"On the Influence of Job on Jewish Epitaphs"

(better: "The Use and Significance of Job in the Development of the Jewish Epitaph")

Introduction

From the small *shtetl* cemetery of Drohiczyn to the largest urban cemetery of Bagnowka in Bialystok in northeastern Poland, throughout Eastern Europe and beyond, Jewish epitaphs frequently extol men as "perfect and upright, God-fearing" paralleling Job 1:1,8; and 2:3. Also, not uncommon is the epithet "he takes and gives in surety," echoing Job 2:20: "The Lord gives and the Lord takes. Blessed be the name of the Lord." In the lengthy acrostic epitaph of a Bezalel Nota son of Meyer (d. 1852) of Szydlowiec in central Poland, the lines building on the Yodh and Resh of his father's name Meyer offer:

> [I] The equity of his truth is in his mouth; in his lips, no wrongdoing is found.
> [R] The hungry as well as the thirsty – the pleasantness of his conversation has satiated.

With these lines parallel is drawn to Job 1:22 (and Malachi 2:6) and Job 5:5.[1] The obvious as well as subtle use of Job in Jewish epitaphs is striking. The current paper seeks (1) to demonstrate this varying use of Joban parallels; and (2) to acknowledge that a distinct use of Joban language from Job's discourse with his friends and the Whirlwind Speeches suggests another source of provenance exists for the Jewish epitaph, in addition to medieval *piyyutim* and the ideology and literature of the Haskalah.

Phases of the Jewish Epitaph

In his studies on Jewish epitaphs from the Ukraine and former Soviet Union, Michael Nosonovsky describes three phases of the Jewish epitaph's development, which again offer insight into why certain biblical texts are used in the Jewish epitaph. The earliest epitaphs, pre-15th century Europe, include "a simple introductory formula, name, usually a date and a blessing."[2] At this stage no biblical or rabbinic texts are

present. The next period, which Nosonovsky labels that of "advanced epitaphs," 16th to 19th, occasionally early 20th centuries, presents brief epithets, and then expanded eulogies, historical details and especially acrostic poetry. Medieval *piyyutim* and the *Haskalah* are credited with influencing the genre of the Jewish epitaph in this phase. In particular, *piyyutim* gave to the Jewish epitaph their poetic expansions, especially the use of acrostic poems (both rhymed and not) and mosaic poems as eulogy.[3] The Haskalah brought to the Jewish epitaph the mark of individuality while still engaging especially the rhymed acrostic poem of the *piyyutim*. In this phase, both direct biblical texts as well as biblical allusion are attested.

The praise and positivistic nature of medieval *piyyutim* as exemplified in liturgical prayers, e.g. the Kaddish, potentially influenced why certain biblical (and rabbinic) texts were incorporated into the Jewish epitaph. Either the medieval *piyyutim* or the Haskalah may be responsible for moving direct biblical references toward paraphrase or allusion. Finally, as the 20th century progressed, the genre of Jewish epitaph declined, with introductory and closing elements "fossilized," biblical references absent, and epitaphs, at times, written in vernacular tongues. This last phase reflects "the decline of a traditional Jewish community and modernization."[4]

In the second phase of the epitaph's development, when Job is referenced, it is the positivistic language of the patient Job that prevails. As the Haskalah gave way to the rise of nationalism, anti-Tsarist activity brought turmoil to the Pale of Settlement in the late 19th to early 20th centuries and disrupted what has been called "the didactic, moralistic and nationalistic bias of the poetry of the Haskalah, at least in Eastern Europe.[5] However, the rise of nationalism did not mean an immediate decline of the genre of the Jewish epitaph as Nosonovsky suggests. The influences of these movements added the freedom to express the realism of the time amidst especially individualized acrostic poems of eulogy that would now engage distinct Joban passages to express the turmoil of this age.[6] Epitaphs employing passages reminiscent of the questioning or "Impatient" Job now begin to appear.[7]

The Language of Job

The structure of Jewish epitaphs of the second phase offers the opening abbreviation פ נ "Here lies"/ Here is buried", (frequently) a brief epithet describing the deceased, the deceased's name, (frequently)

paternal lineage, (infrequently) date of birth, and date of death followed by the closing abbreviation of blessing תנצבה "May his/her soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life." Variation is present when lengthier epithets, historical details, or an acrostic poem is incorporated, sometimes in addition to an initial brief epithet.[8]

The epithets for men most frequently extol them as 'perfect and upright', which immediately draws reference to the biblical Job: "There once was a man from the land of Uz whose name was Job and that man was perfect and upright, God-fearing and one who turned from evil" (Job 1:1). Thus, the deceased is described as "a perfect and upright man"; "perfect and upright, God-fearing", "God-fearing, perfect and upright", "perfect and upright, God-fearing and one who turns from evil" and sometimes simply "an upright man."

Less frequent, though not uncommon, elderly men are described as having died "old and full of days" paralleling the language of Job 42:17: "And Job died, old and full of days." Also attested is simply the adjective "old" /zaqen/ or occasionally, "aged" /yašiš/, drawing parallel in Job 12:12 "Is wisdom with the aged?" (15:10; 29:3; 32:6).[9] While one might argue that describing the fulfillment of a long life with

the expression "old and full of days" finds parallel in Gen. 25:8; 35:29 and I Chron. 29:28, the extensive use of Job 1:1 language, suggests the biblical Job is more readily the point of reference for influence.

The extant epitaphs on *Bagnowka Beth-Olam* offer the largest corpus in this region to consider Job in advanced epitaphs. Of the extant 2300 epitaphs, approximately 120 offer advanced epitaphs, predominately in the form of acrostic poems in rhyme.[10] Of this corpus, 15 epitaphs offer allusions to the biblical text of Job, the majority of which expand on the language used in the brief epithets, ascribing to the deceased the qualities of "blamelessness" or "uprightness". Thus, epithets describe a man and occasionally a woman as:

"an upright man/woman who walked in perfection [with integrity]"
"an upright man/woman (who) walked in perfection, God-fearing"
"one who walked in perfection and uprightness"
"an upright man/woman who walked in the way of the goodly"
"an upright man/woman who walked in the way of the pious"

Such epithets reflect a synthesis of attributes as found in Job 1:1 and Job 1:8; 2:3, 9; 4:6; and Job 27:5; 31:6: "He still persists in his

integrity". However, these latter phrases may better present a mosaic of Joban language with echoes of Proverb 10:9 "Whoever walks in integrity walks securely"; Psalm 26:11 "But as for me, I walk in my integrity"; or Psalm 101:2 "I will study the way that is blameless". In several expanded epitaphs, the deceased is described as "perfect and upright" and also described as "he takes and gives in surety", both expressions drawing on and transposing the language of Job 1:21 "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away":

> Here lies an upright man and honorable merchant who takes and gives truthfully Aaron Zvi son of Moshe Ari Czeszla from Knyszyn. He died in a good name on the way to his ascent to another world. 11 Marcheshvan 569[-].

Czeszla was a merchant thus this Joban parallel is used to reflect the quality of honesty.

In yet another epitaph, at present the lengthiest extended epitaph from Bagnowka (and northeastern Poland), the biblical text of Job is again engaged:

> Here rests **an old man, full of days**, 80 years old he was at his death, prominent in Torah, Fear of the Lord was his treasure. In his soul, he loved the Torah and study of the Lord – in surety and in perfection, the esteemed man, our teacher Reb Naphtali Hertz, son of Reb Yehoshua of blessed memory, Nejmark. The city of Brisk Dłita was the city of his birth. He was a great merchant in the days of his youth and during the time of his old age he engaged much in Torah. In the year 5639 [1879], he was in the city of Petersburg and suddenly a decree was enacted on behalf of him because an trolley crossed over him and it shattered his leg. [And so] he walked haltingly upon a wooden leg all the remaining days of his life. **His pains and his sufferings which he endured from this time were the greatest of burdens, but he carried them with great love.** His eyes and his heart bore them eternally for the sake of his Creator. He maintained his vow which he made for the noblest of Jacob to build a house of study, with his inheritance, for Torah and for prayer. He died Friday, the eve of the Holy Sabbath, 20th Tevet 5654 [1894]. May his soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life.

This inscription describes the life and character of Reb Naphtali Hertz Nejmark. He was born in the city of Brisk D'lita in 5574 [1814].[11] Brisk D'lita (literally of Lithuania) is the Yiddish name for the city of Brest-Litovsk or Brest, now in Belarus. It was a city renowned as the city of origin for the Soloveitchik dynasty of rabbinic scholars and their yeshivas, and for trade and commerce. In Reb Naphtali's time, it would have been under Russian control. His accident in Petersburg occurred in 5639 [1879], at age 65; however, he lived on till age 80, dying in 5654 [1894] and, like Job (42:17), was "an old man, full of days". His inscription records that though he 'walked haltingly' on a 'wooden leg', i.e. "with a cane", the remainder of his life, he bore his sufferings with endurance for the sake of his Creator. The line "His pains and his sufferings which he endured from this time were the greatest of burdens, but he carried them with great love" clearly evokes the circumstances of the biblical Job, with the vocabulary "pain" and "suffering" clearly derived from the biblical text (Job 2:13; 16:6; 33:19). The attitude of endurance "carried out with great love" is much more suggestive of the patient attitude of Job to describe Naphtali's response to decades of suffering. We might say that the distinctively individualized nature of this epitaph owes it influence to the Haskalah, marked by an increasing interest in the value of the individual as opposed to the community.[12] Yet why draw parallel with the patient depiction of Job? While Naphtali's epitaph was composed at the end of the final phase of the Haskalah, as nationalism and other movements emerge, it still reflects a community in which individuality can be noted, whereas the attributes of the patient Job are still deemed appropriate.

In northeastern Poland, then part of Russia, the individualist mark of the Haskalah co-existed with Yiddish culture and literature very much at home in Bialystok.[13] The Yiddish literature of this period is marked by a blatant honesty in response to the realities of life, in particular, the impact of three waves of anti-Semitism that would assail the Pale of Settlement beginning in 1881.[14] In Marcus Moseley's "Life, Literature: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Interwar Poland", Moseley emphasizes the use of Joban language in youth autobiographies dating from the mid-19th to early 20th centuries.[15] One such anonymous biographer named "Forget-me-not" writes: What does life mean? Can I use this beautiful word to describe the hard and

thorny road that I've travelled? Why is my life a long chain of suffering and struggle, an endless struggle to survive? For the first time, I asked: Where is my home, my childhood, my youth, about which poets write so much?"[16] In Martina Urban's article "Retelling Biblical Mythos through the Hasidic Tale: Buber's 'Saul and David' and the Question of Leadership", Urban demonstrates that in Buber's 1908 *Die Legende des Baal-Schem* Saul is crafted so as to evoke "Job the Impatient" as in Job 27:2: "By God who has deprived me of justice! By Shaddai who has embittered my life." In Yiddish literature, the realism of life finds Job "the impatient," the sufferer, who will not bear his burdens "with love," more compelling, contrary to Naphtali Hertz's use of the patient Job. The Job, engaged in dialogue with his friends and demanding of divine response, is more at home in Yiddish literature.

This impatient Job provokes thoughts of unjust suffering and is used in Jewish epitaphs to enunciate the sadness and mournful response by the living in reaction to death primary or secondary to anti-Semitic violence. We see this in an allusion to Job (2:13; 16:6; 5:14), crafted as a mosaic with Joel (3:15) in the following epitaph:

May her soul rest in Paradise - The heart is sorrowful, the eye is crying, **great is the pain**, **mourning and moaning, our sunlight darkened, the grief is heavy**, our souls are lowered to the earth, the Rabbi's wife, Ester Chaya, daughter of the Rabbi, the righteous Rabbi, Rabbi Eliezer, president of the rabbinical court of the holy community of Ribiņiški, wife of the learned rabbi Rabbi Icchok Zev Zukerman, president of the rabbinical court of the holy community of Bransk.

So, too, does another epitaph, remembering a husband and wife killed in a tank battle in Bransk in 1941, offer a mosaic of Job and Joel allusions:

Beloveds and friends in their lives and also in their death they will not be separated. Here lies – **the sun grows dark at noontime, [so too] lights [grow dark from] the sound of lament and weeping** for the souls of our father and our mother who were killed in the days of the battles of the death of the holy ones. (R.) Our honorable mother, important, modest, a precious soul, the late Leah Ruhama, daughter of Benyamin. She died 28 Sivan 5701 [1941]. (L.) Our honorable father, 'son' of many good deeds; he established time for Torah, the late YehoshuaElhanan, son of Reb Shlomoh. He died 28 Sivan 5701 [1941]

Joban allusion here is to Job 5:14a: "They meet with darkness in the daytime". Reference to Joel is 3:15: "The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining" and Job 16:20 "My friends scorn me; my eye pours out tears to God"; and 30:25 "Did I not weep for those whose day was hard? Was not my soul grieved for the poor?"

One exceptional example is the partial epitaph from a victim of the 1906 pogrom in Bialystok, preserving just five lines of an acrostic poem in rhyme:[17]

> **Pain and distress** designated a place of slaughter/
> He [God] built for the sacrifices of man an altar,/
> Such is hidden in the clods of the grave/
> For himself and for his son-in-law
> **devastation and destruction** came/
> Fire consumed his mother and his teaching/

These extant lines conjoin the imagery of altar and sacrifice, atop which is engraved one of the two hands raised in priestly benediction and the crown of the esteemed Torah scholar. The poet, who composed these words for an Avraham Katz, juxtaposes the imagery of biblical sacrifice (as in the Aqedah in Genesis 22), the language of Joban suffering ("pain and distress" echoing Psalm 69:29 /wa'ani 'ow-

ni we-kho-'ev/) with the destructive language of loss drawn from Job 5:21 (xxxx) and Isaiah 65:5 ("devastation and destruction" /shod washever/).

Set against the historical records of the time, the details of Avraham's epitaph become clear. On the second day of the worst pogrom to strike Bialystok in June of 1906, the home of the 49-year-old Avraham Katz became one place of refuge for Jews fleeing the Tsarist military and Polish police. The Katz house, located near a garden in the peaceful district of *Boyari*, came under attack from two sides. The house caught fire in the crossfire and began to burn. The soldiers commanded the women and children to come out. Katz was the first to jump out of his burning house only to be "instantaneously bayoneted by the soldiers, who were surrounding the burning house."[18] Katz's son-in-law, Nachman Grabowski, 27-years-old, had also fled to the home of his father-in-law on the second day of the pogrom, only to suffer the same fate as Katz when jumping from the burning building.[19] Nachman's epitaph similarly references his fate in the home of his father-in-law. Katz' mother also perished in the fire, as cited in the Duma Report; her epitaph only indicates that she was "a modest, God-fearing woman," killed on the

second day of this pogrom.[20] The death of Avraham, his son-in-law and mother are referenced on his epitaph. The injustice of Abraham's innocent death is given voice through a mosaic of Joban and Joel allusions.

Concluding Thoughts

Contemporary scholarship suggests that the structure and use of Job (and biblical and rabbinic texts, in general) in Jewish epitaphs owe their provenance to direct biblical influence, medieval *piyyutim* and the movement and attendant literature of the Haskalah. This examination of the use of Job in the Jewish epitaph from northeastern Poland supports this development though acknowledging an additional stage before the decline of the epitaph - the realism attendant with nationalism and Yiddish literature of this period. In the end, the use of Joban language, whether direct or indirect, becomes self-evident in its selection of passages, and serves as a reflection of the community's ideology, [21] whether idealized or realized.[22]"

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[1] The use of Joban language, however, is not unique to northeastern Poland. Such language is found (in varying degrees) on epitaphs throughout Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, the Ukraine, Slovania, Serbia, the Netherlands, to Great Britain, indeed to the isle of Rhodes. Translation by the author for the Jewish Online Worldwide Burial Registry and for Bagnowka (www.bagnowka.pl) has revealed, for example, such Joban epithets in the cemeteries of Solotvino (nine of 136, most illegible); Vysna (18 of the 25 of men preserved from 62 images); Beverwijk (19 of the 26 men's epitaphs of total 46); Winschoten (84 of 208 men's epitaphs of total 267); and Leek (14 of 44 men, 94 total). Additionally, an extensive collection of cemeteries (documented by Tomasz Wisniewski and translated by the author) throughout Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, and the Ukraine can be found at www.bagnowka.pl) with men's epitaphs once again preserving Joban language in their epitaphs. Given the extensive (and yet growing) data, precise statistics have not yet been computed, but easily discernable. One potential factor in the frequency of use may be literally the size and simplicity of the tombstone. Those tombstones (as in Drohiczyn, now Poland), which are small and boulder-shaped, seemed to preserve a greater frequency of use, whereas those larger (and of granite or shale) permit a much more extensive repertoire of epitaphs (to include acrostic poems), where Joban language can still be found though frequently as a prelude to a more extensive epitaph.

[2] Nosonovsky, *Hebrew Inscriptions*, p. 69.
[3] *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, edited by T. Carmi (New York: Viking Press, 1981, 15, though the genre does not appear in the Ashkenazi School until the 12th century (16) and "the poetic efforts of the Ashkenazi school concentrated on passionate penitential verse (*selihot*) and dirges (*kinot*), many of which recorded the harrowing experiences of the Rhineland communities" (31).
[4] Nosonovsky, *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 70.
[5] Nosonovsky adds to these literary influences what he terms "co-territorial non-Jewish epitaphs." (*Hebrew Inscriptions*, 70). See also, Imanuel Etkes, "Haskalah" in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews of Eastern Europe*, edited by Gershon David Hundert (online at: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Haskalah#id0e1uag); and Carmi, who comments that the quality of the poetry of the Haskalah declines, which may be due to "the didactic, moralistic and nationalistic bias of its poetry" (39).
[6] Nosonovsky, *Hebrew Inscriptions*, adds to these literary influences what he terms "co-territorial non-Jewish epitaphs" (70). See, also, Chava Turniansky, "Yiddish Literature: Yiddish Literature before 1800" in YIVO Encyclopedia (online at: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Yiddish_Literature/Yiddish_Literature_before_1800), which notes this trend in realism influenced by the "persecutions and assaults on Jewish communities in

Eastern Europe" in the literature dating from the Chmielnitski Pogrom in 1648.

[7] The Jewish epitaphs used for this analysis are those extant in Bagnowka *Beth-Olam*, located in the conurbation of Bialystok, established in 1892 and used until 1969, excluding the years when the Bialystok Ghetto Cemetery was in use (1941–43). Bagnowka Jewish cemetery was (and still is) the largest urban Jewish cemetery in northeastern Poland. Once covering nearly 40 acres, it cradled the remains of nearly 35,000 Jews from Bialystok and surrounding smaller towns. Today, approximately 3000 tombstones with inscriptions remain, in various states of disarray. Two other cemeteries in Bialystok were also considered the *Old Beth-Olam* (c. 1871–1920) and the *Cholera Beth-Olam* (c. 1831–c.1890). Early 20th century photographs existed for both cemeteries and Herszberg's *Pinkos Bialystok* (the Chronicle of Bialystok) preserves an appendix preserving epitaphs from prominent members of the Bialystok Jewish community. The source database for this research also includes epitaphs from approximately 27 *shtetl* cemeteries throughout northeastern Poland. The size of such cemeteries ranges from Drohiczyn,[7] with its now extant 54 *matzevoth* to that of Bransk or Choroszcz with c. 200 *matzevoth*.

The tombstones of Drohiczyn were photographed in 1989 by Polish historian Tomasz Wiśniewski. Wiśniewski's collection contains 93 images, 54 of which preserve epitaphs legible (in varying degrees); one image is quite dark, making translation impossible; another image contains the fragments of two to four tombstones. This data was collected from my translation of nearly 1000 tombstones from eight cemeteries in Poland, the Ukraine, Slovakia, and the Netherlands for the Jewish Online Worldwide Burial Registry; the translation of nearly 4000 tombstones in approximately 68 cemeteries in Poland, the Ukraine and Belarus for the Polish organization *Bagnowka* (www.bagnowka.com), and visits to approximately 20 cemeteries in Poland (predominantly NE Poland) and the Czech Republic (2003, 2005,2007,2010).

[8] Nosonovsky delineates for components to the earliest epitaphs (pre-15th century Europe): "simple introductory formula, name, usually a date and a blessing" (69). The period, which he labels "advanced epitaphs" (16th century to 19th century, occasionally beginning 20th centuries), incorporates even brief epithets. As the 20th century progresses, the genre of Jewish epitaph goes into decline, with introductory and closing elements "fossilized", the absence of biblical references, the epitaph may be written in vernacular tongues. Nosonovsky explains

that this phase reflects "the decline of a traditional Jewish community and modernization. The Jewish cemeteries in northeastern Poland reflect the second and final stages of epitaphic development.

[9] The latter epithets might also find parallel in Job 12:12 "Is wisdom with the aged?" (15:10; 29:3; 32:6).

[10] This paper was delivered in 2012 with data before more extensive restoration and recovery of epitaphs pushed the total extant inscriptions to over 3000. While a precise total of inscriptions with Joban language has not been recalculated, Joban expressions continue to be documented.

[11] Though his date of birth is not provided, his date of death [5654] and length of life [80 years] are provided to establish a date of birth.

[12] "The history of Haskalah in Russia can be divided into three periods: from the early nineteenth century until the 1840s; from the 1840s until 1855; and from 1855 until the advent of the Jewish nationalist movement in the early 1880s." YIVO http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Haskalah#id0e1uag

[13] See, for example, the prominence of Abraham Ber Gotlober, who made Bialystok one of his homes in the final decades of his life (c. 1879–1899).

[14] See, for example, John D. Klier, *Russians, Jews, and the Pogroms of 1881–1882* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[15] *Jewish Social Studies*, 7/3, Spring/Summer 2001 (New Series), 1-51.

[16] Moselely, Ibid, 5.

[17] This style is commonly attested to at Bagnowka, arranged both horizontally and vertically. /ABRHM/ is on line one, /BN/ on line two, and /ZLMN/ vertically on lines 3–5, although only the top of line 6's letters are visible, revealing the /n/ of Zalman.

[18] *Duma Report*. London *Times*. *American Jewish Year Book* Vol. 8 (1906-1907): 78.

[19] Nachman's epitaph records his fate: "Looking for a refuge you escaped to your father-in-law, there the murderers killed both of you after they burned his house on you. He is the honest, upright, young man, the martyr, our teacher Nachman, Jakob son of Reb Moshe Grabowski, who was murdered during the days of the pogroms on the eve of the Holy Sabbath 22 Sivan 5666."

[20] Her epitaph reads: "Here lies the modest, God-fearing woman. The important Mrs. Toive, daughter of the Rabbi Reb Pinchas of blessed memory, wife of Reb Zalman Katz, was killed on Friday on the eve of the Holy Sabbath 22 Sivan 5666. May her soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life." *Duma Report*. London *Times*. *American Jewish Year Book* Vol. 8 (1906-1907): 78.

²¹ See Monika Krajewska, *Tribe of Stones: Jewish Cemeteries in Poland*. (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers Ltd., 1993): 38, who acknowledges that while these epitaphs may reflect the *hoped for* attributes of the deceased by living relatives, they do also reflect the "the system of values accepted by the Jewish community" in Pre-World War II Poland.
²² Drawing on the presupposition of one trend of literary criticism that a text preserves both "the social and historical conditions of the text's production," see Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve:*

Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 25. See, also, Alfred J. Kolatch, *Inside Judaism: The Concepts, Customs, and Celebrations of the Jewish People* (Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 2006), 284. See also the association of the Mourners' Stools in *Baba Metzia* 59b as derived from Job and his friends, who sat with him upon the earth (495); and Appropriate Conversation with a mourner as 'unnecessary,' modeled after the response of Job's friends to his loss (124).