

נאָטע מאַנגער

## שפּראַכן

די קליינע פֿייגל אויפֿן דאַך  
גיבן-אַפּ צו גאָט אַ שוואַך –  
טשיריק, טשיריק, –  
אין זייער שפּראַך.

די גרינע זשאַבעס פֿונעם טײַך  
גיבן-אַפּ צו גאָט אַ שוואַך –  
קוואַ, קוואַ, קוואַ –  
אין זייער שפּראַך.

איך לייען יהוּאַשעס תנ"ך  
און גיב צו גאָט ברוך-הוא אַ שוואַך  
אין מאַמע-לשון –  
אונדזער שפּראַך.

## Yehoyesh and his Bible Translation

No single work—Shakespeare excepted—has so influenced language and modes of thought and feeling in the English-speaking world as has the 1611 King James Version of the Bible. Despite scores of translations since—more accurate, more accessible, often more readable—it continues to occupy a special place among monuments of the English language. Historians have stressed the impact of Martin Luther's Bible translation on German nationalism and culture. Many peoples throughout the world received their alphabets and their first written literary work when linguist-missionaries translated the Bible into their native language. (For some of the world's more than six thousand or so languages this process continues.) A handmaiden of Yiddish literature, present at its genesis, Bible translation has occupied a strong if no longer central position in Yiddish writing.

At a World Jewish Congress-sponsored conference in London around 1961, the alphabet scholar David Diringer and others suggested a project to retranslate the Hebrew Bible into a more modern Yiddish than that employed by Yehoyesh.

Nothing came of this idea (which has perhaps been raised at other times and in other forums as well), and it seems even less worthy of high priority today when Yiddish language maintenance is hard pressed. But the Yiddish world can rediscover what it does possess in the wide field of Bible translations and, especially, reacquaint itself with the masterwork of its kind, the Yiddish Tanakh of the poet Yehoyesh. Yehoyesh's translation, which is both learned and beautiful, was begun when the Yiddish world counted more than ten million potential readers and when Yiddish writing on both sides of the Atlantic overflowed with talent. It stands at the summit of Yiddish bible translations and retains the status of a classic. It drew the universal admiration of Yiddish writers and readers alike before the Shoa as reflected in numerous allusions to Yehoyesh in Yiddish poetry. Through the Yiddish press—the chief reading material of the immigrant generation—Yehoyesh was known to millions of readers. Half a century has passed since Y. Rozental analyzed Yehoyesh's translation at length for academic students of Yiddish (in *Yivo bleter* volume 34 [1950], 59-128). Readers today may find Yehoyesh's diction somewhat archaic and “poetic,” yet his remarkable fusion of the contemporary and the olden can still move us deeply.

Leonard Prager

## Yehoyesh's Life and Work

Yehoyesh (pseudonym of Yehoyesh-Shloyme Blumgarten [Yehoash-Solomon Bloomgarten]) was born September 16, 1872 in Varzhbolove (later Virbaln), near the Russian-German border. He died in New York in 1927. His father was a devout scholar, a maskil and an active member of Khovevey-Tsien ('Lovers of Zion'). His mother ran a small ironware store to support the family; she was also active in communal charitable organizations.

Yehoyesh began kheyder at the age of 4, then studied Tanakh, Talmud and Hebrew, first with his father and then with private tutors; at an early age he began to read the works of Haskalah writers such as Smolenskin and Gotlober. At 13 he was enrolled in the famous Volozhiner Yeshive, but soon returned home where, under the influence of his sister Sheyne, he studied foreign languages and literature and wrote his first poems in Hebrew. For a time he was a private Hebrew tutor in wealthy homes, but not content with this, he resolved to emigrate to America. In 1889 he brought his first poems to Peretz in Warsaw. Peretz befriended him and foresaw a great literary future for him. David Pinski quotes Peretz's own

words (in "The Jewish Worker," NY, 1927): "... Only a young man, in his early 20's, but filled with torah, with Jewish and worldly knowledge, a language scholar, with a great memory."

In 1890, perhaps to avoid conscription into the Russian army, Yehoyesh emigrated to America. He earned his livelihood at first as a Hebrew teacher and continued writing poetry in Hebrew. However, he was dissatisfied with his work and destroyed these early poems. He decided to try occupations other than teaching—tailoring, peddling and bookkeeping in a glass factory. In this period he wrote nothing. He then met Dr. Israel Davidson, a young Hebrew writer, under whose influence he began to write again. He composed a book of Hebrew poems, but sudden illness forestalled its publication. Manuscripts of these poems are in the Yehoyesh archives.

In 1900, Yehoyesh contracted acute tuberculosis and spent the next seven years at the Jewish Consumptives Relief Society sanitarium in Denver, Colorado, setting aside his writing. He was married in 1903, and in 1908, cured of tuberculosis, he made a fund-raising trip across America on behalf of the relief society. These travels enabled Yehoyesh to become acquainted with the landscape and natural beauty of America, and to meet numerous influential people. Returning to New York in 1909, he wrote prolifically until 1914. He also participated actively in Jewish cultural life in New York in

those years, especially for the Poale-Tsien (Labor Zionists). His *Dictionary of Hebrew and Aramaic words used in Yiddish*, co-written with Dr. Khayem Spivak while at the Denver sanitarium, was published in 1911; a second edition was published in 1926.

In January 1914, Yehoyesh and his wife, with their daughter Evelyn, emigrated to Palestine, settling in Rekhovot. There he learned Arabic and studied the Koran and post-Koranic literature. The family lived for several months in Relvan, on the border of the Egyptian desert, not far from Cairo, then returned to New York in the summer of 1915, not long after World War 1 broke out. His travel experiences were serialized in *Der tog*, including "Biz Rekhoves un Tsurik" ("To Rekhovot and Back"), later published separately as a book. Although Yehoyesh's literary activity began with Hebrew poetry (which was never published) while he was still attending yeshive, all of his published work is in Yiddish. Encouraged by the Hebrew writer Ben Avigdor, he sent some of his early poems to Peretz, who published them in his *Di yudishe bibliotek* (Warsaw 1891). These poems included a translation—from English—of a Byron poem, and a translation of Chapter 18 of the Book of Psalms, his first Tanakh translation. He also wrote for Mordecai Spektor's *Hoyzfraynd* (Warsaw 1894).

In America, through the years 1891 to 1912 he published poetry and popular historical novels in *Der folks-advokat*. He wrote for *Di yudishe gazeten*, *Yidishes tageblat*, *Der forverts*, *Der varhayt* and others: poetry, fables, translations, as well as Chinese, Japanese and Arab legends. From January, 1902 until his death in 1927, he wrote for *Der tsukunft*: poetry, legends and fables, and translations of Byron, of Longfellow's "Hiawatha," and of Omar Khayam's "Rubaiyat." He contributed to Minikes' *Yontef-bleter* and from November 16, 1916, was a regular contributor to *Der tog*, where he published most of his Tanakh translations. From 1909-1919 he wrote for the humor and satire journal *Kundes*, including his version of "Around the World in 80 Days." From 1908-1915 he contributed to Zhitlovski's *Dos naye lebn*.

Yehoyesh was a regular contributor to most of the Yiddish periodicals in North America, Canada, Russia, Poland, Argentina, Austria, Palestine and other countries. His poems were translated into English, Polish, Russian, French, German and Hebrew. Many of his poems were included in anthologies and in textbooks used in Jewish schools; many were set to music and performed widely.

His first impulse to translate the Torah came to Yehoyesh in 1904. By 1909 he had completed a translation of Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Ruth, Job and, in 1910, Isaiah. He was dissatisfied with his first efforts and destroyed them. In

preparation for his great project he read Bible translations and commentaries in many languages and versions (Septuagint, Vulgate, Onkeles, Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Ramban, and others) and clarified hundreds of interpretations of words and sentences. His translation is not only a monument of the Yiddish language, it is a creative work.

Yehoyesh labored at his translation from 1909 until his premature death in 1927. From 1922-1927, *Der tog* published hundreds of letters from leading Bible scholars responding to the Tanakh serialized in its pages. According to Leyeles, Yehoyesh destroyed his first Tanakh translation of 1909-1910, including the printing plates and galleys, wanting to purge all daytshmerisms. Surviving today, and so long as Yiddish is spoken, read and understood, are the later translations of the Pentateuch (1927), the Early Prophets (1927), the Later Prophets (1929), the Writings (1936) and the revisions of 1933 and 1938 (aside from the special editions (*Der tog*, 1936 and 1941; *Der forverts* in 2 volumes in 1939). YIVO also issued separately *Shir hashirem* (1932), *Megiles Ester* (1936). In 1940 a *Khumesh far kinder* appeared. In 1949, Mortkhe Kosover edited a lexicon of commentaries based on Yehoyesh's prolific notes on the Tanakh.

Selections from Yehoyesh's Tanakh (in English translation!) can be found in the anthologies by Joseph Leftwitch (*The Golden Peacock*, 1961) and by Howe and Greenberg (*Treasury*

of *Jewish Poetry*, 1957). Shmuel Niger praised Yehoyesh's translation and claimed its utility in the study of the Hebrew original. Yankev Glatshteyn credited Yehoyesh with rescuing and immortalizing thousands of forgotten Yiddish words. Until his death, Yehoyesh studied Syriac grammar to help him prepare a Bible translation he hoped would surpass his earlier efforts. A memorial book in 1935 listed over 50 translations of his poems in 10 languages. His yortsayt was celebrated in the ghettos of Warsaw, Lodz and Vilna.

We conclude with the poem, "Yehoyesh," written by Avrom Sutskever for a Yehoyesh commemoration in the Vilna Ghetto on April 6, 1943. "Yehoyesh" was published in New York in the April 1946 issue of *Yidishe kultur*, while Sutskever was still living in Moscow. It was also published in Sutskever's *Lider fun geto* (1946) and his *Poetishe verk* (Tel Aviv, 1963, vol. 1, pp. 296-297).

This sketch was adapted from a translation of the entry "Yehoyesh" by Khayem-Leyb Fuks in the *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1961, vol. 6, cols. 233-244 ). Sol Liptzin's *The History of Yiddish Literature* and Charles Madison's *Yiddish Literature – Its Scope and Major Writers* were also consulted.

Itsik Goldenberg

אברהם סוצקעווער

## יהואש

די ערד, – אַ בלינדער זשיפענדיקער שטראָם, –  
און אויפֿן שטראָם – אַ בינטל קראַנקע הייזער  
ווי רעשטלעך פֿון אַ שיף...

אין זייער טיף –

נשמות פֿון אַרויסגעהויכטע שעהען.

און קינדער אין די ווינקלען –

גראַע טויבן אין אַ שטורעם,

פֿאַרקלאַמערטע אין זייער לעצטער מידקייט.

דאָס בינטל הייזער טראַגט זיך שטראָם אַראָפֿ,

אַנטקעגן קאַכט אַ קעסלגרוב

מיט יעדער בליק אַלץ נענטער.

געזעגעניש.

געפלאַץ פֿון מאַרגנס.

ווערטער שיידן זיך מיט זאַכן ערב זייער סוף.

נאָך אַ רגע,

נאך,

און

מיט אַ מאָל –

אַ נאָמען הייליק-אויסגעשמידט פֿון אַלטן גאָלד:

י ה ו אַ ש.

און שוין פֿאַרגייט מיט קאַרשנבליטן

דער פֿאַרשמאַכטער טרויער.

קוואַלן בלאָ, מיט זונען אויף די דעקן,

שנירלעך זיך פֿאַרבײַ די נאַכטיק-פֿלאַטערדיקע שוויבן

און וואַרטן מע זאָל עפֿענען.

און אַנשטאַט גרוב און קעלער –

טורעמט צווישן צעדערן אַ טעמפל

מיט זײַלן אויסגעקנאָטענע

אויס דעם געביין פֿון דורות ---

סאַראַ מאַכטיק-אויסגעוואַכטער יום-טובֿ!

סאַראַ ליכטיק-ריכטיקע דערקענטשאַפֿט!

יעדער פֿון די גוססדיקע קינדער אין די ווינקלעך –

איז איצט פֿאַרוואַנדלט אין אַ יונגן נביא,

געוואָשן אינעם ערשטן טוי  
פֿון שנייִק-ווייסע רויזן.  
און אויף די ליפן –  
בענטשונג און נבואה,  
איינגעוועבט מיט זעונגען  
פֿון אויסגעלייזטער פֿרייד,  
פֿון יובלדיקן פֿאַלק.

דער טויט אַליין דערשרעקט זיך פֿאַר דער שיינקייט,  
און טרייבט אַוועק צוריק  
זיין בלאַטיק-רויכערדיקן קעסל ———

---

געשריבן צו די יהוּאַש-פֿייערונגען אין ווילנער געטאַ  
ווילנער געטאַ, 6טן אַפּריל 1943