

“The Meal before the Fast”
by Uri Nissan Gnessin, 1905

Translated from Hebrew by Marina Mayorski

Translator's Introduction

Uri Nissan Gnessin (1879–1913) was a Hebrew author, translator, and literary critic. He became well known for his unique prose style, being the first author to experiment with introspective fiction and stream-of-consciousness techniques in Hebrew, offering a radical and remarkably coherent alternative to the dominant tradition of Hebrew realism of his time. For decades, the lyricism and opaqueness of his style, coupled with the deliberate semantic complexity and syntactic irregularities, left Gnessin on the margins of the Hebrew literary canon, with the exception of a limited yet enthusiastic reception among a small group of critics and scholars.¹

Gnessin's biography is emblematic of the upheaval experienced by his generation. Born in the Russian Empire (in what is today Ukraine), Gnessin roamed restlessly between his hometown Prochep and Warsaw, London, and Palestine. He was the son of a well-known rabbi, the head of a Yeshiva where Gnessin himself studied. His father was well versed in rabbinic traditional writing (Talmud and Mishna) as well as Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah). Under his father's guidance, Gnessin acquired deep knowledge of the Hebrew language in all its various historical layers, before it fortified its status as national language. He was also versed in Russian, Yiddish, German, French, and Aramaic.

The short story "The Meal before the Fast" (*se'uda mafseket*) was published in Warsaw in 1905. It portrays the eve of Kippur in the house of a grief-stricken Jewish family in Eastern Europe. The epicenter of the story—the tense relationship between the father and the daughter—reflects the conflicts that haunted young Jewish men and women at the time: processes of Jewish emancipation and urbanization that upended traditional Jewish life and led many young Jews to Western metropolitan centers in search of secular education and integration in European societies, creating a deep intergenerational divide. This tension is accentuated by the timing of the plot—the Eve of Yom Kippur—the holiest day of the year in Judaism, a time

¹ Pinsker, *Literary Passports*, 13.

of self-scrutiny, atonement, and repentance. Gitel, the daughter, is drawn toward Western values and lifestyle and yearns to leave her suffocating small town home. She struggles with a myriad of mixed emotions with regard to her widowed father, whom she abhors for moments of unmasculine weakness but also cherishes for his kindness and vulnerability. This debilitating and static state of affairs is presented almost in the absence of action in the plot, which is constructed through intrusive, traumatic memories of the past and the attentive depiction of consciousness and memory.

Gnessin's experimentalism and his incorporation of different languages and linguistic registers render his work an immense challenge to the translator. His texts employ biblical and rabbinic idioms, molded with Russian syntactic structures. He tends to liberally incorporate allusions to Western European works, and his characters often recite Russian and Ukrainian texts and songs, which appear in these languages in Cyrillic alphabets. Gnessin's linguistic complexity and ingenuity are all the more striking if we consider that he wrote about contemporary life in Hebrew when it was not widely used as a spoken language in Eastern Europe.

In a letter written to his nephew in 1906, the author expressed his reticence about the translation of his works to Russian, stating that the "gentile soul" of the Russian translator might not be able to translate his literature, which is "built completely on *half-words* that, when aren't in the right place, don't say anything."² In these "half-words" we can place not only Gnessin's unique, flexible, and often aberrant use of language (even compared to his contemporaries) but also his rich and multilayered linguistic texture, incorporating many allusions to Jewish sources as well as to the intricacies of modern Hebrew literature. In doing so, the author recognizes a twofold irreducible difference: the linguistic difference, distinguishing the Jewish and the non-Jewish language, and, in a broader sense, the *Jewish difference*.

² Gnessin, *Ketavim*, letter 71, page 109. The italics are mine.

Works Cited

- Gnessin, Uri Nissan. *Ketavim*, vol. 3, with an introduction by Shkhena Nashkes. Merhaviya: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1946.
- Pinsker, Shachar M. *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.

“The Meal before the Fast”

Sullen, Rabbi Noah opened the bedroom door slightly, put his gray-ing head and beard, still wet from bathing, through the door, and whispered in a feeble voice, “Gitel . . .”

Gitel was lying on the bed, her hands under her tilted head, sleeping. The room was in disarray. On the black dresser, mounds upon mounds had been amassed, books bound and unbound, newspaper sheets, and notebooks. Scattered here and there on the floor were scraps of paper, some blank, some scribbled on, some shrunken, and some smooth. On the top of the bed crouched an open book, its spine facing upward. On the desk, which was leaning against the mirror between the two windows, stood a globe; a large atlas on its edge, leaflets and folders strewn on top of it, some scribbled, some empty, and some erased; thin books, intact and torn. On the wall above the dresser hung Vereshchagin’s *Battle of Shipka*. The entire bothersome assortment lay half lit in the incandescent yellow strips of the afternoon sun. With a soundless sigh Rabbi Noah furtively closed the door.

“Ah, good God!” he muttered to himself in shivering lament, as his slightly taller-than-middling figure, wrapped in a gray, elongated garment down to the knees, topped by a light silk brimmed hat tip-toed away with a quiver.

An image came to him, echoing from the depths of time: a little room, a secluded house in the woods . . . Late in the day, by the light of a lamp, beloved *Gemara* fills the heart. Then his lips uttered once again with stinging bitterness, “Ahh! Good God!”

Approaching the table, covered in white cloth for the day of atonement, with prompt silver candelabras harboring unlit candles, he set his gaze upon the window. His hand reached and seized the edge of the tablecloth and briskly pulled from the table. The silver candelabra bustled, shook, and fell to the floor with clamor. Rabbi Noah stirred.

“Ahh . . .” he whispered despondently. “Where is the *Siddur*?” And his hands began rummaging through the empty table.

With the tumbling sound of the silver, Rachel, the maid who has been groaning since the morning, stormed into the room at once as though she was standing prompt just outside the door.

“Rabbi Noah . . . what is . . . the meaning of this?” She asked anxiously.

“Eh! What is this!” mumbled Rabbi Noah. “Pick up . . . the . . . where is the *Siddur*?”

And as he turned to the bookcase behind the door, his shoulders quivered, and he whispered bitterly, “Lying there . . . Ehhh . . .”

The maid’s somber, pale face shivered as her eyes filled with scorching tears. In her father’s house, she remembers, they would cry so much at this time, cry surreptitiously . . .

Rabbi Noah, he is a righteous man . . . erudite, she thought with a sigh of relief, arranging the candelabra.

“Have you seen my sash?” She heard his low, fractured voice, and hurriedly abandoned the candelabra, running to his quarters:

“Right away, Rabbi Noah . . .”

Rabbi Noah, walked toward his daughter’s bedroom. He reached his hand to the door but then turned his head and muttered, “Ehhh . . . After the *Minḥa* . . .”

His graying beard shivered.

“Here is the sash, Rabbi Noah!” the maid called out. Rabbi Noah took the sash and agonizingly began strapping it to his waist. Apprehensive, Rachel stood beside him.

“Is it . . . is it already time for the *Minḥa*, Rabbi Noah?” Her voice fumbling anxiously, wishing to speak with him a moment longer.

“Is it . . . and what do you think?” His words crumbled as his frail motions quickened. “Must hurry. . . The day isn’t long . . .”

He wore his long, black overcoat, habitually stroking his beard as he stepped toward the door.

“Prepare everything here,” he added. “Tell . . .”

His words lingered unfinished. He kissed the *mezuzah* and departed.

“Wha . . . What . . .?” Her question demised on her trembling lips.

There the empty room was anxiously holding its breath. As yellow daylight froze soundlessly, a greenish fly hummed, pleading on the windowpane. Rachel suddenly felt herself orphaned and feeble, abandoned to wander an endless desert, as though a hot metal claw were cauterizing her heart, dazzling her senseless. In an instant her eyelashes became fevered, as her heart-rending wail poured into the room.

The door burst open in a tumult as Gitel appeared. A girl of sixteen, not very tall, her shoulders just barely beginning to take mature form. Her fresh face appeared anxious, her large eyes blazing and fixating.

“Rachel! What is this? What is the matter with you?”

Rachel’s lament deepened as she hastened to the kitchen. Gitel finally yanked her legs to follow her, yet she soon recalled and withdrew her steps.

Eve of Kippur—the thought shot through her mind. Her lips became distorted with quiet ridicule—*Gullible fool* . . . She returned to her room and lay on her bed.

—*Crying* . . . she still could not forget the display—*Such vulgarity* . . .

She quivered. Was it not only last year that she, Gitel, was crying as well . . . she rearranged her coiffure with fervent diligence.

—*And yet* . . .

Last year, this room was filled with some odd disquiet . . . Her mother was still alive . . . She remembers her, traipsing around, wearing her white coat, absentminded, pale, moaning anxiously . . . Her heart had told her . . . As her head shook abruptly, her mind came to a halt.

Nonsense . . . *old habits* . . . *here Rachel cries as well* . . . Gitel sighed. Her eyes suddenly closed on their own, and in the arcade of darkness, silvering wandering dots unfolded before her, slowly sketching the image of her pale, dying mother . . . She did not know why, but from time to time, when her mother’s image emerged, the first thing she saw were the ghastly arms, shriveled as the hands of death itself, faintly groping the blanket searching for something or other. What were they searching for then? Here it is, the frail face,

the bulging shiny forehead, and there—the gaze, the dreadful, abysmal gaze, the final gaze . . .

Gitel bit her lower lip as a feverish blush appeared on her cheeks. Ten months, ten whole months. How quickly time went by. How she wished to behold her now. Gitel tossed and turned. But the image, the cruel image, incarnated in an instant in her mind, filling her convulsing heart, refused to leave her side. Rotten, wet mass, worms crawling, bones bulging. Her mother . . .

Her nostrils palpitated, her throat heated, a thin stream trickled down her eyelids. Swiftly and decisively, she turns her face to the wall.

“Nonsense!” she mumbles mournfully and coughed, “I’ve already cried plenty . . .” But the image persisted, constricting in her throat.

She remembered the seven days of mourning. The house in chaos, nothing in its place. The mirror hides its face in the wall, the beds undone. A table with prayer shawls and prayer books in the center of the house. On the dresser, covered with coarse dark cloth, two candles burning, spreading strange, warm light, piercing light. Filth, mire, clouds. On a stool in the corner by the stove, her father, silent, weeping . . . She sits before him flustered, crying as well . . . The tears sting, burn, scorch . . . The aunt, she too cried incessantly . . .

How much he cried then, a man . . . The thought crashed in her mind. *And then, before they departed . . .*

It appeared before her now so clearly. She sat in the crimson chamber of the station, one hand on father’s bag, the other on her knees. The chamber was bustling. A long table, filled with flower vases and strange bottles. Agile young men, polished young women, among them her thickset teacher, all chattering with their spoons and glasses, whispering and laughing. All around her small groups of Jews gathered, conversing. Her father, who had begun graying in those two months, walked around with his head tilted and his hands clasped, turning back each time he approached one of the groups. Before, she remembers, he, too, would converse and trade with them . . . suddenly he came up to her and said in a trembling voice, “Let’s go home, Gitke . . .”

“Yes, I will go tomorrow . . .”

She did not inquire any further on the matter. And all along their journey home, she recalls, he moaned every now and then and wiped his eyes.

“It was just a cold that she had . . . Just a cold . . .”

Wretched! Gitel thought with exasperation. *Wretched father . . .*

Suddenly, she stood and hurried to the door. In her heart kindled an immense, blind desire to see father, to embrace him, kiss him, talk to him—

“Gitel!” Rachel’s fractured voice reached her from the other room. “Will you wash your head? Father went to pray and asked to prepare everything . . .”

“He’s not here . . .” Gitel lay back down. She will not wash her head today. Father probably won’t even ask. She snickered bitterly.

“Gitel!” Rachel’s voice crept up again as she glanced into the room.

“Oh, just leave me alone!” she called out in anguish. Arranged her coiffure and muttered, “Gullible fool . . .”

Then she realized that, when father returns, she will be the one who has to bless the candles. The bed suddenly seemed too narrow. The ceiling appeared to be lower, burdening her chest with unbearable cruelty. She jumped to her feet, struck by piercing heat from head to toe, and began pacing around the room as her eyes wandered nervously, seeking refuge. Ah, how her heart yearns to go, leave, break out of these narrows, stand on her own, live as she wishes, do whatever she wants . . . Ah, how narrow this place is . . .

She sat on the bed, leaning on her right arm as her fist supported her chin. Her gaze fell on the clutter of school books. Her eyesight became blurry. There she will complete her studies, she will receive her diploma, and then . . .

And the image of sweet father, lonesome father, wretched, aging before his time, appeared before her in all its affectionate cruelty.

Nonsense! Gitel abruptly concluded, running her hand through her hair. *Nothing to it . . . Father will understand . . . Father will . . . Father is kind . . .*

She recalled how, several weeks ago, she told him she wouldn’t eat meat anymore. Gitel’s shoulders shivered and she squirmed. A

moment later she arose and began pacing in the room once again. What open eyes can mean to a person, she wondered with joy. Such truths, such sacred truths, she thought. If it hadn't been for that book . . .

Chills crept down her back. Only a few weeks passed since she stopped eating meat, and now it seemed that an eternity stood between her and that time. She can no longer fathom that she—she, herself—used to eat it each day, with such appetite, the flesh of the poor animals.

And father? Gitel sighed. Such pure heart, such gentle soul—and yet . . . She remembered how, in the first days, he would try to appease her, persuade her to stop with that “silliness.” She disregarded it once, twice. But when he persisted, she called out, “I don't understand, father, how you call ‘silliness’ to things, that . . . that many people think to be . . . well, simply, a sacred duty?”

He grumbled, *but ever since then*—he stopped. It was that night, she recalled, that his associate Rabbi Kalman had tea with them, and when he extended his hand, with his cup in it, he called out, as always, “Please, my child, another cup . . .”

Father responded with a mock-threat: “Be careful, Kalman . . . ‘Child’ . . . you are speaking to a knowledgeable one, already able to impose duties on herself . . .” Rabbi Kalman stared at him, and father added, “Child . . .”

Rabbi Kalman, his associate—an incidental notion crossed her mind—he is a different sort of man. When father told him of the matter, he cast a piercing glare and called with glacial wrath, “Brrrrr . . .” She chuckled, and father sighed quietly.

Ahh, what will be the end . . . Gitel's legs were suddenly struck by frailty and her mind seemed to sluggishly unravel. Her heart shriveling, she opened the window and sat on its sill.

Above the row of low-lying houses, extending beyond the quiet street, appeared the pure, free sky, which sprawled sinking and delving, delving and drowning, beyond the dewy treetops, grasping the jaded blue smoke, onward in the distance, the heartwarming distance that speaks to the heart, that whispers to the soul, glaring over the top of the temple, shining now in the weary rays of a setting sun, over the woods surrounding the cemetery, over the vicissitudes of the

railroad tracks winding endlessly and aimlessly . . . onward, onward. From another world, from a new world, bustles that mystery-distance. The gardens of the houses beyond that frozen street stood shrunken, holding their aging breath, and it seemed that the mere proximity of the sky burdened them, and there, in the sky, where no gaze can reach, one of the freeborn birds bathed in the pale blue waves. Her wings carrying her wherever she wishes, praying, dying, becoming one with the materializing blue, where man's eye can reach it no more . . .

“Gitel! . . .”

Gitel shook. She turned her eyes to the door, where her father stood hunched, pale, gaping. His reddish eyes wandered as his hands fumbled his gray robe.

Her heart pressed, as by a scalding metal claw. It was as though he appeared before her for the very first time.

“Gitel, come . . .” mumbled Rabbi Noah's shattered voice.

“Where? . . . What?” Gitel lowered one of her legs from the windowsill and lingered, embarrassedly.

“Come . . . the meal before the fast . . .” His voice broke, which Gitel did not notice.

“Ah! Soon, father! . . .” She stood up and began arranging her belt.

“No!” hurried Rabbi Noah as he took several steps toward his daughter. His voice was strange. “I am . . . with me . . . with me . . .”

Gitel turned pale. As by sunstroke, her mind ripped by a single, grave notion. The window before her suddenly became a black square in the white wall, and she collapsed backward on the bed with a suffocated moan.

“My child . . .” whispered Rabbi Noah in tears, pacing. “My only child . . . For my sake . . . For me . . . Eve of Kippur . . . My dear child . . . Come, eat some meat! . . .”

In the evening's twilight, two piercing, grief-stricken cries soaked the air of the room.