

**THE FAMILY MOSKAT: CHAPTER 65**

*Isaac Bashevis Singer*

Chapter 65 was included in the Yiddish version of *The Family Moskat* both in the serial publication of the novel in the *Jewish Daily Forward* and in the Yiddish published edition. The chapter was, however, omitted from the English translation (New York, 1960 and 1965). Singer has on several occasions intimated his motivation. The chapter was added to the original Yiddish in order to mitigate the harshness of the original ending—"Death is the Messiah"—which would have been too shocking to the sensibilities of the Yiddish reader, newly aware of the horrors and the almost total destruction of Jewish life under Hitler. The chapter was omitted from the English edition, which was addressed to a much wider audience, since the optimism of the Zionist emigration, which concludes the chapter, was really irrelevant to Singer's theme. *Ed.*

1.

Hadassah is dead. Her bones lie in the cemetery in Kortchev. Barbara has gone off to the East. She left Asa Heschel a kiss and a promise not to forget him till her last breath. Asa Heschel trudged off to Novolipki Street, where he had some of his things. He packed a valise with a few shirts, underwear, a sweater, socks, and some books. Spinoza's *Ethics* he shoved into his pocket. He took a few steps and stopped. He was too weak to carry the suitcase from Novolipki to Francishkaner Street without resting. German planes kept bombing the city, but he did not hide. What's the difference, now or later? He stood near the boarded-up doorway of a shop in the glare of a burning sunset and took stock of his life. Is there a God? Yes, there is. He is everything: the earth, the sky, the milky way, the crying of a child, the Nazi bomb, Einstein's theory, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The smoke rising there is He, too. He is One, He is Eternal. My body is an infinitely small part of His body. My spirit is a drop in the ocean of His spirit. Who is killing whom? Who hates whom? All answers rest in God. We have one aim here: to continue existence as long as possible; to be happy as much as one can. If you can't, let His will be done. Is this Spinoza? Yes, that's the whole of him. Can one die with such a

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*Translated by Joseph C. Landis.*

philosophy? There's no choice. What do the others say that's different? God's ways are hidden.

But no, no! It isn't so! There is another credo: God is a fighter, a warrior. God is on the side of the righteous. He gave free will to choose between good and evil. Every hour. Every second. What kind of God is that? The Jewish God, the Judge of all the earth, the God who is jealous and vengeful. He wages war against Amalek. He is neither Hitler's *Mein Kampf* nor the Nazi bomb. Nature is His work but is not He. He created evil to provide a choice. He sent Hitler as a trial and a punishment. Is God to blame if we sat by with folded hands and let the wicked rise up? If we are all lazy, why should He be diligent? Why should not the wicked triumph if the righteous wait for miracles? How could I have forgotten this precept? Did I not learn it in religious school, studying Deuteronomy? I forgot it because I wanted to cast off every yoke, because I wanted to yield to every lust and close an eye while men of power robbed, killed, raped, incited. What better excuse for tolerating evil than to blame God for everything?

Asa Heschel sat down on a doorstep. His failing strength could carry him no further. There was no place to hide. Night fell but it grew ever brighter. Here the sky became scarlet-red, there sulphur-yellow, here daybreak-blue and there lightning-violet. Pillars of smoke rose above the walls. The constant crash of bombs roared like a hurricane. A single bird flew and fell. The stars were dulled, the flames paled. Weathercocks on the roofs stared in astonishment.

A bomb exploded like a thunderbolt. Dust fell. Whitewash poured down. The street lay crooked and empty. A piece of paper rolled over the stones. A limping horse appeared from somewhere. It stepped carefully, head bent, its browless eye gleaming. Every step left blood-stains on the cobblestones. What was the sin of this mute creature? What was the explanation for its sufferings?

Asa Heschel got up, picked up his pack. What's the use of all these speculations? Anyhow, it's too late. The cup of affliction has spilled. He started towards Francishkaner Street. The bombing had changed the streets. He could no longer recognize where he was. He stopped and read the street names by the light of the fires. He dragged up hill and down. He stepped over tables, benches, a bathtub, a chest. Suddenly he noticed corpses. Among bricks and boards lay a family: a man, a woman, a child. The man's face was seared. The hairs remaining on his head stood stiff as wires. His eyes rolled back, he stared with one white eye. The woman's head was covered with debris. Her legs stuck out, her skirt blown back showed a knee, a thigh, colored undergarments, a silk stocking. The child's intestines poured out of his body as out of a pot.

Asa Heschel turned his face away from the horror. A silent scream rang from the dead: Look, Heavens, what has been done to us! Tasteless waters flowed into Asa Heschel's mouth. Fiery dots danced before his eyes. Nausea welled up with a rush. He leaned over the ruin and vomited. He felt a pressure in his intestines. A bitterness like gall filled his throat, his palate, his nostrils, his mind. He moaned: "Oh, Mother!"

He passed the armory. The square prison squatted, as yellow as wax. A light not of this world froze in the barred windows. Had one prisoner jailed another? On Nalevki Street, Asa Heschel saw something weird: A fire burned in a shop and the flame rolled slowly among the shelves, small and lumpy, like a gnome.

Asa Heschel finally reached Francishkaner Street. The house where Dinah lived was still standing. The gates were shut, but he kept knocking until someone came. The janitor knew him. He opened the door and saw Edel. She was sitting on a stool mending a shirt. When she saw Asa Heschel she pulled the needle and stopped, petrified. During the last few weeks the hair on her head had grown as white as the linen on her lap.

## 2.

The Byalodrevna prayerhouse on Gzhibovska Street had not been destroyed in the bombardment. Refugees brought bedding, sacks of straw, and lived here with their wives and children. For Rosh Hashona different sleeping quarters were found for the homeless. The sexton and a few young men cleaned out the sanctuary. The windows were opened to ventilate the place. Wax was dripped into the six-branched candelabrum. It was not expected that many would come to pray, because it was dangerous to leave the house. In addition, men were being impressed for labor. But the night of Rosh Hashona the prayerhouse was full. The windows were pasted over with black paper and covered by shades.

A kerosene lamp was lit. Hassidim came wearing their satin caftans and fur brimmed hats. The rabbi, Reb Arele, stood at the Eastern Wall. Pinye led the holiday evening prayers. With a hoarse voice he sang the words "for they are our life and the length of our days and upon them we shall meditate day and night." Boys chimed in with piping little voices.

Warsaw was under siege by the Nazis. Houses burned. The firing of cannon could be heard. Only here, in the Byalodrevna prayerhouse, everything seemed to be as of old. A white satin curtain covered the

Holy Ark, as is customary on the High Holy Days. The gleam of the bright light was reflected in the gilded lions that supported tablets of the ten commandments, in the embroidery of the tablecloth on the table, on the Scrolls, on the bindings of the holy books, in the red lettering of God's ineffable name on the mantle of the Scrolls. Although Byalodrevna Hassidim did not ordinarily cry out during prayers, this year sighs erupted everywhere. Men rocked back and forth, clapped their hands together, groaned.

Itchele Anshels, Fischele's relative, was a widower again. His wife had been killed by a bomb. He stood in a corner and wept bitterly. Fischele had also suffered a misfortune. While Fischele was in Palestine, his youngest son, Yekhiel (named after his Rebbe), had lost a leg, severed by a bomb fragment. Nyunye, Hadassah's father, also came to pray. He sat hunched over on the bench, gray as a pigeon, and read his prayerbook. What had come of the Enlightenment in which he had believed so ardently, of all those books he had read, of all those new ideas? Darwin could not help him, nor Spencer. The shop on Shtyentokzhiska Street had burned down. The apartment on Bagatelle Street was occupied by Gentiles. Homeless, he and his wife and granddaughter Doshke were put up at Pinyele's on Tvarda Street. Young men were on the run to Russia, but Nyunye was an old man. He couldn't run, nor could he leave Bronya and Doshke alone. Nyunye turned the yellowed leaves, stained with Dakhe's tears. He glanced at the Yiddish translation:

God, the God of our fathers, rule Thou over the whole world with Thine honor and be Thou exalted over the whole world with Thine esteem and shine Thou with all the glory of Thy mighty strength on all the places of Thine earth, the world, and let each of Thy works know that Thou didst work it, and let every creature know that Thou didst create it, and let everything that has a soul in its nostrils say, "God, the God of Israel, is king and His kingdom doth reign over all."

Nyunye read and shook his head. He really gave it to us, the God of Israel! He gave us full measure. Everything was a deception: religion, evolution, progress, mankind itself. After the evening prayer, when Pinyele wished him a good year and a good always, Nyunye waved his left hand and grunted: "Eh. . ."

Since many homes had no wine for the kiddush sanctification and the Rebbe did have wine, the sexton recited the kiddush for all, as is the custom among Ashkenazi Jews. In the turmoil of war, Leah, the Rebbe's mother, had changed her dollars and bought whatever she

could for relatives and friends. The American consul had assured Leah that, as soon as the bombings ended, he would help her return to America along with Lotte and Mashe. He even promised to get permission for Arele to return to Palestine. At Leah's expense, poor Hassidim were provided with bread, flour, potatoes, fruit, honey and whatever could be gotten. The buying and distributing were done by Avigdor, Abram's son-in-law. He literally risked his life to bring food to the Hassidim. He ran with bundles among the falling bombs. His wife, Beyle-Ite, begged him to be careful, to remember he was a father, but Avigdor was not to be moved.

"Who's afraid of their bombs? They're not worth a fig. 'He who is sent to perform a good deed is protected from harm.'"

At prayers, Avigdor helped Pinye with the chants. He stood on the threshold, with one foot in the ante-room, where a bag of provisions stood ready. On their way home, the needy Hassidim each got his share. The next day the Nazi airplanes did not stop bombing the Jewish sections. Nevertheless, the prayerhouse was full again. Since it was hard for some women to obtain a place in a synagogue or a smaller prayerhouse, the Byalodrevna Hassidic wives prayed in the ante-room. Leah stood, wearing a hat and a black silk dress, and shared a prayerbook with her sister-in-law Khane. Lotte read from a prayerbook with an English translation. Leah's daughter Masha, the former convert, appeared in the doorway, swathed in black, like a mourner. The women looked askance at her, but they had no wish to cause her anguish, nor did they wish to shame Leah. Who knows? Perhaps she was truly penitent. A holiday warmth emanated from the room where the men were praying. They had divided the prayers among several readers. An old Hassid intoned the "Lord of the Universe" prayer. He gurgled the verses with a toothless mouth and lifted his shrivelled fists to heaven. He interjected Yiddish phrases: "Oy vey, dear Father! Oy vey and vey-vey!" They honored Pinyele by assigning him the morning prayer. The reader intoned: "And God remembered Sarah." Before the sounding of the ram's horn, Reb Arele delivered a sermon. The room became very crowded, as people kept arriving from all the neighboring courtyards. Reb Arele lifted the ravelled collar of his prayer shawl that covered his head, revealing a pale face, a damp beard, a pair of tearful eyes. The Rabbi blew his nose, mopped his neck. His voice kept breaking. He began so quietly that he was scarcely heard:

"Says the Gemora: Which month is it that the moon is hidden? That is Rosh Hashana. The sun, as is known, is the quality of mercy. The moon is the quality of law. On Rosh Hashana, the quality of law is hidden. Rosh Hashana is mercy alone. How is it, then, that Rosh Hashana is called the day of the law rather than the day of mercy? The

truth is that they are one and the same: mercy is law and law is mercy. Both derive from the same source. What is law? Free will. The chooser chooses between good and evil. He is his own judge. Everything is given into your care. Everything is given as a pledge, and a net is spread for the whole of our life. The shop is open, and the shopkeeper lends. The account book is open and whoever wishes to borrow may borrow. This is the quality of law. True, the borrower does not always notice how his debt grows. But what does that matter? The debt is a debt. According to law, a debt must be paid. What does the Almighty, Blessed be He, do if an obligation grows too great and there are, Heaven forbid, no means to pay? Credit stops and there is an end to choice. The soul returns to its heavenly Father, and from one's father one has no need to borrow. A father gives freely. But what is the good of eating the bread of charity? A person is sent down upon this earth to earn his livelihood. 'The days of his life are on loan.' A man in this world is on hire. For what is the purpose of creation? Free choice. For the sake of free choice the Infinite made himself Finite. For the sake of free choice, the evil powers were created. That is the meaning of the verse: 'God sits daily in his judgment seat to judge mankind, and He judges the world with understanding. He rises from the seat of law and seats Himself on the seat of mercy. For both law and mercy deprive mankind of choice. Both lead back to the Infinite.'

The Rabbi's exposition lasted a long time. He paused and began again. Drops rolled down his cheeks, remained suspended on his beard. When the Reader intoned: "Out of the depths I call to Thee, oh Lord. Answer my pleading," a cry burst out of every throat. The women began to weep. Pinyele burst into tears. With a quavering voice, the Reader called for a sounding of the ram's horn: "Tkiah," "Shvorim," "Truah." The Congregation held its breath. The blasts of the shofar pierced the lamentation of the women. The Shofar of the Messiah came to mind. Who knows? Maybe there would come an end to Jewish suffering. Perhaps the measure is full at last. The last reader was Yisroel-Elye, the warden. He stood before the reading stand in his prayer shawl and robe and called out: "Behold the wretched who pleads," and stopped. After a pause he called out again: "Banish Satan lest he obstruct my prayer." After the priestly benediction, people wished one another a happy holiday and each returned to his home or his hovel. The worshippers had to wait in doorways between one alarm and the next. The sirens sounded their own kind of shofar: The attack is over! The Nazis went off to reload more instruments of destruction. At the head strode the Rabbi, Pinyele, and Nyunye. Their wives followed: Leah, Lotte, Masha. They stepped over piles of bricks, iron, plaster. The firing of machine guns ceased, but in the sky, among the

clouds, knots of smoke remained hanging. They floated in the void in a herd, wooly and curly, like a horde not of this world. The little garden on Gzhibov Street had been turned into a gentile cemetery. Two men were digging a grave. A priest chanted unintelligibly. Flames of light froze in the brightness of day. The streets changed hour by hour. An early autumn glamor descended on the broken roofs, the half-standing chimneys, the shattered windows, the dangling balconies. In a house that had been split in half, stood a crumpled bed. Above it hung a picture of a Jew in a white beard and a square skull-cap. At the entrance to Reb Meshulam Moskat's house, feet stopped of their own accord. Leah clapped her hands to her cheeks and gasped. All that was left of its former grandeur was a hill of stones and plaster. Smoke poured out of a crack. The ruin was burning in its depths.

Pinyele's house was still standing. They recited the holiday sanctification of the wine, including the phrase "Who hast chosen us among all the peoples." They sat down to a feast: bread and honey, rice and water, apple compote. Evening fell. The western sky was enveloped in flames. Windows flashed, and ran backwards. The sun sank towards Volya, towards the Nazis, large, blood-red, cut in half by a face-shaped cloud. Everything blended together: the purple of the sunset, the glow of the fires. It seemed both the Creation and the End of the World. Pillars of smoke rose above Warsaw as they had over Sodom and Gomorrah.

Evening arrived, but no holy day candles were lit. The Rabbi dozed off over a text. Pinyele drowsed on the couch, Leah, on the bed. Lotte sat in the kitchen on a stool, roasting potatoes in the ashes. Doskhe went to a neighbor. Masha sat herself into an armchair and locked her eyelashes. In the dreamy twilight, Hadassah's face emerged, half in sunlight, half in shadow, with fiery golden hair. How Masha envied her now! Hadassah is free at last. Everything has stopped: the pain, the hope, the fear, the jealousy, the worries. No one can torture her any more. No one can do her any favors. She is lying in a grave and resting her eternal rest. Well, what about her, Masha? How long will she wait for deliverance? Will she be endlessly dying?

Masha reminded herself of that night, the fifth or the sixth, when Yanek rang her doorbell. He was wearing civilian clothes, a ravelled jacket, knickers, heavy-soled shoes. He was carrying a rucksack on his back. Yanek—Reserve Colonel Yan Zazhitsky, former official in the Foreign Ministry, who had gone hunting with Goering in the Forests of Byaloviezh—had not even been able to get a seat on the train that carried the government to escape. He stood at the door, bent-over, with a heavy growth of beard, his face gaunt, his forehead damp, his dark eyes staring wide open. A Jewish fear looked out of his pupils. He

choked on his own voice: "Masha, forgive me . . . we'll never see each other again . . . I've made a mistake, a bitter mistake!"

3.

In the courtyard on Francishkaner Street where Dinele lived stood a synagogue. Dinele had early bought a place for the High Holy Day services. In honor of the holiday, she had put on her golden dress, which she had inherited from her mother, a pair of old-fashioned shoes with buckles, and a silk shawl over her matron's wig. She took the special holy day prayerbook with the copper clasp, the gilded women's prayerbook, the holiday prayerbook of the thirty-nine virtues and went off to pray. She took Edele and Temerl with her. Both sons, Gabriel and Don, prayed a little further away in Reb Itche's Yeshiva; Menashe Dovidl ignored dangers and went off to the Uman prayer house on Djelna Street. The dead Hassidim, as those who followed Reb Nachmen of Bratslav were called, celebrated as they did every year. They danced before prayers and studied together the works of the Maharar. An old man, Reb Menakhkem, explicated a text for the gathering. The Hassidim applauded, artfully snapped their fingers, hopped along, and gesticulated. One Hassid reminded another of Reb Nachmen's warning: There is no such thing as despair. As long as the fire glows, nothing is lost! Of course, things are bitter. Jews are in danger. The water has risen to the neck. Well, then, so what? That is the time to be merry! For what is melancholy? Kerosene on the fire of temptation. What does Satan really want? Heaven forbid, surrender before the Redemption. The plague take him! May an arrow pierce his eye! If the devil wants sadness, then let him burst with frustration. We will be hopeful!

There was a great noise in the prayer house. One man was studying the Gemora regarding Rosh Hashona; another was intoning passages from the prayerbooks; a third sang the Rabbi's favorite melody, and a fourth recited the Psalms. Although it was dangerous to go out into the street, young men went off to the ritual bath in a nearby courtyard. The cauldron was unheated. The water was ice cold. But who cared about such nonsense? They shivered and they bathed. Menashe Dovidl was the first into the cold water. He dipped under and disappeared, so that his concentration might be more intense. After a long while his head bobbed up. The water dripped from his beard, flowed from his side locks. His eyes gleamed. Who cared about Hitler? Who was this Hitler anyway? It was the same old Satan. Sometimes he was an evil thought; another time he came in the form of an illness; a

third time he fired artillery. Essentially he always wanted the same thing: to destroy faith, to confuse the mind. What, indeed, are all the actions of this world beside the study of Torah and the observance of the commandments? Delusions, trials, nets. If Satan cannot capture the soul in one way, he tries another. He uses clever tricks and traps. Then, what must one do? Stick out your tongue at him, saying: Fellow, we know you! As long as the evil one cannot grasp you, his power is annulled. Standing in the bath, Menashe Dovidl did not stop dancing and grimacing. He called to the other young men: "Well, why are you standing there? Come on in! The water is delightfully cold."

Everyone went off to prayers. Asa Heschel alone remained in the house. First of all, in such times one couldn't leave the house unguarded. Secondly, Asa Heschel did not want to go to a holy place. If you live as an unbeliever, you should die an unbeliever. You don't make up with God at the gates of hell. He leaned against the bed, leafing through the pages of Spinoza's *Ethics*. What did he want, that Amsterdam philosopher? Did he know what he was talking about, or was he simply splitting hairs? What is it, this substance and its endless attributes? Whom does he call God? What is thought? What is spirit? What are ideas? What sort of spider's web has he woven here? Asa Heschel tried to run quickly through all the theorems, but the more he studied, the more confused he became. Some sentences were obvious; others now seemed to him unclear, ambiguous, a game of words. In essence, one could very well be both a Nazi and a Spinozist. True, the fascists were opposed to Spinoza, but only because he was a Jew. The professors of philosophy in Berlin, Leipzig, Bonn, are no doubt analyzing Spinoza now, just as the poets there are still writing poems, and the essayists are chattering about culture, aesthetics, ethics, personality. They had divided the roles among themselves. You fight and you sing; you philosophize and you rob; you slaughter children and you write history. All together this is civilization. Then what does one do, eh? How does one escape from this horror? There is no place to run. The jungle is exactly the same. They devour and they sing hosannahs. The Bible? Yes, let's have a look. What does he say there, Moses? Don't steal. Don't kill. Don't sleep with Fischele's wife. Don't even covet his wife, his ox, his ass. It's easy to say. All of creation is one great murder. It has always been and still is. Might is master.

Asa Heschel leaped up. He hurried into the living room, drew a Bible out of the bookcase. He began to leaf through the pages, back and forth. Well, my dear Prophets, what do you fellows have to say for yourselves now? For two thousand years, we have been awaiting the fulfillment of your promises, and what has come of our waiting? Neither grace, nor judgment, nor righteousness! Hitler at the gates of

Warsaw and Nuremberg laws in the Land of Israel. Jehovah is still wrathful. He still breathes fire.

Asa Heschel wanted to throw the Bible to the ground, but his hand did not move. He took the book to his lips and kissed it. What fault is it of theirs? They meant well. Did they not want judgment with righteousness? They were the only ones that yearned. Whom is Hitler warring against if not against them and their children? All evildoers already know the secret: they have but one enemy—the Jew and his Bible. Hitler is only doing what the others want. . . .

Asa Heschel sat down in the kitchen and began turning the pages again. Suppose there is no God! Suppose the murderers are right! Suppose God himself is on Hitler's side! Suppose Moses is a liar! His words are thereby not diminished but more exalted. One Jew, Moses ben Amram, stood up in opposition to nature, to man, to history and let his voice be heard:

I am the Lord Thy God Who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. . . . Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. . . . Be holy, for I, the Lord thy God, am holy. . . . Thou must not steal nor deal deceitfully nor fraudulently with thy neighbor. . . . Thou must not oppress nor rob thy neighbor. . . . Thou must not be guilty of unjust verdicts. Thou must neither favor the little man nor be awed by the great. . . . Thou must not slander thy people. . . . Thou must not bear hatred for thy brother in thy heart. Thou must openly tell him of his offense, thus not take a sin upon yourself. Thou must not exact vengeance nor bear a grudge against thy people. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. . . . Thou shalt not follow the laws of the nations that I expel to make way for thee, because they have practiced all these things and I have come to detest them. And I say unto thee: thou shalt take possession of their soil. I myself will give it to thee, a land flowing with milk and honey. . . . And I will set thee apart from all these peoples to be mine . . . to be high above the other peoples I have made, in praise, in reknown, and in honor, to be a nation consecrated to the Lord, your God. . . .

In the street, bombs kept exploding. Fires flamed. Cannons cracked. But Asa Heschel did not interrupt his reading. These words, indeed, are neither unclear nor ambiguous. The Nazi could not adopt them. These are not words but flames that the eternal Jew has flung at eternal evil.

That day, scores of miles from Warsaw, in a pine forest, three men

and two women celebrated Rosh Hashona. The Germans had surrounded the region, but there remained a hope of breaking through the front and reaching Russia or Roumania. The group had one aim in mind: to reach the land of Israel. The oldest of the small band was Shimon Bendl. The other two were would-be pioneers from Grokhov. One of the women was also a Halutz, the other, a member of the Hoshomer Hatzeir Party. They had remained in the forest because of the danger of being seen on the roads. And, they needed to rest. Their shoes were torn. Their feet were swollen and blistered. They sat down among the bushes near a quiet stream. A woodpecker pecked away at a tree. A cuckoo cried. The lowing of cows echoed from the meadows. The blowing of a shofar was heard from somewhere. A turtle slid across the moss like a moving stone. The girls untied their bundles; the young men, their rucksacks. One combed his hair; another washed his feet. One applied salve to a sore; another bit into a slice of hardened bread. Shimon Bendl had carried the heaviest burden on his back. His rucksack contained a pot and a spoon, bread and buckwheat groats, salami and dried pears, an undershirt and pants, Bialik's poems, and a map of Eretz-Israel. A revolver was stuck into his back pocket, a compass in his side pocket. He had a knife with a copper handle. Shimon had had to leave Shosha in Warsaw. In her pregnant state, she was in no condition for the journey. But Shimon himself had no intention of letting himself be slaughtered like a sheep, neither by Arabs nor by Germans. The entire time he led the way, a load on his back, unshaved, head bent, burnt by the sun, and sang to himself his favorite song:

In that land our fathers longed for  
All our hopes will be fulfilled.  
There we shall in freedom settle  
There we shall a new world build.  
Torah there again will bloom,  
There the Shekhina find a home.

Shimon Bendl and his comrades were not the only ones. From every town, young men and women, Zionist and otherwise, started out with the same desire: to reach the far-off promised land, Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Jaffa and Haifa, the colonies and kibbutzim. They were to be found waiting in every port city. They sailed on every wandering ship. They smuggled across every border. Those that were caught stood at the fences of the concentration camps, with yellow faces, beaten bodies, dreaming a single dream: certificates. They wore down the threshold of every consulate asking for visas. As in the days of Sikhun, they swore:

We will not stray into any field or vineyard. We will not drink water from a well. We will travel the royal road until we cross your border. But are not Sikhun's hounds today the same as those of old?

Far away was the Jewish earth. Barred was the desert. No pillar of cloud showed the way by day. No pillar of fire lit the night. Hidden was God's countenance. Each was beaten. His enemies scoffed: "Where is your God, Israel? Why is he silent, your protector? Where is His right? Where is His pledge? Your prophets have deceived you. God is himself a Nazi."

Jacob is burnt to death, Dinah dishonored. Shimon and Levi, gird your loins! Hope for no mercy. Amalek lies in wait for you. Pharaoh hitches up his chariots. All is as it once was: Israel and the Canaanites; God and idol; Egypt and the fleshpots. Moses is dead, but his words summon you: "Rise up, oh, remnants of Israel, and prepare for the final battle. Like a torch is the House of Jacob and the House of Esau is straw. Rise up and fear not. Yours is the final victory. Unto you will come the Messiah."

ENDED AND COMPLETED.

## SINGER ON AARON ZEITLIN

Aaron Zeitlin had the good fortune to be born into a house where the problems of literature—style, description, dialogue—were always real. His father, Hillel Zeitlin, was a famous Yiddish journalist, author, and, I might add, scholar, although he himself made no such claim. Hillel Zeitlin brought with him from the town of Homel, where he was raised, the entire Jewish legacy. He had studied in *kheder*, in the Yeshiva, in the synagogue study house. He could easily have become a rabbi. He had an interest in cabala and in Hassidism, not so much Polish Hassidism, but the Hassidism of Reb Schneyer Zalmen of Lyadi, the author of the *Tanya*, the founder of the Chabad [i.e., the Lubavitch movement—ed.]. In his own way Hillel Zeitlin also experienced the age of the Enlightenment—not the enlightenment which preached assimilation, but the enlightenment that strove, from the very outset, to return to Jewish roots—to Hebrew in Israel. Hillel Zeitlin also studied Russian and German and was, for a time, a follower of Friedrich Nietzsche. By all odds, Hillel Zeitlin should have become an opponent of Yiddish, like most of the adherents of the Enlightenment. But some instinct in him that was stronger than all influences told him that one cannot return to the roots of thousands of years ago, and yet deny the roots of the past five or six hundred years of Jewish history in eastern Europe. Hillel Zeitlin became, after his own fashion, a "Yiddishist." That same instinct which prompted him not to negate Yiddish also told him that Yiddish by itself, the language alone, could never restrain the Jew from assimilation. The same is also true of the Hebrew language and even of a Hebrew state. To remain a Jew, one must be bound to the foundation of Judaism: belief in God, in the Torah, and in the specific mission of the Jewish people. He who wants to be like all other peoples, becomes one of them.

Hillel Zeitlin's ideas did not fit into Zionism, as Herzl, Weitzman, and Ben-Gurion understood it, nor into Yiddishism as Zhitlowsky and other Yiddishists understood it. And Zeitlin certainly could not fit into modern orthodoxy, which clung with all its might to every detail, to every strict interpretation of generations of rabbis. Very soon, Zeitlin

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"Aron Zeitlins esayen," foreword to: Aron Zeitlin, *Literarische un filosofische esayen* (New York, 1980). Translated by Joseph C. Landis.