

Kadia Molodowsky's "God of Mercy"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/kadia-molodowsky-god-mercy>.

Introduction

Kadia Molodowsky's "God of Mercy" ("El Khanun") is a moving, fascinating, and challenging Yiddish poem written in 1944. It has been translated multiple times and adapted for use in a Hollywood movie. Molodowsky, a leading poet of her generation, lived in Warsaw, where she taught Yiddish and Hebrew from 1921–1935, before settling in New York. The poem was written with full knowledge of the events of the Holocaust, by a writer whose intellectual and cultural development took place in Eastern Europe but who had observed the horrors from a safe remove. This resource kit includes materials that will help teachers tease out the complexities in the poem and the various ways in which it has been received and adapted.

Cover image: Photograph of Kadia Molodowsky by Arnold Chekow, 1970, courtesy of the photographer.

Subjects

Holocaust, Poetry, Tanakh, Women Writers, Translation

Reading and Background:

- A short biography of Molodowsky is available in the *YIVO Encyclopedia*. A selection of her poetry in English translation is available in *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky* (1999), edited and translated by Kathryn Hellerstein.
- Scholarly discussions of this poem and its translations can be found in Anita Norich's *Writing in Tongues: Translating Yiddish in the 20th Century* (pp. 102-07) and Kathryn Hellerstein's *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987* (pp. 324-28). Hellerstein has also written an extremely useful, concise account of the history of the poem's translations, including its use in *Defiance*, in "The Gilgul of a Translation: Kadya Molodowsky's 'Eyl Khanun,'" published in *Yiddish-Modern Jewish Studies* 16:3-4 (2010).
- For information on Yiddish culture in America during the Holocaust, and specifically on what Yiddish writers and readers knew about the genocide, see Anita Norich's *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture During the Holocaust* (2007).

Resources

1: Poem, 1944, and recording, 1969, Kadia Molodowsky "God of Mercy," Yiddish.

The poem, reproduced in full here and declaimed by Molodowsky herself, draws on liturgical and Biblical language and imagery.

Suggested Activity: Play the recording for students so that they can hear how the poem sounds in the original language. Ask them to pay attention to Molodowsky's tone of voice and her intonation. Even without understanding the words, what can they gather about the poem's subject? If students know the Hebrew alphabet, have them read along with the original. Have them do so again while you then read the poem in English.

Sources: Kadia Molodowsky, *Der meylekh dovid aleyh iz geblihn: 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 December 10, 2015, <https://archive.org/details/nybc208413>.

Kadia Molodowsky, "Kadia Molodowsky Reads from Her Work and is Interviewed by Abraham Tabachnik" (1969), audio collection



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of the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. Digitized by the Yiddish Book Center as part of its Frances Brandt Online Yiddish Audio Library, accessed December 10, 2015,

<https://archive.org/details/KadiaMolodowskyReadsFromHerWorkAndIsInterviewedByAbrahamTabachnick>.

2: Translation of Molodowsky's poem, Kathryn Hellerstein, "Merciful God," 1999.

This complete English translation of the poem, one of many available translations, was done by Kathryn Hellerstein, a literary scholar who has written some of the most penetrating studies of Molodowsky's work.

Suggested Activity: Discuss the poem. Some suggested questions: What is Molodowsky saying? Why does she choose this form—is this a prayer? What does it suggest about Molodowsky's faith in God? Is the speaker sincere or ironic in the final stanza?

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

3: Source sheet, "El khanun" in the Hebrew Bible.

The phrase "*El khanun*" appears many times in the Tanakh, first as part of the "thirteen divine attributes" that God teaches Moses in Exodus 34.

Suggested Activity: Ask: Why do these translations render "*khanun*" as "gracious"? What is "graciousness"? Why would Molodowsky use "*khanun*" (gracious) instead of, say, "*rachum*" (merciful)? What does it mean that the translators of the poem chose a different word?

Sources: Exodus 34:6-7, Jonah 4:2, Nehemiah 9:16-17, trans. Jewish Publication Society, 1917. Source sheet compiled by Josh Lambert using sefaria.org, 2015.

4: Translations of the poem's last line, Irving Howe (1969, 1987) and Kathryn Hellerstein (1999).

"*El khanun*" has been translated many times, and the final line, which uses two words with powerful resonances in traditional rabbinic culture, שכונה (*shkhine*) and גאונות (*geoynes*), has been translated in a number of different ways.

Suggested Activity: Read the original and each translation aloud while projecting them on a screen. Ask students to paraphrase each translation and to think about how they differ. How would these different final lines change the meaning of the poem?

Sources: Kadia Molodowsky, trans. Irving Howe, "God of Mercy," in *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, eds. Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), 289-90.

Kadia Molodowsky, trans. Irving Howe, "God of Mercy," in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, eds. Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 331-32.

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

5: Film excerpt, director Edward Zwick's "Defiance," 2008.

This Hollywood movie was based on Nehama Tec's book *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (1993) and fictionalizes the real-life story of Tuvia, Zus, Asael, and Aron Bielski. In this scene, a rabbi eulogizes two partisans using the exact (translated) words of Molodowsky's poem.

Suggested Activity: Discuss: Why do you think the filmmakers chose a poem written at the end of the war, by a poet in America, for a character living through the Holocaust to recite? How do you feel about the poem's being used in this way? (Note that Molodowsky's name does not appear in the credits or in virtually any review of the movie.) Finally, compare the final line of the poem here ("Take back the gift of our holiness. Amen.") to the way it is rendered by Howe and Hellerstein. How does the film's translation differ from the others?

Source: *Defiance*, directed by Edward Zwick (2008; Paramount Home Media Distribution, 2009), DVD.