

## **Afterword to the epic poem of Nathan Alterman "Joy of the Poor"**

Briefly about the two concepts of interpretation of the book of Nathan Alterman. The first was proposed by Boaz Arpali in his book "The Ties of Gloom" in 1983, the second by Mordechai Shalev in an article in 1989, and expanded when written in collaboration with Eli Alon and Yariv Ben-Aaron in 2001 book "The joy of the poor. A treatise". None of the concepts claims to explain all the issues related to the understanding of the work, which itself asserts the ambivalence and incompleteness of our knowledge of reality and the impossibility of giving it an unambiguous objective assessment.

### **Boaz Arpali Concept**

The phrase "joy of the poor" seems at first glance so clear, as if it were an expression of popular wisdom, proven over the centuries. In fact, it contains an internal contradiction, a paradox, even an absurdity.

Alterman's poem is an absurd answer to the absurdity of the world, in which true happiness and freedom, if possible, are only on the verge of death. In this world, one has to give answers to absurd questions: what is more important - ideas and principles, imposed on to a collective or imposed by a collective, when the life of an individual loses all value (for example, in a totalitarian state), or life as such, outside spiritual values, preserved by negating the value of other people's lives? In such a situation, all joy is a lie. Submission to the laws of this absurd world, where power and coercion rules, the poet believes, deprives life of meaning. Resistance to them, even if it brings death, is the only thing that can give life meaning and purpose.

Nathan Alterman, unlike the poets of the previous generation (for example, Bialik), whatever was their relationship with God, is clearly not a religious person. For him, the concept of the divine does not have the meaning that religion puts into it. But, unlike some poets of the next generation (for example, Amikhai), he does not also agree to see in the life of an individual the measure of all things.

Alterman's work "Joy of the Poor" is an undivisible whole (and not a collection or cycle of poems). In form, this is a poetic work of rather large volume with a through plot.

With the exception of the first poem Introduction (from the author), everything else is a dramatic monologue of an alien from the other world. This is the way Alterman chose to describe the inner experiences and behavior of the heroine: not from the author's and not from her face (she herself couldn't or shouldn't tell some episodes), but from the face of her really non-existent husband. This allows one to describe her both "from the outside" (beauty, fortitude, suffering) and "from the inside" (with all the experiences and vibrations), although she remains silent almost all the time.

This approach also makes it possible to describe scenes in which the heroine does not take part, and to give the story a generalizing philosophical character, where a particular case is a prototype of a human problem: do moral values and behavior matter in the face of imminent death? And in general - what is the value of life?

In this case, the husband, an alien from the other world, becomes more likely a symbol of certain moral attitudes than the protagonist of the poem.

*Joy of the Poor* is also a symbol, not a participant in the plot, a concept, and, moreover, an ambivalent concept: on the one hand, it is the true, disinterested joy of the poor, inaccessible to the rich, on the other - the joy of the poor, weak in spirit, unable to resist on the brink of death. Accordingly, all the artistic means in the poem are ambivalent: the words in context acquire the opposite normal meaning, the situation at the end of the description turns out to be not the same as what she was seen at the beginning, the dead are present (but do not participate) in the life of the living, etc. Such is the ideological background of a specific "history" of the two main characters in the poem - a paradoxical combination of alienation between the living and the dead and, at the same time, the inseparable intimacy and dependence in memory, feelings and moral values handed down from generation to generation. Both the jealousy of the hero, and the zeal of the heroine and her brothers in the defense of the town, in fact - an extreme commitment to moral principles and spiritual values.

The connection of generations also contains paradox: not only the living need moral support of the dead, but they, in turn, are infected with the enthusiasm of the living ("Underground").

In a specific situation, it was especially important for Alterman to emphasize his commitment not only to moral and - more generally - cultural heritage, but also loyalty to the Land of Israel, the "land of the covenant" - one of the highest spiritual values and one of the necessary conditions for the preservation of the Jewish people.

### **The concept of Mordechai Shalev**

Without denying the seriousness of the external danger for the heroes of the poem, Shalev's concept emphasizes an internal danger, no less crucial: the confrontation of two directions in the spiritual life of the Jewish people: Judaism (in its orthodox form, requiring strict execution of religious norms and traditions) and Zionism (asserting the primacy of the task of building a Jewish state in Palestine to save the Jewish people from physical extermination and dissolving in other nations). Orthodox Jews consider the ideas and practical deeds of the Zionists to be contrary to the prophecy, according to which only the Messiah, having come, will create such a society where all of humanity will gather around the Jewish people.

According to this concept, the main characters of the work are an artistic representation of these two trends. The dead husband personifies the bearer of the ideas of Judaism, and his living widow is the embodiment of Zionism. Relations between them are characterized by mutual love-enmity, jealousy and mutual dependence. This dependence stems from the fact that, on the one hand, the people (including its Zionist-minded part) cannot live without a single code of morality, the provisions of which largely rely on religious norms and tradition; on the other hand, the need to combat Zionism, paradoxically, is the only force that unites heterogeneous masses of followers of various branches of Judaism (as, incidentally, is the Israeli Arab environment). According to Shalev, Nathan Alterman is trying to find a way to bring Zionism and Judaism to agreement and merge (the personification of such a prospect is the son of the main characters, to whom the poet saves life).

*Joy of the Poor* is also not just a symbol of the ideas of Zionism, but also an active actor in the work. It is she who sentences the Poor man to death (in the first poem of the book) for his decision not to open the door for her, not to take part in the struggle for liberation from oppression and galut. This reveals the ambivalence and inconsistency of the image of *Joy of the Poor*: saving the people from physical destruction and poverty of galut is achieved, it turns out, by distance from religion, which, according to the author of the concept, is equivalent to the spiritual death of the people and their disappearance, dissolving in the environment.

Yes, Zionism itself that is embodying in practice the idea of internal and external renewal of the people for its salvation, twice in a short period was on the verge of death - during the offensive of the German armies of Rommel in 1940-1943 and immediately after the proclamation of the state of Israel in 1948, when there was almost no chance of resisting the invasion of the five Arab states' armies. ("The Day of the Catastrophe of European Jewry" and "Independence Day" in the state of Israel are celebrated annually with a difference of one week).

To substantiate his concept, Shalev cites examples from the text of the poem (for example, "Song of Dancing" is interpreted as the violence of religious dictate; the "Request for forgiveness", as an act of recognizing by ultra-religious Jewry the difficulties of the first Zionists' battle on the Land of Israel, in which ultra-religious Jewry did not participate; one of the heroine's brothers, a Zionist, who could not bear the brunt of the struggle, accuses, in turn, the dead from the Underground that he is a traitor, since he does not take part in the struggle, etc.). Quotations are also used from other - earlier and later - works of Alterman (to show the ideological aspirations of the poet) and from ancient religious sources, whose influence on Alterman and his poem is enormous. And even the "iron" law of Alterman's creativity is formulated - the "law of victorious return" of everything expelled and rejected.

Based on Alterman's profound knowledge of Judaism (including studies at the gymnasium in Chisinau and the Herzliya Tel-Aviv gymnasium), Shalev claims that the religion and its future deeply worried the poet. This, according to Shalev, is confirmed by the text of the poem. To this is added, Shalev believes, also some Freudian motifs, as the poet's subconscious fear for the fate of the child, to whom his wife should have given birth at the time.

In his article "Neither Zionism nor Judaism - Shalev once more wrote <The Joy of the Poor>" [8] Boaz Arpali sharply criticized the concept of Mordechai Shalev, indicating that it proceeds from a predetermined purpose, in accord to which takes place the interpretation of the episodes and phrases from the text of the work ( examples contradicting this purpose are ignored), as well as from other works of Alterman and other literary and biographical sources. Arpali quotes Nissim Calderon's opinion: "Shalev reads not to understand Alterman, but to impose his ideas on him. He rapes the text <Joy of the poor>".

Shalev, according to Arpali, violates the rules of literary criticism, ignoring the genre of the work (modernist poem) and arbitrarily interpreting its text. So, according to Shalev, the dead man, in order to satisfy his jealousy, sends enemies to the city, and that in some episodes the Widow and Joy sometimes split, then merge, etc.

And the personality traits of Alterman are groundlessly distorted. He was credited with the spiritual fluctuations and duality of the civil position, although the facts show that he was not afraid to express his opinions even when they were contrary to the position of the majority of society. And, of course, he did not put on the same footing the danger of the physical extermination of the people with the departure from religion (such punishment is the prerogative of God).

With the death of Boaz Arpali in 2010 the discussion was interrupted. Nevertheless, the concept of Shalev has quite a few supporters (for example, the writer Amos Oz) who are attracted, first of all, by the urgency of the issue of confronting Zionist and ultra-religious circles and ideas. As the authors themselves say in the "Treatise": "The roots of the war of cultures in our time in the state of Israel at the beginning of the third millennium

open to our eyes in all their entanglement in the brutal Alterman's drama "The Joy of the Poor", describing the power of these clashes and outlining their desired resolution."

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### **Nathan Alterman "Joy of the Poor". The language of hints**

In the process of translating Alterman's poem, I had to face many questions concerning the meaning of certain poems. Some of the questions were discussed on the forum of the site "Nathan Alterman". On others, an attempt is made to answer (or to suggest an answer) in this article, basing on the text of the work. Of the numerous books and articles devoted to the "Joy of the Poor", only two books are cited where the topic is most fully discussed: [1] Boaz Arpali, "The Bond of Darkness," 1983. and [2] Mordechai Shalev, Eli Alon and Yariv Ben-Aaron "Joy of the poor. A Treatise", 2001.

Characters:

- Poor (pseudonym). In my opinion, we are talking about two people: # 1 is the hero of the first two chapters, # 2 is the hero of the rest of the poem.
- His wife
- Their son
- Brothers of husband and wife (judging by their number, it is not a family relationship, but national kinship)
- Wife's father
- Soldiers of the besieging troops
- Mysterious old man carrying the body of a dead warrior
- Joy of the Poor - allegorical image

Brief biography of the two Poors, restored based on the text of the poem (Alterman does not describe, of course, a specific case and does not deal with prophecies):

About Poor # 1, we know that if he had not gotten sick, had not become impoverished, and had not died prematurely, he would have been 50 years old now. His wife is a young woman, about 27 years old, and their son is about 3 years old, so the husband, who is much older, calls his wife sometimes "my daughter" and "girl":

*The disease broke the chain of days,*

*And with me, girl, you poverty know...* "The song to the wife of youth"

*As your mother I am old and feeble...*

*To my bald head you are a disaster...* "Blind mole"

He was wealthy (maybe rich), preferred the company of young men, gained many friends and felt young. There he met a cheerful and beautiful girl, fell in love and married her:

*I could say to my money: "go!"*  
*How to burn my years I know....* " The song to the wife of youth "  
*... Also when the bracelets were ringing,*  
*You, laughing, danced for us in shine,*  
*And rose a chorus of joy and greetings,*  
*Among your friends, in light and singing... "Song of light"*

He was a loving husband, but painfully jealous (perhaps because of the difference in age). Even after death, he returns to take her to the grave with him:

*Only you I followed, girl,*  
*As the neck goes after a rope. ...* "The song to the wife of youth"  
*I will pray that as a candle you should be faded,*  
*That the sword should give me you at morning... "The newcomer entered the town"*  
*From glances and fingers and sighs of the men*  
*My jealousy will guard... "The newcomer is jealous of the beauty of his wife"*

Regarding Poor # 2 (assuming that the action of the poem occurs in the year of its writing, 1940), it can be argued that he and his wife lived, apparently, in central Europe (judging by the description of nature):

*He hung my brothers on the bitches as rags -*  
*On bitches of a pine, an oak, a linden row... "Spell"*  
*So that a lumberjack from the woods could say,*  
*From the woods could confirm a beast... "Prayer for revenge"*  
They lived in a big city where life raged:  
*On weekdays, the big street, up to evening, beats... "Tambourine"*

But soon the situation changed dramatically: new laws (racial?) allowed enemies to deprive him of all rights and property; friends could not help him, because they themselves fell victim to the changes taking place in the country: instead of builders and blacksmiths, instead of "mothers of iron and stone" (an expression from Alterman's book "Stars outside") that walked earlier along the street in daylight to the sounds of violins and flutes, now the streets were filled with the rabble of servants and maidservants, marching in the light of fires (and torches) to the rumble of large drums.

The Poor and his comrades lost everything:  
*He has bribed all the judges, took all what I saved up.*  
*"The knife came!" - said the foe, and I lost all my blood.*  
*There is no judge to him, and he saved up enough ... "Spell"*  
*We were poor, none was so poor in the world... "Tambourine"*

He had to flee the city, but the enemies chased, beat, and eventually have killed him. He was buried hastily, and the place of burial was marked with a pile of stones:

*In the gorge, in the grove they trampled me...* "Prayer for revenge"

*...he alive me hit...* "Spell"

*Girl, the metal had rose and cut down*

*My head above yours in a moment...* "The song to the wife of youth"

*Who in these stones will be longer known?*

*Who in friendship was stronger than stone.* "The newcomer remembers his friends"

And since then he appears in the poem as a ghost. You can see in him the reincarnation of Poor # 1:

*I, poor-as-dead, I will find a way,*

*And all time I will stay at your door...* "The newcomer entered the town"

And his brothers died ("Crystal Night", the persecution of Jews in Germany - both the rich and the poor?). And the enemy proclaimed that it would be forever (the "millennial Reich"?):

*He hung my brothers on the bitches as rags...*

*And, when he finished, said: "Let it be always so!"* "Spell"

His wife managed to escape with her son in another country (suppose, in Poland, in Warsaw), found there some kind of pitiful room and lived in hunger. But now the enemies appeared by the refuge town and surrounded it (the forcible transfer of Jews by the Nazis to the Warsaw ghetto in 1939?). And the final solution of the issue is predetermined:

*In your beggar's room you're scraping every corner,*

*As long as the walls stand and the rafters ...* "Song of the eyes' joy"

*I'll bring you a piece of bread...* "The newcomer entered the town"

## **Stages of creating the poem**

Literary critic Boaz Arpali argues that "Joy of the Poor" was written by Alterman in the second half of 1940. [1,147]. There is also an opinion that its creation began in 1939. This question is important because in 1940, after the outbreak of the World War II (the invasion of the German armies in Poland in September 1939), Alterman's work was largely determined by the new situation, which included the almost inevitable possibility of the Nazi invasion of Palestine, followed by the complete destruction of the Jewish population in it. He interrupted some of the works he had begun ("The Song of Ten Brothers" and others) and, if he really started writing "Joy of the Poor" even earlier, now he has completely changed his plan.

It seems to me that this was the case, since the first two chapters of the work is completely different from its continuation.

These two chapters are written in the style of an English or Scottish medieval ballad (Alterman was interested in these ballads, translated some of them and wrote an article on this topic). The whole situation in the first chapter corresponds to that era; the city cannot be entered, it cannot be left (it is closed) ... There is no mention of any events except the relationship between the hero and the heroine. The hero is described only on the one hand - as a loving and jealous husband. Nothing indicates the development of his character.

It seems that Alterman intended to write a stylized ballad. But later, in the light of the impending tragedy, which determines both the future of the whole world in general and the fate of European Jewry in particular, he came up with a new - deep and versatile - concept of the poem, in which he inserted a partially finished ballad. In the original text of the work he made some changes; he added the phrase "*Girl, the metal had rose and cut down / My head above yours ...*" ("The song to the wife of youth"), emphasizing the fact of persecution and murder (contrary to what was said

earlier about his illness, as the cause of impoverishment and, apparently, death. But the impression that we are talking about two different people remains, especially since the topic of jealousy, the main and essentially the only one in the two first chapters, subsequently disappears completely from the poem.

Only at this stage was added, apparently, "Introduction", placed outside the body of the poem itself - without a number and (in later editions) without a title. Here, for the first time, enemies appear and the word "closed" acquires the meaning of "besieged" in the future.

In other chapters of the poem also there are elements of a ballad: ghosts walk around the town at night and day (husband and father of the heroine); the whole plot is presented in the statements of the hero; there are exaggerations in the description of the battle, etc. Boaz Arpali suggests [1] to see the inner dialogues of his widow in her husband's monologues, but it would be more natural, in my opinion, to regard them as her memories and reflections (the husband quotes only four phrases she said - one in the poem "Feast" and three in "On the ground of stones").

Starting from the third chapter, new heroes appear. First, the husband's comrades, who are to occupy the underground of the dead, then his brothers, who also died without resistance, and his wife's brothers, who are ready for the final battle. And the dead-living hero himself passes through enlightenment and changes in the essence of character: from reconciliation with fate and from jealousy - to a sense of shame for the choice he made (see below "The lot"), then to an understanding of his betrayal, to anger and to a thirst for revenge, to participation (emotional) in the last battle of his wife's brothers and up to the requirement: "Living son of the dead, repeat, dear, / After me: "I call: get up, my mother!" ("The end").

Another character appearing in the first line of the poem is an allegorical image called "*Joy of the Poor*". We meet with her only two and a half times. In the introduction, the Poor-as-dead is happy to go to the grave provided that Joy will come with him. In the poem "Feast" his wife denies Joy of the Poor and does not believe in her willingness to follow the dead:

*"How are you strong, Joy of all poor! And thus*

*We unable to take you, as turned.*

*Neither in our life you aren't given to us,*

*Nor could be taken to the next world."*

And in the "Song of Signs" the poor rejoice when they hear that somewhere *Joy* is knocking at the door, but they are mistaken: it is not joy of the poor, but the joy of the enemies besieging the town.

## **The lot**

Nathan Alterman tried to answer the monstrous dilemma: is there any point in fighting if the result is known in advance - surely death? And both heroes of the poem - Poor and his wife - must choose a road, each at his own intersection.

In the opening lines of the poem it says: "The Joy of all poor ... brought her lyres...". The authors of the "Treatise" [2] are surprised: "Alterman speaks about the Joy of the poor in the singular, and about her lyre in the plural. It is difficult to assume that he does it artificially, only for the sake of rhythm ... It turns out that when "Joy of the poor " she assumes the role of Zionism or resurrection, the transition to the description in the plural suggests that it will play simultaneously on all her lyres" [2,176] and give similar examples from other works by Alterman. In this particular case, I offer the following explanation: *Joy of the Poor* does not at all suggest to play the lyre itself. She brought them for all the poor as a lot: either you will rise, as free people, to a pre-lost battle and be honored (posthumously) to play lyres on the victory holiday ("The end"), or (the lyre has another use) humbly will accept fate, like slaves or like a beast intended for slaughter, and then you will sing your shame on the lyre ("Where to place the shame?"). The choice of a husband becomes known to us already in the "Introduction": he is happy to go to the grave, so long as *Joy of the Poor*

accompanied him. (The popular opinion about European Jews at that time among the Jewish population of Palestine accused them of not resisting the atrocities of the fascists).

The same fateful question arises in front of Poor's wife in the poem "Song of light": *"And each soul when it meets knives shudders..."* In the "Treatise" [2] these lines are not commented. Will she decide to turn the kitchen "weapon" into a combat one and meet with it an enemy who will come with a sword? (*"So in the mirror in the rays of the sunset, / Like with a sword, you stand in your home,"* her husband foresees. The answer is delayed almost to the end of the book. In the poem "The Night of the Siege," the husband says about her: *"The knife in the hand that's what have you at all"*... Arpali writes: "Although, obviously, it was the real circumstances of that time that did not allow the author of the book "Stars outside" to remain in the world of lyric poetry and sharply turned his attention towards another world - the moral-socio-political and although the transition from one "world" to another happened, in particular, through the "jewisation" of the text "Joy of the Poor" (diction, allusions) and the general atmosphere, but at the same time Alterman did not allow these circumstances and the Jewish problems associated with them to appear in this work explicitly. On the contrary, he forms it just in accordance with the universal models to include moments of personal and even intimate, to which the poem gave universal significance"[1,152].

Almost at the end of the poem, on the night before the battle, the heroine remembers her father, who had recently died, and for whom she harbored feelings of love and respect, since he was a devoted and caring parent. And this memory does not appear by chance. One hint connects the image of this father with Nathan Alterman's father, Yitzhak, who died in early 1939. from throat cancer: the father of the heroine because of the disease cannot speak. This is the first hint of personal property.

And on the day of the battle, a mysterious old man appears in the poem, carrying the body of a killed fighter, one of the heroine's brothers: *"An old gray-haired man came out of town, / he carries a dead body with him - / To join him to the brothers behind the wall"*. ("Dawn") Who is this man? The editors of the "Treatise" [2] write: "The appearance of this old man is mysterious. Until now, we had fighting "brothers", "friends" and underground people. And now a mysterious old man has appeared. Maybe this is another embodiment of the image of the father? Or this is an association with the prophet Elijah, whom Alterman sends to perform a completely new job for him: to carry the corpses from the battlefield ?!" [2,262]

The reincarnation of the image of the father? Yes, but not the next incarnation, but very ancient! It seems to me that Alterman likens the death of the besieged town here to the destruction of Troy (also besieged). In the last song of the Iliad (24,677-699), Homer describes how at night Priam, the king of Troy, with the help of the god Hermes, secretly takes the body of his son Hector, killed in battle by Achilles, from the Greek camp:

*"And Hermes yoked for them the horses and mules, and himself lightly drew them through the camp, neither had any man knowledge thereof...."* (Homer. The Iliad with an English Translation by A.T. Murray, [690])

Alterman had this in mind, apparently from the very beginning, and it is not for nothing that the only weapons mentioned in the poem are the spear and the sword:

*That the sword should give me you at morning...*

*Not my hand – my compassion, girl,*

*Will protect you, like fire and spear....* ("The newcomer entered the town")

*... Like with a sword, you stand...* ("Song of light")

*...Your brothers in rows raise and raise their swords...* ("Dawn")

This, of course, is not the bronze sword of the era of Homer, but the sword of our "iron" century:

*Girl, the metal had rose and cut down...*

*The iron will be destroyed, I know...* ("The song to the wife of youth")

*And towards the metal rise the men with no flaw.*

*Metal meets metal at the gates with no awe...* ("Dawn")

In the poem "Father" from the cycle "The Song of Ten Brothers", written and published at the end of 1940, a little earlier than "Joy of the Poor" (March 1941), the fourth brother speaks about his father:

*O living earth! He is the strongest of your strong fortresses.*

*The father fights a battle at the midnight, covered thickly with stars.*

*Neither the siege tower, nor the assault, nor the ram will not destroy*

*The hard labor that is valuable by the good fruits of the skillful work.*

Again we hear about the besieged town-fortress and the ancient instruments of war - siege towers and rams. Alterman quite clearly speaks here about his father Yitzhak (whom he is only hinting at in the poem "Death of the Father" from "Joy of the Poor"). And if he likens the "father" to Priam, then the "son" - Nathan himself - is likened to Hector, and Nathan's sister, Leah, whom he very much loved and appreciated - to the prophetess Cassandra, the most famous of Priam's daughters (Nathan specially went to the kibbutz, where the sister lived to listen to her advice).

Nathan Alterman chose his lot, he was ready to fight against the enemies.

And one more hint of personal quality: in the poem "The newcomer is jealous of the beauty of his wife" the dead man addresses his widow with the words "My spouse and mother." In the "Request for forgiveness" he says: "To soothe my only son you are due", in the poem "On the Land of Stones", the little son, covered by his mother's apron, appears before the Creator. And in "The end" is said: "Your son for you'll measure the couch".

This child is Alterman's hope for the salvation of the Jewish people.

So, we are talking about a little boy who can be hidden under an apron, but who is already old enough to repeat his prayer after his father for his mother's saving. And, in fact, in 1937 to Leah, the sister of Nathan Alterman, was born the son Eran, and, therefore, in 1940 he was about three years old. Mr. Eran Laav now lives and works in the same kibbutz, where she lived since 1936 and worked very fruitfully in the field of practical and theoretical pedagogy. This is the kibbutz "Nir-David" (formerly "Tel amal"), the first of those that were built by the method of "wall and tower" during one night. And, if this is the case, we may, as they say, "call for their names" (with limited liability) some of the actors listed above.

The many thousands of years of history of the Jewish people, specific biographies of his father and sister, hope for a better future for the next generation (Alterman's beloved daughter Tirtza was born in January 1941) are the sources of inspiration for Nathan Alterman in his work on the poem "Joy of the Poor".

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In his book "From Private to the Essential" (1981, Tel Aviv), literary critic Dan Miron points out the principle of the genre construction of a "modernist" poem: from a lyrical song to ode and on to epic. That is how the poem "Joy of the Poor" develops. Moreover, Alterman draws into it (hint) the epic of another nation and another era ("Iliad"). It is significant that at the moment when Alterman finishes creating the poem (December 1940), Anna Akhmatova begins to create her "Poem without a Hero", built on the same combination of genres, in Leningrad.

## A small note

In the Introduction to the poem "Joy of the Poor" it is said:

*Cursed and robbed, on the straw slept at night,*

*He dreamed only about her:*

*Sweeter than revenge, more hurt, more white*

*Than the last sheep of the poor.*

Speaking of Joy, Alterman uses the word that has two meanings in Hebrew - "the dreamed" and "the healthy, strong". It seems to me that in this case he has in mind the second meaning and hints at the saying, the source of which is in one of the satires of the famous Roman satirist Juvenal (who also spent his whole life in poverty, by the way). Juvenal wrote about someone that "he has a healthy soul in a healthy body" (*mens sana in corpore sano*). When this expression was turned into a proverb, the "body" was put at the beginning of the phrase and somewhat changed its meaning: (only) in a healthy body (maybe) a healthy soul; in another version - healthy mind (*spiritus sano*). Alterman adds his "not", which are so numerous and important in the poem: (not only) in a healthy, but also in a sore body (it can and should be) a healthy soul; this is the poet's message to the reader.

## And a few more comments regarding the interpretation of the "Joy of the Poor" by Alterman.

And this time I'll confine myself mainly to a book edited by Eli Alon and Yariv Ben-Aaron, "The Joy of the Poor. A Treatise," 2001.

1. Some argue that of all the inhabitants of the besieged city, only the son of the "living dead" and his wife survived, and it is he who symbolizes the "continuity and renewal" hope of the Jewish people for a better future in their country. "The son who survived after the death of his parents was like a reflection of the Messiah ... and the resurrection of the dead is entirely a matter of the future" (Tractate, p. 271). Apparently, Elijah the prophet in the role of the elder from the funeral fraternity could not help ("Treatise", *Breaking Dawn*, 262). Let the editors of the book leave the problem of the resurrection of the dead. So they interpret "The end" - the last poem of the work. But let's read it in the way that they propose with respect to another poem ("Treatise, *Underground*", p. 240), "literally from beginning to end":

Does the poem say that the wife of the "living dead" is dead? "*On your face the pitch dark appears*" ("The end") does not mean that she is dead! Otherwise, there is no point in burying her again in the future when the son grows up: "*Your son for you'll measure the couch*". The editors of the "Treatise" claim that "she has been resurrected ... only to be buried again in the land of the covenant"! What, we return to the customs of the burial of two thousand years ago, to the ossuaries and the re-burial of bones? (But even then it was done a year after the death of a person). And, if my assumption that the poem has a personal aspect and that the character of the heroine hides the sister of Nathan Alterman, then it is not logical to think that he prophesies her death in the near future.

(In the Hebrew explanatory dictionary A.Even-Shoshan in the article "To live" there is, among others, the following interpretation: "4. He came to life — he came out from fainting (for example, this boy's soul returned to him and he came to life." – as in *Prophets, Kingdom*, 1,17,22) ". Maybe the prophet Elijah did artificial respiration for the baby or an indirect heart massage?)

2. It is clear that the future meeting of the heroine with the dead brothers is just a symbolic wish. But what kind of brothers are we talking about here? Will the brothers of her husband from the poem "Underground" participate in the celebrations on the occasion of the victory over the enemies? The editors of the "Treatise" emphasize the importance of the connection between generations, the connection between the dead and the

living: “The sentence in “The end” poem: “And will live between brothers” indicates that the brothers from this work are a direct sequel of the brothers from the poem “Underground” and that the return of the latter with a victory is ensured” (“Treatise”, p. 244). Is it so? All the feelings of the "living dead" that is ready to stand outside the window and strangle the enemies, as well as the willingness of the brothers from the underground to fight after the first sign - all these are just words that do not change anything in the reality of the battle. No wonder the heroine brothers exclaim during the battle:

*May be, brothers, once a thousand year today*

*Our death acquires a meaning.*

(“The town falls”)

From this we can conclude that in their eyes everyone who died without providing armed resistance died senselessly, and there is no reason for them to participate in the triumph of victory. Only those who “*without fear ... stand.../ But the hope out of mind*” will be called upon to rejoice in the joyful hour (“The Night of the Siege”). Not only the Poor-as-dead himself, who was frightened to open the door to the Joy of the Poor, condemned to shame: *Shame, you thousands of brothers have stigmatized* (“Where to place the shame”), because

*When you heard your brother screamed through the wall,*

*You were silent bashfully until he ends.*

*When he writhed tortured behind the wall,*

*You covered your ears with your hands.*

(“Traitor”).

3. The connection of generations, the influence of the memory of the dead on the living play a very important role. This is bear on the relationship between the heroine and her father. He is full of worries about her even on his deathbed (“Death of the father”), and she remembers him before the fight, because the “*oath between him and you*” is confirmed by the deed, unlike the oath of her husband’s brothers.

Is there evidence of emotional connections between the heroine and her late husband? He is sure that “*you call me low*” (“Crying”) and that “*Our life is full with the thoughts of the dead*” (“Blind mole”). Is it so? Maybe she was crying about the fate of her and her son and that her husband did not try to protect them? Interestingly, in the few words of the heroine, which are voiced by her spouse, she never mentions him!

4. A substantial question arises from here: was Alterman of “Joy of the Poor” in 1939-1940, when the Nazi troops were so close to the Land of Israel and its inhabitants were terribly threatened, was Alterman really concerned about the relationship between Zionism and the orthodox Judaism, according to the editors of the “Treatise”? Does he at one with those who do not see the point in a doomed armed resistance in advance? Or perhaps his task is more concrete and clear: to inspire and mobilize all the people to fight to the last man.

Of course, the confrontation to the approaching death is not the only topic that Alterman touches on in the poem "Joy of the Poor". The main thing is how to answer the hard questions that life poses: what is its meaning and what is the essence of such concepts as love, brotherhood, friendship and the connection of generations?

And all this in a wonderful poetic form. In my opinion, “Joy of the Poor” is the pinnacle of twentieth-century Hebrew poetry.

Adolf Goman

P.S. This article on the forum of the site "Nathan Alterman" (Hebrew) was read 88 thousand times (as of 07/17/19)  
<http://www.alterman.org.il/%D7%A7%D7%91%D7%95%D7%A6%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%94%D7%A4%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%9D/tabid/61/afv/topicsview/aff/1/Default.aspx>