

## FIRST CRY: MOSHE BEN-MEIR'S EARLY HOLOCAUST POETRY OF THE UN-PASSOVER

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The response of America's Hebrew literati to the Holocaust has been long-neglected. The compositions created bear the markings of the immediate years of the Sho'ah and thereafter and are among the earliest works of literature to address the matter. Moshe Ben-Mier's strategy of representation of the Holocaust in poetry composed between 1941 and 1944 is by inverting traditional liturgy and Scripture of the Exodus story as an expression of his sense of powerlessness and loss of faith in covenantal promises in light of the experiences and premonitions of things to come. His poems comprise a single whole that undermines the story of the Passover to engender the Un-Passover.

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All night, in the faintest whisper, they had been telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt. With their legs hanging down from their bunks, they repeated by heart what they could remember, helping each other out; they had also begun by blessing the two wafers, a kind of matzah that they had prepared well ahead, fearfully and in great secrecy, "bread of affliction" in every sense. They tasted nothing else, despite the gnawing hunger, and drank only the four measured sips of water they had set aside, no more; then they placed their elbows on their knees and began to sing the traditional songs.<sup>1</sup>

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It was as early as late spring of 1942 that official word reached America of the program of the annihilation of European Jews perpetrated by Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup> No doubt, though, news to this effect was in the air even earlier among American Jews who were following developments in Europe in the

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<sup>1</sup> A. Kovner, "The Fourth Scroll: Ash of the Heavens," in *Scrolls of Testimony* (ed. Sh. Luria; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. 116. Original Hebrew: A. Kovner, "Megilah Revi'it: Efer Meromim," in *Megilot Ha'edut* (ed. Sh. Luria; Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1993), p. 169. Unless otherwise noted, all following translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Another claim is that it was later, in December of 1942 when the American press began reporting on the estimated pace of extermination of Europe's Jews. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise was informed on August 28, publicizing the news by November of 1942. See A. D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 3–22, 26–27; D. E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust 1933–1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), pp. 157, 159, 180–186. The first word of the gassing of Polish Jews was in August 1942, and see D. S. Wyman, ed. *Confirming the News of Extermination* (vol. 1 of *America and the Holocaust*; New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), pp. 178–181.

early war years.<sup>3</sup> From October of 1941, increasingly harsher and more urgent word was being published in the American press of the Nazi campaign of atrocities, including deportations, killings of Jews by starvation, execution squads, and the like.<sup>4</sup> Concurrent with authoritative testimony, early works of literature appeared in America that reflected a growing concern with events in Europe that did not bode well for the near future. Undoubtedly, many in America were able to draw conclusions as to the decimation of Europe's Jewry even without explicit knowledge of the extent of the annihilation planned by the Nazis and their accomplices.

In the wake of these events, Hebrew literature in the Golden Land was shaken out of its complacent, self-absorbed, lyrical somnolence—occupying itself as it did with transcendental concerns, acculturation, and lyrical introspection—to countenance the fate of their coreligionists in the Old Country. This awakening yielded a significant body of literary response by writers such as Israel Efros, Ephraim E. Lisitzky, Reuven Wallenrod, A. Zeitlin, and Moshe Ben-Meir. The contributions of these writers—and I must limit myself here to but a fraction of that corpus—was of a significant quantity, some even of high quality and an immediacy to rival any writing of any venue. Until today, however, this literature about the Holocaust has been rarely (if ever) studied as part of the scholarship of the Sho'ah.

Many American writers of Hebrew prose and verse were motivated to voice their anxiety at the news coming from Europe. They took part in what I propose to call the “first cry,” that wave of early Holocaust writers who composed and published works before the early 1960s, when the Eichmann Trial catalyzed a rising tide of interest in the Sho'ah to turn it into a proper subject for discussion and inquiry in ever widening popular and scholarly circles.

Prior to this time, from the Holocaust years to the early 1960s, discussion of the subject was limited to defined circles of survivors and a handful of scholars. The atmosphere of silence of the times is best captured by Hebrew literature in the “Momik” chapter of David Grossman's *See Under: “Love”* and Amir Gutfreund's *Our Holocaust*.<sup>5</sup> Writers at the time who composed

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<sup>3</sup> A good example is the letters of Aaron Zeitlin, who by 1939 was in Havana and was attempting to rescue his family from Europe. He was awaiting a visa in order to move them and himself to the United States. His correspondence indicated that things were already not good for his family in Warsaw, a situation that underscored the urgency of his position. See, for example, Zeitlin's letters to Moshe Feinstein, dated December 20, 1939, Gnazim no. 600/8759/35.

<sup>4</sup> D. E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, pp. 135–158; D. S. Wyman, *Confirming the News*.

<sup>5</sup> D. Grossman, *Ayen Erekh: Ahavah* (Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuhad and Keter, 1986), pp. 9–76; A. Gutfreund, *Sho'ah Shelanu* (Lod, Israel: Zmora-Bitan, 2002). English versions: D. Grossman, *See*

literary responses (poetry, prose fiction, and memoirs) fall under two broad categories that intersect at some point. The first is comprised of Holocaust survivors (Jews and Gentiles) who have personally been interred in camps run by the Nazis or their co-conspirators—among them we can point to Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowsky, Dan Pagis, Yitzhak Ketznelson, and Aharon Appelfeld—or those comprising the subcategory discussed below who wrote at the same period without experiencing the same degree of horror—as did U. Z. Greenberg and a larger number of American Hebrew writers including A. Zeitlin and Moshe Ben-Meir. The second group is of writers who remained on the outside, unaffected directly by the events.

The immediacy to the Sho'ah of many of these writers' works, many having been composed concurrent with the events themselves, constitutes a body of significant evidence to the reception of the Holocaust in Hebrew letters. So it is quite puzzling that these works received next to no attention whatsoever as part of the study and inquiry into the literature of the Sho'ah. This oversight calls for rectification. Its output needs to be placed in several contexts, among them Hebrew literature of the Holocaust, early responses to the outbreak and travesties of the event, and the larger corpus of American Hebrew literature. My purpose in the foregoing is to ameliorate the status quo by putting forth and illuminating one case of American Hebrew literature's response to the Holocaust.

The Holocaust's impact on American Jewry was a poignant reminder of the latter's profound cultural and ethnic ties to Jews worldwide. The event was a disquieting experience to those occupied with becoming American, acculturated or assimilated into this new landscape. The outbreak of the Holocaust at the time tested their sense of belonging to the greater body of world Jewry, a response which was not always made as affirmatively and unambiguously as one would like to think.

In part, our inquiry attempts to probe the strategies adopted by Hebrew writers to respond to the Holocaust. Certainly some have followed the practice of avoiding literary embellishments to represent an event and experiences that transcend artistic and aesthetic conventions. Not having any established alternative tools, others turned to traditional literary sources or

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*Under: Love* (trans. B. Rosenberg; New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), pp. 3–86; A. Gutfreund, *Our Holocaust* (trans. J. Cohen; New Milford, Conn.: Toby Press, 2006). For a seminal study debunking the notion of American Jewry's silence in the post-Holocaust decades see H. R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

emulated past responses to national or personal catastrophe or manipulated them to suit contemporary circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

Composed with an immediacy that emanated out of the secure confines of Fortress America, American Hebrew Holocaust literature bears the hallmarks of the early stages of the genre as it sought definitions, paradigms, and limitations. Its themes and forms are familiar to readers of literary responses in Europe or Eretz Yisra'el. They may be categorized as works of stark expression at the feared loss, voicing the angst, anger, or bewilderment of the writer whose sense of isolation was confirmed by an ever decreasing readership. Their remoteness from the destruction facilitated a literary distance that permitted a more detached perspective for American literati than of their fellow writers in Europe. In writing of the Holocaust, the fiction of some is characterized by sparse literary embellishment of the facts, as these writers strove to depict the experiences in fact or as imagined. Others are more allusive, engaging traditional language and imagery to express the catastrophe, shock, and anger at the world's complacency. Finally, a number of poets distinguished their work by a rich allusiveness, some inverting the language of tradition to mark the chasm forming between the promise, or national myth and that which has transpired.

In terms of immediacy of response and assessment of the loss, few could compete with the quantitative output and sense of alarm of Hebrew writers in America—though a realization of the full extent of the destruction was initially published with skepticism and “with due reserve”<sup>7</sup> by official circles. American Hebrew writers had the opportunity and capacity to respond as did surviving Hebrew writers of Europe or the Land of Israel. The latter were torn between the Holocaust and their own immediate war of independence, which demanded an attitude of triumphalism and valor that vied for predominance in place of a direct address of the annihilation of European Jewry. Israel's writing establishment was in the process of producing a canon of heroic literature while the reality and immediacy of the Holocaust flew in the face of this tendency, at least in its broadest outlines.

Comfortably ensconced in Fortress America, American Hebrew writers were sheltered from the brunt of the war and Holocaust by oceans and a diminishing familial fidelity to those they left behind. As the Hebrew novelist S. Y. Agnon observed wryly, “Columbus ... adjured all immigrants to

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<sup>6</sup> A. Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> P. Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), p. 23.

America to disregard their homelands.”<sup>8</sup> They were also spared the urgency of a bifurcated literature as did their brethren in the Land of Israel. It seems, indeed, that any escape from their European roots was only partially effective. Europe came knocking with news portending the most horrific fates that Jews’ intuition can imagine and impressed upon them their lasting identity with the world they left behind.

At times the works of some literati published during the Holocaust or the years immediately thereafter are characterized by a decidedly unliterary shift in their poetics. Their taste, it seems, directed them to shun the flowery, ornate aspect of belles lettres for an approach resembling reportage. Others, however, remained adherents to the traditional fashion extant in Hebrew literature as they continued to compose in a flowery style inlaid with allusive references.

Such is the case with the works of the poet under consideration, Moshe Shlomo Ben-Meir (1897–1958). His Holocaust poetry, interred somewhere in the recesses of Modern Hebrew literature, and quantitatively modest, represents one of the early reactions to the calamity through the literary prism of tradition. His poems, composed mostly between 1941 and 1944, constitute a fitting illustration of one early strategy of response to an event the poet could not even imagine. Having no alternate means to depict or express the events that he experienced, he turned to the traditional responses to catastrophe. These have been modeled by a number of creators of Hebrew belles lettres in the modern age. Among the most noteworthy was Saul Tschernichowsky whose “Baruch of Mainz,” reflected recent events through the prism of the Crusader massacres of Jews in medieval times. Others include H. N. Bialik, who wrote of the Kishinev Pogroms, and Uri Zvi Greenberg, who composed the definitive poetic oeuvre of the Holocaust years in Hebrew.<sup>9</sup> Ben-Meir’s approach, however, was not to rely on traditional works of national catastrophe but to undo those of national triumph.

Early writers who sought strategies to voice their concerns and fears about the fate of Europe’s Jews were at first unaware of the extent of the devastation. Cognizant of the damage wrought by twentieth century revolutions, pogroms, and wars on Jewry, none could rest assured that the impending war would pass without exacting some toll on them, particularly in

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<sup>8</sup> S. Y. Agnon, “Sipur Pashut” (A simple story) in *Al Kapot Hamanul* (At the handles of the lock) (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1966), p. 119. The translation is mine principally because the English translation of the novel does not capture this observation. And see, S. Y. Agnon, *A Simple Story* (trans. H. Halkin; New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> A. Mintz, *Hurban*, pp. 123–154, 165–202.

light of Nazi anti-Semitic rhetoric. Expressing the anger, frustration, and shock he felt at what he learned about the fate of Jews under the rule of the Nazi regime and their ilk, Ben-Meir chose to transmit the experience by subverting past epic narratives to underscore his perception of a distorted world. His representation of the Holocaust is modeled on a miracle-laden past, overturned as if to point to the disparities between then and now. The temporal gap between things as they were and are becomes the poet's expression of disenchantment with present realities and an observation of the loss of innocence about the recurrence of miracles that, in antiquity, were proof of divine intervention to rescue the Jewish people. In light of the powerlessness of the latter to assure the people's survival, Ben-Meir challenges Jewish certitudes about their traditions. And, by underscoring the shortcoming of words in describing events, he focuses on their consequent impact on faith and belief. As a metaphor for the present, his poetry foregrounds the bankruptcy of past beliefs about divine intervention and miracles, elements that were at the core of Jewish collective memory.

At the focal point of these doctrines stands the story of the Passover, the nation's founding myth. It is not coincidental that Holocaust literature would fix its attention on the festival that celebrates the historical launching point of the Children of Israel as a nation. In some instances, even in memoirs, the confluence of the Passover with actual occurrences becomes a fitting temporal marker and symbolic conclusion to freedom. Thus, for instance, Elie Wiesel notes the Passover as the last celebrated before he, his family, and community are subjected to deportation to the "little ghetto" and on to Auschwitz.<sup>10</sup> Also, as cited in the prologue above, the Hebrew writer, ghetto fighter, and partisan Abba Kovner writes of the tenacity of Jews to celebrate the Seder even under the hardships of concentration camp conditions. With the destructiveness of the Holocaust still ongoing, Ben-Meir fears the worst, signifying it in terms of a reduction of Jewish civilization to its pre-national dimensions. Though unaware of the full extent of the extermination, he fears that, barring miracles, Jewry is destined for catastrophe, reduced to become again merely a group of individuals characterized by a diffused unity, divided, scattered, and living under the shadow of recurrent and ever more severe calamities. What unifies them, though, is his constructed rite commemorating the destruction, a new sacred moment reminding its celebrants of the hollowness of the supernatural or mythic to

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<sup>10</sup> E. Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Discus/Avon, 1969), p. 19.

overwhelm present realities. Celebrations affirming past glories are replaced with those unfolding as a consequence of the horrors of national dissolution.

When it first appeared in the late 1950s, Ben-Meir’s sole anthology of collected poems, *Tzlil va-Tzel*<sup>11</sup> was favorably received as “modest, unpretentious but authentic and sincere” in its unvarnished eloquence and directness.<sup>12</sup> Reviewing the book in greater depth, the poet Aaron Zeitlin focuses on Ben-Meir as a “God-Sick” (*holeh-elohim*) poet in his quest for communing with the divine. In the manner of the Transcendentalist fashion prevalent among American Hebrew literati of the age, Ben-Meir’s poetry is a quest after God’s immanence that concludes on a note of futility.<sup>13</sup>

The most notable feature of Ben-Meir’s Holocaust poetry is the strategy of representing the decline of Jewish civilization by reversing the language of Scriptures and liturgy to negate familiar myths and archetypal tales. Although this technique of reversing or transferring traditional language to secular circumstances emerges most stridently in his Holocaust poetry, it is anticipated in earlier works as well. This penchant underscores a temperamental inclination to reverse imagery as a means of self-expression, as if challenging original certitudes about the national myth. Before Ben-Meir’s day, this practice was an established one used by literati of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment) and *Teḥiyah* (National Revival) as an effective way to critique tradition, religious practice, or present reality. It is also evident in Ben-Meir’s early poetry, as evident in his poems from the 1920s, as in a love poem of 1924 entitled “She” (“*Hee*”) in which the imagery attributed to the beloved has its origins in traditional sources, as for example:<sup>14</sup>

אם תדרכך -- קדש,	If sacred be your room,
את קדש קדשים	Holy of holies are you
ואני -- כהן גדול.	And I—the high priest
.....	.....
פי לך יעריף	To you my mouth will rain
יין תפילה.	Wine of prayer.
על הכרובים --	Upon the cherubim—
שתי עיניך --	Your two eyes—
נשיקותי	My kisses

<sup>11</sup> M. S. Ben-Meir, *Tzlil va-Tzel* (Sound and shadow) (New York: M. Newman, 1958). All page numbers in the text refer to this volume, followed by the original year of publication of the poem.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Milton Arfa to Jacob Kabakoff, February 4, 1959; personal collection.

<sup>13</sup> A. Zeitlin, “Ish ve-Sifro” (A man and his book), in *Be-ohalay Sifrut* (In the tents of literature) (vol. 2 of *Beyn Emuna le-Omanut* [Between faith and art]) (Tel-Aviv: Y. Orenstein and Yavneh, 1980), pp. 231–233.

<sup>14</sup> As in his untitled poem from 1923, and “*Hee*,” in M. S. Ben-Meir, *Tzlil va-Tzel*, pp. 7, 10–14.

אֶזְרֹק, אֶמְנָה :	I shall sprinkle, and count:
אֶחַת וְאַחַת.	One and one.
תֵּאדַמְנָה	Your cheeks
לְחֵינֶיךָ	Will turn red
כַּפְרוֹת	As the curtain
מִדָּם כַּפּוּרִים.	From the blood of atonement.
כָּל עוֹד תּוֹקֵד	So long as the fire
עַל מִזְבֵּיחֶךָ	Of good favor burns
אֵשׁ הַרְצוֹן --	Upon your altar
לְךָ אֶקְרִיבָה	My innocence
תִּמְתַּת תְּמִידִי.	To you I give as a regular offering.

Once established, this strategy also informs his non-Holocaust poems, as is his poem "Opening" ("*Petihah*," p. 5); though undated, its message indicates a late composition.

לא מִרְק עוֹנֵי-דְמוּנָי,	My sin of imagination has not been scoured, [Lev. 6:21]
טִפַּחְתִּי לְשׂוֹא אֶת עֲוֹנָי,	For naught I nursed my torment,
לא רִפְאָה הָאֵהָבָה וְגוֹנִי,	Love has not healed my sorrow,
לא כָּפַר נְדוּוֹי.	Nor has my confession brought atonement.
הִכִּיתִי עַל לֵב יָמִים-שָׁנָיִם.	My heart was struck year upon year.
הִשְׁבַּעְתִּי אֶת נַפְשִׁי תִמְרוּרִים.	I filled my soul with bitterness.
וְעַדֵּן אֶיֻחַל, כְּלִפְנָיִם,	Yet I still long, as before,
לְיוֹם כַּפּוּרִים.	For an atonement day (p. 5)

Being an occasional poet whose total oeuvre remained meager, Ben-Meir's single anthology (of 130 pages) comprises all the poetry composed during a brief lifetime. Shortly after his death the book was forgotten, relegated to oblivion in the catalogue of unread and unappreciated works which fell between the cracks of the canon. Consequently, perhaps also due to its preponderance of lyrical poems, the anthology's impressive poetry of the Holocaust was overlooked by every collection deeming to represent Sho'ah literature, its author becoming an unknown even in American Hebrew literary circles.

Moshe Shlomo Ben-Meir (Tershansky)—born in Goniondz (Goinaitz), near Bialestok, May 11, 1897, died in New York, December 21, 1958—received his religious and general education from local tutors. Before and



during the First World War, he continued his learning in Warsaw (1912–1914) and Białystok. Later, he taught and directed Tarbut schools in Poland and elsewhere. Between 1924–1940, he lived in Antwerp, Belgium, and was employed as teacher, diamond polisher, and “Po’alay Tziyon” activist. Due in part to the latter, and the intervention by the leadership of the American Federation of Labor on his behalf, he received visa papers that enabled him to emigrate—though flee would be a better term—in 1940 to the United States. Once in the States, he resided in Philadelphia and then, since 1943, in New York. In America, Ben-Meir taught Hebrew language and literature at a number of schools, including the Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan Yeshiva. He passed away shortly after his wife, leaving behind two young children—Frieda and Naḥum.<sup>15</sup>

Ben-Meir’s Holocaust poetry is characterized by a lyricism of a rich, intertextual language that upends traditional terminology as a metaphor for the regime of chaos and violence overtaking the world. It is as if the poet, at a loss for words, found the manipulation of traditional language an apt metaphor for his perceptions about the impact of the Holocaust, the surviving remnant and notions of the covenant. Instead of adhering to conventional phrases, however, he inverts the coded language of Scriptures and liturgy to represent a new reality, in which the familiar is inverted, the sacred made profane, and certainties cast in doubt. The poet’s tone and technique of forcing an intersection of traditional language with the catastrophic events that they represent signal the bankruptcy of Jewish theology, myth, and faith.

Ben-Meir is a survivor of the Holocaust under circumstances that require a specific category. In his own words, he is a “*palit*,” Hebrew for a fugitive or refugee. He and other “*plitim*” had the good fortune to escape Nazi Europe at the very last minute. Of these, Ben-Meir and Aaron Zeitlin are arguably the best known Hebrew writers to have fled before the Nazi invasion to have found refuge in America. As Uri Zvi Greenberg in *Eretz Yisra’el*, they lived for many years in Europe before the Holocaust. As fugitives (or refugees), they were spared the direct physical and emotional brunt of Nazi atrocities that became the lot of writers such as Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, A. Appelfeld, Dan Pagis, and countless others. They also share the experience of surviving by the skin of their teeth, of sensing and ex-

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<sup>15</sup> G. Kresl, *Lexicon ha-Sifrut ha-Ivrit ba-Dorot ha-Aḥaronim* (Lexicon of Hebrew literature of recent generations), vol. 1 (Merḥavyah: Sifriat Poalim/Ha-kibutz ha-Artzi ha-Shomer ha-Tza’ir, 1965) p. 285; also “At M. S. Ben-Meir’s Funeral,” *Hado’ar* year 38, vol. 39.11 (14 Shevat 5719; January 23, 1959): 203 (in Hebrew).

hibiting the guilt of a survivor, as in Greenberg's case. Tracing their journeys, they seek reasons—rational or not, as did Greenberg—for having been spared, fated to come out alive, while others could not. Also as in Greenberg's case, they often seek an explanation that would assign them a mission in life, as if “chosen” to live for some greater purpose. Significantly, their shared legacy is an immediacy of response to the experience that few could countenance during and immediately following the Holocaust.

This immediacy is also a central feature of Ben-Meir's Holocaust poetry. His representation of the times underscores the events that signal a crisis in Jewish tradition. Given his status as a fugitive, he adapted a relatively comfortable vantage point to reflect on the ravages in Europe. As a “palit,” he cannot present his readers with an eye-witness report nor the authoritative voice of having been in the crucible of the camps, experiences that have come to characterize the more horrific experiences of the Holocaust. However, he has the benefit of a remote perspective, and, as accomplished by Greenberg, he can dramatize his anxieties by presenting imagined situations to convey an imagined world following the events.

The fate of Ben-Meir's Holocaust poetry is that of much of American Hebrew literature. Nearly all the literary output of American Hebrew writers—refugees and not—pertaining to the Holocaust (as to most other issues) has been ignored, forgotten, and marginalized. This corpus is not a meager one, so it was not too minuscule to make itself known. As to the Holocaust, some poetry or prose were produced on the subject by nearly every writer. All shared the dubious advantage of a relatively comfortable vantage point, observing the raging acts from Fortress America. In many instances, their writings were produced before Holocaust literature became fashionable and popular. Writing at such an early period, their motive to do so must have emerged from personal, emotional needs to vent the pain or to bequeath to the future a view that may or may not have been of interest at the time.

Ben-Meir's Holocaust poems, while composed as individual works, at times years apart, coalesce about a number of central Jewish national myths, which they proceed to demolish by inversion. They are read most effectively as a single narrative, as an evolving sequence of meaning whose message, much as Greenberg's poetry is discernible in the full sequence of his Holocaust poems.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, an examination of the individual works is

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<sup>16</sup> Demonstrated by A. Mintz, *Hurban*, pp. 172–202.

also of benefit as it illuminates particular themes and the poet's strategies of presenting the message of his work.

Ben-Meir's cycle of Holocaust poems, collected in his book under the rubric "*Siyutim*" (night-terrors or night-mares, pp. 37–69) is a series of reversals of conventional notions embedded in national myth of salvation. They tell of the undoing of Jewish existence under God's unresponsive gaze. The prologue poem, "Stone" ("*Even*," p. 36; 1958), anticipates the message arising from the full cycle. It illustrates Ben-Meir's strategy by invoking the words of Ezek 36:26 about God turning the people's heart of stone to flesh. Seeking to reverse the message, the poet implores God to turn his heart into stone. Times, and his role as witness and survivor, demand an imperviousness to pain at the sight of suffering and the vanishing of human goodness in the world. Moreover, with a heart of stone, he can cast stones back at those who throw stones, so he can "return a stone for a stone." Composed in 1958, the poem may have been initially written as a response at the death of his wife, though in its present context its tone and general tenor of mourning permit a reading in light of the national loss:

אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי, רַבּוֹן הַלֵּבָבוֹת!  
הַפֶּךְ-נָא לִי בְרַכַּת נְבִיאֲךָ הַטּוֹב  
וְתַחַת לֵב בֶּשָׂר תֵּן לִי לֵב אֶבֶן --  
בְּלִתִּי-רִגֵּשׁ לְכוּי הַחַיּוֹת;  
לְצַבַּת הָאֵבֶל, לְמַרְצֵעַ הַיְגוֹן,  
לְשׁוֹן הַכְּלִיּוֹן שֶׁל טוֹב עוֹלָם כִּי גָו.  
הַכְבֵּד הַקֶּשֶׁה. אֶבֶן לְבִי!  
וּבְפָנַי גּוֹרֵל הָאֲבָנִים נָפַל עָלַי,  
וּבְפָנַי קְרוֹב עוֹמֵד בְּרַחֲוֹק  
וּמְזִידָה בֵּי תַנְחוּמַי אֶבֶן --  
אֲשִׁיבָה אֶבֶן תַּחַת אֶבֶן.

My God my God, master of hearts!  
I pray turn your good prophet's blessing  
And in place of a heart of flesh give me one of  
stone—  
Unfeeling for the burn of suffering;  
For the tongs of mourning, the awl of grief,  
For the tooth of annihilation of a world of goodness  
that vanished.  
Make heavy, hard. Petrify my heart!  
So in face of the fate of stones that fell upon me  
And in face of a close relative standing afar  
Tossing stones of consolation at me—  
I shall return a stone for a stone.

Ben-Meir's poetry of the Holocaust dwells in the shadow of the likes of U. Z. Greenberg, with whose works it shares an affinity for being expressionistic, though decidedly more modest than the former. Transfiguring man by giving him a heart of stone resembles the prologue to U. Z. Greenberg's Holocaust poetry. There, too, the protagonists lose their human image by

abandoning life above ground to reside in its depths, convinced that human survival on the surface is impossible.<sup>17</sup>

The unfolding narrative of Ben-Meir's sequence of poems begins with a series of three compositions, written between 1941 and 1943. The first, "Poems of the refugee" ("*Mi-shiray ha-palit*," pp. 37–42; 1941) is comprised of nine distinct poems that introduce the speaker as a "palit," who, much as Ben-Meir, has fled the killing fields. All three poets—Ben-Meir, Greenberg, and Zeitlin—refer to themselves by this term. Aaron Zeitlin devotes a series of poems to his experience as a fugitive in Cuba that he composed in 1940 while seeking refuge and waiting for papers to enter the United States, and which he titled "Fugitive on the Isle of Cuba" ("*Palit be-ee Cuba*").<sup>18</sup> The same term appears in the prologue of U. Z. Greenberg's *Rehovot ha-Nahar* (Streets of the River), "Ba'ay ba-Maḥteret" (Those who come underground). The term "palit" betokens not just a survivor of a war or similar calamity but also the bearer of a message, as the "palit" who brings Abraham news of the abduction of his nephew Lot in Gen 14:13. Ben-Meir uses the literal connotation of the term, as one cast out or expelled, when the "palit" describes himself as having been vomited up by a diseased world, "I am a bloody phlegm from Europe's throat," he declares (p. 38). Referring to themselves by this term, all three (and perhaps others) seek to distinguish themselves from those who physically experienced existence on the "other planet," yet to occupy a position somewhere between those who remained behind in Europe and those who physically and temporally were remote observers from the outset.

Ben-Meir's "palit" maps his journey as he fled Belgium through France, Spain, and into Portugal, before landing in America. His message portrays an utter physical and moral dissolution in Europe, of Jews and Gentiles and their lands falling prey to the forces of destruction. The similarity of the narrator's tale to Ben-Meir's experiences underscores the autobiographical aspect—life experiences and ideology—that characterizes this poem and which runs through all subsequent compositions. This proximity to the poet's experiences lends his poems an authority of the fugitive eye-witness as he reflects on his perceptions of the new reality.

The poem opens with a threefold negation that distinguishes him from the Bible's refugees: "My uniform is not shred,/ No soil on my head,/ My

<sup>17</sup> U. Z. Greenberg, "Ba'ay ba-Maḥteret" (Those who come underground), in *Rehovot ha-Nahar* (Streets of the river) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1954), pp. 9–13.

<sup>18</sup> A. Zeitlin, *Ruah mi-Metzulah: Shirim u-Pho'emot* (Wind from the abyss: Poems and poems) (Tel-Aviv: Y. Orenstein and Yavneh, 1975), pp. 329–339.

eyes with ashes I do not spread” (p. 37). The first two lines draw upon the image of a fugitive in 1 Sam 4:12—his uniform rent and with soil on his head—who comes to Shiloh to tell Eli of Israel’s defeat in battle, the plague in the ranks, the death of his two sons, and the capturing of the Ark of the Law by the Philistines. The second reference, of eyes smeared with ashes, is derived from 1 Kgs 20:38, 41—an account of a prophet who tells King Ahab a parable that includes a battle. While externally not resembling a fugitive, the narrator unveils a tale of the chaos overtaking Europe. He underscores an affinity with the past by retaining the identity of a refugee from battle who bears the ominous news to those beyond the violence. The situations of the past become metaphors for the present.

The ensuing poems continue to unfold the evolving narrative of the protagonist’s plight. “A bundle of keys” (“*Tzror ha-maftehot*,” pp. 43–44; 1941) dwells on the poet’s uprooted condition. Though physically in the United States, the “palit” retains the keys to his home in Antwerp, referred to as Rubens’s birthplace. Paraphrasing the familiar words from Yehudah Halevi’s poem of longing for Zion, Ben-Meir describes himself as, “I am in the west/ and my spirit is in the east, beyond the sea” (p. 44). Unlike the medieval bard’s object of longing, however, Ben-Meir’s is not the Land of Israel as much as his home, favorably described as a place of the arts. His revulsion of the events that befell him does not mean an abandonment of Europe. Less intertextual, the theme of a retained key in this case is nevertheless significant. In contrast with Abba Kovner’s casting his away in “The Key Sank” (“*Ha-mafteah tzalal*”), Ben-Meir’s attitude betrays an ongoing attachment to his European roots, seeing that he identifies Belgium as also a victim of the Nazis as much he is. The same applies to keys in other works, among them Agnon’s *A Guest for the Night*.

The third poem of this self-introduction focuses on the narrator’s mother. “To My Blind Mother” (“*Le-imi ha-iveret*,” pp. 45–46; 1943) foregrounds, as the aforementioned keys, another link with Europe. The nexus between the image of a mother and the continent underscores the poet’s affirmative conviction about a coexistence of the two, an attitude that U. Z. Greenberg does not share. The account focuses on his mother’s blindness caused by her tenacious adherence to religious ways. In spite of her doctor’s warning to limit her reading, she stubbornly insisted on studying the holy books. The poet’s abandoning of his mother in Europe as well as that of his own innocence about religious teachings evinces an anxiety about a lost stability. The event prompts him to curse the evildoers with blindness. If nothing else, the

gesture indicates the limits of his capacity to mount any resistance; it remains a picture of his helplessness in face of approaching malevolence.

Having established a literary persona analogous to his, Ben-Meir turns to communal concerns, altering his discourse from first person singular to plural. In the poems that follow, he deconstructs a number of national themes. Considering the contents of these works, his alteration is indicative of an anxiety about the foreboding developments affecting Europe's Jews. Of the handful of leitmotifs that group several poems into brief narratives, his focus is particularly strong about the Exodus story, and the associated Passover ceremony in particular. It is as if he contrasts the present with the epic past as he reverses or inverts familiar liturgical works to unveil a new reality. The number of allusions he makes to these and other items is so great that no translation can adequately simulate the resonance of his lines with biblical and liturgical works. Some of the discussion that follows will attempt to illuminate a number of such examples.

In the first poem, "Because the Sign has not Come" (*"Ve-khi lo ba ha-'ot,"* pp. 47–48; 1944) the title evokes the signs and wonders God (and Moses) displayed before the Egyptians in the course of the Ten Plagues. In the present, asserts the poem, the warning sign did not come from above to rescue the Children of Israel. Moreover, the fourfold powerful negatives of "no" at the poem's opening that resembles Bialik's ominously foreboding opening of "In the City of Slaughter" (*"Be'ir ha-haregah"*), an earlier outrage against the Jews to which the poet links his work, initiates the negation and ultimate reversal of the miracle-laden national myth of the Exodus story that used to affirm salvation by divine intervention:

וכי לא בא האות והגואל לא קם,  
 המשחית עבר ולא פסח על בתינו,  
 וגם לא נקרע לפנינו,  
 וראה -- ישראל מת על שפת הים!

Because the sign did not come, and the redeemer did not arise  
 The Destroyer went through and did not pass over our homes,  
 And the sea was not split before us,  
 And behold—Israel is dead upon the sea shore! (p. 47)

The poem underscores the breakdown of divine communication, a mark of the covenant's anemia. The principle of a standing covenant has included a traditional belief in God's forewarning and delivery of Jews from evil. Its absence signals an ever widening gap between present experience and no-

tions derived from Scriptures and promulgated through traditional sources. Biblical texts testify to active divine intervention in history and assistance to the Children of Israel in antiquity, a phenomenon that has become part of the Jewish national myth in explaining the people's survival. In the nineteenth century, the notion of the supernatural longevity and survival of the Jews received a "modernist" stamp in Krochmal's philosophical work. Soon, however, the calamitous events that affected Israel led to reappraisals about the covenant, national behavior, and immediacy of divine communication.

To underscore this change, the poem juxtaposes the present with the first Passover when, as told in the Book of Exodus, the Destroyer (the angel of death) literally passed over the houses of Israel. In the twentieth century, asserts the narrator, no miracle or divine signal came to forewarn of the impending catastrophe. Such an absence is what precipitates a sequence of devastating events that the poet fears: the present-day Destroyer has not passed over the houses of the Children of Israel, whom he has marked for death; nor has the parting of the sea occurred, leaving Jews sprawled dead on its shores in place of the Egyptians of yore. Ben-Meir's narrative is a willful appropriation and reduction of the account in the Song of the Sea (*Shirat ha-yam*) from triumph to defeat.

In the second stanza, the poet observes that the surviving remnant of those who died on the shores of the sea cannot commence to praise God—as did Moses, Miriam and the Children of Israel in the past. Following their initial catastrophe, contemporary Jews are tormented and devoured by what he terms the wilderness and Satan, stemming any chance for redemption and praise in these times. Instead, the situation renders hollow the words of the blessing—presumably the "she-heḥeyanu" blessing—"Blessed are thou Lord, Ruler of the Universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us and brought us to this time"—recited during a propitious time or season. In fact, any such utterance becomes a bitter and ironic observation when addressing the issue of place and time.

כִּי עַל הַשָּׂדֵד מִדְּבַר פּוֹעֵר פִּי וּבִשְׂרִידֵינוּ שֶׁטָן מְתַעֵל -- אֵי-זֶה הַפֶּה שֶׁיִּפְתַּח אֶת הַהֶלֶל וַיְבָרֵךְ עַל הַזְּמַן בְּאַפְסֵי-זֵיוֹ!	For the desert opens its maw upon the remnant And Satan yet abuses our remainder— Where is there a mouth to commence and praise And bless over the time without splendor?
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The poem's first two stanzas willfully obscure specific temporal markers, leaving as indefinite the poem's referential circumstance. Only in the third

does the poem identify its subject as being of contemporary relevance in place of a revisionist retelling of the Passover story. Resembling U. Z. Greenberg's renaming Nazi Germany as a hyphenated "Ur-Ashkenaz,"<sup>19</sup> Ben-Meir's poem joins the ancient tale to present circumstances by labeling Poland as the new Egypt, "Poland-Egypt" ("Mitzrayim-Polin"). That act alone calls for a reappraisal of the immediately preceding lines as references to the Sho'ah. The juxtaposition creates a wry counterpoint to the Exodus narrative, so terms scattered in the poem such as "Satan," "the Destroyer," "the wilderness," "time," or "season" (Satan, "ha-mashhit," "ha-midbar," "ha-zeman") no longer fall into a retelling of the ancient epic tale but are an adaptation of the account for more contemporary circumstances.

כי ממצרים-פולין עולה-בא האד  
 בצחן-גז ומחנק שם בגרון --  
 איזה-זה הלב שיר גאולה יוכל לרן?  
 מי יקרא דרור ומועד ביום איד?

For out of Poland-Egypt arises and nears the mist  
 With a fetid gas stifling the throat—  
 Where is there a heart that could sing a song of redemption?  
 Who will cry out freedom and festival on a day of misfortune?

Even, for example, the word denoting the stifling mist or vapor of fetid gas rising from Poland-Egypt, called "ed" in the poem, is borrowed from Gen 2:6, where it is an etiological response to how the earth was irrigated before humankind was created: "but there went up a mist from the earth." The juxtaposition points to an analogy between the present and primordial days, as if everything is reverting to an uncivilized reality; it is a reversal of the Edenic idyll in the present.

Rather than commemorating the Passover festival, a new ceremony displaces the old, reversing the traditional rites. Appropriating elements of the Seder, the poem reconfigures the new celebration: Candles are lit, and cups of wine are filled for the guests—the martyred dead; the night of feasting, termed traditionally as "watch night" (*leyl shimurim*) becomes a sacred fast. No eating or drinking is to take place, nor responses to any questions of "how is this night different," a reference to the "*mah nishtanah*" of the

<sup>19</sup> U. Z. Greenberg, "Lord You Saved Me from Ur-Germany..." in *Modern Hebrew Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (ed. R. F. Mintz; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 126–129. Hebrew original, entitled "Be-Motza'ay Tefilah" (At prayer's end), pp. 379–380.



Passover Seder. Presumably due to the obviousness of the response or an inability to explain the occurrences, the celebrants sit in silence until daylight.

<p>אח מספן, בא ונערך שלחן-הצות:          בקרנת-סוד הנרות דומם נעלה,          וברקט קדש כוסות-הג נמלא, --          לאורחים -- נשמות קדושים נעשה זאת.</p> <p>וליל שמורים זה יקדש צום.          לא נטעם ולא נשאל, אף לא נענה.          כי בת-קול תבך באין "מה נשתנה?" --          כה אלמי יגון גדול נסב דם          עד אור היום.</p>	<p>Impoverished brother, let us set a midnight table:          Let us kindle the candles in fearful mystery,          And fill festive glasses in sacred trembling—          We will do so for the guests—souls of the martyrs.</p> <p>And this watch-night consecrate a fast.          We shan't taste nor ask, neither answer.          For an echo will cry in one's ear "why is this night so different?" —          Thus mutes of a great sorrow we shall sit mutely          Until daylight.</p>
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Passover occupies a prominent role in a number of poems of the sequence. The fact that preference is given to a thematic arrangement of the poems in place of a chronological one reinforces my assertion that this is a sequential "narrative" of evolving signification. The message in Ben-Meir's poems is an assertion that today the miracles of yore are forestalled, resulting in the devastation which the poet witnesses.

The second poem, "Watch-night," or "Memorial Night" ("*Leyl shimurim*," pp. 49–50; 1943), elaborates on the ceremony embedded in the title, a phrase which was announced in the previous poem.

ליל שמורים זה הלילה, עב-עלטה רב-יסורים,  
 ליל צלמנות כבד אימים, הרה בכי וילל-תמרורים.

This is a watch-night, densely dark, abundant with agony.  
 A night of the shadow of death heavy with terrors, pregnant with cries and bitter wailing.

The poem, whose title derives from Exod 12:42, is suffused with the language of traditional texts, every line resonating with the familiar terms of ritual. But the negation, reversal, or eradication of references to the sacred explain its hold on the reader. Focused as they are primarily on the Festival

of Freedom, the words herald a deconstructed Passover, a repudiation of the traditional Seder. The poem's rhymed couplets enumerate the contents of a New Passover (or No-Passover) celebration as they undermine the myths of the familiar feast.

According to the first couplet, the ritual is held in darkness—a reminder of the ninth plague but principally a negated echo of the notion of the Children of Israel leaving the darkness of bondage into the great light of freedom, “*me-’afelah le-’or gadol*.” As if to punctuate the reversal, the theme of darkness receives a threefold repetition in these lines, marked by three different words for the absence of light—“*leyl*” (*laylah*), “*rav-alatah*,” “*leyl tzalmave!*” (night, great-darkness, a night of the shadow of death)—a progression from the common, objective to the subjective quality of darkness as a horror-laden night of death.

The disassembling of the tradition is announced in the second couplet as it calls on all to celebrate a Seder night without “*seder*.”

ליל הסדר ללא סדר הבה נחג בליל תרועה  
ונתנה שֶׁבַר עוֹלָם רַעֲבֵי פְדוּת וצִמְאֵי תְשׁוּעָה.

Let us celebrate a Seder night without order on a shofar blowing night  
And let us tell of a broken world of those hungry for redemption and thirsty  
for salvation.

The reference to a “*seder*” night, literally a night with a specific order, has been turned into one without a “*seder*,” literally disorderly, chaotic. And as if to announce its dissolution, Days of Awe terminology intersects that of the Passover. To that end, the poet makes references to “a night of the blowing of the ram’s horn”—“*Leyl teru’ah*” in place of “*Yom teru’ah*”—and uses the rare term “*u-netaneh*,” “let us recount,” that is reminiscent of the “*u-netaneh tokef*” prayer recited on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In place of inviting all to come, eat, and hear the story of the sanctity of the day, the telling becomes one of “a world broken for those hungry for redemption and thirsty for salvation.” The Passover Seder’s invitation to all who are hungry to come and eat is destabilized; the hunger, literal and metaphysical, is not eradicated. Throughout, codes associated with the Passover are recycled in ways that demythicize them. For example, even the words for “a world that is broken,” (*shever olam*) echo the injunction in Exod 12:46 not to break any bones of the Pascal offering.

While the “Un-Passover” is celebrated, asserts the third couplet, the Destroyer (as in the first poem, an allusion to Exod 12:23) crosses over the

land, taking with him the sacrificial offerings of the firstborn of humankind. Though literally denoting first-born, the term “*bekhorot*” refers in the poem to the Jewish nation as the “firstborn of [all] humankind” (*bekhorot adam*).

על הארץ עובר משחית, בכורות אדם לו נזבחים ;  
על מזוזות בית ישראל דם הבנים, לא דם-פסחים.

The Destroyer passes over the land, the firstborn of humankind to him are sacrificed;

The blood of sons is on the doorposts of the houses of Israel, not that of the Pascal offerings.

The couplets proceed to unfold the ceremony, each alluding to the Passover ritual by evoking one of its aspects or another and subverting it. As in the previous poem, the Passover imagery and celebration metamorphose into a contradictory version of the celebration of freedom and liberation, one that commemorated the miracles leading to the Festival of Freedom.

Included in the celebration rites are goblets, though no longer filled with red wine (in Hebrew, *yayin adom*) but red grief (*yagon adom*), a term that acoustically resembles “*yagon adam*,” human grief. The obscure reference in couplet seven to “*hamar shimurim*” (p. 49) is either a reference to froth of yeast, though then it should read “*shemarim*,” whereas the term as it appears echoes the sleepless night, or the night on which all watch to remember and observe the law of the Passover, but now coupled with the term designating froth or anger. Moreover, the word “*hamar*” may mean a measure, as in Ezek 45:13, “*hamar ha-se’orim*”—a reference to a measure of barley.

Intersecting references of the Seder with the *Hallel* (Psalms of praise) service, the eighth couplet invokes vengeance as a response to the Holocaust by rephrasing verses from Ps 24:7 as Ben-Meir writes: “Open, you heavens, gates of vengeance, rip open your door, O firmament;/ Let there rise and come an ancient melody, cast forth thy wrath, we cry” (p. 49).

These hybridized lines, combining a verse from Psalms with key terms from the “*Shefokh hamatkha*” (Cast forth thy wrath) passage of the Seder, announce the transition to the poem’s principal subject, the eternal call to the prophet Elijah for help. At the absence of divine intervention, the poet’s call is more specific, inviting Elijah to avenge his people’s suffering by the hands of today’s Baal-worshipping heathens. For its remainder, from the eighth couplet to the nineteenth, the poem’s subject turns to the call on Elijah. Sadly, this recourse to a verbal outpouring is a mark of the helples-

ness of the individual to accomplish on his own anything by way of rescue or revenge.

By summoning Elijah, the narrator refers not to his good and miracle-working role, nor as the messianic herald but as the avenger, as a “*kana*” (p. 49), the impassioned warrior against the resurgent followers of Baal. This Elijah, bearing the role of the zealous advocate of God’s ways, is called upon to rescue the saving remnant. In a world wherein God’s efficacy is in question, it becomes Elijah of old who is called upon to lend a helping hand. Man, in the form of the prophet, replaces the absent God to wreak vengeance upon Israel’s tormentors.

While reacting to the Holocaust by calling for revenge, and doing so by invocation based on a myth-laden account of yore, the poet also mourns the loss among his people—two acts that he can accomplish verbally. As a follow-up to this gesture, the next poem, “Cry, Rachel” (“*Bekhi, Rahel*,” p. 51; 1943) calls on the matriarch to intercede with God on her people’s behalf, another verbal act of resistance.

<p>רחל אִמֵנו, מִקְבַּרְךָ קוּמִי-צְאִי. הֲרִימִי קוֹלְךָ, נְהִי תִמְרוּרִים שְׂאִי וְעוֹרְרֵי אִמָּהוֹת, עוֹרְרֵי אָבוֹת -- עַל חֲלָלֵי בְּנֵיךְ הַעֲשׂוּקִים, רוֹיִים, שְׂרוּפִים, טְבוּחִים וְנַחוּקִים לְמֵאוֹת, לְאַלְפִים, לְרִבְבוֹת בְּיַד גּוֹי נָבֵל -- אֲרוּרֵהוּ! -- בְּכִי, רַחֵל, אֱלֹהִי!</p>	<p>Rachel our mother, arise and leave your grave. Lift your voice; raise it in a bitter cry And arouse matriarchs, awaken patriarchs— For the dead of your children who are oppressed, Shot, burned, massacred and strangled By the hundreds, the thousands, tens of thousands By the hands of a villainous nation—a curse upon it! — Cry, Rachel, my God!</p>
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<p>רחל אִמֵנו, מִקְבַּרְךָ קוּמִי-צְאִי. הֲרִימִי קוֹלְךָ, נְהִי תִמְרוּרִים שְׂאִי וְעוֹרְרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים, הַעִירִי שׁוֹרֵ-יִשְׂרָאֵל. הֲיָנוּם-יִישׁוּן שׁוֹמֵר עִם נַחְלָתוֹ!? אִם נִנְעְלוּ שָׁמַיִם לְזַעֲקָתוֹ!? וּמֵתֵי יָקוּם, יַעֲמֹד מִיְכָאֵל? -- הוּ בָּאָה כְּבָר "הַעֵת הַזֶּה"! בְּכִי, רַחֵל, אֱלֹהִי!</p>	<p>Rachel our mother, arise and leave your grave. Lift your voice; raise it in a bitter cry And arouse the prophets, awaken the Lord of Israel Does He slumber-sleep the guardian of the people His patrimony!? Have the heavens shut at the sound of its cry!? And when will Michael arise, and stand?-- For “that time” is already nigh! Cry, Rachel, my God!</p>
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Rachel's role is founded on the image she bears in Jer 31:15. The same source is also the origin of key terms embedded in this poem, particularly to "sound out in lamentation and bitter weeping" (*nehi tamrurim se'i*). In the wake of the First Temple's destruction and ensuing Babylonian Exile, the prophet Jeremiah calls upon Rachel to mourn the loss of her children, a stratagem that the poet, at a loss for alternative measures, embraces as another expression of his sense of helplessness.

As with Elijah, Rachel, too, is a mediating figure to intervene and redeem, messiah-like, for her actions may result in her sons' returning to their land. If Elijah is invoked by association with the Passover ceremony, Rachel's identity is with the Ninth of Av (*Tishah be-Av*), the solemn commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple, redefined in the poem as the annihilation of the people themselves. As with the Un-Passover, the ceremony on the Ninth of Av is also held at night and by candle-light. Ben-Meir calls on Rachel, though in ways unlike Jeremiah's invocation, to awake and arouse the mothers, fathers, Israel's prophets, princes, and God. He also asks her whether God, who has not responded to his people's cries, is slumbering. It is as if the times confirm his suspicion that a reversal has also taken place in God as the guardian of Israel who "shall neither slumber nor sleep" (לֹא־יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל, Ps 121:4). Unlike Greenberg, whose dispute with God goes much further in crossing the boundaries of tradition, Ben-Meir is generally more circumspect, restrained and conservative in his questioning divine authority.

Declared a lullaby, the next poem in the sequence, "Lullaby" (*"Shireres,"* pp. 52–53; 1945) negates the function and themes of the genre.

ליל חֲשֵׁרֶת צֶל יָכַס תְּבַל. עוֹרָה, בְּנִי, וּרְאֵה! בְּעֶבֶר יָם נִהְפָּךְ עוֹלָם. בְּכָה, בְּנִי, בְּכָה.	A night of a gathering shadow covers the world. Arise, my child, and see! Across the sea the world turns over Cry, cry, cry.
עֲמַד עַל אִם הַדְּרֹךְ עֵץ, תַּחְתָּיו יְהוּדִי וְגִדִי. הָעֵץ שָׂרוּף, הַגִּדִי עָרוּף, טְרוּף, הַיְהוּדִי.	On the crossroads stood a tree. Beneath it a Jew and kid goat. The tree is burnt, the kid beheaded The Jew, devoured.
הַסָּבָא שָׁם, הַסַּבָּתָה שָׁם, דּוּדִים, דּוּדוֹת הַרְבֵּה. נִשְׁפָּךְ הַדָּם וְאֵל נִרְדָּם -- בְּכָה -- בְּכָה -- בְּכָה.	Grandfather is there, grandmother is there, Uncles, aunts aplenty. Blood was spilled, and God's asleep— Cry—cry—cry.

As those before, it is also set at night-time. Its relation to the Seder, though tenuous, may be the poet's recall of children falling asleep before the ceremony is over. Yet in place of putting a child to sleep, it awakens him to witness a world set askew. The growing-up theme of the lullaby is retained, though redirected to serve a hideous goal, as the words instruct the child to hate and to destroy the Destroyer when he grows up. As some lullabies, it intertwines two or more subjects, though subversively. In this case, it is the fate of the Jews and traditional lullabies, both of which, asserts the poem, are dead. The poem subverts the lullaby motif in other ways too, as by negating its accepted conventions of darkness, telling of something being across the sea, a landscape with a tree, a Jew and a goat-kid, grandparents, uncles and aunts, and growing-up. In their place, the poet declares that the world is in chaos, awakens the child and calls on him to cry and not sleep; he declares that the tree, the Jew, and the kid have perished. He substitutes bucolic scenes with images of war and destruction, and ends by cursing Germany and commanding the child to abhor the enemy.

By the time the cycle reaches the penultimate poem, composed in 1943 and entitled "Out of Darkness," ("*Mi-maḥashakim*," pp. 54–56), the formality of the poems has given way to a looser cohesiveness, defined by lines of varying length and composed in blank verse. Thematically, the poet directs questions at God about creation and the image of humanity. The poem's subtext is twofold: The first is represented by the title's allusion to the Bible (Ps 88:7 or 143:3 or Lam 3:6) in which a cry calling on God's help rises from the darkness. It also resembles the "*mi-ma'amakim*"—out of the depths—supplication prayer on the Days of Awe (of Psalm 130). Instead of pleading for relief, the speaker's inquiry about the purpose of creation stems from the narrator's sober view of the world, the violence committed by mankind whose image has been reduced to that of two-legged boars and apes. The other subtext is the notion of Jews being a light unto the nations, about which the narrator has become despondent and ready to resign his role, resulting in his call emanating out of darkness. Their mission has subjected Jews to decimation and annihilation with no recompense, asserts the poet, without a sign of divine punishment to the killers.

By this stage, the poet has reached a new low in terms of disillusionment with the covenant and abandons it. Conducting this Un-Passover ritual, the participant's abrogation of past rites has brought him to the essence of the covenant. He as a Jew is tired of carrying the burden of generations, of being of a chosen people sentenced to be eternal victims bereft of divine mercy. The poet's frustration is the question of how to bear this condition,

“And how should I bear” (*ve-'eikhah esa*, p. 56), the words resonant with the opening and title of the Tishah be-Av lament. Sardonicly, the narrator asks how his people are to bear the curse of God’s blessing that has led to their demise.

The final poem, “Let There Arise” (“*Ya’aleh*,” pp. 57–59; 1944) is an evocation of the familiar announcement of the impending Rosh Ḥodesh (New Moon) service, on the High Holy Days and embedded into the Passover Seder ceremony, and the *piyut*, or hymn, based on it that is recited during the *Ma’ariv* (evening) Yom Kippur service of *Kol Nidray*, but in reverse. Drawing on the original hymn, the poem highlights the threefold verbal formula, “let there arise, come ... and be seen,” (*ya’aleh ve-yavo ... ve-yera’eh*). The poem’s leading verbs refer to a god who lacks the faculties of hearing and sight. The resultant tone implies a resentment and frustration with the Almighty. God desires the sweet scent of the sanctified that rises up in a great flaming pyre, a description of the divine reminiscent of the more anthropomorphic, “primitive,” episodes representing the divine in the Bible and elsewhere. In this piece, God’s transcendental image has been written off, revealing a blood-thirsty image instead, as the poet shuns his covenantal obligations. He portrays God as resembling idols which Jews have mocked since biblical times for not seeing or hearing. Paradoxically, such expression comes from a poet who continues the dialogue and never abandons his maker, one described as “*holeh elohim*” (God-sick).

The subtext of the aforementioned prayer also meets the poet’s strategy of reversals, particularly with reference to the Rosh Ḥodesh (New Moon) liturgy. In the original text, we find attributes that are no longer efficacious:

Let there arise, come, reach, appear and be accepted, heard, considered and remembered our memory and consideration, the memory of our ancestors and the memory of the messiah, son of David your servant ... and the memory of all your people Israel before you, for deliverance, goodness, favor, kindness and compassion, for life and peace.

Richly intertextual and evocative of liturgical terms and phrases, the poem’s occasional rhymes contribute as well to fuse the allusions into a single whole. The example below is of the first two stanzas:

יַעֲלֶה כִּיּוֹם	Let there arise today
לְמַרוֹם	To the heights
בְּשָׁמַיִךְ	Of your heavens,
וְיָבֵא בְּאַפֵּיךְ	And come into your nostrils

עשן הכבשן	The smoke of the furnace
מערי-הרנה, --	Of the cities of slaughter,—
ענן הקטרת --	The incense-cloud—
גז החנק,	Choking gas,
לחן-צחן	Stinking-tune
של אלפי-רבבות בנים,	Of your myriad offspring,
פגרי המתים	Corpses of the dead
אשר הקטרו לעיניך.	Turned to incense before your eyes.

אהה, טהור-עינים!	Aha, you pure-eyed!
כי לא ראתה עינך	For your eye did not behold
הנפש בדם רקוקה,	The spirit spat up in the blood,
הפלצות של חלל-הרעב,	The hideousness of the starved-dead,
את מכוה הבשר הרטוש,	The burn of torn flesh,
שבער וקדש וטהר	That burned to sacred purity
באש-משנה מאש הסנה.	By a twofold-fire than the burning bush.
כי דמע-תפלה לא רצית,	For you did not accept the tears of prayer,
לא האזנת ללל החמס,	Did not hear the violent wail,
אנקת הזועה לא שמעת	The hideous moan you heard not
מפי עוללים ויונקים.	From the mouths of babes and infants.

(p. 57)

The referent texts portray a God seeking a hideous self-gratification by smelling the odor of human death. Any reference of the first three lines to the liturgical source, and an implicit prayer, is soon corrupted by those that follow. The smoke of the fire from the cities of slaughter refers, though in the plural, to Bialik's poem of the Kishinev Pogrom, "In the City of Slaughter." In this case, though, the image of the flames likened to a furnace resembles the theophany at Sinai (Exod 19:18), intersecting the sacred and horrific in the Jewish experience. Similarly, the words "the incense cloud" is the term used in Lev 16:13 in reference to the offering made to God. But here the words are further corrupted by association with the poison gas killing the myriads of God's children. It becomes a distorted and contemporary reference to the incense before the Almighty, a capturing of the moment when flesh becomes smoke as an offering of pleasant smelling incense to the Creator.

The second stanza's reference to God as "pure eyed" is the epithet from the words of the prophet Habakkuk (1:13). Its use here, as in the original, lends poignancy to the notion of an omniscient and omnipotent God. Con-



tently, too, the circumstances are similar, though harsher now, in that God cannot discern evil. The severity about divine blindness is that God does not discern the blood and life (or spirit) that is being spilled—the latter a reference to the prohibition behind consuming blood, for in it is the spirit (Deut 12:23), or life, which belongs to the divine. Nor does God notice the other dead, not those whose blood is shed but those who, according to the proof-text in Lam 4:9, are worse off by dying of hunger. Also, God does not notice the shredded and burned flesh rendered holy and pure, although the destructive fire is twice as great as the consecrating one beheld in the burning bush, another mark in the reversal of peoplehood.

The stature of the Creator is diminished in words that underscore God's indifference to the ravages of mankind. In the final two lines, the poem distorts the verse from Ps 8:3: "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast Thou founded strength" to imply that the source has been abrogated, for out of their mouths issue the horrific cries that were unheeded. The utter bankruptcy of the image of God leaves a hollow and unholy image.

The poem's affinity with a celebratory hymn announcing the new moon underscores the shortcomings of divine help in fulfilling the requests included in its words. If the poem were to be measured against the High Holy Day *piyut* (hymn) bearing these words, then it would be deemed as usurping the solemnity of the former to serve the new context while foregrounding the ineffectual role of words as prayer.

Regardless of the ravages performed on (and with) what would be taken as sacred language, Ben-Meir's strategy of dissolution remains a mark of continuity within the tradition rather than a break with it. The poems in the sequence, while echoing verses and fragments derived from liturgical and scriptural sources, are particularly focused on the national themes of becoming, liberation, and acceptance of God. The poet never breaks with God or the traditions of his community. Rather, the Holocaust prompts him to seek avenues for conveying the tragedy of the event and its consequences on Jewry. This he attains by emptying the language of tradition of its original contents, reversing rites and rituals to unfolding before the reader a topsy-turvy world of chaos and insanity.

The sequence concludes with a number of poems announcing the closure of the ceremony of the Un-Passover. The first, "On a Sleepless Night," (*Beleyl nedudim*," pp. 60–64; n.d.) echoes the opening as it revisits the "Watch Night" rite that includes anecdotes about the sleeplessness of the "celebrants." The opening line, "And it was after midnight" (*Va-yehi aḥar ḥatzot*) is evocative of one of the Seder's concluding songs, "And it was in

the middle of the night,” (“*Va-yehi ba-ḥatzi ha-laylah*”). Being a recounting of God’s miracles, the original is reduced to picture a world empty of the wonders of times long ago, leaving only words as reminders of a vanished legacy.

The poem “Ne’ilah,” (Closure, pp. 65–69; 1946), composed in five parts, derives its title from the closing ceremony of the Yom Kippur service. It repeats the poet’s strategy of integrating the rites of Passover with Yom Kippur, the personal with the communal, as the ceremony of a new fast draws to a conclusion. Upon the close of the day—for it appears as if the intersection of the Un-Passover with Yom Kippur has now given way to the latter’s closing prayer—the fate of the poet’s people will be sealed. He takes upon himself the role of *ḥazan* (cantor) or *shlichah tzibur* (communal emissary) as he leads the prayer to God asking for a national salvation at the close of the day.

<p>אָבִי, אָבִי, שְׁבַשְׁמִים! --          . . . . .          אֲשֶׁר אֶת שׁוּלֵי שְׂכִינְתְךָ רְקוּמִי צֶל וְאוֹרָה          נְשָׁקָה נִפְשִׁי בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה בְּבֵית-הַקְּנֶסֶת          בְּשַׁעַת נְעִילָה, בְּהַסְתַּלַּק יוֹם כְּפוּרִים</p>	<p>My father, my heavenly father ...          . . . . .          The fringes of your holy presence          embroidered in light and shadow          My soul kissed for the first time in          synagogue          At the hour of Ne‘ilah, at the close of Yom          Kippur...</p>
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The poem is a recollection of the poet’s childhood when, during the “Ne’ilah” service at the end of Yom Kippur, he learned that crying before his biological father is inappropriate at a time when the congregation is imploring their heavenly father for a verdict of life.

הַפְּעוּט בָּכָה : אָבִיא, אֲנִי מֵתִירָא...  
 וְכַף קִטְטִינָה נִתְקַעָה בְּרַעְדָה אֶל תוֹךְ כְּפוּ.  
 אֵךְ אָבִיא גָחוּ, לְחַשׁ לִי עַל אֲזִנִּי:  
 הַס-הַס, לֹא יֵאָה עֲתָה בְּכוֹת כְּמוֹךְ פֹּה לְפָנַי, --  
 הוּ בָלֵם בּוֹכִים לְפָנַי אָבִיא בְּשָׁמַיִם.

The small child cried: father, I am afraid...  
 And a tiny shivering hand grasped his.  
 But father bent over, whispering in my ear:  
 Shush-shush, it is not nice for you to cry now here before me,—  
 For all are crying now before their father in heaven.

Yet despite leaving childhood's innocence behind, he writes, the cry of that Ne'ilah remains with him, to plead now with God to avert the closing hour. Composing it in 1946, the poet demonstrates a greater familiarity with the scope of the devastation and outcome of the Sho'ah. He can therefore declare that Jewry has lost tenfold the number of those who left Egypt's bondage. This observation not only underscores of the magnitude of the loss as against the formative age of the nation but thematically ties the poem to the Passover (and Exodus) leitmotif at the core of most previous poems. Mankind, asserts the poet, has again eaten of the forbidden fruit to take on a distorted aspect of God, as knowers of only evil.

The poet's prayer does not conceal his misgivings about a God who permitted all this to happen. Yet Ben-Meir does not plumb the depths of the theological upheaval that the Holocaust catalyzed. He remains a man of faith, though seeming to reserve the (traditional) prerogative to admonish and contend with God about the Sho'ah's impact. But he has no recourse in terms of faith, preferring to choose belief over nihilism. His Jobean cry remains one of a believer directed at God as the sole judge and power.

As tradition would have it, the sequence concludes on a high note, with a poem that alters the tone to optimism and joy. "Israel," (p. 70), is a finely structured and rhymed sonnet composed in the wake of the establishment of the State of Israel and published in 1949.<sup>20</sup> It not only seals the sequence by returning to a formally recognized poem, but its thematically upbeat tone announces the following sequence of eight poems, entitled "Israel" that celebrates the birth of the Jewish State.

Surveying the devastation of the Holocaust, "Israel" nevertheless places the emphasis on the positive. Its opening foregrounds the unity of the people and their fate by reference to the word "*eḥad*," namely one. Borrowing the leading word in the "*shma*," the Jewish avowal of God's oneness, the poet turns his back on the strategy of reversal. Calling the Jews the heart of all nations, the poem traces their near eradication. Yet they were rescued, he asserts, by a primordial force to flower again and promote the mending of the world.

In his modest oeuvre of poems focused on the Holocaust, Moshe Ben-Meir has crafted one of the most daring subversions of the sacred. Yet it is not for the sake of annihilating the traditional that he revises sacred texts and dogma but to reflect verbally on his fears about that which may be taking place to affect Jews physically and in the subliminal world of spiritual-

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<sup>20</sup> *Hado'ar*, year 28, vol. 29.28 (28 Iyar 5709; May 27, 1949): 693.

ity. The changes include a total overhaul of one's perspective on the world, the notion of a national (religious and ethnic) survival in the face of a devastating force, a further invalidation of Jewish dependence on Diaspora existence, and a personal transmutation of faith.

Hebrew poetry in America, conservative as it was formally and thematically, did not avoid confronting the Holocaust in literary terms. Poets, and Ben-Meir among them, resorted to traditional modes of expression to seek out the consequences and meanings of the event in their lives. So while he retained a formally recognizable mode of expression, his choice to vent the frustration and explore the significance of the event is primarily by inverting the accepted terms, negating communal myths as an observation of the upheaval in Jewish thought. However, he does not abrogate faith or its cultural components.

Coming as it had in the wake of the great migrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Holocaust did not leave the American Jewish center as a viable alternative to take up the mantle dropped when the European centers were annihilated. America was by then a locus for an altered Jewry, one so Americanized, secularized, and de-Europeanized as to possess values and social goals unlike their European counterparts.<sup>21</sup> The measure by which American Jewry rejected its European roots by the late 1930s became the determining factor negating the prospect of it taking up the role of a viable center of Hebrew culture in the wake of the European disaster. America was a new and different arena for Jewry, one in which assimilation was willfully and gleefully undertaken and accelerated by Jews themselves, many who readily surrendered a centuries-old culture, deeply seated and rich, for the American pot of porridge.

American Jewry lost an opportunity to become the new cultural locus of world Jewish life. Yet it instinctually demonstrated its continued ties to Jews of Europe, an act that affirmed the sense of their shared fate. However, the destiny of Hebrew culture in America was no longer considered viable. It was sufficiently obvious that the premiership of Hebrew literary centers became the emergent center in Eretz Yisra'el, another arena with its own innovations, agendas, and radical change as it too underwent a process of rejecting things Diasporic, Ashkenazi, and Western.

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<sup>21</sup> Attested also by P. Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 32–33.