

Pearls From Tears
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The poet whose work about the Shoah is closest to my heart is Irena Klepfisz. She was brought up by a single mother who survived the Holocaust after Irena's father died fighting for the Jewish people. Mother and daughter emigrated to the US after the war and lived together in New York until Irena grew up. Here are a pair of poems that try to make sense of the incomprehensible:

Bashert

These words are dedicated to those who died.

These words are dedicated to those who died
because they had no love and felt alone in the world
because they were afraid to be alone and tried to stick it out because they could not ask
because they were shunned
because they were sick and their bodies could not resist the disease
because they played it safe
because they had no connections
because they had no faith
because they felt they did not belong and wanted to die

These words are dedicated to those who died
because they were loners and liked it
because they acquired friends and drew others to them
because they took risks
because they were stubborn and refused to give up
because they asked for too much

These words are dedicated to those who died
because a card was lost and a number was skipped
because a bed was denied
because a place was filled and no other place was left

These words are dedicated to those who died
because someone did not follow through
because someone was overworked and forgot
because someone left everything to God
because someone was late
because someone did not arrive at all
because someone told them to wait and they just couldn't wait any longer

These words are dedicated to those who died

because death is a punishment
because death is a reward
because death is the final rest
because death is eternal rage

These words are dedicated to those who died

Bashert

and:

These words are dedicated to those who survived

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because their second grade teacher gave them books
because they did not draw attention to themselves and got lost in the shuffle because they knew
someone who knew someone else who could
help them and bumped into them on a corner on a Thursday
afternoon
because they played it safe
because they were lucky

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because they knew how to cut corners
because they drew attention to themselves and always got
picked
because they took risks
because they had no principles and were hard

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because they refused to give up and defied statistics
because they had faith and trusted in God
because they expected the worst and were always prepared
because they were angry
because they could ask
because they mooched off others and saved their strength
because they endured humiliation
because they turned the other cheek
because they looked the other way

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because life is a wilderness and they were savage
because life is an awakening and they were alert
because life is a flowering and they blossomed
because life is a struggle and they struggled

because life is a gift and they were free to accept it

These words are dedicated to those who survived

Bashert

The Yiddish word "bashert" cannot be translated by any single English word. It means something like "fated" or "preordained", but it is part of a world view in which any individual person is part of a vast eternal plan and the idea of a vast eternal plan exists in the mind of the individual person and all those persons who participate in the culture. It is often used in the sense of object choice. When one falls in love it is because it is bashert. The person with whom one falls in love is one's bashert. Bashert is a choice with no choice. It is a threat; nothing you can do can prevent it. It is a consolation; nothing you could have done could have avoided it. It implies forgiveness. It forgives the victims and it forgives the survivors. None of the choices people make is without consequences. But if all is bashert none of those choices is decisive, nothing could have been done either to insure or to doom the doer. This pair of poems, by ironically showing the same ideas as explaining why people died and why they lived, together elucidate the word "bashert".

The poet is wrestling here with what every child of survivors suffers with as she tries to understand why her parent survived when the rest of her family did not. Was her father irresponsible for sacrificing his life rather than protecting his wife and child? Was her mother culpable for hiding with her baby rather than fighting for her people? The world asks the same questions. Why? How can one make sense of this experience? Theologians ask: Where was God while this was happening? Moralists ask: Was it ruthless action that allowed them to survive? Was it selfishness? Was it sticking with one's friends or family? Was it being selfless and feeling worthy? The questions the poem grapples with turn on the immediate questions for us now: should we honor the dead or despise their weakness?; should we honor the survivors or condemn their complicity with the death machine? Her paired poems answer: There is no difference between those who died and those who lived, no difference in the beliefs, thoughts, actions, only a difference in something outside of them. The difference is only in what is bashert. Both the dead and the survivors are honorable. Both contribute to the present, to the poet, and through her to the culture and to people who are victims of trauma in other times and places.

The last poem of hers that I feel sums up the loss of our people and of Yiddish culture is:

Etleke verter oyf mama-loshen/
A few words in the mother tongue

lemoshl: for example

di kurve: the whore
a woman who acknowledges her passions

di yidene the Jewess the Jewish woman
ignorant overbearing

let's face it: every woman is one

di yente the gossip the busybody
who knows what's what
and is never caught off guard

di lezbianke the one with
a roommate though we never used
the word

das veible the wife
or the little woman

in der heim at home
where she does everything to keep
yidishkeit alive

yidishkeit a way of being
Jewish always arguable

in mark where she buys
kartofl un khala
(yes potatoes and challah)

di kartofl the material counterpart of yidishkeit

mit tsibeles with onions
that bring tremn tzu di oygn
tears to the eyes when she sees
how little it all is
veyniker un veyiker
less and less

di khale braided
vi irh hor far dir khasene
like her hair before the wedding
when she was aza sheye meyd
such a pretty girl

di lange schvartze hor
the long black hair
di lange schvartze hor

a froy kholmt a woman
dreams ir ort oyf dre velt
her place in this world
und si hat moyre and she is afraid
so afraid of the words

kurve
yidene
yente
lesbianke
vaybl

zi kholmt she dreams
und zi hat moyre and she is afraid
ir ort
di velt
di heym
der mark

a maydle kholmt
a kurve kholmt
a yidene kholmt
a yente kholmt
a lesbianke kholmt

a vayble kholmt
di kartofl
di khala

yidishkait

zi kholmt
di hor
di lange schvartze hor

zi kholmt
zi kholmt
zi kholmt

She writes in two languages at once, alternating the Yiddish of her childhood and her feelings with the American English of her adulthood and of her readers. She has a mind formed in a Yiddish culture destroyed by the several forces of modernization, urbanization and most immediately and effectively by the Holocaust. As she speaks to the childhood figures embedded

in her soul in Yiddish, she teaches us her language. She will give us a few words in her "mother tongue." Mamaloshen is the time honored conventional way of referring to Yiddish, a language used by mothers talking to their babies and each other in a culture which used Hebrew for male religious tradition and used Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Czech, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Bulgarian and other languages in school, trade, professions and contact with the world. Mamaloshen was the language of intimacy, made precious by its being incomprehensible to those outside the home. Mamaloshen is the most personal of languages. If the poet is to express her inner self in the tradition of confessional lyric poetry, she must use mamaloshen. But if she is to communicate with a modern American audience, she cannot rely on our understanding this language. All she can do is try to teach us a few of the words of it that express her deepest fears and desires.

In this totally personal poem the poet looks at who she is and how she chose the life that chose her. She fits her own experience into a cultural context. By alternating the intimate Yiddish with the English of communication with the outer world, the poet brings us close. The poem begins mildly academic in tone: "Lemoshl, For example". This "for example" is a didactic device to suggest that what follows is only one part of a larger universe of meaning. She follows it with a slap. Her first definition "di khurve" is the whore, But it does not have the connotation that it has in English of a woman who exchanges sex for money, rather it connotes unbridled sexuality, a woman who wants and openly acknowledges her desire. Such a woman is denigrated and defined in contrast to "di yidene", the woman who takes her identity from "der yid", the man. But "di yidene" is also devalued, uneducated yet arrogant, she cannot learn. The alternative definitions of what it is to be a woman progress in a dire direction: "di yente" is an ironic term. It means gossip, but has an admiring ring to it. Derived from the Italian Gentile which has the same root as gentleman or gentlewoman, it implies social awareness, propriety and social effectiveness. Yet in Yiddish it also implies inquisitiveness, intrusiveness and obnoxious activity. The unspeakable version of woman is di lezbianke, the woman with another woman. And the last definition of woman, das veible is a term of endearment, a little wife. A woman can be one or more of these things, or can she? The poet demurs. Fear grips her. She is afraid of all of these words. She dreams, she has an inner life that does not fit with these words, nor with these cultural choices. The only role that does not mean being demeaned is that of the little wife. But the little wife must cut off her long black hair, give up her beauty, give up that inner self. If the role of the little wife is to become a provisioner, to busy herself with shopping, cooking and transmitting Yiddishkeit, it is not safe to be the little wife. With the Holocaust Yiddishkeit is over. The culture is gone. All she can do is dream and dream and dream.

The title of the poem and of the book in which it appears has a sense of nostalgia. No one but the super orthodox speaks Yiddish now. The world of those who speak it is no longer that of a vibrant secular Yiddish culture in which books on the Montessori Method or Mathematics could be published and read in Yiddish as they were in early twentieth century Poland and Lithuania. But the poem itself is not nostalgic. The poet does not want to give up her long black hair, her dreaming, or her poetry. She chooses to eschew that life. In her choice to write this poem she has chosen to keep the culture alive as it lives in her dreams, not in the daily life of pre-Holocaust time. She has turned the passive loss into an active rejection. The girl, the whore, the Jewish woman, the gossip, the lesbian, all dream. The veible can only dream of potatoes and beautiful bread. To be the wife is to submit, to lose one's hair and one's dreams, to be the submissive partner in a dominance-submission relationship. The poet chooses dreams, words, poetry; she

chooses being, a girl, a whore a Jewish woman, a gossip, a lesbian, a dreamer. She chooses language and adds a few Yiddish words to our vocabulary. She chooses; to choose is to honor and act on desire; to choose is to be.

As a young child--I was four in 1939-- I already heard of the terrible things going on in Europe. While the terrible things were happening there, my family was frantically trying to get enough money together to bring relatives to the United States. One came, cousin Aaron who had walked across Poland into Italy and gotten to a boat coming to America. This pink cheeked eighteen year old immediately enlisted in the army and soon went back, first to Africa, then to Italy and eventually to Germany. He sent me a treasure from Egypt. It was a camel skin bag decorated with green palm trees and improbably red camels tattooed onto the soft pale leather. He was my hero, but he came back from the war with stories even more horrible than the ones he told when he first came to us.

Then came "The Black Book of Polish Jewry" It had stories of the horrors that people perpetrated against people. The perpetrators were the German soldiers and their Polish accomplices; they were the Christians. We were the Jews. They killed us. They maimed, tortured and degraded us. We were hated, hunted, killed. How could I make sense of this? It has taken my whole lifetime so far, and I am not sure that I am done yet.

But poetry somehow metabolized the horrors and this is the function of witnessing, The poem that first served me in that way is Paul Celan's:

Death Fugue

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes there lies one unconfined
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes he writes when dusk falls to
Germany your golden hair Margerete he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing
he whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in the earth has them dig for a grave he commands us to strike up for the
dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown
we drink and we drink you
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes he writes when dusk falls to
Germany your golden hair Margarete your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes
there one lies unconfined

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing now and play he grabs at the iron
in his belt he waves it his eyes are blue jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on
for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown

we drink and we drink you
A man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents
He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from Germany he calls out more darkly
now stroke your strings then as smoke you will rise into air
then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined
Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue he strikes you with
leaden bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
he sets his pack onto us he grants us a grave in the air
he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master from Germany
your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

translated by Michael Hamburger

The contrast between the golden hair of the beloved and the ashen hair of the Jewish woman, gleam of gold alongside the ashes somehow makes a beautiful image, and it is all the more horrible for its beauty. How can such beauty describe such hatred, such cruelty and such inhuman preening/ It was only on later readings that I noticed that Margarete is the name of Faust's beloved, that he has her only by making a contract with the devil. So the master from Germany is a Faust, a man who has his Margarete only because he is willing to pay for her by selling his soul to the devil. And it was later still that I understood the name Shulamith as quintessentially Jewish, unlike the biblical names that many Protestants give their daughters, Shulamith is never used for Christian children. It has the further ironic connotation of Shalom:peace. The black milk is the smoke black air filled with the ashes of humans. And the sweetness and playfulness of the master from Germany as he calls for music, for his serpents and his dogs is the very essence of the fallen angel: the devil. The black milk smoke theme plays out musically as a fugue, swirling through the lines of the poem, enlarging the horror with the repetition and furthering the story with the variations as the theme is played over and over again. Klepfisz's "A Few Words in the Mother Tongue" echoes Celan in many ways The theme of the hair as female beauty and female sacrifice that provides the recurrent chorus for Celan happens as the unfolding narrative in Klepfisch's poem. The longing and desire speak the loneliness of each narrator, the perpetrator has the same longing as the child of the victim, the humanness of each touches the reader and hearer. The influence of irony and bitterness in the Celan poem attests to the poet's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to express what could not be contained and that led to his suicide. Klepfisch who was an infant during the Holocaust and experienced it mediated through the experience of her mother, has been able to use her art to sustain her life.

So what is psychoanalytic in all this? Irena Klepfisz's poems come out of the conflict between her feelings for her parents and her feelings about herself as the child of those parents. They are the triumphant integration of exquisitely painful contradictions Can I love the dead father who

fought for his people and died fighting? Can I love the living mother who preserved her life to nurture and protect mine? Can I choose the life of a poet rather than become the wife and mother that my Mother and my Mother-tongue and culture demand of me? These poems outline the formation of a self struggling to preserve her own desire and inner life. They document from the inside what we try to help all of our patients to do. They show a person constructing a life that meets her desire but honors the demand of family and society at the same time. They show someone engaged in the endless task of constructing a life of freedom within the bounds of conscience just as all of our patients and we ourselves do every day. Influenced by experience, the insistence of desire cannot be separated from its direction. As a lesbian, Klepfisz's desire is unmentionable in her native language and culture. When she says "di lezbianke the one with a roommate/ though we never used / the word"

she dares to use the word she and her mother and her social group never used. In her daring is her identification with her heroic father. Such daring trumps victimhood, asserts power and raises the person's self esteem. An answer to the Holocaust, it is also an answer to exclusion, marginalization and the shame of being hated. By putting desire into words, a person is empowered, central to the social group- in this instance the readers of the poem and in the instance of analysis the social group as psychoanalytic pair .

In contrast to the raw excruciating pain of the "Black Book" and the tamed horror of "Death Fugue", Klepfisz's poetry is hopeful, an elegy that is a note to the future, A future exists and is worth addressing. Someone will take heart from this witnessing and retelling. I think embodying her loss and grief in these poems is an act fully as protective of others as was her father's act of disabling the machine gun. It is choosing a larger posterity, the posterity of her readers and students rather than a biological posterity. It is choosing dreams over genes, and love over dominance-submission. The idea of identification covers more than identification with the aggressor or authority. It also stands for emulating and internalizing what one admires. In the instance of Klepfisz, it is a commitment unto death and above all a commitment to life.

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