

YIDDISH BOOK CENTER  
2018 Great Jewish Books Book Club Video Conference  
*American Yiddish Poetry* by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav  
with Barbara Harshav  
August 29, 2018  
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Edited by Jessica Parker

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**JESSICA PARKER:** Okay, we're going to get started. Hi, everyone, and welcome to our third video conference of the 2018 Book Club. Thank you for your careful reading, your thoughtful comments, and your insightful perceptions in our Facebook group and via e-mail. I'm so glad that you're all joining us this evening.

I'm Jessica Parker, the coordinator for the Great Jewish Books Book Club. In just a moment, I'm going to introduce our featured guest, "American Yiddish Poetry" editor and translator, Barbara Harshav. But first, I want to tell you about the structure for this evening. All participants will be muted to prevent excessive background noise. Barbara will start with a 15-minute introduction, and then we'll open it up to questions for about 45 minutes. You can ask them questions by typing in the chat box. You can ask her questions, sorry, by typing in the chat box.

To access the chat box, hover over the bottom of your Zoom window. You should see a speech bubble with "chat" written underneath it. Click on that speech bubble to open the chat window. You'll be able to send messages privately to individuals, or to everyone. Please address your questions to everyone, not just the speaker, Barbara. It's helpful for me and the rest of the group to be able to see them.

Barbara will be repeating the questions for our members who will be watching the video recording after the fact, and won't have access to the chat box. I will be posting the video recording to Vimeo and sharing the link with you all as soon as possible. Rest assured that no one's video, other than mine and Barbara's, will be part of the recording. So feel free to have your webcam on. You're not going to be recorded.

In addition, we are offering live captioning for this video conference. If you would like to see the closed captions, hover over the bottom of your Zoom window. You should see an icon that says "CC." To turn them on, click on that "CC" icon. To turn them off, click on the "CC" icon again.

There is a 4- to 5-second lag time with the captions as a result of the software integration and the fact that it's being live captioned. Thank you in advance to our captioner, Heidi!

And if you use the closed captioning, I'm keen to receive your feedback afterwards, so please do call or e-mail me to let me know about your experience. And, if you're having a technical difficulty or issue this evening, please send a private chat message to me at "Jessica Parker – Book Club Admin," or email me at [bookclub@yiddishbookcenter.org](mailto:bookclub@yiddishbookcenter.org). For this evening, please don't call me, as I'm sitting next to Barbara, and that will interfere with the rest of the webinar.

So, without further ado, I would like to introduce Barbara Harshav. Barbara Harshav has been translating for some 30 years from Hebrew, Yiddish, French and German, and has published over 50 volumes of history, poetry, fiction, and essays. She is a past president of ALTA, American Literary Translators Association, and the 2018 recipient of the prestigious PEN/Ralph Mannheim Award for Lifetime Achievement in Translation.

So, if you'll just give me a moment, I will turn on her mic. Thank you very much, everyone.

**BARBARA HARSHAV**: Okay, is it on?

**JESSICA PARKER**: Mm-hmm.

**BARBARA HARSHAV**: Okay, good. Good evening, and thank you for, Jessica, for inviting me. And essentially, I want to talk about the book *American Yiddish Poetry*, this big anthology that we published in 1986, which seems like a long time ago. First, I would like to discuss the -- how the anthology came into being and was produced. There was a character in Tel Aviv who loved Yiddish, grew up in it, and had a lot of money, and wanted to produce some works of Yiddish literature.

He approached Benjamin Harshav to do poetry and so Benjamin agreed, and he decided on an anthology, that is, Benjamin did, that's slightly different from the normal anthology. The normal anthology of poetry gives you a poet and then five poems, and so on. That came in the second volume of this series, *Sing Stranger*, but for the first volume, Benjamin decided that Yiddish literature was not well known in America, and that, first of all, it would be a bilingual edition.

Now, this is kind of dicey, because, first of all, just from a practical perspective, you need to coordinate the two languages, and in this volume, we -- the pages are wider than normal, so that they can both fit on the page.

And this is a problem for the typesetters. We finally got someone who could prepare a volume like that, and so we did it. And the idea that Benjamin came up with here was he wanted only seven poets, seven poets, and many, many poems, sometimes over 100 pages of poems of each of these poets, who were all high-level, and I mean that in literary terms. This is high literature. We tend to think of Yiddish literature as the Sweatshop Poets, and they're great, but this is not what we were looking for.

They all belonged to a group called the *Inzikhists* who were very sophisticated poets who used the language magnificently and who dealt with just about everything. Their idea was that Yiddish poetry should be able to cover every aspect of human life, and so it does. I'll give you some examples later.

And now kind of a personal comment. Benjamin learned, I think -- he knew several languages, and the last one he learned was English. And he picked it up, and, boy, did he pick it up. It was brilliant.

When we met, he was looking for somebody to go over his English, to make comments or edit it. I soon -- he translated about three-fourths of the book by then, and I soon realized that frankly, he didn't need me to do that. His English was perfect. His poetic sense was magnificent, and as for his Yiddish, there's probably nobody left in the world who has a grasp of Yiddish as Benjamin did.

He defined the search for Yiddish poetry as archaeological, and if that's the case, then Benjamin was like finding somebody who lived in the ruins that the archaeologists dug up. He'd grown up in Yiddish, and he knew it really in his bones.

And that's important for translating Yiddish, because translation altogether, I maintain, is ethnography. That is, we don't translate words, or we shouldn't be translating just words. We're conveying a culture in another language, and it's important to know the culture, the depth of that culture.

And he certainly did, and provided me with enough so that I could do it, too.

And I think it's a monumental book, and a monumental undertaking, frankly. It, as I say, this was not poetry for the masses. It's a very high level of literature, and language. These poets used language in a phenomenal way. They were very conscious of various levels of Yiddish, and were able to use it creatively and poetically. And translating this -- well, first of all, another aspect of the translation is that it's a collaborative work.

We translated not only this together, but also a major volume of Yehudah Amichai from Hebrew and Menke Katz from Yiddish and Avrom Sutzkever from Yiddish and the whole work was completely collaborative, we both worked, we sat together, and often I have no idea who translated what. And so it comes out of this sort of, I don't even know how to describe it, but it was two soulmates working on this together.

Translation is a funny business. And that's why I say the dual language thing is dicey, because often you have somebody who knows the original language, who will say, "but that's not what it is." And the point is, in translation, especially of poetry, you often have to deviate a little bit, not too much, but a little bit, from the original to convey the poetry of language, and this is a very -- this is difficult, and let me -- shall I give you some examples of this? Are there any

questions to begin with?

**JESSICA PARKER:** I think give some examples.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** Okay. There's a poem by Jacob Glatshteyn, it's a children's poem, and it was fun to do, because we kept a little bit of it in Yiddish. The name of the poem is "Tirtle-toyben," or "Turtledoves." And this is our English translation [p. 215]:

Impulses of memory:  
Lightning, swift—  
Gleam of the sun on a blade.  
Suddenly:  
*Heder* years and a word,  
Just a word:  
*Tirtle-toyben*.  
Turtledoves.  
And it won't relent,  
With the soft bend of *tir-tle*,  
With the fondling fold.  
*Oh tirtle-toyben*  
*Tirtle-toyben*.  
*Tirtle-tirtle*  
*Tirtle-toyben*.  
*Heder* years, childhood years.  
And it sings.  
And it haunts.  
And it rocks.  
And reminds:  
*Tirtle-toyben*  
*Tirtle-tirtle*  
*Tirtle-toyben*.

And this was a, an attempt to recreate the whole sense of childhood that's in the poem. Normally we wouldn't use original words, but that time, we did.

This is -- there's a poem by Moyshe-Leyb Halpern that we liked, and it's a -- I'm sorry.

But I tell you another problem of translating from Yiddish, is that you have to be very, very careful of using words that have come from Yiddish into English, and in the process, have taken on a kind of humorous connotation that they don't have in Yiddish. So, there's a poem by Leyvik, and it's a very sad poem.

**JESSICA PARKER:** Can you just give the page?

**BARBARA HARSHAV**: Let me find it. It's called "Yiddish Poets." In my book, it's on 741.

**JESSICA PARKER**: Same.

**BARBARA HARSHAV**: Same? Okay. And in it, the poet talks, it's a post-Holocaust poem, and he talks about the fact that the Yiddish poets have lost their readership after the Holocaust, and in the penultimate stanza, he writes [p. 741]:

Sometimes, like frazzled cats, dragging  
Their kittens around, distraught,  
We drag our poems between our teeth  
By the neck through the streets of New York.

I saw one translation of that where the translator, now the word in Hebrew is "shlepn." But that's not "schlep" in English and you have to be very careful. And one translator translated this: "We schlepped our poems between our teeth." Well, that gives it a tone that isn't there and it's not the fault of Yiddish, and it's not the fault of the translator. The problem is that you have to be careful of words that in English -- Yiddish words in English -- that have taken on humorous tones, and that one word destroys the whole tone of this very sad poem.

Another poem that we like a lot is by Moyshe-Leyb Halpern that -- it's called "The End of the Book," and it plays with the -- the Yiddish comic thing of "*shm-*." We'll do it here, too. "Statistics, shmatistics." And in this poem --

**JESSICA PARKER**: 429.

**BARBARA HARSHAV**: Yeah, "The End of the Book," and in Yiddish, he uses that "*shm-*" structure. And also, the sort of -- the affectionate "*-le*." Like, "*in mayn bikhele*." The question was, what are we going to do with this? "*Bikhele, tikhele*," and he says "*shmikhele*," "*tikhele, shmikhele*," "*bikhele, shmikhele*." Well, the question was, what do we do with this in English? And so, I don't know, we fooled around with it and it came out this way.

So I ask my dear wife  
How to finish the affair  
Of my little booky—  
Says she: Let happiness leave on a train  
And wave back with a hanky.  
Says I: Hanky-panky—  
Says she: Booky-shmooky—  
And asks me whether I'd like  
With my coffee a cooky.  
Says I: Cooky-shmooky—  
And tell her to put a case on my pillow  
And not to play hooky.

Says she: Hooky-shmooky.  
And tells me to repair her shoe  
By hook or by crooky.  
Says I: Crooky-shmooky.  
So she jumps up, and points at my head:  
I am bald and spooky.  
Says I:  
Spooky-crooky-hooky-cooky-hanky-panky-booky-shmooky.  
But she cannot say it as fast as I can, as fast as I can:  
Spooky-crooky-hooky-cooky-hanky-panky-booky-shmooky.  
So we laugh together—  
Laugh so nice.  
Till she closes my eyes—  
Closes my eyes.  
And rocks me with a song of rain and light,  
Rain and light,  
That you sign to little children at night,  
Children at night.

I think that captures both the fun in the poem, the rhythm of the poem, and the sweetness of the poem, and these are what you have to know. The other problem translating Yiddish poetry is that a lot of time it depends on rhyme and meter. Rhyme and meter is not that -- oh my goodness, there are a lot of questions here. Rhyme and meter are not that popular in contemporary American poetry, and so -- this is the problem. You have to decide when the poem needs rhyme and meter in translation and when it doesn't. And this is something that I cannot give you any rules because there are no rules for it. You just have to feel it.

Now, shall we look at some of these questions?

“Do you think that even though this is American Yiddish poetry, there's a divide between New World and Old World poems and poets?”

Yeah, I think there is. Part of it is in the language, but also part of it is the topics that they write about. These poets, interestingly enough, they all came to this country, most of them, in their early teens, and they saw an America that Americans didn't see. They saw very interesting things. They were most of them socialists, so they saw injustice. Their poems that they wrote about lynching. Sacco and Vanzetti, you know about Sacco and Vanzetti, was a big topic for them, and there's an awareness of the American landscape that for Americans is not there.

For example, there are poems about the subway, which is something new for them and something that struck them. They wrote about Blacks in America, which again was something new. Didn't exist in Europe. And so, they were very much attuned to these kinds of questions, problems, social events, so yeah, there is a difference between what they wrote about and what their European counterparts did at the same time.

Let's see what else do we have here?

“What is the meaning of, there's the title of the poem on page 517.”

**JESSICA PARKER:** The star.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** The star, yeah, what's that? There was no title to this poem, so we just put a star in.

The other thing that's remarkable about this anthology is that we decided to not illustrate it, but to put in contemporary art that is contemporary to the poets, because the artists were working in a universal language, if you like, of visuals, and frequently, they had the same feeling and the same tone as the poems, and so it was fun to go looking at -- for these artists. Most of them were Jewish, I think almost all of them were Jewish, and to see what they were doing. The sensibilities seemed to be the same.

And talking about Sawyer and -- I can't remember the name. He was a famous sculptor in America. The artists had more -- they had a bigger, I want to say readership, but a bigger audience than the poets did.

By the way, if I don't answer your question fully, please let me know.

Somebody writes: “Moyshe-Leyb Halpern was my favorite.” You know what? Mine too. I love Moyshe-Leyb Halpern. And let me give you one of my favorite poems, it's a sad poem but it's a beautiful poem, I think. It's called “The Clown of Karahamba.”

It's called “Kol-Nidre.”

**JESSICA PARKER:** 467.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** Yeah, the title of the poem is “Kol-Nidre,” which is becoming timely. I think it's just beautiful.

The clown of Karahamba used to crumble  
Pieces of onions into his coffee.  
I am sad—so I tell it to myself  
To the tune of Kol-Nidre in the dark.

How strangely his red eyes blinked  
Over the simple mug of clay;  
With a plain wooden spoon he ate  
The onions in his coffee.

Seven days of mourning, autumn rain in the window  
Cannot remind me of death as much  
As the misery that whined,  
Whined from each sip he took.

I shall go where my fathers have gone—  
Thus spoke his open mouth to the spoon.  
My wife Balaykah is already there,  
I shall go where my fathers have gone.

The pieces of onion in his spoon  
Looked like broken pearls;  
And they were like tobacco-yellowed  
Thin fingers plucking a guitar.

In a dress of seven times seven feet  
Balaykah danced toward her bridegroom.  
Why do you cry, clown of Karahamba,  
It's only my Kol-Nidre tune.

The coffee mug of clay is warm.  
So is my heart that was born blind.  
And the crumbled bits of onion  
Are harsh as my sadness in the dark.

It's a really -- I just love that poem. I think it sort of represents Moyshe-Leyb Halpern beautifully.

When Benjamin was a fellow in North Carolina at the National Institute for the Humanities, and he was working on these poems, and the typist there was typing up the typescript, and she couldn't understand why everything was so sad. And they are. There are many sad poems, because what they saw was sad, what they'd experienced was sad. And they conveyed this so beautifully.

“Why did you choose the poets you did? And is the fact that only one was a woman a comment on the quality of American Yiddish women's poetry?”

No, it wasn't, but it was a comment on the members of this *Inzikhist* group. So that's why there's only one woman poet. There are many of them, and some of us are working on this now, so be patient. They'll come.

What have we got?

I have a question about Leyeles' poem, page 159, “The Madonna in the Subway.” “It's a



beautiful poem. I think about the birth of Jesus, but why did Leyeles write it? Perhaps because he saw a beautiful woman with the face of the Madonna? The verse, 'In Galilee, once upon a time in Galilee,' reminds us of the New Testament in the Bible, but I do not come any further, I would like to know Professor Harshav's explanation."

These were cosmopolitan people. As a matter of fact, even the Israeli poets of the time were very cosmopolitan. They read the New Testament and the imagery was available to them, "The Madonna in the Subway," and that cosmopolitan nature comes through. They weren't steeped in only Jewish. They were aware of the world around them, and aware of its impact and aware of its influence. Leyeles' poem that opens this volume sort of gets that. That's on page -- just read that the other day. It's called "The God of Israel." It's right at the beginning of the book.

**JESSICA PARKER:** Page 77.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** 77? It's a fascinating poem, I think, because it compares the cultural legacy of humanity versus the cultural legacy of the Jewish people.

The God of Israel is not rich.  
I saw the Sistine Chapel,  
Notre-Dame, the Cathedral of Cologne—  
You can feast your eyes on them, you can enjoy.

The God of Israel is stingy.  
He won't fill his museums with statues,  
Paintings, altars, thrones,  
Purple gowns, three-tiered crowns,  
He does not wish to live in the Palais.  
The Jewish museum has a modest display.

A Chanukah-lamp, a curtain, a scroll,  
A spice-box, tefillin, a pointing Hand,  
A menorah, a Torah Crown, tools for circumcision,  
And an old, ancient manuscript.  
And another manuscript and another manuscript,  
Entangled, bound, locked together.  
Letters in love with letters.

Am I doing things?

**JESSICA PARKER:** There we go.

What does the God of Israel ask?  
What does the God of Israel demand?  
The God of Israel is a just demander.

The God of Israel is a strict demander.  
The God of Israel is a stingy demander:  
Search by yourself, research by yourself, suffer yourself—  
For your own and for my honor.

In a gray-gray, once-upon-a-time,  
From a mountain-top into a valley,  
He dropped two handfuls of letters,  
Scattered them over the roads of the earth.  
They sparkled with speech, blazed with sayings,  
And since then—  
For thousands of years we seek them,  
For thousands of years we save them,  
For thousands of years we explain them,  
And there is no solution on earth  
For the letters, the sayings, the words.

Another manuscript, and another manuscript,  
Entangled, bound, locked together—  
Letters in love with letters.

For me it's amazing because the comparison between the rich artistic Christian iconography, versus what we've got. We've got twenty-two letters. And I was reminded of that the other day when I was at the Metropolitan Museum where they have an exhibition of Catholic art and vestments. And they're magnificent. We don't have anything like it.

And, by the way there's a word here that can't be translated, and that's "tefillin." Cause the only translation we've got is "phylacteries," and I have no idea what that is and I don't think anybody does. So, I just leave it "tefillin." That display of wealth and magnificence and beauty, and actually, all I could think of were the poor girls who went blind doing that luscious embroidery which you're not supposed to think about.

We've got these twenty-two letters, and look what they've done with them. A world we created with them. It's amazing. So, I'll take that against all those magnificent garments, vestments, whatever. Three-tiered crowns.

What have we got here? "One of the best parts of the book, and by coincidence we had a copy of Shahn's Alphabet of Creation in my house growing up."

That's interesting. We often use the pamphlet, the Ben Shahn pamphlet, The Alphabet of Creation, in our Passover seder, because it's really such a beautiful explanation of the letters. It's so lovely.

So, let's see.

"I remember thinking as a child that it was somehow spooky." Huh? The Ben Shahn? "I was deeply affected almost haunted by Glatshiteyn's repeated imaginative way of reverse imagery. Examples: 'God sleeps into the dream of my people.'" It's lovely, yes, wonderful. "'Shadow me in, dark me in. Disappear me.'" That's a beautiful poem, 'The Small Night-Music.'" Of course, that refers to Mozart's *"Eine Kleine Nachtmusik."* "I shall dream myself into you, Chopin *"Nacht"*...

You see, these were really broadly cultured people who reached out and included everything.

"Were these sorts of opposite reversal images difficult to translate from the Yiddish?" You betcha. "Any other thoughts about the way Glatshiteyn often tipped reality on its head?"

You know, that's one of the great fun of translating is fooling around with those kinds of things, and coming out with something that I think is very beautiful. As beautiful as the poetry if I can possibly be chutzpadik enough to say that. The images, I think, are fantastic. Yes, they were hard to translate. We worked on them, but that's the real challenge of translation. You know, anybody can translate anything, I suppose, but to do that and get those haunting images, I think, is really exciting.

And part of it is because Jewish languages have that kind of personal message. For example, I was just talking to somebody saying, "Okay," what is it, when you say to somebody, *"Gey gezunterheyt."* It's *"geyt mir gezunterheyt,"* "go, give me your good health," right? "Go, be healthy for me." There's that nice interpersonal back and forth so when you get those images of, "I shall dream myself into you," what a beautiful image.

Part of the thing of translating, too, is you really have to feel this stuff. And it makes you better as a translator, as a person.

"Are there different challenges in different kinds of poems? For example, Glatshiteyn's resistance in the ghetto which is a detailed narrative and the power comes from details and rhythm, and 'Here I have Never Been,' which is an internal grappling with unfathomable grief. Is that clear?"

Are there different challenges? Yeah. Every poem is a challenge. Every poem poses its own challenge, and every poem poses its own solution. And Glatshiteyn's resistance in the ghetto is, I think, is a very interesting poem. All of them are.

But let's see. Oh, somebody says, somehow the speaker keeps getting muted. Am I speaking too softly sometimes?

**JESSICA PARKER:** No, it was an issue of the keyboard.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh. Okay, we fixed that.

The challenges. "First line should be challenges in translating different kinds of poems." Okay, yes.

Yeah, there are -- look, every translation is a challenge. And I have a whole thing about translation. My translations are in fiction and poetry and drama and everything. I like to see a picture, I like a vivid picture, and the whole issue is to translate out of the picture so that I convey the picture.

And that's the thing in the poems, I think. That poem that she mentions, "Here I have Never Been," is -- it's a remarkable poem. He conveys the -- what's happening in the Holocaust, is something that we've never seen before. We don't know what it's -- we've seen pogroms, we've seen ghettos, but we never saw this. And it's that sense of something new and different that he manages to convey. And it's very powerful, I think.

Yeah, "do you think Yiddish is especially hard to translate because it is multilingual? There are German, Slavic, Hebrew and Aramaic elements which a native speaker would immediately understand, but which doesn't come -- which don't come through in translation."

Quite right. It's interesting, because each of those languages has a different weight in Yiddish. I was looking at some Yiddish films a couple years ago, and one of them, or two of them, actually, were almost pure German. It's interesting, because German is considered a higher language.

And I was fascinated by it, because they weren't Yiddish, except the one that was, the one that I saw in the film festival, was Maurice Schwartz's *Tevye* and that was a Yiddish film, but the others were almost pure German. Not very good, by the way, either but that's another story.

It's hard, because to convey those different languages in translation, especially if you're translating into English. Because what do you do with all these various elements? And this is a real problem, and I don't know how to solve it, to tell you the truth. So, I don't even know how to answer the question, but it is difficult.

Any other questions?

Says more. Does that mean that there are more?

**JESSICA PARKER:** Someone asked if you could read the line in Yiddish that begins...

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** Oh, "booky-shmooky-cooky."

**JESSICA PARKER:** Just so they can hear that.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** What page did we say it was on? Forgive my accent.

*Freg ikh bay mayn liber froy,  
Vi azoy tsu farendiken dem roman,*

“Roman,” not “book,” actually, it’s “novel.”

*In mayn bikhele—  
Zogt zi: dos glik zol avek mit der ban,*

And, see, this is all rhyme, and we decided not to do that because it would just be too artificial, so – “roman” and “ban” get to rhyme.

*Un tsurikvinken mit a tikhele.  
Zog ikh: tikhele-shmikhele—  
Zog zi: bikhele-shmikhele—*

Is that enough? And then the end:

*Biz zi hot mir di oygn farmakht—  
Di oygn farmakht.  
Un mikh aynggevigt mit dem lid funem regn,  
Mit dem lid funem regn,  
Vos men zingt fun kleyne kinders vegn.*

So, “regn,” “vegn.” With that one, we chose to keep the rhythm.

Okay, what do we have?

“I have some ability to read and understand Yiddish, although not at a high level. Do you think it is worth trying to read through the poems in the original?”

Sure, especially since you've got the pony on the other side, so you can look at it. I think it's a good lesson. As a matter of fact, friends of mine who teach Yiddish use this book with the dual language, and it's very helpful, they say.

“You mentioned rhyme. You mentioned rhyme. I was just wondering about the nonsense line you read in English.” What nonsense line? “A whole bunch of them.” [Laughter] I'm not sure. “You mentioned rhyme. Please comment on translating formal forms such as the villanelles or sonnet.”

Actually, the most complicated forms here are the sonnet ring. A sonnet ring is a specific form, and it's very, very complex. It's fifteen sonnets, and the last line of each is the first line of the next, and the last sonnet is all of the first lines of the previous sonnets. And it all makes sense.

And this was something that, you know, my English is good, except that Benjamin did that

himself, and it's mind-boggling. It takes tremendous patience and time. And that's another philosophical kind of thing about formal and what you do with it.

There are translations of 17<sup>th</sup>-century and 16<sup>th</sup>-century Hebrew poems. Those poems are by Ibn Gabirol and various others and they're very, very complicated poems with rhymes and internal rhymes, and they're amazing.

The question is, and it takes a lot of talent and a lot of time and a lot of effort to get those into any other language, including modern Hebrew.

And there are some translators who just do it free-verse. And I maintain that that really doesn't give -- it's not a translation of those poems, because I've seen English translations of them that are magnificent, but the time and the patience and the trouble it takes to do that is phenomenal, and you have to be a poet yourself, really, to be able to do those.

But it's worth it, because what you come out with is something fantastic, and something that -- you know, the idea that readers have to, or that you have to strain to understand -- we don't like to do that in America. You're supposed to -- everything is supposed to be easily accessible, but it's so wonderful when you can stretch the language, as in those quotes from Glatshiteyn, where you fool around with the language. The English language is fantastic. You can do all sorts of things with it.

So, stretch the reader's mind. Stretch the language we use. Otherwise, why bother? It's not -- if you're going to write Hallmark cards, go get a good-paying job. Don't fool around with translations.

See what we've got here. Yeah, okay.

“Could you please discuss the decision to create lovely new compound words in the English translation? Yeah, examples would include in Glatshiteyn's ‘To a Friend’ [p. 267], ‘worduproar,’ ‘posteriorstition.’ ‘May-he-live-long.’ In ‘Dissolution’ [p. 273], the word,” oh golly, really? “‘Moralerotassociations’ and ‘indepthinkings.’”

Yeah, you know, that's one of the great fun things about Yiddish poetry. For example, Avrom Sutzkever has lots of neologisms that you have to play with and to put together. Again, those kinds of things are the fun. Puns are difficult, you can imagine that. And puns are the greatest fun of all. You have to fool around with the language and come up with something, as we did with the Glatshiteyn poems, those poems are in “exegyiddish,” is a neologism that we created in English. He fooled around with Yiddish, so we fooled around with the English, and where is -- what was the -- what are the pages here? 267.

Yeah, right. Even the title, “To a Friend Who Wouldn't Bother to Strain His Noodleboard Because Even So It Is Hard to Go Hunting When Your Rifle Is Blunt and Love Is Soft as An Old Blanket.” And we had a lot of fun just putting this stuff together, because it is -- as I say, we

called it “exegyiddish.”

“Dissolution,” oh, my God. Right. That's great fun because it doesn't make any sense.  
“In sad” -- this is page 273.

In sad dissolution rust quotations  
Of bugographs.  
Dear Matilda, sing me a lemon of sedate aphorisms  
And howtolives.  
Tatters of silence, crucified emptiness.  
Throbbing, I race to the comic sophisticated finish.  
In wishy-washy meantime

This is fun, poetic fun, and having fun with language. And that's --  
I juggle the lung-and-liver that they hung on me:  
Rising and setting regularities,  
Shorthands of erudition—  
Moralerotassociations.  
Yoke.

And so it goes.

Are “We the Wordproletariat”? I mean, this whole thing should be -- we can take a break from sadness, and come up with a lot of fun. So, yes, it was wonderful creating those compound words. “Bugographs,” I have no idea what it is, but it's great.

“You've translated many authors, many languages. How do you choose the writer? Do you need to build a relationship with him or her before you can translate a novel or poem? How important is his or her biography?” -- that's you. Jessica Parker, it says --

**JESSICA PARKER:** I'm asking on behalf of someone else.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** Okay. Look, on behalf of Ibn Gabirol?

**JESSICA PARKER:** No, that was intended for the captioner.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** Okay. Well, as I've been telling people, I'm now in an enviable situation of being able to do this for fun, and also I have a position now in the world, especially of Hebrew writers, so I can pick and choose what I want to do. So, if I find a book that I like, and I often do, I will go to the writer and say, “Can I translate this?” And sometimes, most times, they say: “Oh, yeah!” So, I've been fooling around with a whole lot of stuff.

There's a young Israeli writer called Matan Harmoni, who's published a Hebrew novel called *The Hebrew Publishing Company* about a Yiddish writer in New York at the turn of the 20th

century, and I just love the book and it hasn't been translated so I just went to Matan and said, "Can I do that?" And he said, "yes," so that's what I do.

I like to work on -- now that I can. When you begin translating, as a freelancer, you take anything that comes along, because there's a sort of thing in the back of your head: If I turn something down, nobody will ever offer any anything else again in the world.

Well, I'm beyond that, and so I can turn a whole lot of stuff down, which is great, if I don't like it. But if I love it, then I can do it, and even if nobody else wants it, I do, so it's a fun thing to do. The word is "play," and playing with language. It's great, and it's a wonderful profession, as long as you've got a day job. But it's -- I recommend it if you just want to play with words. Playing with words is fantastic.

**JESSICA PARKER:** We have about five more minutes.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** Five more minutes? My goodness.

"I am so profoundly moved by so many of the Glatshiteyn poems, and found many of them to be soul-piercing." So did I. "I sometimes had difficulty reading one -- more than one or two at a sitting. Whether ars poetica of Yiddish or rapturous descriptions of higher spiritual states, e.g., 'stealing oneself into a prayerbook.'" Isn't that beautiful? "Whether poems about faith even in the face of destruction. Or whether poems about remembrance, tipping God into a silly, paper God, Holocaust poems. Well, too many subjects and point of view to list but I'm wondering, if a reader could be so deeply moved to the point of being unable to continue reading, how long did you and Benjamin spend translating some of these Glatshiteyn poems?"

It did involve years, for many reasons. Yes, you can't do more than one or two of these at a time, because you'd probably go crazy, but the other half of the problem is that both of us are perfectionists. So, we translated these pretty fast, it was a few months, and we did the whole book, and then we went over it and over it and over it and over it, and by the time we got through, I think it was, like, six years that it took to do all of these, to finally come up with the book.

But that included finding the art, getting the right typesetter, doing all this together, and then the rest of the story goes like this --

The publisher asked Benjamin to write an introduction. And he did. And then he said to me, "What do you suppose the editor will do when I send him 400 pages of an introduction?"

And I said, "Well, I think he'll probably have a heart attack," so -- Well, the solution to the whole thing was that he wrote a condensed version of this, and then they published a separate book called *The Meaning of Yiddish* that was the more expanded version, so if you haven't read *The Meaning of Yiddish*, I recommend it. It's a beautiful book. Lucidly written, and very, very instructive.



Okay.

**JESSICA PARKER:** Maybe one last question?

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** Okay. Let's see. "Was Glatshiteyn contemporary of e.e. cummings who made compound words?"

I think everybody in those days was influenced by e.e. cummings, who fooled around with words, and put together beautiful words like in "Just-spring," what does he call it? "The goat-footed balloonman." Beautiful images, and so I assume that Glatshiteyn was reading those.

By the way, if you want to know about Glatshiteyn... Cynthia Ozick's story, "Yiddish or" ... what does she call it? No, no. Something like "Translation or Yiddish in America." That's the conflict between Bashevis Singer and Glatshiteyn, and the problem was that Bashevis Singer got all those women to translate his stuff, and Glatshiteyn didn't, so everybody knows Bashevis Singer, and not too many people know Glatshiteyn, which is too bad, because I think Glatshiteyn is a great poet but I think all of these -- thank you, "Envy or Yiddish in America," which I think is her best work.

But it's -- "What's in the appendix?" Oh, well, that's -- okay. "Chronicle of a Movement." That's part of *Yiddish, The Meaning of Yiddish*, so I recommend that you look at that. That would be the whole thing.

Yeah, "what's exegyiddish?" It comes from a combination of "exegesis" and "Yiddish." So, it's "exegyiddish."

**JESSICA PARKER:** Great. So maybe we'll leave it there.

**BARBARA HARSHAV:** Okay. Alright. We done?

**JESSICA PARKER:** Great. I'm just wrapping up. So we're just about out of time so I'm going to wrap up our video conference this evening.

Thank you to Barbara Harshav for sharing so much of your time and expertise, to Heidi for the live captioning, and to all of you for joining us.

The recording of the video conference this evening, including the live captioning, will be posted online shortly, and I'll send out the link as soon as it's available.

Our next selection will be mailed out the week of September 17, and you should receive your copy by October 15, at the latest.

We're going to start reading this next book together on October 15, and details about the video

conference for that book are to come.

So, have a good evening, everyone, and thank you again for joining us.

[End of video conference]

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