

Bread and Poetry¹

By Yisroel Shtern (1938)

Translated by Andrew Firestone (2005)

In one of Warsaw's poor Jewish laneways there's a home I know. The people there eat little. They talk about food a lot.

There are three of them. Father 69 years old. Mother 46 (the second wife). The daughter is 12. They live in the kitchen; some elderly people live in the room.

Kitchen and room – equally pretty. Adorned with squalor. No plumbing. No toilet. Electricity – yes. It belongs to them all jointly, and all are miserly with it.

Around nine, nine thirty at night the urging starts “Nu, let's sleep”, “Enough, to sleep now”, “Let's call it a night”.

Meanwhile though, the daughter is only twelve. What does she have to hurry for? Slowly she turns the pages of a little book. She is reading. From both the room and the kitchen come the calls “Nu, Simme-Leye, to sleep”, “Enough, Simme-Leye, to sleep”, “Simme-Leye, let's call it a night” – but Simme-Leye is right in the middle of a chapter and doesn't want to stop.

Now everyone is talking at once. Her father, her mother, the neighbours – none of them can understand: why does she read so much? Day and night, always reading!

It goes on like this, until someone runs across and puts the light out. Simme-Leye keeps sitting there, gazing at the darkened pages. So much was going on before. There was laughter and movement – living, believing, singing, dwelling. Now the pages are dead, the world has come to a standstill. It's time to sleep now.

Once everyone is in bed, the mother reminds herself:

“How can I get to sleep? I've eaten nothing today.”

The father resents this: “And what have I had to eat?”

“You” the mother replies – “you... I brought in half a loaf of bread this morning, this evening another half, where did that all go?”

The daughter doesn't get involved in their quarrel. She's pondering on how

1 (All footnotes by Ed.) This essay can be taken as Shtern's “credo” or “passport” (Yid.) – with his customary indirectness, yet clearly and vividly, Shtern declares and explains his belief that starving readers are more likely to apprehend poetic truths (that is, spiritual ones) than the sated. Is there another writer who draws on the authority of his own starving in this way? (In “Springtime in the Hospital” Shtern makes clear that the claim is for suffering in general.)

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strange the pages of a book are. So long as the light is on, a book is so lively – racy and inspiring. But the moment it's dark – it is finished: as dead as the dead themselves.

She knows that her thought is a silly one. Of course, when it's light you can see to read, and when it's dark, you can't. All the same, she's still thinking about it...

If you go early to bed, you rise with the day. At any rate the father is starting to get dressed.

And no sooner has the father crept out of home than the mother starts laying into the daughter.

“Read, Simme-Leye, read! Your booklets will give you what to eat! Pretty soon your father will be going from door to door, I'll be out washing people's clothes and you'll be sent away for a servant. Read your little books, read!”

This particular home often brings a song to my mind. A wellknown song that I dislike; a tremendously popular song, and that's not an especially good sign either... A song that is quoted with every pogrom, every grief, and which is about as lovely and refined as Jewish grief itself:

“Give to the dead for their shrouds,
Give the living bread.”

You know the song? Basically sound, straightforward and compassionate. But try and analyse it more closely.

When in a single breath we say “Give to the dead for their shrouds, give the living bread”, the living are a kind of dead as well, only dead that have to eat.

And what dead body will have the cheek to bang on a table and say “Give me shrouds!” Imagine the tumult that would arise from all sides – “Go to your rest...”²

Similarly, the living man is supposed to sit or lie dead-still, waiting until someone comes and offers to cut him a piece of bread, freely and good-heartedly – just as the piece of cotton gets cut off, for a corpse.

And another thing. When you “give to the dead for their shrouds” everything is in order. There's never been a greedy ghost, dissatisfied with the arrangement and demanding something more. So why should the living need anything more than bread? They too, after all, are only dead folk, just dead folk who need sustenance.

² ironical - the reader understands this is a euphemism for “Gey in d'r erd arayn” – the common curse “Go bury yourself!”.

Furthermore: what crazy hygienist is going to dig up a corpse to change its clothing? Clothe them once and it's done. So give to the dead for shrouds and give the living bread: carcasses Type One and carcasses Type Two. Give them their due once and for all, and may the devil take them...

Yes, a mournful song alright. Mournful in every way – and very popular.

Just think how much less popular it would be, with a line like “give the living more than bread”?

And how disliked this saying would be – how totally ignored – in the interpretation of a peevish poet, were he inclined for instance to scold as follows:

“Give the living bread and poetry”.

Together with Simme-Leye's mother and father you'd hear the yelling of hundreds and thousands of other fathers and mothers: “Go ahead then, all of you, read your little books, read them. The books will give you what to eat.”

* * *

What does a poem matter to them? What do they care about poetry? They need to eat. Why are you bothering them with this kind of foolishness?

But precisely because nothing else can exist for them; because every experience and event, all their hopes and goals have been torn down like so many paper walls – while from this side of the wall, stretching away, away to infinity are – brown and black slices of bread; for this very reason hunger is more, much more than just a prosaic matter.

When there's something that drives out everything else from the eyes, so that one thing alone glints there: when there's something that blocks out all voices and echoes, all sighs and faint noises, and alone resounds in one's ears like heavy copper bells – then that is Blood Awakening³, a clamour for bread, blood's song.

Of course, when you are starving, all you want is food, food.

The time when everything's pressing in on you, cramping you in, squeezing you with pliers – hunger.

The ceiling looks strange; the floor, hostile as well. Sitting in the chairs are skeletons, who have run away from graves somewhere.

³ *blut-dervakhung* - note the influence of Nazi Germany next door.

You can't cope with the horror of your own home, you run out to the street.

But the buildings stand in repose, like dark prisons. The people in the street smile straight at you, taking pleasure in your misfortune. There is one escape, only one salvation: the full moon is a round loaf of bread. But the baker has hung it up so high there, so far off...

To tease you... in spite, to distress you.

In the big-city night all the illuminated windows twinkle out at you: "you're the hungry one, not us, not us!"

Soft satisfied cars sail past on their fat quiet tyres, trumpeting their cosiness: "It's you that is hungry, you, you".

Even the drozhke⁴ horses run towards you "We've eaten oats, and we've eaten hay, and tasty steamed potato peels..."

Eating is the hub and all five senses rotate around it... Maybe the sixth as well.

The river of events has come to a standstill. All the countless forms have taken each other by the hand - and then fallen over all together, to lie in a single heap. Every subject, in its awesome fullness, has lost its mug; in the fire of hunger all the differences between them have blended together like melting coinage. Into a dull and blurry, shapeless thing.

Everything's surrendered. One alone survives and won't give in.

Millions have turned into one alone...

And when it all happens in one place – that becomes the place of the great dream:

When your own neighbourhood's no longer there to distract you, and the features of an area strange to you are crowding in upon you –

When your flesh is so fearful, so on edge, it's like an axe has chopped off all your pains –

When the world is no bigger than your heart, and your heart is no smaller than your solitude –

When the flux of happenings has frozen and only your own blood is still flowing, rushing with mysteries –

When all four sides of the world bend, bend over your need and poverty as over a naked helpless child –

4 horse cab

Then are you, poor thing, the one to be honoured – and as if garlanding your brow, the world pays you tribute...

And all in all, taking her as she is, you gaze upon the world. There in your four cubits' space you contemplate her. You are in no condition to look beyond your four cubits. And so she has come to you, the far, wide outstretched world.

Just like the coming of the entire great and holy Gospel, to the tiny half-dark cottage of Sonia and Raskolnikov⁵...

If all distances cluster together in the one spot, a hill must start to grow. Higher and higher. As a person rises upwards, the world becomes more beautiful...

This is the holy hour. All you clamorous ones, respect and honour! It's now that the universe quietly unifies itself. The golden thread is being woven, and it extends from the black earth all the way to God...

The birth of vision, the origin of the great dream.

Clear-headed⁶ people won't understand this. Their dustbins are overflowing with jokes on the topic of Hunger and Higher Matters. The grotesque thing here is that most of this ridicule was invented by the poor themselves. They didn't just bake the bread and cool the wine for the rich, they also took care of the souls of the sated... Ensuring they could feel spiritually superior as well.

So no sarcasm was spared in sayings about the difference between a hungry belly and higher things. And it was cheap wisdom that triumphed.

It's natural that the clear-headed don't comprehend this. Clear-headedness is the wisdom of man's waistcoat pocket; poetry, the wisdom of mankind. Wealth's splendour is external; poverty shines from within.

And so: it is the poor who understand poetry the best.

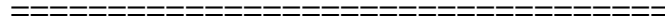
⁵ Referring of course to "Crime and Punishment" - but there is no such scene in Dostoyevsky's book. Shtern here appears to have invented his own gloss for Dostoyevsky's request in the Epilogue: after Raskolnikov's release from prison, readers are asked to imagine the couple's simple life together in Siberia as one of spiritual perfection.

⁶ Lit.- sober. Shtern is privileging a higher reality than sober everyday business sense. It is of interest here that Shtern habitually worshipped in a shtibl of the "Dead Chassidim" (so-called because they chose to remain for ever leaderless, after the death of the original Bratslaver Rebbe.)

Just don't set up a barrier⁷ between them and yourself; don't talk yourself into believing that such delicacy isn't for the guts of the poor.

Don't go to fry a cutlet made of bread and shrouds mixed! Don't think that a poor person who's alive is dead – just chewing and swallowing.

Be warned about the poor. For this is where Man becomes rich... For here we have to do with the noblest ones...



⁷ *mekhitze* - lit., the visual obstruction in the synagogue which prevents men and women from seeing each other.