

Mangers Khumesk-Lider

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In Itzik Manger's Chumash Lider, both God and nature are engaged in a struggle to win over humanity to their own world view. To that end, Manger mythologizes landscapes and personifies trees. In "Eve and the Apple Tree," the apple tree appeals to Eve with tears and words of longing, "It rustles, it leans over her/ It says, 'Beloved Eve/ Not every warning Word He speaks/ Has to be believed.'" Throughout Manger's Chumash Lider, nature is portrayed as being sympathetic to emotions and longings, whereas the figures of traditional religion are depicted as being impervious to these forces. Eve expresses Manger's personal proclivities when she chooses between God and tree- "Lovely apple tree, don't weep/ I am your melody/ And know your word is stronger far/ Than the Word that's warning me." Manger thus presents the "pure, noble emotions" as being intertwined with nature, and usually in competition with the demands of God. This tension is explored in three of Manger's Chumash Lider, "Eve and the Apple Tree," "Abraham Takes Isaac to the Sacrifice," and "Hagar's Last Night in Abraham's House."

As indicated by the title, Adam is not one of the main characters in "Eve and the Apple Tree." Eve is caught in the middle of the struggle between the tree and God; each wants to convince her of the truth and authority of his own worldview.

The compelling force and beauty of the apple tree's message is immediately apparent. In the Yiddish version the setting is rendered more dramatic by the use of rhyme: "...Der zunfargang iz royt/...vus vaystu vegen toyt?" The image of Eve's confrontation with the setting red sun, the round red apple, and death is vivid; the reader can envision her riveted to the ground, fascinated by the seductive power and mystery of this tree.

Adam, on the other hand, seems to be oblivious to these unfolding mysteries. The alliteration present in the original Yiddish gives the reader the sense that the portrayal of Adam is parodic. "Adam iz aveck far tug/ in vilden vald aleyn/ Adam zugt: der vald iz vild/ un yeder 'vild' iz sheyn." After this "brilliant" statement, Adam disappears from the poem, clearly peripheral to the struggle taking place.

Once Adam vanishes into the woods, ceasing to be a character, the apple tree eclipses him, becoming increasingly personified. The tree begins to come to Eve in her dreams. It calls her "bashert," rustling over her in a sort of embrace. The apple tree openly challenges Eve not to listen to God's warnings, and so she accepts the tree's offer and picks an apple. This decision is so liberating, that Eve dances around the tree, reacting emotionally, using all of her senses. In turn, God is so affected by Eve's reaction, that He murmurs, "S'iz sheyn" and delays the final setting of the sun. Manger seems to be saying that perhaps God can soften, even if it is

only for a moment. On the other hand, this portrayal of divine empathy could be wishful thinking taking place in Eve's dreams.

The boundaries between dream and "reality" are blurred in this poem. With each reading, the boundaries seem to shift; the dream or dreams appear to have a life of their own within the confines of the poem. In another dream, the apple tree is weeping, and a tear drops onto Eve's hair. The personification of the tree is quite poignant; the range of emotions it expresses very wide. The tree yearns for a connection to Eve. It longs so palpably that Eve is compelled to respond. (Did Shel Silverstein ever see this poem? -The Giving Tree is so reminiscent of this)

Eve makes her choice, and embraces the apple tree, telling it- "Veyn nisht, sheyner epplboim/ du roishst un zingst in mir/ un du bist shtarker funem vort/ vus vornt mich far dir." Not only does Eve accept the apple tree's offer in defiance of God's warnings; she even internalizes the tree's message in such a way that it "sings in her." In Manger's view, humanity and the desires and sensual longings represented here by nature are intended to be intertwined, but the dictates of God and religion get in the way. The "pious stars" which "tremble with alarm" are not of this world, and so they are personified as immune to this conflict. For those on earth, though, the choice is clear, according to Manger's outlook of secular humanism. It may be true that, "Der toyt dus iz der epplboim," but the poet clearly believes that it is the earthly life which is redemptive.

In "Abraham takes Isaac to the Sacrifice," one sees again the conflict between what are viewed as the harsh and unnatural dictates of God and the natural desires of humanity. Abraham dutifully prepares to do God's will, but it seems as though all of the other characters and elements in the poem are anxiously poised, sympathetically watching the awful event unfold.

As Abraham takes Isaac by the hand, a "blue and pious star" shines overhead. Distanced from the emotions of flesh and blood, the star is able to piously approve. On earth, though, all the elements of nature empathize with the suffering of men. Even the road is silvery; at once beautiful and tearful-"Sad and lovely," the poet says/ 'Are the roads of the Holy Book." In this mythic setting of the Holy Book, where the word of God is obeyed at all costs, there is a tragically beautiful cast to the landscape.

As Abraham, Isaac and Eliezer set off on their mission, all of nature is alarmed-"The graying willows on the way/ Run to the house again/ To see if his mother weeps beside/ The cradle of her son." Isaac is purposefully portrayed here as a baby or very young child: it is very poignant and disturbing to envision a baby being pulled from his mother's arms. Clearly, the tree and the mother are viewed as sharing a close connection to nature and its indigenous desires and instincts.

Isaac is portrayed as such an innocent young child, that when he asks his father where they are going, Abraham responds with a traditional lullaby, here hideously ironic- "Daddy,

where are we going now?'/ 'To Lashkev-to the fair.'/ 'Daddy,
what are you going to buy/ At Lashkev-at the fair?/ 'A
soldier made of porcelain,/ A trumpet and a drum;/ A piece
of satin to make a dress/ For mother who waits at home."
Abraham's response has a folkloric quality, which lends a
sense of universality to the situation depicted in the
poem. All human beings want the best for their children,
and all parents use whatever means available-even if it is
only a lullaby-to assuage their children's fears. Usually,
though, it is the mother who sings the lullaby to her child
in the cradle; here, the cradle is empty and the mother is
weeping.

Abraham is not presented here as an uncaring, unfeeling
father, though. Rather, the reader receives both subtle and
clear messages that there is a close relationship between
Abraham and Isaac. Isaac addresses his father as,
"tateshi," and Abraham refers to his son as "Yitzhaklen;"
both of which are affectionate diminutive forms. It is
apparent that Abraham is experiencing great pain, and feels
the knife is in his own heart- "Abraham feels his eyes grow
moist/ And the steel knife pressing, where/ It scalds the
flesh beneath his shirt.../ 'It's going to be some fair."
Manger is illustrating a scenario wherein Abraham is
following God's command, in spite of his emotions and
misgivings. The willow tree, Sarah, and even Eliezer, "the
loyal servant" watch anxiously, while Abraham acts against

his instinct and emotions. It is because of this tension that the poet says, "Sad and lovely are the roads of the Holy Book."

God's dictates are again followed at the expense of the love and deep connection between two human beings, in the poem, "Hagar's Last Night in Abraham's House." In this poem the characters who are traditionally presented as very positive are depicted as quite negative; whereas the classically negatively-viewed character is portrayed in a sympathetic light.

The poem is written from Hagar's point of view; she, who is usually seen as a lowly maidservant with no feelings, is depicted here as a noble, mistreated lover who has been jilted. The portrait drawn of Abraham and Sarah, on the other hand, is shockingly grotesque. Sarah nags Abraham to send Hagar away, proclaiming, "Oder du treibst die dienst aroys,/ az nisht vill ich a get." Abraham is even more coarse- "Klipah,' hut er ihr gezogt,/ du tretst mich op, tsie nein?" These two traditional models of virtue seem almost laughable in their depravity.

Hagar, who occupies the lowest position in the social caste system, has the noblest emotions. She is the classic servant who has a love affair with her master, which is doomed to fail. The inequity in their relationship insures that she will be the one hurt most in the end. As the poem closes, Hagar is still washing and scrubbing, left only with

memories and feelings of longing. She holds the gifts which Abraham gave her in better days; brightly colored objects, reminiscent of summer and passion. Even at the height of their love, though, hints of the transient appeared. Hagar remembers, "These were the gifts he gave her/ Once upon a day/ When they strolled the meadow/ By the railroad right-of-way."

The railroad, which is the classic setting wherein lovers part, is also the source of the poem's primary symbol for love. "How like the smoke of a chimmney,/ How like the smoke of a train/ Is the love of a man, dear mother,/ The love of any man." To Hagar, the love of a man is ephemeral; never to be depended upon. Abraham's love for her has been blown away like smoke, because God has commanded Abraham to heed Sarah's words. Hagar is ennobled by her pure and honest longing for Abraham; Abraham is tainted and coarsened by following God's command instead of his heart.

By examining the manner in which Manger views classic Biblical characters, the reader understands Manger's purpose in reviving them. His portrayal of these personas is far from traditional; the greater the incongruity between their actions and their natural instincts, the more grotesquely they are painted. For Manger, redemption lies in making choices in our lives which are unfettered by the dogmatic demands of a religion or a distant God. Thus, when the apple tree reaches out to Eve, she responds honestly,

"Lovely apple tree, don't weep/ I am your melody/ And know
your word is stronger far/ Than the Word that's warning me."