

Melilah

MANCHESTER JOURNAL OF JEWISH STUDIES

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Title: "Why the Geese Shrieked": Isaac Bashevis Singer's Work Between Mysticism and Scepticism

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Source: *Melilah*: Atheism, Scepticism and Challenges to Monotheism, Vol. 12 (2015), pp. 145-157

Published by: University of Manchester and Gorgias Press

URL: <http://www.melilahjournal.org/p/2015.html>

ISBN: 978-1-4632-0622-2

A publication of the Centre for Jewish Studies,
University of Manchester, United Kingdom.

Co-published by



“WHY THE GEESE SHRIEKED”

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER’S WORK BETWEEN MYSTICISM AND SCEPTICISM

Khayke Beruriah Wiegand*

ABSTRACT: In a chapter of his memoirs, the acclaimed Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer grants his readers some insight into the life of his father’s rabbinic household in Warsaw – a household full of contrasts and tensions between his parents’ conflicting personalities, between Hasidic and Mitnagdic tendencies and between mysticism and scepticism. Both his father’s mysticism and his mother’s scepticism were formative influences on Bashevis, and his writing constantly vacillates between these two world-views. Bashevis is well-known for his short stories about demons, dybbuks and other supernatural phenomena, but it is interesting to note that at times his demons clearly seem to be external manifestations of internal, psychological states of being, whereas at other times no rational explanation for an apparent supernatural phenomenon can be found. Bashevis’s narrators and protagonists constantly question God and express their scepticism about traditional Jewish beliefs, while, on the other hand, they are deeply influenced by Jewish mystical ideas. The conflict between rationalism and mysticism, between modern philosophy and Jewish religious beliefs, especially Kabbalistic ideas, never gets resolved in Bashevis’s works, but this continuous tension is exactly what makes Bashevis such a great writer!

In the second chapter of his memoirs *מיין טאטנס בית-דין שטוב* (*In My Father’s Court*), entitled “פאַרוואָס די גענדרוואָס געשריגן” (“Why the Geese Shrieked”), the acclaimed Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904 – 1991) grants his readers some significant insight into the life of his father’s rabbinic household on *Krokhmalne-gas* (ulica Krochmalna) in Warsaw, a household full of contrasts and tensions between his parents’ conflicting personalities, between Hasidic and Mitnagdic tendencies and between mysticism and scepticism.¹

Bashevis’s father, Rabbi Pinkhes-Mendl Zinger, was descended from an illustrious line of rabbis, scholars and Kabbalists. He was a believer in Hasidism and a follower of the Radzymin *Rebe*.² Yitskhok’s mother, Basheve Zinger, née Zilberman, was the youngest daughter of the highly-respected rabbi of Bilgoraj, who was the undisputed authority of his town, an outstanding scholar and a *Mitnaged*, an opponent of Hasidism. Basheve herself was a rationalist and an intellectual and was sceptical by nature. She was also much more scholarly than other women of a similar background and position in society.³ The

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¹ Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger, *מיין טאטנס בית-דין שטוב* [In My Father’s Court] (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1979), 15-19. This is a reprint of the first edition (New York: Kval, 1956), but without the author’s introduction. For an English translation, see Isaac Bashevis Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, trans. Channah Kleinerman-Goldstein, Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer (London: Penguin, 1979), 19-24. This is a reprint of the first edition (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966).

² Ibid. Yiddish: 140-41, 149-50. English: 45-46, 52-53.

³ Ibid. Yiddish: 16, 18-19, 143-44. English: 20, 23-24, 47-48. See also Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

diametrically opposed characters and temperaments of Yitskhok's parents, his father's Hasidic enthusiasm and his mother's rationalism and scepticism, were the source of constant friction in the Zinger household.

In the second chapter of his memoirs, Bashevis informs his readers that his father liked to speak about dybbuks, demons and *gilgulim* (transmigrated souls) and that he believed in hidden powers.⁴ Thus when a woman brought the rabbi two decapitated geese, which shrieked when they were hurled together, Pinkhes-Mendl expressed a mixture of fear and vindication and was convinced that signs from Heaven were sent to him. The shrieking geese seemed to confirm Pinkhes-Mendl's mysticism and question Basheve's rationalism. Basheve, however, a Mitnagdic rabbi's daughter and a sceptic by nature, found a rational explanation for the apparent mystery. She removed the windpipes of the geese and asked the woman to hurl the birds together again.

אלץ האָט געהאַנגען אויף משקולות : אויב די גענז וועלן ווידער שרייען, האָט מיין מוטער געהאַט אלץ פאַרשפּילט : איר גאַנצע מתנגד'ישע תקיפות, איר גאַנצן סקעפּטיציזם, וואָס זי האָט גע'ירשנ'ט פון איר פאַטער דעם למדן, דעם מתנגד. כאָטש איך בין געווען דערשראָקן, האָב איך געבעטן גאָט אַז די גענז זאָלן יאָ שרייען... זיי זאָלן אַרויסלאָזן אַזאָ געשריי, אַז מ'זאָל הערן אין גאָס און מ'זאָל זיך צוזאַמענלויפן...

אַבער וויי ! די גענז האָבן געשוויגן ווי עס קאָנען נאָר שווייגן צוויי טויטע גענז אָן גאַרגלען. Everything hung in the balance. If the geese shrieked, Mother would have lost all: her rationalist's daring, her skepticism which she had inherited from her intellectual father. And I? Although I was afraid, I prayed inwardly that the geese *would* shriek, shriek so loud that people in the street would hear and come running.

But alas, the geese were silent, silent as only two dead geese without windpipes can be.⁵

It is interesting to note that although the young Yitskhok was afraid and ran to his mother for protection, he sided with his father and his belief in supernatural powers, hoping the geese would shriek again. But, of course, they did not, and Yitskhok had an opportunity to observe the powerlessness of his father's mystical faith when faced with his mother's rationalism. After the incident with the geese, the story ends as follows:

די מאַמע איז צוריק אַריין אין קיך. איך בין געבליבן מיט'ן טאַטן. ער האָט מיט אַמאָל גענומען רעדן צו מיר ווי צו אַ דערוואַקסענעם.

- זי געראַט אַריין אין דיין זיידן, דעם בילגאָרייער רב. ער איז טאַקע אַ גאון, אַבער אַ קאַלטער מתנגד... מ'האַט מיך געוואָרנט איידער כ'בין געוואָרן אַ חתן...

און דער טאטע האָט געטאָן אַ מאַך מיט דער האנט ווי צו זאָגן : איצט קאָן מען דעם שידוך שוין נישט צוריקכאַפן... Mother went back to the kitchen. I remained with my father. Suddenly he began to speak to me as though I were an adult. "Your mother takes after your grandfather, the Rabbi of Bilgoray. He is a great scholar, but a cold-blooded rationalist. People warned me before our betrothal..." And then Father threw up his hands, as if to say: It is too late now to call off the wedding.⁶

In this chapter from Bashevis's memoirs, his Hasidic father interprets the shrieking geese as a sign from Heaven and a proof of supernatural forces being at work in the world, whereas his sceptical Mitnagdic mother endeavours to find a rational explanation for this

⁴ Bashevis-Zinger, *מִינן טאַטנס בית-דין שטוב* [In My Father's Court], 15-16. Bashevis Singer, *In My Father's Court*, 19-20.

⁵ Ibid. Yiddish: 19. English: 23.

⁶ Ibid. Yiddish: 19. English: 24.

phenomenon. This incident is a poignant example of the conflict between Pinkhes-Mendl's mysticism and Basheve's rationalism as experienced by their son, and although Yitskhok has to acknowledge that his mother's rational explanations and arguments are usually correct, he is also fascinated by his father's mysticism, and various motifs connected to his father's mystical worldview can be traced in his works as a mature Yiddish writer. Throughout his life, he remained convinced that Jews like his father, who believed in Jewish folklore, in spirits and demons, were not "superstitious," as Janet Hadda has pointed out, but were "Jews of the highest moral and religious integrity." They "expressed their faith in God's wonders and miracles," and "when cynical or rationalistic Jews reveal these demons to be an illusion," as Bashevis's mother did in this episode, "their literal-mindedness does not diminish the admiration the narrator feels for those who by contrast had complete faith in miracles and the mysteries of divine power."⁷ But both his father's mysticism and his mother's scepticism were formative influences on Bashevis, and his writing constantly vacillates between these two worldviews. In an interview with Grace Farrell, Bashevis said of his parents:

My mother was a skeptic and my father was a believer. But let me tell you, there is a believer in every skeptic and there is a doubter in every believer, because no matter how much you believe there is always a spark of doubt in you which asks how do you know this is true. And again the skeptic would not be a real skeptic if he were not a believer. [...] Sceptics are people who would like to believe but they would like to get proof for their belief. And this proof can never be really obtained.⁸

Bashevis is well-known for his short stories about demons, dybbuks and other supernatural phenomena, but it is interesting to note that at times his demons clearly seem to be external manifestations of internal, psychological states of being, whereas at other times no rational explanation for an apparent supernatural phenomenon can be found, as in the case of the shed that mysteriously disappears and reappears in his short story "מעשיות פֿון הינטערן אויוון" ("Stories from behind the Stove").⁹ Zalmen Glezer, one of the three narrators in this story tells his listeners in the house of study about a certain Reb Zelig, a home-owner in the *shtetl* of Bloyne, whose shed suddenly disappeared one morning together with everything that had been inside, like wood, flax, potatoes, etc. The sceptics of the town, including the Maskilic pharmacist R. Falik, and the Polish non-Jewish doctor

⁷ See Janet Hadda, "Folk and Folklore in the Work of Bashevis," in *The Hidden Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Seth Wolitz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 170.

⁸ Grace Farrell, "Seeing and Blindness: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer," in *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Conversations*, ed. Grace Farrell (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 133. The interview was first published in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 9:2, Winter 1976, 151-64. Whenever [...] appears within a quotation, as it does here and throughout this article, this indicates omitted text from quotes. Where the "..." appears without square brackets, this indicates that they were part of the original quotation.

⁹ Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger, "מעשיות פֿון הינטערן אויוון" [Stories from Behind the Stove] - first published in *די גאלדענע קייט* [The Golden Chain], no. 66 (1969), 18-28. It is the title story of the collection *מעשיות פֿון הינטערן אויוון* [Stories from Behind the Stove] (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1971), 7-25. It is also included in standard Yiddish orthography in the collection *דער שפיגל און אנדערע דערציילונגען* [The Mirror and Other Stories] with an introduction by Chone Shmeruk (Jerusalem: Magnes & Hebrew University Press, 1979; first edition: 1975), 151-66. In English translation: Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Stories from Behind the Stove," trans. Isaac Bashevis Singer and Dorothea Straus, in *A Friend of Kafka and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970). This was reprinted in Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories*, vol. 2 (New York: The Library of America, 2004), 54-67.

Dr. Chalczynski, were convinced that there must be a rational explanation for the disappearance of the shed, and kept investigating the matter:

נו, אָבער דער דאָקטער קאַלטשינסקי וויל נישט אָפּטרעטן. ער פֿאַרשט. ער מעסט. ער שנאַפט. ער'ט זיך אַרומגעדרייט אַרום דעם זעליגס הויז ביז נאכט. פֿריער האָט ער זיך געוויצלט. דערנאָך איז ער געוואָרן אומעטיק. ער טוט אַ זאָג צו פֿאַליקן : אויב דאָס איז געמאַלט, וואָס פֿאַר אַ דאָקטער בין איך ? און וואָס פֿאַר אַן אַפטייקער ביסטו ? – ס'שטעקט דאָ עפעס אַ קונץ, אַ שטיקל – שרייט דער אַפטייקער. ער'ט זיך אויסגעצויגן אויפֿן גראָז און געשמעקט צו דער ערד. ער'ט זיך געהייסן דערלאַנגען אַ לאַפעטע. ער וויל גראָבן. דער זעליג זאָגט : די לאַפעטע האָב איך געהאַלטן אין דער קאַמער. זי איז אַוועק מיט איר צוזאַמען.

But Dr. Chalczynski would not leave Zelig's place. He kept on investigating, measuring, sniffing. He stayed around Zelig's house until night. At first he joked, then he became sad. He said to Falik, "If a thing like this is possible, what sort of a doctor am I? And what kind of druggist are you?" "There is some swindle here," the druggist replied. He stretched out on the grass and examined the earth. He asked for a spade. He wanted to dig. But Zelig said, "I kept the spade in the shed. It's gone."¹⁰

So the sceptics brought in spades from elsewhere to dig a ditch, but the earth was full of stones and roots, so the shed could not have sunk in. All of this led both the non-Jewish doctor and his enlightened Jewish colleagues to question their sceptical worldview:

ביי נאכט האָבן די לייט מער נישט געשפּילט אין וויסט, נאָר זיך געהקרגט. אויב אַ קאַמער קען צעגיין ווי שניי, אַפֿשר איז דאָ אַ גאָט ?

At night the enlightened ones no longer played cards; they brooded. If a shed can dissolve like snow, perhaps there is a God?¹¹

The narrator then tells his listeners that two weeks later, the shed reappeared as mysteriously as it had disappeared, and everything inside was exactly as it had been before. This resulted in the Maskilic pharmacist's wife repenting and becoming religious, the pharmacist divorcing his wife and remaining as sceptical and cynical as before, and the doctor becoming mad and leaving the *shtetl*. The first story in this set of three tales ends with the narrator informing his two colleagues in the house of study that the shed eventually burnt down. No rational explanation for the mysterious disappearance and reappearance of this shed is ever given by Bashevis or his narrator, Zalmen Glezer. Bashevis's second narrator, Levi-Yitskhok, suggests that this was the work of the *silve-akhre* (סיטרא-אחרא), literally "the other side," i.e. the dark forces or demons, and the first narrator merely wonders what these dark forces had against the shed, but never questions the premise that the disappearance of the shed was the work of demons.¹² Thus the conclusion of this story is the exact opposite of the chapter of Bashevis's memoirs, where a supposedly supernatural phenomenon is found to have a perfectly rational explanation. While the scepticism and rationalism of Bashevis's mother proves to be vindicated in his memoirs, in this short story Bashevis gives free reign to his father's mystical worldview and his belief in

¹⁰ Bashevis-Zinger, דער שפיגל [The Mirror], 154; Bashevis Singer, "Behind the Stove," *Collected Stories*, vol. 2, 56.

¹¹ Ibid. Yiddish: 154. English: 57.

¹² On the different narrators in Bashevis's Hasidic tales, see Chone Shmeruk, "The Use of Monologue as a Narrative Technique in the Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer," introduction to *דער שפיגל און אנדערע דערציילונגען* [The Mirror and Other Stories] by Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger, xxviii.

demons through the mouthpiece of his three Hasidic narrators, and the story's characters who are sceptics and rationalists are being treated with mockery.

Bashevis, however, was consistently ambivalent on the subject of demons. Many of Bashevis's critics refused to accept "the reality of his demons" and insisted that they are "no more than metaphors of psychological processes."¹³ Bashevis's demons are certainly "forces of the irrational in that they operate beyond the limits of reason," but as Grace Farrell has pointed out, "this is not to say that they are manifestations solely of the psyche." "They are supernatural beings, and, although they often function thematically as reflections of mental confusion, they always retain their autonomy as agents of Chaos."¹⁴

The question of Bashevis's belief in the demonic and his use of it in his fiction frequently arose in his many interviews. In an interview with Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, Bashevis distinguished between his own belief and his literary use of the supernatural. On the one hand, he stated: "I truly believe that there are forces and spirits in the world, about which we know very little, which influence our lives. A hundred years from now, when people know more about other things, they will also know more about these spiritual powers. [...] I find it very easy to believe in reincarnation, possession by devils, and other such things. We have many proofs that these things exist."¹⁵ On the other hand, he admitted that there was also a "literary reason" for his employment of demons and supernatural forces in his works: "It's a kind of spiritual stenography. It gives me more freedom. For another thing, the demons and Satan represent to me, in a sense, the ways of the world. Instead of saying this is the way things happen, I will say, this is the way demons behave. Demons symbolize the world for me, and by that I mean human beings and human behavior."¹⁶

In an interview with Cyrena Pondrom, on the one hand, Bashevis agreed with the suggestion that in his works demons or supernatural forces often "manifest themselves in psychological terms, as psychological forces," saying: "In writing you have to find a way to say these things or hint them. I found that folklore is the best way of expressing these feelings, because folklore has already expressed them, has already given clothes to these ideas. By really calling demons names and by assigning to them certain functions, it makes it more concrete and in writing you have to be concrete; if not it becomes philosophy or brooding."¹⁷ On the other hand, Bashevis again stressed his belief in supernatural powers as a substantive reality: "But basically behind all these names and all these functions is the idea that powers exist – of which we really don't know. [...] It is true I don't know what these powers are. They may be divine powers or other kinds of powers, but I will always have this feeling, and this is the reason that I write about the supernatural. The supernatural for me is not really supernatural; it's powers which we don't know."¹⁸

In an interview with Grace Farrell, Bashevis replied to a question regarding the "imps who are always testing man": "It's all parables; we don't know what they are. It's man

¹³ Grace Farrell, "The Hidden God of Isaac Bashevis Singer," in *Critical Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Grace Farrell (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996), 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁵ Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," in Farrell, *Conversations*, 18-19. The interview was first published in *Commentary* 36 (November 1963), 364-72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁷ Cyrena Pondrom, "Isaac Bashevis Singer: An Interview," in Farrell, *Conversations*, 65-66. The interview was first published in *Contemporary Literature* 10, nos. 1 & 2 (1969), 1-38, 332-51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64, 66.

himself who is always ... we are always tempted whether the imps do it or some other creatures. All these names are taken from folklore.”¹⁹ On a deeper level he connected the existence of the powers of evil in this world with the fact that human beings have free choice: “The material world is a combination of seeing and blindness. This blindness we call Satan. If we would become all seeing, we would not have free choice anymore. Because if we would see God, if we would see His greatness, there would be no temptation or sin. And since God wanted us to have free will this means that Satan, in other words the principle of evil, must exist. Because what does free choice mean? It means the freedom to choose between good and evil. If there is no evil there is no freedom.”²⁰

Bashevis’s novel that deals more than any of his other works with the power of evil over people, and, in fact, over an entire Jewish community, is his first novel *דער שטן אין גאָרײַ* (*Satan in Goray*).²¹ Set in seventeenth century Poland, the novel shows the devastating effects of Shabbatean messianism on the community of Goraj (Polish: Goraj) in the wake of the Chmielnicki massacres. Despite its rabbi’s warnings, the entire community succumbs to Shabbatean messianic beliefs, which leads to mass hysteria, to various kinds of atrocities and calamities and, finally, to demonic possession.

Very often, those of Bashevis’s characters who are plagued by demons or possessed by dybbuks come with a history that would make them psychologically prone to fall prey to some kind of abnormal phenomena. This is also the case with Rekhele, the central female character of the novel. The year of her birth is 1648, the year of the Chmielnicki massacres. Her upbringing is attended by blood and violence. Her mother manages to escape from the massacres in Goraj with her child, but dies when Rekhele is still young. Rekhele is brought up in Lublin in the house of her uncle R. Zeydl Ber, a *shoykhet* (ritual slaughterer), of whom she is terrified. His description is replete with images of blood and animal slaughter.²² But perhaps even more terrifying is the presence of Rekhele’s grandmother, who scares the child with her constant talk about dybbuks, *gilgulim*, wild beasts and dragons, and who touches her at night with her “dead” hands.²³ When her grandmother dies, the frightened Rekhele is left alone with the corpse on the night of *Kol Nidre* and has a terrible vision of the dead chanting the *Kol Nidre* prayers and of the pots on the stove flying through the room, which is filled with a scarlet glow. In addition to this, her grandmother appears to her in a dream wearing a headscarf soaked in blood. Her nightmarish experiences on that night leave Rekhele speechless and paralyzed.²⁴ She eventually regains her speech, but remains limping on her left foot, as well as being beset by mysterious illnesses, which some attribute to the work of demons.²⁵ After her illness, she has another traumatic experience when her blood-splattering uncle first wants to marry her and then suddenly dies. When Rekhele is reunited with her father R. Elazar Babad after R. Zeydl Ber’s death and they return to Goraj, Rekhele is not the same person any

¹⁹ Grace Farrell, “Seeing and Blindness: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer,” in Farrell, *Conversations*, 137.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

²¹ Yitskhok Bashevis, *דער שטן אין גאָרײַ* [*Satan in Goray*], originally serialized in *גלובוס* [The Globe] (Warsaw), January - September 1933, published in book form by the Warsaw Yiddish Pen Club in 1935, thereafter in Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1955. In English translation: Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Satan in Goray*, trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: Farrar & Straus, 1958).

²² Yitskhok Bashevis, *דער שטן אין גאָרײַ* [*Satan in Goray*], 52-53. These page numbers, and the ones in the following footnotes, refer to the latest Yiddish edition of the novel (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1992).

²³ *Ibid.*, 54-56.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60-62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

more.²⁶ With all these details, Bashevis provides the psychological background which would make Rekhele capable of seeing visions and experiencing demonic possession at a later stage in her life, while at the same time through his narrative method, he gives concrete reality to Rekhele's visions and her demonic possession.²⁷

But there are several more layers to Rekhele's demonic possession. Rekhele's biography reflects the history of Goraj. As Ruth Wisse wrote in her introduction to the 1996 English edition of *Satan in Goraj*, Rekhele is born "at the very moment that catastrophe befalls the Jews," a calamity brought about by cruel outside forces, and she dies as the result of an even greater catastrophe, which the Jewish community brings upon itself by its readiness to trust in the false Messiah Shabbatai Zvi and in false models of redemption.²⁸ Since Rekhele is so closely associated with both the community of Goraj and with the community of Israel at large, the battle taking place within her epitomizes the battle between the sacred and the profane within Goraj and within the community of Israel, which have followed a false Messiah and false models of redemption, and have permitted themselves gradually to be taken over by corrupt leaders and by evil ideas. The *Shekhinah*, with whom Rekhele has also been closely associated through various Kabbalistic allusions throughout the novel, has not become reunited with the rest of the Godhead. Instead of a *Tikun* within the Godhead and messianic redemption for the community of Israel, there is an eruption of evil coming from within the community, much worse than the evil coming from without, which Chmielnicki and his soldiers have brought about. Instead of developing her full potential as the *Shekhinah* reuniting with the rest of the Godhead, which is hinted at in various passages in the novel, Rekhele at the end comes to embody the *Klipah* ("Husk"), the "shell into which evil finds its way," as David Roskies has shown in his chapter on Bashevis in *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*.²⁹ Thus the declaration of the "profane" that the *Klipah* or "Husk" will reign forever, has become true for Rekhele and for her community. Rekhele, the prophetess, who represents a microcosm of her community, who had the potential of becoming a metaphysical portrait of the *Shekhinah* reuniting with the rest of the Godhead, once she lets the Shabbatean heresy enter her heart, becomes a "metaphysical portrait" of the *Klipah*, the "shell," into which a dybbuk can enter.³⁰

The idea of a dybbuk as the spirit of a dead person, seeking refuge in the body of a living man or woman, was combined with the doctrine of *gilgul* (גלגול), the transmigration of the soul, in the 16th century and became a widespread popular belief. The term *dibbuk* (דיבוק) is an abbreviation of *dibbuk me-ru'ah ra'ah* (דיבוק מרוח רעה), the cleaving or adhesion of an evil spirit, and was "introduced into literature only in the 17th century from the spoken language of German and Polish Jews."³¹ Seventeenth century Poland is, in fact, the setting

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Maximilian E. Novak, "Moral Grotesque and Decorative Grotesque in Singer's Fiction," in *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. M. Allentuck (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 59-60.

²⁸ See Ruth Wisse, introduction to *Satan in Goraj* (New York: Noonday, 1996), xxi.

²⁹ See David G. Roskies, "The Demon as Storyteller: Isaac Bashevis Singer," in *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 277.

³⁰ Ibid., 277.

³¹ See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 349.

of both *דער שטן אין גאָרײ* (*Satan in Goray*) and *דער קנעכט* (*The Slave*), where an abundance of superstitious beliefs and practices can be found.³²

In *דער קנעכט* (*The Slave*), the main character Yankev (Jacob) has been sold as a slave to a Polish master, named Jan Bzik, in the wake of the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648. He falls in love with Jan Bzik's daughter Wanda, who subsequently converts to Judaism and acquires the name Sore (Sarah). Since conversions to Judaism were strictly forbidden according to Polish law at the time, Sore pretends to be mute when she and Yankev settle in the Jewish community of Pilica, where she goes through a difficult pregnancy and birth, and when she begins to cry out in her native Polish, the women at her bedside are convinced that a dybbuk has entered her.³³ But while with regard to *דער קנעכט* (*The Slave*), the reader knows from the beginning that the dybbuk which has supposedly entered Sore is nothing else than a superstitious fantasy, with regard to *דער שטן אין גאָרײ* (*Satan in Goray*), the dybbuk reportedly possessing Rekhele appears to be substantial, at least in the context of this fictional creation.³⁴ On the other hand, the story of Rekhele's demonic possession is much more than a simple folk tale about a dybbuk. It works on so many different levels, psychologically, reflecting her own personal history, symbolically, reflecting the history of her community, which has fallen prey to the Shabbatean heresy, and Kabbalistically, in showing her failed potential for embodying the *Shekhinah* on her way towards reunification with the rest of the Godhead and instead of this becoming a metaphysical portrait of the *Klipah*.

In fact, Bashevis's best novels all operate on several different levels. There are the individual struggles of Bashevis's protagonists, the historical frameworks of their stories, and very often Kabbalistic undercurrents to the design of a given novel. On an individual level, the male protagonists of Bashevis's novels are often torn between the traditional Jewish beliefs they grew up with and modern secular ideas. Bashevis's protagonists like Oyzer-Heshel Banet in *די פאמיליע מושקאט* (*The Family Moskat*) and Yasha Mazur in *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* (*The Magician of Lublin*) constantly question God and express their scepticism about traditional Jewish beliefs, while, on the other hand, they are deeply influenced by Jewish mystical ideas.³⁵ In *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* (*The Magician of Lublin*), the historical framework for this is the urbanisation, modernisation and growing interest in art, culture and science in late 19th century Poland. In *די פאמיליע מושקאט* (*The Family Moskat*), the historical setting is Poland in the first half of the 20th century, where Bashevis's urbanised and sophisticated modern secular characters are vying with his traditional religious Jewish characters in expressing their various models of redemption, while in the end sharing the same fate when the Nazis enter Poland in 1939. In terms of the Kabbalistic undercurrents of these two novels, there are many Jewish mystical motifs

³² Yitskhok Bashevis, *דער קנעכט* [The Slave], first serialized in *פֿאָרווערטס* [Forward] (New York), 1960 - 1961, published in book form in Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1967. In English translation: Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Slave*, trans. Isaac Bashevis Singer and Cecil Hemley (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1962).

³³ Bashevis, *דער קנעכט* [The Slave], 216-18.

³⁴ Bashevis, *דער שטן אין גאָרײ* [Satan in Goray], 169-89.

³⁵ Yitskhok Bashevis, *די פאמיליע מושקאט* [The Family Moskat], originally serialized in *פֿאָרווערטס* [Forward] (New York), November 1945 - May 1948, published in book form in New York: Moyshe-Shmuel Shklarski, 1950, thereafter in Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1977. In English translation: Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Family Moskat*, trans. A.H. Gross, completed by Maurice Samuels, Lyon Mearson and Nancy Gross (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950); Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger, *דער קונצנמאכער פון לובלין* [The Magician of Lublin], originally serialized in *פֿאָרווערטס* [Forward] (New York), 1959, published in book form in Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1971. In English translation: Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Magician of Lublin*, trans. Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer (New York: Noonday Press, 1960).

related to the Lurianic doctrine of creation, *Zimzum*, the "breaking of the vessels," the concept of "sparks of holiness" in places of evil, and *Tikun* (cosmic restoration), as well as the idea of the creation of the world from the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that is expressed in *Sefer Yezirah*, all of which add a deeper level of meaning to the protagonists' conflicts and struggles.

In a chapter of *די פאמיליע מושקאט* (*The Family Moskat*) Oyzer-Heshl expresses his enlightened rationalist ideas in a conversation with his traditional religious grandfather Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn, who engages him in a discussion about the formation of the universe:

- זאג מיר, כ'בעט דיר, וואָס האַלטן זיי, די היינטיקע חוקרים? ווער האָט פֿאַרט באַשאַפֿן די וועלט?
- [...] דיי רעכענען, אַז פֿריער איז דער גאַנצער שטאַף געווען ווי אַ נעפל, וואָס האָט אויסגעפֿילט דעם שטח.
- דערנאָך זיינען אַנטשטאַנען קנולן. דורכן כּוח המושך זיינען געוואָרן די הימלישע קערפּערס – [...]
- און ווער האָט באַשאַפֿן דעם נעפל?
- ער איז געווען פֿון אייביק אױף.
- און פֿון וואָס האָט זיך גענומען די צורה? ווי אזוי זיינען אויפגעקומען די בראים? [...]
- פֿריער איז אַרויסגעקומען אַ באַקטעריע, אַ פּיצעלע באַשעפֿעניש, פֿון איין קעמערל. ביסלעכווייז האָבן זיך צונויפֿגענומען אַ סך אזוינע און ס'זיינען געוואָרן גרעסערע באַשעפֿענישן.
- און פֿון וואָנען האָט זיך גענומען, ווי הייסט עס דאָרט, דער ערשטער – ווי רופֿסטו עס?
- דאָס ווייסט מען נישט.
- Tell me, I ask you, what do today's philosophers reckon? Who created the world?
- [...] They reckon that at first the whole matter was like a fog, which filled the space. After that, clusters were developing. Through the power of attraction, the celestial bodies came into being – [...]
- And who created the fog?
- It has existed since eternity.
- And where did the form come from? How did the creatures come into being? [...]
- At first, a bacteria came up, a tiny little creature, of one cell. Little by little, many such cells came together and larger creatures came into being.
- And where did the first such being come from – how do you call it?
- This is not known.³⁶

But despite expressing such agnostic ideas in his conversation with his grandfather and seeming entirely convinced by this scientific, rational explanation of how the universe came into being, Oyzer-Heshl is still able to experience moments of mystical significance. When he goes outside after this conversation, the nocturnal sky appears to him to be immense and purified and full of mystery.

אין די האַלב-קײלעכיקע שול-פֿענסטער האָבן געציטערט גאַלדיקע פֿלעקן. ס'איז שווער געווען צו וויסן צי קומט די שײן פֿון אינעווייניק, אָדער פֿון דרויסן. קעגן דער מטושטשער שײן האָט זיך געדוכט, אַז דער פֿאַרדארטער בוים אויפֿן אַלטן בית-עולם איז באַדעקט מיט צווייט. [...] וואו דאָס אויג האָט דערגרייכט האָבן געלויכטן שטערן, גרויסע

³⁶ Yitskhok Bashevis, *די פאמיליע מושקאט* [The Family Moskat] (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1977), 294-95. The translation is my own. This paragraph, like many others in the novel, is omitted in the existing translation by A.H. Gross, Maurice Samuels, Lyon Mearson and Nancy Gross.

און קליינע, גליווערדיקע און בלינצליקע, צונויפגעלייגט ווי סגולם, צירעס, חיריקס, שוריקס, אותיות און נקודות, פֿאַרהוילן און אויסטערליש ווי די שמות אין זיידנס ספֿר-יצירה...

On the half-round windows of the synagogue, golden spots were trembling. It was difficult to know whether the light came from inside or from outside. Against the indistinct glow, it seemed as if the withered tree in the old cemetery were covered with blossoms. [...] As far as his eyes reached, there were stars shining, large and small, glowing and glittering, combined like *segols*, *tsirehs*, *hiriks*, *shuriks*, letters and vowel-points, concealed and strange, like the holy names in his grandfather's *Sefer Yezirah* ...³⁷

In this passage, it is not clear to Oyzer-Heshl whether the light he sees has its origins inside or outside the house of prayer. Oyzer-Heshl's question about the origins of the light is particularly significant here, after he has just had a discussion with his grandfather about traditional Jewish ideas versus scientific explanations of the formation of the universe. He cannot decide whether these glimpses of light come from within the synagogue, symbolizing traditional Jewish religion, or from the majesty of nature outside. But independent of their origin, for a moment they fill him with so much hope for new life that even the withered tree in the cemetery appears to be blossoming. In this passage, despite all his secular learning and rationalist ideas, Oyzer-Heshl has for a moment a feeling of connection to his grandfather's faith in the creation of the universe by God through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet according to the teachings of *Sefer Yezirah*, and he senses again the mystery and the immensity of creation.³⁸

Another good example of this tension between rational, scientific ways of seeing the world and Jewish mystical ideas can be found in *דער קונצנאכער פון לובלין* (*The Magician of Lublin*). The scene that epitomises this tension more than any other is Yasha Mazur's reaction to the emission of fiery sparks from his lover Emilia's silk gown during his attempt of seducing her:

ער האָט זי געפֿירט ביי דער האַנט צו דער סאַפּע און זי איז אים נאָכגעגאַנגען מיט דעם גייעניש פֿון יענע, וואָס זענען מער נישט ביי זיך אין רשות.

- כ'וויל נישט אָנהייבן אונדזער לעבן אין זינד – האָט זי געשעפטשט.

- נייין...

ער האָט זי געוואָלט אויסטאָן און דאָס זיידענע קלייד האָט גענומען קנאַקן און שפּריצן מיט פֿונקען. ער האָט זיך ווי דערשראָקן פֿאַר דעם דאָזיקן פֿייער, וואָס ער האָט געוויסט, אַז ס'איז סטאַטישע עלעקטריע.

He steered her to the divan and she followed like one who is no longer mistress of herself.

"I don't want to begin our life together in sin," she whispered.

"No."

He wanted to undress her and the silken gown began to snap and shoot off sparks. The fire, which he knew to be static electricity, startled him.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., 298. This is again my own translation. In the existing translation, the conversation between Oyzer-Heshl and his grandfather is abridged and the description of the nocturnal landscape, including the reference to *Sefer Yezirah*, is omitted.

³⁸ On the creation of the universe by means of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, see especially: *Sefer Yezirah*, chapter 1, Mishnah 1, and chapter 2, Mishnah 2; Eveline Goodman-Thau and Christoph Schulte, eds., *ספֿר יצירה: Das Buch Jezirah*, trans. Johann Friedrich von Meyer, Jüdische Quellen, vol. 1 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), 6, 9; Aryeh Kaplan, trans., *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*, with commentary by Aryeh Kaplan, revised edition (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1997), 5, 100. On *Sefer Yezirah* itself, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, third revised edition (New York: Schocken, 1974), 75-77; Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 23-30.

³⁹ Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger, *דער קונצנאכער פון לובלין*, [The Magician of Lublin] (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1971), 111. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Magician of Lublin* (London: Penguin, 1979), 87-88.

Yasha knows rationally that the emission of sparks is due to static electricity. But at the same time, Bashevis's readers will recognise this motif of fiery sparks from other instances in his works as an allusion to the Lurianic idea of "sparks of holiness" in contexts of darkness or evil, which play an important role in the process of *Tikun* or redemption. The appearance of sparks in Bashevis's works tends to "accompany moments of heightened perception or ethical awareness."⁴⁰ In this case, through the sudden appearance of these redemptive "sparks," the attempt of seduction is brought to a halt, and Yasha is prevented from breaking the commandment against adultery and from inflicting more pain upon his wife. The appearance of these sparks at this point might also hint at "Yasha's eventual penitence and withdrawal as the immured *poresh* or recluse."⁴¹ But what is also interesting in this scene, is the mixture of mysticism and rationalism. On the one hand, Yasha is startled on account of the mysterious fire of the *funken* (פֿונקען) or "sparks." On the other hand, as a modern, enlightened Jew, he knows exactly that this fire is static electricity. This mixture of mysticism and rationalism is absolutely characteristic of Bashevis's works.

There are many characters in Bashevis's works, who hail from a traditional Jewish background, which they leave behind in search of secular learning, modern philosophy and the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment. Most of them remain torn between the religious background they have left behind and their new enlightened ideas and modern ways of life, and they cannot find their place in modern secular society. Several of these characters closely reflect Bashevis's own struggles and inner conflicts. Hailing from a rabbinic background, he has left behind his traditional, religious life in pursuit of modern philosophy and literature and has become a secular Yiddish writer. Yet his writings are full of quotes from the Bible and the Talmud and full of ideas and imagery from Kabbalistic literature. Despite all his secular learning, he remains drawn to demons, dybbuks and supernatural phenomena in his works. Sometimes he finds rational psychological explanations for them, but more often he leaves his readers with a sense of magic and mysticism. The conflict between rationalism and mysticism, between modern philosophy and Jewish religious beliefs, especially Kabbalistic ideas, never gets resolved in Bashevis's works, but this continuous tension is exactly what makes Bashevis such a great writer!

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⁴⁰ See Hugh Denman, "Imagery and Motivation in the Works of Yitskhok Bashevis-Zinger," in *Isaac Bashevis Singer: His Work and His World*, ed. Hugh Denman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003), 236.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

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