

“Your Eyes” by Yisroel Shtern: The Lover as Mystic

By Miriam Koral (2005)

At first blush, you might think it is a love poem; after all, only a man in love exalts his beloved’s eyes, calling them “pearls”, “black laughing children”, and “holy tablets”, even as he is above all concerned that she remain faithful to him.

The style of the poem is also in a genre found in folk songs and ballads that tell of a contest between lovers – the question-and-response, with the response characterized by a particular charm and wit. Is she seeking to reassure her lover, or to outwit him, or merely to prove that she is infinitely more capable than he gives her credit for? It brings to mind the popular Yiddish ballad, “Tumbalalayka”, where the *meydl* (girl) beautifully answers the *bokher’s* (lad/bachelor’s) riddles, not shaming herself at all. This genre is common to other traditions as well, and is usually full of symbolic meaning related to love and its flip side – heartbreak. Think of the American ballad, “I Gave My Love a Cherry”.

With its repetition of phrases, “So he said:” and “And she answered him:”, and the short lines and six short stanzas, it’s easy to imagine this poem set to music. While the original Yiddish doesn’t entirely rhyme, there are enough rhymed lines within the poem that enhance its song-like rhythm.

But is this really a poem about love and doubt between a man and a woman? As much as one would like to grant the genius, disconsolate poet Shtern a love affair worthy of a poem, a closer look at the symbology suggests that “Your Eyes” is a quintessentially Jewish-themed ode to the often tormented relationship between the people Israel and that aspect of the Divine which touches down closest to our realm – the very feminine *Shekhina*. It is that presence and that relationship which is exalted in the “Song of Songs”, the most famous love poem which is at once divinely ecstatic and sensuously earthy. In Shtern’s poem, the lover is far less exultant than he is doubting and fearful. Yet the *Shekhina* does her best to reassure him.

It is the lover of the Divine, wanting desperately to cleave to the beloved, who questions the beloved’s constancy. Her eyes are “pearls”, a symbol of purity and wisdom. Yet the waves in which they lie, like the waves of fortune and misfortune, grace and void that characterize his earthly existence, never cease. How can he trust the Divine in this relentless, changeable sea? Her response is not to promise him calm, but to challenge whether his faith measures up in the roughest surf.

In the third stanza, Her eyes are supernatural, endlessly in motion like laughing children, running and dancing from the earthly plane (streets, trees) up to the celestial (sun and moon). Laughter, and then tears in the dark, in compassion for change and loss. The lover is mistrustful of such equanimity. The *Shekhina* suggests that he learn not only compassion, but empathy, to *feel* and express the joy of the Divine, as well as Her sorrow at the restriction of light.

By the fifth stanza, the Judaic symbology is its strongest – a reference not only to the tablets (Ten Commandments), but to the desert wanderings, and the breaking of the tablets -- the talisman of the covenant, in response to sinning. What Shtern is really asking is not whether his human beloved will keep her commitments even if he should be stressed into some transgression, but whether the Divine will honor the covenant under any circumstance when the “story” suggests otherwise. The *Shekhina*’s response is to invoke Moses, to suggest that with great compassion and pure intent, with a prayer literally cried out to the heavens, it is possible to be a go-between between heaven and the hills, connecting the dwelling place of the Divine with the loftiest earthly places man can reach.

In each response, the Beloved -- the *Shekhina* -- and thus Shtern, is challenging us and himself to cultivate, if not acknowledge, the attributes of *emunah* – faith in the Divine, and *dveykut* – cleaving or oneness with the Divine. This is in the best tradition of mystical poetry.

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