

Yankev Glatshteyn's "Good Night, World"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/yankev-glatshteyns-good-night-world>.

Introduction

Yankev Glatshteyn (also known as Jacob Glatstein or Jacob Gladstone) (1896–1971) was one of the most famous poets of American Yiddish literature, and this poem became the most often translated, anthologized, and analyzed of his many works of poetry and prose. Glatshteyn came to New York from Lublin, Poland, in 1914 at the age of 18. Within four years he was studying law at New York University, but he was drawn to journalism and poetry, which became his life's work. In 1934, Glatshteyn went back to Lublin to see his dying mother. He witnessed first-hand the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany and Poland after Hitler's rise to power. "Good Night, World," ("A gute nakht, velt") is a compelling response to that trip and to contemporaneous world events.

Cover image: The Jewish Quarter of Lublin, Poland, 1938.

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Modernism, Poetry, Translation, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- For a biography and bibliography of Yankev Glatshteyn, see the *Yiddish leksikon*.
- Yankev Glatshteyn's 1934 visit back to his birthplace, Lublin, Poland, inspired "Good Night, World." See the *YIVO encyclopedia* for a detailed article on the Jewish history of Lublin from 1795 to the present. Janet Hadda's *Yankev Glatshteyn* (Twayne, 1980) contains a biography of the poet as well as literary analyses of his work.
- [Here](#) is an excerpt of an interview with Glatshteyn concerning Yiddish poetry after the Holocaust (in Yiddish with English subtitles).
- The *1938 Projekt* will familiarize students with Jewish history in 1938. The website offers students a news item or archival document from every day of the year as well as a side-by-side timeline of major historical events.
- An analysis of the poem appears in chapter two of Anita Norich's *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust* (Stanford University Press, 2007, 42–73).
- For a comparison and analysis of 12 varying translations of the poem see Anita Norich, *Writing in Tongues: Translating Yiddish in the Twentieth Century* (Washington University Press, 2013), Appendix A: 113–128 (for 12 translations), and 66–96 (for the analysis).

Resources

1: "Poems (in Yiddish and English) with recordings, Yankev Glatshteyn's "Good Night, World" and Kadya Molodovsky's "God of Mercy."

Yankev Glatshteyn's poem, "Good Night, World," was written in Yiddish in 1938, just before the start of World War II. Kadya Molodovsky (sometimes written Kadia Molodowsky), a Yiddish writer and one of Yankev Glatshteyn's peers, wrote "El khanun" ("God of Mercy") in 1944 just before the end of the war, when the full horror of the *khurbn* (Holocaust) and World War II was known.

Suggested Activity: Have students listen first to Yankev Glatshteyn reading "A gute nakht, velt," recorded in 1955. If students can read Yiddish (or the Hebrew alphabet), they can follow along in the text. Students should pay attention to Glatshteyn's tone of



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voice, volume, pacing, and repetition. Ask: What do you hear? What emotions do you hear present in the reading? Now have students read the poem in English. What do you think Glatshteyn is saying about the world to which he is saying good night?

Now have students listen to Kadya Molodovsky's recording of "*El khanun*" ("God of Mercy," recorded in 1969. Again, students should listen carefully to Molodovsky's tone, volume, pacing, and repetition. Ask: What do you hear? What emotions do you hear present in the reading? What similarities do you hear in the two recordings? What differences?

Have students read the poem in English. What do you think Molodovsky is saying about the "chosen people?"

Although students may have no background in Yiddish, it's important to have them encounter the text as a primary source. Even without an understanding of the words, students can glean information from other aural cues.

Sources: Yankev Glatshteyn, "*A gute nakht velt*," *Inzikh* (April 1938). Courtesy of the Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania.

Yankev Glatshteyn, "*Yankev Glatshteyn leyent*," ["Yankev Glatshteyn-Reading"] (1955), audio collection of the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. Digitized by the Yiddish Book Center as part of its Frances Brandt Online Yiddish Audio Library, accessed June 3, 2020, [online](#).

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Barbara Harshav and Benjamin Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 305–307.

Kadya Molodovsky, *Der meylekh dovid aleyh iz geblibn: lider un poemes (Only King David remained: verse and long poems)* (New York: Farlag papirene brik [Paper bridge publishing house], 1946), 3–4. Digitized by the Yiddish Book Center as part of its Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, accessed June 3, 2020, [online](#).

Kadia Molodowsky, "Kadia Molodowsky Reads from Her Work and is Interviewed by Abraham Tabachnik" (1969), audio collection of the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. Digitized by the Yiddish Book Center as part of its Frances Brandt Online Yiddish Audio Library, accessed June 3, 2020, [online](#).

Kadya Molodowsky, trans. Kathryn Hellerstein, "Merciful God," in *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky*, ed. Hellerstein (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 353, 355.

For more background on Kadya Molodovsky and her poem, see Josh Lambert's resource kit "[Kadia Molodowsky's 'God of Mercy.'](#)"

2: Definitions of Modernism, various online sources.

Yankev Glatshteyn is considered to be a modernist writer. There are multiple definitions of literary modernism.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the following three definitions of modernism. Ask them: What do the definitions agree upon? Where do they disagree? What parts of these definitions do you find reflected in Glatshteyn's poem?

Sources: Rebecca Beasley, "Modernism" on <http://writersinspire.org/content/modernism>. Accessed on June 18, 2020. Licensed as Creative Commons BY-NC-SA (2.0 UK).

José Manuel Campos Noguera, "Characteristics of Modernism," from "A Guide to Modernism in Literature," on <https://englishpost.org/literary-movements-modernism/>. Accessed on June 18, 2020.

Brenna Dugan, "What is Modernism," on <https://www.utoledo.edu/library/canaday/guidepages/Modernism2.html>. Accessed on June 18, 2020.

3: Last lines of Jacob Glatshteyn's 'Good Night, World' as translated by various translators, 1939–1993.

Many different translators have translated Yankev Glatshteyn's poem, "Good Night, World." Every translation reflects the choices of the translator and is informed by the cultural moment in which it is published.

Suggested Activities: Have students read each of the different translations of the last line of the poem out loud. What differences

do you notice in word choice and meaning? What similarities do you notice? How is your understanding of the poem affected by these similarities and differences?

One of the translators, Spiegel, chose to add an extra line that doesn't appear in the Yiddish. How does this extra line affect your understanding of the poem?

Sources: Anita Norich, "Becoming American- Yiddish in the Golden Land" (presentation, Stroum Lectures, University of Washington, 2006), [YouTube](#), 17:48.

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Back to the Ghetto," trans. Joseph Leftwich, *The Golden Peacock* (London: Robert Anscombe and Co., 1939).

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Moshe Spiegel, *Chicago Jewish Forum: A National Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1967).

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Ruth Whitman, *Delos: A Journal on and of Translation* 2 (1968).

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Marie Syrkin, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969).

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Etta Blum, *Jacob Glatstein: Poems* (Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz Publishing House, 1970).

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Barbara Harshav and Benjamin Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Richard Fein, *Selected Poems of Yankev Glatshteyn* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987).

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Barnett Zumoff, *I Keep Recalling* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1993).

4: Poem, "Back to the Ghetto," Joseph Leftwich's translation of Yankev Glatshteyn's "Good Night, World," 1939.

Joseph Leftwich, the first translator of "Good Night, World," made a number of choices that make his translation different from both the Yiddish source text and from other translations.

Suggested Activities: Have students begin by looking at the title Leftwich gave his translation. Why might he have chosen this title for the work, even though it is not a direct translation of Glatshteyn's title? What does this title signal to the reader? Then have students read through Leftwich's translation and the Harshavs' translation (in resource 1 of this kit). What differences do they notice in word choice and syntax? What does each translation offer?

Leftwich chose to leave out the lines in which Glatshteyn calls our attention to Germans, Poles, and Amalekites. (According to the Hebrew bible, the Amalekites were early enemies of the Jews.) Why do you think he left out these lines? How do the Harshavs name these enemies? What is the effect of that naming?

Sources: Yankev Glatshteyn, "Back to the Ghetto," trans. Joseph Leftwich, *The Golden Peacock* (London: Robert Anscombe and Co., 1939), 332–333.

Editor's note: We have not been able to make contact with the rights holders for Joseph Leftwich's translation. Any information about the current copyright holder for this material would be welcome and appreciated.

5: Excerpt, "In zikh" Manifesto, 1919.

Glatshteyn was a proponent of *Inzikhism* (Introspectivism) and, together with Aaron Glanz-Leyeles and N. B. Minkoff, he founded the journal *In zikh* (In the self) in 1920. "Good Night, World" appeared on the front page of that journal in April 1938. As its name implies, *Inzikhism* maintained that the poet's subject was "the wide world as it is reflected in the poet." The focus for the Introspectivists was on the self, their own psyche, and the associations evoked within them. They insisted that they were not bound by rhyme or regular meter.

When "Good Night, World" was published, some Yiddish critics wrote that Glatshteyn had turned away from the principles of *Inzikh*

and literary modernism and adopted a more nationalist tone and theme, urging a return to the bounds of tradition because of the European threat to the Jewish people. Indeed, the poem may be considered one of the earliest responses to the looming destruction, written before the ghettos and concentration camps could have been imagined. It could be seen as heralding the end of the Enlightenment's promise that Jews would be accepted as equal citizens of the countries in which they lived. Although the poem seems to reject the wide world and embrace the more circumscribed Jewish world, it also suggests that such a rejection is impossible for the modern person and the modernist poet. Glatshteyn had both a secular and religious education, but he did not come from a ghetto or "the humpbacked Jewish life" to which the poem points. He had left the world of kerosene, crooked alleys, Talmudic study, and rabbinic law that are invoked in this poem.

Suggested Activity: Read the excerpts from "The Introspectivist Manifesto" (1919). What do you think it means to say that "the human psyche" is an awesome labyrinth? To what extent does Glatshteyn's poem give expression to that labyrinth? What connections do you see between Glatshteyn's poem and the "age of the big metropolis?"

Another activity you can do with students: Yiddish writers were famous for writing literary manifestos. They were influenced by world literatures and, in particular, by historical events. Write your own manifesto for the present times. What do you think literature should do and how should it do it? How important do you think literature is in a time of crisis? Why?

n.b. There is another activity concerning Introspectivism in Barbara Mann's [Teach Great Jewish Books resource kit](#) on Anna Margolin's poem "*Ik bin geven a mol a yingling*."

Source: Jacob Glatshteyn, A. Leyeles, and N. Minkov, "Introspectivism," trans. Anita Norich, appendix to *American Yiddish Poetry*, eds. Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 774–775.

6: Translations of Glatshteyn's "Good Night, World," by translators who did multiple translations.

Ruth Whitman, Marie Syrkin, and Etta Blum each published two versions of the translated poem.

Suggested Activities: Split the class into three groups and assign each group one of the translators. Have students read both of the translations by their translator out loud, paying close attention to differences between the two. Consider the significance of the changes they made. What, if any, difference do these changes make to your understanding of the poem? Why might the translator have made these choices when revisiting their translation? Why might a translator choose to translate a poem twice? Have each group report their findings back to the whole class.

Sources: Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Ruth Whitman, *Delos: A Journal on and of Translation* 2 (1968): 118–121.

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. by Ruth Whitman, *The Selected Poems of Jacob Glatstein* (New York: October House, 1972), 59–60.

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Marie Syrkin, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), 333–335.

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Marie Syrkin, reprinted with emendations in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, edited by David Roskies (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 374–75.

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Etta Blum, *Jacob Glatstein: Poems* (Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz Publishing House, 1970), 48–49.

Yankev Glatshteyn, "Good Night, World," trans. Etta Blum, *World Jewry* 14 (1971): 18.

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