

Introduced and translated from the Yiddish by Jeffrey Shandler

At the end of March, as the novel coronavirus spread rapidly across the country, my colleague Susannah Heschel asked me if I knew of an English translation of “A khasene afn besoylem” (“A Wedding in the Cemetery”), a short story by the Yiddish writer Joseph Opatoshu. The story, written in 1929, describes a kholere khasene (cholera wedding)—also known as a shvartse khasene (black wedding)—an Eastern European Jewish ritual in which a marriage of two poor, disabled, or otherwise unfortunate people was performed in a cemetery, in the belief that their union would bring about the end of an epidemic. Given the resonance with the current moment, Susannah wanted to teach the story to her students this spring. I couldn’t find a translation at home in New York (and my books at Rutgers, where I teach, are “quarantined” for the foreseeable future)—so, after tracking down the original story, I decided to translate it myself.

Opatoshu, born in Mława, Poland, in 1886, was a prolific Yiddish novelist and short story writer, renowned for vivid accounts of pre-modern European Jewish life. His best-known works, all of which have been translated into English, are his novels Roman fun a ferd-ganev (Romance of a Horse Thief, 1912), In poylishe velder (In Polish Woods, 1921), and A tog in Regensburg (A Day in Regensburg, 1933). Opatoshu’s depiction of a kholere khasene is less well-known to readers of Yiddish literature than the one found in S.Y. Abramovitsh’s late 19-century novel Fishke der krumer (Fishke the Cripple), which was memorably staged in Edgar Ulmer’s 1939 Yiddish film adaptation, known in English as The Light Ahead. Opatoshu’s story similarly presents the custom as a macabre example of primitive folk beliefs—and like Abramovitsh, his treatment critiques the ritual’s exploitation of the class divide between the rich Jews, who organize and perform the wedding, and the poor ones, who are the victims of this rite of appeasement.

The kholere khasane rests on an age-old assumption that outbreaks of disease are a divine punishment for wrongdoing, which calls for an act of atonement or affirmation of faith as the remedy. The kholere khasane is one custom among an array of folkways centered on cemeteries as sites for connecting with the dead: for instance, placing locks in graves to keep the cause of death from escaping, or measuring tombstones with strings used to make candle wicks, lit on Yom Kippur to ask the dead for protection.

The folkloric implications of the kholere khasene are compelling: As a wedding procession traditionally takes precedence over a funeral cortège, the ritual uses the wedding to halt the stream of burials of an epidemic’s victims. The unusual setting enables the dead to serve as witnesses of this ostensible good deed, so that they can then intervene on the community’s behalf in heaven. Opatoshu also draws parallels between the kholere khasene and the practice of shlogn kapores: a pre-Yom Kippur ritual of atonement—still practiced by some Jews—of symbolically transferring one’s sins to a chicken, which is then slaughtered and given as a meal to feed the poor before the start of the holiday.

Of course, we now understand the kholere khasene as an ineffective response to an outbreak of disease. Still, at this moment, as most religious leaders beseech their followers to avoid congregating and to pray at home instead, it is well worth recalling the appeal of a response rooted in a belief in the healing powers of communal rituals and communion with the World to Come.

A Wedding in the Cemetery

THE ENTIRE JEWISH COMMUNITY, over ten thousand people, were imprisoned in their homes. They were afraid to be out on the street or in the marketplace, where the gutters had been spread with lime. Their sealed-up houses and windows testified that the epidemic spared no one, young or old, poor or rich.

Family after family stood beside their shuttered windows. They gazed fearfully at the stretchers and wept as they were borne away, carrying patients to the hospitals. As the wailing of family members gradually diminished and then stopped completely, the streets grew emptier, more silent. It was rumored that no one taken to the hospital ever returned home.

Once again, mothers brought out their bottles of phenol, which were marked with the Angel of Death carrying his scythe, and began to dampen the heads of their terrified children, then washed their hands and warned them, “For heaven’s sake, children, don’t eat any fresh fruit, don’t drink any fresh water. In these times, the less you eat, the less you drink, the healthier you will be. If you drink at all, it must be water that has been boiled. Such an affliction, such a bitter affliction!”

The epidemic grew stronger, attacking like a well-armed enemy, moving from one street to the next. There wasn’t a single house in the city without someone who had the disease. The members of the burial society were exhausted, drained of all their strength, as corpses lay out for four to five days, waiting to be prepared for burial.

The study houses were packed with frightened men. They fasted, wept, held meetings. Laments resounded throughout the city:

“We’ve never experienced such a bitter affliction.”

“It’s a massacre, a real massacre.”

“No one is spared—not Jews, not Christians. And even the cows and goats have stopped giving us milk.”

The city’s Hasidic leader, the rabbi, the rabbinical court, and leading members of the Jewish community stayed up through the night, seeking a way to halt the epidemic, to rid themselves of this affliction. Then, on the morning of the fourth Friday since the start of the epidemic, the entire city, young and old, learned that, in the cemetery that afternoon, the hunchback Shloyme—a freeloader who hung about the study house—would take as his bride Berl the schoolteacher’s daughter Brokhe, a young woman who was disabled.

Everyone in the city poured into the street. They were no longer afraid of the people who carried stretchers with invalids through back alleys, who had been avoided as if they were lepers. The Jewish community leaders took over the streets and the marketplace, assuring everyone that they now had the Angel of Death by the throat and that, before the start of the Sabbath that evening, the epidemic will have ended.

The richest women in town put on their long diamond earrings and heavy gold chains. Their husbands, dressed in caftans of silk and satin and wearing fur-trimmed hats, distributed alms to

the poor. Crowds of people, young and old, wearing their holiday finery, set out to the old graveyard.

Christians, who had been parading through the streets every day with icons and statues, doing everything possible to stop the epidemic, now stopped their efforts and hoped that the “Jewish God” would end the plague.

Hundreds, thousands of people gathered in the field by the cemetery. They arrayed themselves at the fence—men and women, old and young—their grim faces and sorrowful eyes revealing that this was more a funeral than a wedding. No one arrived empty-handed. People brought items of clothing for the groom and the bride as well as linens and household items.

A coach drew up with the couple and their parents. The groom was so tall and thin that it almost appeared as though he would snap in two when he walked. Under his silk caftan, the hump on his back looked like it was attached to him, because hunchbacks aren’t usually so tall. He looked bewildered. His wide face was bony with red tufts of beard, and riddled with pockmarks; it looked like a cemetery in which the graves had been dug up and the corpses had fled. The bride was thin, wiry, with such red lips and cheeks that it seemed as if they were painted. She had barely any hair on her head, on which a white paper flower had been placed. Her right hand was shorter than the left one and was withered, ending in a small fist like that of a three-year-old child.

Across the length of the field, the crowd of thousands of heads leaned forward as it came to the fence.

“Where are they taking them? Are they already under the wedding canopy?”

“No, they’re going into the gravedigger’s house.”

“And where will they seat the bride before the ceremony?”

“In there.”

The hot, summer sun stood in the sky, beaming down on the people and the grass. The sky was so blue and clear that one could see for miles into the distance.

At the gate of the cemetery, two large tables were set up for wedding gifts: one for money, the other for presents. The city’s most esteemed men and women stood around the tables and lit dozens of candles, which were set in boxes filled with sand and earthenware pots. The flames stretched up to the sun, becoming one with the blue sky, and the garments of silk and satin gleamed with the light reflected from the blazing candles.

The head of the burial society, an old man with eyebrows that obscured his eyes, rapped on the table with his cane and called out in a sanctimonious tone, “Family of the groom, family of the bride, people of the entire city: Bring forth your wedding gifts!”

The crowd did not stir, but stood as breathless as if this were the eve of Yom Kippur. Their eyes bulged as they stared at the empty tables. Rich, poor, or in-between—death had erased all social distinctions, and each person was afraid to be the first one to step forward.

Then a woman, a beggar dressed in rags, approached. With eyes full of fear, she glanced at the crowd, then at the men standing at the table, astonished that she was the first. The head of the burial society motioned to her with his cane. As the woman limped forward, she withdrew from her bundle a new tin spoon. She held it over her head and waved it around once, twice, as if she were performing the atonement ritual for Yom Kippur. Then she placed it on the table and cried out, "May it go away from me and stay with you! From me, to you!"

The crowd surged forward between the boxes of candles. They tossed down their gifts and money, and each one repeated, "From me, to you!"

The tables groaned under the weight of the wedding gifts, which piled up over an hour, then two. And the air, melting under the flaming sun and the hundreds of burning candles, was flooded with tears and with the cry:

"From me, to you!"

"From me, to you!"

Off to one side stood the town architect. He had set up a camera to take pictures. The crowd pleaded with him:

"Don't do it, Mister!"

"We beg you!"

The architect laughed and started to argue with them. Then a man, a Jew, grabbed the camera off its tripod and tossed it into the air. Another man, a Christian, caught it like a ball and tossed it further. Before long, it was smashed to bits. The police feigned ignorance of what was going on and quietly suggested, "Break his bones, the son of a bitch—then he'll know what it means to work for the Devil."

All around, voices shouted, "To the wedding canopy! To the wedding canopy!"

Thousands of candles flickered, and the crowd looked around to find the wedding musicians. Then it grew quiet.

Women dressed in silk and satin, with pearls and golden chains around their throats, leapt forward with every bend and turn. They moved among the tombstones, dancing their way to the tomb where a revered Hasidic leader was interred. Their shawls of black and white silk fluttered, then fell on the limping beggarwoman. Looking disheveled, like a witch, she raised her voice in a song that rose over all the others. She sang louder and louder, over one woman, then another, resounding in the air: "From me, to you!"

The wedding canopy had been set up at the tomb. The tall, gangly groom, wearing a high fur hat, covered his eyes with his hand. Under his black silk caftan he wore a white ceremonial robe with wide sleeves. The rabbi, the Hasidic leader, and the members of the rabbinical court stood around, impatiently asking again and again, "Where is the bride?"

The bride, dressed in white and covered with a veil, approached from a distance. The limping beggarwoman danced in front of her, carrying a loaf of challah in both hands. Every once in a while she stopped and blurted out, through thick, fleshy lips, "From me, to you!"

Accompanied by a soft melody, the bride was led with dancing steps under the canopy. She looked about and grew terrified. She raised her withered hand and looked as if she were about to flee, then stopped, and exclaimed in a thin voice, “Our neighbor won’t be able to stand it! She’s so jealous, she was always teasing me that I’ll never get married.”

The people who had led her to the canopy tried to calm her: “Hush, hush, Brokhe, a bride mustn’t speak now.”

Brokhe tore the groom’s hand away from his face and stared at him, the way a child stares at a new doll, and then she turned away. “But that’s Shloyme—that good-for-nothing Shloyme is my groom? No, no, no!” Her voice became a thin, sharp cry, rising over the thousands of bowed heads, reaching up to the blazing sky.

Joseph Opatoshu (1886–1954) was a prolific author of Yiddish fiction. Born in Poland, he emigrated to the United States in 1907. For decades he contributed hundreds of stories to the Yiddish daily *Der tog*, in addition to writing major works of historical fiction and accounts of immigrant life in America.

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