Contradiction & Dichotomy:

David Bergelson and Itzik Manger Confront the Bible

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Introduction

"Itzik, the sacrifice is ready"[1]
–Itzik Manger

In this thesis, I investigate two very different answers to a central question for early twentieth century Yiddish authors: how should one relate to the Bible, the central Jewish text, in a world where Jews are both promised emancipation and threatened with fascism. David Bergelson (1884-1952), who grew up in a religious household in Czarist Russia and eventually, after a period in Berlin, returned as a loyal Soviet, wrote prose fiction that represented the old Jewish world as doomed and broken. In his short story *Altvarg* (Old Age/Obsolescence), he presents the Bible as something that gave meaning to the lives of the old shtetl Jews, but ultimately prevented them from participating in modern life, paralyzing them in the past. Itzik Manger (1901-69) was the most skilled balladeer in Yiddish, creating witty, tragic and beautiful poems drawing on his childhood experiences in the Carpathian Mountains with his grandfather, his extensive reading of German literature from his childhood in Hapsburg Czernowitz, and centrally the tales of the Bible. Instead of seeing the Bible as something that necessarily traps Jews in the past, Manger

[1] *"Itsik, s'iz greyt di akeyda"*

unites the contradictions of past and present to make the Bible relevant and meaningful in a changing world. By casting himself in long Jewish traditions of reinterpretation and irreverent humor, Manger was able to bring the Biblical stories to life without falling prey to the heaviness of the divine edict that Bergelson's character is unable to escape from. In this thesis, I will first show how Bergelson forcefully creates an image of the way that the Bible can trap, and then, through an analysis of Manger's *Akeyda* (Binding of Isaac) poems, show how the poet is able to escape the snare by bringing together the contradictory elements of the universal and the particular, the ancient religious past, folk traditions of the shtetl and modern avant-garde art.

Itzik Manger was a man of contradictions. One of the greatest folk-singers of the Yiddish language, beloved for his witty, brilliantly multifaceted, accessible poetry, he was an obnoxious, unlikeable, sarcastic drunk in person. "Manger often comes into conflict with the outside world, and with himself, but never with his poetic vocation…In life Manger is disorderly, intemperate, but in his poetry there is not a single word reflecting his disheveled head," noted a review by a contemporary poet, Rochl Korn (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 362). He loved German literature with a passion, yet left the Kaiser-Königlicher Dritter Staats-Gymnasium after only one semester, probably kicked out for his chronic pranks (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 77). Writing poetry deeply influenced by Verlaine and Rilke, Manger saw himself as a Yiddish troubador in the long tradition of "wedding jesters and Purim players" (Roskies 220).

Despite his scanty religious education and irreverent attitude, his most famous books are retellings of Biblical stories, his 1933 *Khumesh-Lider* (Pentateuch-Songs) and 1936 *Megile-Lider* (Scroll of Esther Songs). The *Khumesh-Lider* cuts all divine melodrama: no creation of the

world, no plague-heralded Exodus, no special effects at Sinai or entry into the promised land. Manger's forefathers are also exceedingly human: petty, overly concerned with reputation at the expense of the humane treatment of others, nasty, lying and limited. Moses isn't even mentioned once (*The World* xxxii). While he was unsurprisingly criticized by the Orthodox establishment for such a portrayal of the Bible, with Rabbis calling to have them banned from Jewish homes, he was also critiqued by left-leaning Yiddish authors for his seeming inability to shake off the past (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 320–23)

For a book seemingly intent on removing the force of God's command from the world, almost a third of the *Khumesh-Lider* is devoted to the saga of the *Akeyda*, the Binding of Isaac. This story seems the paragon of divine intervention. Abraham leaves behind all he values to follow God's command. Throughout history, the *Akeyda* has troubled readers, both Jewish and Gentile, a prefiguration of Christ or a symbol of Jewish martyrdom (Frakes). According to twentieth century Jewish theologian Yishayahu Leibowitz, Abraham must "set aside all human values, beginning with the satisfaction of one's most natural feelings, and ending with the most universal of goals, out of the fear of God" (Milman 62). In this he echoes Kierkegaard's explanation in *Fear and Trembling* of Abraham's actions as a "teleological suspension of the ethical" (McDonald).

The *Akeyda* is fundamentally a contradiction: is it the story of the salvation of Isaac from the knife or of the divine command to "take now your son, your only son, whom you love...and offer him there for a burnt-offering?" (Genesis 22:2). In exploring these questions, from before his first published volume up until his last prewar book of poetry, Manger touches upon all the

conflicting parts of his identity. In one poem, the fulfillment of the deferred sacrifice is Jesus; in another, it is Manger himself, whose name is a diminutive of the Hebrew *Yitskhok*. In the *Khumesh-Lider*, the Biblical characters tread the world of the poet's grandfather, the Carpathian woods which birthed Hasidism. What relationship to the European universal is Manger positing, as Abraham and Isaac chat in household Yiddish as Christ on the cross is spread over the sky? In "The Sacrifice of Itzik" (1937), his grandfather Abraham explains his pronouncement, "Itzik, the sacrifice is ready":

> Itzik, do you
> remember—a long time ago—an angel
> spread his wings above us
> and you were saved?
>
> He regrets that, our old God,
> and now demands His sacrifice

Why does God demand his sacrifice now? What could it mean for this blasphemous poet to be the sacrifice? What does this tell us about Manger's relationship to Jewish tradition and European universalism as Nazi's shadow grows larger?

To understand these tensions, I introduce David Bergelson as a counterpoint. In Bergelson's story *Altvarg*, like Manger, he layers the past onto the present, the shtetl and the Bible. But unlike Manger, who creates beautiful, funny poetry that brings the Bible vividly to life without giving up a hope for universality, the protagonist in Bergelson's story is unable to reconcile the past and

the present. He interprets his life through the lens of the Bible and its Rabbinic interpreters, yet the grand conclusions he makes about his own actions ultimately have no impact on the real world, as he never does anything to fix what he sees as his great sin. He is paralyzed in the religious narratives. One line perfectly represents this. As the protagonist reads from a holy book, "He hummed like a bee that had wandered into the narrow space between double windows and keeps banging and banging into the panes without managing to escape" (*The Shadows of Berlin* 10). This story, in its intricate rendering of the web of connections between Biblical narrative, homiletic reinterpretation, the old shtetl and the new cosmopolitan world, is a perfect counterpoint to Manger's work.

As a religious Jew, I have struggled with the contradictions of living a life caught between the past and the present, my religious life and the modern world. After a year of study in a traditional seminary, *yeshiva*, in Israel, I came to Princeton where I studied Comparative Literature with a focus on German. Discovering Rilke's *Book of Hours*, I found what felt like a parallel soul: deeply yearning, yet skeptical, wanting to submit to God, but not sure if God exists without his prayers. When I realized that my knowledge of Hebrew and German could allow me to read Yiddish, a shocking idea for a Sephardi boy who was always taught that it was sacrilege to use pronounce the traditional greeting *good shabbes* instead of a meticulously enunciated *shabbat shalom*. When I first read Bergelson and Manger this past summer at an anarchist Yiddish music festival in the cobbled streets of Weimar, Germany, I understood that, despite the massive gap in our experiences, they were trying to answer the same questions. I was drawn to Bergelson's strange and powerful imagery, and Manger's brilliant wit. But more deeply, Bergelson spoke to the part of me that sometimes wants to just leave this religious and cultural mess behind, take my

place in the exciting universal world out there. But I know I could never do that, for the ties are too strong. Instead, like Manger, I will just spend my life grappling with the contradictions.

Background

Eastern European Yiddish authors in the interwar period faced two interrelated tasks: finding a place between past and present, Jewish particularism and European universalism. While all modern authors sought out a place in relation to the past and the particular, the specific historical and cultural conditions facing Jews at the time made these questions particularly pressing and relevant. From the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, massive political and historical changes rocked Europe. Nationalist movements came to the fore as great empires disintegrated (Bukovec). Urbanization and industrialization led to mass migrations. Farmers left in droves to the city, a situation not always appreciated by the city folk: ”the potatoes,” as was said, “have moved” (Wisner). The Russian Revolution promised a new era of representation for the common people and a secular state where previously opposed identities could be absorbed into one multiethnic country (Endelman). These changes affected Jews particularly strongly. In the first three decades of the twentieth century Jews across Eastern Europe fitfully gained the right to join society. Yet rising tides of antisemitism were visible on the horizon, as the newly formed nations rebelled against the presence of liberated Jews in their midst. The genocide of the Holocaust was followed by the Soviet destruction of the remaining Eastern European Jewish culture under Stalin in the 1940’s (Bukovec).

While many cities had vibrant Jewish cultures and substantial populations (a quarter of Budapest and a third of Warsaw were Jewish), Jews sat uneasily in this new European paradigm (Bukovec,

Polonsky, "Warsaw"). Unlike other minorities who were finding their voice in the early twentieth century, Jews had no homeland, no territory to call their own. Debates raged about how to balance tradition and modernity. Assimilationism, trying find a place in the wider society by shaking off aspects of Jewish religion and culture, was strongly opposed by Orthodox Jews who thought it would spell the end of Judaism. This balance played out differently based on political and cultural trends. In Russia, Jews found ways to maintain their cultural uniqueness while participating in the mainstream because of the multiethnic character of the state, whereas in Poland, stronger antisemitism and nationalist movements drove Jews more starkly to extremes of assimilation of tradition (Endelman). One of the strongest signals of Jewish particularism was the Yiddish language, the old world "jargon." The Zionist movement sought to extricate the "New Hebrew" from this language encumbered with five hundred years of debilitating *golus*, exile (Chaver xiv), while some assimilationists saw Yiddish as uncultured, a remnant of tradition irrelevant in a cosmopolitan world (Endelman). Writing in Yiddish was a political act as much as a literary one. What is Yiddish?

Yiddish developed over a thousand years ago, as Jews immigrated to Germany. As happened before with Judeo-Arabic and after with Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), Jews created their own version of the local language, written in the alphabet of the Hebrew liturgy. Middle High German lent its grammar and vocabulary to the budding Yiddish, which was expanded to include Slavic languages as Yiddish speakers moved East. Throughout, as in all Jewish languages, *lashon kodesh* (the tongue of holiness) was always key. Hebrew and Aramaic words resonated with Biblical stories, Talmudic argumentation or Jewish liturgy and ritual (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 32).While all languages are a tapestry of influences from a variegated history, Yiddish retains the

individuality of its numerous sources, leading to a high degree of what linguists "component awareness" (Kronfeld and Peckerar). Yiddish authors could choose from a dizzying array of synonyms of different registers and cultural meaning. Because almost all Yiddish speakers were at least bilingual, authors could even insert whole sequences in Ukranian or Polish without problem (eg. Bergelson, *Shṭuremṭeg dertseylungen* 30). Like the Jews, Yiddish was a language without a land. It was known by two names: *Taytsch,* meaning both German and translation, reflecting its connection between Jews and their surroundings, and *Mame-loshn*, mother tongue. As the native tongue of most Eastern Europe Jews, it became a kind of "spiritual-national home," Yiddishland (Shandler; Chaver xiv).

The history of modern Yiddish literature is a compressed one, hemmed in on both sides by pressures from the outside world. While tied to earlier literary genres from medieval times through the Hassidic and Haskalah literature, the modern development of Yiddish literature really begins with the Russian reforms of the mid-1800s, which allowed Jews to participate more fully in the secular world. The flourishing of Yiddish culture was brought to an abrupt end as the Holocaust wiped out most of its speaker and Stalinist Russia slammed the coffin closed with purges of Jews and the destruction of Yiddish culture only one century after it took off (Howe 1–2).

Yiddish literature always stood on the threshold: between Jews and non-Jews, the past and the present. As Irving Howe notes, choosing to write modern fiction, and not just religious texts, was an "irrevocable step into the modern secular world" (13). From the beginning, Yiddish authors blended Biblical stories with European literary frameworks, "emerg[ing] out of the adaptation of

non-Jewish literary models and material and its fusion with specifically Jewish traditions and the contemporary worlds of Jewish experience" (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 34 [my translation]). Alongside fifteenth century translations of chivalric romances, awkwardly adapted to include Biblical characters as the knights, stood retellings of Biblical stories in the meter of the *Nibelungenlied,* portraying the Bible as a Jewish epic worthy of the European literary canons (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 34; von Bernuth). Yiddish literature took off in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as writers used it as a vehicle for their views on religion. *Maskilim* (Jewish Enlightenment thinkers) wrote novels critiquing religious superstition, while Hasidic Rebbes told fables to encapsulate sacred teachings. The ambiguity and inability to reduce these texts to a simple religious or political ideology give them enduring literary value (Krutikov).

Yiddish changed across time and place. As a massive oversimplification, one can divide modern Yiddish literature into four periods: the rise in the late 1800s, the prewar fluorescence of new genres and authors as a brief respite from political chaos allowed culture to bloom, the interwar hopeful writing which was soon threatened by the storm clouds of fascism and antisemitism across Europe. After the destruction of the majority of Yiddish culture in World War II, Yiddish authors turned inwards and back to tradition, but Yiddish was on a dying path, and there are few good Yiddish authors or critics today, though there is a rise of literary activity in Hasidic communities, the main speakers of Yiddish who are left, though little of it is of great literary merit (Krutikov). Even within a period, political pressures affected Yiddish culture massively: after World War I, pressure to assimilate in America and the Soviet Union drove Yiddish authors to look outwards, while rising Polish nationalism forced Jewish culture inwardly (Howe 39).

The foundation of modern Yiddish literature is as much myth as history. Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, known by his pseudonym Mendele Moykher-Sforim (1835–1917), Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (1852–1915) and Sholem Aleichem (Shalom Rabinovitz; 1859–1916), commonly known as the "grandfather," "father," and "son" of classical Yiddish literature, were in fact contemporaneous authors of the first generation to break free of the ideological driven Yiddish literature before them. This genealogy, intended to give Yiddish literature a history like that of other European literatures, was manufactured by the authors themselves.

All three of these authors came from religious backgrounds, but in their exposure to secular literature were able to bring new modes of writing into Yiddish. They were not only crafting literature, but language. Abramovitsh fashioned a literary idiom that was accessible and universal, connected to the masses and transcending the idiosyncrasies of dialect. Peretz was a key figure at the 1908 Czernowitz Yiddish Language Conference, which proclaimed Yiddish a national language of the Jewish people. And Sholem Aleichem brought the rhythms of folk language into literature with his avuncular, fate-bedraggled, scripture-misquoting Tevye the Dairyman. They all tried to find a way back to the Jewish people: Abramovitsch through his language, Peretz through his collections of Yiddish folklore, Sholem Aleichem through his representations of the common people in his tragicomic portrayals of the shtetl. They did not shy away from critiquing the old world (Abramovitsh was a harsh critic of the stultified traditional life and economic relationships in the shtetl) but nor did they spare their critique from Yiddish literature. Peretz worried, like the religious critics of his modern literature, "that a deracinated Yiddish could itself become a means of assimilation unless it drew on traditional sources,"

demanding a literature in touch with the people and the past. (Wisse; Miron, "Sholem Aleichem"; Miron, "Abramovitsh, Sholem Yankev")

From the first generation of Yiddish authors to the second there was a big change in relationship to Jewish tradition. Most of the first generation could count on their readership understanding religious references, as they, like the authors themselves, had mostly grown up religious. In the late interwar period, very few Yiddish authors were religious, Aharon Zeitlin being a rare example (Howe 40). While the history of Yiddish literature can be seen as the rapid turnover as new generations of authors tried to revolutionize, moving farther from the "folk constraints and ideological formulas" of the past, this inevitably brought them away from their base, as they became constrained to be the literature of the elite.

Manger and Bergelson

Bergelson represents both the earlier, more religious strand of authors, and the radical movements towards universality inherent in his allegiance to the Soviet Union. They carried out two very different literary projects. Manger crafted a mythos of himself as a folk-poet, a persona from the old world. But underneath the simple, folksy surface of his poems hid complex and modern poetic techniques. He used the tradition of the Purim play to create poetry that was both traditional and heretical, framing his humanist and irreverent retellings of the Bible as if they were just some old religious fun. He was rooted in the people.

Bergelson joined the people in a different way, by becoming an ardent socialist. Although his impressionist fiction was much more clearly a European form, he wanted to be an author who wrote for the *amkho*, the people. He thought the only place possible to do that was the Soviet

Union, where the state supported authors and they were loved and widely read. But he clearly separated himself from the past, leaving behind his religious upbringing. His stories tell of the shtetl, but they ultimately present the old world as something dead, where his characters can only resign themselves to loss. This resignation is the opposite of the hope in the Soviet Union's promise of equality, modernism and Jewish culture.

The two authors I focus on in this study, David Bergelson (1884-1952) and Itzik Manger (1901-69), shared a fundamental feature of the early twentieth century Jewish experience. They stood at the crossroads of the old world and the new, the particularism of the Jewish experience and the promise of joining the European universal. This started in their families, who valued traditional education but also ensured that their sons received a grounding in secular literature and language, allowing them to read widely and fluently in Russian and German, respectively (Gal-Ed and Rosenwald 33). Bergelson and Manger were both born in what would later become modern Ukraine, and like so many Jews of their time, travelled first to the big city and then left Eastern Europe, both spending time in Berlin and New York. Beyond these basic details of the modern Jewish experience, they were incredibly different. Bergelson, though raised in a wealthy religious household insulated from the political currents rocking Europe, eventually became a staunch Communist. He thought, as seemed possible in the twenties, that Yiddish only had a future in the Soviet Union, to which he moved in 1934. His predictions soon turned out to be tragically wrong. He was murdered (on his sixty-eighth birthday no less) along with scores of other literary luminaries as Stalin purged the USSR of Jewish culture in the forties and fifties (Sherman; Peckerar). Manger, the son of a freethinking tailor, was a strong believer in *doikayt*, "here-ness," the idea that a home could be found for Jews in Eastern Europe. While leaning

socialist, he was no ideologue, and saw himself as a wandering drunk more than an activist. His most productive period was spent in Warsaw, a center for Jewish culture in the heart of the non-Jewish world (Roskies and Wolf xix). After two tortured post-war decades in Britain and America, he eventually found his way to the holy land, where he died in 1969, an acclaimed poet (Brenner). Throughout their lives, these authors inhabited radically different cultural and political worlds. In addition to their physical and ideological migrations, Bergelson and Manger wrote literature at a crossroads. They were both deeply influenced by European authors, and wanted to create literature that would be part of a universal canon, while still retaining its Jewish character (Sherman, Novershtern, Gal-Ed, Roskies and Wolf).

The way they navigated their relationship to Jewish tradition in their literature was just as starkly opposed as their ideological choices and life paths. Bergelson, who grew up in a religious household and spent a decade studying Talmud in a traditional *kheyder* (classroom), wrote literature with little explicit trace of the traditional texts. While he wrote almost exclusively about Jewish topics, his prose was influenced more by the modern Yiddish classics than the Bible or Talmud he knew so well, using instead impressionistic language to convey his central themes of resignation, silence, and loneliness (Novershtern; Liptzin 196). Manger, the son of a Bible-loving apostate father and a more pious mother, was given a rudimentary religious education in the Hapsburg university city of Czernowitz (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 62–63). His early texts are subversive, the figure of Christ looming large (Gal-Ed, "Between Jesus and the Besht"). Yet his most well-known work is his retelling of stories from the Bible into modern humanist poems, a modern *midrash*.

Bergelson's portrayals of the old Jewish world show paralysis, a religious system fading into obsolescence as the world changes without it. Manger, however, found a way of combining the old and the new, the folk song of the shtetl and avant-garde poetry, the Biblical text and modern sensibilities to craft a lasting text that not only integrated past and present, universal and particular, but also jumped over deep divides among Jews over these questions, becoming one of the first Yiddish texts to make it big in Israel, a land that tried to leave behind this language of the old diasporic world (Brenner). As Irving Howe, a noted scholar of Yiddish literature, describes in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, Yiddish authors were carried "toward the lure of personal speech and back to the web of Jewish destiny. Weak poets succumb to the tension of this movement back and forth; strong poets make it into the very substance of their work" (47). Itzik Manger's life was spent navigating these contradictions instead of running from them.

Because Bergelson shied away from using traditional sources in his fiction, there is little literature about his use of the Bible. Instead, most of the criticism focuses on his relationship to revolution and influence from European styles (for example in a recent collection of essays from the Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish). By analyzing *Altvarg*, one of his only texts to explicitly engage with religious narratives, I extract a strong sense of his position on the place of religious texts in Jewish life.

The current literature on Manger, while extensive, never directly answers the question of the *Akeyda* in his work. Analysis of his *Khumesh-Lider* focused either on his use of idiom (Kronfeld and Peckerar) or parallels to the German poet Rilke (Spiegelblatt). While Kronfeld and Peckerar

help us understand his approach how his intentional anachronism creates a modernist distance from the Biblical text, as opposed to the shtetl Jew, who saw the Bible and life as continuous (10). They also apply the concept of Bakhtin's chronotope to this literature. A chronotope is a literary world that blends past and present. While Manger uses the chronotope to enrich the present, Bergelson's character Grayvis is unable to differentiate the chronotope of his religious imagination from the real world. Efrat Gal-Ed's in recent, meticulous, and massive critical biography of Manger provides a key resource for understanding the background of Manger's life (*Niemandssprache*). Gal-Ed's compelling representations of how Manger explored the relationship of Yiddish literature to the European milieu serve as important models for my analysis of how these two poles play out in the *Akeyda* poems (Gal-Ed and Rosenwald; "Between Jesus and the Besht"). Finally, David Roskies' work on Manger's literary persona is an important background to how the poet approaches the Bible. Roskies' claims that Manger is able to sum up all the different authors before him, bringing together his disparate roots into a "lyric-poetic dawning" (226). By combining this with Kronfeld and Peckerar's, I am able to show how Manger's anachronism goes beyond only creating a self separate from his chronotope. Instead, like the *Akeyda*, where Isaac's sacrifice ensures future generations, Manger reincarnates the Yiddish world by weaving together past and present.

This thesis provides a key study in the fundamental question of how modern Yiddish authors integrated past and present. By comparing the dichotomous model outlined in *Altvarg* to Manger's playful anachronism, I tease out how two approaches that share some surface similarity are fundamentally different. Yiddish authors who layered past and present were not doomed to lose their place in the contemporary world. I look specifically at Manger's *Akeyda*

poems, so key to his exploration of the paradoxes of modern Yiddish literature. The *Akeyda* poems stand at the crux of Manger's work, as the only divine drama in his central work on the Bible. They present the relationship of the universal to the particular, humanism to religion, poetry to pain. When the war comes, they form a key image in Manger's response to catastrophe. Looking at these poems, whose significance is never truly approached in contemporary scholarship, and *Altvarg*, a lone presentation of Bergelson's views on religious text in the sea of his impressionist fiction, I fill a gap in criticism of twentieth century Yiddish literature.

To answer these questions, I rely on close reading. While both Bergelson and Manger were prolific authors, looking closely at their works enables me to see how they represent the entanglement of past and present on the micro-level. As Chana Kronfeld and Robert Peckerar amply demonstrate in their brilliant investigation of Manger's (mis)use of Yiddish idioms in Hebraic contexts, his poetry cannot be understood without a close attention to the manifold meanings curled up into every word (Kronfeld and Peckerar). Something as small as a two-letter diminutive suffix or the careful use of colloquial language can provide depths of meaning, not only to the poem in which they occur, but to our understanding of Manger's political and literary stances. Lawrence Rosenwald aptly shows the value of "reading in slow motion" to Manger's poems, which are intentionally ambiguous and deeply complex behind their simple exterior (Rosenwald 17).

David Bergelson (1884-1952), who wrote psychologically cutting prose about loss in the shtetl, decided that a modern Yiddish literature, while relying on Jewish themes, needed to find an idiom and means of expression free from the shadow of the Bible. In my first chapter, I show

how Bergelson encapsulates this message in his image of a tortured, old world religious Jew in the short story *Altvarg* (Old Age/Obsolescence). The protagonist of that story interprets his life through the lens of the Bible and its Rabbinic interpreters, leading to a megalomania about his own importance and an inability to take action in the real world, as he is so stuck in the religious narratives that he is rendered paralyzed. He is unable to separate the biblical narratives from his life, and in doing so, sees the world in black and white. Modern life is simply sinful, and he only finds truth in religious texts, which bring him down into a spiral of inaction, guilt, and pain. In the melding of the pious imagination with his experience of reality, he lose touch with life, becoming obsolete.

In my second chapter I explore Itzik Manger's presentation of contradiction in his *Akeyda* poems. These various retellings of the Binding of Isaac touch on all the cornerstones of modern Yiddish literature. They explore the power in joining European universalism, and contend with the threat of the holocaust. They outline Manger's belief in the salvific power of beautiful poetry, as well as the pain of human nastiness. In bringing together all these contradictions, Manger is able to unite the dead world of the past and the threatening world of the present to emphasize humanity and the importance of emotion. In parallel, I explore Manger's representations of Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden to show how he finds the power of beauty in the interstitial spaces between life and loss.

In my conclusion, I compare Manger's anachronistic layering of past and present with Grayvis's obsessive inability to extricate himself from the past. I show how Manger's techniques let him

draw on this past without losing himself in it, using the exegetical tradition to reinterpret Judaism and keep it relevant, allowing him to face whatever may come.

Bergelson's *Altvarg* (Obsolescence/Old Age):

Holy text as inescapable doom

Introduction

David Bergelson's short story *Altvarg* (Obsolescence/Old Age) was published in 1926, the year he swore his allegiance to the Soviet Union. The story portrays Moshe Grayvis, an old man alone in the apartment of his daughters in Berlin. He has been recently transplanted from his small city in Ukraine where he lived a comfortable life, both spiritually and economically, believing that the money that his renters brought in for him was an assurance of God's love for him. As the story goes on, we learn that his adult daughters set him up with a second wife to ameliorate his loneliness, but soon sent her away because, in their words, she was unable to "settle in." Grayvis does not object to his daughters' actions and sees his failure to extract forgiveness from his wife as a great sin: not only does he think it spelled the doom of his city, but also caused the Russian revolution and its attendant changes in the world: "exactly from that point on began the war."[2]

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[2] punkt fun demolt on hot zikh ongehoybn di milkhome

All quotes in Yiddish are transliterated and paginated from *Shṭuremṭeg dertseylungen*. Translations are cited by page number from Joachim Neugroschel's collection *The Shadows of Berlin*. Some quotes are slightly modified from Neugroschel's translation to clarify the Yiddish word choice, and are therefore marked with an 'm' after the number, eg. (12m). For quotes of my own translation I simply omit the English reference, including only the page number from *Shṭuremṭeg* in the footnote.

This old, lonely man believes that he is responsible for cataclysmic changes. In this chapter, I will show how he comes to this conclusion, through a combination of a formulaic life of piety and a set of texts that present sin as inescapable and disastrous. The religious texts he reads, instead of being a model for living, serve to trap him in the past, dragging him down into inaction and ultimately obsolescence.

Altvarg is chiastic in structure and scattered with echoes, repeated fractured versions of the whole. In the middle of Gravyis's sleepless night in his daughters' apartment, he recollects life in his Ukrainian *shtetl*, memories of its streets framing his memories of his great sin. These transitions are facilitated through traditional texts. The descriptions of his night in Berlin are interwoven with the story of the prophet Jonah, as he imagines himself fleeing his sin. The gap between Berlin and the vivid image of the *shtetl* is bridged by an "ancient and yellow" holy tome (*seyfer*). This book explains how sin creates ripples in the world, wreaking destruction. This creates a way for Grayvis to understand why his life was turned upside down by the Great War.

Grayvis is an obsolete man: his "hair had once been blonde, and now grayest of all were the bushy eyebrows. He was an old and very pious Jew, whose children had recently brought him to Berlin from a little Ukrainian ghost town" (9). This is the image of a man past his time: graying, a pious transplant from a dead world into the modern city. In his daughters' Berlin apartment, it is as if he isn't even there. "The big grandfather clock was ticking in the corner the way such clocks tick […] when all the tenants have gone out, and they, the clocks, remain in charge" (9).[3] The clocks no longer register that he is there: he is no longer present in the passage of time,

[3] es klapt in vinkl der groyser shtey-zeyger, vi se klopn azelkhe zeygers in a vinter-nakht beeys ale fun shtub geyen avek, un zey, di zeygers, bleybn balebos (151)

written out of history. Instead, he is stuck in the past: no matter how much he tried to distract himself, "he was still haunted" by the sins of his past (13).[4] His pious reading pulls him back further: "you shall remember all your sins and the sins of your fathers and your fathers' fathers all the way back to the generation of the Flood" (10).[5] He lives in foregone Jewish worlds, not the present.

Berlin is the opposite of this pious, quiet, old man: the "very big and blasphemous city" is young and energetic. Twice, Grayvis muses about Berlin's sin, an almost verbatim paragraph on the first and last page of *Altvarg.* The first time he reflects on Berlin's sin is at the beginning of the story, right after he "had said his bedtime prayers, put out the light, and sighed the sigh of a pious Jew as he got into bed" (9). He is a quiet, religious man, going to sleep at a reasonable hour. His daughters, on the other hand, the women of the city, "had gone to some ball […] and they wouldn't be back until daybreak." The city doesn't sleep, it revels in hedonism. Yet ultimately, Grayvis also stays up all night, kept up by his conscience, wallowing in the past.

As Berlin begins to awake at the story's end, it is clear he doesn't fit into "the charging racket […] filled with young desire" (18).[6] The city is loud and young, counter to Grayvis's quiet manner. "With fresh, renewed strength, the well-rested elevated trains clattered aloft" while Grayvis lies in his bed as he tries to catch a moment's rest after a sleepless night (19).[7]

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[4] *lozt im nit op* (155)

[5] *az du vest zikh misvade zeyn, zolstu gedeynken deyne zind un di zind fun deyne eltern un fun deyne elterns eltern biz dor-hamabul* (152)

[6] *zeyer farbay-yogndiker gepilder iz ful mit yungn kheyshek* (161)

[7] *vi mit frish-oysgeshlofener baneyter kraft klaft inderheykh di oysgerute mekhtike shtot-bon* (161)
er shlist ale veyle shtarker di oygn af onshlofn tsu vern (162)

The man who believes that his piety ensures him quiet is robbed of it, while the city he sees as sinful thrives, well-rested despite its wantonness. He tries to keep the city out, "shutting his eyes tighter and tighter," but he can't escape his endless worries about the sinful city, "His head kept whirling incessantly" (19).[8]

Beforehand, in the middle of the night, "he heard people talking in the street, yelling cheerfully, he heard young men singing and girls laughing—and their laughter was nocturnal and wanton and faraway, like the laughter in ancient Nineveh." The sexual tension in this energetic group contrast with the cold and "very taciturn, very sluggish" nature of his second wife. As he does to the sounds of the day, he tries to shut out this youthful laughter : he "hunched even deeper over his religious tome and he began humming even more piously" (11).[9]

His daughters ally themselves with the city against Grayvis and his world. The descriptions of the factory whistles calling the workers and the laughter are distant (*vayt*), just like his daughters, who "had all married and moved to distant cities" (13).[10] Even when he moves in with them in Berlin, they live a modern, big city life, partying all night, while he sits and studies holy texts. According to his daughters, he was obsolete even in his old city in Ukraine. He was just an afterthought to their obligatory visit to their mother: "his rich married daughters would come to visit their mother's grave, and when doing so, they would spend a little time with him"[11] (13). To

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[8] *in kop dreyt zikh im on ufher* (162)

[9] *dernokh hot er derhert fun gas a gerederey fun mentshn, vos shreyen zikh freylekh adurkh — a gezang fun yungeleyt hot er derhert un a gelekhter fun meydlekh, un der gelekhter iz geven a banakhtiker, an oysgelsener un a veyter, vi der gelekhter in uraltn ninve. greyvis hot zikh iber zeyn seyfer nokh mer eyngeboygn un hot nokh mit mer frumkeyk ongehoybn zhumen.* (153)

[10] *denstmol geht khsene gemakht ale zeyne tekhter in di veyte groyse shtet* (155)

[11] zeyne reykhe oysgegebene tekhter flegn dan kumen tsu zeyer muter af keyver-oves, un az zey flegn aropkumen, flegn zey farbleybn ba im a shtikl tseyt (156)

these women of the city, the old world was a dead place, just a cemetery. Their father, stuck in the old ways, was just an object of pity: "they looked at him, their father, who sat there, studying a sacred tome—who had remained in the town, remained in the country, all alone and miserable…very miserable…." He was remnant of a former time, a two dimensional-image, lacking relevance and life. Grayvis's daughters must have seen the revolution as the final nails in the shtetl's coffin, unlike their father, who seems to think that everything was secure and good before the war.

Grayvis's Piety Buys Quiet

His Transactional Religion

Grayvis is defined by his *frumkayt* (piety). Even his sighing and humming are described as *frum*, yet his relationship to God is shallow and transactional, exchanging piety for quiet. One of the few things he mentions about his old city is his old house, where he lived in six rooms above six shops that he rented out. The rent he obtained from this property is proof to him that his piety is rewarded by God:

> like protection, like sacred payment, like some kind of special gift that God sent him, Moyshe Grayvis, for his piety […] and that was why it was always still in his home. He could sit there, studying the holy texts, with the assurance that God loved him—if not

> mightily then he was at least…sort of important …God knew who Moyshe Grayvis was. (12m)[12]

Grayvis takes the money that his *frum* renters pay him as proof of God's recognition of his own *frumkayt*. The rent comes "punctually" on *roshkhoydesh*, the holiday of the new moon—simply the first of the month in the Jewish calendar. In Grayvis's view this is a sign that the rent is holy. He believes that he lives in a virtuous tit-for-tat with God: his piety buys him the space and quiet that allows him to devote his life to God.

His religion is about fulfilling a formula. Gravyvis claims: "he always wanted to donate part of that money to charity—not a lot, but still a bit." He gives not because of the good it could do, but because the very act of giving fulfills his religious obligation. On the other hand, he describes *roshkhoydesh* as the holiday in which "one says a whole lot in the prayer book,"[13] spiritual importance reduced to the number of pages. But in both cases, what matters is the surface level: did he give charity? How much had he read? Dit really matter if God loves him? All that matters is the tacit recognition: the assurance that God will uphold God's side of the bargain.

The only regular interruption to his quiet was the boy who came to call him to prayer every morning: "Reb Moyshe, they're already standing at the lectern, Reb Moyshe"[14]

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[12] vi shmire, vi heylike skhires, vi epes a bazonder matone tsugeshikt fun got tsu im, moyshe greyvis, far zeyn frumkayt… un shtendik flegt zikh im veln fun ot di skhires gebn tsdoke…nit keyn sakh, nur dokh abisele…un derfar iz in zayn hoyz geven shtendik shtil. er hot gekont zitsen un lernen mit der zikherkeyt, az got hot im lib…oyb nit shtark, iz dokh… a shtikl khoshev… got veyst, ver iz moyshe greyvis.

[13] me zogt asakh in sider

[14] reb moyshe, me shtelt zikh shoyn tsum omed, reb moyshe

(Bergelson 156). One might have expected such a *frum* man to arrive on time to prayers. Perhaps, his lateness indicates his desire for the feeling of being needed, the repetition of the honorific Reb (a bit like mister) signifying his worth. It must have made him feel as if her was "sort of important"; the congregation showed that, just like God, they "knew who Moyshe Grayvis was"[15] (12m). Though the calls to prayers, punctually payment by his tenants, and visits from his daughters are all incidental, not the result of caring, he takes them as signs of favor and security.

The calls to prayer are also indicative of another of his character traits: he doesn't take personal responsibility, waiting to be called instead of arriving himself. This trait plays out in the story with his second wife. His daughters make all the decisions for him, seemingly without any explicit input from him: "she had wired him to come to an unfamiliar railroad station…. And as it turned out, they had a wedding right there, in the unfamiliar railroad station" (14).[16] The daughters then decide the woman isn't a good fit for him. Grayvis only comment is a verbatim repetition of their words: "He was satisfied that a word or two from his daughters had spared him a lot of talking" (15).[17] As we will see, this passivity is as far as possible from his absurd assertion that he caused the first world war. But the combination of craving recognition, and feeling powerless would very likely play into the need to feel like he had done something important.

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[15] a shtikl khoshev…veyst, ver iz moyshe greyvis (155)

[16] *zi hot im denstmol aroysgerufn durkh a depesh ergets-vuhin af a fremdn vokzal…un der sof iz geven, az take af yenem vokzal hot men geshtelt a khupe* (156)

[17] (Bergelson 157-8)

His Daughters' Transactional Empathy

His daughters too care more about formula than reality, but they have a different sense of what matters. Instead of Grayvis's religious obligations, they feel a need to express a surface empathy, without necessarily caring about others' emotions. The daughters put on great displays of empathy: the oldest "cried, cried hard"[18] when her sister told her how "all alone and miserable… very miserable…" Grayvis was (13).[19] Yet, they don't do much personally to try to change this: they only spend time with him as an afterthought to visiting their mother's grave, and when they later bring him to Berlin, they're out all night, "leaving him all alone in the apartment" [20] (9). They decide that he needs a new wife. But they never even ask him if he's lonely: his description of his experience in the old city is unequivocally good, his comfort in his quiet, pious life as described above.

When the new wife turns out to not be what they wanted, they make her disappear, take her "somewhere, left her with people."[21] The older daughter says: "it tore her heart out" (*oysgerisn dos harts*)[22] to leave this woman, who "had no one in the entire world" (158).[23] Despite this supposed empathy, the daughter never takes responsibility for causing the woman's pain. When questioned, it comes out (*oysgevizn*) that asking forgiveness ("*aroysnemen…mekhile*") "just slipped out of the mind" (*gor vi aroys funm kop,* 158). The fourfold repetition of "*oys*—out" intensifies the irony of the situation: her melodramatic expression of empathy is contrasted to her

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[18] geveynt, shtark geveynt

[19] geblibn eyner aleyn un iz nebekh elnt... zeyer elnt...

[20] hobn im gelozt eynem leyn in der gantser voynung

[21] *di tekhter hobn demolt di froy ergets opgefirt, zikh ergets farlozt mit ir af mentshn* (15-6m, Bergelson 157)

[22] es hot oysgerisn dos harts

[23] zi hot af der gantser velt keynem nit

simply forgetting to carry out a formulaic apology, a fact she casually lets out.

Her supposed care doesn't lead to moral action because it is simply a part of a transaction. Appearances and stories are far more important than what is felt. The woman they wrong, on the other hand, "didn't cry—not at all […] She can't cry, apparently—that's the kind of person she is" (16). In the face of formulaic expression of emotion, this lonely woman is silent.

Sin as Formula

Grayvis is dumbfounded that his daughters never asked the woman for forgiveness: "Can you imagine? […] 'Oh my, oh my!' Right then, he, Moyshe Grayvis, regretted it. 'Too bad, too, too bad! … How can you forget something like that?'" (16m).[24] He can't believe it, he can't understand why his daughters didn't ask forgiveness—but his expression, "a real/great shame" (*a groyser shod*), is closer to what would say when one drops a teacup, not when one divorces a woman without explanation. He never blames himself for the sudden banishment of this lonely woman. In fact, he had "*nit kegen dem gornit*—nothing against it all." The verb he uses for asking forgiveness, "*aroysnemen,"* means literally to extract, to tear away, to have a document issued. It is both violent and bureaucratic, just like the second wife's sudden exile, her divorce carried out via envoy (*sholiekh* []). His daughters simply failed to carry out the bureaucratic procedures necessary to make the ticks in his religious world line up

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[24] *— neyn... hert nor a maise !..*
— vegn roysnemen ba ir a mekhile iz gor keyn reyd nit geven...
— s'iz epes gor vi aroys funm kop...
— ai... ai... ai... ht dn er, moyshe greyvis, badoyert, — a shod... a groyser shod... vi frgest men ds za zakh l... vos heyst ? — mekhile... (158-9)

Throughout the story, he comes back to the idea of repentance: "One ought to track down the woman. If she's still alive, we ought to give her money, pay her off. If she's died, we ought to visit her grave and ask her forgiveness…. And perhaps… perhaps we should also visit her first husband's grave and ask his forgiveness too…" (16-17m).[25] Like his daughters, he doesn't take personal responsibility: "One ought to" do it. And his suggested method is to pay her off, literally "make it good with money" (*fargitikn mit gelt*), as if money could fix emotional hurt. The absurd notion that he should ask forgiveness at her, or even her first husband's grave makes clear that he is not actually trying to fix the harm he caused, but rather simply carry out a religious transaction that makes it right.

This small formulaic failure, not asking forgiveness, becomes a "great sin," for which he and the world are punished. It breaks his transactional relationship to God. The quiet previously assured him as a sign of God's noticing his punctilious *frumkayt*, piety, is gone. "Perhaps all this," the Russian Revolution and its attendant catastrophes for Jewish life, "was his, Moyshe Grayvis's, fault […] he alone, had brought" these events (17-18).[26] All the blame falls on him: his daughters never did anything wrong in their own moral system. They showed their empathy, and that was enough to balance the scales. So the responsibility for the religious failure falls on him. To understand how Grayvis could think that this sin led to this world-shaking events, we must turn to the texts through which he reads his life. They create a vision of the world where sin is inescapable and cataclysmic.

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[25] *di froy volt men badarft ufzukhn. oyb zi lebt, darf men zi fargitikn mit gelt. oyb zi iz geshtorovn , darf men betn mekhile ba ir afn keyver. un efsher... efsher darf men oykh afn keyver fun ir ershtn man betn mekhile...* (159)

[26] az zayn zind is derveyl gevoksn un in dem ales iz efsher shuldik er […] nur er hot gebrakht dertsu (159-61)

Grayvis's *Shelah*: Sin is Inescapable and Destroys the World

Stuck in the Texts

Grayvis views his experience through the lens of three texts: the book of Jonah, a *seyfer* (holy book) "the thickness of a Talmud," and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis. These texts are interrelated and interleaved, as the *seyfer* weaves a theology of sin and repentance from the imagery of storm and overthrow in these biblical stories. The seeming endless layering of interpretation and reference, as the *seyfer* constantly cites sources from the Bible and Talmud, some of which cite others, compresses thousands of years of history. This web of text is then transposed onto Grayvis's double-layered experience of Berlin life and *shtetl* memory. The constant movement between strata blends reality with text, inserting Grayvis's life into the hermeneutical Rabbinic tradition. But instead of reinterpreting the past to act in the present, Grayvis reality dissolves in the face of this endless interpretation.

His life is linked to the texts through translation, as he transposes the Hebrew line-by-line into Yiddish. This links the texts not to the outside world of the German metropolis, but to memory, the *shtetl*. At points these glosses are almost ridiculous: when he translates "וכשתתודה/ *ukshetisvade*" (and when you will confess) as "*un az du vest zikh misvade zayn*," the single Hebrew word becomes seven. The Yiddish here, in all its verbosity, does not elucidate: it simply literally parses the Hebrew, even using the Hebrew root in simply a variant conjugation (*misvade*, *Shṭuremṭeg* 152). Instead of helping him understand the text, this language of the *shtetl* only serves to add more weight to this web of tradition hemming him in.

As he reads the holy words, "He hummed like a bee that had wandered into the narrow space between double windows and keeps banging and banging into the panes without managing to escape"[27] (10). Instead of the traditional tune (*nign*) used by *yeshiva* students to parse the complex grammar of the *Talmud*, Grayvis's humming is a sign of paralysis. He interprets his life through the lens of these texts. But instead of serving as a window onto the world, they separate him from it, just as "the curtained windows" of the apartment at the end of the story mark the abyss between the aged Grayvis and the energetic city outside (18).[28] He can't escape the texts: "His head kept whirling incessantly" with the story of Jonah (19).[29]

Inescapable, Destructive Sin

Grayvis's *seyfer* (holy tome), which he reads throughout Altvarg, presents a theological framework which traps him in the past. Not only does his reading remind him of painful memories, but the text itself asserts the preeminence of the past over the present. The *seyfer* is "ancient and yellow, just like Grayvis himself," two relics of a previous time (10).[30] This anonymous book is a heavily modified composite of disparate sections from the seventeenth century *Shenei Luchot Habrit* (Two Tablets of the Covenant, known by its acronym ש"של"ה/ *Shelah*). This ethical will by the Polish Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz combined "biblical commentaries, Kabbalistic discourses, explanations of the precepts and rituals of Judaism, ethical teachings, liturgical notes, and a treatment of Talmudic methodology" ("Isaiah Horowitz"). An influential

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[27] er hot gezhumet, vi a bin, vos iz areyn in a shmoln ort tsvishen tsvey fentster, klopt zikh, klopt zikh in di shoybn un kan nit aroys Bergelson 152

[28] *fun yener zeyt farhangene fentster* (161)

[29] *in kop dreyt zikh im on ufher* (162)

[30] *an altn un fargeltn, vi er aleyn* (152)

text for Hasidic Judaism, the *Shelah* is still read today as a source of "consolation and instruction" ("Horowitz, Isaiah").

While based on the *Shelah*, the *seyfer* that Bergelson creates is fundamentally different. Instead of a rambling book of theology, if "very strict in matters of ritual law," Bergelson creates a doomsday book where sin is all-encompassing and destructive (ibid.). The *seyfer* outlines an interventionist theology, where inescapable sin leads to destruction of the world. Ultimately, this confirms Grayvis's transactional view of religion. If his piety affords him material security, then it makes sense that sin would impact the physical world. Grayvis's belief that his sin caused the revolution and the Great War is based on two assumptions: that sin can be punished tangibly in the world, and that it is large enough to merit such destruction. The *seyfer* provides a theology to explain this.

All of *Altvarg* can be read as a sort of confession, a framing for Grayvis explaining and grappling with his sin. As he begins to read, the first section in the *seyfer* explains why his sin perpetually haunts him:

> And when you confess, you shall remember all your sins and the sins of your fathers and your fathers' fathers all the way back to the generation of the Flood and the generation of the Tower of Babel, and Sodom. For a man is punished not only for his own sins but also for the sins of all earlier generations (10).[31]

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[31] *vezeh seyder havidui, — un dos iz der seyder fun videzogn… […]— ukshetisvade... — un az du vest zikh misvade zeyn, zolstu gedeynken deyne zind un di zind fun deyne eltern un fun deyne elterns eltern biz dor-hamabul un dor hafloge un biz sdom, vorum nit nor far zeyne zind vert a mentsh geshtroft, neyert oykh far di zind fun ale frierdike doyres* (152)

Instead of the *Shelah's* original lengthy, but feasible approach, where one should remember the previous generation's sin "insofar as he takes into his hand the actions of his fathers," only as they relate to one's life, the *seyfer* offers something infinite and inescapable.[32] The past becomes a crushing burden of sin. The *seyfer* emphasizes this with a biblical proof-text: "Parents eat sour grapes and their children's teeth are blunted." This quotation not only ignores the context in Ezekiel, but also the *Shelah's* clear explanation:

> "Why do you keep quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel, 'Parents eat sour grapes and their children's teeth are blunted'?'" [Ezekiel 18:2]…the soul that sins will die for its sin and not for the sin of its ancestors…children cannot be held responsible for the sins of their progenitors.[33]

Bergelson directly reverses the original meaning of the text. Instead of an affirmation that one is only responsible for one's own life, Bergelson creates a religious model where one can never escape the past. Even when the old world, his ancestors' *shtetl* is dead, Grayvis's sin will always haunt him. But how could his sin, even if inescapable, impact the world so greatly? In the next

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[32] *Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Aseret HaDibrot, Yoma, Ner Mitzva, chapter 2:33*: "And this is the order of the Confession of Sins […] when he confesses he should remember his sins and the sins of his fathers because he is punished for them insofar as he takes into his hand the actions of his fathers"

וזה סדר הוידוי […] כשיתודה יזכור עונותיו ועונות אבותיו כי היה נענש עליהם באחזו מעשי אבותיו בידו

[33] *Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Asara Maamarot, Second Maamar 13,* quoting the earlier fifteenth century *Akeidat Yitzchak* and Ezekiel 18:2:

מה לכם מושלים את המשל הזה על אדמת ישראל לאמר אבות יאכלו בוסר ושיני בנים תקהינה [...] הנפש החוטאת היא תמות בעונה ולא בעון אבותיו [...] שלא יושלם שום עונש לנפש הבן ממעש' האב

The third source used in this section is *Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Aseret HaDibrot, Pesachim, Matzah Ashirah 3-53*: "And now the sins separated and spoiled, and the generations afterwards spoiled, the generation of the Flood and the generation of the Tower of Babel, and the people of Sodom […] until the young man of iron had to come to refine and purify all generations"

ועתה עונות הבדילו ונתקלקל, ואחר כך הדורות אחריו נתקלקל דור המבול ודור הפלגה ואנשי סדום […] עד שהוכרחו לבא בכור הברזל לזכך ולטהר כל הדורות

section that Grayvis reads, the *seyfer* outlines an interventionist theology, that instead of affirming security in God emphasizes the fragility of life in the face of divine wrath:

> It says in the Book of the Pious: 'The world is a tempestuous ocean…life is a pile of earth on the shore of the ocean…man stands on the pile, and the tree of life hangs over him. The man must hold on strongly to the branches, because otherwise, God forbid, the great wind can blow...the great wind….' As it says in the Bible: 'And now a great and strong wind rends mountains and breaks the rock into pieces….'
>
> (11m)

The original passage in the *Shelah* describes spiritual, not physical danger: "The body is a pile of earth within [the sea]. The soul is a man standing on the pile."[34] The soul is enjoined to hold onto the tree of life, the Torah, "Because today or tomorrow the waves will his mightily and the pile will be destroyed."[35] Sin is dangerous for the soul, not the body, which will simply die naturally. Bergelson transposes this into the physical world: life is the pile, and man himself stands upon it.[36] One must cling to God because otherwise not only will you be swept away, just as Grayvis was from Ukraine to Berlin, but the world can be destroyed in the process, as this fragile pile of dirt is hit by a wind which "rends mountains."

To accomplish this shift, Bergelson replaces the original proof-text from Proverbs, "*ets khayim hi lemokhozikim boh*—It [the Torah or wisdom] is a tree of life for those who hold on to it" (3:18)

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[34] ve'haguf tel efer betokho. haneshamah ish oymed al hatel
(Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Aseret HaDibrot, Yoma, Derekh Chayim 13)

[35] Ibid. כי היום או מחר יכו בחזקה גלי הים בתל ויהרס

[36] khayim tel efer bam breg fun yam…ish oymed al hatel
(Bergelson 153 / 11)

with the verse from Kings. This provides a positive end to this dark image: while life is short and fragile, Torah is not just a lifeline but a source of flourishing. The use of Kings 19:11 underscores the possibility of worldly destruction. Elijah, driven into hiding by the evil king Ahab, is called on a forty-day trek to Sinai, a replay of Moses' earlier experience in Exodus 33. Standing on the mount, Elijah sees these destructive winds, followed by earthquakes and wildfires. This is a fitting choice for this passage, a lonely man on mountain surrounded by danger. Instead of a metaphorical verse about the Torah, the verse from Kings frames God's role in directly shaping history. It locates God not only as the tree you grasp but the wind attempting to throw you into the sea.

Why would God try to destroy human life? Bergelson's Yiddish translation of this verse answers this question through a subtle change: the biblical "splitting mountains and shattering rocks" is rendered "knocks down mountains and overturns boulders."[37] The power of the wind thus becomes parallel to the destruction of Sodom, "when He overthrew [lit. turned over] the cities" (JPS, Gen. 19:29).[38] The wind is no longer just a sign of God's power, as when Elijah saw it, but a punishment for human sin. Sin can literally lead to revolution. When Grayvis's daughters fail to ask forgiveness,

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[37] מְפָרֵק הָרִים וּמְשַׁבֵּר סְלָעִים / *varft um berg un kert iber felzn*

[38] בַּהֲפֹךְ אֶת-הֶעָרִים

> At that very moment, the war had broken out…. It was the revolution, the great wind had blasted, rending mountains and breaking rocks into pieces…. How often had he, Moyshe Grayvis, mused that it had been a great sin? (16)[39]

But Grayvis is the only one to see God behind the cataclysm, just like the lone prophet in Kings on the mountain: "nobody knew that […] perhaps all this was his […] fault" (17).[40] While this would seem the opposite of the security Grayvis experienced back in Ukraine, it is a natural extension of his transactional and interventionist vision of God. When he fulfills his obligations, God ensures him peace. If he doesn't, then God can turn the whole world upside down. As he thought about his rent: "God knew who Moyshe Grayvis was" (12m).[41] His religious megalomania, believing that he has a special connection to God evident in his life, is thus fulfilled by the philosophy of sin laid out in the *seyfer*.

Still, Small Voice

But the most important part of the reference to Kings is the end of Elijah's experience. After the pyrotechnics, the Bible explains: "the LORD was not in the wind," nor in the earthquake or fire. Instead, a "still small voice," followed, in which God is implied to reside (JPS, I Kings 19-12).[42] At the end of the story, Grayvis repeats his refrain that "perhaps all this was his […] fault." But he has come to a new realization as to why:

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[39] *punkt demolt hot zikh ongehoybn di milkhome... es iz gekumen di revolutsie, es hot a bloz gegebn der groyser vint, vos varft fanander berg un kert iber felzn.. im, moyshe greyvisn, iz vifl mol arufgekumena fn zinen, az es iz a groyse zind...* (159)

[40] *un keyner veyst nit, az zeyn zind iz derveyl gevoksn un az in dem ales iz efsher shuldik er, moyshe greyvis* (159)

[41] got veyst, ver iz moyshe greyvis (155)

[42] קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה

> Because of his sin against the woman, who was sort of cool and couldn't cry… for because of a girl's cry, God had once destroyed Sodom, as it says in the Bible: "I will come down and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry" of a girl. (17m)

Just as the story of Jonah explains Grayvis flight to Berlin and the *Shelah's* wind connects his sin to the revolution, this interpretation of Sodom's destruction applies this framework to his specific sin. To do so, Bergelson tells the narrative of Sodom via a Talmudic exegesis, which puns on the verse, "the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great (*rabba*)," to read instead the identically spelled "*riva*—young woman." The Talmud uses this reading to explain the locus of Sodom's sin, telling the story of a magnanimous woman in Sodom, caught giving food to the poor. When the twisted people of the city discover her charity, they slather her with honey and leave her out to be consumed by bees (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 109b:9). The great sin of Sodom is therefore the cry of a woman.

When Grayvis compares himself to the prophet Jonah it is as someone running away from God: he "had fled from his sin— fled from God, just as Jonah had once fled from God" (18). Jonah fled from going to Nineveh, which "God had wanted to destroy it and wipe it out, just as he had wiped out Sodom. Nineveh was big and sinful, according to the Bible: 'And Nineveh was a great city before God'" (8-9).[43] If Grayvis's sin is parallel to Nineveh, the "great city," the Talmudic exegesis invoked above can serve to integrate the greatness of his sin with the fact that it was just hurting one woman.

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[43] *ninve, der shtot, vs ht in di eeg fun ioyne hanovi dertsornt got, un got ht zi gevolt borev mkhn un iberkern, veyer ht ibergekert sdom ; di shtot iz a groyme, a zindike, zoy vi in posuk shteyt : unnuh hish eir gdulh llhis* (151)

The focus finally shifts from his sin to the woman he wronged, who couldn't cry: "and that was worse than anything else, worse than anything else is the crying of a mute person…"[44] Recognizing the pain of a silent woman is exactly the opposite of viewing morality transactionally. Instead of his daughter's focus on showing emotion on the surface, Grayvis recognizes that what is actually much more important is that which is unexpressed, which cannot be expressed. He is also able to break loose of his formulaic vision of religion, seeing past the clerical error of not asking forgiveness, which imbues with cosmic weight, to the actual hurt caused. For so long he focused on the devastation in the wake of this sin. But in the end he realizes that God was not in the destructive wind but in the "still small voice," his ex-wife's silent tears.

Conclusion

All his many hours of sitting and learning Torah silently, trying to hold onto the branches of the tree of life failed to provide his salvation.The final passage that Grayvis reads from the *seyfer* affirms that ultimately one needs to live in relation to others, and not just in some abstract theology: "And if a man repents his sins, then let him remember that God forgives all sins except a sin against another person."

Learning Torah and cultivating a relationship with God is not enough to free one from sin: when he hurt another person, the only way he could have fixed that was to get forgiveness from her: "But he, Moyshe Grayvis, hadn't done it…. He had waited too long" (18). Most of all he failed to act. When Elijah sees God in the verse from Kings, he is empowered to appoint a new king over Israel and a successor to himself. But Grayvis never saw God: he was looking at the wind,

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[44] un dos iz erger fun alts — erger fun alts iz der geveyn fun a shtumen…(Bergelson 162, 19)

and not the small voice. At the end, all Grayvis can do is continue hiding, like Jonah in the bowels of the ship as it slowly goes under.

Grayvis thinks that he is special, and that the Bible is actually playing out in his life, especially in the transition from the old world of his city in Ukraine to the new one of Berlin. Yet the layering of the old city and the stories of Jonah and Sodom is clearly delusional. As pointed out by Murav, Grayvis is clearly not a proxy for Bergelson himself. The very title of the story, *Altvarg* (Obsolescence) makes it clear that this world view is on the way out.

Manger's *Akeyda:*

The paradox of salvation

Jewish Background to the Akeyda

The Binding of Isaac, the *Akeyda*, is a paradoxical, troubling story. God tells Abraham to sacrifice the son he was just granted through divine intervention, and through whom he was promised a lineage. It fundamentally contains a contradiction: God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and then (at the last minute) not to do so. Through Abraham's willingness to shed the blood of his beloved son he receives the blessing of descendants as numerous as the stars (Gen. 22:17). The solution to this paradox is a substitution: Abraham sends a ram "up for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son." (Gen. 22:13). This substitution forms the basis for the system of sacrifices in Second Temple Judaism, which then become the basis for Jewish prayer. In Christianity, the *Akeyda* forms the critical antecedent to Jesus, who is able to carry out the ultimate sacrifice without substitution (cf. Hebrews 11:17–19).

The *Akeyda* has been a central way of understanding Jewish persecution throughout history: from as early as the Book of Maccabees, the *Akeyda* is used as a model of martyrdom, dying for God and Judaism (Levenson). The *Akeyda* "took on great significance during the Middle Ages as an allegory of the divine plan (including divine protection) as it was worked out in the Jewish

exile and the recurring martyrdom of the Jewish people during periods of persecution" (Frakes). The connection of the *Akeyda* to martyrdom was key to Jewish understanding of the Holocaust. Rabbi Kalonymos Shapira, a key religious figure in the Warsaw Ghetto whose buried writings are seen as masterpieces of grappling with the Holocaust, grappled with the story of the *Akeyda* to understand his son's murder. Because the Akeyda is never accomplished, he says:

> the murder of a Jew by idolaters, which as an action devoid of worshipful intention is an absolute antithesis to the Akeidah, actually consummates the Akeidah. The Akeidah was just the beginning, the expression of intent and desire, while the murder of a Jew is the conclusion of the act. Thus, the Akeidah and all the murders of Jews since are components of one event.
> (Elimelekh and Shapira xxiii)

With Zionism, martyrdom became something chosen, with a purpose. Jews could fight for their own country, and if they died, then they could just carrying out this fundamental sacrifice. The *Akeyda* is "the most widespread biblical myth in modern Hebrew poetry," a way to grapple with the vicissitudes and dangers that have faced Jews in Israel from the start of the Zionist movement (Milman; Feldman). Moshe Shamir, one of the founders of Israeli literature, stated unequivocally: "The story of the Akedah is the greatest, most magnificent, and most deeply meaningful of all. It is the story of our generation" (Sagi 45).

The *Akeyda* thus stands as a crossroads between Jews and non-Jews, the past and the present. As a central metaphor for Jewish suffering, it is a story of particularism, of us against them, but as

the true sacrifice, fulfilled in Christianity by Jesus, it becomes the most universal way of serving God.

A major strand in the *midrashic* commentators is Isaac's perfect willingness to be a sacrifice (Levenson). With little formal religious training, Manger's access to midrash was mostly moderated through the *Tsenerene* (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 316n77). Written in 1590 by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi, this "women's Bible" retold the Pentateuch with "legends, homilies, midrashim and commentaries" (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 34–36). The *Tsenerene* describes how Isaac went to the *Akeyda* "with joy and with his full heart."[45] A legalistic discussion follows in which rabbis argue about whether Abraham should be lauded more for being willing to kill his son, or Isaac, who "let himself be killed."[46] Christian tradition, in seeing Jesus as the joyful bridegroom and fulfillment of the *Akeyda*, also emphasizes this willingness. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs,* Hippolytus of Rome tells how "The blessed Isaac became desirous of the anointing and he wished to sacrifice himself for the sake of the world" (On the Song 2:15, quoted in "Binding of Isaac").

Manger

Itzik Manger told the story of the *Akeyda* throughout his career. His use of the motif can be split into three categories: in his first book of poetry from 1929, "*Akeydas yitskhok*" (Sacrifice of Isaac) presents an image of universal, longed for sacrifice, as Jesus takes Isaac's place. The 1934/5 poem cycle *Khumesh-Lider* (Pentateuch-Songs) tells the story of Isaac at length: the *Akeyda* becomes a human conflict, parallel to the banishment of Hagar. Finally, in a series of

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[45] mit freyden un mit dem gantsen hartsen

[46] "hot zikh gevolt lozen shekhten"

four *Akeyda* poems written from 1937 to 1943, Manger slowly develops the *Akeyda* as a response to the Nazi threat, showing slowly his loss of faith in the possibility of salvation, whether through poetry or divine intervention. He realized: "The last *akeyda* will not be protected by any miracle" (ShiP 441).[47]

The *Akeyda* lets Manger explore the contradictions of connecting to the old world of Jewish tradition and the universal modernist Europe. In the paradox of the *Akeyda* as finding life through death, Manger is able to reincarnate the shtetl in a new world. Ultimately, he finds a way to create living Yiddish poetry by inhabiting all of the contradictions.

The *Akeyda* lets him explore the past and present through the question of the role of the divine. Leaning into this ultimate moment of the divine overcoming humanity, Manger reformulates the *Akeyda* as something human. He connects the current fate of the Jews to the Bible through *Akeydas Itzik*. He plays with different options for Isaac's substitute. A Jesus-cum-Jewish messiah saves through his gruesome death on the cross in one poem. Poetry serves as a different salve for pain. The world of his grandfather becomes both escort to sacrifice and a sign of God.

Manger tells the story of the *Akeyda* explicitly four times. In the strangely idyllic "*Akeydas yitskhok*" (Sacrifice of Isaac), published in his first book of poetry in 1929, Isaac sees the image of Jesus on the cross, causing Abraham to drop his knife and say: "your beautiful death is fated to another" and the two walk home as the sun sets (*ShoD* 63).[48] The 1934/5 poem cycle *Khumesh-Lider* (Pentateuch-Songs) tells the story of Isaac at length, yet we never arrive to the

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[47] "di letste akeyda vert nisht bashitst fun keyn shum nes."

[48] **All English quotes without reference to a translator are my own translation.**

scene of sacrifice, fading out as we watch Abraham and Isaac walk down the road out of sight. In the introduction to this book, Manger describes the "sweet terror" as a child, carried through the dark Carpathian woods in his grandfather's wagon, fearing that this graying *Avrom* (Abraham) was bringing him to sacrifice (*KhL*). Finally, there is the 1934 "*Akeydas Itzik*" (The Binding of Itzik), which explicitly recasts the biblical tale onto Manger's life as the pressures of Nazism built in Europe

These four retellings of the *Akeyda* bring together different moods and radically different ways of understanding the story, including where they start and end, and the ultimate fate of the Isaac involved. Yet they all use related imagery and language. Dreams, death, twilight and unearthly beauty are all intertwined into portrayals of this sacrifice that are ambiguous in their tragedy. Why is Itzik condemned to die? What makes this sacrifice beautiful? And why does Manger see himself in this story?

Two Models of the *Akeyda*: The Sacrifice of Isaac or Itzik?

The first *Akeyda* poem, "The Sacrifice of Isaac" (*Akeydas Yitskhok*), published in 1929, presents the sacrifice as something lovely, Isaac's "beautiful death." Horror is encapsulated in an idyllic frame. I quote this short poem in full because the order is important:

> —What do you see now, my child and sacrifice?
>
> —I see: over the light sky-blue

A heavy, deep hour stretches out its wings

And on a cross hangs a man, dead.

Why are you standing, father, so pale and silent,

And your knife is slips down to the earth?"

—Your beautiful death is destined to another

Put on your sadness, my child, and come.

Who is he, who? I want to see his face.

Holy must he be, and extraordinary and lovely—

Yes him, who took my sacrifice!

—Come, child, the evening darkens already in the field

The path is long and far to the tent

And he, the happy one, he still has to come

(*ShoD* 63)[49]

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[49] *Akeidas yitskhok*

— vos zestu itster, meyn kind un korban ?
— ikh ze : ibern likhtikn himl-blo
tsit oys di fligl a shvere tife sheh
un oyf a tslm hengt a mentsh geshtorovn.

vos shteystu, foter, azoy bleykh un shtum,
un s,glitsht deyn meser zikh arop tsu dr,erd ?
— deyn sheyner toyt iz an andern bashert,
tu on deyn troyer, meyn kind, un kum.

— ver iz er, ver ? ikh vil zeyn pnim zen.
heylik darf er zeyn un oysterlish un sheyn —
ot der, vos hot meyn korban tsugenumen !

— kum, kind, der ovnt tunklt shoyn in feld.
der veg iz lang un veyt nokh dos getselt,
un er, der gliklekher, er darf ersht kumen.

The setting of the poem is idyllic. The two forefathers have their conversation under a light-blue sky. Isaac sees "over [or across] the light sky-blue, / A heavy, deep hour stretches out its wings." An image of beautiful gravity: sadness or the onset of evening. The angel is missing from this *Akeyda*—are these the wings of a protector? The sight of this tableau, sky, hour and crucifixion do stave off the sacrifice. This nightfall seems to hold little of the threat of death that we will see later in other poems by Manger. The darkening evening at the end of the poem portends not death but the end of a long day where peril was overcome. The long journey leads home, not to the *Akeyda*, and wends through open fields, not foreboding woods. With the promise of salvation, gravity becomes beautiful, as in the *Khumesh-Lider,* the silver roads leading to the *Akeyda* "Sad and lovely." Under such a model, Isaac's death can be lovely.

Still, the emotions expressed in the poem are strange, a seeming reversal of expectation. Isaac is unsurprised to be Abraham's "child and sacrifice," instead asking why his father's: "knife slips down to the earth?" In Genesis, Abraham only takes the knife when he is about to kill his son (22:10). He doesn't understand why Abraham tarries to carry out the sacrifice. It seems a shame that his "beautiful death is destined (*bashert*) to another"—Isaac asks, perhaps impatiently:

> Who is he, who? I want to see his face.
> Holy must he be, and extraordinary and lovely—
> Yes him, who took my sacrifice!

Isaac goes from speaking lyrically about the "wings of a heavy, deep hour" to this childish patter, repeating himself, interjected questions and exclamations. It's unclear how Isaac feels about this man on the cross. Is Isaac jealous, and this list of qualities is a standard he feels someone must

have, to take over the sacrifice ("he better be holy…"). Or does he recognize that the man is holy, to be able to have saved him (hands of the man nailed to the cross parallel the outstretched wings of the deep hour)? Is this impatience excitement or frustration?

Abraham, the responsible adult, repeats again that he must come, as if trying to drag him home from the park. One line above, he stated: "put on your sadness," as if sadness were a coat, "my child, and come." It seems natural to read the sadness in line with Isaac's confusion about Abraham dropping the knife or revelation that his sacrifice was given away, as they immediately precede it. But this is very strange, taking the traditional *midrashic* idea that he was wanted to do God's will "with his full heart" *ad absurdam* (). If God chooses for it to be otherwise, shouldn't he be happy to escape with his life? One might expect that even if he were to fully willing to sacrifice himself so serve God, that he would be simultaneously sad to lose his life—it certainly is unintuitive that he should be sad to not be killed.

This beautiful sadness is balanced by the grotesque: "And on a cross hangs a man, dead." The function of this "and" is unclear. Does it locate the cross "over" the sky with the hour? Or does it separate, so that these lines sketch a vertical arc, as Isaac's gaze lowers from sky to hour to cross on the ground. Is this an apparition, like the cross of light that converts the islanders in Thomas More's *Utopia*, or the original cross framed against the sky on top of Golgotha? Either way, the image descends into gruesomeness. The participle at the end (*geshtorbn* instead of *toyt*) emphasizing both the process of dying and its finality.

But this vision, we learn at the poem's end, is of the future: "he, the happy one, he still has to (*darf*) come." As in Isaac's statements about the man's holiness, this *darf* (has to) is ambiguous.

Is it a statement of fact (he is yet to come) or one of necessity (he must come)? The time of arrival is equivocal: is it just forthcoming from the perspective Genesis, or has the man still not come as Manger writes in 1929? Answers to these two questions seem correlated. He could be Jesus, who did come, or Jewish Messiah, still not here, and sorely needed. The ambiguity renders it impossible to clearly choose one. Instead, the two become mixed. This poem serves to connect an *Akeyda* told in a familial Yiddish, *khumesh* and *shtetl,* with the universal figure of Christ. In seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of the biblical story, Manger sidesteps the traditional Jewish distaste for connecting the two testaments. By framing Jesus as a messiah who is possibly yet to come in a Yiddish (not German) poem, Manger neutralizes the sting of supersession. He joins the European narrative without giving up himself, turning the Christian universal into another strand in the seventy faces of the Torah.

This poem leaves more questions than answers. What is Isaac's relationship to Jesus, his substitute, and why is he so eager to note the honor of being killed? Why would he be sad to not die himself? Who really is the salvific figure here?

Sacrifice of Itzik

The next *Akeyda* poem that Manger publishes shares a similar name. "The Sacrifice of Itzik" (*Akeydas Itzik*) followed five years after "The Sacrifice of Isaac" (*Akeydas Yitskhok*). It appeared first in the journal *Haynt* (Today) and then in Manger's 1937 collection *Demerung in shpigl* (Twilight in the Mirror), his last before the Second World War, both in Warsaw. [50] *Akeydas Itzik* seems the opposite of the previous poem. Instead of Jesus fulfilling the *Akeyda*, the poet

[50] Published in Haynt (96), 27. April 1934: 5. (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 69n24) .

himself (Itzik being a diminutive of Isaac) is called to the sacrifice. Manger's grandfather Avrom (Abraham) calls to him:

> Grandfather says, "Itzik, do you
> remember—a long time ago—an angel
> spread his wings above us [appeared to us]
> and you were saved?
>
> He regrets that, our old God,
> and now demands His sacrifice,
> though I've lived and I've died
> so many times"
> ("The Sacrifice of Itzik")[51]

This stands in sharp contrast to the universalizing move of *Akeydas Yitskhok*, where Isaac is replaced with something totally different, an ambiguous messianic figure. Instead, the substitute for Isaac is the latest iteration of an endless chain of figures, generations of Isaacs and Abrahams. The link to this tradition is Manger's grandfather, the representation of traditional Judaism. Avrom Manger, travelling in his cart through the Carpathian mountains past the haunts of great

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[51] *zogt der zeyde : „itsik, gedenkst —*
tsurik mit azoyfil iorn —
ven s'hot zikh der mlakh tsu unz antplekt
un du bizt nitsul gevorn?

itst hot er khrth, der alter got
un er mont bey mir dem krovn,
khotsh ikh hob shoyn azoyfil mol gelebt
un bin shoyn azoyfil mol geshtorben.
(Manger, *Lid un balade* 311–12)

Hasidic Rebbes, was upset that his son became a tailor because handwork wouldn't allow him to constantly study religious texts as Avrom did while driving (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 59).

Itzik Manger describes in a memoir of his childhood, how after searching for him for so many years, he finally found his grandfather in himself and his poetry. A couple years before the Second World War: "my *zeyde* Avrom appeared before me as the tragic extension of the Abraham figure in the Pentateuch, but this time he wasn't driving his son Yitskhok to the *Akeyda*, but his grandson Itzik."[52] The appearance (appeared before me—*far mir antplekt*) of the *zeyde* parallels the angel who "appeared to us" (*tsu unz antplekt*). This realization, the connection of himself to the *Akeyda*, becomes a kind of salvation in itself. The grandfather and forefather "became one. They were joined in tragic-historical fate."[53] Across the endless Jewish generations the first and last collapse into one. From the post-war perspective of this memoir, Manger describes how all "the Itziks from Poland, Lithuania, Russia and Romania, from the whole European continent are the heaps of ash of this last *Akeyda*" (*Shrifṭn in proze* 442).[54] Not only is history collapsed, but so is geography and all the infinite variations of Jews across Europe. As the Nazis reduced all to the label *Jude*, Manger found universality in Jewish particularism. The biblical Rebecca, in a 1929 poem, reflects on the devastating conflict between her sons Jacob and Esau. She imagines them saying: "life separated us, now death makes us brothers" (*Lid un balade* 40).[55]

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[52] "hot zikh mayn zeyde avrom far mir antplekt vi der tragisher hemshekh fun der avrom-geshtalt in khumesh, aber dos mol firt er nisht zayn zun yitskhok tsu der akeyda, nur zayn eynikl itzik. di letste akeyda vert nisht bashitst fun keyn shum nes."

[53] "zenen gevorn eins. Zey farbindet in tragish-historisher gorl"

[54] "di itziks fun poyln, lita, rusland un rumenie, funm gantsn eyropeishn kantinent zenen di hoyfns ash oyf der doziker letster akeyda."

[55] Tsesheydt hat unz dos leben, itst farbridert unz der toyt

The last Akeyda poem, “The Sacrifice of Itzik,” published first in 1934, begins in the poet’s voice: “Rock me, rock me, blind fate, / I dream with my eyes open.”[56]

“Rock (*vig*) me” is a return to childhood, the cradle (*vig*) which stands for innocent sleep —the brief respites of happiness in the *Khumesh-Lider* (“Sarah Sings Isaac a Lullaby,” *KhL* 25). But the empty cradle hints at a not-so-innocent final sleep. As Abraham and Isaac travel to the sacrifice, the willows along the road fly back, "To see if his mother stands beside / The cradle of her son” (*The World* 16).[57] In the poem *Mayn mame* (My Mother), Manger credits his mother’s cradle-song with imbuing in him the symbols of Yiddish folk poetry which stand as the foundation of his life’s work (as outlined in a speech at the start of his career in Warsaw, Gal-Ed and Rosenwald 36). Published in the middle of the war in a sequence dedicated to his beloved brother, a victim of the war, this poem tells of loss:

> The soul of the golden kid under my destroyed cradle
> Languishes for your cradle song
> With broken wings the golden peacock flies
> And carries in its beak the false ring, “happiness”[58]

But in this poem, everything is broken. The cradle is destroyed, the wings of the golden peacock are broken, and the ring of happiness is a lie. Eastern Europe as Yiddishland, where *mame-loshn* (mother tongue) was the cradle of Jewish life is under threat.

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[56] “vig mikh, vig mikh, blinder gorel, / ikh kholem mit ofene oygn.”

[57] “a kuk tun tsi di mame veynt / iber der puster vig.” (*KhL* 37)

[58] "*dos 'goldene tsigele' unter mayn kharuv'er vig / benkt di neshome oys nokh dayn vign-lid, / mit gebrokhene fligl di 'goldene pave' flit / un trogt in ir shnobl dos falshe fingerl 'glik*'." (ViD 41)

But this is not yet gone. The trochaic rocking of the first two lines pauses as the narrator begins to dream: the iambic “I see—” (*un ze—*) leaves the reader suspended a moment above the dash, and then, born on the languorous movement of three diphthongal dactyls, “a great silver bird” comes “flying / in from the ocean.”[59] Like Isaac in *Akeydas Yitskhok*, the poet sees salvation in suspension, the hint of an angel’s wings. The bird seems to herald promise, as the narrator wonders whether it brings "sweet wine / from the land of Israel?” As Manger wrote about the place of poetry with the rise of the Nazis, his contemporaries pondered the possibility of flight to Palestine (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 361). The old world is brought in on the wings of salvation to Manger.

The death sentence is once again not carried out. But instead of a substitution, all we have is a suspension of the moment. Repeating an earlier verse, it ends as Avrom Manger leads Itzik by the hand on a dreamlike journey across the landscape: "the cities / so small, the villages so large, / and we stride across them.” The grounded grandfather now takes flight, grandson in hand over a topsy-turvy world. The old world, the villages of Galicia, are bigger than the modern cities. As Nazism threatens on the horizon, the old world comes into view.

Akeydas Yitskhok promised salvation through a combination of Jesus and a Jewish messiah, a yearned for death. In *Akeydas Itzik*, the salvation is only a caesura. To understand how death could be so beautiful, we need to look at Manger’s poem, “Eve and the Apple Tree.” The Fall functions as an antiparallel model to the *Akeyda*, the introduction of death. Like in *Akeydas Itzik*, this poem ends with a suspension. By looking at the Fall I will show how this suspension is

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[59] *a groyser zilberner foygl*

inherently tied to sexuality. Sex and love function as the epitome of aesthetic beauty, which in Manger's poetry becomes salvific on its own.

Fall as Anti-*Akeyda*

To understand these poems, The Fall is a sort of anti-*Akeyda*, and the condition for the *Akeyda* to be possible. The central tension of the *Akeyda* is the question of reversibility, salvation at the last moment or after the fact. The *Akeyda* only carries with it the dramatic possibility of irrevocable loss because of the finality of death.

The Fall is an irrevocable change, an introduction of finality to life. But it also defines the continuation of life. Adam and Eve's curse marks the beginning of the difficulty in sustaining life, the curse to toil the earth, and the pain of making it to the next cycle, labor pangs. The tree of knowledge, on the other hand, introduces lust, driving the continuation of life. The combination of drive and difficulty in procreation is the prerequisite for the central tension of Genesis around inheritance. The *Akeyda* is also a generational story, as the choice to kill the son makes the promise of descendants come true. Instead of Eve's disobedience to the divine word resulting in death and the difficulty of creating the next generation, God's demand for death results in life.

The combination between life and death in the *Akeyda* and Fall is not new. In one Greek poem from the late fourth to early fifth century, Abraham is presented with a μήγλον as a substitute for Isaac, a word which could either mean sheep or apple, based on a verse in Song of Songs (2:3): "as an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons." The substitution, and the sacrifice, are a lover. The poem uses imagery of marriage, to establish the

Akeyda as the prefiguration of the spiritual marriage of the Church to Jesus, salvation in sexual love. (Kalish)

All but one poem in the *Khumesh-Lider* touches on the topic of sex, marriage, or relationships between parents and children. While Genesis, the book the *Khumesh-Lider* draws from, is mostly a family saga, Manger removes not only stories about relationship to God (except the *Akeyda*) but all non-familial stories. The conflicts between siblings are reduced to only a few poems, barring Ishmael and Isaac, who are only told of through their parents' eyes. The key change is the focus on sex: as Manger reveals the emotions between the famously terse biblical text, he unveils sexual tension and longing. Lot's daughters are granted only one half-verse of ambiguous sexuality: "there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth," unclear if there is more to it than the fact reported a couple of verses later that they were with child (19:31, 36).[60]

Manger gives us their sexual yearning clearly: "my bedclothes / At night grow feverish hot / […] I dreamed / A blue-clad soldier came / And slept all night between my breasts..." (wolf 10). The procreative focus of the Bible is switched to a sexual one. While Abraham and Sarah are described as sexless (outside of Abraham's belief that God will grant them a child, for if He wills it, "even a broom can shoot"), the next generations' couples are framed with desire. Characters "fever,""tremble," or turn red, they stretch out their hands, and the poet discreetly averts his gaze as they disappear into silence or the wind's embrace.

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[60] "there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth"

Eve and the Apple Tree

Manger's poems about the Fall don't contain the full finality of death. In "Eve and the Apple Tree," the first mother is seduced by the tree. The poet asks her, "Mother Eve, what do you know, / What do you know of death?" As Lawrence Rosenwald notes in his brilliant "reading in slow motion" of this poem, the lack of knowledge of death is a problem for God's command to not eat of the tree to have power, that the serpent in Paradise Lost diminishes this punishment in his reference to "the pain / of death denounced (whatever thing death be)" (9:695). As Rosenwald points out, Eve's answers to this poem, images of weariness and evening are a "threat of death a long way from being efficacious" (Rosenwald 21-2). These hints of death are inherently different in their lack of finality—the sun sets every day, and we go to sleep, but the next day the world is in motion again. As Adam lies in the garden (post Fall) in Manger's poem *Odom iz ayfersikhtik* (Adam is Jealous), the second in the KhL, he looks at his wife and remarks: "it's good, that it is light by day / and dark by night" (13).[61] The cycle of day and night is beautiful and equal, each with their own charm. "Eve and the Apple Tree" not only denies the finality of death, but creates ambiguity left and right: statements appear without quotation marks or without attribution, making it unclear just who, if anyone, is speaking. The lines between Eve's dream and reality are blurred, as awake, Eve tries to comfort the tree weeping in her hair.

Most importantly, the poem presents a vision where beauty is paramount. Even God is seduced:

> And "he" who forbade the tree,
> he himself says, "it's beautiful,"

[61] "s'iz gut vos likhtik iz baytog / un finster iz baynakht"

and holds the great sunset

back for a moment. (Rosenwald 18-19)[62]

Beauty has the power to overcome the word of God, if temporarily. Rosenwald notes that this is not the biblical conception of beauty, where moral judgements hold sway, “and God saw that it was good,” and Joshua deserves a stopping of the sun’s course to pursue a just war, not beauty. Rosenwald further points out that the object of beauty in God’s eyes is not the masculine tree or feminine Eve, but “it,” the whole scene (23). The previous stanza is in fact the very opposite of God’s word, it is the moment of sin:

And Eve breaks off an apple

and feels strangely light,

she circles lovingly around the tree,

like a great butterly. (ibid, 19) [63]

This is a moment surprising for God to find beautiful: it parallels Lot’s daughters, who as their drunk father ascends the stairs, “fever." Around the lamp / flies a late butterfly.”[64] This is the most unholy use of sex: incest, perhaps rape (as the father is described in the Bible as not knowing that he had sex with them).

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[62] un „er„ vos hot dem boym farvert,
er zogt aleyn: „s‚aiz sheyn„
un halt nokh oyf a rege oyf
dos groyse zun-fargeyn.

[63] un khaveh reyst an epl op
un filt zikh modne gring,
zi kreyzt farlibt arum dem boym,
vi a groyser shmeterling.

[64] "zey fibern. arum dem lomp / a shpeter shmeterling flit —"

The specific language Manger uses here is resonant across his oeuvre, the salvific power of beauty. Eve's strange lightness (*modne gring*) is laden language. I will discuss *modne* later, as it plays a key role in the *Khumesh-Lider Akeyda* sequence. *Gring* is a word used by Manger to discuss beauty, death and sadness. In the poem "Spring" (*friling*), the green butterfly, "flutter[ing] still and light" is a sign that "no moment of beauty is wasted on earth" (LuB 63).[65] This image of a light butterfly is the epitome of beauty. This lightness is also a sign of death that occurs in a saved way. The Baal Shem Tov, a parallel figure to Jesus in Manger's writing, ensures that "autumn Landscape" "And the red moon, fevering and on fire, / Will go out more easily on his pious arms" (Autumn 48).[66] These two come together, as lightness connects beauty and death, as loveliness lightens death: the beauty of the moon, a "white bread," helps starving children "die a light death" ("shtarben a gringn toyt"). But it is also a way of making sadness easier. In "Autumn Landscape," "the apples are ripe and the sadness" and the "mourning-bird" knows that, because "there is not and will not be any consolation / his sadness will be milder, lighter."[67] Rather, another poem notes, "as one cries oneself out fully, it becomes lighter."[68] Eve's erotic love for the tree is beautiful, and reduces the weight of sadness and death, as opposed to the queen Vashti in the Megile-Lider, "weeping bitterly," though she asks the executioner to "give me one more moment with the sunset!," almost identical to what God gives Eve.[69]

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[65] "flatert shtil un gring / a griner shmeterling."
"keyn rge sheynkeyt geyt nit oyf der erd farloyrn."

[66] un di royte levone, vos fibert shver un brent, / veln gringer oysgeyn oyf zeyne frume hent. (Shod 21)

[67] "di epl zenen tseytik un der troyer—" / "az s,iz nishto un vet nisht zeyn keyn treyst. / vert zeyn troyer milder, gringer." (harovstikelandshaft - lub 417)

[68] az men veynt zikh oys, vert gringer.

[69] "veyṇt […] mit a biter geveyn" / "loz mikh nokh a rge mitn zunfargang!" (Vashtis Kloglid)

This poem is intimately connected to the *Akeyda* poems. At the end of the poem, the "the pious stars," "Tremble with alarm."[70] The pious stars, which shine over Abraham's house in the Pentateuch-Songs and burn in Avrom Manger's eyes in "The Sacrifice of Itzik," fear Eve's disobedient death instead of shining on death for God. Like the Akeyda, eating the apple is *bashert* ("fated"). The *bashert* of the *Akeyda* is ambivalent: in *Akeydas yitskhok*, it is the longed for loss, to Jesus, of the chance to be a sacrifice. In the *Khumesh-Lider*, when the shadow on Sarah's floor suggests that "not every Jew / is fated to such a happiness," she banishes shadow and tear in her anger. In "My Hate-Song," the fate considered is whether Manger is to be "the last singer / of an entire witness" (*Der shnayder-gezeln Noṭe Manger zingṭ* 57).[71] Fated (*bashert*) can be beautiful, one's destined beloved, or the ultimate fate of us all, death. But while it is fated, like all the *Akeyda* poems, this fate is postponed. Not only does God pause the sunset for a moment, but the poem ends at the moment before consummation of Eve's love, the most explicit of the sexual scenes in Manger's biblical poetry. The poet moves his gaze up from Eve, who "takes hold of the apple tree / with both hands around," past the treetop to the trembling "pious stars," where he lets the moment dissolve in an ellipsis, just as, in the only poem to describe the violence of the Akeyda, the narrator is abandoned half-dead as the poem fades to black.[72]

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[70] vos veystu, muter khuh, zog,
vos veystu vegn toyt ?
[…]
ain iber der kroyn fun epl-boym
tsitern di shtern frum . . .

[71] „iz mir bashert tsu zayn der letster zinger
fun an oysgesamter ede?"

[72] "un khave nemt dem epl-boym / mit beyde hent arum, / un iber der kroyn fun epl-boym / tsitern di shtern frum…"

Akeyda as Human Conflict

In the *Khumesh-Lider*, Manger sets up a model of the *Akeyda* as a human conflict, ultimately just the natural conclusion of human emotions and conflict, instead of a divine command. Manger makes the emotions of the biblical characters clear, making it understandable why they would act in the nasty ways they do. This shows that the pain of the *Akeyda* is just the pain involved in all of life. Almost a third of the book is devoted to the saga of Abraham, Sarah, and their sons, from their inability to conceive to the birth and eventual banishment of Ishmael, and culminates in the *Akeyda.*

The *Akeyda* seems like the last choice for a staunchly antireligious author. Yet unlike creation and revelation, where God reigns supreme, dictating truth from on high, the *Akeyda* is a true meeting of human choice and life with the divine dictate. Unlike Sodom, where Abraham tries to bargain God out of destroying the city, the ultimate choice did not lie in the heavens but in the breast of man. In Manger's telling of the sacrifice in the *Khumesh-Lider*, the only place God appears is in the whispering of a shadow on Sarah's floor and the mutterings of Abraham under his breath as he sharpens his knife.

All we have is the play of the human, just as all too human emotions ended in the heartless exile of Hagar. These two stories, kicking out Ishmael and Hagar and leading Isaac to sacrifice are parallel, in both the biblical and Mangerian tellings. The God-demanded sacrifice seems perhaps retribution for the lack of love and compassion on the part of the forefather and mother, destining a child to be thrown to die of thirst under the desert bushes simply because he laughed. In both

stories, however, God ultimately saves the child. Ishmael is fundamentally an outsider. Born into Abraham's family, he never really fits in, just as Manger felt himself permanently an outsider. But God promises that a great nation will become of him.

Manger shows the *Akeyda* as human by knitting the stories of Ishmael and Isaac more tightly together, flipping who you expect to be divinely chosen. While the birth of Isaac is "a miracle, a fated miracle" (*a nes, a nes bashert*), Hagar tells her son that "*azoy iz unz shoyn bashert*—this is already fated for us." But this then falls back on Abraham's family. The only real instance of prayer comes in the poem "The mother Sarah has a heavy countenance" (*Di muter sore hot a shver gemit*). Right after Hagar has been ungracefully exiled, Sarah prays, "[God-]fearing tender and pious" to protect the

> the worm, that nothing
> which crawls in the dust.
>
> And the small mouselet
> In his mouse-hole—
> And ordain (*basher*) for all of Israel
> A good full week! (KHL 33)

Of course, she gives no thought to the handmaid, abandoned in the desert. In fact, in the next poem, she smiles thinking how "Hagar is gone, / with that little bastard Ishmael, / on that thin path." (KHL 35). This wish for a good fate for Israel is soon countered by a tear which "in her old eyes gleams…and trembles quietly." The tear talks to the shadow on the floor, if it is true

that “Avrom / wants to sacrifice his son?” Grasping for a reason “for which sin?” The shadow responds to be quieter and then says “they only know, not every Jew / is fated (*bashert*) to such a happiness.” Sarah in anger throws the tear and shadow out, just as she exiled Hagar, wishing that it should fall “on my enemies’ heads.” She then goes to the cradle and returns to her prayer, but instead of the A to Z of her earlier prayer, she just prays for God to protect her little son. The wish for this tragedy to fall on someone else cannot happen, because it already has happened. She refuses to see the possibility of her son being sacrificed as “glik” (happiness or luck). This is in line with the midrashim, which explain that Satan comes to Sarah to tell her that Abraham is going to sacrifice her son, that she dies immediately (AgadaH) or that Isaac asks his father to not tell Sarah when she is on the edge of soemthing, because she might fall off and die. Manger seems to follow these *midrashim*, as the poem immediately following the Akeyda, Sarah is dead.

Ultimately, seemingly against fate, the *Akeyda* is transmuted into marriage: “it wasn’t destined / that you should bring your child to the *khupe* (marriage covering).”[73] But there is no promise of seed as numerous as stars in heaven (Gen. 22:17). Only Hagar, the outsider is pledged a grand lineage: abandoned in the desert, she sees a sultan’s caravan, which claims her son as their ancestor (*KhL* 32).

Hagar recognizes the injustice of Abraham. She calls on the divine for retribution, framing the *Akeyda* as punishment for causing human hurt. In "Hagar Leaves Abraham’s House,” the first time she says, “This is the way of the Fathers / With their long and reverend beards,” it is meant as a comfort to her son Ishmael as she tells him to stop crying, for “this is already preordained

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[73] "nisht geven bashert / zolst firn tsu der khuph deyn kind’" (40)

(*bashert*) for us."[74] This quiet resignation in the face of the unfairness of fate gives Hagar the gift that Isaac felt was taken from him by Jesus in the first *Akeyda* poem. Her loss is fated, and as Abraham tells Isaac to do in that poem, she "puts on her sadness…and goes" without complaint.[75] But she doesn't want this sacrifice. As we will later see Manger do to God, she calls out the injustice. Once she leaves, she "takes the earth and heaven / To be her witnesses" against Abraham for his actions.[76] As Kronfeld and Peckerar point out, this is a verbatim translation of "Moses's condemnation of the people's conduct, which is reiterated three times in Deuteronomy (4:26, 30:19, and 31:28): 'va-a'ida bam et ha-shamayim ve-et ha-aretz' ('I call heaven and earth to testify this day against you')" (19). One of the *midrashim* protesting the Akeyda suggest that God tests Abraham because the forefather pointed out how God failed to live out the divine vision of justice (Sagi 56–57). Hagar's points out Abraham's religious hypocrisy: "a frume bord (a pious beard) is a sarcastic Yiddish idiomatic expression that functions as a synecdoche for Jewish men who are religious only in their external appearance and not in their morals or actions" (Kronfeld and Peckerar, 19). The glory of the *Akeyda* outlined in *Akeydas Itzik* is mooted, shown as a sign of religious hypocrisy.

The dreamlike visions in the poems about the sacrifices of Isaac and Itzik gets brought down to earth in the *Khumesh-Lider*. Pain and beauty don't sit together nearly as comfortably, nor is the repetition of Jewish history a connection to the past that is powerful and divine, but the result of human action. In the Pentateuch-Songs, dreams and death don't weave one idyllic tapestry, but

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[74] *azoy iz unz shoyn bashert*

[75] tu on deyn troyer, meyn kind, un kum.

[76] *"nemt far an edus / dem himl un di erd"*

compete as opposite paradigms, with death as a painful reality. While these poems contain elements of humor and still beauty, Manger makes evident the human passions of the biblical characters, nagging sorrow becoming nastiness and joy becoming pain. As Hagar points out, the biblical heroes are deeply unkind in their piety. Abraham, God's chosen, is the worst. He is horrible not only to Hagar)"Beat it, you bitch," *The World* 12), but also to his wife. When Sarah is crying about not having a son, he says "animal, shut up! Now stop already / And she just cries and cries" (KhL 21). Abraham can't deal with emotion, going almost mad as he sharpens the knife for the *Akeyda*. He "murmurs strange words" announcing his readiness to carry out God's "prank."[77] Like the poems about Eve and the earlier *Akeyda* poems, these poems also play with the idea of idyll. But this idyll is short lived, and not clear if it is real. The break between feelings, idyll and reality leads to tragedy. The loveliness, as Ishmael plays "With sunbeams in the sand," is broken by Sarah's sadness at not being able to have a son of her own:

> I find myself caressing him
>
> And grief overwhelms (*vert modne troyerik*) my hand.
>
> […]
>
> I feel my blood turn strangely cold (*s'vert modne troyerik*)
>
> And then my eyes are wet (*KhL* 19).[78]

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[77] *"s'tsitert im di groe bord / un er murmlt modne reyd: / „vilst mir tun a sbitke, got? / iz mila, ikh bin greyt'."* (36)

[78] shpilt zikh mit der zun in zamd
un ikh gib im ibern kepl a glet,
vert modne troyerik meyn hant.
…
vern meyne oygn feykht un groys
un s'vert modne troyerik meyn blut.

The pure, light, happiness of Ishmael evokes unsettling emotions in Sarah's body.This word *modne* (strangely), is important because it ties together various elements from these poems. As Eve picked the fruit she felt "strangely light" (*modne gring*) and in the introduction to the Pentateuch-Songs, Manger describes the Galician landscape with its "strange hushed twilights" and childish fears of "strange creatures that hung over and lay upon the willows beside the road" (*KhL* 5–6; *The World* 3–4).[79] *Modne* serves to emphasize the dream, the blurred connection between reality and self, the transformation between states and the possibility in everyday things. Yet roles soon switch, and now Isaac plays in the sand as a "blue night descends from the nearby mountains." Unlike with Ishmael, Sarah "looks at Isaac and *kvells*," but is unsure: "is it a dream or is it real"? (*KhL* 35).[80] Happiness is dreamlike, and her brief idyll has the same blue sky as Manger's first *Akeyda* poem, where Isaac looked down from the "light heaven-blue" to fix on a crucified man. This brief moment of happiness is not necessarily reality. Just as Avrom comes to terms with the fact that he must murder his son, idyll returns:

> And from the nearby apple orchard
>
> wafts the taste of branch and wind
>
> […]
>
> which lull a child to sleep

---

[79] modne shtile demerungen…mshune modne bashefenishn, vos hengen un lign oyf di verbes paze veg

[80] un s'nidert fun di noente berg
a bloe nakht in land.
…
zi kukt oyf itskhklen un kvelt :
s'aiz khlum tsi s'aiz vor —

And with the knife in hand

Avrom stands and hears

How across the whole earth

Soaks up the quiet cradle-song.[81]

The sharp contrast between the beautiful dream and the gut-wrenching reality is painful to read. The apple tree is not an innocent soporific. As we saw in "Eve and the Apple Tree," the apple tree stands for the dreamlike yearning for death, the innocent image for those who do not know what is coming, just as Isaac lies oblivious in his cradle. This contrast is tragic: the beauty which in the other poems coexists with death appears here as the opposite of the reality of death. When it actually comes down to it, when considering this sacrifice in the context of a relationship between father and son, it is simply painful. When the sacrifice actually comes around, however, the beauty doesn't disappear, as the poet describes the roads as "sad and lovely." The simple power of beauty to wash away pain is not enough when real emotions are involved, but it still shines through.

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[81] un fun dem noentn eplsod
farshmekt mit tsvit un vint,
mit a-a-a un ey-liu-liu,
vos shlefert eyn a kind.

un mitn meser in der hant
shteyt avrum un er hert,
vi s'nemt dos shtile vignlid
arum di gantse erd.

Akeyda as Martyrdom

Manger's poems of the *Akeyda* written during the war continue the human thread started in the *Khumesh-Lider*. A continuation of the personal aspect of *Akeydas Itzik*, the *Akeyda* is brought into the contemporary world to describe the real loss facing Jews as the war begins. These poems continue the themes of the earlier poems, but they break down in the face of this great tragedy. The *Akeyda* is no longer a ritual death, sacrificing to bring salvation, but meaningless loss.

The promises of salvation begin to break down. Poetry is no longer able to wipe away the tears in the face of a world so broken. The grandfather, the shtetl world, abandons the Jews on this last *Akeyda*.

Will Salvation Come?

The first, *Der ovnt tunklt* (The Evening Darkens), dated Warsaw 1938, the year he fled to France, describes the coming *Akeyda*. For the first time, the sacrifice will not be carried out by Abraham: "the murderers sharpen / the axe. They murmur, avowing the *Akeyda*" (ViD 16f).[82]

The parallels between their murderous intent and Abraham underscore their difference. The trembling Abraham, sharpening the knife in the *Khumesh-Lider*, "murmurs strange words" announcing his readiness to carry out God's "prank."[83] Avraham is driven almost mad with pain, the strangeness parallel to Sarah's pain in her childlessness. As she tries to be loving to Ishmael, her hand and blood "become strangely sad," her eyes become "moist and large" like Abraham's driving to the *Akeyda*, a deeply physical sensation of sadness, as Sarah's "flesh weeps every

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[82] "*di roskhim sharfn / di hek. Zey mormlen bashvern di akeyda*"

[83] *"s'tsitert im di groe bord / un er murmlt modne reyd: / „vilst mir tun a sbitke, got? / iz mila, ikh bin greyt'."* (36)

night" and Abraham's knife "scalds…his flesh."[84] This stands in sharp contrast to these murderers, who swear: "with drunk lips, when the murder stinks / with brandy and with hate."[85] This new *Akeyda* comes not from the hands of a loving father, but inebriated anti-Semites.

The knife is replaced with an axe. The knife is the precise vehicle of sacrifice—the razor-sharp implement of the *shoykhet* (ritual slaughterer) is bound by intricate religious rules, locating divine ethics within slaughter. The axe is a brutish weapon, a peasant tool repurposed for war—the fratricidal Cain, eight poems later in the same volume, calling his father to look "At the scarlet ribbon of blood / That wriggles along the earth / And smells so sad and good" (*The World* 28). These new agents of the *Akeyda* are uncouth, brutish.

But these murderers inhabit only one verse of seven in this poem. The others are split evenly between looking forward into the evening and autumn imagery, foreshadowing death, and gazing back to the *Akeyda* of the Bible. The poem presents a caesura, a moment of dread held between past and future as "the murderers sharpen / the axe." But unlike the other narratives of the *Akeyda*, it is unclear whether salvation will come before the moment falls.

The poem opens and closes with the image of its title: "the evening darkens" (*der ovnt tunklt*). The darkening evening is foreboding. But in Manger's previous biblical poems, it also carries with it a possibility of salvation. In *Akeydas Itzik,* "the evening is darkening already" (*der ovnt tunklt shoyn*) and Abraham calls his son to join him on the long path home after the suspended

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[84] *"ikh gib im ibern kepl a glet, / vert modne troyerik meyn hant. / […] / vern meyne oygn feykht un groys / un s'vert modne troyerik meyn blut"* (*KhL* 19)
"a yede nakht / her ikh vi s'khlipet meyn layb" (19)
"brit dos layb" (38)

[85] *"mit shikere leftsn, ven s'shtinkt der mord / mit bronfn un mit sino"*

sacrifice, for "he, the happy one, he still needs to arrive."[86] They must take the long weary path home, but the Messiah will come, Jesus will take up the *Akeyda*. In the *Khumesh-Lider,* the path *tunklt* as Abraham gives up hope on having a child in his old age, musing how "just like a shadow and like smoke / our days pass." But "from the darkness emerge" the three angels who have come to promise him a child.[87] Even when the salvation is not promised, it is hoped for, as Sarah, worried about the upcoming *Akeyda,* prays to God for protection as the "Sabbath-twilight darkens."[88]

The hope in this poem is tied to the threat. After evening is announced, we see the "evening birds" sit on the tree, reminiscent of Eve's naïve concept of death: "Death, ah death's…/...the bird upon the branch / Singing an evensong." As Rosenwald notes, these are all signs of an impending death, but not the death itself. They still fall far short of an actual concept of death. These birds are foreboding, but not a sign of death yet here. The glimmer of hope and protection is tied to this image: "our home is a miracle / in foreign forests. Our dream raises / its wings to the stars." Like Isaac's birth—"a miracle, a miracle destined" (soon threatened by filicide—this is hardly a reassurance: Manger fled Warsaw the year he wrote this poem.[89] Europe has turned into "foreign forests," the salvation Manger saw in the woods of the Baal Shem Tov is gone. The dream's wings, borrowed from the death-alike evening birds, are raised to stars that have no

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[86] "kum, kind, der ovnt tunklt shoyn in feld. / der veg iz lang un veyt nokh dos getselt, / un er, der gliklekher, er darf ersht kumen"

[87] "un zet vi s'tunklt der veg — / ot vi a shotn un vi a roykh / fargeyen unzere teg. / [...] / un fun der tunkl sheyln zikh oys"

[88] "di shtile shabes-demerung tunklt"

[89] *a nes, a nes bashert,* (*KhL* 23)

salvific power in Manger's poetry: all they can do is bear witness, as they do a stanza later, "trembling fearfully."[90]

The poem next looks back throughout history to the memory of when a "father hand / raised the knife" und trembling God-fearing "sweet summer stars." Then the drama was all in God's hands, and he was saved by "the wonderful-light" angel, who "we call in fearful hours / when fate punishes."[91] Fate is no longer *bashert*, destined love, but *gorl*, the blind fate of *Akeydas Itzik*. To face this meaningless fate, a stronger intervention that just appearing is needed, the angel must be the one "who restrained the hand with the knife." Ultimately, the danger lies not in fate, but in the angel:

> As children we read the stories of the *khumesh*
> Woe is the hand which raises the ax
> Sharp. Ten times woe the angel
> Which arrives too late.[92]

Here the salvation and muted threat of autumnal evening unite: the late (*farshpetikt*) angel is like the "ripe (*tsaytike*) stars," which "fall tired in the autumn night / down into the grasses."[93] Stars

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[90] *"shtern tsitern forkhtik"*

[91] "vu s'hot a foter-hant / gehoybn dos meser. / zise zumer-shtern / tsitern forkhtik"
"dem malakh nor, dem vunderlekh-likhtikn, / vos hot di hant farhaltn mitn meser, / im rufn mir in shoh'en angstike, / ven s,strashet der gurl."

[92] *vi kinder leyenen mir di meshius fun'm khumsh*
iz vey der hant vos hoybt di hak,
di sharfe. tsen mol vey dem malakh,
vos farshpetikt tsu kumen.

[93] "tsaytike shtern faln mid in di harbst-nekht
/ arop in di grozn. "

herald death, trembling above Eve as she takes the apple, falling as Abraham reads of the death of Sarah. This imagery is parallel to a favorite poem of Manger's, "Autumn" by Rilke:

> The leaves are falling, falling as if from far away,
> as if in heaven distant gardens were withering;
> they fall with a gesture of negation.
>
> And in the nights the heavy earth falls
> from all the stars, into solitude.
>
> We all are falling. This hand here is falling.
> And look at others: it is in all of them.
>
> And yet there's One, who with infinite gentleness
> holds this falling in his hands (Gal-Ed and Rosenwald 47).[94]

Rilke's autumn is a harbinger of death, but also an opportunity to find God in the process, falling into the divine embrace as one gives up oneself (Jackson, *Blossoms from the Dust*). Manger plays

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[94] Die Blätter fallen, fallen wie von weit,
als welkten in den Himmeln ferne Gärten;
sie fallen mit verneinender Gebärde.

Und in den Nächten fällt die schwere Erde
aus allen Sternen in die Einsamkeit.

Wir alle fallen. Diese Hand da fällt.
Und sieh dir andre an: es ist in allen.

Und doch ist Einer, welcher dieses Fallen
unendlich sanft in seinen Händen halt.

on this poem in a second poem titled "Autumn Landscape," where the Baal Shem Tov catches the falling autumn (Gal-Ed and Rosenwald 48). But unlike the figures in these poems who are always there to break the fall, in *Der ovnt tunklt* it is unclear if the angel will arrive on time. Instead, the poem ends on a foreboding version of the final ellipses in the *Khumesh-Lider*, three dashes, as if a Morse code call for help. In the earlier poem "Autumn Landscape," "the apples are ripe and the sadness" and the "mourning-bird" knows that, because "there is not and will not be any consolation / his sadness will be milder, lighter."[95] But here, the Jews of Europe need divine consolation.

The Failure of Poetry

In *Mayn Zeyde*, we return again to the theme of Manger's personal *Akeyda*.

The first stanza is almost playful, combining elements from the previous poems to show the grandfather's cart, going "upmountain, downmountain." But this is not just a journey through physical land, the trips from Stopchet to Kolomea that Manger loved so much as a child.[96] They are a journey through time: "through forfeited years, / the clouds and the birds flee in a wager." As the years pass, Manger's poetry is brought into question. In the wagon:

> My grandfather is silent. Only his deep sadness speaks:
>
> "Ever rose bleeds on its thorns,

[95] "di epl zenen tseytik un der troyer—" / "az s,iz nishto un vet nisht zeyn keyn treyst. / vert zeyn troyer milder, gringer." (harovstikelandshaft - lub 417)

[96] ShiP 440.

The scythe sings cutting the grain,

Have you devised this, crazy poet?" (ViD 39)[97]

This parallels Isaac right after the *Akeyda*, who sees a butterfly (a symbol of sexuality in Manger's poetry) alight, only briefly, on a blue cornflower, and he wonders if the charlatan has "Given the flower a divorce?": "In Isaac's eye there gleams a tear— "The world is filled with sin" (*World* 17).[98]

This notes the end of an old world, where, three poems later, Manger sang, harnessing himself to a "flying colt" as his grandfather harnessed the bays, riding swiftly across the land, "where the beauty wipes away the tears from every distress" (*Ikh Aleyn,* ViD 43).[99] Beauty has always been fleeting, with eyes "dark, deep and large" and "on its breast a sick rose," the moment of sunset.[100] The grandfather's tear notes that it's not just that the rose is wilting, but it is bleeding out from its own thorns. The world is full of pain. But this image from the old world is no longer beautiful, it is dead: "alte miln moln / broyt un toyt far yedn oyf der erd," the mundane is deadly, and destroys all. The scythe that cuts the grain is deadly, and we are all just grain.

A world where Manger could wipe away the tears with beauty is gone: he did that for "something like twenty years" but now his grandfather's questions it. Did his poetry, trying to salve pain with beauty, create a world where all that is beautiful is painful?

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[97] *meyn zeyde shveygt. nor zeyn tifer troyer redt:*
„a yede royz blutikt oyf ir dorn,
di kose zingt shneydndik dos korn,
hostu es oysgetrakht, mshugener poet?

[98] "in itskhks oygn finklt a trer: / s'aiz ful mit zind di velt !"

[99] "vu di sheynkayt visht di trern op fun ale tsar'n"

[100] "tunkl tif un groys" / "oyf ir brust a kranke royz"

Just as poetry abandons him, suddenly so does the grandfather:

> The evening darkens, where are you, old *zeyde*?
>
> I lie not quite dead at the *Akeyda*
>
> And only see the shadows of your tired horses…[101]

Only the shadows of the horses which carried him so swiftly are left. There is no running now, no striding over cities. Like the dying cities of *Mayn sino lid*, Manger is now on the threshold of death, not quite dead. He has not been put on the *Akeyda* by the grandfather. Or the grandfather has left him there, bound and dying. The horses, which could have carried him away and carried him before are gone.

The narrator is like a child, suddenly lost, looking for his parent, seeing just the shadows of others. When Itzik Manger was a child, his grandfather passed away. His parents never told him that he'd died, he just stopped coming. Little Itzik waited, for days and days, and *zeyde* never showed up. He went to the hay market, where all the wagon drivers gathered, and searched among all the horses for his grandfather's. He saw ones that looked like his, but was confused, because they weren't quite right.[102] He never found him, and didn't understand: "vi nemt es plotsim a zeyde un iz nishto?!"

In this poem, the *zeyde* is missing again. The poet is once again a small child among the shadows of horses, searching for his grandfather, whose name he can only give as *zeyde* to a helpful

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[101] *der ovnt tunklt. vu biztu, alter zeyde ?*
ikh lig a nisht derkoyleter oyf der akeyda,
un ze bloyz di shotns fun deyne mide ferd . . .

[102] Kinder-yorn in Kolomey, ShiP 440-1 (**Jan 1,** 1961 "Childhood in Kolomea" N659n18)

passerby, simply a representation of the old world. The death which took his grandfather is now threatening him.

This sudden turn from the *zeyde's* cart to the evening without him is ambiguous: for the first time, we see the consequences of the *Akeyda*, but we didn't see it happen. The moment is cut out of time. It's like waking up from a dream: the previous stanza, which begins "and the path goes on,"[103] ends with a comma, followed by this independent clause, unrelated to the previous paragraph, as if the path kept going, but the narrator is no longer on it. This is parallel to the transition from the first to second stanza. A stanza of travel, movement through different scenes ("*un*—and" serving to carry between and join different images), ends with a comma, as if to say there will be more, but the following one starts with a short statement, a fake enjambment, seemingly parallel to that two lines before. But instead of an explanation of movement ("up and down mountains" or "through silent villages"), there is a sudden pause, a tableau: "my *zeyde* is silent," "the evening darkens." In both there is a loss, words or vision, almost equivalent in a poem. The silent grandfather fades into the night, leaving only the shadows of his horses.

Revenge

In *Mayn sino lid* the transformation of the *Akeyda* is totally complete (*Der shnayder-gezeln Noṭe Manger zingṭ* 57). The process began with the first poem where the *Akeyda* is given (if ambiguously) to the Christian universal in the figure of Christ to a personal vision of sacrifice in *Akeydas Itzik*. The Galician *Akeyda* of the *Khumesh-Lider* turns into the threat of the German *Akeyda*. Now it has totally flipped, and Manger wants to carry out an *Akeyda* on the "blond

[103] "*un vayter geyt der veg*"

chins, the blue-eyed fools," counting out their minutes, hearing their last breaths, asking to be "distributed...in thousands of nightmares / for I should consume the body and the dream."

The imagery of the earlier *Akeyda* poems is all present: fate (*bashert*), willows by cradles, shadows and dreams. The poem ends with a verse parallel to the refrain in *Akeydas Itzik*. The poet calls all crows to "flutter...over the bloody nation, / over dying villages, cities and castles." The kaleidoscopic towns of earlier have become *goses'dike*, on their last breath. No grandfather is there to take him by the hand and fly over the country. All that is left are the animals, omens of misfortune. Manger's life, he says, he has "travelled a journey through paths / through cities and shtetls, through singing years"[104] with the Broder Zinger.

The flight here is not the dreamlike striding over cities of *Akeydas Itzik* or Eve's circling the apple tree in love, like a butterfly. Nor is it the joy of fluttering (*flatern*) swallows: over Sarah's roof as a metaphor for her satisfaction, her joy over Isaac in the brief moment of peace before the *Akeyda*, or by the barefoot Rachel, dreaming of her lover Jacob. The sexual imagery of flight, which Manger certainly knew from Freud and carried out in these poems, has disappeared (Rosenwald 26). There is no next generation of Jews to be brought about through love and lust. These birds are messengers of death, a sign that Germany is doomed for its sins, that its young children deserve to die. Germany carried out the *Akeyda*, and there was no salvation, no resurrection. For cutting of the seed of Abraham, their next generation deserves to die.

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[104] "bin mit zey a maholekh vegs opgeforn / durkh shtet un shtetlekh, durkh zingndike yorn," VII: Broder zinger (Vid 44)

This urge for revenge is rooted in a tradition where the *Akeyda* and martyrdom are linked in the promise of redemption. The scholar Israel Yuval argues that Eastern European Jews yearned for a "revengeful redemption":

> Since God is not indifferent to spilt Jewish blood, the sacrifice on the altar of faith will not be in vain, as they may well be the ones who will stir Him to forswear his passivity and begin the process of redemption (Sagi 55).

But God is gone, and the revenge can only be carried out in mourning. Manger asks in the poem to be a willow by the cradles of German children, counting out their breaths. Willows are a sign of the loss of Jewish worlds. The willows of Psalm 137 are a sign of exile, "By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there
we hung up our harps" (*NRSV*). Zionist poets in the twenties reclaim the image of the harp, taking it down from the willow to herald a new Jewish dawning (Jackson, *Warring over Yiddish Poetry* 24). Manger is not able to pick up the harp, because there is no hope of salvation after the holocaust. Instead, he can only accuse God.

In one postwar poem, he describes three Hasidic rabbis, known as "Lovers of Israel" for their charity and kindness, carrying out trial for God. They declare: "Creator of worlds, Thou art mighty and great, / But we Galician Jews forever erase / Your name from the list of true Lovers of Israel" (Howe 594–95).[105] The divine is gone. The rabbis are not given the power of accusation by their religious role, but through care for their fellow human beings, a care God has

[105] "Bashefer fun di veltn du bizt mekhtik, moradik un groys / nur mir di galitsianer mekn dikh oyf eyvik oys / fun der eda emse, ohavey yisroel"

abandoned. This accusation follows a long religious tradition stretching back to *midrashim* about the *Akeyda*. Instead of seeing the sacrifice as a beautiful way of serving God, these "protest midrashim" emphasis God's failure to carry out justice in the Bible. The *Akeyda* is an unecessary sacrifice to which God is forever in debt, invoked on Yom Kippur to demand that God forgive our sins (Sagi 56–57).

Conclusion

Manger and Bergelson fundamentally lay out different methods of approaching the past. In trying to find a path forward, Bergelson presents a vision the old world and the new as dichotomous, while Manger happily inhabits the anachronistic contradictions of mashing together different worlds.

In *Altvarg*, Bergelson sets out a model for viewing past and present, which we should not confuse with the author's views. His criticisms of Grayvis, do however, present a vision of how the traditional world interacts with the modern. Given Bergelson's radical shift away from his sheltered, rich, and religious upbringing to a politically involved role in the Soviet Union, this presentation of religion and life as incompatible in the twentieth century seems fitting. In *Altvarg*, the religious texts which used to suffuse the world of the shtetl are now not relevant. Those who try to use them to understand the world will only fail. Instead of gaining a way to live, as the texts promise, they will just pull you further into oblivion.

Manger, on the other hand, doesn't take a simple approach. He builds his persona and poetry on contradiction. The Bible is vicious, but also beautiful. His greatest goal is to reach universality by joining the ranks of European literature, but to do so stretches deep into the Jewish past. He layers his texts on medieval Jewish epic, the hermeneutical tradition of *midrash*, and the biblical narrative. Onto this he adds the world of the folk: the *purim-shpil*, folk language and song, and the world of his grandfather, the shtetl Jew. In doing so, he escapes the trap that Grayvis faces. In Manger's poetry there is no clear dichotomy between the modern metropolis and the Jewish tradition. He reaches past and present, universal and particular by refusing to see them as incompatible. And he is comfortable in the fact that they don't fit well together, bringing humor and connection out of anachronism.

Instead of this self-aware layering, Grayvis cannot separate the religious narratives from his life. Past and present are indistinguishable: Berlin becomes Nineveh, Grayvis becomes Jonah. This melding leads to unbridgeable gaps between reality and experience, as youth and activity becomes the antithesis of piety. By seeing his life as biblical narrative, the religious demands create sharp distinctions between shtetl and city, making them incompatible. Manger's poems, on the other hand, draw lines between the real and the fantastical. When Abraham closes his eyes, he sees the angels travelling, "holding on to the thread" of Isaac's tears (*KhL* 27).[106] The two worlds are layered, and sometimes one can reach through the veil to the other side. But in their separation, Manger maintains a functional sanity. Present reality is infused with the past, but it exists on its own. Human life exists as something discrete, allowing his characters to live normally.

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[106] *zey haltn zikh on di fedim / fun dem kinds geveyn*

Both authors struggle with the role of the human. Bergelson's Grayvis is so stuck in his theology and obsession with sin that he misses the humanity of people. Youth and activity, instead of representing life, are markers of depravity. At the end of *Altvarg*, he realizes that he has been misreading the texts, carrying out his religious world wrong. But instead of freeing him from the trap of the texts, this just throws him deeper into them, as he realizes he was hiding not only from his sin, but from God himself.

Manger uses the *Akeyda* as the primary example of conflict between human and divine. The demand for the beloved son seems the most inhuman vision of divinity. But ultimately it turns out to be the expression of the most human part of the world: nastiness and pain. By turning the biblical texts into human tales of lust and sadness he removes their sting. The biblical characters, instead of being upright, are nasty in their *frumkayt*. Abraham, God's chosen, is the worst, horrible not only to Hagar but also to his wife. He has no patience for other people's pain, unable to face the reality of the world (goes mad/modne, fair). In his representations of such characters, Manger shows that he understands the pain, that he can comprehend, and creates a gospel of empathy, as even the nastiest characters become understandable (sarah's modne troyerik, lot's daughters).

Facing Loss

The *Akeyda* is the combination of death and salvation, continuation impossible without loss. Manger recognizes the loss of the old world, and doesn't try to recreate the shtetl. He instead reincarnates it in his poetry. Poetry itself becomes salvific, as "beauty wipes away the tears from every distress" (*ViD* 43). By exploring the fall in contrast to the *Akeyda*, Manger shows not only

that beauty can save, but that the most beautiful, the most intense human emotions of lust and love are based in the promise of death.

Both Manger and Bergelson's Grayvis face the destruction of the old world. And it is personal in both. In *Altvarg*, Grayvis sees the crisis of the Russian Revolution as punishment for his sin, a world destroyed by one man. The *Akeyda*, especially when read through the lens of Jesus, presents an individual sacrifice which saves the world. But Manger does not have Grayvis's theological megalomania. Even when he places himself on the altar, he is a representation of all contemporary Jews. All "the Itziks from Poland, Lithuania, Russia and Romania, from the whole European continent are the heaps of ash of this last *Akeyda*" (*Shrifṭn in proze* 442).

Grayvis sees himself as the last survivor of this old world. Yet he never adjusts to being in the new one. Manger, when he worries that he is "destined to be the last singer / of an entire witness," is able to reinterpret the Biblical tradition of the *Akeyda* (*Der shnayder-gezeln Noṭe Manger zingṭ* 57). He transforms his earlier notions of salvation into the hope for vengeance, drawing on the exegetical tradition to reinterpret his life. Instead of taking his powerlessness and turning inward, Manger sings loud and clear. The passive Grayvis can only beat himself up for his daughters' sin and the loss of his world. Manger is able not only to indict the Germans for their violence but is even able to accuse God: "Creator of worlds, Thou art mighty and great, / But we Galician Jews forever erase / Your name from the list of true Lovers of Israel" (Howe 594–95).

Manger does suffer an irrevocable loss, however. After the war, his poetry is haunted by the death of his brother Note, who becomes his muse. But his prolific prewar output is over. He

publishes no poetry from 1948 until the year before his death in 1968, when he puts out a collection, *Shtern in shtoyb* (Stars in the Dust), with only twenty-three new poems (Gal-Ed, *Niemandssprache* 703). Poetry has lost its power of salvation.

Shorthand for Works by Manger

DiSh: Demerung in shpigl

KhL: Khumesh-lider

LuB: Lid un balade

ShoD: Shtern oyf'n dakh

ShiP: Shriftn in Proze

ViD: Volkns ibern dakh

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