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“Ethics in Extremis in The Warsaw Ghetto Writings of Yitskhok Bernshteyn”

Sven-Erik Rose, University of California, Davis

PLEASE NOTE: *I provide these quotations – transliterated Yiddish and my rough working translations into English—in case anyone might be curious about a quote from my talk and want to take a look. Don't feel obliged to study these quotes if not! Also, **please don't circulate—as I said, these are rough working translations only** (suggestions for improvement welcome!). -- Sven-Erik*

From “Dos moykhes fun Mendeles shafung” [The essence of Mendele’s oeuvre]:

“To zayt mir moykhl: undzer heyliker barg is sinay, un af sinay hot zikh getlekhe sheynkeyt bavizn durkh etishe gezetsn, durkh sotsyale gezetsn, vos shafn a gerektik erdish lebn.”

“Well, excuse me: our holy mountain is Sinai, and on Sinai divine beauty revealed itself through ethical laws, through social laws that establish a just earthly life”

From “Vi azoy hat der malkhume oysbrukh gevirkt af di psikhik fun yidishn mentshn” [How the outbreak of the war has affected the Jewish person’s psyche]

“The destruction and wreckage haven’t spared the wealthy echelons. The devastating firebombs made no distinction between palace and attic room.”

“Der khurbn un di tsesterung hobn nisht oysgemitn di raykhe shtufn. Di tseshternde un brenbombes hobn nisht gemakht keyn untershid tvishn palats un boydem-shtibl.”

“Der mentshliker egoizm, vos hot gegloybt in der almekhtikeyt fun gepantserte kases un seyfn hot bakumen a toyt-klop.”

“Human egoism, which had believed in the all-powerfulness of armored lockboxes and safes, suffered a death-knell.”

“es helft nisht keyn fermegn in teg fun tsorn un tsdoke ratevet fun toyt.”

“no fortune helps in days of wrath and charity rescues [presumably one and others] from death”

“Es iz dershitert gevorn der gloybn in egl-hazohev. Men hot gezen, az der opgot iz hilfloz.”

“Faith in the golden calf has been shaken. One has seen that the idol is helpless.”

“A naye velt hot zikh far di dozike entplekt: di velt fun noentn un di velt fun nisht gezetikte primitive baderfenishn vi hunger, kelt. Vi farshemte un bali-tsuves zeyen oys di dozike mentshn. Epes zenen vaykher gevorn zeyere gezikht-shtrikhn, a funk fun beserer mentshlikhkeyt hot zikh bavizn in zeyere oygn.” (ARG 1210 Ring I 6000012)

“A new world was revealed to them: the immediately proximate world and the world of basic needs like hunger and cold. They appeared ashamed and like bali-tsuves. Their faces acquired slightly softer features, and a spark of better humanity shone in their eyes.”

People fled the fire and destruction via a thousand roads, and:

“Der oysgeshtrennter himl iber zeyere kep hot zey farbridert, di shutfesdike tsore hot zey tsuzamengebrakht—mentsh tsu mentsh. Es zenen ayngefaln mekhitses.”

“The starry sky above their heads made brothers of them; the shared misfortune brought them together, person to person. Barriers fell away.”

“Di tragishtste mesholim fun amolikh profet un fun a hayntsaytikn musar-prediger zenen gevorn a virklekhkayt. Der toyt mit zayn unrokhmonesdikn [sic] serp hot farshnitn kinder fun eltern un eltern fun kinder. Fartilikt man un froy.”

“The most tragic illustrations of a prophet of old and of a contemporary musar preacher have become reality. Death with its merciless scythe has cut children from parents and parents from children. Annihilated husbands and wives.”

“A idilye fun hunger” [An Idyl of hunger] (Iekoved shavues 5701)

Iz es a geshikhte vegn hunger un vegn heymlozikeyt. Iz geshtorbn der man un zayne tsvey zin. Di eynzame froy Nome kert zikh tsurik in ir geboyrn-land un di muabishe shnirn viln ir nisht farlozn. Rut geyt avek mit ir, baheft zikh mit Nomen af gutn un shlekhtn goyrl. Ez es shoyn a dertseylung nisht bloyz vegn hunger un heymlozikeyt, nor oykh vegn menshlekher trayshaft. Hunger un heymlozikeyt vern a probir-shteyn far mentshlekhe trayshaft. –Umgluk ruft aroys di baderfenish fun sotsyalen hilf. Rut geyt nokh di shniters un zamelt zangn. Boaz nemt Rutn unter zayn shuts un hot mit ir khasene. Di dozike libe, vos iz geboyrn in umgluk vert fun got gebensht: in an optsveyg fun zeyere kinder vert geboyrn der kenig Dovid. – a vunderlikhe dertseylung vegn hunger un vegn heymlozikeyt, vos zenen farvandlt gevorn in mentshlekhe trayshaft un in sotsyalen hilf un oysgegangen in libshaft un gebensht gevorn fun himl. Tsi iz es nisht a symbol, az hunger un heymlozikeyt darfn oysgeyn in trayshaft fun mentsh tsu mentsh, in shuts, in libshaft? Dos shvere lebn shtetl far [illegible] un shaft di meglekhkeyt far groyser tugend. Ruth farlozt nisht Nomen in der groyser noyt un Boez git shuts der eynzamer froy. Umgluk git a gelegnheynt far etishe maysim, umgluk trogt in di faltn fun zayn boged groyse tugend. (ARG 1210 Ring I 6000031 [p.29]).

It is a story of famine and homelessness. The man and his two sons died. The solitary woman Naomi returns to the country of her birth and her Moabite daughters-in-law don't want to leave her. Ruth goes with her, ties herself to Naomi whether their fate be good or bad. It is a tale not only

about famine and homelessness but also about human loyalty. Hunger and homelessness become a touchstone for human loyalty—misfortune elicits the need for social aid. Ruth walks behind the reapers and gathers ears of grain. Boaz takes Ruth under his wing and marries her. That love, born in calamity, is blessed by God: King David is born in one of the branches of their children. — A wonderful tale about hunger and homelessness, which are transformed into human solidarity and social aid ending in love and being blessed by heaven. Is this not a symbol that hunger and homelessness must lead to loyalty between people, to protection, to love? Life’s difficulties present [illegible] and create the possibility for great virtue. Ruth does not abandon Naomi in her great need. And Boaz lends protection to the solitary woman. Calamity offers an occasion for ethical deeds; calamity carries great virtue in the folds of its garment.

“Der Kelmer Magid”

Tsi gloybt ir nisht in batsolung? Tsi gloybt ir nisht, az far di zind fun sdoym kumt a regn fun fayer fun himl, az zind brengt af zikh a mabl, az zind brengt farlendung, mide keneged mide, a mestl far a mestl? Ir gloybt nisht in genem? Ir, vos geyt arum iber di gasn fun Varshe tsh’a [1941 א״תש״א], ir gloybt nisht in genem? Oder gloybt ir in genem far andere un nisht far zikh? Ir kluger [sic], ratsyionalistn, apikorsim, vos gloybt nisht in genem, vos fremde laydn tun aykh nisht vey, vos ir vert nisht vanzinik, ven ir tret iber vegn geplasterte mit Kindeshe sheydlen. Hert, ir ruike un zikhene un vert umruik: es kumt a mageyfe undz tsu farlendn, tsu fartilikn. Yeder blutiker shpay fun di farhungerte, yeder hoykh fun zeyere fartserte leyber, yede oysdamfung fun blut un markh un di klole, vos geyt fun zeyere leyber in der shtil un dos krikhdike gebet afn kol veln ontsindn a tsorn. Hunger, vos vert azoy farvorlozt, vert farveremt un farvandlt in a serp, vos shnaydt orem un raykh. Di batsolung shteyt far undzere tirn. Dos geshpens [sic!], vos verkt-man un froy, ying un alt, orem un raykh— mide keneged mide, a mestl far a mestl.

Don’t you believe in retribution? Don’t you believe that for the sins of Sodom a rain of fire will come from the sky, that sins call forth a flood, that sins call forth annihilation, *mide keneged mide*, measure for measure? You don’t believe in hell [genem]? You who walk the streets of Warsaw in 1941, you don’t believe in *genem*? Or do you believe in *genem* for others but not for yourself? You clever ones, rationalists, *apikorse*m, who don’t believe in *genem*, who are not pained by the suffering of others, who don’t go mad when you walk over streets paved with children’s skulls. Hear, calm and assured people and be disquieted: a plague is coming to destroy us, to annihilate us. The bloody spit from the starving, every breath from their wasted bodies [...], every vapor emitted from their blood and marrow; the curse said silently by their bodies and the creeping prayer they say aloud **will ignite wrath**. When so neglected, hunger becomes infested with maggots and is transformed into a scythe that cuts poor and rich. Retribution is at our doors. The relentless specter--man and woman, young and old, poor and rich—*mide keneged mide*—measure for measure.

Vu nemt men dem kelmer magid, vos zol varfn far aykh pakhed, vi a vergndike shtrik iber heldzer, vos zol makhn tsugeyn farshteynerte hertser, vos zol mit tsvangen bay aykh aroystsien dem bashlus tsu teyln zikh mitn letstn bisl fun ayer moyl mit dem hungeriken, vos zol aykh batsvingen dem bashlus tsu farvandlen in maysem? Vu nemt men dem beyzn shtrengn yid, dem kelmer magid, vos zol oyfshoydern di gevisns, vos zol aykh bavizn a tsveytn medor fun genem, vos zayn nomen iz:

batsolung far hunger-toyt fun brider, ven der ershter medor —hunger – iz nisht genugend? Vu nemt men a kelmer magid, vos zol aykh tserbrekhn, keday ir zolt gants vern?

Where can you find the Kelmer Maggid who would cast terror over you, like a choking rope around your throats, who would melt your stone hearts, who would extract from you with tongs the resolution to share your last bit of food with the hungry, who would compel you to decide to act. Where can one find the stringent angry Jew, the Kelmer Maggid, who shall make consciences shudder, who shall show you another realm of hell, namely retribution for the deaths of brothers by starvation, when the first realm—famine—is not sufficient? Where can you find a Kelmer Maggid who would break you to make you whole?

“Varshe, ה'תש"א h'tsh'a (poeme)"/ [Warsaw, 5701 [1941] (poem)]

Varshe, du brenst un blendst vi mit eydl-shteyner, mit shkorbut un shkhin, vos blit af mentshlekhe ponimer un af leyber farpeynikte. Varshe, du bizt a mizbeyekh far hilfloze un a lebediker denkmol far dem sotn, a denkmol fun geloshe gevisns. Varshe, du bizt groys un zindik, bizt peyn un umglik!

Warsaw, you glare and dazzle as if with precious stones, with scurvy and boils that blossom on human faces and on tortured bodies. Warsaw, you are an altar for the helpless and a living memorial to Satan, a memorial to extinguished consciences.¹ Warsaw, you are vast and sinful; you are pain and misfortune!²

Varshe! Di flamendike nekht fun september zenen geven groylekh un sheyn. Haynt, in helft fun 1941 hot hunger koshmar geboyrn un koshmar hot af brokh-shtul umzin gevunden. Un umzin hot mentshlekhe hertser farshteynert un es geyen um in dayne gasn mentshlekhe khurves un oysgeloshene gevisns. Es zenen oyfgeshtelte mizbeyekhes af dayne gasn un es vern karbones oyfgebrakht fun mentshlekhe gufim, vos faln in di tsentoyznter untern hunger-meser. Un af mizbeyekhes andere kumt far a shvarts-shabes fun geyster bay mentshlekhe gevisns af eybik farloshn. A vakbanalye-tants, an umziner, vi far Ashtores [עשתרות], arum zatn tish fun genus. --

Warsaw! The blazing nights of September were terrifying and beautiful. Today, in the middle of 1941, hunger has spawned nightmares, and nightmares have spun senselessness, and senselessness has turned human hearts to stone. Your streets are haunted by human ruins. And sacrifices are made of human bodies that fall by the tens of thousands under the knife of hunger. And at other altars there transpires a black sabbath of spirits in human consciences forever extinguished. A crazed Bacchanalian orgy, as if for Ashtoreth, around a lavish table of indulgence [genus].

“Kidesh hashem”

Mir lekhtsn nokh sheynkeyt fun payn un fun laydn fun eygenem bashlus. Mir lekhtsn nokh gvure fun leybn-harts, vos bafelt zikh aleyh af di kni zikh tsu shteln far a heyliktum, far epes vos iz hekher

¹ In the version of this text he published in his 1954 anthology of Warsaw ghetto writings, *Tvishn lebn un toyt*, Ber Mark omits “a memorial to extinguished consciences” [a denkmol fun geloshene gevisns].

² Mark changes Bernstheyn’s “umglik” to “umkum.”

fun eygenem lebn. Mir benkn nokh sheynkeyt fun gvure, nokh hod [הוד] un tifore [תפארה] fun martirertum, fun frayen oysval.

Vayl undz hot me keyn oysval nisht gegeben!!

We thirst for the beauty of pain and suffering from one's own resolve. We thirst for the heroism of the lionhearted who order themselves to their knees in the service of holiness, of something higher than one's own life. We thirst for the beauty and heroism, the grandeur and glory of martyrdom, of free choice. [...] Because we were not given a choice!!

“Yom Kiper”

Varshe! Es iz in dir itst an eybiker yom kiper! Es brenen gufim un es tsankn neshomes. Es zaynen mentshn yortsayt-likht avekgeshtelt nokh zayere fargangene lebens. Iber dayne hayzer un iber dayne vent hoybn zikh tsum himl vogn un vogshaln un es vegt zikh dayn goyrl: zoykhe tsi khayev? – Dayne kateygers geyn in shvartse kemares un greytn zikh tsu dayn yoym-hadin un keyn saneyger iz far dir nisthto! – Hilflozikeyt iz dayn saneyger, onmakht, nebekhdikayt un aropfal. – Veynt aropfal un nebekhdikayt, makhtloz: tsi kon men hilflozikeyt mishpetn?

Warsaw, it's eternally Yom Kippur in you now! Bodies are aflame and souls sputter. [...] Over your buildings and walls, measures and scales rise to heaven and your fate is being weighed: worthy or guilty? Your accusing angels go in black [...] and prepare for your day of judgment, and there is no defending angel there for you! – Helplessness is your defender, impotence, piteousness, and decline. Decline and piteousness cry, impotently: can you judge helplessness?

Shteyt a zindike eyde un klogt zikh: di aseres hadibres hobn mir lang shoyn fargesn. Der vint hot opgevisht di verter fun shteyn un di khsime zeyere in undzere hertser. Az mir gedenken zey nisht, di tsen gebotn. Es hot zey gots finger geshribn amol far mentshn, velkhe zaynen got enlekh – ober nisht far mentshn-verim. Mir gedenken zey nisht, mir farshteyen zey nisht. Es filt nisht dos harts dem tveytns vey. Es filt afile nisht dem eygenem vey. Farshtumt iz gevorn dos filn. Mir veysn shoyn nisht, vos dos iz leydn, vayl mir filn nisht. Veysn mir nisht, vos iz azoyns rakhomem un farshteyen nisht gerekhtikeyt. Mir hobn es fargesn. Mir hobn dos gevust in der frierdiker ekzistents, ven mir hobn gefilt, gezindikt mit bavustzayn un pkhire. Haynt zaynen mir verim. Toyznt mol nidriker vi avodem. Tsi hostu geshribn di tsen gebotn far verim? Mir tretn eyner dem andern, mir erhoybn zikh mit gayve eyner iber dem andern, haltn farmakht di shpaykhlers³, keday es zoln kholile keyn hungerike nisht genisn. Es greykhn nisht tsu undzer hazhgokhe di gezetsn, vos zaynen geshribn gevorn far mentshn, vos zaynen got enlekh. Mir zaynen mentshn-verim, tsi kon men undz mishpetn far nisht ophitn di gezetsn fun mentshn-geter? – Iber undzere moyern un vent hoybn zikh vog un vogshaln: zoykhe tsi khayev? Vign zikh di vogshaln vi in shturm vint—vign zikh un vern farshtumt.

A sinful community stands in self-reproach: we have long forgotten the ten commandments [di aseres hadibres]. The wind has wiped away the words from the stone and their imprints in our hearts. We can't remember them, the ten commandments [di tsen gebotn]. God's finger once wrote them for human beings, who resemble God—but not for human worms. We don't remember them, we don't understand them. One's heart doesn't feel another's pain. It doesn't even feel one's own

³ granary, storehouse, grain elevator

pain. Feeling has been silenced. We no longer know what suffering is because do not feel. We do not know what such a thing as compassion is and we do not understand justice. We have forgotten it. We knew it in our earlier existence, when we felt, sinned consciously and of our own free will [gezindikt mit bavustzayn un pkhire]. Today we are worms. A thousand times more wretched than slaves [avodem]. Or did you write the ten commandments for worms? We step on each other, we raise ourselves up one over others with pride, keep the storehouses locked so that, God forbid, none of the starving should partake [genisn]. Written for human beings who resemble God, the laws do not apply to us. We are human worms, so can we be judged for not upholding the laws of human gods? Above our walls rise measures and scales: worthy or guilty? The scales teeter as in a tempest – they vacillate and fall silent.