

Szpek, “May the dew fall upon them”

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Jewish Epitaphic Poetry from the late 19th – early 20th Centuries
in Bialystok and Bible Reception

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Biblical texts have long been recognized as a component of the Jewish epitaph. Men are frequently described as “perfect and upright,” in keeping with the character of the biblical Job (1:8). Women are often remembered as “women of valor” (Prov. 31:10). Nearly every epitaph aligns the deceased with all who preceded them in death in its final blessing: “May his/her soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life” (I Samuel 25:29). In more traditional Jewish epitaphs, individual poetic lines as well as extensive acrostic poems are also incorporated to characterize the deceased, to express family or community’s response to a person’s passing and/or to offer commentary on death due to trauma.

The last Jewish cemetery in Bialystok, (current day) Poland, preserves approximately 3000 of its once 35,000 epitaphs, many of which incorporate individual lines of poetry and nearly 70 record acrostic poems. Dating to the late 19th – early 20th centuries, these poems are replete with biblical references, drawn especially from the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Lamentations, Genesis and Isaiah. Scholarship, in general, views these compositions as derived from the medieval *piyyutim*, but degenerative in quality. While not ignoring the complex history of epitaphic poetry, the biblical texts, which are used in this corpus, are significant for considering the reception history of the bible both in the epitaphic tradition as well as in this period in history. Ultimately, the crafting of biblical texts in these epitaphs reflects a diachronic connection with the greater epitaphic tradition; the value and adaptation, at times, of these texts for this community; and the struggle of modernity in this traditional (*mithnagdic*) Jewish world in Bialystok (and Eastern Europe, in general) to maintain a foothold in the rapidly modernizing era at the turn of the 20th century.

Introduction

Biblical texts have long been recognized as a component of the Jewish epitaph. Men are frequently described as “perfect and upright,” in keeping with the character of the biblical Job (1:8). Women are especially remembered as charitable in keeping with the characterization of a “woman of valor” (Prov. 31:10-31). Nearly every epitaph aligns the deceased with all who preceded them in death in its final blessing: “May his/her soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life” (I Samuel 25:29). In more traditional Jewish epitaphs, individual poetic lines as well as extensive acrostic poems are also incorporated to characterize the deceased, to express

the family's or community's response to a person's passing and/or to offer commentary on death due to trauma.

Scholarship, in general, views these epitaphs as derived from the medieval *piyyutim*, but already by the sixteenth century degenerative in quality.¹ While not ignoring the complex history of epitaphic poetry, the biblical texts, which are used in the corpus under study here – the Bagnowka corpus from Bialystok, are significant for considering the reception history of the bible both in the epitaphic tradition as well as in this period in this community's history. More specifically, this paper takes up a case study of the biblical texts used in the corpus of Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery, the last Jewish cemetery in Bialystok, (current day) Poland. Though functioning from 1892 to 1969, with approximately 35,000 burials marked by epitaphs, today approximately 3500, dating from 1892-1952, are extant. In Bialystok, the mid- to late 19th century saw a significant transformation of its Jewish community from a traditional (*mithnagdic*) inclination, moderated by the rabbis and the Talmud Torah, to a modern world, infused by the spirit of the Haskalah (Enlightenment), where *mithnagdic* philosophy was just one of a variety of ideologies, to include Hasidism, Musar, Zionism (varieties), secular Judaism as well as the social philosophies of the Bund and other labor and political parties. The Jewish epitaph, a religious document (on par with the ketubah/marriage document), reflects the social and cultural developments of this period while preserving the religious inclination of its strong traditional heritage. Thus, many of its inscriptions, whether traditional or modern, incorporate individual lines of poetry, drawn especially from the texts of Job, Isaiah and Proverbs. In addition, nearly 70 inscriptions with acrostic poems are still extant (1892-1935). These poems, in particular, are replete with biblical references, drawn especially from the books of Job, Isaiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Lamentations, and Genesis.

The present paper will first consider the biblical texts found in the primary epitaph – the designation given to the basic epitaph with the formulaic components: opening abbreviation or words, epithets, name of deceased, paternal (rarely maternal) lineage, and closing abbreviation/words. Next, the biblical texts that are crafted into the extended epitaph are analyzed. The term extended epitaph refers to full poetic lines, rhymed poems or, most often, an acrostic poem that remembers the deceased. Given space constraints, one rare extant line of lament with vocalization and four representative acrostic poems of an extant 70 poems will be examined in detail to best consider the reception history of the biblical texts in this time period.

(These extended epitaphs remember a nine-year-old victim of the August 1920 Pogrom; death in childbirth (Sora Rabinowicz, 1896); a compassionate 'mother' (Sora Leah Treywosz, 1911); the life (and death) of a merchant (Tsvi Konica, 1911); and a precious father (Yehoshua b. Yaakov Karton, 1899).) Analysis of the biblical text in both the primary and extended epitaph is focused not only on which texts are used for each component of the epitaph but also on the context of the text in its biblical counterpart. To create an anthology of texts used in the epitaph in itself is insufficient for considering the reception history of the text.² Therefore, finally, a response to why said texts are used is offered. Ultimately, the choice or repurposing of specific biblical texts in these epitaphs reflects a diachronic connection with the greater Jewish epitaphic tradition; demonstrates the value and adaptation, at times, of these texts for this community; and the acknowledges the struggle of modernity in the traditional (*mithnagdic*) Jewish world (or vice-versa) in Bialystok (and Eastern Europe, in general) at the turn of the 20th century.

Biblical Texts in the Epitaph

The biblical texts used in the Bagnowka corpus of epitaphs from Bialystok incorporate words, phrases, an occasional line from and allusions to the passages in the following biblical books:

- Genesis** 3: "flood gates (windows) of heaven opened" (A)
- Genesis 31:52 "this matzevah is a witness; this heap is a testimony" (O)
- Genesis 35:8 "the oak weeps" (O)
- Genesis 35:20 "matzevah of the resting place" (O)
- Leviticus** 25:24 "redemption of the land" (E)
- Deuteronomy** 32:2 "Let my (God's) teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew,
- 1 Samuel** 25:29 "May his/her soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life" (C)
- 2 Samuel 1:23 "Beloved and friends in their lives and in their deaths, they will not be separated." (O)
- II Kings 19:3/Is 47:1 "delightfully young" (A)
- Isaiah** 11:1 "a branch from the root [of wisdom]" (E)
- Isaiah 22:16 "a grave was chiseled" (O)
- Isaiah 22:24 "offspring and offshoots" (A)
- Isaiah 23:8 "merchants ... traders were honorable" – of Tyre] (E)
- Isaiah 33:6 "fear of the Lord is his treasure" (A)
- Isaiah 38:10 "in the *dmy* of his days" (A,C)
- Isaiah 56:5 "a hand and a name" (A,P)
- Isaiah 62:3 "crown of splendor" (E,A)
- Jeremiah** 31:8 "the woman-in-confinement" (E)

Job 1:8 "perfect and upright, God-fearing" for men and women (E,A)

Job 14:7 "a tender tree" (A,E)

Job 28:3 "stone(s) of darkness and the shadow of death" (O)

Job 42:17 (Gen. 25:8; 1 Chron. 23:1 and more) "old and full of days"

Proverb 3:15 "made it (Torah) more precious than pearls" (E)

Proverb 4:5,7 "acquire wisdom" (E)

Proverb 5:2 (Malachi 2:7) "lips guard knowledge" (E)

Proverb 10:7 "of blessed memory"/ "remember for a blessing" (E,A)

Proverb 10:9 "walk with integrity" (C,A)

Proverb 22:1 "he died in a good name" (O)

Proverbs 31:10 "woman of valor"; Prov. 31:20 "palms give to the needy" she stretched her hand to the needy" (E,A)

Psalms 91:1 "may he reside in the shadow of" (C)

Psalms 103:15 "his days are like the flower (פֶּתִיחַ) of the grass" (A)

Psalms 143:3 (and others) "guard mouth from evil" (E)

Lamentations 3:49 (Psalms 119:136; Jeremiah 14:17) "my eye, my eye sheds tears ..." (O)

Ecclesiastes 1:3; 3:9 "profit from the work/toil of his hands" (E)

While biblical texts are incorporated into each formulaic component of the primary epitaph, specific rules are suggested that delineate which passages are used in each component:

1. In the opening or closing components of the epitaph, selected passages emphasize witnessing the burial site, e.g. Genesis 31:52 "this matzevah is a witness; this heap is a testimony"; Genesis 35:8 "the oak weeps"; Genesis 35:20 "matzevah of the resting place"; note extraordinary mourning, e.g. Lam. 3:49 (Ps. 119:136; Jer. 14:17) "my eye, my eye sheds tears"; Job 28:3 "stone(s) of darkness and the shadow of death"; or acknowledge an extraordinary bond of love, e.g. 2 Sam. 1:23 "Beloved and friends in their lives and in their deaths, they will not be separated"; 1 Sam. 25:29 "May his/her soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life."
2. In general, words or passages, used in the primary epitaph, evoke the contextual nature of their source. Thus, Psalm 91:1 the protective connotation of "may he reside in the shadow of the Lord" is maintained in the epitaph of a 70-year-old man (Yerahmiel Halpern, d. 1921). ("You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who resides in the shadow of the Lord, will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.")
3. Use of a biblical text in epithets (short adjectival attributes), generally, maintains the gender-specific designation of the biblical text *and* restricts the choice of passages to those that reflect only the positive nature of the deceased,³ e.g. Job 1:8 "perfect and upright, God-fearing man"; attaining longevity in life, e.g. Job 42:17 (Gen. 25:8; 1 Chron. 23:1) "old and full of days"; and acquiring wisdom, e.g. Prov. 3:15 "he made it (Torah) more precious than pearls"; Prov. 4:5,7 "he acquired wisdom"; Prov. 5:2 (Malachi 2:7) "his lips guarded knowledge." Occasionally, masculine texts are adapted

for the opposite gender. Thus, a woman is described as "perfect and upright" (feminine forms) as the biblical Job or as "a crown of splendor" (Isaiah 62:3), an accolade more often ascribed to a father, but still positive.

4. Job, in particular, is the quintessential figure of unjust suffering in the Bible and beyond; he becomes the quintessential suffering Eastern European Jew in the Jewish epitaphic tradition, in general, who maintained his integrity in the face of persecution.⁴ Thus, the Job of Prologue and Epilogue is used for positive details; Job in the Whirlwind speeches used for evoking the frailty of life and suffering. His characterization as "perfect/ flawless and upright" is perhaps the most common epithet for Jewish men regardless of their profession or position in society. Both men and women, however, are equally remembered as "God-fearing" (Job 1:8).
5. Women are occasionally designated as an Eshet Hayil "woman of valor" (Prov. 31:10). More often their charitable nature is remembered using the language of this proverb (31:20) "she opens her palms to the needy; she stretches her hand to the poor." The use of this proverb is not surprising, given its place in the weekly Sabbath prayers and as a prayer at gravesite for a woman.

Thus, the nature of the passages chosen are also not surprising, as they are in keeping with the purpose of the epitaph to mark the passing of a person and the natural human response which transpires. Indeed, such eulogizing may be inspired by Abraham's example, following the death of Sarah (Gen. 23:2).⁵ However, more varied texts and dissonance with the context of the biblical text can be present when lengthier epithets, historical details, or poetry is incorporated, sometimes in addition to an initial brief epithet.

In the extended epitaph, be it a rare bicolon of poetry or a lengthy acrostic poem, creative license with the biblical texts and dissonance from the source text is most observable. In the single extant line of poetry, a child's death in the 1920 August Pogrom is remembered:

A blossom is fresh; a flower is tender. / Before it has fully ripened, it was plucked off, it was killed.
Here lies—in the shadow of the field, the child Dabe, daughter of Reb Hayyim Ha-cohen, Kaplanski, takes
refuge, who died before (her) time in the ninth year to the days of her life
on the 5th day of Elul 5680 [19 August 1920]. תנצבה.

These two lines are also the only two extant full lines of vocalized text in the Bagnowka corpus.⁶ Moreover, they end with an unprecedented ellipsis [...] that either suggests that these two lines are an excerpt from a contemporary (Hebrew or Yiddish) poem or that the composer could no longer express the inexpressible. Within each bicolon there is rhyme: *lah//rakh*; *gamal//qatal*. However, the meter of the first bicolon [2:3] is disrupted by the second bicolon's meter [4:4].

Indeed, the first line of delicate florescence is shattered by the unexpected turn of the second bicolon: "before it has fully ripened, it was plucked off, it was killed." Though the meter is not the traditional biblical *qinah* meter [3:2], metric pattern as well as imagery are in discord as the reader moves from line one to line two.



<Insert Image.jpg>

Detail of vocalized lines of poetry on tombstone of Dabe Kaplanski (d. 1920).

This lament provokes allusion to Isaiah 40:7 "The grass withers, the blossom fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass"

(יָבֵשׁ תִּצְיֵר גִּבֹּל צִיץ כִּי רוּחַ יְהוָה גִּלְשָׁבָה בּוֹ אֶכּוּ תִצְיֵר הָעֵצִים:) and to Job 14:2 "(A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble), comes up like a blossom and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last" (כְּצִיץ יֵצֵא וַיִּמָּל וַיִּבְרַח כְּצֶלֶל וְלֹא יִעֲמֹד:). Likening a child to a human flower is also recorded, for example, in a then contemporary Sephardic mother's prayer at her child's grave (by Fanny Neuda): "a human flower (פרח הדם ובל יבש) has withered and dried out, and become dust and ashes. Beneath this mound rests my love's flower ..."⁷ Dabe's epigraph provokes allusion to both Isaiah and Job, which intensifies both the frailty of human existence and the injustice that cut short her life.

The epitaph of Sora Rabinowicz (d. 1896) preserves a brief acrostic poem, which precedes her primary epitaph, based on her given name:

Szpek, “May the dew fall upon them”

/S/ Here rests a perfect and upright woman/ [Job 1:8]

/R/ Delightfully young [Deut. 28:56; Is. 47:1], upon the birthing stool came her destruction/calamity [II K 19:3; Is 37:3];

/H/ the opportunity to become a mother was shattered and she found her grave [cp. Job 3:22]

It is the modest and righteous (married) woman,

Sora Rabinowicz,

daughter of R. Eleazer Katz of blessed memory.

She died Sunday, 24 Menachem Av 5656 according to the abbreviated reckoning.

May her soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life.



The first line of her acrostic incorporates the opening formula component (“Here rests), which fulfills the /S/ of her given name. More significantly, she is remembered in Joban language (1:8) as “a perfect and upright woman,” adjusted for the feminine gender. She is then described as “delightfully young,” *rakkah ‘anugah*, an expression derived from Deut. 28:56/Is. 47:1, “tender and delicate.” The referent, however, in these verses is “a ‘refined’ woman (and earlier man), “who does not obey God’s words will deny food to her spouse and children (Deut. 28:56); and the humiliation of Babylon, personified as a young woman (Is. 47:1). In the Bagnowka epitaph, it is the connotation of still being vibrantly young that is intended not the contextual use in each biblical passage. This line of poetry continues with the brutal explanation for this intense characterization: “upon the birthing stool, her destruction came” in language reminiscent of II Kings 19:3 and the parallel passage in Isaiah 37:3: “for children (lit. sons) have come unto the birthing stool (i.e. the point of birth) but there is no strength to bring them forth.” Note the word מְשַׁכֵּר records a pataḥ vowel to precisely indicate that this term be read correctly. (Such is the most common use of vocalization in the Bagnowka corpus.) Writes Amos Goldberg in *Trauma*

in *First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust*, “the Hebrew word that denotes crisis – *mashber*– signifies a two-fold phenomenon. On the one hand ... it is a ‘descent and low point’, but it is also ‘the opening of the womb from which an infant emerges into the world’ and by metonymy, a birthing stool.”⁸ This moment of crisis can lead to either “resolution in the form of a new life”⁹ or the antithesis, loss of mother (and child) as in this epitaph, which continues with the cognate “her devastation (came).” The final line of her acrostic explicitly makes this clear: “the opportunity to become a mother was shattered” – taking up the cognate verb, concluding with “she found her grave,” reminiscent of, for example, Job 3:22 “when they find the grave.” In the biblical texts, the birthing stool symbolizes helplessness; in this epitaph, it literally refers to this young woman in the last stage of labor where crisis turns to devastation rather than redemption.

The next acrostic poem, also for a woman named Sora (Sora Leah) (d. 1911), remembers her as a “compassionate mother” to “sons of afflicted ones”:

Here lies
the modest, God-fearing mother,/ compassionate to afflicted (**Ps. 82:3**) people (lit. sons), Mrs.
Sora Lea, / daughter of R. Shaul, wife of R. Azariel Yermiyahu Treywosz. /
She died Thursday, 7 Kislev 5671 [**1911**]).

/S/ You were hope (שָׁרָה) to the poor and the needy;/
 /R/ You only showed kindness [*hesed*]./
 /H/ You hid your righteous deeds from every eye./
 /L/ Everyone (*yahad* with your sons) recounted (stories) about you./
 [E] Those who were saved by you,
 /H/ Will they not find in your death a little (of this compassion)./
 May her soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life.



Sora Lea Treywosz is remembered as “a compassionate mother” in her primary epitaph but the recipient of her compassion and rearing is not her children but “the sons of afflicted ones,” a poetic euphemism for the less fortunate in her community. The acrostic poem, which follows her primary epitaph, offers more insight into her character and the recipient(s) of her kindness. At once, the language that builds on the first letter of her given name /S/ seemingly echoes the attributes of an *Eshet Hayil* in respect to the “poor and needy” (בְּפֶה פְּרָשָׁה לְעַנִּי וְיָדֶיהָ שְׁלָחָה לְאַבְיּוֹן: (Prov. 31:20) – the most common passage accorded a woman. More accurately, it is Psalm 82:4 that is invoked here: “Rescue the poor and needy” (פְּלֹטוּ-גֹל וְאַבְיּוֹן מִיַּד רְשָׁעִים הַצֵּילוּ:). The psalmist’s imperative, however, is transformed by the epitaph’s perfective – “you were hope,” as Sora Leah has fulfilled this command at the completion of her life. Line two’s – /R/ “you only showed kindness,” reaffirms her actions to the less fortunate in language reminiscent of numerous passages where both God and people act with kindness in the Bible. Line three, building on the letter /H/, reminds that Sora Lea’s actions – “righteous deeds,” were concealed from community members (“every eye”), demonstrating her humbleness and sincerity. This language recalls the opposite, for example, of Psalm 40:10¹⁰ where the psalmist does not hide God’s righteousness in his heart but speaks out. Then follow poetic lines crafted with her second given name, Lea. /L/ “Everyone recounted about you, /E/ those whom you saved.” While she did not speak of her actions, her community did so in language reminiscent of Psalm 9:1-2 “I will recount all your wonderful deeds,” where, however, God is the subject.¹¹ The final two lines are directed to those who were her ‘children’: /E/ “those whom she has saved, /H/ “Will they not find in your death a little (compassion)?,” suggesting her compassionate nature still touches them from the grave.

The next acrostic poem precedes the primary epitaph for the merchant Tsvi Konica (d. 1911), and offers one of the most creative poems in its use of vocabulary that emphasizes his merchant trade in its first four lines:

Land of Tsvi.

[TsV] The host of his days were filled while living on the *road*.

[Y] The *road* was great but the *thread* of his life was shortened.

[B] The train stations (houses of *highways*) were an eternal *highway* for him.

[N] He *stretched* out to rest there but from there he *walked* to his eternal life.

[MR] Bitterly his wife and sons wept and howled.

[D] His pride and progeny cannot be give naught;

[KhY] for their glory was taken. Alas, in the desolation of his days!

It is he the precious scholar, the honorable merchant, our teacher R. Tsvi, son of R. Mordechai of blessed memory, Konica from the settlers of Slonim. He died on the eve of the Holy Sabbath 17 Adar year 5671 [4 March 1911] as the abbreviated era. תנצבה.

The language of a merchant is not unexpectedly language of travel. Since medieval times, Jewish merchants traversed what is now called Poland and Lithuania.¹² Tsvi Konica's epitaph employs the nouns *road* (דרך) and *highway* (נתיבות), and the verbs *to walk* (הלך) and *to stretch* (נטה), crafted into an acrostic elegy in aaaa/bbb rhyme to poetically convey a go-stop movement. The travel of a merchant along a highway is juxtaposed with that of the soul walking to eternal life. Yet his is a mournful death as the deceased was taken abruptly before his time. His passing came (presumably) in a train station where "he stretched out to rest." Lacking a Hebrew term for train station, the periphrastic genitival clause "houses of highways" (בתי נתיבות נתיבות) is used.¹³



Tombstone of the merchant, Tsvi Konica (1911).

In the expression "the thread of his life" (פתיל חייו) in the Konica epitaph, the term *thread* (פתיל) may hint at the nature of his trade. The shtetl of Slonim, some 161 kilometers due east of Bialystok, was a town of merchants with a trading network with Lublin, Poznan and even Konigsburg in the late seventeenth century. In the next two centuries, grain, lumber, hides, furs and steel were added to their trade. By the early nineteenth century, Slonim had its first textile

factory and other products for trade. Trade with Koenigsburg suggests Slonim merchants may have visited Bialystok as Bialystok itself was developing. Emigration from Slonim may be the result of a horrific city fire in 1881 that decimated most of the town's synagogues and prayer houses as well as homes, stores and businesses. Movement from Slonim could also have been impacted by the economic and political struggles in the 1880s, resulting from pogroms and anti-Jewish legislation.¹⁴ This time suggests itself for the movement of "the settlers of Slonim," as mentioned in Tsvi's epitaph, to make their way from Slonim to Bialystok.

General biblical parallels to the three lines that follow this mercantile poem are readily evident. Line four's "[MR] Bitterly his wife and sons wept and howled" finds frequent contextual parallels, for example, in Judges 21: 2 ("The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly").¹⁵ Yet only once (Joel 1:5) are verbal parallels extant (הִקְיִצּוּ שְׂכֹרִיִּם וְכָלוּ וְהִילְלוּ כָּל-שָׂתִי גֵן עַל-עֵשִׂים כִּי נִכְרַת מִפִּיָּכֶם). There the context is wholly inappropriate ("Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine.") Line five's "[D] His pride and progeny cannot be given compensation for their glory was taken" preserves but reverses the familiar Hebrew "progeny and pride" (נִין וְנֹכַד) as in Gen. 21:23; Is. 14:22; Job 18:19. The last line of the acrostic: "[KhY] for their glory was taken. Alas, in the desolation of his days!" preserves the all too familiar attribute of the Lord's glory/splendor (תְּפָאֶרֶת), not uncommon in the Bagnowka corpus to describe most frequently family men or scholars. It's designation here seems appropriate as Tsvi Konica is remembered as a precious scholar in his primary epitaph, which follows.

The final phrase, "in the desolation of his days," derives from Isaiah 38:10 "in the *dmy* of my days" (בְּדַמִּי יָמִי), in which King Hezekiah of Judah (late eighth century BCE) offers a prayer after surviving what Isaiah prophesied as his imminent death.¹⁶ Biblical scholars have long recognized the dubious nature of this particular expression found only in this passage. Ancient, medieval and contemporary translators and commentators have embraced a variety of translations: "in the midst of my days"; "in the noontime of my days"; "in the cutting off of my days"; "in the half of my days"; "in the pause of my days"; "in the desolation of my days"; and "in the prime of my life (lit. days)," with each text, commentator or translator struggling to delineate the linguistic base of the term *dmy* while offering a contextually appropriate translation.¹⁷ This phrase, situated within the Psalm of Hezekiah, "is permeated by the imminence of death."¹⁸ The words of the psalmist are those ostensibly spoken by King Hezekiah,

who believed death was imminent. Such a claim and translation are not valid for this expression in the Jewish epitaph, words which are performed for a deceased relative on behalf of the deceased at a time when death is not imminent but a fact. "In the prime of my days" is most readily accepted by translators of Jewish epitaphs,¹⁹ perhaps unaware of the dubious nature of this expression and its long unresolved textual history of discussion. The rabbi's manual *Hamadrik* cites this expression as a substitution for a man—not a woman,²⁰ "who walked to his [eternal] world at old age and a good old age,"²¹ when the deceased is "a middle-aged person."²² The translation "prime" (or its synonyms) is particularly unacceptable in Isaiah 38:10 and equally unacceptable in the Jewish epitaph. Perhaps the most blatant acknowledgement of the inappropriateness of this translation ("prime") is its use in the epitaphs of very young children as well as those of the elderly. So, for example, in the Bagnowka corpus, it is used in the epitaph of a fifty-four-year-old father;²³ and beyond Bialystok, at Kuldiga, Latvia, in the epitaph of a five-year-old boy.²⁴

Among the extant corpus of Bagnowka epitaphs, the phrase "in the *dmy* of his/her days" (בדמי ימיו / ימיה) occurs nearly thirty times, once with the variant "in the *dmy* of his youth" (בדמי עלומיו), and is predominately preceded by the verb *to pluck off* (קטרף 13x), in keeping with other expressions of premature death. Additional verbs, however, are also employed: *to die* (מות 5x); the abbreviation *to depart [this world]*, *die* (נפ 3x); *to kill, slay* (הרג 1x); *to fall* (נפל 1x); and the expression *she walked to her eternal life* (הלכה לעולמה 1x); and once no verb is used. Of the epitaphs preserving this expression, nearly half are terse and formulaic, offering little additional epigraphic clues (or available archival data), to firmly suggest a translation.²⁵ However, the medieval commentator Rashi's note on Isaiah 38:10 offers a translation for *dmy* that speaks to the nature of the days,²⁶ a translation amenable to many of the epitaphs in which it appears (and relevant to Is. 38:10). Commenting on Isaiah 38:10a, Rashi wrote: "I said, In the *desolation* of my days בְּדָמִי"—from the onset translating *dmy* in Isaiah as "desolation," followed by the comment: "When I saw my days *in desolation and in silence*" (italics added). Rashi recognizes in this expression a connotation of "bleakness" that marks the tone of the days for Hezekiah in Isaiah 38:10. Thus, when this term is used in the epitaph, it is not focused on the youthfulness of the deceased, their role in life or that they died at the height of achievement. It is commenting on the nature or state of life at the time of death and more appropriately translated "amidst the *desolation* of her/his days" or more simply "amidst [her/his] *desolate* days."²⁷ What makes days

desolate? When the language of the epitaph is terse, as in more modern epitaphs, there are no clues to answer this question. However, in about half of the epitaphs from Bagnowka that preserve this expression, other unique details are incorporated into the epitaph, which, when conjoined with extant archival or historical records, offer some explanation as to the nature of days. Thus, for example, this expression is used in the epitaph of a twenty-one-year-old unmarried woman (d. 1899); of a father killed in the storming of the city prison in 1905; of a soldier who fell in World War I (1914); of a young girl, young adult siblings, and another soldier killed in 1920 amidst the turmoil of the August 1920 Pogrom and the Polish-Soviet War. In the present epitaph for the merchant Tsvi Konica, his poem indicates he lay down to rest in a train station where he transpired. Yet this period in history was also was a time when Jewish merchants were returning to Bialystok from Russia as manufacturing and trade improved in Bialystok despite the dangers of **travel on the road.**²⁸ Another epitaph of an honorable merchant, Yisrael Gutman (d. 1920), records that "murderers fell upon him on the road." Thus, this Isaiac passage may have been used to highlight this dangerous period for travel, in general.

One final epitaph considered here, that of a Yaakov Karton (d. 1899), again preserves a mosaic of familiar biblical texts shaped by a vertical and horizontal acrostic with three texts, in particular, that are most intriguing for considering the reception history of the biblical text:

[Y] This day in every year is one of mourning and helplessness(?).
[H] Alas and [W] woe! [Jer. 6:4] we cry out with a bitter voice [cf. Jer. 31:15; Esther 4:1]!
[Š'] **The gates of heaven were opened for us [Gen. 7:11]**
[BM] **because of the death of [Y'KV] Yaakov, our father.**

[K] Holy is the one who dwells in the heights. [Is. 57:15]
['] El, the compassionate father,
who has compassion for all the men of Israel. [Ps. 103:13]
[T] **May the dew fall upon them [Deut. 32:2 and Prayer for rain]**
[W] and, in their midst, he will be remembered for goodness and a blessing, [Prov. 10:7]
[N] the soul of our precious and exalted father.

It is he, Mr. Yehoshua, son of Yaakov
Karton.
He died 24 Sivan 5659 (29 May 1899) as the abbreviated era.
May his soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life.



The mosaic of biblical phrases crafted into this poem are readily recognizable, drawn from the books of Genesis, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Psalms with allusions to Jeremiah and Esther. Words of lament “Alas and woe!” (cf. Jer. 6:4) and “with a bitter voice” (Jer. 31:15; Esther 4:1) give way to divine assistance in line 3 as “the gates (שַׁעַר) of heaven are opened.” “The gates of heaven were opened for us” is *suggestive* of Genesis 7:11 (וַאֲרָבָת הַשָּׁמַיִם נִפְתָּחוּ:) where it visually announces the beginning of the Flood. In this epitaph, however, reference is clearly not to a literal flood storm but to the most superlative degree with which the rains fell, now transferred to the epitome of bitter mourning, annunciated in the previous two lines. This contextual dissonance may explain the substitution of “gates” for Genesis “windows.” Intriguingly, this sorrow is because of the “death of Jacob, our father,” a comment that recalls the passing of the patriarch Jacob (Gen. 49-50); however, it is here directed at the deceased whose name however is Yehoshua. His *father* is named Yaakov. The acrostic letters [B M Y’KV] remind the reader that this phrase technically refers to the decedent as “the son of Jacob.” Divine assistance gives way to praise for God as “the Holy One, who dwells on the heights” (Is. 57:15), “El, Compassionate Father”, and “compassionate unto all the men of the people of Israel” (Ps. 103:13), who will hopefully be nourished with the permissive phrase “May the dew fall from heaven.” While this latter phrase provokes allusion to Deut. 32:2 “Let my (God’s) teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants,”²⁹ it may also derive from the liturgical “Prayer for Dew,” recited on Passover, which replaces the Prayer for Rain [in the Amidah] as the gentle dew will now only moisten the

crops awaiting harvest. The metaphoric rains of sorrow alluded to in the earlier opening of the "gates of heaven" are now lessened to nourishing dew. Dew is a blessing like the blessings that conclude this epitaph: "He will be remembered for goodness and for a blessing," invoking Proverb 10:7 "The memory of the righteous is for a blessing" (זִכְרֹן צַדִּיק לְבִרְכָּה). This latter allusion, in particular, is provocative for considering the reception history of the text from which this epitaph's composer drew inspiration. The Hebrew Bible and the liturgy offer equal options although the Prayer for Dew was, no doubt, recited more often as part of the Amidah than the reading of this Torah portion.

The Culture of the Bible in the *Fin-de-Siècle* Bialystok

At the turn of the 20th century, the *mithnagdic* world of Jewish Bialystok was impacted by the forces of modernity. While modernity brought changes to all aspects of Jewish culture, certain aspects persevered, for example, nearly 70 *batei midrash* "houses of study" still functioned before the onset of World War II and the Holocaust, along with Talmud Study groups and Inspirational Societies. The Jewish epitaph (and tombstone) is a literary artifact of this culture. Marked by modernity in its use of vernacular languages, decrease in traditional funerary symbols and extensive epitaphs (and tombstone style), it still preserved *mithnagdic* details with its use of seemingly direct and indirect passages from the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish epitaph, thus, functions as a product of reception history, preserving what was deemed worthy of remembering, including the role and view of the biblical text in the turn of the 20th century milieu.³⁰ Though changing, this world still respected and took comfort and inspiration from the sacred literature at its source, the Hebrew Bible.

The "cataloguing of texts"³¹ from the primary epitaphs in the Bagnowka corpus offered above and the analysis of poetry in select extended epigraphs does allow some conclusions to be advanced by which to (begin) understanding the sheer complexity of the relationship between text and culture. (1) Not surprisingly, words of comfort derive (especially) from the books of Lamentations, Proverbs and Psalms – the same textual sources that have sustained the Jews in challenging times throughout their history, demonstrating the timelessness and universality of these texts. (2) Aligning men with the biblical Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Job, found early in the biblical tradition itself, prevails in the Jewish epitaph. While women are aligned, too,

with the biblical matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, no association is yet found in a Bagnowka epitaph. The Patriarchs are invoked in the first blessing of the Amidah; the Matriarchs in some prayer books, too. Perhaps in the Amidah regularly recited in Bialystok, the matriarchal blessing was not included. (3) It is woman as Eshet Hayil (Proverb 31), specifically in her charitable role that predominates in the Jewish epitaph, an influence that may more possibly derive from its weekly Sabbath Eve reading. This proverb/prayer is also recited gravesite for women making it even more relevant for its use in the epitaph and derivation from the biblical text and/or liturgy. (4) Key passages, derived from Genesis, marking the prototype of biblical burials, logically serve to mark period burials. (5) When seeking to offer comment uniquely relevant to a decedent, for example, uniquely chosen passages are in evidence. For example, for a man whose life was devoted to Zionist causes, the biblical text of Leviticus again is most apropos, given its function as the source text of Zionism.³² *In each of such borrowings from the biblical text, a direct contextual parallel is preserved with the biblical text.*

(6) Also observed, however, are passages where the contextual meaning in the epitaph is completely dissonant with that of the biblical text. At present, one explanation for such semantic dissonance is that a dramatic and provocative meaning of a said passage in the biblical text, overwhelming in its imagery of devastation, serves as the epitome or superlative expression of mourning and grief in the biblical text. As observed in the above example, the biblical flood gates (windows) of the Noahide flood are transformed into the floodgates of unprecedented mourning for the family of the decedent. Another example: the dutiful wife who 'begrudges' her husband and child (Deut. 28:56) and the virgin daughter of Babylon (Is. 47:1), each whose youth is described with the hendiadys "tenderly delicate," are hardly the contextual basis for an epitaph. Yet these passages are used to in an acrostic to describe a woman, who perishes while on the birthing stool, perhaps seeking the extraordinary connotation of sublime youth and beauty.

(7) But what of the mosaic of biblical texts conjoined in the acrostic poems? Technically, such creativity in literary pastiche need look no further than the biblical text, as, for example, in Judges 21 the story of the Levite's Concubine. Yet such weaving of biblical words and phrases is also commonplace in the medieval *piyyutim*, whether originating in Eretz Israel, the Sephardic lands or the later adaptations in the lands of the Ashkenazim.³³ By the 16th Century, medieval *piyyutim* are credited with influencing the genre of the Jewish epitaph.³⁴ In particular, *piyyutim* are credited with giving to the Jewish epitaph their poetic expansions, especially the use of

acrostic poems (both rhymed and not) and mosaic poems as eulogy.³⁵ It has been suggested, too, that the Haskalah brought to the Jewish epitaph the mark of individuality while still engaging especially the rhymed acrostic poem of the *piyyutim*.³⁶ The praise and positivistic nature of medieval *piyyutim* as exemplified in liturgical prayers, e.g. the Amidah or the Kaddish, potentially influenced why certain biblical (and rabbinic) texts were incorporated into the Jewish epitaph. Thus, the medieval *piyyutim* or the Haskalah may be responsible for moving direct biblical references toward paraphrase or allusion.

Ultimately, the use and crafting of biblical texts in these epitaphs reflects a diachronic connection with the greater epitaphic tradition whether directly from the Hebrew Bible or indirectly through the *piyyutim* or the literature of the Haskalah. In its choice of passages, the epitaphs reveal the value and adaptation, at times, of these texts for this community. Job, Proverbs, Isaiah and Psalms take a prime position of importance, each responding extraordinarily to a milieu of change. The presence of historical and secular details in the Bagnowka corpus, though only hinted at above, reveal the intrusion of modernity in the traditional (*mithnagdic*) Jewish world in Bialystok (and Eastern Europe, in general) at the turn of the 20th century. The presence of 'biblical' texts in these epitaphs suggests the struggle of the traditional (*mithnagdic*) Jewish world to preserve a foothold in this rapidly modernizing era.

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¹ Scholars, such as Simon Dubnow and Michael Nosonovsky, saw the epitaphic poems, derived from medieval *piyyutim*, as degenerative by the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Nosonovsky, *Hebrew Epitaphs and Inscriptions from Ukraine and Former Soviet Union* (Washington D.C.: Lulu Press), 69.

² Write Emma England and William John Lyons in *Explorations in the Reception of the Bible*, "There can be no simple series of enquiries because it is not possible to ask identical questions of each and every biblical text, or of each and every occasion of biblical use or impact." Introduction, *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*. Ebook. (Bloomsburg T&T Clark): 4%.

³ See, Heidi M. Szpek, "On the Influence of Job on Jewish Epitaphs": The Use and Significance of Job in the Development of the Jewish Epitaph." Pacific Northwest Society of Biblical Literature. Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington, 13-15 May 2011.

⁴ See, Heidi M. Szpek, "On the Influence of Job on Jewish Epitaphs": The Use and Significance of Job in the Development of the Jewish Epitaph." Pacific Northwest Society of Biblical Literature. Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington, 13-15 May 2011.

⁵ Aliza Lavie, ed., *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008), 359.

⁶ Zalman Schneour's poem, engraved on the black pillar in the Memorial Complex on Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery, is vocalized.

⁷ Aliza Lavie, ed., *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008), 360.

⁸ Amos Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust*, 56.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ צדקתה לא כסיתי | בתוך לבי אמונתה ותשועתה אמרתי לא-כתדתי חסדך ואמתך לקהל רב:

¹¹ אִתָּהּ יִהְיֶה בְּכָל־לַיְלָה אֲסֻפְּרָה כָּל־נִפְלְאוֹתֶיהָ: אֲשֶׁמְתִּיחַ וְאֶעֱלֶה בְּךָ אֶזְמִירָה שְׂמִיךְ עָלֶיךָ:

¹² A. Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, vol. 1 (2010), 101–12.

¹³ This clause also is also employed in a memorial epitaph from the 1906 Pogrom, detailing the death of one victim in the Bialystok train station.

¹⁴ "Slonim," *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, vol. 3 (2001), 1200–1201.

¹⁵ וַיָּבֹא הָעָם בֵּית־אֵל וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם עַד־הָעָרֶב לַפְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּשְׁאָר קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכּוּ בְּכִי גָדוֹל:

¹⁶ The relevant verses read: (38:10) "I said: *In the dmy* of my days, I will go / I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. (38:11) I said: I shall not see the Lord in the land of the living; / I shall look upon mortals no more among the inhabitants of the world." (NRSV). The earliest extant occurrence on Bagnowka dates to 1899; the latest dates to 1952, thus spanning nearly the entire period in which this cemetery was in use. This expression is rarely attested to with frequency beyond Bialystok, save in the neighboring northwestern gubernya of Suwalki, in its largest city of Suwalki.

¹⁷ Biblical lexicons typically derive this noun from the root דָּמָה "to cease, cause to cease, cut off, destroy." This noun is attested to only three times in the Hebrew Bible in its absolute form with the meaning "quiet; rest": Is. 62:6 "keep not quiet"; Is. 62:7 "and give no rest to him"; Psalm 83:2 "keep not quiet" (in prayer to God); and once, Is. 38:10, in its construct form "in the *dmy* of my days." Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* offers a variety of "apparent" or "figurative" expressions, acknowledging that its usage in this expression is "dubious" (198). Translations proffered for Is. 38:10 include: "quiet, peacefulness, even tenor, of my days"; "pause, resting-time, i.e., noon-day, fig. of middle life"; "cessation, pause, of natural end of life;" however, parallelism with the following verse is against this reading. Ancient translations are varied in their readings, with the Septuagint reading "end (ὑπὲρ) of my days"; the Syriac "the half/portion (*plgot*) of my days"; and the Targum "languor/ weariness of my days" (דון). The medieval commentator Rashi offers an intriguing reading: "I said, 'In the desolation of my days: (בדמי). When I saw my days בדמי, in desolation and in silence." Compare Zeph. 1:11: "For the entire people of Canaan has been silenced (נִדְמָה)," clearly associating this term with the root דָּמָה and emphasizing the connotations of "desolation" and "silence/to be silenced." Ibn Ezra offers "in the cutting off of my days."

¹⁸ Michael L. Barré, *The Lord Has Saved Me: A Study of the Psalm of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:9–20)* (Catholic Biblical Association, 2005), 74.

¹⁹ See, for example, the epitaph translations of Sara Mages at Bagnowka.com and the inconsistency in translating this expression at Darmouth Hillel's Project Preservation: <http://dartmouthprojectpreservation.org/>

²⁰ For a woman, who did not die "in old age and a good old age," other sample epitaphs are offered, which use the expression "in the choicest part of her years" or "in the middle of her days." Two sample epitaphs are provided for a woman who was a bride or unmarried. Hyman E. Goldin, *Hamadrikh, The Rabbi's Guide: A Manual of Jewish Religious Rituals, Ceremonials and Customs* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1956), 250–52.

²¹ Literally, this expression reads: "He walked to his world in old age and a good hoary head." These synonyms emphasize the deceased died a full life and reached old age. The latter expression is drawn from the biblical text, as for example in Genesis 15:15 and 25:8, where it is used of Abraham.

²² Goldin, *Hamadrikh*, 247.

²³ "Here lies an upright and honorable man, outstanding (in) doing good deeds, compassionate to all and beloved by creatures, husband and father, faithful-hearted. He died in the *dmy* of his days in the 54 years to the days of his life, Yehuda, son of R. Arie Shmul. He died 10 in Tevet [5]700 [22 December 1939]. [In Polish:] Judel Szmul 1885–1940."

²⁴ "Here rests our son, the boy, Pesah Isaiah, son of Moshe Mahler. He was born the 21st Sivan year [5]656 and died in the *dmy* of his days, five years old, [5]661 [on the] 11 to the month of Tammuz. תַּצְבֵּנָה. [In German:] Here rests in God, our dear little son, Peter Mahler. Born on 21 May 1896, died on 15 June 1901."

²⁵ Initially, I opined that this expression should be rendered "in the bloodshed of his/her days," a linguistically-sound translation, derived from the base *dm*. However, not all the epitaphs in which this term appears can, with certainty, describe premature death amidst a physically violent context.

²⁶ This reading is derived from *dmh* II "to be silenced, destroyed," Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 198; Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 313.

²⁷ While technically *dmy* is in the construct state with the following noun "her/his days," it does not necessarily function in the most common way to indicate the genitive, i.e., "in the X of her/his days." In this expression, the construct may function in a wider sense in which the "*nomen regens* probably governs the construct state." (*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., [Oxford University Press, 1922], 422). In other words, *dmy* functions much as an adjective and thus describes the following noun "days." Incorporating the pronoun into the clause is a bit awkward and superfluous; however, it is not uncommon for epitaphs to present a somewhat fractured reading when words or expressions are incorporated from the biblical or rabbinic texts. Moreover, if this

phrase is drawn from Isaiah 38:10 and patterned on the other expressions for premature death, the pronoun may have been retained for stylistics.

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²⁹ יֵעָרֵף כַּמָּטָר לְקֹחֵי תִזְלַל כָּטַל אִמְרָתִי כְּשֶׁעִינָם עַל־יְדֵי־אֵשׁ וְכָרְבִּיבִים עַל־עֵשֶׂב:

³⁰ The emphasis on traditionalism in the Jewish epitaph may be comparable to what Natalie Aleksion's research revealed on portraits of Jewish women as depicted in community memorial books (*yizker bikher*). She notes that the choice of what is preserved in *yizker bikher* "say[s] a great deal about the lost communities' ideas of family, education and leadership" of women. (Natalia Aleksion, "Gender and Nostalgia: Images of Women in Early Yizker Bikher," *Jewish Culture and History* 5, no. 1 (2002): 69). See, also, Szpek, *Bagnowka*, 16–7, 319–20.

³¹ Eric Repphun et al. 'Editors' Introduction: Beyond Christianity, the Bible, and the Text: Urgent Tasks and New Orientations for Reception History', *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 1/1 (2011), 1–11 (4).

³² "Here lies our precious father, an honorable and outstanding/dedicated man in his community, the redemption in the land was his hope. Hwas an active member of *Agudath Beth-Jakob*, R. Yaakov Judah, son of Tsvi Arie Abrasz. He died in a good name in the 67th year to his life, 19 Shevat 5689 [30 January 1929]. May his soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life."

³³ For this history of the piyyutim, see Leon J. Weinberger, *Jewish Hymnography*. The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000.

³⁴ Michael Nosonovsky, *Hebrew Inscriptions from Ukraine and Former Soviet Union*. Lulu Press, 2006.

³⁵ *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).

³⁶ See Nosonovsky, 68, for the individualization of epitaphs, and p. 69 for influence of the Haskalah on the lexical level in epitaphs. See also, "Haskalah," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 683, for creation of modern Hebrew poetry and the Haskalah, which sought to use biblical poetry as a source of inspiration and an aesthetic model.