

Great Women of Yiddish Poetry

by *Ellen Cassedy*

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OVER THE CENTURIES, Jewish women have written prolifically in Yiddish. Most of their output was poetry. Why so — why poetry rather than novels, for example — is a matter of scholarly debate. Anita Norich has pointed out that the Jewish storytelling tradition was associated with religious learning, therefore male — and that poems, being relatively short, can be written in between domestic obligations. (“It is, however, difficult to imagine any poet making such an argument,” she acknowledges.)

If the sheer volume of women’s poetry was impressive, women poets were nonetheless consistently marginalized. In her groundbreaking, heartbreaking introduction to the anthology *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (1994), Irena Klepfisz describes how Yiddish literature, once the province of women, was gradually “masculinized.” In the 19th century, three towering literary masters arose, all men, whom Sholem Aleichem dubbed *der zeyde* (the grandfather), Mendele Moykher Sforim; *der tate* (the father), Y. L. Peretz; and *der zun* (the son), himself.

Yiddish newspaper and journal editors and book publishers allocated a disproportionately small space for the work of women writers. In English translation, too, into the 20th century, women received little recognition, either in solo publications or in anthologies. There was an outstanding exception, however: a 1928 anthology of seventy women poets writing in Yiddish, edited by Ezra Korman and published in the U.S.

Kathryn Hellerstein encountered Korman’s book through the Yiddish poet Malka Heifetz Tussman (1893-1987). In the late 1970s, Hellerstein was a doctoral student struggling mightily with her dissertation about a male poet. Heifetz Tussman, her mentor, one day grew suddenly irritated with the struggle. She pulled Korman’s anthology off a shelf and pushed it across the table. “Women wrote beautiful poems in Yiddish,” she said. “*Leyen!*” (“Read!”)

Hellerstein used the Korman anthology as the starting point for a twenty-five-year project. The result is *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* — a book that is impressively wide-ranging and just as impressively deep. In January, it won a National Jewish Book Award.

HELLERSTEIN BRINGS FORMIDABLE POWERS to her work: She is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems by Kadya Molodowsky* (1999); she co-edited *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (2001); she's a poet herself, and poetry editor at two journals.

Her new book is a close look at eighteen poets, with special attention directed toward the many different ways these women wrote about the experience of being female. Training a gender-studies lens on poems that span four centuries, Hellerstein helps us achieve an intimate understanding of a wide variety of work.

A Question of Tradition begins with an examination of early Yiddish devotional poems, known as *tkhines*, published in the late 16th century in Krakow, Amsterdam, and Prague. These pious poems, meant to be recited by women, were mostly written by men, but Hellerstein introduces us to several women *tkhine* poets, primarily wives or daughters of rabbis and printers. She notes that although the *tkhines* were recited privately at home, they nevertheless spoke in a communal voice rather than an individual one: May the Lord protect us, not me.

Tkhines were the foundation. What most interests Hellerstein is the interplay between such traditional sources and the more modern concerns of later women poets, who didn't simply discard the literary and religious traditions that bound them, but worked with them, struggled against them, adapted them to new ends. In so doing, Hellerstein argues, these writers played a vital role in shaping the development of modern Yiddish literature as a whole.

In Poland between the world wars, she shows us, such poets as Kadya Molodowsky, Dvora Fogel, Rikuda Potash, and Rokhl Korn devoted themselves to expressing the struggle of women to free themselves from the strictures of Jewish tradition. Unlike the women poets of earlier centuries, these poets spoke as "I" rather than "we," but in constructing their verses, they often dipped into the well of devotional tradition.

In her poem, "Fun finster" ("From Darkness"), Molodowsky (1894-1975) evokes the traditional image of a woman washing her hands and blessing the sabbath candles. In this sacred moment, instead of covering her eyes before the flickering flames, the narrator looks up into the sky and makes a bold declaration:

From darkness, from hiding
I emerge — And stride
With broad steps at the head of my generation...

Rokhl Korn (1898-1982) grew up in a Polish farming village. Much of her work draws on nature imagery. She opens her poem "Dir" ("To You"), addressed to her husband, with the familiar trope of female receptivity:

I'm soaked through with you, like earth with springtime rain

But Korn's next image modifies the usual passive female/active male dynamic:

And my fairest day hangs
By the beating pulse of your first word,
Like a bee by the blossoming branch of lindens...

Two other poets, Miriam Ulinover (1888-1942) and Roza Yakubovitsh (1889-1942), employed old-time devotional forms, archaic language, and biblical characters, but put these elements to brand-new uses. Ulinover created the "literary folk poem," featuring a *shtetl* grandmother in dialogue with her modern granddaughter. Hellerstein suggests that Ulinover probably influenced the better-known Itzik Manger, whose biblical poems reimagined the patriarchs and matriarchs as small-town characters.

In this excerpt, Yakubovitsh expresses a sentiment typical of many of the writers in Hellerstein's volume:

... my thoughts begin to stir freely
And, taking wing, fly out through the barred door.
Behind, my grandfather's shout follows...

Hellerstein's final chapter examines how Kadya Molodowsky and Malke Heifetz Tussman responded to the Holocaust through their poetry. Here again, Hellerstein is most interested in how poets reached back to age-old traditions and adapted them for their own purposes.

Both had immigrated to the U.S. before the war. In the aftermath of the destruction across the sea, they struggled to find ways to continue writing poetry, and to do so in Yiddish. In her most famous poem, "Merciful God" (1944), Molodowsky bitterly asks God to release the Jewish people from the privileged position of "chosenness." She begins:

Merciful God,
Choose another people,
Elect another.

A 1945 poem by Heifetz Tussman uses as a starting point Mark Warshavsky's well-known "*Afn pripetchik*" ("At the Fireplace"), in which a teacher urges his students to find consolation in the Jewish alphabet. But Heifetz Tussman calls on her Yiddish students to do more than have feelings: She urges them to act, to fashion letters into tools and sustenance, turning the *samekh* (S) into a spade, the *bes* (B) into bread. If only, she laments, she could shield them from dreadful truths:

Let it elude them
That fey [F] is flame and fire

Hellerstein also examines Heifetz Tussman's haunting "*Froyen*" ("Women") series. An excerpt:

Frogs in the rushes
Wind
In
Chimneys
Willow branches swaying, hugging tight —
Ooo — sadness

Throughout Hellerstein's volume, her scholarly chops and her profound empathy for women's lives are everywhere on display. She has a dazzling feel for the nuances of Yiddish syntax and vocabulary, rhyme and rhythm, puns and allusions. As she allows her erudition and her poetic gifts to play over the face of these poems, she affords us both a powerful artistic experience and a window into the lives of our Jewish foremothers.

Expansive as her project is, she ends her volume by listing the names of twenty-seven women poets in Yiddish who do not appear in her book. "The work is not yet done," Hellerstein says.

By the 1920s, a modernist Yiddish literary movement was in full swing in New York. Most of its members were men, but among the few women were the poets Celia Dropkin and Anna Margolin. Rejecting *tsnies*, the traditional Jewish code of modesty for women, both boldly announced their sexuality and presented lust as holy.

The Acrobat: Selected Poems of Celia Dropkin is a particularly gratifying read. Its forty-three poems appear in both Yiddish and English — short, spare lyrics in tiny print, with lots of white space. Passionate, vivid, often angry, they burst in the mouth like forkfuls of horseradish.

Dropkin (1887-1956) was born in Belarus and began writing poems in Russian as a girl of 10. She married a Bundist organizer, and the two of them fled to New York just before World War I. Stimulated by the thriving Yiddish literary scene there, she began translating her Russian poems and writing new ones in Yiddish. In 1935, her only volume, *In heysn vint* ("In the Hot Wind") appeared. She continued publishing in periodicals until 1943.

THE STORY of how this new collection of her work came to be is an interesting one. The three translators — Faith Jones, a librarian, Jennifer Kronovet, a poet and translator of poetry, and Samuel Solomon, then in high school and now a professor of comparative literature — met in 2000 as fellow students in the YIVO summer program in Yiddish. They came upon Dropkin's poems and fell in love with them. For years, the three met regularly to hone their translations. Their aim: "to make her work feel, as it had when she wrote it, radical and at the same time spoken as if by a dear friend."

"It's scary reading Dropkin, sometimes," Faith Jones has said. "I think she scared a lot of people." Indeed, her poems are strong stuff. An excerpt:

... that fat worm — passion —
just won't crawl out
of my juicy body. I am left, discarded, as it
gnaws me to death.

Dropkin's male contemporaries tended to disapprove of her frank, intensely erotic, sometimes sado-masochistic poems. "Oppressively personal," one prominent literary figure pronounced. Despite her critics' scorn, however, Dropkin's poems were not undisciplined spewings but carefully crafted creations. Another excerpt:

I planted potatoes in my garden
and weeded out the flowers:
but between the vegetables, like a tiny slipper,
my red flower brazenly bursts open.

What a privilege it is to see that flower bloom, and to be able to sample, as well, the many and varied blossoms of Dropkin's literary predecessors.

Ellen Cashedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012).