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## S. AN-SKI'S *THE DYBBUK*—AN INEXHAUSTIBLE OPERATIC INSPIRATION

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*Somewhere I believe every human being  
to be possessed, and to me real writers  
are those who have the ability of exorcism.*

— Isaac Bashevis Singer

*A nation does not live by suffering, but  
by a conscious rapture of itself, by joyful  
creation, by pride in its culture,  
and by the poetry of its everyday life.  
Only by all these things. If all these things  
were not present, the Jewish people would  
have ceased to exist long ago.*

— S. An-Ski, from a letter to Roza Ettinger, 1916.

*My play, needless to say, is  
a realistic drama about mystics.*

— S. An-Ski to Haim Zhitlowsky

There are certain stories, folktales, novels and plays that, over the centuries, opera composers have been unable to resist—even while knowing of already existing operas on the same subject. When the average operagoer thinks of *La Bohème*, for example, it is Puccini's opera that first and in all likelihood exclusively comes to mind, unless he is a dedicated buff familiar with the history of opera in depth. Yet there is also Leoncavallo's *La Bohème*, among others even more obscure on basically the same story or theme. But, while even the most casual patron is familiar with Leoncavallo as the composer of *I Pagliacci*, his *La Bohème* is staged today on rare occasions, if ever, only by a university or a conservatory opera workshop, or perhaps by an organization devoted specifically to obscure operas. And in addition to Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, there is another by Giovanni Paisiello (1740–1816). The Faust theme, too, has been addressed in various ways by a multiplicity of opera composers in addition to those whose operas are firmly established within the standard repertoire, such as Gounod's eponymous *Faust* and Boito's *Mefistofele*. Several Shakespeare plays have inspired more than one opera (Rossini's *Otello* in addition to Verdi's, for example). The one that appears unsurprisingly to have found its way into the greatest number of operas (as well as oratorios, symphonic tone poems, and ballets) is *Romeo and Juliet*.

This is also the case with certain Jewish topics or characters of biblical, Apocryphal, legendary, or literary connections. Hence the many operas, for example, about Judith, Deborah, Esther, the Golem legend, and King David.

But the Jewish subject—in this case a play—that has seeded the composition of the greatest number of operas is without a doubt S. An-ski's *The Dybbuk*—both its Yiddish and its Hebrew versions, numbering at least sixteen operas by now in five languages, with more on the way.

S. An-Ski's *THE DYBBUK—Between Two Worlds* (*Der dibek—tsvishn tsvey veltn*), a story about thwarted love and a resulting, ultimately fatal demonic possession, set among nineteenth-century Hassidic Jewry in the Pale of Settlement of the Tsarist Empire, remains unquestionably the most famous serious Yiddish drama of all time.<sup>1</sup> It is probably also safe to say that its Hebrew version, which first brought the play to the attention of many composers of “dybbuk operas,” is still the most widely known of all Hebrew plays. Its subject is of course manifestly Jewish, notwithstanding layers of universal sentiments and issues. But inasmuch as it was written originally in Russian for (it is assumed) a Russian or at least Russian-speaking audience, and in light of its setting in the Pale, its author's duality as both a Russian and a Russian Jew, and his sociopolitical alignments and activities on behalf of Russia's future, there are those who find it curious that the play has escaped the canon of Russian literature.

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Shlomo [Solomon] Zaynvil [Zainvil; Zanvil] ben Aaron ha'Kohen Rapoport, born in 1863 in Belarus (then White Russia) in the village of Chashniki and reared in Vitebsk, was a celebrated author, ethnographer and folklorist as well as a playwright—and, for a time and to fluctuating degrees, what might be called today a sociopolitical populist activist. The son of a Hassidic family, he grew up within a typically insular Hassidic community—which would later find resonance in his knowledge of Hassidic *rebbe*s, the workings of their judicial procedures, and many other aspects of Hassidic life and belief that he brought to *The Dybbuk*. Of course he had a traditional Jewish education, presumably infused with or augmented by the teachings and texts of Hassidism.

In his late teen years, however, the future S. An-Ski separated himself from his religious milieu—first to teach Russian to Jewish children and then eventually to associate himself with the Haskala (the Jewish Enlightenment in its Russian Empire phase). Meanwhile, he became attracted to populist stirrings and Socialist revolutionary circles. By the time he was in his early twenties, he was living in the southern city of Yekaterinoslav, two thousand miles from his family home in the Vitebsk region, and for a while he surrounded himself with the miners in the Donets Basin. It was then that his name was Russified as Semyon Akimovich, only later to be shortened to the nom de plume S. An-Sky.<sup>2</sup>

Drawn to the populist Narodniki phenomenon, which embraced Russian peasant roots and values, An-Ski lived among Russian peasantry as well as some of the workers in order to gain firsthand empathy with their plight and to try to educate them toward sociopolitical arousal.

Nothing suggests, however, An-Ski's involvement or even sympathy with the Narodniki's (or a significant element of its) turn to radical violence and terrorism in line with the Anarchists, which included random attacks and planned assassinations. Historians have tended, not necessarily without reason, to emphasize that aspect of the Narodniki.<sup>3</sup> But An-Ski's focus at that period was on a type of agrarian socialism—which departed in a number of ways from Marxian principles—and not so much on the industrial proletariat, even though some workers were among those he addressed. His principal efforts were aimed at tutorial awakening of the peasantry from generations of lethargy—in part out of ingrained quasi-religious loyalty in principle to the tsar as the “Little Father”—and on fostering the progressive idea of organized sociopolitical alternatives to the status quo.

In terms of An-Ski's own monumental contributions to Jewish ethnography and Jewish historical preservation, his experience of living among the peasantry ignited an interest in collecting—at that point Russian folklore. His curiosity would soon develop into a passion for collecting specifically Russian Jewish folklore, artifacts, field recordings, photographs and all other possible documentation of a way of Jewish life that he realized would soon become extinct.

An-Ski was a committed Socialist but never a Communist, much less a Bolshevik. He became a deputy to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly on the Socialist Revolutionary ticket, returning to Russia in the year of the 1905

Revolution after a thirteen-year period tantamount to exile in Western Europe—spent mostly in Paris. Meanwhile, his fraternization with the Jewish Labor Bund, despite its support for the Social Democrats to whom he was opposed, became echoed internationally in his Yiddish song “*Di shvue*” (The Oath), which was written in Bern but published in 1902 in London in *Der Arbayter*. Not only did this become the Bund’s national anthem, but, with his poem set to an anonymous tune, it acquired quasi-folksong status. Known colloquially as the “Jewish Marseillaise,” it was sung not only at Bundist but at other socialist-oriented and labor movement rallies for decades of the twentieth century. Around the same time, he wrote a cycle of revolutionary verses in Yiddish, and he translated to Yiddish from the original French “The Internationale” by Eugène Pottier, which later became the anthem of the Bolsheviks—and then the national anthem of the USSR until 1944.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, An-Ski wrote mostly in Russian, though without abandoning Yiddish altogether. His serious, unambivalent return to Yiddish, however, came in the opening years of the twentieth century and has been attributed to his personal epiphany upon reading the collected writings of the seminal Yiddishist author Yitzhak Leybush Peretz. Upon his discovery of Peretz, he is said to have come almost instantaneously to the realization of the potential of Yiddish when it came to expressing modern sensibilities.

At some point shortly after the outbreak of the 1905 Revolution, An-Ski developed his sympathetic concern for the Jewish nationalist and cultural-nationalist cause in Russia—perhaps initially fertilized by his contacts with Zionist youth groups in Geneva before returning to Russia. Rescuing and preserving what would otherwise soon become an entirely lost Jewish world and folk past became an artistic as well as an ethnographic mission for him, amounting to a “return” to his people with pride. This newfound passion involved one of several manifestations of a syncretism—in some ways symbiotic—of the “two worlds” he was now straddling. For one thing, documenting and preserving the Jewish folk past became as important to him as Russia’s future direction and his socialist revolutionary aims—with the two not mutually exclusive. Some early proponents of the Haskala had dismissed Jewish folkways, folklore and folk traditions with contempt—seeing them as not merely antiquated and outmoded but as petrified obstacles to enlightened rationalism and therefore not worthy of preservation, even as admittedly premodern relics of a heritage. In some views, preserving those relics could even risk being counterproductive, as an exotic attraction to young modernized or modernizing Jews. For others, the association of Jews and Judaism with that folk life might be embarrassing when revealed openly.

Yet no such fear of exposing Russian peasant ways or embarrassment of folklife gripped the Russian intelligentsia, middle or upper-middle classes, or even the aristocracy; the collection of Russian folksongs and other folklore was a valued activity of Russification dating to the late nineteenth century. (Tsar Nicholas II even took to wearing peasant-type tunics in public, albeit expensively bespoke with elaborate tailoring and, at least in part, politically motivated; and the language at court became Russian instead of French.) In fact An-Ski maintained that the heritage of Jewish folklore was more than merely interesting—that in its postbiblical mores, refinements and developments it contained seeds of potentially progressive values that could combine to become a transitional bridge from the past to the future. He even insisted that Hassidic legends and beliefs, with all their superstitions and seeming backwardness, could be a viable instrument for introducing awareness of Jewish moral, ethical, theological and human values.

By 1910, referring to his “return” to his people after having devoted his energies as a populist to Russian peasant and folk culture for such a long time, he explained himself and his previous focus to a gathering of fellow Jews: “My life was broken, severed, ruptured. Many years of my life passed on this frontier, on the border between two worlds.”<sup>24</sup>

An-ski’s interest in the Jewish past revolved principally around Jewish folklore among Ashkenazim within the Russian Empire. To that end, he proposed and then directed the groundbreaking Jewish Ethnographic Expedition (1912–1914, later informally known as the An-Ski Expedition). Financed primarily by Baron Horace Guinzbourg, the expedition was conducted throughout areas of heavy Jewish concentration in regions of the Pale of Settlement, notably Podolia and Volhynia. The expeditioners collected folklore, folktales, religious and quasi-religious artifacts, folk art and craft, field recordings of music, photographs they took, and other documentation of Jewish life in the

unmodernized communities in those towns, villages and hamlets. The fruits of the expedition were to be brought back to St. Petersburg, where they would be available for scientific scholarly study, public exhibition, and artistic use.

By most accounts, the totality of what was collected, retrieved and accumulated comes to significantly more than eight thousand items. Beginning almost immediately upon collection of musical specimens, composers in Russia started making use of collected folk songs, liturgical chants and instrumental renditions—ranging from artistic arrangements to original compositions based on or incorporating and developing musical materials from the expedition. But many of the actual field recordings in their original state have been made publicly available only since the collapse of the USSR—on obtainable CDs and other current forms of audio dissemination.

The story goes that it was during that expedition that An-Ski—while together with the music critic, composer and head of the expedition’s music section, Joel [Yuli Dimitrovitch] Engel—heard from an innkeeper’s wife the account or tale of frustrated, aborted love and demonic possession that would become the substance of *The Dybbuk*; it was recounted not necessarily only as a folk legend, but as an actual occurrence, presumably in that town.

There are variants of that account regarding precisely where, when (and even if) one or both of them were told that story—apart from the degree to which An-Ski would have embellished, expanded or manipulated it for his dramatic and didactic purposes.<sup>5</sup>

Further fueling suspicion is the likely possibility that An-Ski’s inspiration could have derived from a synthetic combination of tales and legends he heard from town to town while traveling, interviewing, and listening within the Pale—absorbing the overall aura of prevailing mysticism and perhaps hearing more than one romantically tinged story of forced marriage that trumped love and ended badly. In that case, An-Ski’s source could have been a composite of individual threads subsequently sewn together for his version—to be treated artistically and developed to become the play. And whether the concluding disposition of the *dybbuk*—with the liberal, lenient final judgment of the rabbinical court concerning its ultimate fate—was An-Ski’s invention or an echo of one or more tales he heard, is impossible to know.<sup>6</sup>

But from what we can know about Hassidic life and its belief in demonic possession is that An-Ski must have imagined de novo a *dybbuk* that was actually in love with the person whose body and spirit it possessed. As David Roskies has astutely observed, “No story before Ansky’s had ever told of a *dybbuk* who was a lover in disguise.”<sup>7</sup>

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## DYBBUK POSSESSION IN JEWISH HISTORY AND TRADITIONS [WHAT IS A DYBBUK?]

The notion of possession of a living person by a demon or some sort of unwelcome outside spirit is common to many faiths and folk cultures going further back in time than can be specified. In Jewish superstitions or mythical contexts since the sixteenth century, such an intruder has been known in Hebrew as a *dibbuk*, or *dibek* in Yiddish. *Dibbuk* is an abbreviated form of the Hebrew *dibbuk m’ru’ah ra’a* (a cleaving or clinging of an evil spirit), or *dibbuk min ha’hizonim* (a *dibbuk* from the outside but found in a human being).<sup>8</sup>

A *dibbuk* was believed to be an evil spirit that entered a person, cleaved to his soul, caused what today might be considered not merely distress but serious mental disorder (perhaps “madness” in former times or terminology), and spoke through the entered person’s mouth as a different, foreign personality and voice.<sup>9</sup>

Only in the seventeenth century did the term *dibbuk* enter the literature among Ashkenazi Jews, and the attachment of the spirit to one’s body became that spirit’s name. Terminology aside, belief in such spirits is thought to have been common during the Second Temple era, in early talmudic centuries, and in the period of the Christian Gospels—but

apparently less frequently encountered in medieval literature. On the other hand, Lurianic kabbalistic literature contains references to exorcism procedures, and there are numerous manuscripts that provide detailed instructions on the protocols.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, the *dibbuk* was considered a demon (or a sort of “devil”) that entered the body of an unwell person. Another, later explanation, perhaps borrowed by Jews from other cultures, held that *some* of those *dibbukim* were the spirits of dead people whose bodies had not been buried properly according to Judaic prescriptions. That construct (which apparently had some parallels in medieval Christianity) became intermeshed with the mystical doctrines of *gilgul* (transmigration of souls) and, in that combination, became widespread. In those cases, *dibbukim* were most often presumed to be souls, which, as a result of the seriousness as well as the volume of their transgressions, were not permitted to transmigrate. Thus, as naked spirits only—viz., stripped of any human bodily habitat—with nowhere to go to escape ultimate evil and a condition of permanent wandering, they sought refuge in the body of a living person. But in another scenario, that living person could be suspected of having committed some serious transgression(s), which automatically opened an entryway for a *dibbuk*.<sup>11</sup>

All these various guises and scenarios seem to have taken shape as a fusion of beliefs of foreign host cultures with kabbalistic influences. In Hassidic belief, the authority and power to exorcize was divinely bestowed on the Ba’al Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer, also known by the acronym the BESHT), recognized as the founder and progenitor of the Hassidic movement—although some recent scholarship suggests the possibility of earlier origins. And that divinely granted license has applied as well to certain spiritually advanced, accomplished Hassidic masters, as in An-Ski’s play. The exorcism would simultaneously “redeem” the expelled soul by providing it *tikkun* (repair, restoration) and thus permitting its transmigration. Or, if the *dibbuk* refused to leave, it could be cause for irreversible descent to the destructive forces of ultimate evil and consigned to eternal wandering.<sup>12</sup>

By the time An-Ski began work on *The Dybbuk*, he had returned to writing in Yiddish, but he wrote the play in Russian—anticipating a Russian (including a Russian-speaking Jewish) audience. With that in mind, he submitted it to Konstantin Stanislavsky, the director of the Moscow Art Theatre and internationally famous to this day for conceiving and promoting the school of method acting. Stanislavsky was indeed favorably impressed, and he even suggested adding the role of the Messenger. An-Ski followed that advice, creating and developing the Messenger as a neutral yet multifaceted figure who represents from the stage An-Ski’s own voice and presence as an ethnographer, folklorist, poet, playwright, socialist, recommitted albeit “nonreligious” Jew, tragedian, raconteur, mediator, and de facto if veiled narrator. Staging a play set in the inner recesses of the Pale and focused on Hassidic beliefs and folkways, yet geared to a sophisticated modern Russian audience in Moscow, would in and of itself have placed it “between two worlds”—in addition to all else that that phrase signifies about the content of the play and about An-Ski himself. Various secondary sources and overviews of Yiddish theatre have referred to *The Dybbuk* as a “mystical play,” but had An-Ski thought it such, he might not have expected it to resonate with a Moscow audience of Russians and Russian-speaking Jews. To the contrary, he insisted that it was something else entirely: “a realistic drama about mystics.”<sup>13</sup>

A production by the Moscow Art Theater never materialized, by most accounts because Stanislavsky felt—even with the addition of the Messenger who might help a Russian audience understand it—that the play would resonate best with a Jewish audience, produced by a Yiddish company with Jewish actors and actresses who would best express the parts and the plot. An-Ski meanwhile translated the play into Yiddish, initially as *Der dibek—tsvishn tsvey veltn*.

Not long after Lenin’s Bolshevik coup and the establishment of the new USSR, however, and as a known anti-Leninist and anti-communist socialist, An-Ski, in disguise, fled from the Bolsheviks. He took refuge first in German-occupied Vilna, and then, when murderous Jew-hatred (much of it imported) swept the city, only later in Warsaw.

In the process of his flight, An-Ski’s initial Yiddish translation of the play was (apparently irretrievably) lost. Fortunately, in 1918, Haim Nahman Bialik, the towering giant of modern Hebrew poetry who came to be known as Israel’s (de facto) poet laureate, had published his Hebrew translation and version in the proto-Zionist literary journal



*Hat'kufa*. Notwithstanding the widespread success of the famous 1937 film version (followed by less well-known ones in Hebrew as well as Yiddish), it was that Bialik version—albeit in a shortened rendition—that was to bring the play to the widest public awareness, as well as to the attention of most of the composers who would turn it into operas. The first of those, insofar as we know, was Lodovico Rocca, a now-forgotten non-Jewish Italian composer whose *Il Dibuk* was premiered at La Scala in Milan in 1934 and then produced in 1936 in several other European cities and in Detroit, Chicago, and New York in an English translation. Its cast for some of those productions included one of the most internationally celebrated divas of the day, and of all time, Rosa Raisa.

Meanwhile, An-Ski made a new, second translation, but now mostly from Bialik's Hebrew version, which he is said to have preferred to his original Russian *and* to what he remembered of his initial Yiddish translation; and he published it in 1919. Thus the play, as it would now be performed in both versions, went from Russian to Yiddish, then from Yiddish to Hebrew and back to Yiddish. In that sense, too, it stood—and continues to stand—“between two worlds” of Yiddish and modern Hebrew culture.

By 1920, the prestigious Yiddish theatrical company the Vilner Trupe had become committed to mounting a production. When An-Ski died in November of that year in Warsaw, the troupe waited until the traditionally required thirty-day mourning period was over and then staged the premiere of the (second) Yiddish version there in December. The public—as well as critical—acclaim was immediate and loudly enthusiastic. Performances by professional and amateur troupes followed in other cities and towns in interwar Poland as well as elsewhere in eastern Europe—including one by the Jewish State Theater in Bucharest. But this was hardly the end of the story.

Around or within that same time frame, *The Dybbuk*—as Bialik's *Ha'dibbuk*—attracted the interest of the Habima Theater in Moscow, which was founded in 1917 in the aftermath of the February Revolution and the resulting significant relaxation of government and church control and censorship. As a vehicle for modern Hebrew (theatrical) culture, it was inseparable from the awakenings of Jewish national and cultural-national consciousness and Zionist sensibilities. Later, after necessarily abandoning the USSR and touring Europe, America, and what was then Palestine, Habima would go on to become the national theater of Israel. In the meantime, beginning in Moscow, Habima brought international fame to *The Dybbuk* with more than a thousand performances, remaining to this day its best-known production.

Inasmuch as Habima was one of the studios of the Moscow Art Theater, it was Stanislavsky who first brought Bialik's version of *The Dybbuk* to the attention of Naḥum Zemach, one of the three founding members of Habima. Zemach was initially opposed to producing the play because of its antiquated depiction of Jewish “shtetl life,” which he (and others) thought contrary to Habima's mission vis-à-vis Jewish national issues, concerns and values. In the event, he relented, offering to produce it only as a temporary undertaking in the absence of a sufficient repertoire from which to choose—and until what he would consider a more appropriate play, perhaps an original biblical one, could be written.<sup>14</sup>

Stanislavsky's protégé, the director of Habima, Evgeny Vakhtangov, who directed its initial production of *The Dybbuk*, seems to have been more sympathetic from the outset in terms of its potential for resonance with Habima's patrons. He began by reediting Bialik's version for both artistic and practical purposes; and since he did not speak Hebrew, he relied as well on a Russian version in tandem with what was explained to him about Bialik's. It has been suggested that because of his Armenian background, he was particularly sensitive to national aspirations of minorities within the Russian sphere. In any case, in preparation for the production, he read voraciously on Jewish religion, history, folklore and, in particular, Hassidism. Then he brought to his staging a contemporary spirit, emphasizing the social revolutionary messages he gleaned from the play—including but not limited to what he interpreted as freedom from the petrifications of the old world of religious superstitions, resistance to modernization, and even class struggle. Yet he did not ignore the interplay between the world of the play and the world of the playwright.

The Habima production was not an artificially romantic, nostalgic (or manufactured nostalgic) portrayal of traditional Jewish life in the Pale about to be upended—which might have been more than enough for some older, not-so-

sophisticated enthusiasts of a certain brand of Yiddish theatre in which they could find much-wanted escapism. Nor was it an outright, acrimonious or bitterly adversarial condemnation of Hassidism or the Hassidic world per se, even as it rejected that symbolic as well as actual self-imposed insulation from social, sociopolitical, theological and human progress. One could say that the production itself, reflecting Vakhtangov's expressionist tendencies, hovered between two worlds, even if it tilted toward one of them.

The Habima premiere took place in Moscow in January 1922 and was a nearly unalloyed success. "Though I do not understand Hebrew," wrote the reviewer (and playwright) Nikolai Evreinov, "I was constantly excited and my excitement rose and fell with the rhythm of the plot." Reviewing the production during its months of rehearsals, Samuel Margolin wrote in *Vestnik Teatra*, "Everyone in the Habima studio acts in time and rhythm with the [incidental] music of Joel Engel, which is completely fused with the act of performance." And the Russian-Jewish critic Akim Volynsky was mesmerized, for example, by the scene in the first act in which a woman pleads with the Almighty for the recovery from grave illness of her widowed daughter who has two young children: "weeping in a tune which makes one think of David's harp. This is ritual weeping; it has a specific melody, and yet it is most sincere and genuine. The woman approaches the holy arc with firm steps, pulls aside the curtains, and in a voice full of sweetness and pleading pours out her troubles. The entire synagogue is filled with her voice. All disappears, all ceases to exist in a moment."

Habima's shortened version of Bialik's translation (but not otherwise materially or significantly altered apart from reediting) then became the template for all future Hebrew productions.

When presented in Berlin during Habima's residency in Weimar Germany, the production not only marked the company's entry into the European theatre world, but it was received by all as a cultural revelation. A non-Jewish critic for a Berlin newspaper was overtaken: "Of course, I could not understand one word of it," he wrote, "but I could hear that this elegant Hebrew must have been the language in which God spoke to the ancient Israelites when He was in His best mood!"

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When Habima brought the shortened Bialik version to New York in the 1926 season, it was not the first time the American public was able to see the play. In 1922, the Yiddish version had been produced in New York by Maurice Schwartz at his Yiddish Art Theater; and 1925 saw a production in English at the Neighborhood Playhouse. It was attended by twenty-five-year-old Aaron Copland, who was inspired by it to compose his piano trio, *Vitebsk*.

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## THE MUSICAL DIMENSIONS

Apparently realizing—as have nearly all critics since—that the very nature of the play demands serious music not as an optional adornment, but interwoven as an artistic component well beyond the role of much typical incidental theatre music, An-Ski is reported to have asked Joel Engel to compose a full score.<sup>15</sup> Sadly, he did not live to hear Engel's music as part of any production, and probably not at all—unless Engel played parts of it in progress for him privately. Nor was it performed as part of the posthumous 1920 premiere in Warsaw. In fact, despite various guesses, no one knows for certain what pieces of existing music might have been cobbled together for that production.

Engel already had a firsthand association with the inspiration for the play from his role and participation in the An-Ski Expedition. He was also one of the progenitors of the New Jewish National School in music and a founder of the Gesellschaft für jüdische Volksmusik (Society for Jewish Folk Music) as well as head of its Moscow branch. Inasmuch as An-Ski maintained close collegial relationships with some of the society's members, it was only natural for him

to turn to Engel for the music for *The Dybbuk*. Moreover, Engel had already proven himself a gifted composer who knew how to infuse his music artistically, when appropriate, with the folk melos of the Pale. In this case, the score is ingeniously constructed around the tune that is sung to open and close the play—the so-called “*Mipnei ma?*” song (see below)—which, at the discretion of a director, can also be echoed (with or without words) at various points throughout the play as a recurring leitmotif, further establishing the Hassidic setting and its mystical atmosphere. Engel used the tune as a core cell for varied references and development as a unifying musical element.<sup>16</sup>

Engel did finish the score in time for the Habima Hebrew premiere in 1922, after which—whether abbreviated or in its entirety—it has continued as part of both Yiddish and Hebrew productions, as well as some in English as well as other languages. (The 1937 film, shot in Poland, featured instead a score by Henekh [Henry] Kon.) Engel never published the entire score, however, only a concert suite extracted from and based on it: *Suite Ha'Dybbuk* (Op. 35).

Nonetheless, Engel's score was so inseparable from the play that Odette Aslan, writing in 1979 in Paris, reported that when a group of producers was unsure of how to identify the genre of *The Dybbuk*, they decided on “opera.”<sup>17</sup>

Much earlier, reviewing a 1948 performance of *The Dybbuk* in New York, the *New York Times* theatre critic Brooks Atkinson went so far as to write that the production was “so saturated with music and dancing that the [Hebrew] language is not critical to its appreciation.” Of course we can assume that he was able to avail himself beforehand of a libretto with an English translation, in much the same way that most American critics who review performances of, say, Dvorák's *Rusalka* must rely on a translation of the libretto, since few can be expected to know Czech. Admittedly, the analogy is imperfect vis-à-vis a play, much less a drama of this nature whose every word may be significant.

An-Ski's Yiddish and Bialik's Hebrew scripts both call specifically for opening and closing the play with a mystical/mysterious, softly intoned chant or song to furnished words on the first page that precede any of the spoken dialogue. Strangely enough, no musical notation was included in or appended to either script. It has always been assumed and accepted that the intended song is—and was originally—that which became identified and known as “*Mipnei ma?*” Yet neither those words nor that text incipit appear in either printed version. Still, inasmuch as the tune is prominent in Engel's score, and from all we can piece together, it is more than likely that this was the same tune to which the different Yiddish words in the script were sung beginning with the 1920 premiere.

Henry G. Alsberg and Winifred Katzin's 1926 published English translation of the Yiddish version has a musical notation of the tune appended to the end of the play on two separate pages, but strangely enough, with no text underlay and the confounding noncommittal heading “Jewish Melody Sung in Vitebsk (Birthplace of Ansky).” Nowhere do the words *mipnei ma?* appear, nor is the reader even told why that musical notation is provided. Preceding his allusion to that publication, however, Izaly Zemtsovsky confuses us by asserting with certainty that “the melody . . . [was] published in the Yiddish edition of the play,” by which he appears to mean the first such edition—giving the impression that An-Ski included a musical notation of the tune. But he did not.<sup>18</sup>





**"WHY" IS "MIPNEI MA?" ?  
ITS UNCERTAIN, CONFUSING ITINERARY AND CHRONOLOGY**

An-Ski's Yiddish play script (as translated by him from his original Russian and then redone after losing it during his flight from the Bolsheviks) and Bialik's Hebrew version both begin with the lyrics to what is commonly known as "*Mipnei Ma?*" ("Why, Oh Why . . .?"), specified in the instructions in both scripts as a mystical/mysterious softly intoned "song" (*gezang* in the Yiddish, and *z'mira* in the Hebrew instructions, although the latter is not so easily or uniformly translated and could also be rendered as "melody" or "hymn," or even "chant"):

AN-SKI — Yiddish

MAKHMES VOS, MAKHMES VOS  
IZ DI NESHOME  
FUN HEKHTERE HAYKH  
AROP FUN TIFSTN GRUNT?  
DOS FALN TROGT  
DOS OYFKUMEN IN ZIKH . . .

BIALIK — Hebrew<sup>19</sup>

AL MA V'LAMA  
YOREDET HAN'SHAMA  
ME'IGARA RAMA  
L'VIRA AMIKTA?  
YORIDA TZOREKH ALIYA HI,  
YORIDA TZOREKH ALIYA HI.

The Yiddish and Hebrew of these two poems or sets of lyrics mean essentially the same thing and have been translated, with minor differences in nuances of flavor or connotations, as:

WHY, OH WHY  
HAS THE SOUL FALLEN [DOES THE SOUL FALL]  
FROM THE HIGHEST HEIGHTS [THE GREATEST HEIGHT]  
TO THE DEEPEST DEPTHS BELOW? [TO THE ABYSS SO DEEP?]  
WITHIN ITSELF, THE FALL  
CONTAINS THE ASCENT . . . [IT FALLS THAT IT MAY  
RISE AGAIN, IT FALLS ONLY  
TO RISE AGAIN.]

Among the many songs that were heard and collected from informants during the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition and, when possible, recorded—Hassidic *niggunim* or other melodies, some wordless and others with Yiddish or Hebrew words—was the one that became known forever by the incipit “*Mipnei ma?*” It expresses a mystic belief then still current among many Hassidim that one can ascend to the elevated realm (*igara rama*) reserved for mystically purified souls by first descending to the lowest level (*be’ira*) before rising. The first two and last two lines of the poem are in talmudic Hebrew, encasing the middle lines in Aramaic.<sup>20</sup>

“*Mipnei ma?*” may have been heard by more than one of the expedition’s researchers independently of one another, on more than one occasion, from more than one informant, and in more than one town or locale—for certain at least once in Hebrew, but possibly also in Yiddish and perhaps in one or more instances without words. For a long time it was thought to have been heard exclusively as a wordless Hassidic *niggun* to which the words were attached later, presumably by An-Ski. But that assumption is no longer valid, for among the field recordings of the expedition now available to us is one sung by an elderly sounding informant with the obviously anonymous Hebrew-Aramaic words beginning with *mipnei ma?* This recording was made in that informant’s hometown of Medzhybizh [Medzhibozh] in the Podolian region of the Ukraine—the town that was home between 1740 and 1760 to the BESHT (Yisro’el Ba’al Shem Tov, credited as the founder of Hassidism). The identity of the researcher who asked the informant to record the song is, unfortunately, not known. It could have been An-Ski or Engel or both, or neither. And the song could have been heard and perhaps even recorded additionally in other areas of the Pale, in which case it may have been more widely current than once supposed.

An even more expansive travel itinerary for the tune has been proposed, for which one must take into account the variants due to oral transmission. For example, in his book published in Israel (*Hamusika heyehudis v’yotsre’oh*), the musicologist Yisroel Shlita claimed that the tune was known to have been sung as a wordless melody by the Karlin-Stolin Hassidim, which would place its travels to the north of the An-Ski Expedition’s focus. Shlita also notes that the tune was applied to the singing of “*Ya eli v’go’ali*,” a *piyyut* (in the liturgical subcategory of *yotsrot*), which is recited just before the *musaf* services on the Three Festivals.

At one time it was commonly if not universally believed that it was An-Ski alone who heard the song during the expedition—and specifically in Vitebsk (which cannot be ruled out as one possible site in addition to Medzhybizh)—and then shared it with Engel. The Jewish music historian and critic Albert Weisser, however, the first serious authority on the history of the expedition, as well as on Engel, thought it highly unlikely that it was An-Ski who conveyed the tune to Engel. Weisser was convinced that Engel had discovered it on his own and then, later, decided to use it for his incidental score and that An-Ski learned it from Engel—either before or after the conclusion of the expedition.<sup>21</sup>

We can only presume that Bialik’s “*Al ma v’lama*” was either his translation from (An-Ski’s?) Yiddish “*Makhmes vos*” or a reworking of the “original” Hebrew “*Mipnei ma?*” text as possibly transmitted by Engel and/or whoever else might have heard it in Hebrew during the expedition and/or as recorded from one or more informants—or a symbiotic combination of sources. Along the way to Bialik’s 1918 publication, the assumed “original” talmudic Hebrew/Aramaic

had been updated from its antiquated wording—probably by Bialik. It is also possible that he may have drawn on another Hassidic *niggun* that appears in a Habad-Lubavitch compilation, *Sefer haniggunim*, some of whose words and phrases are similar to the updated “*Mipnei ma?*” For example, the earlier “*Mipnei ma yorda*” seems to have become “*Mipnei ma yoredet*” by the time Bialik reconsidered the lyrics for his published version as “*Al ma v’lama.*”

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## THE PLAY

For many operas drawn from literary sources—even when more than one opera is coincidentally rooted in the same wellspring—it is not always thought absolutely necessary to become familiar firsthand with that original source in order to understand and appreciate the opera(s) to which it has given rise. Relying on a careful perusal of the libretto can be sufficient for most. For example, probably few regular opera patrons who adore *La Traviata* and make it their business to attend performances whenever possible have actually read A. Dumas’s play, *La dame aux camélias*, on which Verdi based that opera.

In other cases, knowing in detail the underlying story, novel or play is essential for comprehending and savoring the opera(s) it has generated. Such is required concerning operas based on *The Dybbuk*, especially given the symbolism, references, and multiple layers of meaning attached to nearly every word of its dialogue. Each of the many “dybbuk operas” is tied closely to the action of An-Ski’s play to one degree or another, even though different composers have emphasized different aspects while not viewing the play merely as a springboard for altogether new storylines or their own original, unrelated versions of spirituality.

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

REB SENDER of BRINNITS, a wealthy man

LEAH, his daughter

FRADE, her old nanny

GITL and BASYA, Leah’s friends

MENASHE, Leah’s betrothed

NAKHUM, his father

R. MENDL, Menashe’s *rebbe*

THE MESSENGER

R. AZRIEL’KE, an old *tzaddik* of Mirapol [Azriel]

MIKHL [Michael], his *gabay*—manager of his affairs/attendant

R. SHIMSHON, town rabbi of Mirapol

TWO JUDGES (*dayanim*)

MAIR [Mayer], *shames* (“beadle”) of the Brinnits synagogue<sup>22</sup>

KHONEN, HENEKH and OSHER, yeshiva students

THREE *BATLONIM*<sup>23</sup>

FOUR HASSIDIM

AN ELDERLY WOMAN

THREE POOR OLDER WOMEN: one lame, one with one withered arm, and one [partially] blind

TWO YOUNGER POOR WOMEN: one tall and pale, one with a young child

THREE POOR MEN: a wedding guest, a hunchback, one on crutches, Hassidim, yeshiva students, householders, musicians, wedding guests, beggars, children, musicians.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACT I

In the synagogue and study room (*bes midrash*) in Brinnits in the evening.

The *batlonim* share stories about certain famous Hassidic *rebbe*s while they also discuss kabbalistic matters and the related possible dangers of magical practices, incantations, and formulae.

Khonen is present as well, meditating, lost in deep thought. His fellow yeshiva students recall his brilliance and how he acquired *s'miḥa* (rabbinical authority) before vanishing for a year. During that time, in an attempt to find a way to thwart Sender's daughter Leah's marriage to another young man instead of him, he had immersed himself in Kabbala. At various points during the evening he expounds on kabbalistic notions, including *gematria*—which, if taken seriously in certain kabbalistic concepts, rather than symbolic coincidences employed in traditional Torah explication, can involve manipulation of numerical values of Hebrew letters for magical as well as spiritual results.<sup>24</sup> Khonen echoes mystical beliefs in the Kabbala's power to extricate one's soul from "this world" and raise it to the loftiest heights. Sin, in this mystical concept, he relates, requires no campaign to eradicate it, but only burning it away to become cleansed and refined—leaving only its holiness. And when the most difficult of all sins to overcome—lust for a woman—is purified by intense fire, the greatest "uncleanness" becomes the highest holiness. To support this notion, he cites verses from the biblical Song of Songs.<sup>25</sup>

Henekh, one of the yeshiva students, warns of the danger of such ecstatic flights (of thought), but Khonen pays him no heed. Everything created by God, he insists, including the "devil," contains a spark of holiness. He becomes faint. (Later he will collapse, supposedly from such hazardous dabbling, which is said to invite potentially perilous consequences.)

Meanwhile, the *batlonim*'s conversation turns to Sender and his search for a husband for Leah. He is seeking a son of a family of means as well as prestigious lineage. The *batlonim* observe how this departs from the custom whereby a wealthy man seeks for his daughter first and foremost a Judaically learned and scholarly husband, without regard to his material circumstances.

Leah comes in, purportedly to examine the aged curtains enclosing the Torah scrolls in the ark. She has promised to embroider a new set to commemorate the anniversary of her mother's death. Khonen is transfixed by her, but she averts her eyes. When she is told that he is staring at her, however, she acknowledges—still with downcast eyes—that she remembers him from the days when, as a much younger, poor yeshiva student, he took meals at her family's home.<sup>26</sup> "Breathless," she muses on their mutual attraction. After she leaves, Khonen resumes singing to himself from the Song of Songs an erotic passage referring to physical attributes of the beloved one. Then he confesses to his kabbalistic use of incantations, rituals and formulae according to a mystical manual of "practical magic," which involves complex explorations of secret names for God, talismans, potions, occult symbols and invocations.

Khonen's objective is to inhale into his soul a diamond melted into tears—to acquire the rays of the "third palace" or sphere of the kabbalistic Tree of Life, with the hope of attaining the sixth level: *tiferet*, the throne of glory and house of the "world to come." At the same time, in the earthly world, he seeks sufficient wealth in gold to impress someone (Leah's father?) whose values are defined by material wealth.

Warned by Henekh of the dangerous ground on which he stands with his summoning of holy powers, Khonen remains adamant in his reliance on the Kabbala and the holiness of those powers. The Messenger intercedes to offer his belief that people marry their "intended," and Khonen assumes that to be an acknowledgment of his victory.

But Sender enters to announce that he has indeed succeeded in betrothing Leah to the son of a man of both material means and family pedigree. He has negotiated an agreement for what he considers an "appropriate" marriage, and Khonen now realizes that his kabbalistic machinations have been for naught.

The Messenger comments that betrothal agreements between parents are sometimes not honored by one or the other, and that this can lead to adjudication by a rabbinical court—an observation eerily prefiguring what follows in the play.

Nonetheless, the *batlonim* join Sender in rejoicing with dance. But Khonen, having entered a fatal sphere of kabbalistic exposure through his ill-advised incantations, expires after falling to the floor and exclaiming that the secret of the “twice-uttered Divine Name” has been revealed to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACT II

A square in Brinnits, three months later.

In keeping with a custom to celebrate the upcoming marriage of a wealthy man’s daughter, the town’s beggars and other poor, physically handicapped, and children have been invited by Sender to a communal feast in his courtyard. Facing the synagogue is a mound with a gravestone marking the joint death of a “holy and pure” bride and bridegroom martyred for their faith in the year 5408 on the Hebrew calendar.

A *batlen* explains to a guest that this couple, while being led to the marriage canopy, had been murdered as victims of the infamous Khmelnytsky Cossack revolt and massacres, which commenced in the Ukraine and Poland in 1648 as a war of liberation. Not only Poles were targeted, however; thousands of their protected Jewish intermediaries were murdered as well.<sup>27</sup>

This site, the *batlen* explains, is called the “holy grave.” Sighs are heard from it before weddings. Local custom calls for dancing around it to perpetually entertain the buried couple.

A *batlen* explains to the *shames* the importance of Sender’s lavish communal entertainment in the context of entrenched superstition. One can never know for certain, he underscores, that one of the paupers isn’t a reincarnation of an important person from a previous life. Maybe even Elijah the Prophet, suggests the *shames*.

Waiting for the bridegroom to arrive, Leah, in her wedding gown, dances with the paupers—in the belief that if a bride is left alone before the marriage ceremony, demons could come and carry her away. Frade, her frightened, now-elderly nursemaid from childhood (to whom she refers as her grandmother), cautions that demons are lurking everywhere as evil spirits whose names must not be mentioned. But Leah protests that they are not evil, just the souls of people who died before their time and have returned to complete their lives. In that connection she recalls a young lad of “lofty soul,” profound thoughts and holy purposes who once lived in Brinnits but whose life was suddenly snuffed out without warning (obviously Khonen, albeit unnamed and with vague recollection). She wonders what became of “the rest of him,” for strangers buried his body in “foreign soil.”

Because her mother died young, Leah will go to the cemetery to ask her (spirit) to accompany her father in leading her to the marriage canopy—and even to dance with her afterward.

The souls of the dead do return to earth, interjects the Messenger, but not as spirits without bodies. There are souls that must undergo several incarnations before they receive purification.

Souls of the wicked cannot purify themselves. They require a *tsaddik* to free them of their sins and purify them. But there are also wandering souls who find no repose and thus become *dibbuks* to possess the body of a living person and thus receive their purification.

Sender tells Leah to assure her mother that he has honored all her deathbed pleas to rear her as a virtuous woman, and that he is now giving her in marriage to a learned, God-fearing young man from a fine family.

Leah expresses her wish to invite an unrelated guest to the wedding, who, she insists when Frade objects, is no stranger. To the contrary, he was once like one of the family in their home. Moreover, she knows from a dream where his grave is, and he has asked to be invited.



Menashe, the bridegroom, arrives, seized with some inexplicable terror of “strangers” looking at him—but, above all, fear of “the maiden.”

Meanwhile, Sender becomes concerned that Leah has not returned from the cemetery. When she and Frade do return, Frade explains that Leah fainted there, though she managed to revive her. She begs Sender not to ask what actually happened: “I am still shaking!” When Menashe approaches Leah and covers her face with the customary veil, she tears it off, pushes him away, and exclaims that he is not her bridegroom. She pleads with the martyred “holy bride and groom” to protect her from their joint grave and save her. When lifted up, she screams out in a bloodcurdling man’s voice, “You buried me, but I have come back to my destined bride, to my beloved, and I will never leave her!”

Shaken, Menashe’s father Nakhum exclaims that she has gone mad. But the Messenger explains, simply and with conviction, that a *dibbuk* has entered and possessed the bride.

\* \* \* \* \*

### ACT III

A Saturday evening after the Sabbath in the house of Reb Azriel of Mirapol—three days later.

The large room is filled with Hassidim—some immersed in holy books, others conversing with one another. Referring to the Messenger, one of them says that this “guest” has come with some “incredible and frightening tales” that contain profound, unfathomable allusions. While all wait for Reb Azriel to appear, he relates a parable of the great-grandson of the revered Reb Naḥman of Bratslav, the founder of the Bratslaver Hassidim in the late eighteenth and first decade of the nineteenth century. Reb Naḥman’s highly allegorical and mystical tales are thought by many—including modern scholars of Hassidism—to have been deliberately created so as not to be understood, with secret messianically related meanings that can be deciphered only by an inner core of a future generation of disciples, and only when the time is ripe.<sup>28</sup>

On its face, this parable tells of mystical notions about the heart of the world, which sits at the opposite end of the universe, where a clear spring flows from a large rock on a high mountaintop. This heart of the world yearns for the clear spring but cannot take even the smallest step in that direction, for if it moves from its place, it will lose sight of the summit and the spring. And if the heart of the world attempts to do so even for an instant, it will lose its own life and the world will begin immediately to die. The spring has no time or life span of its own, living on time given it by the heart of the world one day at a time. A righteous, benevolent man travels the world gathering shiny threads from various hearts, and he weaves time from them. When he has woven an entire day, he gives it to the heart of the world, which in turn gives it to the clear spring. And it lives another day.

Reb Azriel enters and announces that this evening’s post-Sabbath celebration, for which the Hassidim have been gathering around the table to partake of *halla*, is the feast of King David “the Messiah.” He tells a story about the Ba’al Shem Tov in which he (the BESHT) came to join a crowd watching a tightrope walker cross a river on a rope. When asked the meaning of his presence there, the BESHT replied that if the tightrope walker would work as hard on his soul as he did on balancing his body—if mankind would submit its souls to such discipline—his soul would be able to cross the deep abysses of life’s slender, tenuous threads.

Taking note of the presence of the Messenger (the “stranger”), Reb Azriel launches into a reminder to all that the holiest word in the entire Torah is God’s Name. He relates how in the days of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, the “four supreme holinesses of the world” would come together annually on Yom Kippur. Then the High Priest would enter the chamber known as the “Holy of Holies” and utter the ineffable name of God—taking care not to allow even the slightest sinful thought to enter his mind at that moment lest it cause the destruction of the world. Expanding on that concept, R. Azriel asserts that any place from which one lifts one’s eyes toward heaven is the “Holy of Holies,” so

that any human, since he has been created by God “in His own image,” is thus a high priest; and each day of one’s life is therefore Yom Kippur, and every word he speaks from the heart is God’s Name. Thus, every sin or transgression a person commits—whether one of commission or omission—leaves a trail in its path, contributing to the world’s destruction.

Through many incarnations, R. Azriel continues, the human soul is drawn to the source of its existence—the “Divine Throne on High.” It sometimes happens that when a soul has reached the highest level of purification, it falls victim to demons—evil forces—that cause it to stumble and fall: “The higher it [the soul] rises, the deeper it falls.” And with the fall of such a soul, a world is plunged into destruction, overwhelmed by darkness and mourned by all ten spheres.

R. Azriel is told that Sender of Brinnits has arrived because a terrible misfortune has befallen him: a *dibbuk* has possessed his daughter and he has brought her to him, God’s emissary. When Sender relates the incident upon her being veiled for marriage, even though she has been pious, obedient and modest—undeserving of such misfortune—R. Azriel observes that children are sometimes punished for the sins of their parents. Viz., perhaps Sender has committed some wrong to bring this upon Leah.

Apparently, in all candor, Sender cannot recall having committed any such egregious wrong, for which, if he knew about it, he would gladly do penance. He does recognize the male voice emanating from Leah as that of a Brinnits yeshiva student who had once taken meals at his home and had died suddenly in the synagogue a few months earlier. He heard that the young man had been dabbling in Kabbala and was thus harmed. It was said that the cause of death was evil spirits, as he had been claiming that one must fight against sin and that even Satan possessed a spark of holiness; and he had tried to conjure up two barrels of gold. But Sender cannot recall ever having caused him pain or shame.

R. Azriel calls upon the *dibbuk* in Leah to reveal his identity. But, through Leah’s male voice, the *dibbuk* refuses. Why has he/it possessed Leah? Because “I am her beloved! I have not died.” R. Azriel orders the *dibbuk* to vacate Leah’s body. Acknowledging that while R. Azriel can command angels and seraphim, the *dibbuk* insists that he cannot do anything to *him*—he has nowhere to go. There are countless worlds, but he has no place in any of them. Thus he pleads with R. Azriel not to pursue or expel him. But both remain adamant.

R. Azriel thus calls for a *minyán* (quorum of ten), which can grant authority for the expulsion of a demon. Still refusing, the *dibbuk*—continuing to speak through Leah’s mouth—refuses to accept R. Azriel’s assurances of protection and, on the other hand, his threats of the consequences—curses, adjurations, ostracism and excommunication if he will not leave: “There is no power on earth that can help me. The loftiest heights cannot compare with my present resting place! I am bound to my beloved and I will never be separated from her!”

Called upon by R. Azriel to grant the required permission to excommunicate a soul, the town rabbi, R. Shimshon, first tells of a threefold dream in which Khonen’s long-dead father, Nisn ben Rifke, demands summoning Sender to a *din torah* (trial by a rabbinical court) concerning an obligation Sender had failed to honor. R. Azriel agrees to serve as the presiding judge at this unusual trial between a living person and a dead one. Still apparently unaware of what might be the accusations against him, Sender nonetheless accepts the summons, as he is required to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACT IV

About twelve hours later in R. Azriel’s house in Mirapol.

Announcing that the judges have decoded R. Shimshon’s dream(s), R. Azriel sends for the deceased Nisn ben Rifke to testify. Sender agrees in advance to accept the court’s judgment, whatever it may be. And he suddenly remembers and confesses to a long-ago agreement with Nisn. But he insists that he is not guilty of anything.

Nisn, speaking from “the true world” (afterlife) in his claim against Sender, testifies that after he and Sender were both married in the same week, they agreed that should their wives give birth one to a boy and the other to a girl, the two children would eventually wed. Sender now recalls that agreement.

Indeed, although Nisn and his wife had moved far away, she bore a son at the same time that Sender’s wife bore their daughter Leah. Nisn, who died shortly thereafter, learned from the “True World” that his son had been born with a lofty soul and was ascending from one plane to another, and that he was drawn to his intended bride since the two were bound together—though Khonen came to Sender’s home to meet Leah as a poor man.

As a rich man, Sender ignored Khonen and began seeking a bridegroom who had distinguished lineage and substantial wealth. Recognizing Khonen’s despair, the “powers of darkness” spread a net and caught him, taking him from this world before his time. Thus his soul wandered until it came to possess his intended beloved bride as a *dibbuk*.

With his son’s death, Nisn was now cut off from both worlds—left with neither a name nor anyone to recite *kaddish* in his memory. He pleads for judgment against Sender for his responsibility, not only for the death of his son but in effect for taking the life of all possible future progeny that will now never be born.

Sender offers no defense or justification. Because his violation of their agreement was not done with malice or even knowledge of Khonen’s birth, Sender asks for Nisn’s forgiveness. But Nisn insists that Sender deliberately made no attempt to inquire about Khonen’s existence or whereabouts because his main concern was a comfortable life for Leah as well as honor for the family.

The court finds that inasmuch as it cannot be known whether at the time of their agreement either one’s wife was already pregnant, and, according to the Torah, any agreement involving something not yet known with certainty to have been created is invalid, Sender was not obligated to fulfill that agreement. However, since the agreement was accepted in the “heavenly palaces” with the belief implanted in Khonen that Leah was his intended bride, and inasmuch as Sender’s later behavior caused misfortunes to befall Nisn and his son, the court orders Sender to give half his fortune to the poor. Moreover, Sender is ordered for the remainder of his life to light a *yartsayt* candle and recite the *kaddish yatom* (mourner’s *kaddish*) each year for both Khonen and Nisn—as if they were immediate family members. At the same time, the court begs Nisn—as a righteous one among the deceased—to forgive Sender unconditionally and order his son to vacate Leah’s body. By so doing, a branch of the fruitful tree of the Jewish people will not wither; and in return, the Almighty will shine His grace on both Nisn and his wandering son.

Sender accepts the judgment as promised. Nisn is ordered to return to his “resting place” and to refrain from doing harm to anyone. But he will not signal his acceptance of that judgment, and the *dibbuk* announces through Leah’s mouth that he will not leave. Thus R. Azriel has no alternative but to proceed with the exorcism and excommunication, and he calls in the necessary witnesses. Since, as he acknowledges, the higher spirits cannot overcome the *dibbuk*’s obstinacy, R. Azriel will now hand him over to the authority of the “middle spirits,” which are neither good nor evil but will drag him out forcefully. An elaborate mystical ceremony ensues, with black candles, a black curtain draping the arc, and all clothed in white robes. “I hereby excommunicate you from the people of Israel,” R. Azriel pronounces as he calls for the blowing of a shofar. Now the *dibbuk* admits that he can fight no longer, and in a dying or dead voice, he submits, promising to depart from Leah and never to return.

R. Azriel then revokes the excommunication, calling upon God to consider the suffering of Khonen’s tormented soul, which was caused to sin by demonic possession because of the mistakes and misdeeds of others. The *dibbuk* asks that the *kaddish yatom* be recited for *him*; and Sender, following R. Azriel’s instruction, is the first to do so—after which Leah faints.

Meanwhile, also following R. Azriel’s further instructions, Menashe and his family have left their home and are on their way to Mirapol so that the marriage ceremony can be performed—with R. Shimshon presiding as *m’sadeh k’dushin* (an authority on the required “holy” components of the marriage ceremony who is present to ensure their proper fulfillment).

Leah awakens and is assured that she will be protected from any evil encounter (“evil eye”) when she is led to the marriage canopy—protected not only by Sender but by the spirit of her dead mother as well. But she hears the sigh of Khonen’s voice, telling her that he is now separated from her by a magic circle into which he may not enter. He has forgotten his identity and can remember it only through Leah’s memory and thoughts of him. She begins to remember how her heart was drawn in the still of night to the light of a star, how she had shed tears and had always seen someone standing before her in her dreams. Khonen admits that it was he, as she continues to recall that she could think only of him day and night. When he left her, she recalls, her light was extinguished and her soul withered like that of a desolate widow. But then, when he came back, death turned to life for her, sorrow to joy. Why had he now left her again?

Khonen’s voice assures her that he had tried everything to break down the barriers between them; and when the last spark of strength was gone, he left her body to return to her soul.

“Come back to me, my bridegroom, my husband,” pleads Leah, “I will carry you lifeless in my heart and in my dreams; together we will rock to sleep our babies that will never be born. They are coming to take me to wed a stranger.” Appearing white-robed against a wall, Khonen’s voice assures her again that he is coming to her soul; and Leah cries out with joy that now the off-limits circle is broken. She sees him and, echoing his voice, entreats him to come to her—for she is coming to *him*. Offstage, voices call for the bride to be led to the marriage canopy. Accompanying music is heard. Leah drops her black cloak and now, all in white, proceeds toward Khonen, and at the spot where he has appeared, they merge into one. In her own voice but from afar, Leah confirms that she is bound to her beloved Khonen forever: “Together we will soar ever upward, higher and higher . . .”

Standing in the doorway and witnessing this along with the others, R. Azriel can only lower his head and mutter that it is too late. And the Messenger utters the phrase that is pronounced upon learning of one’s death, acknowledging and accepting God’s judgment: “*Barukh dayan emet*”—“Worshipped be the True Judge.”

Once again, the song “*Makhmes vos*” (or “*Al ma v’lama?*” in a Hebrew production) is heard from a distance. Indeed, the deep fall of the soul from the loftiest heights has within itself contained the ascent. But does that answer the question “why?”?

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Some of the “dybbuk operas” are titled *The Dybbuk* and subtitled *Between Two Worlds*; others are titled and subtitled in reverse order, or only with the latter; and some are simply titled *The Dybbuk*, even though, as we have seen, An-Ski’s wording *tsvishn tsvey veltn* was inseparable from the play, for him as well as for Bialik.

Just what *tsvishn tsvey veltn* means, or can be interpreted to mean, or was intended by An-Ski to mean has been the subject of numerous examinations and studies ever since the play’s Yiddish premiere, all apart from the ways in which opera composers have understood its significance on various levels and from differing viewpoints.

Some of us have intuited that An-Ski was referring to an aggregation of seemingly incompatible worlds: folklore and reality; mystics and enlightened rationalists; awesome mystery and the everyday; insular Hassidic life and modernity; religion and the living and the dead; public, unashamed folklore preservation and the sociopolitical aims toward Russia’s progressive future; Jewish and Russian identities; evil forces and redemption; and the heights and depths to which a soul (if believed to exist) can be subjected. And the story, the sensibilities of its characters, the belief in legends, and the *dibbuk* all stood between the shores of those gulfs.

There are other, less obvious, opposing or at least differing worlds between which *The Dybbuk* and its related issues can be situated. Often overlooked in this context is the world of folklore and folklife in their natural habitat versus the world of ethnography, which, by definition, is an academic pursuit by (typically urban) enlightened outsiders in the name of historical preservation and objective evaluation. An-Ski was born into and infused with the former.

Yet he had become devoted to the latter well before he was inspired to write this play—when he viewed folklore collection both well within the fields of future scholarly classification and study and valuable for artistic use, as well as indispensable to a full grasp of Jewish, Russian-Jewish and Russian social history. In that sense, among others, he stood himself between two worlds—the more so inasmuch as he still depicted Hassidic life, Hassidism and its values in a relatively benevolent light. For him, that aspect of unchanged life in the Pale certainly merited academic attention as well as public awareness, even if as a relic. In fact, he shied away from the condemnation and dismissive, antagonistic attitudes one might have expected from a social revolutionary who had jettisoned all forms of religious life and observance. At the same time, he made no attempt overly to romanticize or to deny that Hassidic world’s fossilized ways and adherences.

During the administration of the renowned Judaic scholar Louis Finkelstein as chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America—at that time one of the foremost institutions, if not the center, of higher academic Judaic study and research from rationally traditional yet modern scholarly perspectives—there was some discussion about offering an optional course or two on Hassidism and other aspects of Jewish mysticism. Finkelstein objected strenuously, even though the suggestion involved inviting as a guest professor Gershom Scholem—the world’s preeminent scholar and authority on Jewishly related mysticism. How could one justify, Finkelstein asked, the teaching at JTS of what he called such *shtus* (nonsense, foolishness, poppycock) as beliefs in magical powers of *rebbe*s, amulets, talismans, incantations, exorcisms, evil spirits and demons, *dibbuks*, and so on, to say nothing of much kabbalistic absurdity and silliness? “You are right,” Scholem famously replied, “all that is indeed *shtus*. But the scientific, historical consideration and study of *shtus* is called scholarship.” Finkelstein is reported to have been persuaded, at least in principle. An-Ski, however, probably already knew that.

Beyond signifying *The Dybbuk* and its issues hovering intermediately betwixt domains, *tsvishn tsvey veltn* was, as Izaly Zemtsovsky has observed incisively in his analysis, more than merely part of the play’s title; it was a paradigm for An-Ski’s way of “being and thinking . . . his mode of creative existence.”<sup>29</sup>

In the Hassidic world to which An-Ski did not and could not (and did not want to) belong, and despite its folk backwardness, he nonetheless seems to have found much to respect, even to admire—from which the world on the other side of the gulf in whose midst he stood might even benefit if it so chose. For example, there are nods in the play to the concept of fair judicial procedures, to leniency in acknowledgment of extenuating circumstances, to concern for the poor and other disadvantaged townfolk, to the importance and ramifications of honoring a promise. On the other hand, the paradigm applied equally to his ambivalence—to his status as an outside observer, collector and ethnographer as a Russian Jew *and* a Russian with modern sensibilities.

In the event, it is not only the story or the playwright, but the *dibbuk* itself that is caught between worlds—between death and its refusal, the destructive forces of evil and redemption, wandering and refuge, helplessly inextinguishable, eternal romantic love and a promise to forgo it—and between the deepest depths and ever higher heights of the soul, in the end now merged into one with that of the intended bride.

*The Dybbuk* as opera involves an additional set of issues to consider. Of course we can never know if An-Ski ever imagined his play as the basis for a future opera, nor even if he would have approved of it in principle. But if we suppose for a moment that the idea crossed his mind in a positive vein, we can only fantasize about the nature of the libretto he would have wanted. Which characters, emotions and other elements would he have wanted emphasized operatically? How would personalities be portrayed through sung roles? Even as an opera, would he have envisioned any spoken dialogue between arias, ensembles and orchestral interludes? To what extent, if at all, would he have thought in terms of a quasi-Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*? What voice types would he have preferred for which roles? How open would he have been to various compositional techniques, procedures, or deviation from notions of established tonality?

In any case, the accumulation of “dybbuk operas” has introduced the play to another, additional world—the realm of opera, which in some respects can be a circumscribed world of its own, not only in the obvious terms of (primarily)



singers as opposed exclusively to dramatic actors and actresses, but vis-à-vis operatically attuned directors, producers, interpreters, coaches, repetiteurs, audiences, and, not least, aficionados.

Notwithstanding the importance of music that An-Ski, Bialik and Habima attached to *The Dybbuk* originally, leading to Engel's score and its place as a fixture in subsequent productions—but still of course as a spoken play—opera and drama remain two distinct genres, even if sometimes they can overlap. So in a way, *The Dybbuk* might be said to stand now between another two worlds of high culture: that of theatre per se and that of opera.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Pale of Settlement was the area that included the European regions or territories of the Tsarist Empire in which the majority of its Jews were permitted permanent residence. The restriction and its origins date to the last decade of the eighteenth century, more specifically beginning with statutory law in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Increasing restrictions followed, imposing complications throughout the century. There were some temporary relaxations under Alexander II for certain economic, socioeconomic and, later, professional and academic classes, but much of that relaxation did not last. And further, even new restrictions were imposed following the tsar's assassination in 1881 and the waves of pogroms that began that year.

Many thousands of Jews did manage, however, to live illegally, quasi-legally, semi-legally or temporarily outside the Pale, with fluctuating degrees of enforcement at different times. The Pale did not include the Russian Empire's Kingdom of Poland ("Russian Poland") where separate, different rules and regulations applied to Jews. Nor were the permitted ("tolerated") areas of residence of the long-standing communities of Central Asian and Caucasian Jews considered part of the Pale, whose provisions did not apply to them.

The Pale was formally abolished only in March 1917 by the Russian Provisional Government established after the revolution a month earlier, which forced the tsar's abdication.
- 2 David G. Roskies, ed. *S An-Sky: The Dybbuk and Other Writings* (New York 1992 and NewHaven, CT, 2002), Introduction. Roskies points out that miners of the Donets Basin Russified his name for him, and that there are two differing versions that account for the subsequent abbreviation of A. An-Ski (or An-Sky). In one account, An-Ski apparently claimed that the *A* was an intentional echo of his mother's name, Anna. But he offered that explanation only twenty years later. In the other version, however, he recounted that it was the politically radical writer Gleb Uspensky who invented the name for him de novo, without reference to his mother.
- 3 Historians have tended to stress the terrorism aspect of the Narodniki movement, or at least a significant element of it, concentrating on its adoption of Anarchism in a sort of fusion. Referring to the Narodniki as the Party of the People's Will, Barbara Tuchman, for example, quotes from the Narodniki program as aiming to "undermine the prestige of government and arouse in this manner the revolutionary spirit of the people and their confidence in the success of their cause." (See in her *The Proud Tower*; NY, 1962.) Thus, along with others, she highlights the Narodniki's role in the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II, which they considered a "triumphant coup." And yet, ironically, he was celebrated as the liberator of the serfs. The bulk of the peasantry is said to have mourned his death, believing that the landowners were responsible. And, of course, that one or more Jews were involved in the attack easily fed and fueled the era of pogroms beginning that year.

None of this should be associated with An-Ski's educational mission among the Narodniki. And he had no use for the strategies or policies of the Anarchists, who were opposed in principle to the establishment of any type of formally structured political party.

- 4 Quoted by Lucy Davidovitch, *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (NY, 1967).
- 5 Jewish music historian and writer Jascha Nemtsov, who has made exhaustive studies at the relevant archives in the former Soviet Union and has published a number of articles and book chapters on the An-Ski Expedition as well as on the Gesellschaft für jüdische Volksmusik and its circle, thinks it a bit curious that there is no mention in Engel's notes about hearing jointly with An-Ski the legend or story from an innkeeper's wife. Nor has he found field recordings of "*Mipnei ma?*" from any one source exclusively. (P.c. January 18, 2019.)
- 6 According to a 1922 recollection by S. L. Tsitron, a friend of An-Ski's, An-Ski had explained about the source for the play:

"The idea came to me when I was traveling in the Volhynia and Podolia provinces collecting Jewish folklore. Arriving with Joel [Engel] in Podolia, we couldn't find an inn. The rich man of the town took us into his home . . . The thought came to me here in this house that a tragedy was destined to occur. From that Sabbath evening, I began to imagine various ways in which the tragedy might unfold."

(Quoted in Eleanor Mlotek, comp. and ed., *S. An-Ski, 1863–1920: His Life and Work*; NY, 1980.)
- 7 Roskies, op. cit.
- 8 While these are the proper modern transliterations, the term came to be spelled in Roman characters with a *y*, beginning with the Yiddish version—which is how the play is known universally.
- 9 The term, however, appears neither in talmudic literature nor in Kabbala, where the phenomenon is called simply "an evil spirit," and in some talmudic literature also *ru'ah tza'it*. In the Christian New Testament it appears as an "unclean spirit."
- 10 See in Gershom Scholem, "Golem and Dibbuk in the Hebrew Lexicon," in *L'shonenu* 6, 1934.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid. Although all of this is now properly dismissed as irrational superstition, it is worth observing in general that some antiquated superstitious beliefs have their catalytic roots in factual occurrences for which no other logical explanation could be found or imagined at the time. And over time, in the absence of scientific knowledge or reasoning, layers of myths became superimposed that some would refuse to relinquish. For example, some reports of supposedly witnessed possession may have been born of what today would be diagnosed as bouts of serious mental derangement, hysteria or mania—in nonmedical terms what was once called schizophrenia, delirium or lunacy—or as the effects of psychedelic or other drug use.
- 13 See An-Ski's letter to Haim Zhitlowsky, quoted in Izaly Zemtsovsky, "The Musical Strands of An-Sky's Texts and Contexts," in Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein, eds., *The Worlds of S. An-Sky. A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*.

- 14 Emanuel Levy, *The Habima—Israel’s National Theater 1917-1977: A Study of Cultural Nationalism* (NY, 1979), although the book is not without confusing vagueries and some inaccuracies with regard to *The Dybbuk*.
- 15 There are, however, conflicting but unproven accounts to the effect that it was Vakhtangov who first approached Engel. More likely, Vakhtangov urged Engel to complete the score, knowing that he had already committed himself to the project and had already begun work on it.
- 16 See Rita Flamenboim, “Joel Engel (1868–1927)—Music for the Play Haddibuk by Sholem An-Sky” in Wolfgang Birtel, Joseph Dorfman and Christoph Hellmut Mahling eds., *Judische Musik und ihre Musiker im 20. Jahrhundert* (Mainz, 1998).
- 17 Odette Aslan, “*Le dibbouk d’An-Ski et la Realisation de Vakhtangov*” in *Les Voies de la creation theatricale* 7 (Paris, 1979).
- 18 Zemtsovsky, op. cit. Despite its many valuable insights and keen observations, however, this article/book chapter is not unalloyed—especially with respect to verification of certain assumptions (some of them long held) or information only assumed to be factual.
- 19 Some sources give the initial Hebrew rendering of the “*Makhmes vos*” wording as:

*Mipnei ma, mipnei ma  
yorda han’ shama  
me’igara rama  
I’veira amikta?  
y’rida  
tzorekh aliya hi.*

This earlier wording was perhaps based on what was heard sung by one or more informants and/or as considered initially by Bialik. Apparently he revised the wording (for the same tune) by the time he published his Hebrew version of the play in 1918, so that, for example, *yoredet* replaces *yorda*, which was considered archaic; and his Hebrew has *al ma v’lama* instead of *mipnei ma*, which he seems to have considered more in line with modern Hebrew poetry. Also, these changes may have been done in order to render the syllabic count more poetic and more powerful. Ofer Ben-Amots made an exhaustive study of this issue in preparation for his own *dybbuk* opera, and I am grateful to him for sharing his theory.

- 20 Regarding the Aramaic *igara rama*, the full talmudic phrase, “*me’igara rama I’veira amikta*” translates literally as “from a high roof into a deep water [well] [a deep pit].”
- 21 Albert Weisser, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music* (NY, 1954).
- 22 Commonly translated as “beadle” (which can strike many as meaningless), a *shames* is the caretaker or attendant of a synagogue. In addition to keeping order, his responsibilities may include looking after ritual objects, making sure that the Torah scrolls are rolled to the correct place for the next service at which the Torah is read, helping to ensure the presence of a *minyan* (quorum of ten) for all services, acting as a rabbi’s or cantor’s lay assistant, and even functioning as the prayer leader when needed.

- 23** *Batlen* (pl. *batlonim* in Yiddish) translates literally or technically as “idler,” which is how it appears in most English translations of the play. (Hebrew-English dictionaries also give “loafer, ne’er-do-well, or poor men sitting around [with nothing to do].”) But it is also another of the terms unique to typically small, relatively informal Old World orthodox synagogue settings, signifying idle men who hang around the synagogue apart from services on weekdays or weekday evenings. They might be there just to converse socially but also to be available, for a small compensation, to recite Psalms on behalf of those incapable of doing so on their own—in the belief that Psalm recitation could be beneficial to one’s or one’s family member’s recovery from illness or other precarious situations.
- 24** *Gematria* is a procedure for disclosing supposedly hidden meanings in biblical or other sacred texts by reckoning the numerical value or equivalents of the Hebrew letters of a word or phrase. For example, the numerical equivalent of the three Hebrew characters spelling the Hebrew word for “ladder” have the sum of 130. The sum of the four letters spelling “Sinai” is also 130. According to *gematria*, therefore, since the Torah was revealed on Mount Sinai—i.e., “from above”—it is ipso facto the ladder leading from “the earth to the heavens.” Without taking that as actually divine in origin, this sort of coincidence can make for arithmetical amusement and jumping-off points for sermons or homilies. In certain circles, however, these “coincidences” are considered divinely intended.
- 25** Here Khonen follows the traditional rabbinic view—no longer universally accepted by modern biblical scholarship—that the eroticism of the Song of Songs is not meant literally, but is a metaphor for the intensity of human love for God. However, since Khonen is also enraptured by Leah at this point, some might intuit a double reference on his part. If so, it might place him between yet another pair of worlds.
- 26** This was a common practice in eastern Europe known as *esn teg* (lit., eating or meal days), by which families of adequate means provided meals at their homes for yeshiva students, usually on designated days of the week.
- 27** It has been estimated that between 18,000 and 20,000 Jews were murdered in Poland in connection with the Khmelnytsky rebellion—roughly half of the Jewish population then. See, for example, Shaul Stampfer, “What Happened to the Jews of the Ukraine in 1648?” in *Jewish History* 7 (2003).
- 28** For a brief summary of the phenomenon of Reb Naḥman of Bratslav and the issues surrounding his tales, see my chapter on Paul Schoenfield’s opera, *The Merchant and the Pauper*. For more detailed discussions see Aryeh Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman’s Stories (Sippurei ma’asi’ot)* (Jerusalem and Monsey, NY, 1983).
- 29** Zemtsovsky, op. cit.