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by

Hyman Edelstein.

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The RYERSON
POETRY
CHAP-BOOKS



Spirit of Israel

By

HYMAN EDELSTEIN



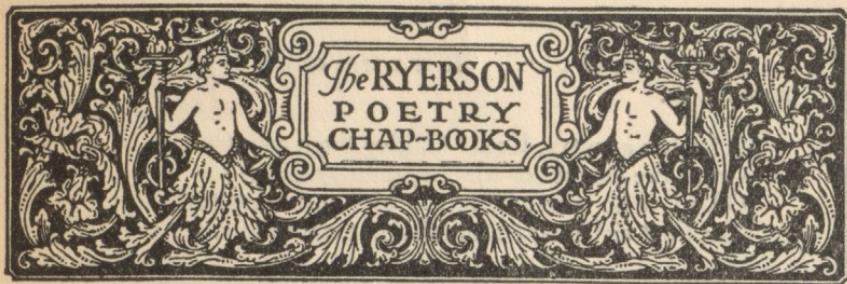
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BORN in Dublin, Ireland, Hyman Edelstein was educated at the famous Dublin High School and at Dublin University, of which he is a First Rank Classical Honourman and Prizeman. He was First-in-all-Ireland Classical Exhibitioner. He came to Canada in 1912 and settled in Montreal where he has been editor of English-Jewish journals. He has contributed to Jewish periodicals in Canada and the United States and is the author of a number of books including *From Judean Vineyards* and *Canadian Lyrics*. His only children, two sons, are on active service with the R.C.C.S.



Part One

SPIRIT OF ISRAEL

"... who has fought and bled on all the battlefields of thought."—Heine.

I

A FIRE-SHOD NOON in August . . . in New York
Amid the tenement-inferno . . . slow,
A Dreamer strayed, where dreams die ere the birth.
The splay-mouthed Sun spewed brimstone on his head;
Whitebeard and hag wide-gaped on balconies;
Babes, mothers, sprawled on grills of fire-escapes;
Youth filed through those Gehennom-wracked ravines
Burnt-offering for the factory-Moloch's maw.
No tree with liquid, sweet cascade of leaves,
Nor green water of grass; no sea-cool wave
Of wind relieved that desert . . . but not these—
Not these the Poet's thirst and hunger had eased—
The white thirst and black hunger of his soul . . .
A dearth far vaster his Sahara made . . .

Voice from little Synagogue of Memory:

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures . . . He leadeth me beside the still waters."

Parched everything and everyone . . .

Voice from little Synagogue of Memory:

"Etz chaim hi . . ." "It is a tree of life to all that walk therein . . ."

"O for the country, God! O, give them country!
Grant fire-escapes of winding country-lanes—
O Lord Who lovest Country—give them respite!"
The Poet sighed and stumbled in tears away . . .

That morn he had spied, his head bent from the glare,
A cranny, faint, almost invisible,
In a gaunt skyscraper's base . . . a lurking furrow
Where God was making country . . .

Voice from little Synagogue of Memory:

"Kol kore . . . Bamidbar panu derekh . . ." "In the wilderness make ye a highway for the Lord! In the desert a pathway for our God!"

. . . and the Poet
Remembering, praised the Lord, and went his way . . .

II

"East is east, and West is west"—
But here the twain forever meet
Where Broadway cleaves through street and street—
East to West, and West to East . . .

Children of Israel,
Everywhere—anywhere—
Everything—anything—
Deborah hags,
Shulamiths in rags,
Coral-lipped odalisques
Transported from Sharon
To these slum seraglios,
Their tinsel-wares bawling
'Mid bargain-sharp brawling
Of market embroglios . . .
While in lofty office,
In shop, exchange,
Brokers, big-businessmen,
Real-estate dealers,
With their stocks and stones;

Garment manufacturers
Clothing the outside
Man and woman,
And a million other
“Great Men of Israel”
Hew their Tablets of Gold—
Their Book and their Law—
Eternally Aaron
Forging the Golden Calf . . .
Eternally Moses
Grinding it to powder . . .

Voice from little Synagogue of Memory:

“Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters . . .
and he that hath no money, come, buy and eat! Yea, come, buy
Wine and Milk without money and without price!”

III

“*And let there be but one Righteous.*”—Bible.

The drooped sun glared one monstrous living coal,
And all around the fires of Sodom blazed . . .
The skyscrapers, lancing the higher air,
Shot up like spears of flame into the void—
With a prophetic glow the City burned.

Of a sudden I beheld him,
In a saving moment I espied him:
Out of the blurred dusk of a doorway
In a tenement basement,
As from some dark cavern of Horeb,
Shining with white beard and cherub eyes—
Old Israel's eyes, those honest eyes,
That looked straight into God's—
Like Moses' unveiled face from the midst of the thick cloud;
And under his arm a Book, hugged hard to his heart,
And he walked anciently, on his staff bending heavily . . .

* * * *

And the mountains of tenements were suddenly black with the
smoke of Sinai—
Yea, the Holy Mountains of tenements thundered and lightened
and quaked . . .

IV

**Ημος δ ηριγένεια φάνη ρ'οδοδάκτυλος ήώς
· · · ίνα · · φώς φέροι · · βροτοίσιν.*

Voice from little Synagogue of Memory:

"And it was Evening and it was Morning—One Day."

And ruddy glowed the Poet's cheek in that Sunset-Sunrise,
And the waste alleys were as a fresh country new-furrowed,
And the Lord God walked in the garden in the cool of the Day.

Notes: "Kol kore . . . Bamidbar panu derekh": "The voice of someone crying:—"In the wilderness open a way for the Lord, in the desert a highway for our God." "Not—"A voice crying in the wilderness" (usual version). Hebrew parallelism and construction of the passage require the rendering given in the poem—which, indeed, is the same as that in the Bible translation published by the Jewish Publication Society of America.

The poem was begun in New York in 1932: I went back to it recently, and believe the completed work truly depicts the frightful material and spiritual poverty of the masses of American Israel—redeemed only by the vision of the Old Hebrew *with the Book*.—H. E.

Part Two

THE BOOK OF THE DEAD —AND THE LIVING

THE GHETTO'S COMMENTARY ON EGYPT



"*Erev Sabbath*"—Friday Night. A University Student in the Ancient Classics and Egyptology visits the Ghetto.

LIGHT

ON Sabbath eve the candles shine from quiet Ghetto alleys,
Lit by old Hebrew mothers when they've veiled the Sabbath
"challies"¹

Blessing, they lit them.—Lo, the Ghetto's oriflamme unfurled!
O little Ghetto Sabbath candles lighting all the world!

¹ *Challies:* Loaves specially baked for Sabbath.

It is peaceful tonight
In the pale little Ghetto lanes.
The blizzard-rolled snow
Folds itself like a Talith¹ about the hovels
In the blue-white moonlight;
Or huddles in hunches at corners,
Like shuddering little Jews,
Hump-backed Jews blessing the moon;
Or prostrate on the roads with Jewish meekness
After a pogrom.

Deserted, silent,
These ancient alleys blanch in the moon:
These phantom homes of Goshen
Nestle placidly
Under the cold eye of Isis;—
Anubis hath never embalmed so well
As is this mummy-race of Ur.
Lo, yonder House of Prayer—
Synagogue-Sarcophagus
Of Rameses!
From its shrunken little portico
The Sphinx stares
With a pallid wonder . . .

[*The Student stops by side door of Synagogue.*]

Beholding a light below
This Prayerhouse shawled in snow,
A Student of Egypt's lore
Knocked boldly on the door . . .
He gloats on rolls of papyrus,
And names from Menes to Cyrus;
Sees Karnaks in every mound,
And Niles in rain-troughed ground,
And grubs and rakes for scraps
Of the Book of the Dead perhaps,
And for graphic relics hidden
In hoar Antiquity's midden . . .

[*He opens outer and inner doors.*]

Into Reb Moissel's cave-like cell
He stamps—Reb Moissel knows him well—
For isn't he the Rebbeh's pet-grandson
Who many scholarships hath won?

¹Talith: Praying-shawl.

Reb Moissel greets him with "Ach—Ach!"
Then in the yellow candle-light
The old Talmudic troglodyte
Returns to his chanting from "T'nach¹."

Reb Moissel is reading from Exodus tonight,
The Book in Hebrew called "Sh'moth"—
Meaning "Names"—for thus it starts:
"These are the *names* of the Children of Israel . . ."
("*Eleh sh'moth b'nai Israel . . .*")
And over the name of each Hebrew Chieftain
Reb Moissel fondly lingers,
And lovingly ekes the "Nigun²" . . .

Suddenly his voice moves faster,
And he gabbles hurrying with slurring, muttering breath:
"And they built Store-cities, Pi-Tum and Rameses"
("*Eth Pithom v'eth Ra'amse*s") . . .

Rameses!—I barely caught it—
Rameses the Great! The Mighty Pharaoh!
Who reigned over Egypt 3,000—or 4,000—years ago . . .
The glorious, historical Rameses
The Egyptologist's awe . . .
A NAME to conjure with in antique lore
(As the Scholars say);
A name gibberishly grunted in a Ghetto hovel
By Melamed³ Moissel who sold potatoes
To stumping old Jews who ate "Kosher⁴,"
Whose fathers under the whip built Store-cities—
"Eth Pithom v'eth Ra'amses" . . .

Wherefore, O Reb Moissel,
Dost hurry, blurring and slurring over the NAME?
Is He not in "Sh'moth"?—one of the "Names"?'
It is a famous name, this Rameses.
It should be in a reverent cartouche
Among thy catalogue of tribal sheiks.
He fought great wars—HE—RAMESSES THE GREAT.
Hast no regard for History, O Reb Moissel?

¹ *T'nach*: A mnemonic formed from initial letters of Torah (Law), Nebiim (Prophets), Ch'tubim (Scriptures).

² *Nigun*: Tune.

³ *Melamed*: Hebrew teacher.

⁴ *Kosher*: Ritually clean (food).

Verily, thou shouldst shout his name aloud.
In sooth, thy race should be exceeding proud
That it lived face to face with RAMESES!
Nor shall I mention Shishak (or Sesonchis)
And Pharaoh So and Hophrah and Necho,
All printed in the Hebrew in "T'nach"—
But Rameses! Ah, Reb Moissel—Rameses!

Then, as if hearing my thoughts, Reb Moissel turned in a fury,
With blazing eyes and cheeks, half-rising, as threatening
vengeance:
And lifting high his voice, still chanting the words of the
Scripture,
Shouted—drawing the pointed nail of his shaggy finger
Across the page like a quill deep underscoring the passage—

"AND THEY WERE BRUTISH DICTATORS
"AND TOTAL OPPRESSORS OF THE PEOPLE" . . .

Thus Reb Moissel answered . . .
Scowling, as if wroth with me;
And I saw his clenched hands . . .
And I knew that he knew only "Sh'moth B'nai Israel"—
Only the "Names of the Children of Israel,"
Of oppressed and martyred people . . .

* * * * *

I am among the Temples and Palaces and massive ruins of
Egypt . . .
And I see the slaves and the taskmasters,
The bricks without straw,
And Miriam and the timbrels in delirium of triumph,
The Lawgiver and the Tables of the Law
Hewn from Rock . . . THE ROCK . . .

[Enters shop and home of a "progressive" worker.]

THE SHOEMAKER

He pounds the leather on the last,
And chants a Yiddish "liedel"¹,
His son upstairs is learning law,
And playing on the fiddle:

¹ Liedel: Folk-song.

His daughter heeds nor violin,
Nor thud of driven mallet,
She's busy at her mirror-easel
And her bureau-palette . . .

* * * *

The colossi of Gizeh loom in yon Mountain
In the moon-twilight
Aghast with the horror of Amen-Ra . . .

[Comes to busy tramway intersection near Mount Royal.]

THE CROSS ON THE HILL

Beside his news-stand on the curb
Where the wild crowds tear past,
Or flee for the tram-cars homeward,
An old Jew shivers against a pole
That points above him with top be-crossed . . .
The snow is hard and cold under his feet.
His small son, between blowings of his ungloved hands,
Serves the papers, and clutches the pennies,
And over all
High from the Hill shines white the glittering Cross . . .

The groaning tram-cars speed their burdens home,
And now but straggling passers pick a paper or two . . .
A bitter wind now sweeps from the hill,
And blows a frozen Jew against a pole
As if impaled . . .

* * * *

Old Reb Moissel and his hundred-thousand-year-old Hebrews
Serenely slumber
In this Sepulchre of all Pharaohs . . .

Calm sleeps the Ghetto tonight . . .

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