

from "Lekh-lekho"

And now, Blimele, dear child,
Look outside, how the second group
Is already wandering into Exile.¹
Soon we'll have to set out, too.

And although, child, you're a little girl
And he who teaches his daughter Torah
It is as if he taught her
To commit an unworthy sin—

Yet the evil day has come,
The evil hour has come,
When I must teach you, a little girl,
The terrible chapter "*Lekh-lekho*."

But how can one compare it
To the bloody "*Lekh-lekho*" of today?
"And God said to Abram:
Go forth from your land

And from the place of your birth
And from your father's house
To a land that I will show you
And there make of you a great people."

This poem was the response of Shayevitsh to the first deportation of ten thousand Jews from the Lodz Ghetto from January 16 to 29, 1942. The destination of the transports were unknown to the victims. The author was powerfully moved by the plight of the victims and by knowledge of what lay in store for him and his family. In the poem, the ten thousand are emblemized in three: a father (the speaker), a mother, and a child (Blimele). The title of the poem refers ironically to God's words to Abraham in Genesis 12:1, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you."

1. The mass deportations of January 1942 resumed on February 22 of the same year.

And now the great people must go
To the unknown distant road—
Sick and weary—broken ships
That do not reach a shore.

One of them, faint with hunger
Will sit down in the snow
And quietly, in pain,
Die like a hurt puppy.

Another's eyes will fail
For terror on the road,
His heartstring will suddenly snap
And he'll fall heavy as a stone.

And someone's shivering child
Will freeze to death in the frost-fire,
And its mother will long carry it
Thinking it's still moving.

And fathers will call to their children
And children demand things from their mothers—
Families will get lost
And never find themselves.

And for a long way they'll carry
The great heavy pack on their shoulders
And throw it away at last, and often
Have no pillow under their head.

And the sick man, strengthless,
Will come to a halt in deep snows.

Birds will fly past
And be frightened, as by a scarecrow.

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And from every shrub
And every twig, hands will lift
And from every little tree
Eyes, as of wolves and lions, will peer.

Someone in the forest waste
Who lies in ambush for your step—
Your vaporous breath will ring
Like the flow of your own warm blood.

So greetings to you, grandfather Abraham!
We go on your hard journey
But won't you be ashamed
Of your grandchildren's bloody tears?

And now, Blimele, dear child,
Put on your little coat, let's go.
The third group sways in readiness
And we must join them now.

But let us not weep.
Let us not lament, but in spite of all foes
Smile, only smile, so those
Who know the Jews will wonder

And not understand that in our blood
Flows the power of our grandfathers
Who in all generations
Climbed atop so many Moriahs;

That although our step is unsteady
Like a blind man's at a strange door,
There rings in it the echo
Of our uncle's stride on Siberian roads,

That although, as in a fallen beast,
Terror in our eyelash trembles,
Pride burns in flaming lightning-bolts
As in our father on the gallows.

And although at any minute
We can be tortured and shot,
Well—it is nothing new:
Our sister was whipped naked.

So let us not weep,
Let us not lament, but in spite of all foes
Smile, only smile, so those
Who know the Jews will wonder

And not know that today
The same angels go with us as before:
On the right Michael, on the left Gabriel,
Uriel in front and Raphael in the rear.

And although beneath our feet is death,
Over our head is God's Presence.
So child, let us go with devotion renewed
And our old proclamation of Oneness.

Lodz Ghetto, February 23, 1942
Translated from the Yiddish
by Elinor Robinson

from "Spring 1942"

2.

And in an hour of good fortune
Spring is here again—
The tree will send another root
Deeper into the earth,
And the birds will build
New cozy nests.
Only my ghetto brothers
Still must leave their homes,
With their gold-spun dreams
In herds—in dozens,
In hundreds—to trudge
Day after day, night after night
Down to the gathering place
To receive the blessing of expulsion.
Tired and sick, their steps
Totter, reel like drunkards.
But they are not drunk from wine
Or whiskey but from anguish and agony,
From despair and bitterness.
Half-numb, their hands—which
Can hardly move—are like sick birds' wings.
Their glances—abysmal, black—
Like those of sheep being led to slaughter.
And in their hearts fear strikes,
Like clumps of earth falling on graves.

"Spring 1942" is comprised of ten sections.
The title refers to the deportations from Lodz Ghetto to death camps in April
1942.

3.

And in an hour of good fortune
Spring—God be praised—is here again.
Night blows on the silvery horn
Of the young moon
And learns a new tune
In honor of Spring, which this year
Came as a very late guest.
But like a camel a mother is hunched
With a pack on her back,
Her five children dragging behind her,
One smaller than the next,
Clad in rags
And torn shoes
Tied with string,
With heavy sacks
Like beggars' bags
Hung on them.
They are tired and can walk no further.
The mother spreads her arms like a hen.
The oldest she leaves unattended,
The second she scolds,
The third she pushes ahead,
The fourth she pleads with,
And the fifth she takes in her arms.
But soon she stands still, breathless
Like a dead fish,
With staring eyes
And open mouth,
And the pack on her back and the child in her arms
Rock cumbrously—

On the mother's scale—
Down and up
Back and forth,
Up and down
Back and forth.

7.

And in an hour of good fortune
Ha, ha, ha, Spring is here again.
The grass, the trees will dress
Themselves in dew, as though with pearls,
And the sun will again present the world
With her gold, squandering it extravagantly.
But why do a branch, a bush
Crack and break when you step on it?
And poor cursed heart of mine,
Do you not break from the pain
When your brothers are driven like dogs?!
Whorish, benumbed heart,
Why don't you die?
Why don't you take leave of your mind
And dance in the middle of the street
And do somersaults—with your head upside down.
With your feet to the sky.
With your fists clenched on your breast.
With your fists clenched toward Him above.
And you bang your head on the wall
And sing a holiday song.
And bite off a piece of your hand,
While tears flow from your eyes,
Pailsful, pailsful.

You poor, cursed heart,
Why don't you burst from pain?

8.

And in an hour of good fortune
Life turns over
Like pages of a book
And Spring is here again.
But where is the great ghetto Jew,
Where is Don Isaac Abrabanel,¹
Who should be a pillar for us
As he once was in Spain?
I do not have the strength for it,
Nor do you, friend,
So what will be?
What will be with the thousands
Of poor ghetto Jews?
Who will comfort them in their terrible tragedy?
Who will ease their agony
On their horrible unknown road?
Who will heal the sick,
Who will bind the wounds,
Who will lift up the fallen,
Who will feed the weak,
Who will quench the thirsty,
Who will bury the dead
And still the crying of the child?
Alas and woe—where is the great ghetto Jew,

1. Statesman, philosopher, and biblical exegete, Abrabanel (1437–1508) was prominent in fifteenth-century Spain just before the expulsion of the Jews in 1492.

Where can we get Isaac Abrabanel?!
But how could such a one help us today?
In the ghetto he himself would walk
With a bent, aching back
And would consider the whole Spanish expulsion
And all the bitter edicts that followed
Child's play, when compared to today.

9.

And in an hour of good fortune
May no Evil Eye befall us, Spring is here again.
Even graves will be covered in green.
So rise up, great poet,
Master of the "City of Slaughter,"²
From your green-laureled grave.
I invite you to walk with me.
In our ghetto you will be quickly satisfied.
Although we are exposed here to ridicule and shame,
No wife's husband—even the most pious—will run to the rabbi
To ask if he may continue living together with his wife.
In our ghetto you will be satisfied.
Not like there in the other "City,"
Where they decreed a fast
And gathered together in the synagogues
"With wild horrible cries
With a burning sea of tears."
I doubt, great poet, if today you will find

2. "The City of Slaughter" is a well-known poem by Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934) concerning the Kishinev pogroms. Bialik's often-quoted line "The sun shines, the acacia blossoms and the slaughterer slaughters" suggests the indebtedness of Shayevitsh to Bialik.

Anywhere in a ghetto synagogue a *minyán*³ to recite the *Kaddish*.
One trudges quietly on the desolate march
And even more quietly one expires
And the bridegroom leaves his weeping bride
And the lover does not know of his bride's remains
And the child is torn in rage from her mother's arms
And the gun pursues her further
With cries: "Shoot—shoot—."
But forgive them, great and wrathful poet.
Although we still have no fist
And the great thunder still does not echo
Vengeance for all "generations"
And although you mocked and ridiculed
Such innocent victims and martyrs,
You will bow your head three times to the ghetto Jew
And murmur with ecstasy, "Holy, Holy, Holy."
God with a mild hand
Also presented us with twins,
A death expulsion and a Spring.
The garden blooms, the sun shines
and the slaughterer . . . slaughters.
And yet we do not demand acknowledgment,
For when a man is slaughtered
They also slaughter his God.
But do you know, poet of wrath and vengeance,
What I require of you?
I ask that you wake from their sleep
Our mother Rachel,
And the Saint of Berdichev⁴

3. Hebrew for a prayer group requiring ten or more men.

4. The Hasidic leader Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740–1810), well known for arguing the case of the Jewish people before the heavenly court.

And that the three of you go together before God.
You will thunder and demand.
Rachel will weep and plead,
And Levi Yitzhak will argue his lawsuit, proclaiming:
—If, Lord of the Universe, You will not be the Savior
Of Living Jews,
You will, God forbid, be the Savior of Corpses.

10.

And in an hour of good fortune
The circling wheel turns
Round and around
And Erev Pesach,⁵
Blessed be His name, is here again.
So let us sit down
To the poor holy *seder*.⁶
Matzoh is here.
There will be four goblets of wine:
Of our tears
And *Morer* and the *Charoyzes*⁷
Are also here—
Our dismal anguish
And the dark, sad, wrinkled faces.
Now, Blimele, my child,
Ask the question:
“*Ma*”—Why is this night
No different from every other night:
Every night people leave their homes—

5. Hebrew for Passover eve.

6. Hebrew for the Passover service in the home, including the ceremonial meal.

7. *Morer* is Hebrew for bitter herbs; *charoyzes* is Hebrew for a mixture of fruit, wine, and nuts.

“*Halaylo haze*”—And this night of Passover—also.
“*Ma*”—Why did miracles occur each time
And today we are so wretched?
And, my lovely child, you should know
That I do not have an answer for you.
Just this once—
Let Mother—
Our dear and beloved friend—
Open the door
And with my father’s holy melody
Translating it, as was his custom,
Into plain Yiddish:
—*Shfoykb hamoskbo al bagoyim*—
Pour out Your wrath on the nations
—*Asber lo yedsukbo*—
Who do not wish to know You
—*Ki akbol as Yaakov*—
Because they devour Jacob
—*Veos navehu heshamu*—
And destroy his home.
Tirdof beaf
Vetashmidem mitakbas shmey adonoy
Chase them in anger
And destroy them from the heaven of God . . .

Erev Pesach [Passover Eve] 1942

Translated from the Yiddish by Chana Mlotek