

## *The Texts of the Convivium*

### THE SILENCE OF GOD IN THE PAGES OF A GREAT YIDDISH WRITER

In the preface of his novel *Shosha*, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Nobel Prize in 1978, says that it has no claim to represent the Jews in Poland in the years before Hitler, but only to tell the tale of some characters.

Each reader has the right to find what interests him more in a book. Therefore, I will start by saying that in *Shosha* what particularly struck me was the vivid representation of a religiousness and religious mentality which appears to be typical of so many stricter practicing Jews, but then however, in depth, and in a more general sense, also of many non-Jews.

What religiousness and what mentality? I will try to give an idea by quoting some passages taken from the novel as I go along to put everything together piece by piece.

The protagonist, Aaron, who narrates in first person, is the son of a Rabbi. He gives a brief description of his father: a short man, red beard and blue eyes, a long pipe hanging from his mouth, seated all day long at a reading desk studying the Talmud, giving explanations and writing comments.

Aaron immediately adds: “Ever since I can remember, I have heard him repeating the phrase: ‘It is forbidden’. Everything I wanted to do was a transgression. I was not allowed to draw and paint a person: it was a violation of the Second Commandment... I couldn’t invent a story: it represented a lie”.

This is how the mother of the young woman Shosha described him: “He was a dear man, a saint. I used to consult him on matters of religious law. He never even used to look at women. When I entered the room, he used to turn away. He was always at his reading desk. There were such great books, like in a house of study”.

One of the protagonist’s brothers, Moyshe, also became a Rabbi, following in the footsteps of his father who had by now passed away. He was taller, with a blond, stringy beard and shoulder length side curls. He came to Warsaw with their elderly mother for Aaron’s marriage to Shosha.

At the station Aaron wanted them to take a hansom cab to the boardinghouse ran by a pious *Chassid* (a devotee of the mystical-popular tradition), where *kosher* food, in other words pure food, was strictly eaten. But the young Rabbi refused to get in the hansom cab. Why was this? “The seat may be made of mixed material”. So what was to be done then? “After a long discussion it was decided that my mother should place her shawl on the seat”.

During the journey Moyshe began to rock back and forth, muttering: was he reciting a psalm, or morning prayers? On arriving at the boardinghouse they found, amongst other people, a man who was also praying, with his prayer shawl and phylacteries (little boxes which contain Biblical passages in parchment) tied to his arm and forehead.

The Rabbi declined an invitation to lunch with his new sister-in-law’s family because he was not sure whether the food would be strictly kosher. He only agreed to have some tea and fruit. But then he didn’t agree with the fact that women were to sit down at the table with men: this did not fall into the Chassid tradition. The lady of the house put things right by seating the more elderly men and women in two different circles and left the young people standing.

When religious people speak about what is happening in the world and the more painful events themselves, the refrain is “Everything comes from heaven” or “Everything is destined”: destined, of course, not by a blind case, but by the divine Will.

“Who are we to tell God what He has to do and when He has to do it?” the Rabbi Moyshe exclaimed at a certain point, and “how can insignificant creatures like ourselves, with such poor wretched brains, understand what He does?”

The author, who expresses himself through the words of the protagonist, is undoubtedly a man of great religious sensitiveness. The answers he receives from tradition leave him unsatisfied, everything appears enigmatic to him, since he is in pursuit of a continual search.

The novel I have mentioned, *Shosha*, is of clear autobiographical inspiration, although the narration requires remarkable variants of authentic fiction. On the contrary, the novel *A boy in search of God* presents itself as being more strictly autobiographical. Furthermore, it is here that the author’s doubts regarding the traditional faith and all his tormented search for a God who decidedly seems to hide Himself are expressed in a more incisive and intense manner.

In certain moments of exaltation God seems to open up His secrets to him, but then moments of desperation shortly take over. Let’s hand the word over to him: “The cause of my melancholy was often the same, unbearable pity for those who were suffering and had suffered throughout all generations. I had heard of the cruelty perpetrated by the Cossacks of Chmielnicki. I had read about the Inquisition. I knew about the pogroms against the Jews in Russia and Spain.

“I was living in a world of cruelty. I was tormented not only by the suffering of men, but also by that of the suffering of animals, birds, and insects. Lions, tigers and leopards had to devour other creatures or die of hunger. The noblemen used to go walking in the forests shooting deers, hares and pheasants for the pure pleasure of it.

“I felt resentment not only against man, but also against God. It was He who had given the wild animals claws and fangs. It was He who had made man a blood thirsty creature, ready to be violent at every step.

“I was a child, but I had the same vision of the world that I still have today... an immense slaughterhouse, an enormous hell”.

Let’s go back to *Shosha*. Here a character who talks with the protagonist tells him of the discourses made by a friend of theirs, Morris Feitelzohn, philosopher and scholar of cabbala but a non-believer.

In times of extreme misfortune for Poland invaded by Hitler’s army, during those sad evenings Morris “used to speak like I had never heard him speak before. The heritage of generations had been roused within him, and he hurled sulphur and stones against the Almighty; at the same time his words were burning with religious fire”. (An unquestionable literary incarnation of the author, who seemed to be speaking through him in first person).

Morris criticized God “for all his sins since Creation. He still asserted that the whole universe was a game, but that this game had raised it to the point of making it become divine.

“The substance of his words was that since God is eternally silent, we do not owe Him anything.

“The true religion, he affirmed, does not lie in serving God, but in teasing Him. If He wanted evil, then we should aspire to the contrary. If He wanted wars, inquisitions, crucifixions, the Hitlers of the world, then we should want justice, Chassidism, our version of grace. The Ten Commandments were not His, but ours”.

I particularly like the novels and tales by Singer that I have read because of the personality of the author that is so human, and even too human, and yet troubled in the

search for God; for the wealth of his experiences, I would say of various levels, and of his representation of life; and likewise because of how he relives, from the inside, that spirituality which traditionally appears to be the most widespread and typical of his people. Not least is the enthralling simplicity of his style, with which everything is described and told.

They are books which not only keep me company, but which give me such a vivid picture of so many things, they edify me for many things, and for many others they pose me with problems of substantial importance. This problematic manner of mine of dealing with the narrative texts themselves leads me to drawing some of my own more personal conclusions, which I will now put to the reader, if he has the patience to follow me.

I would like to start by saying that I am very much edified by seeing these communities so intensely concentrated in the worship of God and prayer. Everything is immersed in such a dense, thick sacral atmosphere, which one could almost cut with a knife!

I well understand how such an attachment to traditions forms strong cement for the internal cohesion of a community, for its historical survival. On the other hand, I do not at all share that obsession of purity linked to mere exterior behaviour.

I think that Jesus confuted once and for all the idea that a man is pure for what enters his body from the outside (like food), and not, on the contrary, for what comes out of his body to express his intimate feelings: for example good words, which reveal good feelings, or, on the contrary, bad words which manifest a wicked heart of hearts (Mt 15, 1-20; Mk 7, 1-23).

I do not at all like that sex phobia, nor do I like that predominance of “no” over “yes”: that moral system of signs bristling with prohibition, of “do not do”, of “it is forbidden to”, of “it is a sin”, of “be careful, as I will strike you down if you move!” although, with all the respect and the most profound veneration, I must confess that in the reading of the Ten Commandments themselves what greatly disturbs me is the recurrence, rather excessive for my taste, of the “do not do this” and “do not do that”.

There is indeed a predominance of the negative over the positive in the ethic itself, from which one can only come out repressed and crushed and, therefore, without any other alternative, sad. Whereas I think that the imperative that urges us to deepen our knowledge, to create beauty, to multiply the initiatives of good is far more ethical: for heaven’s sake, a bit more enthusiasm, and cheer up!

At this point the problem of evil arises, the silence of God and furthermore, man’s reaction to such silence: a reaction which, at worst, could lead him to forms of atheism.

However, if one considers well, to which God does that character rebel, who the author himself seems to be the most faithful spokesman especially in particular moments of black moods (I would say well justified)? I think that the “sulphur” and “stones” of a man like Morris are aimed more at a certain image of God rather than at God Himself: precisely the God of “Everything comes from heaven” and “Everything is destined”, the God from whose almighty, omnipresent, omni-operating will also comes all evil.

Singer seems to contest such a God, without, with this, claiming to define a Divinity that he feels so profoundly mysterious and, despite everything, very real. But is God really like this?

One may well wonder whether He really has predisposed that every thing, even the most terrible things, should be as they are.

A glimmer of an answer could come to us perhaps from certain words uttered by the Rabbi Moyshe: “Since God caused emptiness and attenuated His light with the aim of creating the world, His face has to remain hidden. Without decreasing the power of His

splendour there would be no free choice. Redemption will not come all at once, but gradually. God's war against Amalek will last for a long time..."

Here God appears almighty in His first principle and in the final triumph of His kingdom, but not in the actual situation in which He pours this creation, which is in progress and which appears at the moment to be so influenced by the forces of evil. Evil is born from the free will of the creature, which God places into being, to which God gives consistency, "decreasing the power of His splendour", in other words, withdrawing, surrendering part of His power.

In other words, a certain weakening of God – not of God in Himself, but of the presence of God in the world – is in the logic itself of the creative act: to create means to place very sound, and, in all senses, autonomous creatures into being.

"At the End of Time", Moyshe said a moment earlier, "the Lord will come with fire and with His carriages in a whirl to manifest His anger with fury and His blame with flames of fire". Nevertheless "the wicked will not surrender so easily. When Satan realizes that his kingdom is tottering he will cause fury and rage for the whole universe". Indeed, "there are dark powers even in the highest spheres". And "evil possesses enormous powers".

A God whose power is limited in progress needs the help of all men of good will, necessarily.

In this kind of horizon, setting our friend's Morris heart at rest, "the true religion" lies precisely "in serving God".

That will that places evil, wars, inquisitions, crucifixions and the Hitlers of the world into being should in no way be identified with the divine Will, which only wants good. So here we have that the Ten Commandments, the symbol of all justice, are first of all of God, and then, of course, also ours, but as they come to us from the divine Source of every good inspiration.

I have drawn these conclusions from the reading of a text that I hope I have not excessively forced. All the same, does the wealth of a written work not lie perhaps in the creative reactions themselves which it arouses in the reader?