

Localizing the Pogrom: Jewish Leftist Poets on Palestine, 1929

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*To the memory of my father, John P. Glaser,
who believed in common ground.*

ABSTRACT: In 1929, Jewish left-wing modernists used language and images that evoked recent pogrom violence to describe Jewish and Arab sides of a violent conflict in Palestine. Jews around the world chose to identify with either the aggrieved Arabs who had lost their homes and land or the many innocent Jewish victims of grassroots violence in British Mandate Palestine. This article centers on the 1929 divide as a case study in how collective memories of anti-Jewish violence can be mobilized by competing sides in violent struggles. Drawing from Maurice Halbwachs's definitions of collective memory and Michael Rothberg's more recent formulation of "multidirectional memory," Amelia Glaser argues that an examination of the Yiddish poets who used pogrom motifs to side with the Arabs who waged an anti-Jewish uprising helps us to understand more recent uses of Holocaust memory by activists, often on competing sides, discussing Israel/Palestine.

IN MID-MAY OF 2021, as rockets were fired between Israel and Gaza, Jewish activists around the world were caught in a paralyzing, if not new, position. Hamas, by firing rockets into Israel, and Israel, in its retaliation on Gaza, each prompted responses that evoked historical understandings of justice. The urge among Jews around the world to voice solidarity with Israel or with Palestine has been expressed in terms of community identity. Calls for solidarity with Gaza referenced the correctness of censuring settler colonialism. One widely circulating image showed a protest sign that read, "I am the child of Holocaust survivors. They taught me Never Again To

Anyone.” Another read, “My grandpa didn’t survive Auschwitz to bomb Gaza.” Meanwhile, calls to support Israel’s use of defensive force have evoked historical incidents of anti-Semitism and warned of the danger of renewed anti-Jewish sentiment. Such banners include “We stand with Israel,” and “Israel isn’t the cause of antisemitism. It’s the result of it.” A young college graduate told the *New York Times*, “I’m on a search for the truth, but what’s the truth when everyone has a different way of looking at things?”¹ While the most catastrophic results of the conflict have been in Palestine and Israel, Jews around the world have questioned how they define community and solidarity. Are Jews bound by national tradition to identify as “we Jews”? Or should identity be defined politically—as “we revolutionaries” or “we who resist colonialism”? What is striking about the protests over Gaza in 2021 is that activists (Jews and non-Jews) on both sides explain their position through what Maurice Halbwachs has called “historical memory”—in this case, of anti-Semitic violence.² Those who fault Israel with unjust uses of force pointedly use phrases like “Never again” to evoke the irony of a Jewish state that would oppress a non-Jewish group for ethnic and religious reasons. Those who defend Israel’s use of force recall the Holocaust as the reason for reinforcing a Jewish state. This mobilization of collective memories of anti-Jewish violence on both sides of the Jewish-Arab divide is not unique to 2021, and recalling the modern history of translating the pogrom to other groups’ trauma helps to explain the complex intersection of Jewish collective memory and political interethnic solidarity.

Nearly a century ago, a generation of Jewish left-wing modernists used language and images that conjured recent pogrom violence to describe the Jewish and Arab sides of a violent conflict in Palestine. In September 1929, following a week of violence in Palestine, Yiddish writers around the world chose to identify with either the aggrieved Arabs who had lost their homes and land or with the many innocent Jewish victims of grassroots violence in British Mandate Palestine. Writers on both sides of what Matthew Hoffman has called “the red divide” explicitly evoked the recent pogroms in their arguments about how to interpret the recent violence.³ The young Yiddish poet Moyshe Teyf lived in Soviet Minsk but published his tribute to the Arab cause in the pages of the American Communist daily *Morgn frayhayt*. Teyf’s poem revises Chaim Nachman Bialik’s pogrom poem “In the City of Slaughter,” shifting the victims from Jewish pogrom victims to colonized Arabs in Palestine and the perpetrators to the combined forces of the British and the Zionists.

Vey tsu der heyliker heym
 — a shkhite-shtot!
 Vey tsu dem heylikn nakhtleger
 — a blutiger mizbeyakh!—
 Ir—fun keynem gezalbte,
 Ir—gest nit gebetene,
 Vos hot ir gegazlt di bloy-vayse farbn
 Fun undzere erlekhe himlen?⁴

¹ “Gaza Conflict Stokes ‘Identity Crisis’ for Young American Jews,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2021, sec. A, 1.

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed., trans., and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 53.

³ Matthew Hoffman, “The Red Divide: The Conflict between Communists and Their Opponents in the American Yiddish Press,” *American Jewish History* 96, no. 1 (March 2010): 1–31.

⁴ Moyshe Teyf, “Zing, vint fun midber! . . .” [Sing, Desert Winds! . . .], *Morgn frayhayt*, October 13, 1929, 7. My complete translation of this poem appears in Amelia Glaser, *Songs in Dark Times: Yiddish Poetry of Struggle from Scottsboro to Palestine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 253–55.

Woe to the holy home
 —a city of slaughter!
 Woe to the holy resting places
 —a bloody sacrificial altar—
 No one has anointed you,
 You are uninvited guests,
 Why have you stolen the blue and white colors
 From our honest sky?

Teyf's metatextual reference to Bialik's famous pogrom poem leveraged a clear accusation that Zionists were waging a pogrom in 1920s Palestine. He was, in effect, localizing an East European Jewish text to a new context. Localization is a practice of adaptation that Anthony Pym has discussed as a form of translation that internationalizes texts, products, and software.⁵ Teyf's localization of a modernist poem to a pro-Arab politics exemplifies an internationalist turn in Yiddish poetry that absorbed leftist poets beginning in the 1920s and '30s. This localization of Jewish memory offers a case study in what Michael Rothberg, in his case studies of Holocaust and colonial memory, has termed "multidirectional memory." This conceptual model, Rothberg asserts, "is ultimately preferable to models of competition, exclusivity, and exceptionality."⁶ Teyf, like many in his generation of leftist poets, was building upon modernist motifs of pogrom violence but translating this violence to other contexts, involving non-Jewish victims. As I have discussed in my recent book, *Songs in Dark Times: Yiddish Poetry of Struggle from Scottsboro to Palestine*, these internationalist poets, applying Jewish "passwords" and "pass-phrases" like "City of Slaughter" or even "pogrom" to non-Jewish groups, were fundamentally altering their collective identity. They were changing the meaning of "we" from "we Jews" to "we workers of the world." This internationalist practice of localization helps us to understand how collective memories of violence have engendered diverse political and literary responses to struggles. And as we are well aware, this practice continues to influence discussion about Israel/Palestine today.

Like the fighting between Gaza and Israel in May 2021, the violence in 1929 broke out at the al-Aqsa Mosque, one of Islam's holiest sites. The entrance to these premises is at the base of the Temple Mount, adjacent to the Western Wall. In 1929, the violence centered on access to the Jews' and Muslims' respective places of worship. After skirmishes led to the death of one Jew and the injury of many Jews and Arabs on August 17, the violence spread to other parts of British Mandate Palestine, culminating in an attack by a group of Arab protesters on a Jewish community in Hebron. By the end of the week, over one hundred Jews had been killed in Arab uprisings across Palestine, and as many Arabs had been killed by British forces and Jewish Haganah members. At least twice as many were injured in these clashes, with roughly equal numbers on both sides. The violence prompted Jewish newspapers on the right and the left to evoke comparisons to East European anti-Jewish pogroms. The widespread use of pogrom imagery is especially apparent in satire. A cartoon in the Yiddish daily *Tog* featured the British high commissioner attempting to hold back a racially caricatured weapon-wielding Muslim, who is labeled "pogromchik."⁷

⁵ See Anthony Pym, "The Moving Text: Localization, Translation, and Distribution," *Target* 17, no. 2 (December 2005): 363–69.

⁶ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 11–12.

⁷ Joseph Foshko, "Ikh halt di 'situatsie' in di hent!" [I have the 'situation' in hand!], *Der tog*, September 4, 1929.

A cartoon in the left-wing daily Yiddish *Morgn frayhayt* depicted a caricatured wealthy Jew shooting from behind a caricatured poor religious Jew, suggesting, with two anti-Semitic stereotypes, that Jews are the aggressors in Palestine.⁸ Other caricatures featured images of British ministers as East European Cossacks and pogromists. Images of pogroms, that is to say, became a way of making the current violence meaningful to Jews, but the way the pogrom narrative was presented made clear whose truth—which political and cultural identity—it represented.

An important legacy of modernism is the imperative of using art to envision a new order by dismantling past symbols. In a poem published two weeks after violence first broke out at the Western Wall, the American Yiddish poet Aaron Kurtz attempted to dismantle the wall in a poem, turning a symbol of Jewish faith into a symbol of what he viewed as a corrupt religious power structure:

Di vant, di vant,
Fun vistn, midberdikn gloybn—
A nets far shtarbdike gleyber,
A kval—far di, vos roybn.⁹

The wall, the wall,
Of bleak, desert faith—
A net for dying believers,
A wellspring for robbers.

The modern condition had moved art to the fore, and the modernists had imbued art with the power to articulate new value systems. In his study *Modernism and Revolution*, Victor Erlich proposed that the modernist “[i]nsistence on innovation is inextricably bound up . . . with what has been called ‘the movement principle’—a collective challenge to the ‘philistine’ establishment, an embattled group identity that blends impassioned solidarity with factional intolerance.”¹⁰ In the heat of protests and passionate declarations over Palestine in 1929, both sides found innovative uses of past Jewish symbols to align themselves with their respective antiestablishment movements. Kurtz and his Communist Party–aligned colleagues revisited familiar symbols from the Western Wall in their modernist poetry as a way of rethinking the meaning of collective identity. In the process, they accused the Zionists and their supporters of spreading lies and clinging to false faith. But those who opposed the Party’s identification with the Arabs used the history of pogrom violence to accuse the Party poets of insincerity and untruth. The Introspectivist poet Aaron Glantz-Leyeles compared the Arabs to the East European Haidamak Cossacks, who had carried out anti-Jewish pogroms in the seventeenth century: “Above and beyond every correct complaint about the relationship to the Arab majority resounds the gruesome call to the Arab ‘heroic revolutionaries,’ who have flung themselves according to the familiar, tried-and-true style of the Haidamaks.”¹¹ Whereas for Teyf and Kurtz, the true pogrom had been perpetrated by the British forces and Zionists on the local Arab communities, for Glantz-Leyeles, only those who

⁸ William Gropper, “Di maske hinter velkhe er shist” [The mask behind which he shoots], *Morgn frayhayt*, September 2, 1929.

⁹ Aaron Kurtz, “Di vant” [The wall], *Morgn frayhayt*, September 12, 1929, 5.

¹⁰ Victor Erlich, *Modernism and Revolution: Russian Literature in Transition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

¹¹ Aaron Glantz-Leyeles, “Dem Muftis arbl” [The mufti’s sleeve], *Vokh* 1, no. 1 (October 4, 1929): 13.

could compare the Arab violence against Jews to the grassroots pogroms in Eastern Europe recognized the truth. In the heat of the debates that filled Yiddish newspapers far away from Palestine in the fall of 1929, neither side emphasized the messy fact of the matter—namely, that there were victims and perpetrators among Jews and Arabs alike.

East European Jewish modernism arose in response to pogrom violence. The most familiar early twentieth-century poems in Yiddish and Hebrew, from Chaim Nachman Bialik to Uri Tzvi Grinberg, are works that use new forms to express collective trauma. Bialik's Hebrew-language poetic portrayal of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, "Be-'ir ha-haregah" (In the city of slaughter), describes, in gruesome detail, the piled-up remains of a Jewish community in the wake of pogrom violence:

U-vorakhto u-voso el-khotser,
Ve-hekhatser gal boy—
'Al hagal haze nerfu shnayim: Yehúdi ve-khalbo¹²

Then wilt thou flee to a yard, observe its mound.
Upon the mound lie two, and both are headless—
A Jew and his hound

Bialik urged his readers to seek a space away from anti-Jewish violence, to "flee to the desert." As Steven Zipperstein has recently discussed, Bialik's poem became internationally known following its translation into Russian by none other than Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky.¹³ In large part thanks to this poem, the Kishinev pogrom became the proof text for Jewish accounts of all modern race-related violence. Bialik, as Zipperstein has put it, "managed to conflate—more powerfully than ever before or since in Hebrew—nationalist aspiration with personal anguish."¹⁴ Nearly two decades after Bialik, the Hebrew and Yiddish poet Uri Tzvi Grinberg similarly rejected European anti-Semitism, calling Europe the "kingdom of the cross" in the early 1920s and likening Europe's Jews to the suffering Jesus. These damning expositions of Europe's barbarism combined grotesque images of violence with a sense of Jewish religious and ethnic solidarity to create new artistic expression in Hebrew and Yiddish. Modernist responses to the European pogroms not only gave Jews a vocabulary for discussing anti-Semitism but became a ready analogy for Jews observing other forms of race violence. For example, as Zipperstein has articulated, "It was Kishinev's horrors—followed soon after by the pogrom wave of 1905–6—that would propel a new cadre of activists, many of them Jewish, for whom the conflation of lynching and pogroms would be second nature."¹⁵ In the early twentieth century, the Kishinev pogrom gave Jews around the world a means of understanding injustice writ large.

By the late 1920s, Left-identified Jewish poets increasingly expanded the modernist motif of anti-Jewish violence to describe the suffering of non-Jewish groups. In the 1920s and '30s, poets who aligned themselves with various strains of leftist internationalism, from Bolshevism to anarchism, borrowed passwords, images, and in some cases poetic form from earlier Jewish modernists

¹² Chaim Nachman Bialik, "Be-'ir ha-haregah" [In the city of slaughter], in *Mishrei hazo'am* [Songs of rage] (Odessa: Halperin and Schweizer, 1906), 6. Translation in A. M. Klein, "In the City of Slaughter," in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. David G. Roskies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 160–68. My thanks to Dovid Katz for transliterating the Ashkenazi Hebrew.

¹³ Steven Zipperstein, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (New York: Norton, 2018), 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 114–15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

as a means of empathizing with non-Jewish national minorities.¹⁶ Esther Shumiatsher, who traveled to East and Southeast Asia in 1926 with her husband, the playwright Peretz Hirschbein, later described poverty on the border of China and India with the term “trash heap,” a familiar pogrom image for Jewish readers:

Hot zikh der vey afn mistbarg gemert —
Emitsns lebn iz oysgeyn bashert.¹⁷

Here on the trash heap, the sorrow has grown —
Somebody’s life is bound to expire.

Not only does the “trash heap” recall Bialik’s “mound” (the Hebrew “gal,” meaning “mound,” “pile,” or “wave”), but it also recalls Peretz Markish’s famous 1921 pogrom poem *Di kupe* (The mound), which describes a pile of Jewish bodies in a market square after one of many pogroms carried out during the Ukrainian civil war. Thus, the bodies in Shumiatsher’s poem, piled and dying on the border of India and China, are brought into a Jewish fold, included, by way of trauma, in the collective memory of pogroms.

Similarly, in the early 1930s the American poet Malka Lee used the image of a crucifixion, by then a familiar trope from pogrom poetry, to describe a lynching in the American South:

Der vald hot zikh geboyn vi fun meser shnit
Oyf tsurik, oyf tsurik —
Gots shvartser lam
Hot zikh gerisn fun shtrik¹⁸

The woods bowed low as if cut by a knife
Go back, go back —
God’s black lamb
Tore himself from the rope

These poems of other groups’ struggles reveal a practice of merging modernist Jewish form with leftist internationalist politics. The poets who borrowed tropes from Jewish modernist pogrom poetry were, like their Jewish modernist models, testing the limits of language to describe suffering. But like many modernists in non-Jewish languages, they were also using poetry to wage revolution and to leave behind conventional understandings of national identity. By shifting the meaning of the communal “we,” these poets were entering a debate with their role models. In doing so, they were creating what Susan Vanderborg has called a “paratextual community”—a group of writers who, among other things, “contextualize new poetry within literary and historical traditions familiar to a broad range of readers.”¹⁹ The internationalist poets

¹⁶ Glaser, *Songs in Dark Times*.

¹⁷ Esther Shumiatsher, “Baym rand fun Khine” [By the border of China], *Royte velt*, nos. 7–8 (July–August 1928): 62–64. I have translated this poem in full in Glaser, *Songs in Dark Times*, 252–53.

¹⁸ Malka Lee, “Gots shvartser lam” [God’s black lamb], in *Lider* (New York: Idisher kultur gezelshaft tsvayg, 2009), 152. My full translation of this poem appears in *Songs in Dark Times*, 256–57.

¹⁹ Susan Vanderborg, *Paratextual Communities: American Avant-garde Poetry since 1950* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 5. Gerard Genette has written exhaustively of the paratext in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

who in the 1920s and '30s used well-known themes of anti-Jewish violence in works about other groups were revisiting and even celebrating a history of Jewish textual practice, albeit in service to non-Jewish groups.

Malka Lee and Esther Shumiatsher, who borrowed pogrom motifs to describe lynchings and poverty in the United States and Asia, were expanding a Jewish circle to include other marginalized groups. However, poetry in support of Palestinian Arabs complicated this image of Jewish internationalism, for, unlike poets who wrote in support of Black Americans, Chinese peasants, or Spanish Loyalists, Jews who aligned themselves with the Palestinian Arab cause were, by definition, rejecting the only viable autonomous territory for a Jewish nation-state. By revisiting modernist themes of collective trauma, through Bialik's pogrom poem, Teyf was entering a conversation not with Palestinian Jews or Arabs but with the Jewish modernist poets (Bialik in particular) who had inspired him. In his poem, Teyf lays claim to truth by accusing the Zionists of "false love" (*falshe libshaft*) for a new homeland and of dishonest transactions. Like their "father Shylock" (*tatn Shaylok*):

Hot ir oyf falshe vogsholn
 Gevoygn erd baroybte,
 —shtiker fleysh fun kinder

On false scales you have
 Weighed robbed earth,
 —bits of children's flesh—

But isolation in the desert, Teyf asserts, is not the solution to centuries of European pogrom violence. Rather, he appeals to his "Brothers led astray out of our 'holy diaspora'" (*Brider farfirte fun 'heylikn goles'*) to form a new community with "the riders who come from the desert on camels!" (*di rayter, vos kumen fun midber oyf kemlen!*).

When writers began borrowing pogrom motifs to align themselves with Palestinian Arabs, they were viewed by many as abandoning their Jewishness. This intensified the rift among Jews outside Israel in 1929, and the split centered on interpretations of the violence as a "pogrom" against Jews or alternatively as an "uprising" in response to violent (pogrom-like, some argued) abuses of colonial power. The American Communist daily newspaper *Morgn frayhayt*, after first expressing grief over the "pogrom" that had taken place, soon aligned itself with the official view of the Moscow-based Communist International and declared the events to have been a national-revolutionary uprising. Those who viewed the violence as a pogrom accused the Party adherents of obfuscation and "false news." In a speech at one of many show trials in this period, the critic Shmuel Niger-Tsharny asserted that the Communist poets "fake and falsify—and on such a pretext create a correct social life" (*felshn un falsheven—un oyf aza oyfn shafn gerekhtn sotsialn lebn*).²⁰ Several leading Yiddish modernists immediately left the Communist paper, most notably H. Leivick, Menachem Boreysho, Avrom Reyzin, and Isaac Raboy. These writers formed a splinter journal, *Vokh*, where, for the next ten months, they published creative literature alongside a

²⁰ Shmuel Niger-Tsharny's speech in *Der mishpet: Iber di yidische komunistn un zeyer hoyft-tsaytung, 'Di Morgn-frayhayt'* [The trail: Over the Yiddish Communists and their leading newspaper, *The Morning Freedom*] (New York: Farband-Labor Zionist Order, 1929), 17; see also 34–35 for resolutions passed by the committee. Bund Archive on American Communism, RG 1400, YIVO Inst. 15–16.

large number of opinion pieces criticizing the Party-aligned support of the Arab uprising. Leivick, like Niger-Tsharny, declared that the Party adherents “falsify news, overturn reports, play a game of national treason” (felshn nayes, iberdreyen barikhtn, shpiln a shpil fun natsionaln farrat).²¹

Those who aligned themselves with the Party and sided with the Arab uprising accused the *Vokh* poets of tribalism and superstition. In a poem addressed to the “runaway” writers from the Communist *Frayhayt*, Meynke Katz wrote,

Iz aykh atsind farblibn:
Vi a farloshener hill
Heyngen in beys-medresh-land²²

Now all you have left is
to hang like a spent candle
in synagogue-land

The “runaways,” for their part, wrote poems that accused the Communists of hypocrisy and that likened their actions to religious strictures. In a poem titled “Royte tikhelekh” (Red kerchiefs), Leivick wonders whether, now that he has been deemed a traitor to the Party, he must return red pioneer kerchiefs that had been given to him by children on his recent visit to the Soviet Union:

Ibershikn zey tsurik? —tsu vemen? Vuhin?
Zey veln forlorn geyn.
Saydn ibergebn zey tsu eynem, vos iz kosherer fun mir, komunistisher fun mir, un iz mer roe
tsu trojan di tikhlekh.²³

Should I send them back? —to whom? Where?
They will be lost.

Or should I give them to someone who is more kosher than me, more Communist than me,
and is worthier of wearing the kerchiefs?

Both sides of the 1929 divide over Palestine lay claim to a version of the truth grounded in collective memory of historical trauma. The two sides together present an opportunity to view history through Michael Rothberg’s model of “multidirectional memory.” As Rothberg observes, “one cannot know in advance how the articulation of a memory will function; nor can one even be sure that it will function only in one way.”²⁴ Regardless of whether they aligned themselves with the Jews of Palestine or with the Party-aligned revolutionary movement that sided with the Arabs, the Yiddish poets who described Palestine in 1929 drew their truth from collective experiences of trauma. The memory of pogroms added to the urgency and the group solidarity on each side, obliging them to engage in what Foucault has termed *parrësia*—speaking truth to power.²⁵ Not unlike the post-Holocaust vow of “Never Again,” in its use to defend either Israeli or Palestinian

²¹ H. Leyvick, “Farvos mir zaynen aroys fun der *Frayhayt*” [Why we left the *Frayhayt*], *Vokh* 1, no. 1 (October 4, 1929): 6.

²² Meynke Katz, “Tsu di antlofene” [To the runaways], *Morgn frayhayt*, October 2, 1929, 5.

²³ H. Leivick, “Di royte tikhelekh” [The red kerchiefs], *Vokh*, October 25, 1929, 14.

²⁴ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 16.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth and Parrësia*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

rights to self-defense, the collective memory of pogrom violence—and indeed the modernist practice of describing it—prompted a generation of Jewish poet-activists either to defend new Jewish victims or to feel shame for the Zionist alliance with the British colonial presence. And as recent events have reminded us, Israel/Palestine of the twenty-first century is far from reaching a peaceful solution. But perhaps the fact that the same historical struggle should be articulated by competing political sides is not in itself cause for despair. Rather, the dual articulations of collective Jewish trauma might eventually help to liken the pain of adversaries across a front line. A