרֵב בֵּין הַשְּׂמָשׁוֹת יָשׁוּב אָבָא מְסַבְּלוֹתָיו
וְכַתְּפִלָּה יִלְחֹשׁ נַחַת:
הֵבֵן יָקִיר לִי אַבְרָהָם,
עוֹר וְגִידִים וְעִצָּמוֹת.
הַלְלוּיָהּ.
- הַלְבִּישִׁנִּי, אִמָּא כְּשָׁרָה, כְּתַנֵּת-פָּסִים לְתַפְאֶרֶת
וְעַם שְׁחָרִית הוֹבִילִנִי
אֵלַי עָמַל.
- Halbişini, íma kşéyra, któnet-pásim letif'éret
Veím şáharit hovilíni eléy ámal.
- 3 Ótfa ártsi or katálit.
Bátim nítsvu katotáfot.
Veħirtsuót-tfilin gólşim kvíşim, sálelu
[kapáyim.
- 6 Tfilat-şáħrit po titpálele kírya náa éley bór'a.
Uvabór'im
Bneħ avráham,
9 Páytan sólel beyisráel.
- Uvaérev beyn haşmášot yášuv ába misivlótav
Veħitfila yílħaş náhat:
12 Havén yákir li avráham,
Or vegídim vaatsámot.
Halelúya.
- 15 Halbişini, íma kşéyra, któnet-pásim letif'éret
Veím şáharit hovilíni
Eléy ámal.

Born in Poltava (Ukraine) in 1900, Abraham Shlonsky belongs to the group of innovators who brought to Hebrew literature the revolutionary verve, experimental audacity, and iconoclasm typical of the new century. His father, a true product of the changing East European Jewish world, gave his son a secular Hebrew as well as a religious education, sending him off in his thirteenth year to study in Jaffa's newly founded suburb of Tel Aviv. Unlike earlier Hebrew poets, Shlonsky learned spoken Hebrew in childhood and for a short period

lived in the exciting milieu of the pre-war Tel Aviv *gymnasium* that was to give Israel many of its leaders and intellectuals. After the outbreak of World War I, he was forced to return to Russia, where he completed his high school work and lived through the crucial years of the Revolution. In 1922 he emigrated to Israel as a young pioneer and worked as road-builder and farmer.

A prolific writer, Shlonsky has published many volumes of verse, seventy translations (among them *Hamlet*, *Eugen Onegin*, *Tyl Eulenspiegel*), and an anthology, *Russian*

Poetry, co-edited with Lea Goldberg, which affected younger writers deeply. As editor and mentor, he headed the literary Left, an extremely productive force during the first decade of the new nation. As leader and spokesman of the anti-classicists, he challenged the authority of Bialik and in his own poetry he reflected the influence of Blok's symbolism and the experimentalism and wild imagery of Mayakowsky and Yesenin. A great innovator in language, Shlonsky introduced the raciness of the newly spoken idiom into the verse and where words were lacking he coined them. (Many have since become an accepted part of the language.)

"Toil" appears in a sequence named for Mt. Gilboa, a hill dominating the Valley of Jezreel in whose fields Shlonsky worked. All the poems of this era (1927) mirror a landscape which had been a nostalgic dream in Russia and which, after it became real, lost none of its festive appeal. Shlonsky presents the new Palestinian earth in an ecstatic, quasi-religious light. The building of the homeland and the tilling of its soil are transformed into acts of worship. And the modernist influences of Blok, Yesenin, and other Russian poets are absent from the "Gilboa" poems: they follow the style and language of the Bible and Prayerbook. The lines have the undefined rhythms of the Psalms, varying in length and seemingly arbitrary in shape; but read aloud, they reveal an orderliness indicative of Shlonsky's inclination toward symmetry even in free verse:

(1) *Dress me, good (pious) mother, in a glorious coat of many colors* (2) *And with dawn lead me to toil.*

(3) *My country wraps itself in light as in a prayer shawl.* (4) *Houses stand out [lit. stood] like phylacteries.* (5) *And like phylactery straps, the highways that palms have paved glide down.*

(6) *Here [now] the beautiful town prays matins to its creator* (7) *And among the creators* (8) *[Is] your son, Abraham,* (9) *A hymn-writer (poet)—road-paver in Israel.*

(10) *And in the evening, at sunset, father shall return from his labors* (11) *And like a prayer, he will whisper with contentment:* (12) *My darling son Abraham,* (13) *Skin and veins and bones.* (14) *Hallelujah!*

(15) *Dress me, good (pious) mother, in a glorious coat of many colors* (16) *And with dawn lead me* (17) *To toil.*

Each word in the first stanza is loaded with associations and symbols. The speaker addresses not his own but the generic "mother" common to Yiddish folk-poetry. In the new life, detached from the recent past, nostalgia turns "mother" into a symbolic figure who can give both a blessing and a sacrifice. The "coat of many colors" is of course an allusion to Genesis 37:3, where Jacob makes his gift of love to Joseph. But the Bible reader knows that the coat will be soaked in blood, and line 2 recalls the Isaac story, where sacrifice is also an act of love to be done with "your only son, which you love." Love and sacrifice become one. The pioneer-speaker is a beloved son and the altar is toil. Toil has become an act of worship.

Stanza 2 is a composite of allusions: to Psalm 104:2 (describing God as "wrapped in light as with a cloak"); to the prayer shawl (*talit*); to phylacteries (*tfilin*), which are part of daily worship. The latter consist of boxes called "houses" and of leather straps. The square houses perched on the hills are like phylactery boxes worn on the head, and the roads gliding into the valley like the phylactery straps. The land is now a worshipper standing at his morning prayer.

The words *gólšim kvišim* make a striking synthesis of old and new. In the Song of Songs, the hair of the beloved descends (*galšú*) like a flock of mountain goats. *Kvišim*, however, is a modern term ("roads") associated with the new homeland. The lines also speak of labor, and *kapáyim* ("palms") reinforces the image of worship: the roads are being paved by "palms" of young pioneers, many of whom as members of the intelligentsia had never worked with their hands.

Kiryá (6) in old Hebrew usually designates Jerusalem but in modern usage, a new town or settlement. The town prays to the creator, but it is not God, creator of the old world, but man the creator of the new. This Abraham is a new Abraham: poet, road-builder. *Páytan* (6) traditionally refers to a writer of medieval hymns but here Shlonsky celebrates his grand role as worker-poet in the tradition of the early poets of the Russian Revolution. The meter here has a "boastful" lilt. If we ignore the printed form, lines 6-7-8 become a quatrain of trochaic tetrameters.

The penultimate stanza makes the son's act not a sacrifice but a recompense for the father's suffering, as the father whispers contentedly: "My darling son," echoing "Ephraim, my darling son" (Jeremiah 31: 19). And it is not the spiritual Ephraim-Abraham whom the poem celebrates but an Abraham of "skin and veins and bones." With the last stanza repeating the opening lines, toil is exalted while at the same time recognized as a necessary daily burden. The secular days have become a prolonged sacrifice and a prolonged festival.

— LEA GOLDBERG

Abraham Shlonsky

THREE OLD WOMEN · ŞALÓŞ ZKEYNÓT · שלש זקנות

This poem comes from the last section of *Stones of Chaos* (*Avnéy Bóhu*, 1934). In contrast to the intimate, nostalgic tone of the 1927 volume in which "Toil" appeared, *Stones of Chaos* is permeated by the sense of crisis that pervaded Europe and Palestine in the thirties. The book contains Shlonsky's Paris poems (he had spent much time in that city), poems about building the homeland which are now darkened by the foreshadowing catastrophe, short introverted lyrics, and odes of an apocalyptic mood. For all of Shlonsky's meticulous riming, constructing, and skillful playing with verbal meanings, one senses a disrupting world. Then suddenly, in the last section, one finds poems of childhood that speak of the poet's growth as an artist in a milieu in which Jewish and non-Jewish influences interplay: "... Maimonides looks upon the portrait of Bakunin."

Placed between two autobiographical poems, "Three Old Women" seems out of context. Its atmosphere and its terms of reference are universal whereas the other

poems move between the poles of childhood and old age. Our poem seems to be unique in balancing an epic-like sweep with immediate observation:

(1) *In the gray evening, by the white house,* (2) *Three old women sit, looking (out) before them.* (3) *And silence (is all) around.* (4) *As though the hawk suddenly froze in (his) flight.* (5) *Three old women sitting by the house.*

The first impression recalls a Dutch genre painting and line 3—*vehás saviiv* ("silence all around")—confirms the static quality. But with the introduction of the hawk, the silence becomes charged with a sense of terror—the verb "froze" is hardly reassuring. Line 5 makes an effort to restore the quietude, repeating the first impression.

(6) *Above their heads, someone is silently knitting* (7) *A stocking of blue in the old style.* (8) *A skein of gold unrolls on the horizon.* (9) *Three old women suddenly saw a boy.*

Leaving the real setting, the poem extends the picture to the universe. The sky is now an old-fashioned "stocking of blue" (7) that