

## ISRAEL EFROS

When they arrived in America as youngsters, all of the Hebrew writers considered in this volume hungered for general education. They quickly conquered English, excelled in high school, read the great English and American poets, and applied themselves to their studies in the public universities. But it was Israel Efros, alone of this company, who became an academic scholar writing in English as well as a practicing Hebrew poet. His training and publications allowed him to pursue a teaching career at American universities rather than at the newly established Hebrew colleges, like the rest of his fellow writers. When a branch of the Hebrew University was established in Tel Aviv in the years after the founding of the state of Israel, Efros was invited to come from America to serve as its head. The gift of longevity enabled Efros to finish his life as the honorary president of what had become in the meantime Tel Aviv University and as an American Hebrew poet who had been rescued from obscurity by the chance to reconnect with the dynamic center of contemporary Hebrew literature.

Efros was born in 1891 in Poland in the town of Ostrog to a father who was both a traditional scholar and a maskil and who took in advanced students for board and instruction. The boy was moved quickly through the heder system and then educated by his father at home. In 1905, two years after establishing himself in America, Efros's father brought the family to New York. In the mornings, Efros attended the public schools and the afternoon he studies at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan yeshivah, from which he received rabbinical ordination at the age of eighteen. Daniel Persky remembers him as part of the "Hebrew Gang" of youths together with him and H. A. Freidland on East Broadway on the Lower East Side during these years and shortly after as head of the Yovel youth group in Harlem. After studying at New York University, Efros simultaneously pursued rabbinical studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary and doctoral studies in philosophy at Columbia University, receiving both his ordination and Ph.D. in 1915 at the age of twenty-four. The next year Efros moved to Baltimore to become principal of its talmud torah, and shortly thereafter he founded the Baltimore Hebrew College, which, together with similar institutions in Boston, New York, Chicago and other cities, became one of the key venues of American Hebrew culture and a chief employer of its literary figures. In 1929 Efros was given the chance to do something that



was very rare at the time: to teach Jewish studies in an American university. He joined the faculty of the University of Buffalo, where he taught Hebrew and Jewish philosophy. During the 1940s Efros returned to New York to teach at Hunter College; in 1954 he was called to head the nascent Tel Aviv University. He died in 1981.<sup>1</sup>

Efros's speciality in Jewish philosophy was the medieval rationalist tradition. His first book, *The Problem of Space in Jewish Medieval Philosophy*, was published in 1917 in a distinguished series edited by the Columbia Semitist Richard Gotthiel. He was an expert in the nuances of technical philosophical terminology and in how Greek terms were first expressed in Arabic and then adapted into Hebrew. In 1924 he published *Philosophical Terms in the Moreh Nebukim*<sup>2</sup> and several years later *Studies in Pre-Tibbonian Philosophical Terminology*. Among the many other subjects of Efros's research were the thought of Judah Halevi, Maimonides's writings on logic and a synthetic study (in Hebrew) of medieval Jewish thought as a whole.

Among the Hebrew poets in America, in short, Efros was unique in his formidable knowledge of the philosophical tradition and the technicalities of its abstract terminology. At the same time, however, of all the American Hebrew poets Efros's verse is the least abstract and conceptual. His poetry is distinguished by its search for radical simplicity, by a striving toward a stripped down classical idiom, and by a principled disinclination to make use of the weight of erudition. There are, to be sure, pronounced metaphysical concerns to be found in Efros's lyric verse, yet in mode of conception and expression this is a poetry that is as distant from abstraction as can be imagined, and if one did not know it was written by an expert in medieval philosophical terminology, it would be exceedingly difficult to guess the nature of the writer's "day job."

Simplicity as a realized poetic norm in Efros's poetry had in fact attained a kind of iconic status in American Hebraist circles in the early 1920s. In Shimon Halkin's famous defense of American Hebrew poetry against its detractors abroad, Efros is presented as the exemplar of the lucidity and serenity that are the hallmark of the American style. The poets of Eretz Yisrael, Halkin argues, have fallen for the barbarisms of the European avant guard such as Symbolism and Expressionism, and as a result their poetry is permeated with "neurosis, stylistic unevenness, obscurantist content, and a striving toward the outlandish." American Hebrew poetry, on the other hand, "is straightforward,



speaks simply, and tries to crystallize the refine emotions rather than befog them."<sup>3</sup> Efros is singled out for his simplicity and musicality and for his striving to compose verse (*shirah*) that approaches *song* in the English sense of the term. In short, Halkin saw Efros as an essential figure in the move to rescue Hebrew verse and "return man to poetry and poetry to man."

The components of Efros's simplicity in the first two decades of his poetic production are not hard to describe. He typically makes full use of the regularities of the Ashkenazi stress on the penultimate syllable to fashion a sonorous trochaic line, while make sparing but tactical use of words with a *milra'* stress. Most poems are organized in quatrains with the second and fourth lines rhyming. There is a distinct preference for short words over long words and for simple words over complex words. Although the lexical register is biblical, Efros avoids the grandiloquent dimension of biblical language. For a Hebraist and lexicographer who controlled the language in all its esoteric coruscations—he co-edited a well-known English-Hebrew dictionary—Efros takes a principled stance of semantic renunciation; he knows all the words in the dictionary, but, as Yehuda Amichai was later famously to remark about his own poetry, he uses very few of the, and on purpose.<sup>4</sup>

A similar purposeful minimalism is displayed in Efros's reluctance to allude to classical texts. One of the hallmarks of the great age of Bialik was the advantage taken of the classical literacy of contemporary readers, who could be counted on to recognize references to biblical and rabbinic texts and grasp their ironic, often subversive, import. Efros's readers were not much less literate, yet despite his enormous admiration for Bialik, Efros generally declined to exercise this poetic option. This was a choice made, it is important to stress, by most of the American Hebrew poets, not just Efros, and, as has been pointed out earlier, this constitutes a critical distinction between their poetic practice and that of the great poets of the Tehiyyah [Revival] period, their powerful precursors. In Efros's case, the absence of allusiveness serves the forward flow of the poetic line; the poetry seeks to avoid the kind of impedance that results from the ramifying subtexts and associations released when a reader comes across a reference which, like a pop-up toy or a land mine, scatters attention in many directions. Efros wants to rein in his language



in order to protect the simple integrity of the mood, emotion or image he is floating in the lyric moment of the poem. Most of all, he wants his song sung.

The ideal of simplicity, most conspicuously felt in the early lyric verse, abides in Efros's poetry through significant changes in his writing. In the 1930s and 1940s he turned away from the lyric to compose a series of narrative epic poems on themes of American history and landscape (*Vigvamim shotkim* [Silent Wigwams, 1933] and *Zahav* [Gold, 1942]) that became his most successful and best known contributions to American Hebrew letters. Here too the commitment to a disentangled and unimpeded poetic line enabled Efros to create an effective sense of narrative momentum. When Efros arrived in Israel in the early years of the state, his poetry again took a different turn. He went over to the Israeli accent from the Ashkenazi, which, needless to say, had profound implications for how his poetry scans and sings. For the most part, he abandoned rhyme and fixed stanzaic structure and moved toward free verse. Efros's poetic range was also expanded by translating *Hamlet* and *Timon of Athens*, undertaken as part of the Silkiner-Bialik American Hebrew Shakespeare project.<sup>15</sup> Writing deep into old age—his last book of poetry appeared in 1978 when he was eighty-eight, and his collected writings in five volumes appeared in 1980, the year before his death—Efros was reborn as an Israeli poet. His longevity made him lucky in another way. The trademark simplicity and minimalism that Efros had developed in the teens and the twenties and hued to in the decades following was now precisely the quality celebrated in the new poetry of Amichai, Zach and Pagis. Efros had persevered during the stormy revolutions of Shlonsky and Greenberg and come out on the other side, and if he was not adopted as a precursor by the younger poets quite in the same way that Fogel was, he nevertheless finished his career esteemed as a hoary bearer of a fresh and relevant wisdom.

It is in *Shirim 5611-5628* [Poems 1911-1928] that Efros first established his poetic voice.<sup>6</sup> At the center of these poems is a lyric subject who responds to the phenomenal world around him. Night descends, a fall storm threatens, the first flowers of spring bloom, a fresh snowfall sparkles in the moonlight. Although the poems' climes are those of the American Northeast and they are signed with such place names as the Catskill Mountains and Asbury Park on the Jersey shore, there is nothing local about



these locations. There are no place names within the poems, no local lore, and no effort spent in evoking the unique and indelible genius of place. Nature here is essentialized and elementalized, and one might go on to say refined and classicized. An engagement with the palpable Americanness of American vistas is something that would come later, and come abundantly, in Efros's long narrative poems about the native Americans and the California Gold Rush. Yet in Efros's earlier lyric phase, a natural scene like the aftermath of a great storm serves as a momentary expression of cosmic forces that can configure themselves differently in another mood or another moment.

"Leil horef" ["Winter Night," 1917, pp. 41-46], one of Efros's finest nature poems, exemplifies the kind of imaginative experience triggered by the encounter with the world. The poem opens with a Frost-like consideration of whether the winter woods are more beautiful by day or by night, a question the speaker decides in favor of the possibilities of nocturnal enchantment. He explains the sparkling of the moonlight on the snow by imagining that stars above have been plundered from the heavens and installed below. Pondering this blessed act of cosmic naughtiness puts him in an antic mood, and with the cry "How good to be a child on a night like this!," he rolls in the snow and imagines that he is churning up the stars as the white sparkles cascade off of him. This regressive reverie of mingling with the snow and stars is brought to a halt when he encounters the great trees in the depths of the wood. In the eyes of these great trees, he imagines, he is a provocation: a nosy intruder dressed in black who violates the utter whiteness of their kingdom. Their anger is communicated by a fierce wind that blows the snow into a blinding swirl. Yet instead of being ejected from this wintry Eden, the speaker is vouchsafed a vision. Three white creatures emerge from snowy wind and sing a song that announces that they are snow maidens, who, despite their icy appearance, enfold within their warm hearts the flowers that died the preceding spring and will yet be brought back to life. The infinite cycle of life is assured. The wind dies down, and the revelation from within the storm departs with it. Yet whether from afar or from within him, the poem concludes, the song of the snow maidens still resonates.

Even read in paraphrase, "Leil horef" shows how squarely Efros's lyric verse falls within the conventions of the romantic tradition. The poetry lives *inside* the pathetic fallacy rather than making a pretense of resisting it. There exists a soul of the world, the



*anima mundi*, which the lyric subject encounters in heightened moments of experience. Does the speaker/subject originate his own fantasies and project them onto the *anima mundi*, or are the visions he sees revealed to him from a realm beyond his imagination? In "Leil horef," the speaker begins by projecting and ends by receiving. His little story about the anonymous thief who stole the stars of heaven and scattered them on the moonlit snow is wholly of his own confection. But the spectacle of the snow maidens is disclosed to him from the soul of the winter forest. How does he merit this revelation? Between the fantasy of the stolen stars and this gift of vision, the speaker first has allowed himself to regress into a childlike state of abandonment (the rolling in the snow) and then taken courage and penetrated the darker, stormy depths of the forest. The profundity of this arrival, however, does mark his earlier fantasy as shallow and insignificant. The exercise of his imagination, though projective, was the trigger or the necessary first step in the encounter. "Leil horef" presents itself as a poem about what it takes to make a genuine connection with the soul of the world.<sup>7</sup>

From out of the frozen depths of winter the snow maidens deliver a consoling message about the continuity of life. Concerning many of the encounters with nature enacted in Efros's poetry, it would be fair to say the results are, like these, beneficent. Beauty is discovered, and a quickening of life won from the world. But it is not always so, and Efros has sometimes been done a disservice by such sympathetic critics as Menahem Ribalow, who recommended his poetry to those who "wish to return.[ . . ] to those good days when poets dreamt happy dreams and poems, joy-filled and pleasant, were carried aloft like a bird on the field."<sup>8</sup> Another poem set during a stormy night ("Beleil sho'ah," [On a Night of Destruction], pp. 30-31), ends with the speaker's being unhinged and mortified by the "wild derisive laughter that thunders from the distance." In still another poem ("Pahad 'erev" [Night Dread], pp. 66-67), the romantic expectations associated with twilight are replaced by the perception that with night "a strange fear descends/ upon each hill and valley." The poem ends with the speaker wandering the rain-swept fields, his heart silently clutched in anxiety.

Whether surprised by joy or by dread, the lyric subject is most often alone in the world and with the world. Yet there are times when the encounter is shared with a female companion, but only fleetingly. The poems in which women appear always transpire on



the eve of separation.<sup>9</sup> She is leaving him or he is leaving her, but the atmosphere is never one of abandonment, longing or anguish. Rather, the leave taking, regardless of who is departing, is marked by a mood of melancholy resignation, as if to say that aloneness in the world is the modal state of the lyric subject, and from this situation there can be, almost by definition, only be moments of reprieve marked by miss-matched expectations. In Efros's lyric poetry, as is the case with much of American Hebrew poetry in general—Silberschlag is the exception—the erotic register is set low. The subject husbands his subjectivity for the encounter with the world rather than with others.

In one of the earliest of the collected poems (“Uvemoti. . .” [And When I Die. . . ], pp. 12-13, dated Av 5672/1912), the speaker invites his beloved to put her head in his lap and he promises to tell her the secret of life. “There is an ambient veil,” he reveals to her, “that covers being/ and interposes itself before our eyes.” This may not be welcome news to the beloved, but it nicely epitomizes the dilemma at the heart of Efros's poetry. When the veil is not entirely opaque, the world can be glimpsed and refractions of beauty collected. But when access is denied, the poet is worn down by ennui and assailed by doubt. What surprises us in the poem “‘Ayafti. . .” [I Am Exhausted. . . ], pp. 61-2) is that this Kohelet-like complaint of futility and dashed hopes is addressed to the god Pluto, whose subterranean realm he presumes to disturb. After Shaul Tchernichovsky's pagan poems of a generation earlier, there is no necessary scandal in addressing a Hebrew poem to a Greek god, and the gesture seems more rhetorical than sincerely provocative. (“Ayafti. . .” is in fact followed directly by “Hellas” (pp. 65-77), an ambitious *poema* on the high themes of art and truth. Those ambitions prompted Menahem Ribalow to remark that Efros should stick to the short lyric and leave the *poema* as a genre to Zalman Schnaeour.<sup>10</sup>)

When Efros's speakers expostulate with Heaven it is more naturally the God of Israel whom they address. In the second decade of this poetry, in the 1920s, poems directed to God become more frequent. This is not the God of history or the God of the Bible or the God of Jewish suffering, but rather, simply, the personal God of the universe. The speaker of “‘Et kokhav emunah yid'akh...” [How the Star of Faith Dims, dated 5693/1923, pp. 119-20) describes to God in a quiet, elegiac tone—so markedly different from Bialik's stormy apostasies!—how his sincere childhood faith lost its compass and

drifted away. There remain, however, moments of exaltation. When the veil of the cosmos is parted, the sparks of beauty are reignited, and Efros's speakers do not hesitate to address their thanks to God. "Odkha" [I Shall Thank You, dated Iyyar, 5684/1924, pp. 137-8] is such a poem, and it would not be out place in the liturgy, although it characteristically resists classical Jewish allusiveness and associations. "Would I could be the paint brush, Lord,/ with which you color the wide world!" is the opening (and title) of a disarming invocation that touches on the ontological sources of Efros's mission as an artist.

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This bittersweet and complex little poem is taken from the middle of *Shirim* 5611-5628, and, by placement in the volume, appears to have been written in 1921, although it is not dated.



### Little Clapper

Ding-dong! A little clapper/ dashes back and forth  
and sings out:/ My world is a bell/ my world is so  
narrow.

And when I'm flung/ from wall to wall,/ when I batter  
my head--/ Ding-dong! A song is heard. . .

Someone passes by and listens/ and his heart is filled  
with joy./ Ding-dong! Thus is lost/ my pain in the  
ringing sound.

"Inbal qatan" [Little Clapper] turns on the contradiction between the clarion tones of the bell, which bring delight to listeners, and the hidden violence and self-sacrifice necessary to their production. This is, admittedly, a very large theme for so slight a poem, yet the severity of Efros's lyric discipline pulls it off. Not only are the features of Efros's signature simplicity in evidence here, but they have been wound tighter to compensate for the poem's purposeful slenderness. Efros's characteristic quatrains have been squeezed and compressed into lines with no more than two or three stresses. The language, with one key exception, is classically biblical and composed of short words. The rhymes at the ends of the second and fourth lines are strictly deployed to convey the



poem's central paradox. In the first stanza, *shar* [sings] is played off against *tsar* [narrow], and the second, *qir* [wall] rebuts *shir* [song]; while in the third, *gil* [joy] is closely synonymous with *tselil* [sound], the doubling by this time is palpably ironic.

The poem opens with the tinkling and ringing of the bell, and this onomatopoeia not only enacts the poem's preoccupation with the making of sound but also draws us toward a charmed series of associations with bells, which has already been initiated by the poem's title. Bells and clappers generally evoke beneficent images of delightful sounds announcing glad tidings. This is a *little* clapper and one that not only tirelessly races back and forth within its bell but also talks, and this fact takes us a step further toward the world of animate objects in children's literature, where teapots sing and brooms dance. This progress into fantasy is complicated by the words the little clapper utters when it speaks. "My world is a bell" is an analogy that invites us to think about the conditions under which this proposition could be true, and it recalls the world of Lafontaine's rationalist fables and their personified objects. The concluding line of the stanza ("My world is so narrow.") introduces a discordant, plaintive note for the first time. There is no necessary alarm here, however, for it is in the nature of bells to be circumscribed.

After this resonant scene of happy bells and talking clappers, the middle stanza comes as a shock. We are suddenly thrust inside the bell and exposed to the infernal mechanism that produces the sounds that delight the ears of listeners outside. The violence is encapsulated in the word *aqula'* ["I am/will be flung"] in line 5. In this poem as in most of his verse, it has been observed, Efros writes in a concise and limpid biblical idiom. The morphology of *aqula'* is a conspicuous violation of that norm. Hebrew readers would easily identify the biblical use of this root in the Samuel narratives: first, when David flings [*vayeqala'*] one of his five smooth stones to fell Goliath (I Samuel 17:49), and then when Abigail declares to David that he will be protected as God's chosen one and that God "will fling away [*yiqal'enh*] the lives of your enemies as from the hollow of a sling [*qaf haqela'*] (I Samuel, 25:29). These biblical instances establish the *qal* form of this verb as the standard usage. Yet Efros uses this stem in the future *huf'al*, a construction which is not only uncommon and awkward but one which invokes, at least for sensitive ears, a well-known piyyut from the Yom Kippur morning liturgy in



which, following the Talmud's exegesis of I Samuel 25, the soul of evildoers is flung away [*tequla*].<sup>11</sup> The picture drawn in the Talmud is superbly to the point here. In a *beraita*, Rabbi Eliezer contemplates the differential fate of the righteous and the wicked. While the souls of the righteous in the world to come are ensconced beneath the heavenly throne, the souls of the wicked undergo a horrific ordeal: "An angel stands at one end of the universe and another angel stands at the other end of the universe, and they sling the souls of the wicked back and forth between them."

This might be considered an overwrought piece of morbid erudition if it were not for the fact of Efros's general deliberate avoidance of allusions to classical sources. For, despite his project to free Hebrew verse from the laden allusiveness of Bialik's poetry—while of course preserving many other of the master's practices—Efros is willing to violate his principles for the right opportunity. Here, at the beginning of the second stanza of "Inbal katan," he seizes his chance and positions the word *aqula'* as if it were an land mine. The back-and-forth movement of the clapper inside the bell suddenly switches from being a service happily performed to being an involuntary punishment, to which the forlorn speaker, like the feckless souls of the wicked, will be condemned for all eternity. The sudden of the switch is also conveyed by the word *arotsets* ["I will batter," line 7], which describes the concussing of the speaker's head with each clap of the bell, whereas the happy scurrying back and forth of the little clapper in line 2 is given by word *etrostets*. Although the two terms look and sound similar, they derive from completely different word stems, and this semantic sleight of hand further heightens the turning-inside-out of the initial situation.<sup>12</sup>

Yet it is toward that initial situation that the poem returns. After glimpsing the unremitting punishment necessary to the production of song, the poem moves us back toward the reified object, the song itself, as well as outside the bell, where the song sings. The onomatopoetic *glin-glan* is heard twice (lines 8 and 11), reinforcing the song's "thereness" and its success in detaching itself from its origins and enter the world. The passerby whose heart is filled with joy when he listens to the song is supremely innocent of what when into its making. The speaker, the voice of the little clapper, which returns now at the conclusion of the poem, does not protest: ". . . thus is lost/ my pain in the ringing sound." The vague and bland conjunction *kakhah* ["so," "thus," "in this way,"



line 11] conveys in its minimalism a reservoir of resignation. Yet the submission is not without its secret consolation. The clapper's final utterance is conspicuously ambiguous. The fact that the clapper's pain is lost in the peels of the bell can mean two things. Either the clapper's pain disappears from view so that his suffering is all the more painful for being unacknowledged. Or, this pain is absorbed by or subsumed in the song and thus mitigated or at least sublimated. Because the poem as a whole documents two truths—the truth of the sung song and the truth of the battered head—it is fitting that Efros allows his poem to rest on a statement that can underscore the truth of one or another, or, perhaps more likely, both at the same time.

"Inbal qatan" at once describes Efros's *ars poetica* and embodies it. As an artifact, this crystalline little poem displays all the characteristics of Efros's vaunted simplicity and the limpid sonality. At the same time, it brilliantly reveals the fact that this is a simplicity that is constructed, fabricated, made. And at what cost the overly sensitive reader may not wish to know.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources for Efros's biography include Ribalow, *Antologiyah*, p. 129, Efros's own note about himself in Yitzhak Orpaz et. al. (eds.), *Yisrael Efrat: meshorer vehogeh* (Tel Aviv: Machon Katz Lesifrut Ivrit, Tel Aviv University, 1981), 13-14, and Daniel Persky, idem, 37-42.

<sup>2</sup> The dedication to this English volume is written in Hebrew, and it is a moving tribute to Efros's father, whom he lavishes thanks for his nurturing introduction to Jewish study and to Maimonides. In an endearing play on words that unpacks the title of Maimonides's great philosophical treatise, Efros makes a gesture to his father's *haskalah* interests—and to his own unconventional discipleship--by saying that he implanted in the son esteem for both the guide and the perplexed (*gam lamoreh vegam lanevukhim*).

<sup>3</sup> Shimon Halkin, "Hashirah ha'ivrit ba'ameriqah," *Hadoar* 4, no. 4 (Nov. 28, 1924): 10-12; the translations are taken from Ezra Spicehandler, "Ameriqu'iyut in American Hebrew Literature" in Alan Mintz (ed.), *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993) 78-79.

<sup>4</sup> Edited with Benjamin Silkiner and Yehuda Ibn-Shemuel Kaufman, Efros's English-Hebrew dictionary was first published in 1929 (Tel Aviv: Devir) and went through several subsequent revisions.

<sup>5</sup> *Hamlet, nesikh Denmark* (New York: Ogen, 1944) and *Timon, ish Atunah* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1953).

<sup>6</sup> The volume was published in Tel Aviv in 1932 as a joint venture between the Haverim imprint in New York and the Mitspeh publishing house in Palestine. All page references are to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> "Leil horef" bears an evident debt to a key poem in the Bialik canon, "Tsafririm" [Morning Spirits, 19??], in which the speaker summons up a recollection of the rambunctious sprites that lured to frolic in nature as a boy. In Efros's poem as in Bialik's, these creatures are presented as real rather than merely fanciful or allegorical, and their appearance is revelatory. Efros's treatment of the scene lacks the autobiographical framing of Bialik's text, and hence the endings, though similar, have different resonances. For Bialik, the appearance of the *tsafririm* is presented as being constitutive of his developing imaginations, whereas for Efros the event merely leaves a consoling echo.

<sup>8</sup> MR in YE, MESHORER VEHOGEH

<sup>9</sup> See the poems on pages 1, 12-13, 26-27, 28, 40 and others.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> The piyyut, which begins *Tamid titlonen beyadkha kol nefesh*, can be found in Daniel Goldschmidt (ed.), *Mahzor leyamim nora'im* [High Holiday Mahzor] (Keren Yerushalayim: Jerusalem, 1970), Vol. 2, pp. 172-73. The Talmudic reference is in Bavli Shabbat 152b.

<sup>12</sup> *Etrostets* is the future hitpa'el of *r.u.ts*, to run, whereas *arotsets* is the future pi'el of *r.ts.ts.*, to smash or batter.

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