

Poetry Selection



Ancient Hebrew

Aviya Kushner

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How close the villain is to the harp!
Two vowels separate them, just as two small
letters separate the harp from the generous.

Of course no one learns languages like this,
Because it's considered wrong, ridiculous,
But why that is – that's what I want to know.
Yes the villain can be as mesmerizing as the harp,
Yes evil can seem generous, in clever disguise. Yes all
of them have their own rhythms, and all are close:
Oh who has not felt the tingling of mischief and crime,
sweet music of generosity and still, the lingering pluck
of am-I-evil, am-I-bad-beneath-it-all?

I am giving and villainous and musical.
In my body I carry clarity and crime and the harp.

Exile for the Sake of Redemption

Yehoshua November (first published on Chabad.org)

The way a teacher, standing at the blackboard,

chalk in hand,

suddenly withdraws into himself

to follow the comet tail

of a thought

more profound than he has ever known,

then, after a long pause,

opens his eyes and returns

to the world

of his classroom

to share his discovery

with his students

is the way, the mystics say,

God, seemingly, recedes

back into Himself

until, suddenly, after many years,

redemption comes,

and a Divine light--

more radiant than the world

has ever known--

illuminates the universe

that thought it had been forsaken.

Three Turns of a Chassidic Microscope

Yehoshua November (first published in *Another Chicago Magazine*)

1) Solid, tangible world. 2) World as mere
surface, overlay atop Divine speech.

3) World entirely erased,
Ein Sof light flooding the finite
shoebox of existence. Three turns
of a Chassidic microscope.

Or, perhaps, more like the optometrist's chart
seen through three lenses:

*Can you read the last line for me? Discern the edges
of objects? And now? Do you see the world
as anything more than a translucent sheet lifted
by Divine breath? And how about now?
No world whatsoever, only light?*

And then a fourth lens.

The Chassidic masters call it *Atzmus*
or Essence. Solid world remains but,
simultaneously, *Ein Sof* light all that exists.

And how about now?

Do you see the impossible paradox?

Distant Water: Permutations

Jake Marmer

machloket l'shem shamaim

an argument for the sake of heaven

argument for truths' sake

its own *sake*

drink *sake*

partition the name

by naming the world above

“distant water”

and naming yourself “pet puddle”

the contradiction's distance itself is all that there is

and for god's sake, an argument, *over there*

an argument inside the liquid name of god

it rains so hard it feels the sky collapsed

on your head

you're unified you're a name without

an umbrella an embryo without origin, in the rain

you drink it –

what else is there to do but drink

your *sake* like it was god itself

that poured it

A Moment with Kasha While the American Medal Shines

Jake Marmer

In America, when people try to get to know each other, they ask: what do you do? You know who's who by the how: they make a living. So, instead, some very thoughtful people here ask: can you please share your story with us? And so the two questions shine like two sides of the same fucking medal: mazel tov! Welcome to the USA!

I know, I know: I'm being a curmudgeon. Polite people being polite, your story – why all the fuss? Please, reader, what can any of us expect of each other – an ecstatic soul-union? in place of small talk? with everyone?

What facts and circumstances of our lives can we tell each other to really know each other?

The Biblical story of Abraham starts with the call to get the move on.

...But Abraham, can you please share your story with us? What do you do for living, Abraham? I am my story the most in leaving it, he might have answered, in not wanting to piece the past together.

The voice, he might have answered, is the real center of the story. It is alive and thus inconsistent, and as you begin to learn to follow it, to love and fear it, to diagnose it and speak back to it, it tells you to get going, to leave, to get some blur back on. That voice is the real center around which the circumference of the spirit can finally unspin itself. The voice is the only story that's worth telling.

“Where you from?” is a heinous question, undertones tolling like bells: “If you're not from here, why are you?”

There is an iconic scene in Isaac Babel's *Odessa Tales*. The rising star of the gangster world, Benya Krik, approaches an old boss Froyim Grach about joining the business, and Froyim asks: “Who are you, where are you coming from, and what is this air you're breathing?”

Froyim's questions are fresh with movement. Where you are coming from, which is to say, not only are you on the move, but so is the place you came from, it also keeps walking as you're, keeps changing its airs, its name, its own direction, and you're walking not further and further away from it, but inside of it or within it.

Krik answers Grach laconically: “Let's not shmear kasha on the table. Just try me out.” It is a ritualistic response, a bugged out blessing formula. Where I am coming from is the place where kasha stays in the pot. Where table is a map. “Try me out,” is what god says to Abraham, without specifying the circumstances, exact location, or the date.

The year I was born, they discovered a crater on Mercury, and named it after Dostoyevsky. I am certain it is filled with billowing, noxious gas.

Benya Krik was no regular gangster but the King of Gangsters.

My grandfather told me that our great-great-uncle, whose name we don't remember, was a close associate of Mishka Yaponchik, a real-life figure Benya's character is based on. We don't have rabbis in our family, no geniuses – but we have this one nameless gangster, a legend's sidekick, a drunken and unruly Jewish tough guy from our tiny shtetl. But if you could only see the way my grandfather's eyes lit up, chest barreled out, fingers spread when he'd tell me about this uncle. The stories poured themselves out, without prior contact: even I can see the man sitting in his buggy, facing backwards, towards the shtetl he was riding out of, towards Isaac Babel's gaze, towards the edge of the book that is the backroad of my history.

Describing his encounters with Isaac Babel, Viktor Shklovsky remembered: Babel was “soft-spoken, quietly-regal, fierce in art... hunched, small, tall-chested, and looked like an egg”.

I come from poachers of history, scramblers of language, who, on borrowed or stolen time, survived history's reign for a joke, who got going because inside the sound of their own voice they heard sobs of those who've come before them.

Who is watching over us all, reader?

The first day I showed up at my new American school, it was for the pre-season soccer scrimmage. My new teammate greeted me: “What's up?” I looked up.

Try me, Benya Krik said to Froym Grach, staring all the while upward, at the reader, not unlike yourself. Try me, taste the language. Let's stop shmearing the kasha.