

THE ZOGERIN

Rokhl Brokhes



The zogerin is virtually unheard of in Jewish communities today but in the communities of Eastern Europe she played a central role in women's religious participation.

Traditional Jewish services were highly structured, led by a male, with men and women separated. The women's section was apart from the centre of the formal service; women were not permitted to touch the holy objects, especially the Toyre.

To counteract their distance from what they considered holy, women designated a zogerin — a speaker or teller — a position which was highly respected and admired. The zogerin read the prayers aloud for the women, leading them in the service. The zogerin had a special significance in representing the illiterate. Individual women would also ask her to intercede on their behalf for something personal. This could include anything from the serious, like the health of a child, to the more material or frivolous.

In the following story Rokhl Brokhes confronts us with Gnesye the zogerin, a woman angry and frustrated, whose life of praying for others seems to have given her little but bitterness. Gnesye is the "madwoman behind the mekhitse."

"NO, I SAY; ENOUGH is enough! On their behalf I prayed, for their benefit I cried my eyes out. Enough! I say, no! May I be struck dumb if I will say one more word, not even my name,

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Gnesye.” She had a strong chin. She was a *zogerin*. A very good one and she argued:

“*Reboyne-sheloylem*, kind Father, You alone know how I have prayed both summer and winter, never missed a *Shabes*, never stinted on a *tkhine*. On their behalf what have I not prayed for? Wealth, length of days, pleasure from the children ... Comes *Reshkhoydesh*, my heart simply melts, my soul leaps. It’s no small thing, *Reshkhoydesh*! I pray for everything, everything! Weep for everything! My heart, my heart ... not to even mention the *Yomim noroim*. Every year I leave the synagogue absolutely sick, hoarse, distraught, worn out. Had I been chopping wood or digging ditches I couldn’t have worked so hard. It’s no small thing to be a *zogerin*!

“So many women around me, maybe more than twenty ... the air, stifling ... the din ... the bickering and complaining among them — this one doesn’t hear, she’s sitting too far away, she wants to be closer. Another one is leaning too close to the one beside her. Yet another one thinks that I’m ignoring her, that I failed to remember her grandmother during the *yisker* service. This one, that I forgot about her *Khatskele*; that one, that I didn’t pray for her *Iserl*.”

She complained and fumed, standing in her little room, peering out strangely from under her brow as if searching for something. On the edge of a bench her grandson sat restless. He was some eleven years old. Perplexed and afraid. What was the matter with his grandmother? She was so angry today, bad-tempered and swearing ... he wanted to say something to her, ask her not to scream or cry so much. He felt today her crying was not like other times. This time her tears were different. He lifted up his thin little hand silently and then let it drop again.

Her heart was pounding. “Better to fall ill, better to be struck dumb than to have wasted my life praying for fat Teme

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that she might have such a grand house and so many stores; for Faytl's daughter Shtishe, a rabbi for a son-in-law and such good grandchildren; for that scabrous Tsipore a legacy of ten thousand. For whom have I not prayed and for whose sake have I not pleaded? And what have I gotten from it all? They paid me only a fiver a week and that's *enough*! All they paid me was a pittance to keep my mouth shut. 'Here, choke on it and shut up, for you that's enough.' Can you believe it?"

Her wig askew, eyes blazing, lips foaming in anger, her thin hands fanned herself, here, there and everywhere. Her whole body shook.

"Did I not find a spot for them? They came to the *besmedresh*, that precious Dina, so high and mighty, all puffed up. Pshaw! Came in silk and velvet, a neck thick with pearls. No small thing! And me, Gnesye the *zogerin*, I don't know where to seat her ... and I sob and I pray on her behalf, for wealth; for all that's good and what does she give me? A sixer, a copper, from her munificence! One sixer, for all that I pleaded, for all that I sobbed She gave me only one sixer and nothing more. She, the rich one, while I, Gnesye the *zogerin*, Gnesye the pauper"

The little boy became even more frightened. His grandmother paced the tiny room, screaming. What was the matter with her? He wanted to come up to her saying, "*Bobinke sha, Bobinke* don't cry, be quiet *Bobinke*," but he was afraid. The entire night she had sat up on her cot; leaning over his bed, waking him, speaking to him and to herself, not budging even an inch to eat the evening meal, that's how angry she was.

"It happened one *Shabes*," she complained. "It was a winter day, my bones were aching. My throat was so swollen I couldn't swallow and all my limbs were aching. It seemed to me, maybe a person could have stayed in bed resting herself,

but no, to that I didn't pay any attention. Off I hurried to the *besmedresh*. I moaned, I pleaded. When I came to the *tkhines*, I absolutely melted away, so intense was my prayer."

"*Bobinke sha, Bobinke* be quiet," the child spoke out. Women were standing in the doorway.

"Don't you know?" she screamed, grabbing his hand with her burning one, her eyes crazy clear.

"*Bobinke*, stop," the child begged.

"Be quiet; you don't know, you can't know. All this is not your concern. It's mine. I lamented, I pleaded before the *Reboyne-sheloylem*. All He gave me were my bloody tears. This is all me and my prayers, you hear, Shmertsik? Me and my prayers. Do you hear, Shmertsik, all mine and they repay me with a penny, a fig, like a beggar at the door. My whole life, twenty years, I pleaded for them, on their behalf I fasted. About myself I forgot altogether. I am poor. You see how I wear an old worn-out shirt You see how I eat only a dried out crust of bread *They* live in palaces and sleep on soft beds, silken dresses *they* wear. All that is *mine*, *my* hard-working prayers for more than twenty years."

Actually, the little boy wanted to plug his ears to keep from hearing his grandmother's tirade, wanted to hide himself to elude her gaze.

"Listen, Shmertsik, do you hear? My tears, my widow's tears pierced the very heavens, and all for them. Shmertsik, my child; my bitter little orphan, you are the only one left to me from my seven children. Did *they* want to hear what was in my heart? I knocked on all their doors. No, *that* doesn't belong to them! Everything they own is mine, mine! You hear, Shmertsik? Mine! That Faytl's daughter Shtishe, she wouldn't even give me a scrap of food to feed you with and Hertse's daughter Zlate, she wouldn't give me an interest-free loan from *gmiles khesed*. Teme's daughter Zundl didn't

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even want to enroll you in the new *Talmud Toyre*. I went to that scabrous Tsipore. In front of her I wept, told her all that was in my bitter heart, 'have pity, help me with something for my little one, my poor orphan' but she had no time for me. She was too busy. In the middle of the week, she won't even acknowledge that she knows me.

" 'Mama, some kind of poor old woman wants to see you, probably needs a hand-out,' her daughter says to her. 'A strange woman.'

" 'Mother is not at home, we tell you.' So angry, this daughter.

"Naturally, on *Shabes*, she is entirely different, she has an entirely different hide *then*, she becomes so gentle. Then she needs me, Gnesye the *zogerin*.

" 'Cry, plead on my behalf,' she says. 'I am a wealthy woman. My tears are so precious, they're worth silver. *My* eye, *my* heart, I need to save them for the good things in life.'

"No! I say, do you hear, Shmertsik? Enough!"

Right away the little boy began to cry, sobbing; that's how frightened he was. "*Bobinke sha, Bobinke* be quiet," he stammered. "Look, *Bobinke*, how all the women are staring at us from the window, from the doorway, see?"

She became quiet, pensive. Her eyes bored deeply into herself. She bowed her head low and her old wrinkled face lost its angry red colour. All at once she became deathly yellow. The women at the door and the window went off slowly, whispering and telling secrets quietly among themselves. The little boy practically fell apart from pity. They were talking about his grandmother, but he didn't know what to do, how to calm her.

"Ha," she said, and her gaze fell on the child, an angry, hard look and her voice became entirely different, strong now and full of venom. "No," she said again and stomped her

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foot. "No, I'll show them. Do you hear, Shmertsik? I'll go on praying, I'll go on weeping but now I'll pray for me, just for me. I'll pray for a disaster to fall on them, on all my enemies ... they are my worst enemies. They took away my prayers, my tears, my years Do you hear, Shmertsik? All that they have is mine. I'll pray for it back. I'll take it back, you hear, Shmertsik. I'll take it all back. I'll be avenged on them. My prayer will be a prayer of revenge, do you hear, Shmertsik ...?"

"Be quiet, *Bobinke*," the child whimpered. "Look how they are watching, wondering, the women are shaking their heads."

"Shmertsik, are you listening? I'll ask for it all back. I'll pour out my heart in tears. I'll plead for my own sake and with an outstretched hand. I'll pray for myself. Do you hear, you women, you can plead for yourselves." With outstretched hand, wild voice and flashing eyes, she lunged towards the door. The women moved away.

"Look out," whispered one of the women, "look out. Gnesye the *zogerin* is out of her mind." "God help us! The Lord's miracles!" "It's dangerous to let her out on the streets. She could hurt someone," said a third. "The poor little grandson." "Sh, sh, she's coming."

But she stayed in the tiny room. Only her voice, angry and vengeful, could be heard echoing far, far, all the way into the third courtyard.

TRANSLATED BY SHIRLEY KUMOVE