

Word, Action, and the *Badkhan* in  
in Peretz's *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*

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revolution and revitalisation.

The *batkhn* is a nebulous character, presented in the first act as having just emerged from solitary hiatus. He is introduced as attempting to remember an utterance that has escaped him:

Something has slipped my mind. . .  
I've forgotten some important word. . .  
I've sat too many days in that old ruin  
amongst the spiders. . . (199-203)

Novershtern concludes that this passage "suggests that he is a symbol of the devitalized past," (74) a figure from within traditional Jewish society seeking to rebuild his own lost identity. The *batkhn*, whose traditional function it is to reproduce familiar rhyming witticisms and moralisms at weddings, is a master of words. His art is largely based on recounting and adapting memorised phraseology, and not on generating original, effective speech. The failure of memory, access to the cyclical past of Jewish life, is a key theme in *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* and is connected to action, and agency throughout the play.

The overall structure of *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* comprises a series of verbal units, unconnected and uttered more for the sake of superficial character identification than meaningful exchange or monumental revelation. In a reflection of an extreme degeneration of a traditional society based in words, both written and oral, Peretz's play is *pilpul* taken to the extreme. In the midst of myriad trite statements which serve only to reinforce the static existence of the speakers, the *batkhn* appears seeking to recall and produce that all-meaningful, all-encompassing word. Emerging from isolation, he calls on the function of memory, the collective cornerstone of shared Jewish identity, to recapture what has been lost. The function of memory fails him, and the *batkhn* finds himself unable to produce that one, mysterious missing word, and thus impotent, bereft of power and agency.

The *batkhn's* obsession for *the Word*, which drives him throughout the play, assumes the existence of one word to encompass a potential for action of epic

proportions:

There after all  
has to be such a word  
[For] remaking, [for] overturning everything (217-219)

This quintessential word is a cosmic force, a modern (or modernist) version of the omniscient *logos* in the opening verse of the Christian Testament Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (NRSV, Jn 1: 1). Novershtern asserts that this quest for "remaking" and "overturning" "gives the Jester's search a distinctly eschatological character," and yet his preoccupation is with revolution itself, and not the "redemptive phase" which typically marks the end of the eschatological model (76). The quest for lost memory is a drive for revolution, rooted in the process of effecting radical change and not in its aftermath.

The only response to the *batkhn's* crusade for the Word is the *poresh's* gesture of raising his hand to the sky, accompanied by the phrase: "His handiwork" (220). The ironic gesture and reference links the *batkhn* to the divine order, the very realm the *batkhn* seeks to drastic alter. Despite the cosmic magnitude of the *batkhn's* quest, the scene immediately shifts away from the *batkhn* to the utterings of a host of characters from various facets of the realm of the living, including girls, shopkeepers, and Nosn the Drunk, as if the *batkhn* had never spoken at all. Only when the account of how *batkhn* witnessed the *klezmerim* being sucked into the well by monstrous powers after a night of performing for non-Jews, drinking, and debauchery is recounted to a group of boys does the *batkhn* again speak, and, for the first time, act.

Boy (looking at the *batkhn* in fright):

Was he there too?

Second boy:

He was standing opposite. . . and saw it all. . .

*Batkhn* (angrily pulling a red handkerchief from his breast pocket):

Ha - ha!

Revealing things from school!

(He chases them with the handkerchief.)

Shoo! Shoo!

(The children run up the balcony and into their houses with frightened

laughter.) (324-328)

The *batkhn*, implicated in the demonic event, takes action to detract the attention away from his traumatic experience.

This seemingly minor act marks an awakening of the *batkhn's* supernatural powers:

(Holding up the handkerchief)  
With this cloth I make a wind  
That blows the lights out in each home.  
Let it be dark like in the grave!  
Silent like the grave! (337-340)

Although only partially successful (the lights at the second floor meeting do not dim on command), the agency behind these seemingly innocuous occurrences of lights going out in the houses is attributed to the *batkhn's* verbal command. The transition from day to night both excites and empowers him, and the *batkhn* is presented as personally bringing in the night, the realm of the demonic with which he is associated.

As the day fades, the *batkhn* begins to interact with other characters who appear in the marketplace. He invites the prostitute to come with him, only to have her snatched away by *emets*. This figure of *emets* represents, according to Dan Miron, the Id, the libido, raw sexual desire. Like the *batkhn*, *emets* lacks a formal identity, yet his carnal desire overrides his lack of self and generates who he is:

I do not know who I am  
I only know what I want. (383-384)

Unlike the *batkhn*, *emets* is able to satisfy his desires because he knows exactly what they are. Meanwhile, still waving his handkerchief, the *batkhn* rejoices at sunset:

(With barely suppressed joy):  
[The sun] has set! [The sun] has set!  
Blind houses, black windows! (415-416)

The transition to nightfall parallels the *batkhn's* empowerment; as the light dims, he becomes more bold. The first act ends with the *batkhn*, in a gesture of unambiguous blasphemy, shaking his fist at the sky, and in a warped self-referential parallel of the earlier comment of the recluse, uttering a taunting:

Your image! (429)

After nightfall, the *batkhn* assumes a leadership role, aligning himself with the demonic in a quasi-military dictatorship in the second act. He begins by taking the whistle from the sleeping Night Watchman and mobilising the *gets*, the stone gargoyle over the well:

Hey, you old horror, you (453) [...]  
 Heaven - shut down;  
 It is our night! Our night! (457-458)

Blowing the whistle in a motion associated with the shaking of the lulav and esrog, he stages a dramatic coup against heaven, and begins to summon lost souls from purgatory:

You can punish tomorrow!  
 But during the time You are sleeping  
 I am field marshall!  
 And I shall lead (462-465) [...]  
 Come to the old marketplace, to the old marketplace  
 Come, I shall be in command!

The *batkhn* designates himself self-appointed leader of the netherworld with no further concrete plans to implement apparent. He seeks to lead, but completely lacks direction:

I shall lead God's world!  
 Let me just remember where to. (483-484)

In contrast, the first act of Peretz's family chronicle *Di goldene keyt* portrays Reb Shloyme as seeking to elevate his community by instituting an eternal Shabbes and thereby bringing the Messiah. There is no ambivalence in Reb Shloyme's cosmic plan, and nothing is arbitrary. His means represent a challenge to heaven in a refusal to make Havdalah, his end is Messianic redemption and renewal.

The *batkhn* observes, and interacts with an array of figures from purgatory, on a superficial level. He begins by responding to their plaintive utterings in single-line retorts, with the figure of the Messiah at the centre. To the Water Carrier he remarks:

And may you live to experience the Messiah  
 Because of the merit from [your] fresh drink!  
 To the Woodcutter:  
 And for this he will, when the time comes,  
 Hear the messiah's shofar!

The *batkhn*'s ironic use of these cliches serve to both trivialize the suffering of the characters at whom they are directed, and to denigrate and subvert a tradition which associates human suffering with Messianic redemption. Not reflecting any genuine longing for Messianic redemption, the Messiah serves as an interim catchword for the "remaking" and "overturning" of everything until the *batkhn* locates the actual word for which he is searching.

The *batkhn* succeeds in connecting word and action in his interactions with two figures from the elite of the traditional Jewish community: the wealthy man and the cantor. In response to the wealthy man's boasting, the *batkhn* says, "Die!" and which the wealthy Jew staggers and begins to collapse. To the *khazan* [cantor] he compassionately says:

I don't want to play games with you.  
 Go! (637-638) [...]  
 (pointing to the synagogue)  
 There! (639) [...]  
 Just leave me alone. . . (644)

at which the cantor exits in the direction of the synagogue.

The *batkhn*'s leadership represents a grotesque parallel of a political coup. The first actions of such leadership, after having established a base of support, is to curry loyalty and eliminate all potential resistance, in particular the resistant elite. The *batkhn*'s order to the wealthy Jew to "die," and his sending the cantor into the shul serve to eliminate existing leadership in traditional Jewish society. Still, there is no indication that this *de facto* result is a deliberate action. In fact, it the *batkhn* appears to be bored with these long-winded characters.

In his ongoing search for the Word, the *batkhn* appropriates the revolutionary slogan of an enthusiastic Hungry Worker, extracting from it one

word: "dust":

Hungry worker:

[...] It must be shattered  
Into dust. (666-667)

*Batkhn*:

"Dust"?

Is that the word? (678-679)

In the worker's phraseology, "dust" represents the first destructive phase in the revolutionary process. In contrast, for the *batkhn* who latches onto this one word, "dust" represents the final stage in his own nihilistic and directionless revolutionary impulse.

The discovery of the missing word "dust" does not alter the *batkhn*'s focus away from his military model of leadership. Rather, it concretises his desire to lead, unchallenged. As the figures from purgatory begin to approach the shul, the *batkhn*, contemplating his vague plans, orders his "troops" to drill:

In the meantime:

March! (679-680) [...]

One .. Two! One .. Two! (684)

To compliment the marching, he order the klezmerim to be coughed up from the well, and to begin to play. This arbitrary activity underlines the *batkhn*'s focus on means, and not end; he seeks to lead, even shadowy apparitions from purgatory, at all costs.

The *batkhn*'s actions blur the lines between the realms of living and dead with greater and greater ease. In response to a variety of characters' longings for heroism and redemption, the *batkhn* summons "heroes": martyrs from the ruin. As they appear the *batkhn* exclaims:

Great days! Exalted days!

Heroes of a brand new kind! (738-739)

The *batkhn* is doing more than exerting leadership; he is creating a new cosmic system and mythology to replace the old. This replacement lacks the glamour and mystique of the traditional system of *oylem haze* [this world] and *oylem habe* [the world to come], and Messianic redemption at the end of time. Instead, ostensibly

dead souls from purgatory appear not to have progressed past the conditions under which they perished. The *batkhn* himself says disappointedly,

All that chitchat  
And for what?  
Not one word remembered. (610-613)

The heroes associated with redemption are similarly uninspiring; they are decrepid revived martyrs who complain of their aches and pains.

The *batkhn's* most daring feat, the raising of the dead, constitutes a team effort with *emets*. *Emets*, who reappears, satiated and full of praise for his own potency, declares:

I shall bring you wonderment!  
(suddenly inspired)  
Listen, east, west, north, south!  
Let the graves open!  
Let the dead awake!  
(In a superhuman voice)  
Arise! Arise! (804-807)

As the *batkhn* blows his whistle, this time mimicking the sounds of the shofar, the dead begin to rise from the cemetery. The scene concludes with the *batkhn* jumping up:

All things are possible  
When what I will what *emets* demands! (821-822)

*Emets*, full of inspiration, lacks agency on the cosmic level his ideas demand. The *batkhn* while seemingly omnipotent, lacks vision. His power lies in generating action, not ideas. The *batkhn* seems unable to envision either proposals or consequences for his actions. *Emets*, in contrast, soon perceives the volatile nature of his command enacted by the *batkhn*. Whether moral regret, or an understanding of the danger of tampering with the forces of life and death, *emets* is unnerved, and just before leaving the scene, says:

Here they go! Here they come!  
And they'll expect us to decide. . .  
It was talk, empty talk. . .  
I am empty, I am empty. . . (901-904)

Unlike *emets*, the *batkhn* seems incapable of remorse, anxiety, or contemplation



about potential repercussions of his actions, immediately proceeding to formally manipulate time by setting the clock to midnight as the dead enter the marketplace.

In an extreme case of the same obstacle faced by the *batkhn*, the raised dead lack memory. This makes them unquestioning, yet apathetic and unreliable followers. Only one old man objects to the demonic activity, unsuccessfully attempting to warn the dead:

Someone's playing with black magic!  
 There's not a sign [of judgment day]  
 in heaven or on earth...  
 Wait! (922-925)

Like the *batkhn*, the dead have no concrete goals or direction. Though very much aware they are dead, they lapse into old patterns established when they were alive. In turn, the *batkhn* treats them more like specimens than revolutionary forces, posing questions which reflect his own curiosity. Meanwhile the *batkhn* mixes the realms of living and dead with impunity; a wedding is proposed between the living Nosn the Drunk and his dead Bride, and the consequence of this union is Nosn's collapse.

The climax of *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* is centred around the "dance." The *batkhn* gleans this concept from the rhyme of a group of chanting children:

Tsigele, migele, pick up sticks  
 Red oranges, -  
 When father's beating mother  
 The children go dancing. . . (1034-1037)

*Batkhn*:

Dancing? Is that what I meant? (1038)

He immediately turns to the klezmerim, and orders them to begin to play.

A sense of foreboding is added to the overriding theme of memory, coupled with the *batkhn*'s dance:

The Dead (nervously):

What's happening?

*Batkhn*:

Don't you recognize it? (1091-1092)

In the middle of a line from a acrostic rhyme recited by the Invisible Soul: "When one is called to [heavenly] trial -" the *batkhn* interjects with a laughter which continues after the end of the rhyme, "one must forget everything!" The second act concludes on an ominous note as the dance is linked with death and loss of memory.

In the third act, the dance becomes the vehicle for the *batkhn*'s eschatological vision of revolution:

Feel what you've never let yourselves feel!  
Live what you've never lived before! (1088-1089)

The assumption held by the *batkhn* appears to be that the dead can experience transformation through dance. Still, the dead continue to dance apathetically until the Hasidim, emblems of mystical revival, join the dance and transform it into an activity of spiritual transcendence:

Dancing is a mighty thing!  
I don't want to think, don't want to know!  
Only to be removed from the body! (1224-1226)

The *batkhn*'s associates the dance with life-giving and sensual forces, in a continuation of the driving force motivating the actions of *emets*:

They're dancing! They are really dancing!  
They feel!  
Their dead faces look  
almost alive!  
In those dead eyes: desire, lust! (1255-1259)

The *batkhn* becomes caught up in the ecstasy, jumping on the proverbial bandwagon. The result is the blurring the line between *eros* and *thanatos*, and the transformation of erotic expression into eschatology.

This dance, as Novershtern points out, serves to "obscure any differences of ideology, class, and nation or religion." The dancing women begin to defy the barriers imposed on them by their traditional society, revealing their hair and dancing openly with the men. This temporary equality serves to undo, but not to

remake, erasing the motivating causes behind revolutionary yearning.

Novershtern asserts, "the overwhelming erotic energy released in the dance eradicates the slogans and disempowers words." Whether this revolutionary dance is meant to create any permanent change is called into doubt by the *batkhn's* own words:

Everyone's equal, since everyone's dead! (1296) [...]  
 Every difference - erased! (1301) [...]  
 What a night! (1305)

The social upheaval and accompanying breaking of barriers is a temporary measure, the first phase in revolution, and yet the *batkhn's* domain is temporary, limited to the present night. As Novershtern states, this "dance of death is the anticlimax of the vision of redemption" (80-81).

The climax of Reb Shloyme's eschatological manipulation of the gap between sacred and mundane is the Shabbes dance. Like the Dance of Death in *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*, Reb Shloyme's dance unifies the people. In both dramas, the dance marks a peak before the decline. In *Di goldene keyt*, the decline and breakdown of the "Golden Chain" of Jewish tradition begins soon after the dance; in *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark*, the dance marks the imminent decline before demonic powers take over.

The spontaneous nature of the revolutionary dance make it vulnerable to external disrupting forces. As easily as barriers are dissolved, the dance itself is dissolved when night comes to an abrupt end. Suddenly, maintaining the dance of the dead, and defying death, becomes the locus of the *batkhn's* struggle:

Don't you still long for life? (1351) [...]  
 Life must be taken by force (1359) [...]  
 The Dead, frustrated:  
 But we are dead!  
*Batkhn*:  
 You are misled by foolish belief!  
 Whatever you believe, exists. (1367-1368) [...]  
 Say no to death, believe in life  
 With all your might and - remain! (1370-1371)

The dead swear to deny death, and the *batkhn* claims victory over death. Still, the crow of the Tin Rooster, signalling morning, easily disperses the crowd.

Novershtern writes that the dancers are unable to follow the *batkhn* in his defiance of time because it “represents a disruption of the established world order, a challenge against heaven.” Even the *batkhn*’s threats to the rooster are to no avail, for ultimately he lacks the real support of the masses. The struggle becomes an empty and futile one, doomed to failure, and yet the *batkhn* does not relent. The *batkhn*’s struggle against the rooster becomes a measure of his authority:

This is the battle  
of tonight!  
I’ll beat the daylights out of you (1395-1396) [...]  
Who is still with me? (1403) [...]  
(No answer)  
Follow me up there onto the roof!

Blind Typesetter:

It’s not the class struggle, not your problem. (1411-1412)

He emerges forced to admit that his vision is that of a lone individual, not shared by those around him:

No?  
(No one answers)  
Then I’ll go alone, better - alone! (1413)

The failure of both the *batkhn* and Reb Shloyme to harbour radical change lies in their relation to the people they are attempting to lead. In “*Di goldene keyt*,” Reb Shloyme’s goals are subverted by the demands of the *oylem*, which he resists but are soon heeded by Reb Shloyme’s son and heir, Reb Pinkhas. This betrayal, and the bequeathal of the dynasty of leadership to three subsequent generations in the rest of the play, marks the beginning of the decline of the “Golden Chain.” The *batkhn* begins in a position of ambivalence in relation to the *oylem*, whose members are almost uniformly completely alienated from one another. He attempts to lead it, and draw inspiration from it, converting banalities into bases for action with cosmic ramifications. When he finally does demand loyalty, his revolutionary forces have crumbled and he is left without popular support, alone.

Both the *batkhn* and Reb Shloyme attempt to manipulate time. Both fail. As the dead return to their graves in the play's epilogue, the *batkhn's* challenge to the embodiment of time, the Tin Rooster on the roof, ends in his own surrender. The *batkhn* emerges, bloodied and penitent, and undoes what remains of his actions, banishing the klezmerim, and turning off the gargoyle and statues he has summoned. He renounces everything, including his own will and ambition to undo and remake everything, and with it, denying the existence of, and therefore responsibility for the failure of, a revolution. His surrender and submission to the Tin Rooster is complete:

It was a night like all other nights!  
 You are right . . .  
 Your verdict is just!  
 You, in your high place,  
 You are the Word,  
 the symbol  
 and - the motto.  
 My sin is great,  
 I won't repeat it. . .  
 I'll lay down my life for you!  
 I'll wake the Jews for prayer from now on  
 Forgive me! (1489-1500)

At the heart of his capitulation is the final link between word and bird, between *logos* and the unalterable force of time. The order-shattering and time-defying activities of the night are negated, as if no attempted coup had ever taken place.

The *batkhn* surrenders his identity as demonic military commander and relinquishes his temporary leadership to assume the role of the traditional *shammes*, calling the Jews to morning prayer. Whether this action reflects regret for the havoc he caused, or a pragmatic strategy to ensure his own survival at the mercy of the powers of heaven, his call, the closing line in the play, hails the finality of his defeat, and his resignation to the established world order where time is omnipotent:

Into the shul! . . .  
 Into the. . . (1534-1535)

The call of the *batkhn* is drowned out by the whistle of the factory, both harking the

beginning of a new day, and a return to the mundane: business as usual. His final lines can thus be read not as repentance and return to tradition, but as a face-saving device. It underlines the resistance of a static society to revolution, and the futility of attempting to radically alter cosmic order.

The fundamental difference between Reb Shloyme and the *batkhn* lies in the relationship between vision and agency. Reb Shloyme has a vision: to keep Shabbes, and bring renewal to a fractured "Golden Chain." And yet Reb Shloyme is an individual leading an *oylem* for whom reality supersedes his Messianic vision, and he alone lacks the agency to implement the revolutionary phase in an ultimately redemptive vision.

The *batkhn* has the agency to implement revolution on a cosmic level; he can bring to view souls from purgatory and raise the dead, and orchestrate a dance where individuals from these realms mingle with the living. And yet throughout, the *batkhn* lacks vision. Abstract goals of revolution, for "remaking everything," are prompted by arbitrary means, and rendered concrete without direction. The actions of the *batkhn* are prompted by fragments of slogans and the utterings of transient characters: "dust" is inspired by a revolutionary slogan, the raising of the dead by *emets*, and the dance by the chanting children. What the *batkhn* fails to comprehend is that catchy, attractive words and ideas do not necessarily entail the ideal form of action. His manipulation is of powers he does not understand, whereas Reb Shloyme understands the powers of heaven all too well. For the *batkhn*, the means are the end; he seeks revolution for its own sake, not for the redemption of humanity.

The figure of the *batkhn* reflects Peretz's own ambivalent relation to revolution. Peretz was involved in the organised Socialist movement, writing for the London and New York Socialist presses. His arrest at a public meeting in 1899 and subsequent imprisonment marks a turning point in his artistic life, and it is said that he crafted his first neo-Hasidic stories during his confinement (Wisse, 55). Still,

Peretz was not a revolutionary ideologue. In an address to Jewish Socialists in 1906, "*Hofnung un shrek* [Hope and fear]," Peretz expressed apprehension in response to political revolution (Wisse, 94-95). His fear was that new forces in the emancipated, post-revolutionary society would stifle individual liberty, and that the revolution would result in a new form of atrophy. Revolution was not a response to the decay of the existing world, for its success would not necessarily entail a new reality.

Although he is an unstable protagonist, verging on the demonic, the *batkhn* represents the thread that ties the play together. He prevents the play's dissolution into fragments of speech by a variety of are static characters, appearing only briefly as caricatures to deliver a superficial uttering. The message conveyed by the figure of the *batkhn* is that the hope for renewal and change through revolution without focus is a bankrupt illusion. After the glory of the revolutionary dance is over, only dust remains.