

LITERARY ETERNITY AND SHALOM ASZ

*translated from the Yiddish by Murray
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57 years – from the year 1900, when he first appeared in literature, to the year 1957, when his earthly form was extinguished – there towered in Yiddish literature, and also in the literature of Jews in several world languages, and to a considerable extent in world literature, the majestic figure of a writer of the greatest stature – and his name was Shalom Asz. His seventh *yahrtzeit* is approaching – at age 77 he left the world – and it is appropriate to measure against that tower still a higher tower – the tower of eternity, of literary eternity. To address and to ponder deeply. Ponder with tenderness, without any side distractions or biases on the theme: Shalom Asz and literary eternity.

A few years after Shalom Asz's death, the well-known Hebrew-Yiddish prose-writer, Y. D. Berkovitz¹, in

¹ TN: Yitzhak Dov Berkovitz (16 October 1885, Slutsk, Russia – 29 March 1967, Tel Aviv).

the course of an interview, expressed himself as follows about Shalom Asz: As long as he lived his romances, novels and plays lived with him; when he died, his works died with him.

Clearly, by no means can the right be questioned of such a literary authority as Berkovitz to express freely and openly his opinion about such a figure in literature as Shalom Asz. Sharp as the opinion is, by all means its daring must be respected.

But between respecting a right to an opinion and accepting it as past question is a long journey. In such a long journey it may happen that one arrives in the antipodes, in a completely opposite opinion, that as long as Shalom Asz lived, his works lived with him in the present, but now that he is gone into eternity, his works are there with him – truly in the eternity of Yiddish literature and also – in a higher degree – in world literature. Naturally, the quantity of the work of a writer of a specific people is always greater in the eternity of his own folk-literature than in world literature.

Let us first of all raise a question: What makes a writer eternal?

He is eternal in that he is eternally interesting, has always something to say, is always human.

The great writer, who remains eternal in the literature of his people, must to a significant extent take up the problems of his people's roots. He must not be isolated. Not a light assignment for any writer foreign to the people written about; for the writer of the world Jewish people, it's a really, really, a heavy challenge.

Now let us measure on Shalom Asz all the obligatory qualities of a writer who stays in literary eternity.

Language

It must be admitted that Shalom Asz is not especially careful with language. His vocabulary is naturally folkish, rich in color and rich in sound. From the standpoint of grammar, however, his language is uncertain, irregular, loose. This is true. But Shalom Asz created his own style, a romantic, poetic Shalom Asz-style. Language can be corrected, improved, polished, sharpened. Style cannot be made by others' hands. So, it is debatable what matters to Shalom Asz's literary eternity.

Therefore however – in relation to the other conditions of eternity – Shalom Asz is a mighty giant.

He created a gallery of characters – sometimes based on history and sometimes on contemporary life. Beginning with Moshe Rabeinu and finishing with Reb Yechiel and Itshe Meir² the Warsaw martyr in the days of the third catastrophe³. If we had a normal literature, someone might undertake to create a lexicon of Shalom-

Asz-characters in the forty volumes of his stories, novels and dramas. Yes, he was a mighty giant in that region.

And just as he – Shalom Asz – energetically lived through all that he wrote, so also the attentive reader lives through it. He is drawn into the march of events – he suffers and is happy, he is uplifted and he learns. He is fascinated. He is drawn in. And the experience with his works is an indication that the fascination will not weaken with the passing of the years.

Many Jewish writers have, with and in their works, immortalized the Jewish shtetl-civilization, which has played such a great role in the history of the Jewish people. Shalom Asz was the first to crown just that civilization with beauty. In his love – for like no other Jewish writer he was able to love – he saw the shtetl in such a light as no one before him.

Shalom Asz belongs to Jewish literary eternity and Jewish literary eternity belongs to him. He is, he is, he is – three times we say, with conviction – the fourth pillar to the three – Mendelev⁴, Perec⁵, Shalom Aleichem⁶ – that uphold the dome over the holy of holies of Yiddish literature.

It is worthwhile to discuss the question, and even to debate it, and even sharply, pro and con. By all accounts we do not have many like Shalom Asz in Yiddish literature.

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² TN: see article "Yitgadal v'Yitkadash", on page 322.

³ TN: probably a reference to the two destructions of the Temples and the Holocaust.

⁴ TN: Shalom Jankev Abramovich, aka Mendelev Mocher Sforim [Hebrew, "Mendelev the bookseller"] (2 January 1836, Kopyl – 8 December 1917, Odessa).

⁵ TN: Yitzhak Leib Perec, (18 May 1852, Zamość – 3 April 1915, Warsaw).

⁶ TN: Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich (2 March 1859, Pereiaslav, Russia – 13 May 1916, New York).