

destruct. Only that engagement, that willingness to embrace one's biblical counterlife, would ensure that the Jewish journey went on forever.

Leonard Wolf's translation of "Abraham Takes Itzik to the Sacrifice" is published in The World According to Itzik: Selected Poetry and Prose (Yale, 2002) and reproduced here courtesy of the Fund for the Translation of Jewish Literature.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (ז"ל) and Harold Hassenfeld (ז"ל).

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Tears that Unveil

Rabbi Matthew Goldstone, Adjunct Instructor in Rabbinic Literature, JTS

Deep down, deep down inside, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep. For at the very moment they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye.

—Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind* (126)

“And God became seen before him... and he lifted up his eyes and saw...” (Gen. 18:1-2). Our parashah begins with a visual encounter; God appears and Abraham sees. The motif of sight subtly underscores this week's reading: Abraham asks his visitors if he has found grace in their eyes (18:3), Lot sees two angelic visitors (19:2) and suggests that he has found favor in their eyes (19:19), and Abraham lifts up his eyes to see the ram that will take the place of his son Isaac as a sacrifice.

However, the visual witnessing we find in these rich chapters is not always so uplifting. The men of Sodom who seek to sexually harass Lot's visitors are struck with blindness (19:11). Lot's wife looks back upon the destruction of her home and is transformed into a pillar of salt (19:26). Sarah saw something displeasing about Ishmael, forcing Abraham to banish him and his mother. And finally, Abraham lifted his eyes to see the place where he would have to kill his own son (22:4).

In these biblical moments of attempted assault, destruction, hatred, and death, the text conceals the pain felt by these biblical characters. But we feel the presence of their veiled tears concealed behind the words. Their silent weeping reverberates with us as we look around at the darkness of our own times. Hatred, violence, and death are no strangers for many of us. Yet these stories also tell of how these figures endured. Lot and his daughters continue on after the destruction of their home, Hagar and Ishmael survive in the wilderness, and both Abraham and Isaac return home together. Perhaps we too can allow our tears not to blind us, but to clear our vision to see the possibility of building a better world.

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email, visit www.jtsa.edu/torah



Vayera 5777

וִירָא תשע"ז



Itzik's Journey

Dr. David G. Roskies, Sol and Evelyn Henkind Professor of Yiddish Literature, JTS

He was our Bob Dylan and Dylan Thomas: a Yiddish troubadour and hard-drinking lyric poet who wrote in regular rhymes and rhythms about the lives and unrequited loves of the downtrodden. His name was Itzik Manger, and the Bible was the book he loved most in the world, especially those parts that told an inside, personal story.

Starting in 1935, he began to capture them in verse by breaking down each biblical episode into a three-part drama. The capstone of Manger's love affair with the Bible, perhaps not surprisingly, is the poem reserved for his namesake, Isaac. In this he joined a proud line of Jewish writers named Saul (Tchernichowsky), David (Pinsky, Frischmann), and (Yokheved Bat-) Miriam, who also wrote of their biblical counterlives. Manger had no need to tread lightly across the biblical story: so far as he was concerned, he, his parents, and his grandparents were the biblical story. No need for him to reimagine the ancient Near Eastern setting: eastern Galicia was the biblical setting. No need to study Scripture and midrashic commentary because Yiddish language and folklore were the sacred texts.

So the shtetl imaginary, the East Galician shtetl arrested in time at the turn of the twentieth century, became the setting for Manger's remarkably compressed retelling of the Akedah; the most famous biblical narrative was recast into nine four-line stanzas that rhymed exactly the way that Yiddish folksongs do:

Abraham Takes Itzik to the Sacrifice

The gray light of the dawning
Touches the earth with dawn.
Eliezer, the loyal servant, puts
The black team's harness on.
Taking the child in his arms,
Old Abraham shuts the door.
Over his ancient roof, there gleams
A blue and pious star.

“Up, Eliezer”—the whip rings out,
The road has a silvery look.

“Sad and lovely,” the poet says,
 “Are the roads of the Holy Book.”

The only real landscape, for Manger, is a poetic landscape. So the biblical *baboker*, “early next morning” (Gen 22:3), Manger renders as *demerung*, a German loan word that means twilight or dawn, to signal the ideal state of transition, from darkness to light. With midrashic sleight of hand, the poet turns the nameless two servants into Eliezer, the loyal servant whom Abraham addresses in Ukrainian, and the Middle Eastern asses are replaced with two ordinary horses. The blue morning star shining above Abraham and Sarah’s house adds another domestic touch. If, at this point, the patriarchal landscape (“old” and “ancient”) seems both “sad and lovely,” as Act I draws to a close, our primary sense of the scene surely comes down on the side of loveliness.

But how lovely can it be if Mother Sarah has been left behind to guard an empty cradle? Once the trip has begun, the die is cast.

The graying willows on the way
 Run to the house again
 To see if his mother weeps beside
 The cradle of her son.

“Daddy, where are we going now?”
 “To Lashkev—to the Fair.”
 “Daddy, what are you going to buy
 At Lashkev—at the Fair?”

“A soldier made of porcelain,
 A trumpet and a drum;
 A piece of satin to make a dress
 For mother who waits at home.”

Abraham feels his eyes grow moist
 And the steel knife pressing, where
 It scalds the flesh beneath his shirt ...
 “It’s going to be some Fair.”

Absent Mommy, it’s up to the father to allay his son’s fears. Every Jewish parent knows the lullaby “Daddy’s Away at the Fair,” as surely as every Jewish parent has read and reread the story of Abraham taking Isaac to the Akedah. The one adds pathos and tension to the other because something has already gone wrong: in every Yiddish lullaby it is the mother who stays home with the child, and here, not only does the cradle stand empty, but Daddy has even taken the innocent child along on the fateful journey. Why—and where are they really headed? The two middle stanzas of the poem, moreover, don’t read like a mere paraphrase of your standard lullaby. They read like a desperate dialogue. “It’s going to be some Fair,” the father mumbles under his breath as he presses the sacrificial knife to his chest.

The father-son dialogue that lies at the heart of the second act is suffused with death and foreboding, exactly as in the celebrated German Romantic poem “Erlking,” Goethe’s ballad of a father driving his only son into the hands of death. Reread as a ballad, the Akedah is the most fateful journey of all, for it is the archetypal Jewish narrative.

“Eliezer, stop at the water mill.
 Stop for a while and wait.
 Isaac, my son, and I will go
 Alone from there on foot.”

Eliezer sits on the driver’s seat
 And casts an anxious look.

“Sad and lovely,” the poet says,
 “Are the roads of the Holy Book.”

By now, the balance has measurably shifted to the sad side of the scale. Sad, but by no means terrifying, either in comparison to the biblical account of the sacrifice or in comparison to Goethe’s “Erlking.” Manger’s midrash domesticates God’s terrible test of faith and Goethe’s sexual and supernatural overtones. The Yiddish midrash ends not with the angel staying the executioner’s hand or with the Erlking claiming his innocent victim, but with three benign figures: Old Abraham, determined to carry out God’s difficult command; the loyal Ukrainian servant, Eliezer, who is quietly apprehensive; and the poet, who has every reason to believe that the story will end well.

What, then, is the road that Itzik must travel? It is a road in which Scripture and life are one, in which the natural landscape is suffused with the biblical past—not only because “the poet” says so, but also because that fusion is inscribed into the Yiddish language itself. In Yiddish, the (Slavic) word for road is *shlyakh*, which, as Manger was the first to discover, makes a perfect rhyme with *Tanakh*. With this Slavic-Hebraic rhyme, Manger marks the end of the poem’s first and last acts. (Alas, even the master translator Leonard Wolf cannot capture this in English. Like classical midrash, Manger’s must be read in the original as well.) Throw in the *demerung*, the magical moment of lyric dawning, and you have a perfect triptych of the Slavic landscape, the Hebrew Bible, and the poetic imagination.

Thanks to Goethe’s inspiration, Manger was able to reread the Akedah as a journey. The very title (in the Yiddish) presages a journey—“*Avrom Ovinu fort...*” means “Abraham the Patriarch travels...”—as does the fourfold repetition of the word “road.” On this road, little Itzik, always the child, became Manger, the Bible-intoxicated Jew. Henceforth, the Bible—not German Romanticism, not the ballad revival—was to be his muse, but he would circle back to the Bible through his dual commitment to modern poetry and Jewish continuity. A Jewry that did not engage its own myth as preserved in Scripture, he would write in 1939, was doomed to self-