



## Reflections on Rosh Hashonah



Guest Editorial by Bennett Muraskin

**Y**iddish is experiencing a mild revival. This is a welcome development, since it was the language of Ashkenazic Jews for close to a thousand years and a vast repository of Jewish culture. However, even in English translation, Yiddish literature is not widely known or appreciated. Sholem Aleichem and I. B. Singer are the only exceptions.

The most influential Yiddish writer was actually I. L. Peretz (1852-1915), a Polish Jew who lived most of his life in Warsaw and mentored an entire generation of younger Yiddish writers. Although secular in outlook, he drew on Hasidic folktales for many of his stories. One that is particularly appropriate for this season is “If Not Higher.”

Set just before Rosh Hashonah, it relates an encounter between a Litvak (a Jew from the area around Lithuania, where Hasidism was scorned as irrational) and a Hasidic rabbi (*rebbe*). It seems that the *rebbe* disappears every year just before Rosh Hashonah and his disciples are convinced he ascends to heaven to intercede with God on behalf of the townspeople. The Litvak, who happens to be visiting the

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town, scoffs at this belief and is determined to find out the truth. So he hides under the *rebbe*'s bed and when the *rebbe* leaves in the morning, he follows him. As it turns out, the *rebbe*, disguised as a Ukrainian peasant, chops wood, gives it to a poor, sick Jewish woman and kindles it for her to warm her shack. As the *rebbe* places the wood in her stove and lights it, he whispers the *slikhes* (penitential) prayers. But to the old woman he speaks Ukrainian.

The Litvak, who witnesses the entire incident, becomes a Hasid—a disciple of the *rebbe*. “And ever after, when another disciple tells how the Rabbi of Nemirov ascends to heaven at the time of the Penitential Prayers, the Litvak does not laugh. He only adds quietly, ‘If not higher.’”

Why does Peretz depict the *rebbe* doing his *mitzvah* (good deed) disguised as a Gentile? Perhaps to say that we should conceive of the “other” as a compassionate human being. This principle may appear self-evident to some, but in Israel’s occupied territories, Jews confront Palestinians as oppressors and the Palestinians reciprocate with hatred. Ethnic hatreds are alive and well in other parts of the world too, Georgia being the most recent example.

May Rosh Hashonah be a time we dedicate ourselves to transcend tribal loyalties to respect our common humanity. ♦

## 2008 Federal Election

**T**his issue features a perceptive lead article by Bryan Evans, “Election 2008: Five Parties and Two Options.” This election will take place after almost three years of one of the most regressive governments in Canada’s recent history. The circumstances under which Harper called it show the depths of authoritarianism and duplicity which his government has reached, even judging by the not always inspiring standards of Canadian politics. Contrary to Harper’s excuse, parliament was not “dysfunctional” but was simply not “functioning” completely to his advantage. He and his team made it “dysfunctional” by sabotaging parliamentary investigations into spending improprieties in the 2006 election and other potential scandals, then cut them short altogether by calling an election in violation of his own legislation imposing fixed election dates. Harper probably also wants to go to the polls before the U.S. election, to avoid the possibility that an Obama victory will create a liberal shift in the political mood in North America as a whole, making Harper’s government even more of a reactionary anachronism.

Harper’s contempt for democracy has been demonstrated from the outset by the now-infamous defecation of David Emerson, engineered by Harper, among other dubious appointments; the muzzling of cabinet ministers and civil servants; smearing critics with accusations of disloyalty; restrictions on press access;

the systematic blocking of access to government documents; the closure of the public database of access-to-information requests; the attempted censorship of the Arar report; and the suppression of internal documents revealing torture of detainees in Afghanistan during the prisoner-transfer scandal. It is a record unmatched in Canada, at least by any one government, since the Duplessis era in Quebec.

The Harper government is sordid not only in its means but also its ends—cutting funding to women’s groups and the arts; tax cuts favouring the wealthy and depleting public funds that could be used for social spending and health care; the destruction of the Kelowna Accord; undermining effective action on global warming; support for the Israeli occupation; and committing Canada to a long military occupation in Afghanistan (which Harper now promises to end under the spur of the election campaign). Canada under Harper has been utterly submissive to Bush’s imperial policies—ironically, policies which are now being widely challenged in the U.S. This has been shown in many ways, from Harper’s support for the “Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America” (SPP) scheme for further “integration” of the U.S. and Canada; to the deportation of U.S. war resisters, in spite of a motion—albeit non-binding—supported

*continued on page 8*