

OCCASIONAL PAPERS · 7  
THE FOURTEENTH  
AVROM-NOKHEM STENCL LECTURE  
IN YIDDISH STUDIES

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*'Only King David  
remained ...':  
Reactions to the Holocaust  
in the Poetry of  
Kadya Molodowsky*

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HEATHER VALENCIA

Oxford Centre for  
Hebrew and Jewish Studies



## AVROM-NOKHEM STENCL LECTURE IN YIDDISH STUDIES

This lecture series in Avrom-Nokhem Stencl's memory was instituted in 1983 by Dr Dovid Katz, formerly Woolf Corob Fellow in Yiddish Studies at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, in recognition of Stencl's half-century of work for Yiddish in Britain. Annual lectures were given at the Oxford Yiddish Summer Programme until 1994, and were regularly published as booklets through a grant from the Dov Biegun Memorial Fund. When the Summer Programme ceased there was a hiatus in the series, which was restored in 2005 under the joint sponsorship of the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Unit and the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages and Literatures, University of Oxford. The lectures are now published as part of the Centre's Occasional Papers series.

### HEATHER VALENCIA

Heather Valencia, formerly Lecturer in German, is now an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Stirling. She began studying Yiddish in the mid-1980s and in 1991 completed a doctorate on the earlier poetry of Abraham Sutzkever. She has taught courses on Yiddish literature at the Oxford Summer Programme, as well as in Germany and Sweden. Her publications include articles on Abraham Sutzkever, Yiddish writers in Weimar Germany, and Yiddish writing in London. She has written a book entitled *Else Lasker-Schüler und Abraham Nochem Stenzel. Eine unbekannte Freundschaft* (1995), co-authored *Sprachinseln. Jiddische Publizistik in London, Wilna und Berlin 1880-1930* (1999), and published both a bilingual edition of the London Yiddish play *The King of Lampedusa* and an anthology of Yiddish literature for students entitled *Mit groys fargenign / With Great Pleasure*. Her English translation of Esther Singer Kreitman's novel *Diamonds* is scheduled to appear in late 2006. Her current research interest is Yiddish women writers after the Holocaust.





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THE AVROM-NOKHEM STENCL LECTURES  
IN YIDDISH STUDIES

The Yiddish poet Avrom-Nokhem Stencl (1897–1983), a charismatic figure around whom numerous myths developed, was a committed Yiddish poet and writer who published some forty volumes of verse, edited his own journal for nearly half a century, and led a literary circle that met regularly. For nearly fifty years Stencl lived alone in a modest flat in Whitechapel, the immigrant quarter of London's East End that he designated "the last *shtetl*". Material things held no value for him; his interests were focused exclusively on Yiddish, on behalf of which he worked tirelessly.

Stencl's life can be divided into three periods: his childhood and youth in Poland, from his birth into a Hasidic family in 1897 until 1919, his years as an enthusiastic participant in Expressionist circles in Berlin and Leipzig from 1921 until the persecution of Nazism in 1936, and his life in Whitechapel from 1936 until his death on 23 January 1983.

By his own admission, Stencl was an unruly boy indifferent to study, although in adolescence, out of respect for his observant father, he wore traditional sidelocks and a beard. As a youth he worked as a labourer, nurturing dreams of emigrating to Palestine as a pioneer. In 1919, at the conclusion of the First World War, he left his birthplace in Cześćochowa and spent nearly two years working on a farm in Holland where other young Jews were preparing for settler life in Mandate Palestine. In 1921 the New York Yiddish newspaper *Morgn-zhurnal* (Morning Journal) published his earliest poems, and, like so many other Yiddish and Hebrew writers of the day, Stencl moved to Weimar Berlin to join the city's vibrant literary life.

There he formed a close relationship with the German-Jewish poet Else Lasker-Schüler (1869–1945). By the mid-1920s German translations of his poems by his lover Elisabeth Wöhler had been well received, and the honoraria he earned defrayed the costs of publishing eleven small pamphlets of his work in Yiddish. His best earliest poem was *Fisherdorf* (Fishing Village, 1933), which Thomas Mann praised in a review: "Stencl's passionate poetic emotion and his love for the "warm steaming earth" are wholly unselfconscious, and even the prose writer

may envy Stencl's image-making power.' Stencl continued to live in Berlin until 1936, but increasingly came under Gestapo surveillance. Anti-fascist German friends hid him while others organized and assisted his escape to London.

Whitechapel in the mid-1930s was still a vibrant Yiddish centre, where the Yiddish daily *Di tsayt* (The Time) flourished and Yiddish periodicals appeared regularly. Once settled there, Stencl immediately threw himself wholeheartedly into the Yiddish life of the East End: having arrived only in November 1936 he was able, before the end of that year, to produce a slim volume of verse entitled *Letste nakht* (Last Night). During the Second World War, Stencl tried to boost the morale of Jewish Eastenders by founding a regular series of *literarische shabes-nokhmitiks*, 'literary Saturday afternoons', at which writers, singers and actors lectured and performed, and at irregular intervals he began issuing booklets under such titles as *Farveynte teg* (Bleary Days), *Brenendike gasn* (Burning Streets), and *Yidish shafn in Londen* (Yiddish Creativity in London), which the Whitechapel Yiddish-speaking public affectionately dubbed *Shtentsls heftlekh*, 'Stencl's pamphlets'. Under his editorship these publications developed into the periodical *Loshn un lebn* (Language and Life), a series that ceased only with his death.

For many years Stencl's literary Saturday afternoons, organized by his circle *Fraynt fun Yidish loshn* (Friends of the Yiddish Language), were graced with the presence of Yiddishists and lovers of the language and its culture from all over the world. Attributing the decline of Whitechapel's Yiddish-speaking immigrant community to the ravages of the Holocaust, Stencl strove in his work to import the concept of 'Whitechapel' into Yiddish literature, hoping in this way to leave a lasting memorial to the vibrancy of a Yiddish-speaking area of London that, like many other such areas in other countries and capitals, was rapidly fading from existence.

His was a strong, clear voice in twentieth-century Yiddish letters and the entire spiritual heritage of Judaism can be heard throughout his *oeuvre*. His papers, housed in the archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and fully catalogued by Professor Leonard Prager still await the full scholarly exploration they richly deserve.



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*Avrom-Nokhem Stencl Lectures so far delivered:*

1. A. N. Stencl: Poet of Whitechapel *S. S. Praver* (1983)
2. Morris Winchevsky's London Yiddish Newspaper: One Hundred Years in Retrospect *William J. Fishman* (1984)
3. Yiddish Creativity in the Ghettos and Camps: On Holocaust Folklore and Folkloristics *Dov Noy* (1985)
4. Vilna, Jerusalem of Lithuania *Leyzer Ran* (1986)
5. The Weinreich Legacy *Robert D. King* (1987)
6. From Czar to Glasnost: Yiddish in the Soviet Union *Schneier Levenberg* (1988)
7. Memories of London Yiddish Theatre *Bernard Mendelovitch* (1989)
8. Translations Into and From Yiddish *Mordechai Litvine* (1990)
9. The Children's Literature of Isaac Bashevis Singer *Chone Shmeruk* (1991)
10. The Life and Works of Rokhl Korn *Itche Goldberg* (1992)
11. Puddles or Mainstream: The Stencl Legacy *Leonard Prager* (1993)
12. Vilna, My Vilna *Abraham Karpinowicz* (1994)
13. 'Exquisite Complexity': The Prose Style of Dovid Bergelson (1884–1952) *Joseph Sherman* (2005)
14. 'Only King David remained ...': Reactions to the Holocaust in the Poetry of Kadya Molodowsky *Heather Valencia* (2006)



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## REACTIONS TO THE HOLOCAUST IN THE POETRY OF KADYA MOLODOWSKY

*Der meylekh Dovid aleyh iz geblibn / er mit der kroyn in di hent*, 'King David alone has remained / He, with the crown in his hands'.<sup>1</sup> This lone survivor is an emblematic figure in an eponymous book of poems published in 1946, which Kadya Molodowsky wrote in America as news was breaking of the tragic events in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The astonishing output of work by Yiddish poets from the late 1930s onward refutes the post-Holocaust assertions of Adorno and others that this is a topic that either could not or should not be transformed into literature. On the contrary, Eastern European Yiddish writers such as Avrom Sutzkever and Yitskhok Katzenelson — themselves among those caught up in the very maelstrom of events — found the inner resources to create metaphors and images to transform this incomprehensible disaster into art, even while they were living through the horror.

Critical thinking about what is usually called 'Holocaust literature' has developed since those reservations were voiced. While once many commentators held the view that the only morally or aesthetically acceptable way to represent the catastrophe was by a fact-based documentary approach, a consensus now seems to be emerging that very little *comprehension* of the Holocaust can be transmitted through attempts at factual representation, and that poetry, the genre which is furthest distanced from 'factuality', may, paradoxically, be best suited to the task of confronting the Holocaust through the written and spoken word. As Susan Gubar recently put it, 'in an effort to signal the impossibility of a sensible story, the poet provides spurts of vision, moments of truth, baffling but nevertheless powerful pictures of scenes unassimilated into an explanatory plot'.<sup>3</sup> James Young even asserts that '[r]ather

<sup>1</sup> The title is translated as 'Only King David remained' on the title page of the original edition of the book, and in Kathryn Hellerstein (ed.) *Papirene brikn. Geklibene lider fun Kadye Molodovski / Paper Bridges. Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999). Since the king is present in the poem as the survivor, the present, or present-perfect, tense seems more appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> Kadya Molodowsky, *Der meylekh Dovid aleyh iz geblibn* (King David Alone has Remained) [poems] (New York: Farlag papirene brik, 1946). All citations in this essay follow the text of this first edition.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz. Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003) 7.

than seeing metaphors as threatening to the facts of the Holocaust, we must recognise that they are our only access to the facts [...].'<sup>4</sup> Poetic images can facilitate insights and engage our emotional understanding in a way we would not otherwise experience.

David Roskies and Alan Mintz, writing about Yiddish and Hebrew literature respectively,<sup>5</sup> have argued that, from the Jewish perspective, the concept of 'Holocaust literature' itself needs to be reassessed. Mintz suggests that to define works which stem from these atrocities as 'a distinct genre or body of works existing in several languages and characterised by a common set of techniques or concerns'<sup>6</sup> — in other words, a horizontal classification — is inadequate within the Jewish context. He claims that in order to assess Jewish literature stemming from the Nazi Holocaust one must look instead to the 'vertical axis of literary tradition, which extended back to the Middle Ages and the Bible'.<sup>7</sup> Roskies also sees works by Jewish writers about the Holocaust as being part of a long tradition of Jewish responses to catastrophe. He describes some intrinsic characteristics of this tradition: the use and subversion of various Jewish rituals, beliefs and prayers,<sup>8</sup> the reinterpretation of earlier historical or mythical catastrophes, and the evocation of archetypal, iconic figures in Jewish history and legend. Central to Jewish writing is the relationship, both of the collective and of the individual, to God: writers seek to engage God in a dialogue, reminding him of his covenant with the Jewish people and reproaching him for appearing to break it.

Can this tradition have any relevance to writers responding to the Nazi Holocaust? Mintz points out that biblical writers saw destruction and persecution as 'a deserved and necessary punishment for sin'<sup>9</sup> and the enemy therefore as 'an instrument of God's purpose'.<sup>10</sup> This gave way, he points out, to a medieval interpretation of the massacres during

<sup>4</sup> James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988) 91.

<sup>5</sup> David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse. Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1984); Alan Mintz, *Hurban. Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Mintz, *Hurban* (see n. 5) ix.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Roskies has called this type of subversion a 'sacred parody', see Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (see n. 5) 30.

<sup>9</sup> Mintz, *Hurban* (see n. 5) 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

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the Crusades which made no correlation between catastrophe and guilt, for the disproportion between guilt and affliction was too great. These torments were instead interpreted by Ashkenazi rabbis as 'afflictions from love',<sup>11</sup> a test set by God of the faithfulness of the Jewish people. In different ways, both interpretations make sense of terrible suffering. But modern writers found that no such sense could be made of the Holocaust, a calamity which seems beyond any possible human or divine justification.

Nevertheless, such writers as Kadya Molodowsky continued to turn to the ancient paradigms. This paper will consider her work as part of the Jewish tradition of confronting catastrophe. I shall focus on poems from the collection *Der meylekh Dovid aleyh iz geblihn* in order to examine ways in which the poet subverts and transforms archetypes of Judaism — figures from *Tanakh* and the liturgy — in her quest to articulate feelings about this overwhelming disaster. I shall also touch on the impact of the Holocaust on her perception of her identity as a poet, and will finally consider whether any catharsis is discernible in the course of her writing on this darkest of themes.

First, however, a brief biographical sketch is useful. Molodowsky was born in 1894, in Bereza Kartuska, a town then in White Russia in the Pale of Settlement, but incorporated into independent Poland between the wars. Her upbringing was unconventional for a daughter born into a traditional Eastern European Jewish family of that period. Her father, a follower of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) and an early Zionist, believed that an intelligent girl should have a broad secular as well as a religious education. In addition to studying Hebrew and religious subjects, therefore, she had tutors for secular subjects, including geography, history and Russian language.

Molodowsky earned her own living throughout her life. She gained a teaching certificate at the age of eighteen and worked as a teacher of Yiddish and Hebrew. In the chaos of the First World War and the Russian Revolution she was forced to move between various cities, spending the war years in Warsaw, Odessa and Kiev, teaching and working in children's homes. At the age of twenty-seven, which was late for a woman of her background, she married Simkhe Lev, a teacher and literary critic, and they settled in Warsaw. There she taught Yiddish

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 6.

during the day and Hebrew in the evenings and was already publishing poetry in Yiddish journals. Her first book of poems appeared in 1927.<sup>12</sup> In 1935 Molodowsky emigrated to America<sup>13</sup> and settled in New York, where she became one of the leading figures on the American Yiddish literary scene, prolifically writing drama, poetry, prose and literary criticism. She founded *Svive* (Milieu), an important literary journal which she edited in 1943–4 and then again from 1960 until 1974. She was a passionate educator, and remains famous for her prose and poetry for children, later translated into Hebrew for use in Israeli schools. She and her husband lived in Jerusalem from 1950 to 1952, where she edited a journal for *Mo'etset hapo'elot* (Pioneer Women's Organization), but they later returned to New York. Simkhe Lev died in 1974 and Molodowsky in Philadelphia in 1975. They never had any children, a fact which the poet addressed in several poems.<sup>14</sup>

Molodowsky's life and work exemplify the complexities inherent in the meaning of Jewish identity in the twentieth century. She was one of the first generation of Jewish women writers to emerge — not without inner struggle — from the traditional Eastern European Jewish milieu into an independent literary existence. Her writing reflects those issues that informed her life: her commitment to social justice and education, the Zionism which became a central pillar of her life and work after the Holocaust, her experience of exile, and the struggle between her traditional female Jewish identity and her vocation as a modern writer.

A decisive early influence was the group of modernist Yiddish writers in Kiev with whom she became acquainted around 1920: Leyb Kvitko, Der Nister and Dovid Bergelson, who published her first poems in their anthology *Eygnis* (Our Own), and encouraged her to develop her writing. Contact with Bergelson's philosophy convinced her that literary creation was not a purely private pastime, as she had previously believed. A poem, she subsequently wrote, 'is not entirely the property of the author, but belongs to the community [...] I felt that writing was not a superficial matter, but was rooted in ancient inheritances'.<sup>15</sup> This consciousness of the artist's responsibility to the Jewish people, and of

<sup>12</sup> Kadya Molodowsky, *Kheshvendike nekht* (Nights of the Month of Kheshvan. Poems) (Vilna: Farlag B. Kletskin, 1927).

<sup>13</sup> As a result of visa problems, her husband managed to join her only in 1938.

<sup>14</sup> For example 'Mayne kinder', *Der meylekh Dovid* (sec n. 2) 86–7.

<sup>15</sup> Kadya Molodowsky, 'Mayn elter-zeydins yerushe' (My Great-Grandfather's Legacy),

the ancient line linking her to Jewish tradition, informs her work and underpins her poetic confrontation with the Holocaust.

In 1944, as reports reached the United States about the monstrous events in Poland, Molodowsky abandoned her journal *Svive* and devoted herself to writing poems which, together with earlier ones, appeared in 1946 as the volume *Der meylekh Dovid aleyh iz geblibn*, which she regarded as a work of memorialization. 'All the poems in this book,' she states in her autobiography, 'are *khurbm-lider* (Holocaust poems) [...] The book seemed to me like a tombstone for a life that had vanished.'<sup>16</sup> In the introduction to an anthology of Yiddish Holocaust poetry she edited in 1962, she described the irreversibly changed perspective on reality that knowledge of the catastrophe had brought to her generation: 'All our concepts changed: concepts of earth and heaven, and of the human being; we even perceived nature differently. The foundations of the world changed their form.'<sup>17</sup>

This changed perception is fundamental to the poems of *Der meylekh Dovid aleyh iz geblibn*. Although Molodowsky defines the poems as *khurbm-lider*, there is very little direct allusion to the events themselves.<sup>18</sup> Instead she uses metaphors and symbols to create a nightmare vision of a universe in which the normal points of reference are inverted. A recurring concept characterizing the world the poet presents

*Svive* 33 (January 1971) 60. ([...] *a lid iz nisht ingantsn dos eygntrum fun dem mekhaber. Es gehert tsum klal. [...] Ikh hob gefilt az dos shraybn ligt nit oybn oyf, es vortst in alte yerushes.*) All translations from Yiddish are mine.

<sup>16</sup> Kadya Molodowsky, 'Mayn elter-zeyd's yerushe' (My Great-Grandfather's Legacy), *Svive* 38 (January 1973) 60. (*Ale lider fun yenem bukh zaynen khurbm-lider [...] Dos bukh hot mir oysgezen vi a matseyve af a lebn vos iz farshvundn.*)

<sup>17</sup> Kadya Molodowsky (ed.) *Lider fun khurbm: antologye* (Poems of the Holocaust: Anthology), (Tel Aviv: Farlag Y. L. Perets, 1962) 10. (*Bay undz hobn zikh geendert di bagrifn fun erd, un fun himl, un fun mentsh, afile di natur hobn mir derzen andersh; di yesoydes fun der velt hobn gebitn zeyer geshtalt.*)

<sup>18</sup> Kathryn Hellerstein also comments on this fact, arguing that these are *khurbm-lider* both in the poet's use of 'sacred parody' (see n. 8) and in her 'imagery of scripting'. The main focus of Hellerstein's analysis is the meta-poetic poetry, and the way 'the poet responds to the dismemberment of the world she knew by dramatizing her sense of the limits of language'. See Kathryn Hellerstein, 'A Yiddish Poet's Response to the *Khurbn*. Kadya Molodowsky in America', in Rela Mintz Geffen and Marsha Bryan Edelman (eds) *Freedom and Responsibility: Exploring the Challenges of Jewish Continuity* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1998) 243–60. This essay has also appeared in Hebrew translation: 'Tigvat meshorret idish b'amerike: Kadye Molodovski – al nokheha hashoah', translated by Shalom Luria, *Khuyot* 3 (Spring 1996) 235–53.

is *kapoyer*: upside down, topsy-turvy, the wrong way round. She uses it to refer to the elements of the natural world:

די גאַנצע געאָגראַפֿיע ליגט קאָפּויער,  
און אַלע מײַנע ליבשאַפֿטן – פֿאַרסמטע.  
די קראָ דער זינגער איז, דער טרייסטער – איז אַ טכויר.

*di gantse geografye ligt kapoyer,  
un ale mayne libshaftn – farsamte.  
di kro der zinger iz, der treyster — iz a tkhoyer.*<sup>19</sup>

The whole geography lies upside down  
And all my loves are poisoned.  
The crow – the singer, the comforter – a skunk.

Lone figures move around empty landscapes and sink into the darkness. She depicts an echoing nothingness behind a world of whirling snow, and her poetry too is *an ekho fun amol geven*,<sup>20</sup> ‘an echo of what once was’. The normal relationship between the poet and her work is disrupted: the letters of the alphabet dissolve before her eyes, and her verses, instead of floating like snowflakes, fall on her head like stones because they have nowhere to go. Human contacts are destroyed, leaving the speaker in the poems completely isolated. The only interactions we see are with characters in her own poems who reject her, or a desultory exchange with someone who gives her a light for her cigarette on the street. Traditional methods of communication are also *kapoyer*: the few words on postcards she receives from friends and family in the ghettos of Poland do not adequately communicate the truth. Their most eloquent feature is the blank space where words should be written:

און רחמים בעט דער ווייסער בלוז אויפן פּאַפּיר,  
אזוי מסתמא איז דער כתב פון טרערן.

*un rakhmim bet der vayser bloyz afn papir,  
azoy mistome iz der ksav fun trern.*<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Molodowsky, *Der meylekh David* (see n. 2) 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 11. Hellerstein makes a detailed analysis of this poem in *Freedom and Responsibility* (see n. 18) 246–9.



And the white space on the paper begs for mercy:  
this, probably, is the handwriting of tears.

This reversal of normality is most strongly felt and powerfully evoked in relation to God and the tenets and traditions of Judaism. Prayer has become poison, and the *tsadikim* have eaten up Leviathan, the great fish reserved for the day the Messiah comes. In Molodowsky's vision of that day, the Messiah is not a redeemer but a destroyer:

משיח רייט איצט און שפאלט די ערד.  
אוי ניט גוט, ער האָט אויך ליב דעם קנאַל פֿון אַ ביקס.

*meshiekh rayt itst un shpalt di erd.*  
*oy nit gut, er hot oykh lib dem knal fun a biks.*<sup>22</sup>

Messiah rides and splits the earth asunder.  
Oh, not good, he also likes the crack of gunshot.

The corollary to the poet's commentary, *oy nit gut*, is that in this upside-down universe, God gives his divine seal of approval to murder and cruelty:

די פֿרייד פֿון יעגער  
און דער צאָפּל פֿון גשאָסענעם פּויגל,  
און די רויטע שרפּה פֿון בלוט.  
[...] אויף דעם איז אויך פּי טובֿ פֿאַרשריבן [...]

*di freyd fun yeger*  
*un der tsapl fun geshosenem foygl,*  
*un di royte sreylfe fun blut.*  
*af dem iz oykh ki tov farshribn [...]*

The joy of the hunter,  
And the quivering of the shot bird,  
And the red fire of blood.  
On that *ki tov* ['for it is good...'] is also inscribed [...]<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Molodowsky, *Der meylekh David* (sec n. 2) 36.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 55. Compare Genesis 1:10: *vayar elohim ki tov*, 'And God saw that it was good'.

The events in Europe, though seldom explicitly mentioned, are disquietingly present in this vision of reversal and destruction.

I should now like to look more closely at specific poems to examine how Molodowsky uses the figures and traditions of Judaism in this work. In 'A briv tsu Elyohu hanovi'<sup>24</sup> ('A Letter to the Prophet Elijah'), written in 1942, she attempts to bridge the gap between exile and her former homeland, and between the cataclysmic present and an intact vision of the past. Elijah, whom she calls *alter psure-treger*, 'old message-carrier', can communicate with human beings, answer all questions, and bear messages between God and his people. He is a figure with powerful symbolic resonance in Jewish tradition, who is present at important ritual moments such as a male child's circumcision and at the Passover *Seder* table, and who will bring the Messiah.

At the beginning of the poem, Molodowsky draws on the familiarity she had with him during her childhood to justify her writing to him now:

אַלטער בשורה-טרעגער, אליהו,  
איך האָב פֿאַרלאָרן אלע אַדרעסן,  
שרייב איך איצט אַ בריוו צו דיר.  
האַסט אַלטע פֿרײַנדשאַפֿט זיכער ניט פֿאַרגעסן,  
ווען כ'פֿלעג דיר קינדווייז עפֿענען די טיר.

ניט איין מאָל דיך געפֿירט מיט ציטער און מיט תפֿילה  
צום יום-טובֿדיקן טיש, צום כּוס מיט ווייַן.  
עס קען ניט זײַן, זאָלסט איצט ניט וועלן אויסהערן  
מײַן ביטערע מגילה,  
עס קען ניט זײַן.

*alter psure-treger Elyohu,  
ikh hob farlorn ale adresn,  
shrayb ikh itst a briv tsu dir.  
host alte frayndshaft zikher nit fargesn,  
ven kh'fleg dir kindvayz efenen di tir.*

*nit eyn mol dikh gefirt mit tsiter un mit tfile  
tsum yontefdikn tish, tsum kos mit vayn.  
es ken nit zayn, zolst itst nit veln oyshern*

<sup>24</sup> Molodowsky, *Der meylekh Dovid* (see n. 2) 5–7.

*mayn bitere megile,  
es ken nit zayn.*

Old message-carrier, Elijah,  
I have lost all addresses,  
So now I'm writing a letter to you.  
I'm sure you haven't forgotten our old friendship  
When, as a child, I used to open the door for you.

Often, trembling and prayerful, I led you  
To the festive table, to the cup of wine.  
It cannot be, that you won't hear out  
My bitter tale,  
It cannot be.

She begins conversationally, as if writing to a trusted confidant to request news of common friends whose addresses she has lost. Normality is belied, however, by the fact that she has lost *ale adresn*, 'all addresses', including, in a powerfully symbolic sense, her own. The transition between the idyllic days of the *alte frayndshaft*, when she welcomed him to the *Seder* table, and the 'bitter tale' to which the poem now turns, is effected through the urgency of her appeal that he will listen to her, evoked by in the repeated phrase, *es ken nit zayn*.

The next five stanzas lament the gulf between 'then' and 'now' in a mood of anguished confusion of guilt and self-justification. The focus of the speaker's attention is not yet the Holocaust, but her sin of abandoning the prophet — a symbolic allusion, perhaps, to her having deserted her Jewish heritage in Poland:

כְּהָאָב לַיִכְחֲזִינִיק פֶּאַרשְׁנִיטן אַלע דֵּינע שְׁפוּרן  
און אויך די ווייטקייט פֿון מיין הימל,  
און אויך די וואַרעמקייט פֿון גלויבן.

*kh'hob laykhtzinik farshnitn ale dayne shpurn  
un oykh di vaytkeyt fun mayn himl,  
un oykh di varemkeyt fun gloybn.*

Carelessly I've wiped out all your traces  
And the vastness of my sky,  
And the warmth of faith.

Since her poetry was rooted in that old order, her separation from the prophet has caused her poems to be *nakete, vi burn*, 'naked, like whores'.

The speaker's personal and poetic disorientation is further explored through negative images of cultivation. In attempting to dig flowerbeds she has created chasms between herself and the prophet, full of filth where flowers cannot grow. But she attempts to justify herself to the prophet: hers was not a self-seeking quest since she had no desire to take a drop of the 'sweet springs' for herself, and she ascribes to Elijah the responsibility for having inspired in her the poetic urge, the appetite for the 'sweet springs': *du host eydl oysgefuremt mir mayn haldz un gumen*, 'you delicately formed my throat and palate'.

This lament clearly draws on a long tradition of Jewish poetry as exemplified in the books of Lamentations, Psalms and Job, with their characteristic movement between overwhelming affliction, self-reproach, repentance, and pleas for deliverance from the depths. These biblical texts also embody the tradition of arguing with or rebuking the Deity and Molodowsky does not shrink from accusing the prophet of *an avle*, 'an injustice':

אָן עוולֶה, וואָס דו קומסט נישט און דו זעצסט זיך נישט אַנידער  
 בײַ סדרים אונדזערע מיט חמצדיקן וויין.  
 מיר זינגען דאָרט אַזעלכע לאַנגווייליקע לידער,  
 אַז דו אַליין וואַלטסט אפֿשר מציל זײַן.

*an avle, vos du kumst nit un du zetst zikh nit anider  
 bay sdorim undzere mit khometsdiken vayn.  
 mir zingen dort azelkhe langvaylike lider,  
 az du aleyn voltst efsher matsil zayn.*

It's an injustice that you don't appear and sit down  
 At our *Seders*, with our contaminated wine.<sup>25</sup>  
 We sing such tedious songs  
 That you alone could perhaps rescue them.

This and the following stanza form the pivotal moment of the poem: the poet turns from her personal grief and remorse to the collective

<sup>25</sup> The adjective describing the wine, *khometsdik*, means 'containing yeast [leaven]', which is forbidden for all foodstuffs during the Passover period.

catastrophe of the Holocaust taking place in Europe as she writes. The emphasis moves from 'I' to 'we', the transitional image being the exiles and survivors around the Passover *Seder* table whom she begs Elijah to visit. Even this festival symbolizing freedom from slavery has been perverted: the usually joyful songs are *langvaylik*, 'tedious', 'wearisome', and the wine not *kosher*, but contaminated with forbidden leaven. The desolation of the survivors' table contrasts with her dream of Elijah's coming in the following stanza:

אָפֿט ווילט זיך מיר, אַז דו זאָלסט ווידער קומען,  
 בקפֿיצות-דרך, אויף זילבערנעם לבנה-גראָז,  
 וואָלטסט ווי אַמאָל מיך ווידער מיטגענומען  
 אין ליכטיקן מאַרשרוט פֿאַרזוכן יעדער כּוס.

*oft vilt zikh mir, az du zolst vider kumen,  
 bekfitses-derekh, af zilbernem levone-groz,  
 voltst vi amol mikh vider mitgenumen  
 in likhtikn marsbrut farzukhn yeder kos.*

Often I long for you to come again,  
 With a giant leap, over the silver moon-grass:  
 You would take me with you as you used to,  
 Tasting each cup along our shining way.

These unexpectedly lyrical, fairy-tale images — the 'silver moon-grass' and the term *kfitses-derekh*, suggesting the supernatural ability to cover a huge distance in one leap — bring a momentary dream of escape, a retarding moment before the poet forces herself to confront the reality of the camps and ghettos of Europe. The unmediated shift is enunciated by the stuttering repetition of *dort*, 'there':

צײַ ביסטו דאָרט געווען?  
 דאָרט... דאָרט ... אונטערן בײַזן מויער?

*tsi bistu dort geven?  
 dort ... dort ... untern beyzn moyer?*

Were you there?  
 There ... there ... behind the evil wall?

This reference to the situation in Europe unleashes a stream of tormented questions, evoking the Holocaust through metonymic images of tragedy: the 'evil wall', the yellow star (in Yiddish, *late*, 'patch'), the child shorn of her blonde hair. Within these questions is a further rebuke to the prophet: unlike the pleasant cup of wine Elijah drinks at the *Seder* table, the cup of these victims would, the poet suggests, burn his lips if he tasted it.

At the end of the poem, the *ikh* now returns to her starting point: the names, for whom she has no addresses, of people whose fate only Elijah can tell. The poem has been a journey towards this moment of asking, but in the final lines the poet falters, shrinking both from knowledge of the truth and from the shattering possibility that even the omniscient Elijah may be ignorant of the dimensions of this catastrophe:

כ'האָב מורא פֿרעגן דיך, און זאָג מיר גאַרניט,  
 אויב ס'האָט עפעס זיך געטראָפֿן ...  
 גיב א ריר דינע רחמימדיקע ברעמען,  
 פֿאַרלעש מיין לאַמפּ,  
 און אויב עס איז צו דיר קיין בשורה ניט דערפֿלויגן,  
 פֿאַרלעש מיין לאַמפּ  
 און מאַך מיר צו די אויגן.

*kh'hob moyre fregn dikh, un zog mir gornit,  
 oyb s'hot epes zikh getrofn . . .  
 gib a rir dayne rakhmimdike bremen,  
 farlesh mayn lomp,  
 un oyb es iz tsu dir keyn psure nit derfloygn,  
 farlesh mayn lomp  
 un makh mir tsu di oygn.*

I'm scared to ask, so please don't tell me  
 If something has happened ...  
 Just make a movement of your pitying brow,  
 Put out my lamp,  
 And if no news at all has reached you,  
 Put out my lamp  
 And close my eyes.

The speaker returns from the collective to her personal grief in these final lines, implicitly expressing a desire for death, an impulse that pervades the earlier sections of the book.

This 'letter' to the prophet raises key issues which pervade the collection: the unbridgeable chasm between past and present, the guilt of the survivor, the validity of the poetic word, and the impotence of old certainties in the face of a still not fully known disaster. Yet the prophet, who is capable of answering all questions, remains silent. His silence speaks as clearly as the empty spaces in the postcards from the ghetto.

Another traditional form of address that Molodowsky uses is the prayer. Her intimate conversational tone as she speaks directly to God resonates with the mood of *tkhines*. These Yiddish prayers for women, published from the seventeenth century on, enable a woman to approach God in a direct and intimate manner. The opening poem of this book is entitled 'Eyl khanun'<sup>26</sup> ('Merciful God'), a phrase evoking prayers said on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, and on *Tisha b'Av*, the anniversary of the Destruction of the Temple, seeking to make restitution for sin and to strengthen the special relationship between God and his people. The speaker in Molodowsky's poem begs God to revoke this bond, however, and to choose another people, because

מיר האָבן ניט קיין בלוט מער  
 אויף צו זײַן אַ קרבן.  
 אַ מידבר איז געוואָרן אונדזער שטוב.  
 די ערד איז קאַרג פֿאַר אונדז אויף קברים,  
 נישטאָ קיין קינות מער פֿאַר אונדז,  
 נישטאָ קיין קלאַג-ליד  
 אין די אַלטע ספֿרים.

*mir hobn nit keyn blut mer  
 af tsu zayn a korbm.  
 a midber iz gevorn undzer shtub,  
 di erd iz karg far undz af kvorim,  
 nishto keyn kines mer far undz,  
 nishto keyn klog-lid,  
 in di alte sform.*

<sup>26</sup> Molodowsky, *Der meylekh Dovid* (sec n. 2) 3-4.

We have no more blood left  
 To be a sacrifice.  
 Our habitation has become a desert.  
 The earth has no more space for our graves,  
 There are no more lamentations for us,  
 No funeral dirge  
 In the ancient holy books.

The underlying implication of this lament is that God's covenant has brought this misery on the Jewish people, subverting the concept of 'the Chosen People' and making it a curse rather than a privilege. The poet ascribes to the Holocaust the status of a horror beyond what can be encompassed in the 'ancient holy books', since the lamentations which served for earlier persecutions are of no use here. At the end of the poem she proposes an alternative model for the Jews, that of insignificant labourers and artisans, rather than that of chosen scholars on whom God's bestowal of what she calls 'the divine presence of genius'<sup>27</sup> has wreaked such havoc. God's biblical promise that he would never break his covenant, even when his people displeased him,<sup>28</sup> is here rejected by a human speaker who demands, on behalf of the collective, that he sever the ancient bond.

Even more radical is the reversal of the sacred in the undated poem, which also takes the form of a *tkhine*, entitled 'Havdole' (*Havdalah*).<sup>29</sup> The title and first words replicate the opening of the gentle Yiddish prayer said by women at the end of the Sabbath: *Got fun Avrom, fun Yitskhok un Yankev, der liber shabes-koydesh geyt avek — zol kumen di libe vokh...*, 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the beloved holy Sabbath is leaving — let the beloved week come'. Instead of asking God to bless the new week, however, Molodowsky demands that he annihilate this universe and create a new one:

<sup>27</sup> *di shkhine fun geoynes*, *ibid.* 4.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, 'And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God' (Leviticus 26:44–5); 'And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, I made you to go up out of Egypt and have brought you unto the land which I swore unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break my covenant with you' (Judges 2:1).

<sup>29</sup> Molodowsky, *Der meylekh David* (sec n. 2) 76.



גאָט פֿון אַבְרָהָם,  
 באַשאַף אונדז אַ צווייטן בראשית.  
 מעג קיין זון דאָרט ניט שיינען —  
 דאָס ליכט האָט אונדז סייווי פֿאַרראַטן.  
 מעג דער ווינט דאָרט ניט זינגען —  
 ער האָט מיט די דײַטשן צוזאַמען געטריבן  
 אונדזער פֿאָלק צו די שחיטה־וואַרשטאַטן.

*Got fun Avrom,  
 bashaf undz a tsveytn breysbis,  
 meg keyn zun dort nit shaynen —  
 dos likht hot undz sayvi farratn.  
 meg der vint dort nit zingen —  
 er hot mit di daytshn tsuzamen getribn  
 undzer folk tsu di shkhite-varshatn.*

God of Abraham,  
 Make a second Creation for us.  
 May no sun shine there —  
 The light has in any case betrayed us.  
 May the wind not sing there —  
 Together with the Germans it drove  
 Our people to the slaughter-workshops.

The unexpected and rare concreteness of the term *di daytshn* and the shocking concept of the 'slaughter-workshops' have a jarring impact in the context of a traditional woman's prayer. This is an ironic use of the pathetic fallacy, the poetic phenomenon by which nature is personified and human feelings and reactions are ascribed to inanimate objects. Where Romantic poets often used this device to show a sentient nature in empathy with their emotions, Molodowsky by striking contrast perceives nature as a malevolent force which has betrayed Jews and actively connived in the catastrophe that has befallen them. The poem continues to subvert as, with mounting intensity, the speaker demands the destruction of the sea, the mountains and the sky, and renounces beauty, courage and song — everything to which poets have traditionally sung hymns of praise. In an ironic anti-Romantic gesture, the poet demands a modest, shrunken world reminiscent of the planet of

St Exupéry's Little Prince.<sup>30</sup> It would have a tiny strip of sky and a single star which would shine just once a year to mark *Havdalah*, a ceremony now performed not weekly, as is customary, but merely once a year in a pared-down, minimal universe, and now celebrating freedom from 'the science of blood'. The children's words *omeyn veomeyn*, with which the poem ends, take us back to the idea of an innocent prayer:

און עס וועלן די קינדער אונטער פאסיקל הימל  
ענטפערן: אָמן ואָמן.

*un es veln di kinder unter pasikl himl  
entfern: omeyn veomeyn.*

And the children under the little strip of sky  
Will answer: Amen and amen.

Though this ending could be interpreted as expressing a hope of regeneration, it is predicated on a hyperbolic vision of destruction and of a Utopian new world coming into being; this undermines the child-like, fairy-tale tone of the last words.

A further traditional form adapted by Molodowsky is the psalm. The title of 'Shir hamayles',<sup>31</sup> a prophetic poem written, surprisingly, as early as 1938, alludes to Psalms 120–134, each of which opens with these words, usually translated into English as 'song of degrees' or 'psalm of ascents'.<sup>32</sup> The overall movement of these psalms is upward, from the depths of suffering and despair to redemption through trust in God. Psalm 126 is particularly familiar to Jews as the prelude to the Grace after Meals, and the poet's dark vision contrasts starkly with the mood of well-being with which that psalm is normally associated. Molodowsky's 'psalm of ascents' consists of two apparently unrelated parts. The first three stanzas are a meditation on poetry and truth, the

<sup>30</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1943); in English, *The Little Prince*, translated by Katherine Woods (London: Heinemann, 1944); in Yiddish, *Der kleyner prints*, translated by Shloyme Lerman (Nidderau: Verlag Michaela Naumann, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Molodowsky, *Der meylekh Dovid* (see n. 2) 57–8.

<sup>32</sup> These psalms all begin with the words *shir hama'alot*, literally 'song of going up', perhaps referring to the ascent to the Temple in Jerusalem.

first judging poetry negatively by questioning the poet's arrogation of images of the natural world and suggesting that attempting to impose poetic form on the world and the self is a mockery:

מיט נאַכט, מיט ווינט, אָדער מיט שטורעם,  
מיט וואָס איך זאָל ניט אָנהייבן מיין ליד –  
דער גרעסטער חוזק איז פֿורעמען אַ פֿורעם  
פֿאַר אומגעלומפערטן געמיט.

*mit nakht, mit vint, oder mit shturem,  
mit vos ikh zol nit onheybn mayn lid —  
der grester khoyzek iz furemen a furem  
far umgelumpertn gemit.*

Whether with night, or wind or storm,  
No matter how I start my poem —  
The greatest mockery is creating a form  
For the unformed, clumsy spirit.

This philosophical statement is concretized by comparing these natural forces with the displaced life of a persecuted Jew, which is symbolized by his clothing:

און וואָס איז נאַכט מיט פֿינצטערער פֿאַרצוקונג,  
און וואָס איז ווינט מיט ביטערקייט פֿון בליט,  
און וואָס איז שטורעם, וואָס פֿליקט דעם ים פֿון גרונטן,  
אַנטקעגן הילוך פֿון אַ ייד?

דאָס היטל דעם טרויער פֿון די אויגן צו פֿאַרדעקן,  
דאָס רעקל אויף ערגערן די ברוינע הינט.  
די שיד אַ מיטברדיקער פֿיבער זאָל זיי לעקן,  
די שיד - די קלוגע, שלעפּערישע שיד.

*un vos iz nakht mit fintsterer fartsukung,  
un vos iz vint mit biterkayt fun blit,  
un vos iz shturem, vos flikt dem yam fun gruntn,  
antkegn hilekh fun a yid?*

*dos hitl dem troyer fun di oygn tsu fardekn,  
 dos rekl oyfergern di broyne hint.  
 di shikh a midberdiker fiber zol zey lekn,  
 di shikh – di kluge, shleperishe shikh.*

And what is night with its dark prey,  
 And what is wind with its bitter blossoming,  
 And what is storm, which plucks the sea from its sea-bed,  
 Compared to the clothing of a Jew?

His cap to cover up the sadness of his eyes  
 His jacket to annoy the brown dogs.  
 His shoes to be licked by a desert fever,  
 His shoes – those clever, vagabond shoes.

Molodowsky seems to argue that both the power of nature and the attempt to render it in poetic form fall short of the suffering of the persecuted wandering Jew.

These three stanzas are followed by an abrupt transition to a vision of the self falling into a bottomless pit. The psychological link between this and the opening ideas of the poem is, I suggest, the poet's anguish over the inadequacy of her verse in the face of the agony of the Jewish people:

א פֿאַלן האָט דערוואַכט אין מיר.  
 איך זע אַפֿילו נישט דעם גרונט פֿון תּהום.  
 אויף זײַנע הענט דער אויבערשטער ט'מסתּם פֿאַרהאַלטן מיר,  
 ווײַל ער איז אייביק,  
 ווי דער גערויט פֿון אַ פֿאַגראָם.

*a faln hot dervakht in mir.  
 ikh ze afile nisht dem grunt fun thom.  
 afzayne hent der oybershter t'mistam farhalten mikh,  
 vayl er iz eybik,  
 vi der geroysht fun a pogrom.*

A falling has awakened in me.  
 I do not even see the bottom of the abyss.  
 In his arms the Lord will probably keep me,  
 For he is eternal,  
 Like the uproar of a pogrom.

The idea of the *shir hamayles* is turned upside down as Molodowsky's 'psalm of ascents' becomes instead a descent into the void. The trust of the psalmist in the protecting hand of God, such as that expressed in Psalm 121,<sup>33</sup> is qualified with 'probably', while the idea of God's eternity is undermined by her coupling it, not with his mercy and redemption as the psalmist does, but with a pogrom, symbol of the persecution of the Jews.

As the inner descent continues, the speaker sees a vision of an apocalyptic conflagration which destroys all possibility of continuity:

און אפֿשר איז דאָס שױן די שרפֿה,  
וואָס שמעלצט אַראָפּ פֿון בוים די פֿרוכטן,  
און ס'וועלן עפל מער נישט וואַקסן  
אויף דעם באַדן דעם פֿאַרפֿלוקטן.

*un efsher iz dos shoyn di sreynfe,  
vos shmeltst arop fun boym di frukhtn,  
un s'veln epl mer nit vaksn  
af dem bodn dem farflukhtn.*

And perhaps this is the fire  
Which melts the fruits down off their tree,  
And no more apples will grow  
In the accursed soil.

Even in the face of this final destruction, the poet continues to recite her own *shir hamayles*, not to the eternal God of Judaism, however, but *tsum shtern vos brent in mir aleyn / tsum shtern vos brent nokh in mayn zinen*, 'to the star that burns within myself / the star which burns still in my senses'. The idea of a transcendental Deity has vanished.

In this poem, as in 'Havdole' and several others in the collection, some vestige of hope remains, since the sacred spark, not entirely extinguished, still 'burns' in the self. But this is not the case with the poem which Molodowsky chose to represent the overall theme of the book: 'Der meylekh Dovid aleyn iz geblibn'<sup>34</sup> ('King David alone has remained').

David's pre-eminence in Jewish tradition rests on the belief that, as the

<sup>33</sup> 'The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil; He shall preserve thy soul' (Psalm 121:7).

<sup>34</sup> Molodowsky, *Der meylekh Dovid* (see n. 2) 74-5.

precursor of the Messiah, he represents the continuity of the Jewish people and their hope of messianic redemption and homecoming. In Molodowsky's undated elegy, David, a desolate figure in a ruined landscape, no longer king since his people have been destroyed, carries his crown humbly in his hands instead of wearing it proudly on his head. The elegiac tone is generated by the repeated lamentation *vund un toyt*, 'wound and death', and the two lines, *der meylekh Dovid aleyh iz geblibn / er mit der kroyn in di hent*. The devastation is described in short phrases, intensified by a sequence of verbs with the prefix *far*, suggesting the finality of the destruction: *farshnitn, farshotn, farbrent, farsreyfet, farlendt*.<sup>35</sup> In the first stanza, human beings and their habitations have been annihilated; in the third, so have both the future — implied by scattered nests which can nurture no new life — and the past, suggested by the meadows of childhood. In the second stanza, I think it is not too fanciful to see in the silenced bugle and the fallen messenger an oblique reference to David's personal tragedy, the death of his son Absalom after the defeat of the rebellion (2 Samuel 18), symbolically linking the ancient and the modern tragedies. In the fourth stanza David is a mourner — *der ovl* — both for his own son and for the slaughtered Jews of the twentieth century.

The fourth stanza seems initially to introduce a moment of hope, since among the devastation, *a veg an eyntsiker grint un iz frish, / der veg tsu zayn zun der meshiekh*, 'Only one path is verdant and fresh, / the path to his son the Messiah'. But the outcome is tragic:

אָהיִן גײט דער אָבֶל, דער מלך,  
ער מיט דער קרוין אין די הענט.

ער טראָגט די געהייליקטע ירושה –  
וונד און טויט.

– אָט איז דיין כתר, משיח,  
אַלע פּערל געשוינט, ניט פאַרשווענדט.  
אָט איז דיין כתר, משיח,  
אויף די לעצטע צוויי ייִדישע הענט.

*ahin geyt der ovl, der meylekh,  
er mit der kroyn in di hent.*

<sup>35</sup> Respectively, exterminated, scattered, burned, consumed by fire, annihilated.

*er trogt di geheylikte yerushe —  
vund un toyt.  
— ot iz dayn keser, meshiekh,  
ale perl geshoynt, nit farshvendt.  
ot iz dayn keser, meshiekh,  
af di letste tsvey yidishe hent.*

Towards him walks the mourner, the king,  
He with the crown in his hands.

He bears the holy heirloom —  
Wound and death.  
— Here is your holy crown, Messiah,  
All the pearls preserved, not squandered.  
Here is your holy crown, Messiah,  
In the last two Jewish hands.

While the crown is in the hands of the earthly King David, it is referred to by the everyday Yiddish term *kroyn*. When this crown is transferred to the Messiah, however, it is designated by the Hebrew word *keser*, which in Yiddish usage denotes the ornamental crown of the Torah scroll, and so is imbued with sacred meaning. The irony of the poem is that the careful safeguarding of this holy heirloom, and its symbolic handing over to the Messiah at the long-awaited moment of his redemptive arrival, has all been for nothing. The Messiah has no role to play, since the crown has been handed to him by *di letste tsvey yidishe hent*. In this, perhaps the most despairing of Molodowsky's poems of reversal, Jewish tradition and continuity, and the core symbol of *geule*, the messianic redemption, are all obliterated.

Earlier, I asked whether any catharsis or sense of redemption could be perceived in Molodowsky's *khurbm-lider*, and I believe it can. A constant inspiration in her life was her unwavering Zionism, and the book *Der meylekh Dovid aleyh iz geblibn*, which opens with the deeply pessimistic 'God of Mercy', closes with one of many poems that Molodowsky wrote about the Land of Israel. The poem 'Morgn vet zayn yontef'<sup>36</sup> ('Tomorrow will be a holiday') depicts the lighting of beacons to spread the word that a holiday is about to begin. It seems to

<sup>36</sup> Molodowsky, *Der meylekh Dovid* (see n. 2) 154–6.

be inspired by the description in the Mishnah of procedures in antiquity for announcing the New Moon of a month in which a festival falls.<sup>37</sup> Starting on the Mount of Olives, signal fires were lit on particular hills until even the Jews of the surrounding Diaspora were all made aware of the news. Molodowsky follows the mishnaic text in her description of the successive lighting of fires,<sup>38</sup> even using the mishnaic spelling of the ancient names, phoneticizing them in brackets for her modern readers. In contrast to its learned background, the poem is written in the apparently artless conversational style of her *maysলেখ*, or 'little tales' for children, with rhyme, repetition and a jaunty dancing rhythm. Thus she closes her book of *khurbm-lider* with a joyful, humorous, childlike vision of renewal for the Jews in the Land of Israel, while emphasizing Jewish continuity since mishnaic times, despite the Nazi attempt to eliminate the Jewish people.

Even the very dark poems do not signify absolute nihilism, however, since by making the symbols of ancient Jewish tradition the signifiers of her poetic questioning, despite the fact that she subverts or negates them, she is maintaining the link to these symbols.<sup>39</sup> Her addresses to God and Elijah, though despairing, are still an attempt at dialogue, encompassing the possibility of some kind of answer or reconciliation. If Molodowsky's belief in the regenerative power of poetry and the public nature of the poet's task had ever really waned, it soon reasserted itself. The poetic vehicle for this sense of renewal after the Holocaust is again biblical: the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses. Her last book of poetry, published nineteen years later, is entitled *Likht fun dornboym*<sup>40</sup> (Light from the Thornbush) and bears the epigraph, 'and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed' (Exodus 3:2). Its opening poem, written in 1954, is entitled 'Af mayn dorn blit a royz'<sup>41</sup> ('On my thorn a rose is blooming'). The poet

<sup>37</sup> Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:3, 2:2–3.

<sup>38</sup> *Mehar hamishkha lesartaba, umisartaba ligrupina, umigrupina lekhevran, umekhevran leveyt baltin* [...] 'From the Mount of Olives to Sartaba, and from Sartaba to Agrippina, and from Agrippina to Hauran, and from Hauran to Beth Baltin [...]. Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:4. I am indebted to Oron Joffe of Stirling University for this reference.

<sup>39</sup> Compare Hellerstein (see n. 18) 246.

<sup>40</sup> Kadya Molodowsky, *Likht fun dornboym. Lider* (Light from the Thornbush: Lyrical and Narrative Poems), (Buenos Aires: Farlag Poaley Tsién Histadrut, 1965)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 5–6.



witnesses with amazement the blooming of the rose and other unexpected happenings symbolizing regeneration: wine sparkling in the broken shards on her table, or a cornstalk growing in the desert. She wanders the earth, looking for explanations, until she finds her old protector, Elijah:

איבער ימען, לענדערייען  
גיי איך היין און צוריק.

ביז איך קום צו אליהו  
דער, וואָס היט מיך אַלע יאָרן.  
זאָגט ער מיר:  
ס'איז נישט קיין דאָרן,  
ס'איז אַ גרינער בוים.  
[...]

זאָגט ער מיר:  
ס'איז נישט קיין שערבֿלעך –  
פּאָלדענע. אומשטערבֿלעך  
איז די ברוחה איבער ווייַן.

*iber yamen, lenderayen  
gey ikh hin un tsurik.*

*biz ikh kum tsu Elyohu  
der, vos hit mikh ale yorn.  
zagt er mir:  
s'iz nisht keyn dorn,  
s'iz a griner boym.  
[...]*

*zagt er mir:  
s'iz nisht keyn sherblekh —  
koyses goldene. umshterblekh  
iz di brokhe iber vayn.*

Over seas and over lands  
I wander back and forth.

Until I come to Elijah  
 Who has protected me all these years.  
 He says to me:  
 It's not a thorn,  
 It's a green tree.  
 [...]

He says to me:  
 Those aren't shards —  
 But golden goblets. Immortal  
 Is the blessing over wine.

At the end of the poem the prophet instructs her to say *hamoytse* — the blessing recited only over bread — over the dry cornstalk, implying that her word can transform it into nourishment.

Molodowsky is too artful a poet for this to have been a random choice of opening poem. She has carefully positioned it as a counterpoint to her 'Letter to the Prophet Elijah' near the beginning of the previous book. Here the breach with old traditions has been healed, and her dialogue with the prophet restored. Whereas in the earlier volume her desperate appeal to Elijah found no response, he now again speaks to her directly, showing her how, through poetry, there can be healing and renewal. Indeed, her energy and creativity as a poet, editor and literary critic remained undiminished into her old age.

Kathryn Hellerstein has used the phrase 'poems of unravelling' to designate those of Molodowsky's *khurbm-lider* the central theme of which is the disintegration of her poetic language.<sup>42</sup> In my analysis of her use of Jewish archetypes, I have suggested that many poems of *Der meylekh Dovid aleyh iz geblihn* can also be described as poems of reversal, since they confront the Holocaust by subverting and dismantling normal perceptions of the world as well as of traditional Jewish paradigms. Kadya Molodowsky is a major Yiddish writer whose response to the Holocaust makes her work part of a long tradition of Jewish writing on catastrophe. Unlike the biblical and medieval writers, she finds no divine purpose in this catastrophe, and expresses her outrage and despair through her vision of a universe which is *kapoyer*. Out of this dismantling, however, comes reconstruction. In contrast to some other Jewish writers, her poetry struggles through despair to a restoration of meaning.

<sup>42</sup> Hellerstein (see n. 18) 252.

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## APPENDIX

Selected poems of Kadya Molodowsky to which reference is  
made in this lecture.

All texts according to the original 1946 edition,  
but with modernized orthography.  
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Mr Benjamin Litman, Philadelphia.

*The Appendix begins on page 42, and is to be read from right to left.*

דער מלך דוד אליין איז געבליבן

דאָס פֿאַלק איז פֿאַרשניטן –  
ווינד און טויט.

די וועגן פֿאַרשאַטן,  
די הייזער פֿאַרברענט.  
דער מלך דוד אליין איז געבליבן,  
ער מיט דער קרוין אין די הענט.

געשטאַרבן דער שאַל פֿון דעם האַרן.  
דער לעצטער שטאַפֿעט איז געפֿאַלן –  
ווינד און טויט.

עס רייסן קריעה אין הימל  
פֿאַרשרפֿעטע, חרובֿע ווענט.  
דער מלך דוד אליין איז געבליבן,  
ער מיט דער קרוין אין די הענט.

עס הוילט דער ווינט אין צעשאַטענע נעסטן –  
ווינד און טויט.

די לאַנקעס די גרינע פֿון קינדהייט,  
די טשערעדע שאַף – איז פֿאַרלענדט.  
דער מלך דוד אליין איז געבליבן,  
ער מיט דער קרוין אין די הענט.

דאָס לאַנד איז צעמאַסטן אויף קברים –  
ווינד און טויט.

אַ וועג אָן איינציקער גרינט און איז פֿריש.  
דער וועג צו זיין זון דעם משיח,  
וואָס דאָס פֿאַלק האָט פֿאַרטרוימט און צעשמט.  
אַהין גייט דער אָבל, דער מלך,  
ער מיט דער קרוין אין די הענט.

ער טראַגט די געהייליקטע ירושה –  
ווינד און טויט.

– אָט איז דיין כתר, משיח,  
אַלע פֿערל געשוינט, ניט פֿאַרשווענדט.  
אַט איז דיין כתר, משיח,  
אויף די לעצטע צוויי ייִדישע הענט.

און אפשר איז דאָס שוין די שרפֿה,  
וואָס שמעלצט אַראָפּ פֿון בוים די פֿרוכטן,  
און ס'וועלן עפל מער גישט וואַקסן  
אויף דעם באַדן דעם פֿאַרפֿלויכטן.

און אויב אַזוי –  
וועל איך נאָך אין די לעצטע וויילעס,  
ביז וואַנען כוח ס'וועט מיין האַרץ געפֿינען,  
וועל איך נאָך זאָגן שיר-המעלות  
צום שטערן וואָס ברענט אין מיר אַליין,  
צום שטערן וואָס ברענט נאָך אין מיין זינען.

1938

## שיר המעלות

מיט נאַכט, מיט ווינט, אָדער מיט שטורעם,  
מיט וואָס איך זאָל ניט אָנהייבן מיין ליד –  
דער גרעסטער חוזק איז פֿורעמען אַ פֿורעם  
פֿאַר אומגעלומפּערטן געמיט.

און וואָס איז נאַכט מיט פֿינצטערער פֿאַרצוקונג,  
און וואָס איז ווינט מיט ביטערקייט פֿון בליט,  
און וואָס איז שטורעם, וואָס פֿליקט דעם ים פֿון גרונטן,  
אַנטקעגן הילוך פֿון אַ ייד?

דאָס היטל דעם טרויער פֿון די אויגן צו פֿאַרדעקן,  
דאָס רעקל אויף ערגערן די ברוינע הינט.  
די שיד אַ מידברדיקער פֿיבער זאָל זיי לעקן,  
די שיד – די קלוגע, שלעפּערישע שיד.

אַ פֿאַלן האָט דערוואַכט אין מיר.  
איך זע אַפֿילו נישט דעם גרונט פֿון תּהום.  
אויף זיינע הענט דער אויבערשטער ט'מסתּם פֿאַרהאַלטן מיר,  
ווייל ער איז אייביק,  
ווי דער גערויש פֿון אַ פּאַגראָם.

און אפֿשר וואַכט אין מיר די היץ,  
וואָס שוידערט מיך אַ גאַנצע נאַכט,  
און אפֿשר איז דאָס דער לעצטער בליץ,  
וואָס האָט פֿאַרמאַסטן זיך איבער מיין דאָך.

און אויב אַזוי –  
וועל איך נאָך אין די לעצטע וויילעס,  
ביז וואַנען ס'איז נאָך וואַך מיין זיינען,  
וועל איך נאָך זאָגן שיר-המעלות  
צום ערשטן שטערן  
פֿון מאַרגיקן באַגינען.

## הבדלה

גאָט פֿון אַבֿרהם,  
 באַשאַף אונדז אַ צווייטן בראשית.  
 מעג קיין זון דאָרט ניט שיינען –  
 דאָס ליכט האָט אונדז סייווי פֿאַרראַטן.  
 מעג דער ווינט דאָרט ניט זינגען –  
 ער האָט מיט די דייטשן צוזאַמען געטריבן  
 אונדזער פֿאַלק צו די שחיטה-וואַרשטאַטן.  
 מעג קיין ים דאָרט ניט רוישן קיין גרינער –  
 ער האָט געזונקען די שיפֿן – די שפּענדלעך  
 מיט אונדזערע לעצטע אַנטרינער.  
 מעגן בערג דאָרט ניט רייסן צום הימל די שפיצן –  
 זיי האָבן דעם וועג ניט פֿאַרצאַמט פֿאַר די רוצחים,  
 אַ פּיצעלע קינד צו באַשיצן.  
 מיר זאָגן זיך אָפּ פֿון דער שיינקייט.  
 מיר זאָגן זיך אָפּ פֿון דער גבורה.  
 מיר זאָגן זיך אָפּ פֿון דער שירה.  
 מעג איינשטיין קיין יורש ניט לאָזן.  
 מיר זיינען אין חרם צוזאַמען  
 מיטן געטלעכן תּמים שפינאַזע.

באַשאַף אונדז אַ וועלט מיט אַ פּאַסיקל הימל,  
 און איין מאָל אַ יאָר זאָל אַ שטערן דאָרט שיינען,  
 און מאַכן הבדלה, און געטלעך פֿאַרטייטשן:  
 ס'איז אַ צווייטער בראשית,  
 אויסער וועלט פֿון די דייטשן,  
 אויסער חכמת-הדמים.  
 און עס וועלן די קינדער אונער פּאַסיקל הימל  
 ענטפֿערן: אָמן וָאָמן.

איך בין געפאלן און צעטראָטן,  
און יעדער הונט, וואָס לויפֿט פֿאַרבײַ, גיט מיך אַ ביס,  
נאָר סיקלאָפּט מיין האַרץ, גאָרט ביזן לעצטן אָטעם  
צום קוואַל צום אייביקן, וואָס איז נאָך אפֿשר זײַס.

אַן עוולה, וואָס דו קומסט ניט און דו זעצסט זיך ניט אַנידער  
בײַ סדרים אונדזערע מיט חמצדיקן ווייַן.  
מיר זינגען דאָרט אַזעלכע לאַנגווייליקע לידער,  
אַז דו אַליין וואָלטסט אפֿשר מציל זײַן.

אַפֿט ווילט זיך מיר, אַז דו זאָלסט ווידער קומען,  
בקפֿיצות־דרך, אויף זילבערנעם לבנה־גראָז,  
וואָלטסט ווי אַמאָל מיך ווידער מיטגענומען  
אין ליכטיקן מאַרשרוט פֿאַרוזוכן יעדער פּוס.

צי ביסטו דאָרט געווען?  
דאָרט... דאָרט ... אונטערן ביזן מויער?  
אין לאַנד פֿון פֿיין, אין היים פֿון בראָך?  
צי איז אויף זייער יום־טובֿדיקן טרויער  
די לאַטע גרעסער ווי אין מיטן וואָך?

עס שטיקן זיך אין האַלדז בײַ מיר אַזויפֿיל נעמען ...  
אַ קינד מיט בלאַנדע הערעלעך, געשאָרן.  
צי האָסטו זייער פּוס פֿאַרוזוכט?  
צי זינגען דינע ליפֿן ניט פֿאַרברענט געוואָרן?

עס שטיקן זיך אין האַלדז בײַ מיר אַזויפֿיל נעמען ...  
כִּהאַב מורא פֿרעגן דיך, און זאָג מיר גאַרניט,  
אויב ס'האַט עפעס זיך געטראָפֿן ...  
גיב א ריר דינע רחמידיקע ברעמען,  
פֿאַרלעש מיין לאַמפּ,  
און אויב עס איז צו דיר קיין בשורה ניט דערפֿלויגן,  
פֿאַרלעש מיין לאַמפּ  
און מאַך מיר צו די אויגן.



## א בריוו צו אליהו הנביא

אלטער בשורה־טרעגער, אליהו,  
 איך האָב פֿאַרלאָרן אַלע אַדרעסן,  
 שרייב איך איצט אַ בריוו צו דיר.  
 האָסט אַלטע פֿרינדשאַפֿט זיכער ניט פֿאַרגעסן,  
 ווען כ'פֿלעג דיר קינדווייז עפֿענען די טיר.

ניט איין מאָל דיך געפֿירט מיט ציטער און מיט תפֿילה  
 צום יום־טובֿדיקן טיש, צום פֿוס מיט וויין.  
 עס קען ניט זיין, זאָלסט איצט ניט וועלן אויסהערן  
 מיין ביטערע מגילה,  
 עס קען ניט זיין.

כ'האָב ליכטזיניק פֿאַרשניטן אַלע דינע שפורן  
 און אויך די ווייטקייט פֿון מיין הימל,  
 און אויך די וואַרעמקייט פֿון גלויבן.  
 עס שטייען מיינע לידער איצטער נאַקעטע, ווי הורן,  
 נאָר דינע מעשהלעך פֿאַרדעקן זיי ווי טויבן.

צווישן אונדז אַזעלכע פֿרעמדע תהומען זיינען אויפֿגעקומען,  
 איך האָב, זעט אויס, געגראָבן זיי אומזיסט.  
 איך שווער, איך האָב געוואָלט פֿאַרזייען זיי מיט בלומען,  
 ס'איז ניט מיין שולד, וואָס זיי זיינען פֿאַרשאַטן איצט מיט מיסט.

איך האָב געוואָלט דערגראָבן זיך צו זיסע קוואַלן,  
 פֿאַר זיך קיין טראָפֿן ניט גענומען,  
 ניט איינגעשלאָגן ערגעץ ניט פֿאַר זיך קיין סלופֿ.  
 דו האָסט איידל אויסגעפֿורעמט מיר מיין האַלדז און גומען,  
 ווי איידל דו פֿלעגסט טאָן פֿון פֿוס אַ זופֿ.

דו ביסט דער נביא פֿון רחמים און נקמה,  
 דיין פֿייערדיקער רייטוואָגן די וואַלקנס ברעכט,  
 דו ווייסט מיין האַרץ, איך האָב געפֿירט די בראַנע  
 אויף רייניקן די בייט פֿאַר גוטסקייט און פֿאַר רעכט.

אל חנוך,  
גיב פראָסטע בגדים אונדז,  
פֿון פֿאַסטעכער פֿאַר שאַף,  
פֿון שמידן בני דעם האַמער,  
פֿון וועש־וואַשער, פֿון פֿעל־שינדער,  
און נאָך מער געמיינעס.  
און נאָך איין חסד טו צו אונדז:  
אל חנוך,  
נעם צו פֿון אונדז די שכינה פֿון גאונות.

1945

## אל חנון

אל חנון,  
 קלייב אויס אן אַנדער פֿאַלק,  
 דערווילל.  
 מיר זײַנען מיד פֿון שטאַרבן און געשטאַרבן,  
 מיר האָבן ניט קיין תּפֿילות מער,  
 קלייב אויס אן אַנדער פֿאַלק,  
 דערווילל,  
 מיר האָבן ניט קיין בלוט מער  
 אויף צו זײַן אַ קרבן.  
 אַ מיִדבר איז געוואָרן אונדזער שטוב.  
 די ערד איז קאַרג פֿאַר אונדז אויף קבֿרים,  
 נישטאַ קיין קינות מער פֿאַר אונדז,  
 נישטאַ קיין קלאַג־ליד  
 אין די אַלטע ספֿרים.

אל חנון,  
 הייליק אן אַנדער לאַנד,  
 אן אַנדער באַרג.  
 מיר האָבן אַלע פֿעלדער שוין און יעדן שטיין  
 מיט אש, מיט הייליקן באַשאַטן.  
 מיט זקנים,  
 און מיט יונגע,  
 און מיט עופֿהלעך באַצאָלט  
 פֿאַר יעדן אות פֿון דײַנע צען געבאָטן.

אל חנון,  
 הייב אויף דײַן פֿייערדיקע ברעם,  
 און זע די פֿעלקער פֿון דער וועלט -  
 גיב זיי די גבֿואות און די יום־נוראים.  
 אין יעדן לשון פרעפלט מען דײַן וואָרט -  
 לערן די מעשים זיי,  
 די וועגן פֿון נסיון.

## הוספה

געקליבענע לידער פון קאדיע מאלאדאָווסקי וועלכע ווערן ציטירט אין אַט דעם רעפּעראַט.

אַלע טעקסטן לויט דער אויסגאַבע פֿון 1946, אָבער מיט מאַדערניזירטן אויסלייג.  
איבערגעדרוקט מיט פֿריינדלעכער דערלויבעניש פֿון בנימין ליטמאַן, פֿילאַדעלפֿיע.

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