Jordan Schuster
Dec. 2008
Prof. Roskies

The Beginning of Days:
Historico-Theological (Re)vision in Peretz Markish's *Di Kupe* and Yankev Glatshtyen's *Reb Nakhmen tsu Zayn Soyfer*

"A system is like the tail of truth, but truth is like a lizard; it leaves its tail in your fingers and runs away knowing full well that it will grow a new one in a twinkling." -Turgenev

In 1921, from the untouched city of Warsaw, Peretz Markish observed from afar the savagery of the Civil War pogroms sweeping Eastern Europe.[1] He wrote them down in the form of a liturgical masterpiece that numbered no less than 28 pages and 24 cantos. In 1943, from the untouched city of New York, Yankev Glatshteyn observed from afar the near total annihilation of European Jewry, the culture that had raised him, and the language in which he was raised. He wrote it down in the form of a five chapter, free-verse hagiography on Reb Nachman of Breslov. Together, the works of these two poets represent a pair of contrasting attempts to re-envision, reconstruct, and re-institutionalize an ideological system for the new, "post-Destruction" world order. And yet, although both Markish and Glatshtyen imagined the content of these ideological systems in ways entirely distinct from one another, they did so with their eyes trained upon a similar problematic, one of an essentially historico-theological nature that not only addressed questions of prayer, text, and Divinity, but also demanded the dawning of a new relationship to time, both historical and symbolic.

I. An Expressionist's Concession to Day

Newnesses every morning! (Lamentations 3:23)[2]

---

[1] [1] Informal footnote: I wrote this line for rhetorical purposes. I don't know how to determine Markish's actual proximity to the pogroms, though further research into his biography is something I plan for in the future. I did read in your book that Markish was "rumored to have perished in the Ukrainian pogroms." This of course would force me to sacrifice rhetorical fluidity for historical accuracy, and I would very necessarily and without reservation restructure the language of my introduction.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, translations – both Hebrew and Yiddish – are my own throughout. It should be of further note that biblical translations herein have been heavily influenced by Buber and Rosenzweig's "Verdeutschung." See *Di Shrift: Verdeutscht von Martin Buber gemeinsam mit Franz Rosenzweig* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007).

In 1922 Peretz Markish found himself penning an aesthetic manifesto for the expressionist journal, *Ringen.* Entitled "The Aesthetics of War in Modern Poetry," Markish began his treatise by defining history's once inextricable subjugation to time's linearity. Every generation, in terms of both its artistic achievements and its culture, is like a page on a calendar, Markish analogized; when one generation passes away, its corresponding page is ripped off, only to reveal the freshly hung page of another generation. According to Markish, this historico-cultural process of ripping time into sequence, however, is summarily brought to a close by modernity. Indeed, to the modern generation, to the generation of *shlakht un kamf*[3] – of battle and war –

> hot der shturm aropgerisn dem gantsn kalander, di vent tsetsiglt, un oysgemisht ale literarishe shuln un rikhtungen in eyn bagaystertn unison, in eyn groysn polifonishn gezang.
>
> violence has torn down the entire calendar, has even demolished the brick walls upon which the calendar had been hung, has mixed together all literary schools and creative inclinations into one inspired unison, into one great polyphonic song.[4]

Here, Markish asserts with epic description that the violence or, more literarily, "storm," of modernity has laid waste both to the temporal as well as geographic borders that once divided generations and cultures. Irrevocably exposed to this violence and its consequences on space-time, the modern artist – the expressionist – is gifted with a totalizing vision of history and the world, a vision well aware of the extremities, cruelties and pains of the human condition, a vision that – as a result of this awareness – is able to project itself onto any manner of human condition, regardless of space-time. Thus, horrified by history as

---

[3] Peretz Markish, "The Aesthetics of Struggle in Modern Poetry" (in Yiddish), *Ringen* (Warsaw) 10 (1922), 36.
[4] Ibid., 35.

much as modernity, the expressionist can rip open the spatiotemporal gradient and unleash his own ontological sense of "storming" across continents, eras, genres and forms.[5]

One year before Markish discursively explicated his ideology as such, he executed it to ravishing but, as we shall see, somewhat contradictory effect in his magnum opus, *Di kupe (The Heap)*. In the poem, Markish's narrator stands caught in the active process of bending time and space into collapse. He even goes so far as to bend himself into the eternal form of a demi-god. Yet while our narrator is fully successful in dismantling the limitations of historical and religious time, he self-consciously understands that the *de facto* dismantling of sequential time, whether linear or cyclical, remains outside his grasp. Regardless of expressionist yearnings, the sun will always rise and set; the unavoidable fact of day's order will remain just that – an unavoidable fact. And so, much to the complication of our narrator's ideational desires, his dismantling of the spatiotemporal cannot be accomplished in full. Certainly, he can rip apart the calendar of history, but eventually this ripping apart becomes just another page in the book. Privy to his own generation's stake in this inevitability, *Di Kupe's* narrator seeks a way to renegotiate the system. Refusing to intercalate his generation's historical moment into the violence of a pre-existent historical structure, our narrator instead attempts to *re*calate history *in toto*, crafting from the flurry and detritus of the history his generation has torn apart, not a new calendrical page but a new institutional framework from which to string the pages of time. In the service of a new world-order, our narrator has created a new calendrical spine.[6]

---

[5] For a concise analysis on expressionist tendencies see David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984): 97-8.

[6] David Roskies profoundly notes that "violence was a built-in feature of Jewish life, a permanent albeit unpredictable part of cyclical time.' As Roskies demonstrates, however, by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jewish literary strategies to cope with this violence broke down "just as the violence became more endemic and extensive." (79). In this vein, *Di kupe* attempted to repudiate its relationship to traditional Jewish literary reactions to violence. Yet, "the very act of [Markish's] writing a pogrom poem place[d] him within the same continuum he had set out to renounce" (101). Furthermore, the "liturgical framework" created by the

Di kupe's effort to accomplish this grandiose *recalation* relies heavily upon the development of an intricate network of symbols which appear throughout the poem's 24 cantos. Within this network there recur seven signifiers of natural time (sunset, evening, moon, night, midnight, stars, dawning) and three signifiers of historio-theological time (the final night of Yom Kippur, the day after Yom Kippur, and intertexts alluding both to the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgies). As we shall see, through close examination of these temporal signifiers, *Di Kupe's* symbolic structure begins to unlock, the gates of metaphor – broken open. From the Destruction, a decidedly sequential vision of how to effect the advent of a future world order emerges, traced out along the arc of day's inexorable trajectory.[7]

A. The Day After Yom Kippur as the Eve of Rosh Hashanah

Di kupe opens its first canto with a macabre description of the Gorodischche pogrom. In the middle of this small village's marketplace there lies a heap of corpses – rotting hands

---

poem in its dating of the first canto, "creates a construct as timeless as the texts if sets out to subvert" (100). Similarly, Seth Wolitz argues that *Di kupe* employs a "liturgical framework" as part of its self-definition. Wolitz, moreover, takes Roskies' claim one step further, extending *Di kupe*'s liturgical framework from snatches of liturgical allusion as per Roskies to an extensive anatomizing of the poem into three sections (1-10; 11-15; 16-18) which mirror the malkhuyot, zikhronot, and shofarot sections of the Rosh ha-Shanah's Musaf service. This notwithstanding, Woltiz argues that Markish's employment of a "liturgical framework" is for purely subversive reasons and therefore must read solely from a "secular point of view." On these grounds, Wolitz criticizes Roskies for "drawing [this] secular modernist dirge back into the canon of a Jewish religious cultural continuity." To Wolitz *Di kupe* is entirely destructive in intent. To see it as otherwise, to argue that it in fact perpetuates the Jewish sacred tradition, is to deny its staunchly anti-traditional ideological underpinnings. Wolitz makes an important argument here, based in large part on his contextual reading of reactions to the poem by Markish's contemporaries. I however do not see his literary-historico evidence as necessarily overturning Roskies' reading. Nor do I find his reading of the poem and his positioning of it outside the Jewish tradition to be more persuasive than Roskies' positing of the poem within it. Therefore, my reading of *Di kupe* attempts to draw from both these entirely plausible arguments, making particular use of Wolitz's anti-Musaf reading of *Di kupe's* structure, but ultimately siding with Roskies' view of its place within and importance for modern Jewish tradition. See Seth Wolitz, "A Yiddish Modernist Dirge: *Di kupe* of Peretz Markish," in *Modern Jewish Studies Annual* 6 (1987): 56-72.

[7] In contradistinction to this, see Roskies' argument on *Di kupe's* atemporality: "The egocentric vision [of *Di kupe*] allows for no temporal development. Each chapter captures a single moment, and even the poetic "I" has no biographic past..." (98). Also see Wolitz's description of *Di kupe's* structure as "a spiraling vortex" which takes the heap as its "centripetal force" (59).

with skin "warped like brass," beards pasted with "blood and wood-shavings," rivers of "brown grease" pouring from the mouths of the bodies, frogs crawling over them, vomit spewed out like a "black thigh of the earth." Equally disturbing in the descriptions of the first canto is an image drawn through simile whereby the heap of bodies is compared to a pile of slaughtered chickens, set next to the implicitly implicated presence of a "skunk-like" church.[8]

Markish makes the aesthetic choice to represent these brutal descriptions and associations through the structure of a sonnet, perhaps the most treasured of European literary forms. True to his expressionist tendencies, however, Markish abruptly subverts the form, implementing an atypical rhyme scheme (abba/cddc/efef/gg), neglecting meter, and eliminating the volta. This latter point seems to be particularly significant given the volta's indispensable function to typical sonnet structure, serving as the hinge upon which the sonnet's meaning swings from one perspective to another. Of course, in *Di Kupe's* first canto, perspective necessarily remains static. How, after all, could a perspective cast over a heap of rotting bodies – swing? How else to make sense of it? Markish's dissident repudiation of the volta rips apart the calendar of European formalism. What will happen to the scraps depends on how time moves forward.

Fortunately, signifiers of time couched within the first canto will be of some use in our attempt to answer questions of linear and cyclical sequencing. Let us turn then to the first canto's final stanza, where the poet presents us with two allusions to historico-religious time. The key to understanding these allusions requires a close reading of the stanza's central image, a representation of corpses' clothing circling – on wind – through the streets

[8] I work exclusively with the 1921 Warsaw edition of the text of *Di kupe.* However, interesting revisions – here undealt with – obtain in the 1922 Kiev edition. See Peretz Markish. *Di Kupe* (Warsaw: Kultur-Lige, 1921); as well as *Di kupe* (Kiev: Kooperativer farlag "Kultur-Lige," 1922). All canto references hereafter accord to the Warsaw edition. *Di kupe,* canto 1.

of the slaughtered marketplace. In response to this image, our narrator commands the sky to clothe itself, to don the rags of the dead, and to

> ...trogt gezunterhayt, in nakhes, ale, ale!
> Yod Alef Tishrey Trape.
>
> ...wear them in good health, all of them, the ton!
> The 11th of Tishrei, in the year five-thousand-six-eighty-one.

Here allusion to historico-religious time works provocatively. According to the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur ends on the 10th of Tishrei. The fact that a pogrom was committed against the Jewish community of Gorodischche on the day after Yom Kippur resounds with bitter irony. Even more effective than a rhymed insertion of the pogrom's date, however, is the fact that this date has been coupled with yet another historico-religious allusion, an intertext which tears us back in time, to ten days earlier, to the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, prayed out no doubt by the religious mouths of the heap, now "sobbing brown streams of tar." Drawn from Pslam 93:1 and re-situated within the Malkhuyot section of the Rosh Hashanah musaf service, Jews are compelled to pray the following words on the 1st of Tishrei every year:

> God kings. He clothes himself in majesty. God clothes himself. He wraps himself in strength. Indeed, the world is fixed. It shall not be destroyed.

Eleven days after praying these words, a sole surviving mouth – the narrator's – in sonnet form – screams out: "O skies dripping with the wax of animal fat. To you I gift these Sabbath shirts."[9] With such an understandably venomous reaction, *Di kupe* effects its first two examples of linear shift. The first is functional: Before the Destruction, Jews prayed according to the calendrical cycles of their tradition; now that they are dead, the prayers they once prayed are shifted from praise-songs to blasphemy. Temporally, these prayers undergo

---

[9] My translation is here based on David Roskies' understanding of the passage. He posits that the first canto's "heavenly tallow" points to candles which "burn in the sky" and are "lit perhaps in memory of the dead." See Roskies, 99.

yet another shift – a shift that progresses them from the first of the month, from the new moon, from Rosh Hashanah, and – more generally – from traditional Jewish cyclical time, to the day after Yom Kippur. But in what sense are the shifts significant to *Di kupe's* project as a whole?

B. Lunar Prophecies at Sunrise

Canto 2 introduces us to *Di kupe's* first symbols of natural time, told through an unrhymed, rapid-fire trochaic tetrameter. Effectively, this excited rhythm exchanges the grave and static description of canto 1 for intensely dynamic activity. Things begins to happen in this canto, retaliatory measures begin to be taken, at least in theory:

> Toyterhayt vel ikh arayngeyn
> inem tog fun blut un honik;
> toyte oyskuker in land zayn
> veln mayne ershte toybn,
> toybn, toybn – barg aroyf.!...
>
> Deadly will I enter in in-
> to the day of blood and honey;
> dead informers in the land be
> will be will be my first doves, o
> doves o doves o – over heap!...

Playing with biblical descriptions of Israel as the promised land of "milk and honey" while simultaneously recalling the doves sent out by Noah to look for dry land after the flood, our poet here seeks to underscore the gruesome fiction of supposedly Divine promises. This narrational allusiveness calls into question all belief in divine redemption, whether past, present or future. Ironically, the poet means through these efforts to stress the fact that there is no land of milk and honey, that the flood was an act of death not salvation, and that beyond the heap there flows only more blood.

In this vein, the poem continues:

S'iz mayn goyrl ufgehangn
Af der blutiker lavone,
Nor nikudes ire glantsn:
"Beykher, beykher – tsu di shtoybn,
Af sharien iz der shlof..."

How my destiny is hung up-
on the blood red blood red moon, it
shimmers vowel signs upon us:
"Stomachs, Stomachs – to the dust fall,
dawning is the time for sleep."

Urgently, the moon attempts here to communicate a prophecy to the poet, a prophecy communicated not through words or light, but via a "shimmering down" of *nikudes*, of Hebrew vowel signs. The notion of the world as a text, with moonlight functioning as the vocalization of this text, will recur to greater effect in subsequent cantos. For the time being, let us merely note the image and shift our attention to the content of the moon's prophetic message itself.

Quite plainly, the moon instructs the narrator to sleep through the "dawning." Taken with the fact that the narrator's destiny is "hung upon" the moon, it is safe to assume that the ultimate intention of the moon's prophecy is to shift the narrator's waking reality from the realm of day to the realm night. But what does it mean to place one's faith in night, or – more generally – in some salvational future? Isn't this what caused the pogroms in the first place: stubborn, unsubstantiated religious and political ideologies, an implicitly implicated "skunk-like" church? Isn't this the precise position taken by Markish and his cohort of expressionists?[10] Thus, we find our narrator in deep conflict over whether or not to believe in such redemptive notions of linear sequencing, in any manner of ideology upon which a better future may be constructed, in the moon as a symbol for this future. And yet, just like the movement of the sun, a belief in the future moon becomes inevitable for our

[10] According to Wolitz, the metanarrative message of *Di Kupe* is "the desuetude of all traditions and the appeal to secular humanism" (60).

narrator. He cannot abide the world as it is; he cannot abide its historico-religious institutions; but ripping them up alone will accomplish very little in the way of change. At best they would accomplish a small revolutionary act, ripped off from the more firmly entrenched historico-religious calendar of time. This fact draws the narrator ever closer to the allure of night's promises.

If the moon represents something necessary and new, day must represent the past-present from which our narrator seeks flight. This too is captured in *Di kupe's* second canto:

> Af mayn harts geyt dul a shtot oys,
> Fun di aksl krikhn rogn;
> O du tsiele fun ufgang,
> Far tsvey gildn oysgebitns,
> Nokh amol kh'bin af dayn bris...
>
> On my heart a town dies madly,
> On my shoulders crawl town corners;
> O you little lamb of sunrise,
> Traded for two gold two gold coins,
> Once again, I'm at your Bris.

Not only is the sunrise described here as a lamb to be slaughtered but – as a result of the final verse's allusion to *bris* (God's covenant with Abraham and the collective Jewish body) – the sunrise recalls more specifically the lamb substituted for Isaac in the story of *akeydes yitskhak*, the binding of Isaac.[11] Markish's allusion to this intertext serves a dual function. The first allows him to further subvert the standard liturgy of Rosh Hashanah, referencing the text of *akeydes yitskhak* which not only partially appears in the Rosh Hashanah musaf service but is also read in its entirety during the Rosh Hashanah torah service. This subversion revisits the temporal linear shift we already encountered in the 1st canto, by virtue of which our narrator was able to *recalate* the Days of Awe from the 1st of Tishrei to the 11th of Tishrei. In the second canto, however, this subversion has the additional, bibliological

[11] For another interpretation of the 2nd canto, see *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, eds. Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Chone Shmeruk (New York: Penguin Books, 1987): 354.

function of reading historico-religious time onto natural time. Indeed, by reading son onto sun, the narrator is able to symbolically sequester the violence of the old historico-religious complex to day, positing something else, something new, for night. To take such a step, to posit the newness of night, requires the narrator to make his own sacrifice, an offering upon the altar of his expressionist inclination to "tear apart the calendar of history." Now, he will have to adopt a faith in sequence instead, a faith in the future, a faith that will allow him to tear apart one history, yet a faith that will also charge him with the responsibility of reconstructing another. Behind the "blood-red" sunrise, the moon calls.

Prophetic hopes for the future round out the second canto's final three stanzas. Empowered by his newly-found faith in the promises of night, our narrator now aligns the content of this canto with its drumming rhythms. Shifting the static oration of the first canto into flickers of action, he begins to question why he should be "afraid to take a step forward/in the midst of world's tearing-apart." In other words, why merely stop at the tear-apart? Why fear partaking of a progressive sequencing of reconstruction instead? The narrator provides himself and the heap with an answer in the imperative mood:

> Hepe, kupe, vildn fiber,
> Iber griber, iber shvel...
>
> Jump, heap, into wild fever,
> Over thresholds, over pits...

Together, heap and narrator must "jump" to action, shaking down "every corner/and destroy[ing] the world entire." This sentiment only accrues in weight when reconsidering the intertext of the first canto, quoted here for a second time: "God kings. He clothes himself in majesty. God clothes himself. He encompasses himself with strength. Indeed, the world is fixed. It shall not be destroyed." (452) Against the narrator's reconstitive night, the current world order and its God have no hope.

C. The Stars as Title-Page

Now that Canto 1's description of the modern world has been hitched both to Canto 2's symbolic understanding of day as well as its prophecy about the future world of night, Canto 3 commences at dusk, our narrator begging for the sun to set completely and for night to provide him with an arena for change. The form this canto takes is irregular. It lacks both a consistent rhythm and structure. And yet, the first two stanzas *are* measured, written in iambs which – when compared to the drumming troches of canto two – end up sounding eerily soothing. While the first stanza provides a quiet but grievous picture of Gorodischche's abandoned marketplace, the second offers up the following, crescendoing prayer to God:

> A vey-un-vind nor veynt a shkiye, vi a shparber
> Af dakh af blindn fun a betlerisher dlone...
> O efn, efn uf dayn shterndikn shar-blat,
> Almekhtiker fun veltn, —
> Hineyne he'one...
>
> O pain, the sunset weeps – descending like a hawk down
> upon the blinded roof – of a beggar's hand cupped...
> O open, open up – your title-page of stars,
> almighty God of worlds —
> Here I stand, the guilty...

Such a tangle of quietude and dissonance, of prayer and blasphemy, may initially seem difficult to tease apart. Yet the job is of crucial importance to the ultimate decoding of *Di Kupe's* symbolic complex.

Setting down over the marketplace's landscape of violence,[12] the sun appears to "weep" mournfully. Yet the simile our poet attaches to this ostensibly compassionate image lays bear the sun's more divisive internal motivations. Destruction and slaughter – this is

[12] The language of landscape is taken from Roskies, 79.

what ultimately leads people to a sense of urgency – this is what turns them into irrational supplicants, "blindly begging" for the help of some benevolent Divinity. In the stanza's first verse, this Divinity's benevolence – captured by the image of a weeping sunset – is subsequently exposed as "hawkish," perched and ready to prey on the desperate hearts of the living, ready to inseminate[13] them with historical fictions and religious symbols that have led, generation after generation, to inane convictions that serve only to increase physical violence. Despite this cynical perspective on historico-religious traditions, our narrator does not stop himself from offering up a prayer of his own. Although soaked through with sarcasm and vitriol, his prayer is quite genuine in its longing for night, for the new world order this night represents, and for the night's "starry title-page" to commence the writing of a fresh historico-religious text, its consonants vocalized by the Hebrew vowels that moonlight shimmers down.

Disrupting the third canto's iambic flow, the final line of the second stanza tears back in time to the language of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy once again. With the words "heneni ha-oni"[14] – here I stand, the guilty – our narrator assumes the mantle of congregational cantor and initiates the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service with the "Prayer for the Khazn before Musaf." Traditionally within this prayer, the cantor seeks to intercede on behalf of his congregation, pleading that God forgive their sins as well as his own. The fact that our narrator begins to play the role of a cantor interceding on behalf of his "congregation's guilt," however, proves painful when considering the actual congregation for which he pleads – a town of rotting bodies all slaughtered a day after Yom Kippur, the very day upon which their sins were to have been forgiven. Our narrator's blasphemous use of

---

[13] The language of insemination is taken from *Di kupe*, canto 7, where Shaddai, Allah, and Jesus are commanded by the narrator to "pump out the last drops of their moldy semen" upon the heap.
[14] See *Penguin Book of Modern Verse*, 356; also, Wolitz, 61.

this intertext coupled with his genuine, though bitter prayer for night, makes for a rankling contradiction. On the one hand, our narrator evidences an intense hatred for the institution of prayer. On the other, he uses the language of prayer both as a means to articulate his desire for change as well as a means to articulate his disdain for the past, simultaneously tearing it apart and re-membering it.[15]

This contradiction seems to parallel our narrator's more general relationship to historico-religious time. As we've seen previously, to our narrator as well as to Markish, the unprecedented violence of modernity stems from the historico-religious traditions leading up to modernity. Still, to destroy these traditions, to "rip them apart" and leave their scraps behind, is to become just another rebellious page within the pre-established historico-religious complex. Using historico-religious traditions as a tool to establish a new tradition of historico-religious time thus affords our narrator the ability to subvert the system from within. In a similar way, prayer indicates to our narrator mankind's blind subservience to the ancient, insolent, and violent historico-religious traditions he abhors. And yet, it is exactly to these traditional institutions of prayer and prophecy that our narrator turns when he needs to give voice to his desire for historico-religious change. Just as the manipulation of historico-religious time provides our narrator with an arena for change (shifting son to sun, newness to night, the creation of the world from the 1st to the 11th of Tishrei), the manipulation of prayer and prophecy provides him with the courage he needs to inspire change and the language he needs to remember the necessity of change.

Before our narrator can fully commit himself to working within the liturgical and historico-religious frameworks he opposes, however, he must – after tearing them apart like a good expressionist – decide how best to re-envision, reconstruct and re-institutionalize

---

[15] See footnote 5.

them in such a way as to mark the new beginning to a new historico-religious time. Questions that become of utmost importance to the narrator's success in this endeavor include the following:

> 1) If not through God, then through what lens is the new world order to understand the creation and recreation of time?
> 2) If not to God, then to what or to whom should the new world order address its prayers?
> 3) If not in the form of traditional sacred texts, then in what form should the new world order's historic-religious ideologies and liturgies be expressed?
> 4) If not with gratitude and deference, then with what emotions and in what manner is the new world order to pray from these texts?

While the first three questions from the above must be put off for the time being, we have certainly already encountered traces of an answer for the fourth question in both cantos 1 and 2. More explicitly, however, Canto 3's third stanza provides clear resolution:

> Kh'bager mit dir in tfile itst baheft zayn,
> Un nor af lestern un nor af sheltn
> Bavegn zikh mayn harts un mayne leftsn...
>
> I long to bind myself to you in prayer,
> and only blasphemy and curses
> utter their way from my heart and lips.

In other words, in the new world order, the institution of prayer – this yearning for something new – *will* in fact continue to exist. However, its execution will be shifted from an expression of praise to an outpouring of anger, a blasphemous disavowal, a cursing and deriding, a desecrate re-membering of all historico-religious traditions in order to prevent their violent eruption in the future. Thus, prayer begins to take on a bivalent function[16] –

---

[16] The language of bivalency will be of utmost importance to understanding my reading of Markish's relationship to and subversion of both liturgy and traditional historico-theological symbology. Like Wolitz (see footnote 5), I read *Di kupe* as a text which implements liturgy and traditional symbols in order to undermine them. However, unlike Wolitz, I see *Di kupe's* use of liturgy and traditional symbols as a way of imagining a new historico-theological complex, one of secular humanism, albeit one necessarily written in the language of the historico-theological in order to effect a reformative rather than revolutionary shift in time. I have therefore employed the language of "bivalency" in order to convey this twofold nature of Markish's relationship to liturgy and traditional symbology – a relationship that is on the one hand destructive in its

giving voice to our poet's genuine yearning for a new world order while simultaneously allowing him both to blaspheme against *and* re-member the violence incited by the old.

Nowhere is this last point seen more clearly than in the 3rd canto's description of the new world order's most holy site:

> Ikh hob dikh ufgeshtelt in mitn mark a neyem mishkn, Got,
> A shvartse kupe, vi a bluter...
>
> I have erected for you in the middle of the marketplace a new *mishkn*, God,
> a black heap of rotting bodies, like a bandage...

The *mishkn,* God's earthly dwelling place, the site to which the Israelites of times past would make pilgrimage to pray, has here been read onto the heap. And where better to re-member and pray out blasphemies against traditions of the old world order than before a heap of breasts, mastectomized in the name of these traditions?

Having thus redefined temples as slaughter yards and prayer as both a mode of desecrate re-memberance and medium for the articulation of change, *Di kupe* more actively commences its project of historico-religious re-institutionalization. The starry title-page prefacing the book of this re-institionalization has been cracked open, the vowel-signs of the moon – shimmered down. Our narrator will not take the penning of a single dark consonant for granted.

4. The Idea of Liturgy and its Nighttime Rewriting

According to Lawrence A. Hoffman, a noted scholar of Jewish liturgy, prayer within the Jewish tradition has functioned since rabbinic times as a "theological homiletic"[17] which

---

blasphemous subversions of tradition and – on the other – constructive in its implementation of traditional forms to build something that will – in turn – overturn.

[17] Hoffman, Lawrence. "Hallels, Midrash, Canon, and Loss: Psalms in Jewish Liturgy," in Attridge and Fassler, *Psalms in Community,* 55.

"shanghais scripture selectively to demonstrate the truth of [a certain] cosmology, theology and anthropology."[18] Lawrence further claims that

> the prayerbook is less a book than it is a script for a sacred drama performed regularly by a changing cast of worshipers across the generations...the playwright here is the sacred community through time, which periodically alters the script and hands the newest version down to the next generation.[19]

For Lawrence then, liturgy is defined as a weaving together of classical Jewish texts in order to posit the "ultimate truths of God, creation and human nature."[20] Moreover, since the institutionalization of Judaism thousands of years ago – he argues – different communities have been constructing their theologies in different ways, pulling different texts out of the canon for different purposes, writing altogether different prayerbooks to articulate these purposes. As we have already seen – as we shall continue to see in ways much more distinct – the reconstruction of cosmology, theology, and anthropology – the reconstruction of liturgy itself – is precisely what Markish is attempting to accomplish – albeit bivalently – in *Di Kupe.*

Thundering off an epic anapestic meter, for example, *Di kupe's* fourth canto begins to "shanghai" a host of classical prooftexts for "liturgical" purposes. With an imagined cast of rich mythological characters, this canto pairs modern Christian pilgrims returning from a tour of Bethlehem with ancient Israelite musicians once exiled to Babylon after the fall of the first temple. The voices of this latter contingency are to have been purportedly captured by Psalm 137, where – stripping themselves of their instruments – these Israelite exiles refuse to perform songs for their Babylonian captors. Instead, they weep out lamentations before God:

By the rivers of Babylon

---

[18] Ibid., 44.
[19] Ibid., 43
[20] Ibid., 44

we sat.
Also we wept
in our remembering of Zion.
Upon the willows
We hung our instruments.

In contrast, the forth canto finds no trace of lamentation from these musicians. Nor does it describe their defiant hanging up of instruments. Rather – here – the narrator calls upon both the Jewish exiles of history and the Christian pilgrims of modernity to join forces, compelling them to take up their instruments and play. Not only this, but with a bivalent command that contains within it the liturgical seeds of both yearning and desecration, our narrator beseeches them to rebuild the Bible's most infamous of structures:

Farboven dem bovl fun bovln fun ale
Mit tates far tsigl,
Mit milekh fun mutershe bristn far kalekh,
Mit kinder far shteyner
In kroyn-shtot fun beyner!...

Build up build the tower of Babel but greater
with fathers for bricks and
with milk from the breasts of our mothers for mortar,
with children for stones in
The city of bones!...

Almost a word for word subversion of the original biblical text, Genesis 11: 3 reads, "And they had brick for stone, and clay for mortar." The syntactic parallelism is clear. So too is our narrator's bivalent relationship to the passage as he simultaneously blasphemes against it and re-members his way both into and out of it.

The above extends well beyond bivalent concerns of desecrate re-membering. It also infiltrates the realm of traditional Jewish hermeneutics, giving the story of Babel a radical read. To understand *just* how radical a read he gives, however, let us consider the its biblical prooftext in full:

Now all the earth was of one language and one set-of-words…They said, each man to his neighbor, Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly. And they had

> brick or stone, and clay for mortar. And they said, Come, let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven; and let us make a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men were building. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be withheld from them, which they have schemed to do. Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (11:1-9)[21]

To Markish's narrator, the story of Babel should not be read as an account of humanity's evil in their conspiratorial plot against God. Rather, it should be understood as yet another a tale of "sunset," where God as hawk swoops down from the heavens to prey upon humanity. The insidious nature of the Divine's action here is intensified by its juxtaposition to the idea of Babel's pre-sectarian culture, a culture that wanted simply to build a city in order to pool its resources and protect itself against the elements, to live and work peacefully, lest nature "scatter [them] abroad upon the face of the whole earth." It is because God feels threatened by this unified culture that he swoops down upon it, demolishes its city, babbles its language, and – in effect – creates in his Divine wake a bloody dogmatism which divides, riddles and grounds all historico-religious traditions to date.

Our narrator's exegetical implementation of this text thus attempts to convoke Jews and Christians from across time and space, inspiring them with an anthropological etiology of how society looked before God swept in – when the world was innocent of historico-religious sectarianism, when there was "one people," "one language," and one collective sense of humanity unfettered by metaphorical abstractions of Divine Truth, God, and the traditions that erupted therefrom. Like his reconstruction of the symbol of the *miskhn*, our poet's intention in reconstructing the symbol of Babel – built from the bodies of "fathers," "breast milk," and "children" – serves as a gruesome reminder to the type of violence, both textual and contextual, that saturates the entirety of the historico-religious complex.

---

[21] Translation taken from *The Jerusalem Bible*, trans. Harold Fisch (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2000).

If our poet's implementation of Genesis 11 serves an anthropological purpose, defining mankind as ultimately good save the divisive theologies that tear them apart, it inherently makes a comment on the nature of God as well. And indeed, God – that symbolic ideology of ideologies lurking behind the most deadly of convictions – is targeted in the canto's final stanza, the narrator commanding his troops of exiles and pilgrims to

> Dem himl tselekhern
> Un opsheyln hoyl im,
> Borukh she-omar vehoyo haoylem.
>
> rip holes in the sky and
> [to] shuck it clean, naked,
> *Bless'd – he who spoke and the world was created.*

Wrapped in a Hebrew verse pulled directly from the first line of the Pesukei Dezimrah – the second section of the Jewish morning liturgy – *Di kupe* here provides us with its first explicit articulation of deicide.

When viewed from the historico-religious perspective of the old world order, the implementation of this verse serves a purely desecrate function. It is a sardonic jab aimed against God and those institutions and supplicants who believe in God. Its power derives from its ironic juxtaposition of one of the morning liturgy's most sacred lines against the image of dead bodies being erected into a new tower of Babel. In contrast, when viewed from the historico-religious perspective of the new world order, this final verse serves a more self-referential function: the narrator has spoken and the new world has commenced its reconstruction; the narrator has spoken and his speech has come to inhabit the realm of the new world's liturgy, weaving together classical Jewish texts for the sake of pushing a new anthropological, theological, and cosmological (i.e. etiological) understanding of existence.

"Blessed – he who spoke and the world was created." With pen in hand, our narrator creates the symbolic-ideological complex of a new world, inscribing its bivalent

liturgy upon the title-page of a new historico-theological time. This time is fixed at the 11th of Tishrei, the day on which a community of Jews was slaughtered and a necessary, new world order commenced its recreation. The narrator then projects this inscribed title page onto the realm of natural time – onto night – in order to indicate the progression of a new age by tracing the paths of sun and moon. Over the course of the next 20 cantos, our narrator's rewriting of historico-religious symbols and the refinement of his liturgical language to rewrite these symbols becomes ever more adept.

5. *"The Work of the Creator"*

In the 8th canto, our narrator finds himself at the hour of midnight, winds inscribed with blood[22] circling round about him. This image of "winds" was already introduced into *Di kupe's* symbolic complex in the fifth canto when our narrator called them from the deserts of the orient and subsequently learned how, in Eastern Europe, to command them. The mythic notion of calling and commanding the winds would seem to take its cue from Ezekiel 37 – itself an eerie, nighttime passage in which God instructs Ezekiel to direct the winds into the bones of the dead. While the allusion would certainly make sense apropos the deathly context of *Di kupe*, it isn't until now – in the final rhyming couplet of the otherwise unrhymed and unstructured 8th canto – that explicit reference is made to Ezekiel's salvational trope of resurrection.

It would be surprising to find our narrator taking this magical idea seriously. And yet it would also be surprising to find our narrator not making use of these symbols in subversively symbolic ways. Indeed, in a subversively symbolic move, our narrator *forbids* the

[22] That the winds are described as being "inscribed with blood" artfully recalls once again the Rosh Hashanah liturgy and its language of being "inscribed in the book of life." Additionally, by inscribing the winds with blood, their symbolic meaning as instruments of resurrection – a meaning given them by the Bible – become symbols desecrately remembered by the scribe of our text.

winds to come into contact with the dead. Rather, he encircles the dead with a fence built out of the bodies of small girls. Standing at the heart of this brutal barricade, without any assistance from the natural or divine spheres – without wind – our narrator declares that "he alone" will bring about the resurrection, commanding

> Shteyt uf harugim in der kupe,
> Shteyt uf tsu avodes-haboyre.
>
> Arise, you slaughtered ones in the heap,
> Arise, and do the work of the creator.

Like his liturgical language, our narrator's prophetic directive is entirely bivalent. By revealing the absurdity of ordering a pile of corpses to "arise and do the work of the creator," he ironically mocks the old historico-religious institution's metaphysical belief in ideas of resurrection, focusing instead on the physical reality of a town slaughtered. In addition to this, however, our narrator plays with the idea of "the work of the creator," a Hebrew phrase which has the idiomatic sense of "devotion, prayer and service to God." Of course, it is through this type of idiomatic reading that canto 8 appears blasphemous and nothing more. As always, however, our narrator makes room for a bifurcation.

In Canto 4 our narrator assumed the epithet of *haboyre*, the Creator, through "shanghaiing" allusions and drafting from them the liturgical texts of the new world order. In Canto 8 our narrator, the Creator, urges the corpses to do "the work of the creator." But isn't our narrator taking his blasphemy one step too far here? Can he truly be so egomaniacal as to enlist the dead in the service of *his* art? In order to guard himself against such conclusions, our narrator resorts to a strategy of inversion, one which swaps the concepts of Creator and Created, of Artist and Subject. Indeed through this inversion, we – the readers – are compelled to understand that it *cannot* be the heap serving the artist-cum-Creator. Rather, it is the heap that is creating the artist; it is the heap that is demanding the

artist to pen its history; it is the heap that is driving the artist to act as its scribe and supplicant. It is *not* the artist that functions as the God of the heap. On the contrary, it is the heap that becomes the artist's God.[23]

Thus, as opposed to an idiomatic reading of the phrase *the work of the creator* – a reading which would function in a purely blasphemous and ironic manner – the above literalized reading of *the work of the creator* comes to signify that the heap itself is doing passive, albeit *creational*, work. By dint its brutal non-existence, the heap *creates* a horrifying physical reality, in turn generating our narrator's epic attempt not only to capture this reality but to subvert the metaphorical and metaphysical texts which have led up to it. In other words, the artist *does* resurrect the dead. They live insofar as they create the consciousness of the artist who seeks to create the consciousness of a new world. And thus, as the poem's supplicant-scribe rhymes *kupe* (heap) into *boyre* (creator), the metaphoric substance of God is ripped from the heavens and nailed to the earth.

6. Dawn

In the 22nd canto, the 10 commandments are thrown – bloodied – back into the sky; the heap is crowned "Queen;" and our starry title page of night becomes dotted with the consonants of corpses, described as "moonlike" due to their vocalization by the lunar vowel signs. The first page of a new text of time has been completed. But what next? How next is time to proceed?

Alternating between two-, three- and four-line strophes, the 23rd canto punctuates its verses with a choppy, irregular rhyme scheme. An assonance of long o sounds, all terminating in a full range of velar and alveolar stops, forges a soundscape of hammering

[23] This reading accords to Roskies more general assessment of "modernist trends which defined violence as the substance, not merely a subject, of art" (97).

(*got, viyok, golgot, tsviyok, shtot, golgot, op, got, trot, hot, klop, tshvok, trop, hot*) – speeding, striking and driving its way into the canto's horrifying dénouement. Initiated by the narrator in the name of the heap, the poem's final symbolic act reads as follows:

> —Ikh klap arayn dem ershtyn tsviyok in zayne fligl
> af dayne, kupe, hoykhe...bovldike vent...
>
> af ershtn tropn blut fun dayne hent
> —a dorshtiker, a tflediker logl,–
> —shoyn untershtelt hot zikh dos moyl dos sreyfedike fun baginen...
>
> I hammer the first nail into his wings
> onto your, heap, high Babellike walls.
>
> To the first drops of blood from your hands
> —a thirsty, a liturgical wineskin,–
> —has already placed its firelike mouth of dawn.

Here, a return to the symbolic complex developed over the course of *Di kupe's* 24 canto cycle reaches completion.[24] God as hawk is nailed – by the wings – to the walls of a new God, a Babel of corpses that conspire to form the Divine Symbol of the new world order, a Divine Symbol christened by this canto as nothing less than "Bilegod." The blood of these two deities, of God and Bilegod together, intermingle, then drip into "a thirsty, liturgical wineskin" which has "already placed its firelike mouth of dawn" to the suppurating wounds of Divinity mixed. The action has quite literally heaven-shattering consequences. It shifts God from the metaphysical realm to the physical, from abstraction to a rotting heap of dead bodies; itt recenters the new world order around an ideology that re-members not only the heap but the metaphysical abstraction that led to the heap; and more actively, it recenters the new world order around an ideology that concentrates on human beings, on what we have the potential to do to each other, and on what we have already done to each other.

---

[24] The 24th canto is a merely repetition of the 1st canto, though there obtains within it one significant alteration: the narrator is subsumed within the Divine substance of the heap. Within the contours of my reading, this would – in effect – transvalue the narrator to a demi-God, his liturgy – to gospel.

In a bidirectional movement, this act conceptually shifts divinity from the realm of heaven to earth while simultaneously shifting violence from the realm earth to heaven. It reveals how the dead have become gods who command us through the gruesome physical reality of their slaughter to wage war on the supernal symbols that led to their slaughter. It wrests these symbols from the sky and nails out blood.

What we referred to above as the "heaven-shattering consequences" of this vertical shift of Divinity and violence can also be seen as playing out in the horizontal realms of time and prayer. To understand in what manner, let us take our cue from *Di kupe's* final intertext, artfully woven into the fabric of its formally liturgical structure. Psalm 119 begins with the line, "Happy are those whose way is blameless." Throughout the psalm's successive 176 verses, it takes this notion of blamelessness as its theme, repeating it time and again, attaching to it also the idea that blamelessness results most effectively though rigorous adherence to the "words of God." As the psalm shifts from praise into its stanza of dramatic lament (verses 81-88), we read specifically of the psalmists longing to be filled – like a wineskin – with the divine words that can teach him and his readership how to act according to the notion of blamelessness:

> For your salvation, my soul pines,
> I await your words.
> For your words, my eyes pine,
> And thus I speak: When will you comfort me?
> For I have become like a wineskin in smoke... Psalm 119:81-83

Tellingly, the word used for wineskin in Yehoash's Yiddish translation of the psalm (*logl*) is the exact word used by Markish here – in his 23rd canto. This points ever more compellingly to the word's allusive power, paralleling biblical psalmist to modern scribe, ancient liturgist to modern writer, as both stand – empty skins – waiting to filled with the wine of an answer. Were questions of definition to be entertained between these two men, however – questions

such as, What is the nature of blamelessness, what is the content of God's words that can lead to blamelessness, and what is the essence of Divinity itself? – all parallels would break apart, scrape against, draw blood.

After all, for the psalmist, God is a transcendent symbol which *prescribes* his ideologies and laws through Text. Blamelessness is bound to an unquestioned adherence to these *prescribed* ideologies. In contrast, for the modern scribe, God is an immanent symbol that *describes* the horrors of physical reality and enjoins others to *pray* these realities into everyday consciousness. For the modern scribe, blamelessness is therefore bound to a very much questioned politics that itself shifts according to what it means at any given moment to be human and respect the humanity of others. Indeed, the blamelessness of the ancient psalmist stands in diametric opposition to the blamelessness of the modern writer, the latter a figure who in fact deems the psalmist's prescriptive ideologies, untethered as they are to the earth, as entirely blame*worthy*. Indeed, to the modern writer, to our narrator, we can only feel innocent of guilt when we have turned our physical reality into God and our prayers into a ritualized re-memberance of the victims of the Gods of the old world order – abstract Gods who – instead of creating a unified world – created only violence.

In all its pain, the historico-theological (re)vision of the modern scribe drips – together with the desecrated ideologies of the old world order – into *Di Kupe* and each one of its 24 cantos. From the dripping, night – upon which the spine of this new ideology is projected – dawns into day – which becomes the first page hung upon the calendar of a new era. The re-invention, re-envisioning and re-institutionalization of time for our narrator is thus effected not only through projecting historico-religious time onto natural time, but through containing, determining and subverting these temporal shifts through the language of prayer, in the wineskin of liturgy, between the covers of *Di kupe*:

To the first drops of blood from your hands
—a thirsty, a liturgical wineskin,–
—has already placed its firelike mouth of dawn.

A new day has been ushered in; a new God, a new text, a new historical-theological complex has been (re)visioned.

II. *Reb Nakhmen Tsu Zayn Soyfer:*
An Introspectivist's Kaleidoscopic Translation of Night
"Prayer is not in Time, but Time in Prayer." - Martin Buber