

# He Beat Me Black and Blue

## *Broyn un blo hot er mikh gemakht*

### YIDDISH SONGS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

BY ADRIENNE COOPER WITH SARAH MINA GORDON

**P**ICTURE THE STAIRWELL in the poor apartment: the neighbor descends the steps and the woman in the doorway repeats, “Good night, good night,” and then haltingly speaks the words: “He hit me yesterday. I’m black and blue. I was ashamed to tell you. Good night.”

I found the song “Good Night, Brayne” in a 1984 anthology of Yiddish folksongs published by The Hebrew University while I was working with poet Irena Klepfisz and pianist Joyce Rosenzweig on the lives and writings of Yiddish-speaking women. Later, teaching an intergenerational workshop at KlezKanada in Quebec, I asked the class if any of them knew this song. Hands went up. They had learned it as children in their secular Yiddish school, part of the relentless truth-telling that runs through Yiddish culture and the institutions that have taught its values. An East European Jewish folk song collected and preserved by Jewish folklorists in the 19th and early 20th centuries had served as part of a school lesson in 1950s Canada, although the only recorded versions of *A Gutn Ovnt Brayne* that I know of are my own (on “Dreaming in Yiddish” and “Mikveh”).

In the European countries where Yiddish was the language of daily life, there were traditions of extravagantly emotional songs of love, suffering, courtship and marriage. People sang violent ballads and graphic depictions of hard lives; songs of war, poverty, danger and natural disasters. Folksongs were like broadsides—carrying the news of the day, declaring the troubles in society. These songs were created and sung largely by women. Women working alongside other women in fields, markets, factories and homes shared songs reflecting their lives, their experiences, thoughts, dreams, imaginings.

#### THE NAMELESS VICTIM

*A gutn ovnt, Brayne/Good Night, Brayne*

Good night Brayne  
My good neighbor  
My heart is in ashes

*A gutn ovnt Brayne*  
*Di beste shkheyne mayne*  
*Dos harts vert in mir afarbrent*

Since I’ve known this murderer.

Yesterday he beat me  
Made me black and blue  
I was too ashamed to tell you  
Good night, good night.

Oy vey, Brayne  
My good neighbor  
My heart is in ashes  
Since I’ve known this murderer.

I forget to buy parsley  
My mother had to bring me meat.  
Oh, the soup’s boiled off to nothing  
Good night, good night.

I want to divorce him  
Leave the child to him  
But I am so all alone  
I could just lie down in the street.

*Zint ikh bob dem merder gekent.*

*Nekhtn hot er mikh geshlogn*  
*Broyn un blo hot er mikh gemakht*  
*S’iz afile a bezoyen oystsuzogn*  
*Hot zhe mir a gutinke nakbt.*

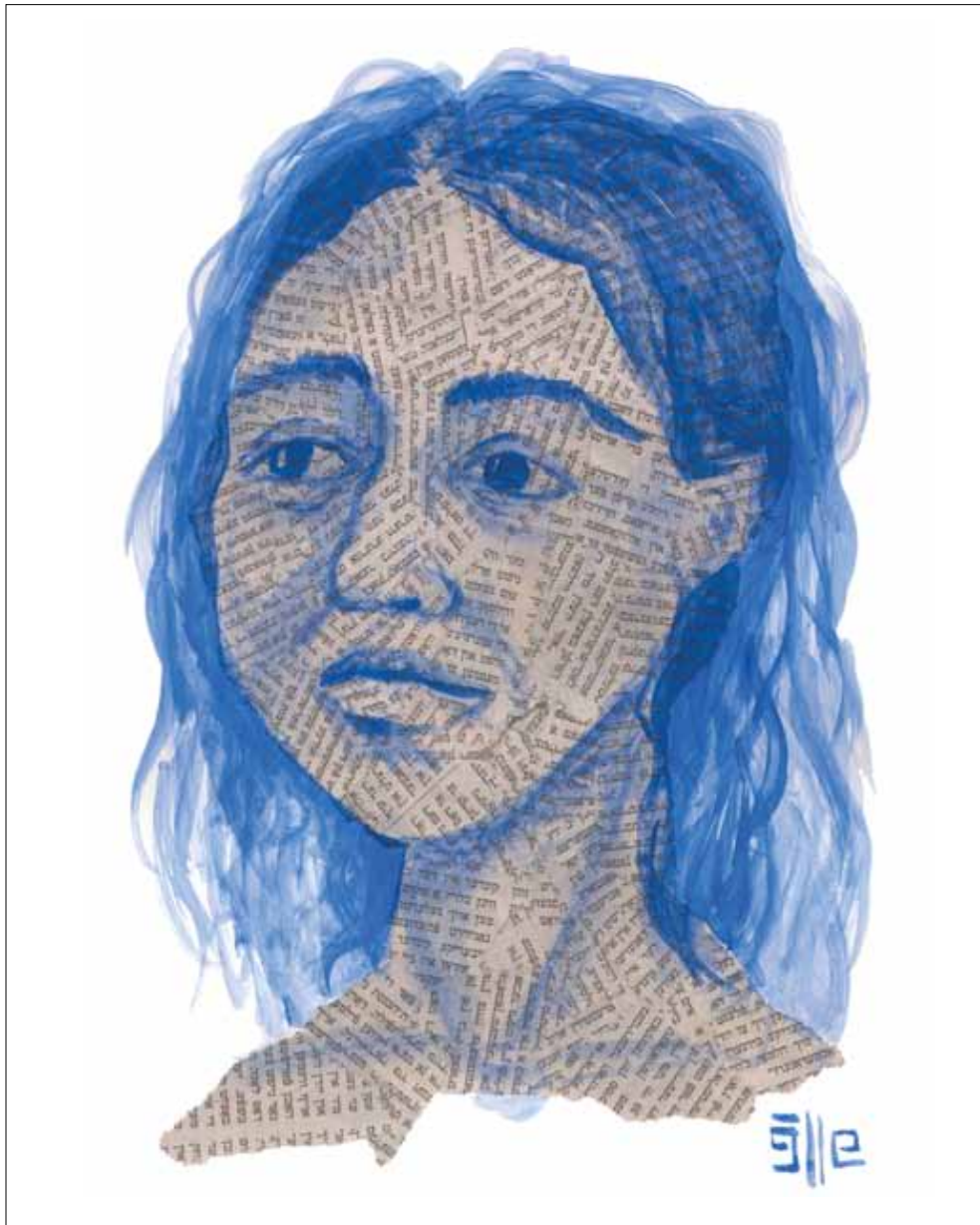
*Oy vey Brayne,*  
*Di beste shkheyne mayne*  
*Dos harts vert in mir farbrent*  
*Zint ikh bob dem merder derkent.*

*Petrishke hob ikh fargesn koyfn*  
*Fleysht hot mir mayn mamele gebrakht*  
*Oy di yoykh geyst dort oyslofn*  
*Hot zhe mir a gutinke nakbt.*

*Kh’volt mit im avade getn*  
*Dos kind volt ikh im ibergelozt*  
*Bin ikh ober shreklekh elent*  
*Khotsh gey un leyg zikh af der gas.*

*Oy Vey Brayne* is a frank depiction of domestic abuse. The nameless victim says good night to her neighbor, and with each verse adds another detail of the abuse and its effect on her. She lists tasks thwarted by the beating. “I forgot to buy parsley/My mother had to bring me meat/Oh the soup’s boiled off to nothing.” Finally, she considers divorcing her husband and going off alone—unable, in her despair, to imagine caring for her child: “I want to divorce him/Leave the child to him/ But I am so all alone, / I could just lie down in the street.”

The melody and rhythm of the song support the lyrics. The description of the beating in the first verse comes in rapid staccato, with a note on each quick, successive syllable: *Nekhtn hot er mikh geshlogn*. The chorus begins with a drawn out, “*Oy vey, Brayne.*” The woman calls out her neighbor’s name, finally managing to tell someone. The melody on the words “my good neighbor” rises to call Brayne back, and “my heart” is cried out higher still. The last line of the chorus darkens and descends as she names her husband as murderer.



ART: SHIRAZ WHITEHEAD, GEDRUCKTE SHTUMKAYT (PRINTED SILENCE), 2011.

The images in the song are stark, vivid, and we can't turn away. We, like the neighbor, are called to witness the loneliness and to hear the desperate declarations. We see the shame, we witness the loss of control over the simple tasks of daily life, and we see a final image of descent—a battered body sinking to the street and lying still. How many women suffered behind the apartment doors of Warsaw and Krakow? How many women carried bruises in the *shtetlekh*, the towns of Poland and Lithuania, Russia and the Ukraine?

### FIGHTING BACK

#### *Soreles khasene / Sarah's Wedding*

When Sorele wed, people laughed and scoffed.	<i>Zi hot im ongeboyn mitvokh in der fri,</i>
Why the laughter? The brand new bride	<i>Un hot im farendikt fraytik far nakht</i>
Couldn't even make kugl for Shabbes.	<i>Ay ay ay, Un az me hot dos kugele tsheshnint</i>

She began on Wednesday morning  
Finished late on Friday, but on Shabbes  
There was stuff in there that made that kugl inedible.  
Her husband, furious, beat his wife  
With each end of a stick.  
“Oh, my husband, What the hell are you doing?  
You beat your wife for a pudding?”  
“Oh my cursed little wife, that kugl cost me money.”  
She grabs her poor possessions  
And takes off for her father's for Shabbes.

*Hot men gefunen an onetsbke in mitn.  
Hot der man genumen a sbtekn mit tsvey ekn,  
Un hot ongeboyn dos vaybele tsu dekn...ay-ay-ay-ay!  
Oy mayn man, a tsore in dayn layb!  
Tsi far a kugele/sblogt men a vayb?  
Ay ay ay  
Oy, mayn vayb, azoy fil hostu makes,  
Vift dos kugele kost mikh piatakes.  
Hot zi gekhapt ire alte shkrabes  
Un iz avek tsu ir tatn oyf shabes..  
Ay ay ay*

“Sorele’s Wedding” tilts toward common comic themes in folk-songs: the inexperienced bride and the challenge of satisfying a finicky husband. But the consequences of a failed kugl turn

menacing, as punishment is delivered “with both ends of a stick.” The rhythm of the song is somber, slow, and the chorus repeats the lamenting syllables, “Ay, ay, ay, ay, ay,” over and over again. However, in this song, the young wife doesn’t sink to the street; she is not silent. She confronts her husband. Sorele names the abuse, grabs some of her things, and leaves for the protection of her father’s house and the peace of an undisturbed Sabbath. This named woman, Sorele, serves as a role model.

## POVERTY AND DYSFUNCTION

### *Di lyalke/The Doll*

Poverty pervaded Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Families, often unable to meet even the barest of necessities, crumbled under the pressure. In Mordechai Gebirtg’s *Di Lyalke/The Doll*, the spectre of poverty-driven abuse hangs in the air of child’s play. A little girl sets up a scenario with a playmate:

Come Shloymele, bring the cradle. Let’s play. You’ll be the father, I’m the Mother, the doll is our child. You come home, not bringing any money. And I fight with you: Good for nothing! Our child is cold and you can’t buy her shoes. You come home worried and I’m on you in a rage: Worthless! Our child is hungry, suffering. You call yourself a father? And when the child cries, gets hungry, no bread, no money in the house—then I curse it, “Die already!” just like my mother curses me.

To document the daily life of young Jews in Eastern Europe, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research—then based in Vilna, Poland—sponsored essay contests in the 1930s. They received teenage autobiographies, in Yiddish, Polish and Hebrew. Jeffrey Shandler detailed for me the family abuse in some of these chronicles, collected in his book *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust*. Among the hauntingly frank and full stories of young lives are depictions documenting the tragic link between economic hardship and abuse. “Khane,” after her parents divorce, was regularly beaten by her mentally unbalanced mother while they wandered homeless for years. “A. Greyno” suspected that his parents might have killed their newborn baby because they were unable to feed another child. The parents of “Forget-Me-Not” fought constantly. After the death of his mother, his father abandoned the children to an orphanage.

### *Svigerin/Mothers-in-Law*

When couples married they did not necessarily become autonomous heads of their own households. Many a new bride—often a teenager in an arranged marriage—moved in with her husband’s family. There she lived under the control of a stranger, her mother-in-law. A large repertoire of proverbs and songs describe the conflict and the lack of empathy in these relationships between women:

A mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law in one house are like two cats in one sack.

*A sviger un a shnur in eyn boyz zenen vi tsvey kets in eyn zak.*

The mother-in-law has forgotten that she too was once a daughter-in-law. *Di sviger hot fargesen az zi iz amol aleyen geven a shnur.*

Several of these kinds of songs and sayings are from Robert Rothstein, who compares the fate of married women in a paper “The Sad Lot of Women in Ukrainian and Yiddish Folksongs.” He quotes folk proverbs of the two side-by-side communities. Ukrainian proverbs point to a greater level of domestic violence: “When your own mother beats you, it does not hurt so much, while a mother-in-law beats worse with words than with her fists.” Rothstein says that there is no parallel in Yiddish for the harrowing Ukrainian proverb in which a mother teaches her son how to punish his wife—beating with a poker, whipping, offering instructions for binding the wife with wire.

Faced with a parallel loss of identity and power, young Jewish women’s songs about love and marriage become gloomy and mournful, filled with dramatic depictions of loneliness and isolation. It seems that no matter what a young bride does, she cannot satisfy the mistress of the house.

Oy mama, what should I do  
I have a cruel mother-in-law

Always on my case

If I walk fast, she says

I’m wearing out my shoes

If I walk slowly, she says that I’m  
crawling

If I cook fish, she says it has no taste;

If I don’t cook, she makes a big to-do,

If I make chicken soup,

She says it tastes like ashes

If I don’t make any,

The house is filled with screaming.

Oy vey mame

*Oy vey mame, vos zol ikh tun,*

*Ikh hob a beyze sviger hot zi mit  
mir tsu tun.*

*Geyh ikh gikh, shrayt zi ikh rays di  
shikh,*

*Gey ikh pamelekh, shrayt zi az ikh  
krikh,*

*Kokh ikh fish, zogt zi s’iz on tam*

*Kokh ikh nit, makht zi in shtub a*

*tararam,*

*Kokh ikh yoykh, zogt zi s’iz mit ash.*

*Kokh ikh nit, makht zi in shtub a rash.*

With this fraught home life, some songs idealize life before marriage and a woman’s relationship with her own mother, in contrast to that with her mother-in-law.

I rest my head on my mother’s bed

My mother passes by and beams.

“Sleep my beautiful daughter.

Let your little eyes close in good  
health!”

I lay my head on my mother-in-  
law’s bed

My mother-in-law passes by and  
curses;

“My daughter-in-law is no real wife.

Gets no work done, just sleeps  
and sleeps.”

*Leyg ikh mir mayn kepele oyf mayn*

*mames betele*

*Geyt di mame farbay nokh anand zi*

*tut un kvelt*

*Shlof mayn tokhter sheyninke,*

*eygelekh hostu kleyninke.*

*Shlof gezunterbeyt, shlof gezunterbeyt.*

*Leyg ikh mir mayn kepele oyf mayn*

*svigers betele,*

*Geyt di sviger farbay nokh anand*

*zi tut un sbelt.*

*Mayn shnur iz keyn berye nit, keyn*

*melokhe tut zi nit!*

*Nokh anand zi tut un shloft.*

Animosity between new wife and mother-in-law is depicted as a common and expected experience. In the song “The In-Laws” the mother of the bride warns the mother of the groom not to mess with her child. “*Tomer vet ir zayn a shlyak, a beyze sviger/ iz mayn tokhter oykhet an antic.*” / If you turn out to be a shrew, a mean mother-in-law, / My daughter is no slouch either.”

Songs transmitted from mother to daughter offer advice on how to maneuver around a cruel mother-in-law. “Beloved daughter of mine; I will teach you how to be a daughter-in-law. When your mother-in-law returns from synagogue, bring her the golden chair.” In several versions of this song, the daughter follows her

Am E  
In vel - dl baym tay - khl, dort zay -

G C  
rit - ke - lekh, e - lnt un kley

Am Dm Am  
kley - nin - ke zu - nen mit vay - sin



mother's advice to no avail. When the young woman is in labor, her mother-in-law refuses to send for a midwife or permit the daughter-in-law to take in fresh air. In another variant, the young woman, in labor, asks her father-in-law to go to synagogue to pray for her. He refuses, saying "Got vil dikh nisht hobn af der velt." / "God does not want you to live." The song ends with the girl's mother finding her daughter dying in childbirth.

### ALLUSIONS TO RAPE *Margaritkelekh / Daisies*

In the woods, by a stream  
The daisies grow like little suns  
With white rays.  
Khavele goes there, quiet and dreamy,  
Her braids unfastened,  
Her blouse open at the neck, she sings.  
When a boy approaches  
Hair black like coal, eyes aflame,  
He answers her song.

"What are you looking for out here,  
Did you lose something?  
What do you want to find in the grass?"  
"I'm just looking for daisies", she blushes.  
"Still looking?" He asks. "And me,  
I just found the prettiest one in the forest.  
With braids and sapphire eyes, what eyes."

"No, let me go, I can't do this.  
My mother says it's wrong.  
She'll be so angry."  
"What Mother, where is she.  
There are just trees here."

"Do you like me?" "I like you."  
"Are you ashamed?" "I am ashamed."  
Then love me, and be ashamed, and be silent.  
And see how my black curls mix with your golden."

The sun is gone now, the boy—gone,  
And Khavele still sits in the woods.  
Looks off into the distance, murmuring the song...

This popular folksong is traditionally sung as a sweet romantic encounter. I had thought of it somewhat more darkly, as a sinister love song. Last year, I conducted a vocal master class and a young woman presented *Margaritkelekh* as a song about date rape. The song reflected her own experience being raped by someone she knew. The confusion, shame and loneliness of the victim in the song was clear to her and it has changed the song for me forever. (The Yiddish text of *Margaritkelekh* is at [www.Lilith.org](http://www.Lilith.org))

### A USABLE PAST

Yiddish folk culture is often seen as a relic of a quaint world gone by. But as these songs show us, this culture connects us to a real and usable past. When we strip away our sentimental notions and look at the content of the songs, the complicated world that our families come from is revealed. In these songs we hear the clarion voices of our mothers' grandmothers. Their experiences and stories empower us to face our own lives as Jewish women.

We are all Brayne. We hear our neighbor's pain. We see the horrific consequences of systemic poverty on women around the world, how laws are used to limit women's autonomy. Against the historical odds, Yiddish culture equips us to act in the present. ■

*Adrienne Cooper has shaped a generation of new Yiddish performance in concerts, recordings, theatrical works, writing and teaching, reframing Jewish women's experiences. Her newly released CD is "Enchanted: A New Generation of Yiddish Song." Sarah Mina Gordon, her daughter, teaches at Brooklyn Friends School and fronts the band Yiddish Princess.*