

Haim Nahman Bialik's "In the City of Slaughter"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/haim-nahman-bialiks-city-slaughter>.

Introduction

"In the City of Slaughter," written in 1903 in what was then the Russian Empire, is the single most influential Hebrew poem—perhaps the single most influential Jewish literary text—of the twentieth century. It is commonly understood to have had an outsized and lasting effect on how people in the once vast communities of East European Jewry, and later in the new Jewish community of Palestine and the State of Israel, understood their collective political situation and what they ought to do about it, the nature of Diaspora and the claims of Zionism, and the political and moral wages of powerlessness. American readers might compare "In the City of Slaughter" to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or indeed Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the sense that their searing moral and political claims about burning political problems had an immediate and lasting impact.

"In the City of Slaughter" is Haim Nahman Bialik's poem about the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, a terrible ethnic riot during which the large Jewish community of this small city in the Russian Empire was attacked over the course of three days by crowds of their Gentile neighbors. Although popular images of the life of Russia's Jews, who numbered nearly six million at the turn of the twentieth century, sometimes treat such anti-Jewish violence as routine, in fact there had been nothing like the Kishinev pogrom before it happened. At the time, Bialik was a young and rising star in the burgeoning world of modern Hebrew literature. In the immediate aftermath of the pogrom, Bialik and his associates spent several weeks in Kishinev taking copious, careful, and sympathetic testimonies from eyewitnesses, from terribly wounded survivors of violence and rape, and from the bereaved. This poem was one of Bialik's responses to the horrors he learned about through this work.

(Many thanks to Sadie Gold-Shapiro for their editorial work on this resource kit.)

Cover image: Abel Pann's *The Day after the Pogrom: A Courtyard with Ruins and a Bereaved Family*, 1903.

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Eastern Europe, Hebrew, Poetry, Social Commentary, Translation

Reading and Background

- The entire text in Hebrew is available [online](#).
- For an excellent and relatively short English-language introduction to Bialik's poetry and its contexts see the introduction to *Songs from Bialik*, ed. Atar Hadari, by the eminent Hebrew literary critic and historian Dan Miron; for a shorter biographical article on Bialik, see [YIVO's Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe entry](#).
- The YIVO Encyclopedia also has an excellent [overview of the history of pogroms](#), including the Kishinev Pogrom. Further background on the Kishinev Pogrom that spurred the poem and a concise, lucid account of the larger context of Russian Jewish history can be found in Steven J. Zipperstein's, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History*, which includes important perspectives on Bialik and the genesis of "In the City of Slaughter." An excerpt from this book is available [online here](#).
- Much of the key critical work on "In the City of Slaughter" is available only in Hebrew, but another classic analysis in English is found in Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, chapter 4. Mintz's book also contextualizes Bialik's poem in the many other Hebrew literary texts of the 1881–1906 era that addressed and represented anti-Jewish violence, and illuminates how Bialik's poem can be seen as a critique of those other more martyrological texts.

Resources



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1: Excerpts from two translations of “The City of Slaughter”/ “City of the Killings.”

The first of these translations, made decades ago by the Canadian Jewish author A. M. Klein, is widely regarded as having “succeeded in conveying,” as Alan Mintz puts it, “Bialik’s juxtaposition of a high biblical diction with restraint and austerity in description.” However, as attentive readers at the time and since have noted, one of the things that distinguishes “In the City of Slaughter” is its mixture, as the critic Dan Miron puts it, of “the loftiness of the Biblical-prophetic tone with the tawdriness of sensationalist news-reportage,” and the latter may not come across fully in Klein’s translation. The second, more recent translation, by the contemporary translator Atar Hadari, brings Bialik’s language much closer to contemporary vernacular English and may do more to help English readers capture some of the shifts in tone between the high Biblical register and the low one—shifts that Bialik evidently meant for readers to hear.

NB: Though A. M. Klein’s translation of the poem is titled “The City of Slaughter,” the poem will be referred to throughout this resource kit by its more commonly used name, “In the City of Slaughter.”

Suggested Activities: Read the title and first line of the poem as rendered by the two different translators. What differences do you notice in terms of word choice? What effect does using a more archaic form of the second person (“thy/thine”) have on the poem in Klein’s translation? Does “town of killings” create a different image than “city of slaughter”? What similarities do you notice between the two translations? Do you think these translations are targeting the same audience? Why or why not?

Next, take a look at an excerpt from the end of both translations. What differences do you notice in punctuation? How do you think these differences affect the tone of the piece? What feeling does the last line of each excerpt leave you with?

Sources: H. N. Bialik, “The City of Slaughter,” trans. A. M. Klein, *Complete Poetic Works of Hayyim Nahman Bialik*, ed. Israel Efros (New York: Histadruth Ivrit of America, 1948): 129–43 (Vol. I).

H. N. Bialik, “City of the Killings” in Atar Hadari, *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of Hayim Nahman Bialik*, ed. Atar Hadari (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 2000), 1–9.

2: Biblical excerpts, book of Lamentations 1:7–11 and 3:1–20.

Bialik’s poem was in dialogue with the Biblical book of Lamentations, a series of painful laments about the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah and of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Lamentations describes with terrible detail the horrific forms of violence directed against the Judeans and the collateral suffering that goes with conquest and subjugation, and also gives special attention to the feeling of shame it ascribes to Judeans in the face of their conquered status and suffering.

Suggested Activities: Read the two passages from Lamentations referenced in “In the City of Slaughter.” Why do you think Bialik chose these passages to highlight? Students might consider: what is the place of shame in “In the City of Slaughter”? Who is experiencing shame in the passages from Lamentations? What parallels can you draw between the city of Jerusalem in the first passage from Lamentations and the plight of Jewish women in “In the City of Slaughter”? What parallels can you draw between experiences of the unknown (male) speaker in the second passage from Lamentations and the reactions of Jewish men in “In the City of Slaughter?”

Sources: Lamentations 1:7–11 and 3:1–20, trans. Jewish Publication Society, 1985. Source sheet compiled by Sadie Gold-Shapiro using sefaria.org, 2019.

3: Excerpts from letters: Yosef Klausner, 1903, and S. Y. Abramovitsh, c. 1904, respond to “In the City of Slaughter.”

Although the Jewish God is a central character in “In the City of Slaughter” and although the poem certainly assumes an impious attitude toward God that some readers may find surprising, Bialik’s readers at the time recognized immediately that an indictment of God was *not* the main point of the poem. Nor was the poem primarily focused on indicting the perpetrators of the pogrom. Instead, much to the dismay of some readers, the primary target of the poem’s anger seems to be the Jewish victims of the pogrom. Here are excerpts from two well-known writers and intellectuals, each of whom responded to the poem immediately after its publication and particularly to the blame it places on Jews for their own suffering.

The first response is by Zionist literary critic Yosef Klausner and the second is by eminent Hebrew-Yiddish novelist S. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher Sforim).

Suggested Activities: Read these two reactions to “In the City of Slaughter.” What did these writers find compelling or troubling about the poem? How did their reactions differ and in what ways did they overlap? Abramovitsh’s anger seems to center on Bialik’s treatment of the pogrom victims. How does Bialik describe the victims and their behavior (and how does he relate to various kinds of victims: men as opposed to women, for instance)? Bialik seems especially concerned with Jewish masculinity, with the action or inaction and weakness of Jewish men. What are we to make of this? How does gender operate in his nightmarish portrayal of the pogrom and its aftermath?

Sources: Yosef Klausner, letter to Hayyim Nachman Bialik, in *Shirat H. N. Bialik: Antologiah, mivhar divre-pesher, ha’arakhot, masot, divre-liyvui ve-zikaron al kol shire Bialik*, ed. Haim Orlan, (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1971), 228 (trans. Kenneth Moss).

S. Y. Abramovitsh, as reported by Yitshak Dov Berkovitsh, cited in Hanan Hever, “Karbanot ha-tzionut” in Mikhael Gluzman, et. al., eds. *Ba-ir ha-haregah: Bikur meuhar* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005), 40 (trans. Kenneth Moss).

4: Poem and song, Simon Frug’s “Have Pity,” 1906.

When we place Bialik’s text in the context of other poetic reactions to the Kishinev Pogrom, we begin to see that his real target was not the victims themselves but the way that some Jewish leaders and intellectuals had taken to writing about Jewish suffering as though there was something noble about it. Bialik was attacking a martyrdom ideal that made a virtue out of suffering rather than making efforts to relieve it. Take a look at another poetic response to the Kishinev pogrom by the then-famous Russian- and Yiddish-language poet Simon Frug. This Yiddish poem, called “*Hot rakhmones*” or “Have Pity,” was published on the front page of one Yiddish-language daily newspaper, the Petersburg *Fraynd*, soon after the pogrom, and it quickly became famous. By the time Bialik wrote “In the City of Slaughter,” “Have Pity” had been set to music and become widely known.

Suggested Activities: Compare Bialik’s treatment of the discourse of the victims in the aftermath of the pogrom to that of Frug. To whom has Frug addressed his poem? What do you think Frug hopes readers will do after encountering his piece? Have students think about more recent instances of violence and suffering. Can they think of any artistic responses to such events? If so, ask them to analyze those responses, asking the same questions they’ve asked about Frug and Bialik’s poems.

Sources: Nathan L. Spector and Samuel Frug. *Hot rachmunes, der pogrom in Russland In Remembrance of the Heroes, Self Defenders in Russia*. Spector, Getter & Co., New York, 1906, 1–3. Accessed at <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihms.200154952/>.

5: Non-Zionist and Zionist responses to “In the City of Slaughter.”

Bialik’s poem had a huge impact on Jews across the political spectrum. For young Zionist Jews of Bialik’s generation and of succeeding generations, “In the City of Slaughter” was an enlivening call to arms, a motivation to organize self-defense and to prepare for future attacks. But many non- or indeed anti-Zionist figures, especially Jewish socialists, have also cherished the poem; revolutionaries recognized the power of the text despite Bialik’s open skepticism and hostility toward socialism. In the first excerpt, Moisei Olgin (1878–1939), a Bundist (Jewish diasporist-socialist) activist, and later Communist leader, attests to the significance the poem had for him and defends its legitimacy for socialist readers. In the second excerpt, Natan Goren, a Hebrew literary critic and Zionist, reflects on the poem’s relationship to the creation of the State of Israel.

Suggested Activity: Read these responses to “In the City of Slaughter” by two literary critics at different ends of the political spectrum. What does each writer value in Bialik’s poem? How do their responses differ?

Have students think of other texts that are appreciated across a wide spectrum of political beliefs. How might someone’s political affiliation change their understanding of a piece of art? What qualities do these texts possess that allow them to transcend the authors’ particular political affiliations?

Sources: Moisei Olgin, “*Yetsirat ha-mehapekhah*,” repr. in *Shirat H. N. Bialik: Antologiah, mivhar divre-pesher, ha’arakhot, masot, divre-liyvui ve-zikaron al kol shire Bialik*, ed. Haim Orlan, (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1971), 220 (trans. Kenneth Moss).

Natan Goren, “*Le-yovelah shel poemah*,” repr. in *Shirat H. N. Bialik: Antologiah, mivhar divre-pesher, ha’arakhot, masot, divre-liyvui ve-zikaron al kol shire Bialik*, ed. Haim Orlan, (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1971), 226 (trans. Kenneth Moss).

6: Painting, Abel Pann's "The Day after the Pogrom: A Courtyard with Ruins and a Bereaved Family," 1903.

Bialik's 1903 Kishinev poems were not the only efforts by Jewish artists in Russia to say something urgent about the Kishinev pogrom through art. Here we have a 1903 painting about Kishinev by the then up-and-coming Russian Jewish painter Abel Pann (Pan); like Bialik's "In the City of Slaughter," it is set in the aftermath of the pogrom, with careful realist attention to the particular spaces where it took place. (Kishinev was a rapidly developing city at the time, and the events took place in a fairly run-down part of town).

Suggested Activity: Compare Bialik's representation of the pogrom and its aftermath to Pann's; in particular, note how both artists place the family and family relations front and center, but with very different foci and effects. What can you observe about the figures in the painting? What details stand out in the background? Do you think this painting is supposed to be a realistic representation of the pogrom's aftermath? Why or why not?

Source: Abel Pann, *Le-maheret ha-pra'ot: hatser bayit im harisot u-mishpahah yetumah* [*The Day after the Pogrom: A Courtyard with Ruins and a Bereaved Family*], in *The Art of Abel Pann: From Montparnasse to the Land of the Bible*, ed. Yigal Zalmona (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 2003).

Editor's note: We have not been able to make contact with the rights holder for the Abel Pann painting; we would appreciate hearing from anyone who can put us in touch with the rights holder.

7: Song, untitled pogrom lament, c. 1903.

Here we have another song in Yiddish about the pogrom in Kishinev. The song would later be rewritten in response to far larger and even worse waves of pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe that followed in 1905–1906 and again between 1915 and 1920. The revival of the song in response to new episodes of violence suggests that the Kishinev experience and its commemoration in some sense set the template for understanding pogroms in the popular Jewish imagination.

In this recording, taken in the Bronx in 1954, the song is sung by Lifshe Schaechter-Widman.

Suggested Activity: Compare the Bialik poem to the tradition of pogrom-laments that took shape in the Yiddish popular culture that flourished on both sides of the Atlantic. What images do you see in the song? How do these images compare to the ones Bialik highlighted in his work? How does the melody inform your understanding of the piece?

Imagine setting part of "In the City of Slaughter" to music. What sort of melody or accompaniment do you imagine would help an audience to understand the poem?

Source: Itzik Gottesman, "One Song – Three Pogroms," *The Yiddish Song of the Week*, accessed [online](#), September 12, 2019.