

**THE GOD OF
VENGEANCE: DRAMA
IN THREE ACTS**

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The God of Vengeance: Drama in Three Acts by Sholem Asch & Isaac Goldberg

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SHOLEM ASCH & ISAAC GOLDBERG

**THE GOD OF
VENGEANCE: DRAMA
IN THREE ACTS**

The God of Vengeance

Drama in Three Acts

By SHOLOM ASH

Authorized Translation from the Yiddish
With Introduction and Notes

by ISAAC GOLDBERG

Preface by Abraham Cahan

Editor of The Jewish Daily Forward
and Author of "The Rise of
David Levinsky"

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Preface

By ABRAHAM CAHAN

Editor of the Jewish Daily Forward and author of "Yekl," "The White Terror and the Red," "The Rise of David Levinsky," etc.

THE birth of Yiddish literature in Russia and the beginning of the great Jewish exodus from that country to America are two effects of one and the same cause. The same anti-semitic crusade that forced the Children of Israel to go beyond the seas in search of a safe home, aroused them to a new sense of their racial self-respect and to an unwonted interest in their native tongue.

Prior to the anti-Jewish riots of 1881 educated Jews were wont to look upon their mother tongue as a jargon beneath the dignity of cultured attention. Yiddish, more especially in its written form, was the language of the untutored. People with modern training spoke and wrote Russian. As for the intellectual class of the Talmudic type, it would carry on its correspondence and, indeed, write its essays, verse and fiction, in the language of Isaiah. One wrote Yiddish to one's mother, for the mothers of those days were not apt to understand anything else. For the rest, the tongue of the Jewish masses was never taken seriously and the very no-

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tion of a literature in "a gibberish that has not even a grammar" would have seemed ludicrous.

Popular stories and songs were written in Yiddish long before the end of the nineteenth century, but, barring certain exceptions, these were intended exclusively for the most ignorant elements of the populace, and were contemptuously described as "servant-maid literature." (As for Yiddish poetry, it was almost wholly confined to the purposes of the wedding bard.) The exceptions here mentioned belong to the sixties and the seventies, when some brilliant attempts were made in the direction of literature in the better sense of the term by S. J. Abramovitch. But Abramovitch's stories were not even regarded as vanguard swallows heralding the approach of Spring. They aroused an amused sort of admiration. Indeed, it required a peculiar independence of mind to read them at all, and while they were greeted with patronizing applause, it was a long time before they found imitators.

All this changed when the whip of legal discrimination and massacres produced the "national awakening" of the educated Jew. Thousands of enlightened men and women then suddenly made the discovery, as it were, that the speech of their childhood was not a jargon, but a real language,—that instead of being a wretched conglomeration of uncouth words and phrases, it was rich in neglected beauty and possessed a homely vigor full of artistic possibilities. A stimulus was given to writing Yiddish "as the Gentiles do their mother tongues." Abramovitch was hailed as "the father of Yiddish

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literature" and his example was followed by a number of new writers, several of whom proved to be men of extraordinary gifts.

The movement bears curious resemblance to that of the present literary renaissance of Ireland.

Some truly marvelous results were soon achieved, the list of writers produced by the new literature including the names of men like Rabinovitch (Sholom Aleikhem) and Peretz, whose tales were crowned with immense popularity.

Sholom Ash belongs to a younger group of Yiddish story-tellers and now that Abramovitch, Rabinovitch and Peretz are in their graves (they have all died during the last two years) he is the most popular living producer of Yiddish fiction.

His narratives and plays are alive with a spirit of poetic realism, with a stronger leaning toward the poetic than toward reality, perhaps, but always throbbing with dramatic force and beauty. Sholom Ash's passion for color and melody manifests itself as much in his rich, ravishing style as in the picturesque images it evokes. The "jargon of servant maids" becomes music in his hands.

His "God of Vengeance," which is his strongest play, is one of the best things he has written in any form. Absorbingly interesting and instinct with human sympathy, it mounts to a natural climax of cataclysmal force and great spiritual beauty.

The theme, while thoroughly original and unique, reflects the artistic traditions of the country in which the author was born and bred. It was a matter of course that the young literature of which he

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is a conspicuous representative should shape itself under the influence of the much older and richer literary treasures of Slavic Russia and Poland. If it was natural for the novel of countries like France, Germany, Norway or Italy to fall under the sway of Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoyevski, Chekhov and Gorki, how much more so was it for a non-Russian fiction produced on Russian soil to seek guidance, directly or indirectly, in the same source.

Human sympathy is the watchword. Pity for and interest in the underdog — the soul of Russian art — became, from the very outset, the underlying principle of the new-born Yiddish art. No human being is so utterly brutalized as to possess not a single spark worthy of the artist's sympathetic, though ruthlessly impartial, attention,— this is the basic rule of Yiddish letters.

Himself a creature of the gutter, Yekel Tchaftchovitch, the central figure of "The God of Vengeance," is stirred by the noblest ambition known to a father in the world of orthodox Judaism. Imbedded in the slime that fills Yekel's soul is a jewel of sparkling beauty. But the very income by which he seeks to secure his daughter's spiritual splendor contains the germs of her loathsome fall and of his own crushing defeat.

The clash between Yekel's revolting career and his paternal idealism, and the catastrophe to which it inevitably leads form one of the strongest and most fascinating situations known to the modern drama.

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I cannot conclude without a word of well-earned praise for the English version of "The God of Vengeance." Dr. Isaac Goldberg's translation is not only a thoroughly correct and felicitous equivalent of the original, but a piece of art in itself.

New York City, April, 1918.