

Dear Friends,

For this year's Yom Kippur discussion, I thought that it would be useful to delve into the world of Yiddish poetry. I choose this topic because I am interested in widening my knowledge of the overall Jewish experience, and as well, I am particularly interested in the intersection between our spiritual and secular sides. Many of us have just spent most of the day in prayer, however, we also have strong secular identities. The question that I would like to address in this year's discussion is how do these Yiddish poems, written by secular and perhaps assimilated writers, but also influenced by Jewish tradition, bring together the multifaceted sides of Judaism.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah - May You All Be Inscribed in the Book of Life!

Michael S Simon

Rokhl Korn (1898-1982)

“I Shall Take With Me”

I'll take green meadows with me,
Scents of the grape-blossom from father's
Orchard,
The narrow lanes between the rye,
Where my childish footsteps linger.
I shall take white, feathery clouds,
Where my head may find a softer place,
And as a head-rest for The Silence,
My mother's weary, tender smile.
And with me shall I take the breath of
Words,
Their softest form, their purest sorrow,
And,
With the final tear,
First love.

- 1. Is the author talking about the afterlife or is this a metaphor for our entire lives?**
- 2. What if anything can we take with us and how do we take it? What happens to it after we die?**

Kadia Molodowsky (1894-1975) (written in 1946)

Merciful God

Choose another people,
Elect another.
We have no more blood
To be a sacrifice.
Our house has become a desert.
The earth is insufficient for our graves,
No more laments for us,
No more dirges
In the old, holy books.

Merciful God,
Sanctify another country,
Another mountain.
We have strewn all the fields and every stone
With ash, with holy ash.
With the aged,
With the youthful,
And with babies, we have paid
For every letter of your Ten Commandments.

Merciful God,
Raise your fiery brow,
And see the peoples of the world—
Give them the prophecies and the Days of Awe.
Your word is babbled in every language—
Teach them the deeds,
The ways of temptation.

Merciful God,
Give us simple garments
Of shepherds with their sheep,
Blacksmiths at their hammers,
Laundry-washers, skin-flayers,
And even the more base.
And do us one more favor:
Merciful God,
Deprive us of the Divine Presence of genius. —
1945

- 1. Is this poem saying that we are tired and had enough of Jewish tradition?**
- 2. Do we want to share some of the wealth of our heavy history with others?**
- 3. What is meant by 'Divine Presence of genius'?**

**Solomon Blumsanter known by pen-name: Yehoash
(1872-1927)**

“Mortality” (November 1901, translated by Marvin Zukerman)

When I press you to my breast,
With wild lust, lip to lip,
And our two souls cling together
And blend into one enchanted beam,

Then, a dark shadow falls upon my joy,
And I think, how quickly, not just the flame of youth,
But our whole lives, mine and yours,
Will be drawn back into itself by the great sea

Of eternity, of death and darkness,
The boundless abyss of ALL and NOTHING
From which a blind hand of destiny
Spit us out and spun us together.

And, measuring the short span of
“Ego-life” of love, pain, and joy,
Against the endlessness
Which spreads behind and before us,

I regret your youth and charm,
And, caressing your glowing face,
My fingers already sense how the frost
Of death and not-being creeps slowly through us,

And the enchantment in my gaze is extinguished,
My hand withdraws itself, frightened, from you,
For merely a spark are you, a mere spark am I,
Spewed from out of emptiness.

And if, day after day, you knitted
Every thread of your being to my soul,
And if I ever, with the same attachment,
Loved you to my life’s highest point,

The deep, eternal night
Would make an end of our dual spark,
And would swallow back up the life-shimmer,
Spit out for one mere moment . . .

—November 1906

- 1. Is this poem asking us to live up to life's potential?**
- 2. Does it say something about our relationship to others, or our relationship with G-d?**

Avrom Sutzkever (1913-2010)

“My Mailman” (1974, translated by Maia Evrona)

My mailman will no longer bring any letters
and the clock in the long archive will stop ticking.
My mailman has been taken, in a sack, by another
to a home beneath clay, and I wait: Is he coming?

The doorbell blossoms. The other mailman arrives.
*—From where, my love? Who has sent this letter, my dear
mail carrier? Until today I had never seen such a stamp,
these dusty boots. Has it come from the earth or from lunar ground?*

*—I don't know whom it came from. I'm not allowed to read.
I only know where I brought the envelope from. An extreme
cold exists there; you better button your sweater.*
The mailman retreats into mist and I kiss the mezuzah.

1974

- 1. Who are the two spirits delivering these messages and who are receiving them?**

Avrom Sutzkver (1913-2010)

A silvery stack of hay under my head,
In a meadow, I dream. No, I'm awake.
So many stars above – as drops
Of dew on earth. A white road
Rises in my stiffening eyes
The stack of hay
Reminders me of my fate, she's close to me,
Rocking me slowly in her cradle.
Smell of blood like blooming honey.
Hot lust gushes from the raw plain.
The stack of hay washed in dew and moon,
And I – it seems I'm lying beside myself,
Breathing in fresh hay the smell
Of green time. I feel, walking through me
Flower and scythe. I lie on an altar
Of colors and smells. Every rustle and sound
Comes strangely close, streams through my limbs.
The tiniest blade of grass, I ache its pain ...
I lie in hay - a weary wanderer,
Till I myself become a stack of hay.

- 1. How does this poem reflect the theme of Neila and “May You Be Written in the Book of Life”?**
- 2. What themes of renewal does the poem bring out?**