

Toil

Dress me, good (pious) mother, in a glorious coat of many colors¹
And with dawn lead me to toil.²

My country wraps itself in light as in a prayer shawl.³
Houses stand out like phylacteries.
And like phylactery straps, the highways that palms have paved
glide down.⁴

Here the beautiful town⁵ prays matins to its creator
And among the creators
Is your son, Abraham,
A hymn-writer—road-paver in Israel.



[1] “And Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, for he was the child of his old age, and he made him an ornamented tunic [coat of many colors].” (Genesis 37:3)

[2] In the Bible, *amal* refers to toil that encompasses travail and suffering, “What gain is there for man in all his toil that he toils under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:3)

[3] The “prayer shawl” is the *tallit*, a shawl-like garment worn during prayer. *Tefillin* are phylacteries—small boxes attached by leather straps to the arm and to the head and worn in prayer as described in the *Shema* prayer: “And these words that I charge you today shall be upon your heart ... And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as circlets between your eyes.” (Deuteronomy 6:6–8)

[4] The religious ritual of wearing *tefillin* is transformed into the secular ritual of building a Jewish homeland, with the square head part of *tefillin* boxes symbolizing houses being built on hills and the black leather arm straps of the *tefillin* representing new roads in the country.

[5] The word *kiryat* was generally used in the Bible to refer to Jerusalem. Here—and in contemporary Hebrew—it refers to a new settlement, neighborhood or town.

And in the evening, at sunset, father shall return from his labors
And like a prayer,⁶ he will whisper with contentment:
My darling son Abraham,
Skin and veins and bones.
Hallelujah!⁷

Dress me, good (pious) mother, in a glorious coat of many colors
And with dawn lead me
To toil.⁸

Translated by Shimon Sandbank and John Felsteiner



[6] In earlier times, a father would participate in the evening prayer service at dusk. Now the word *avoda*—which traditionally referred to part of the evening prayer ritual—is transformed into the secular return from physical labor.

[7] *Hallelujah* is a word used in the Book of Psalms. Its literal meaning is “praise God” (some have suggested that it might also be a kind of musical punctuation sign, since the psalms were generally sung).

[8] Shlonsky concludes the poem with the new notion of “toil” as physical rebuilding and creation rather than verbal piety in words and prayer.

עֵמֶל

הַלְבִּישֵׁנִי, אִמָּא כְּשֶׁנָּה, כְּתִנֹּת־פָּסִים לְתַפְאֶרֶת
וְעַם שְׁחֲרִית הוֹבִילֵנִי אֵלַי עֵמֶל.

עוֹטְפָה אֶרְצִי אֹר כְּטִלִּית.

בְּתִים נָצְבוּ כְּטוֹטְפוֹת.

וְכַרְצוּעַת־תְּפִלִּין גּוֹלְשִׁים כְּבִישִׁים, סָלְלוּ כְּפִים.

תְּפִלַּת שְׁחֲרִית כֹּה תִתְפַּלֵּל קְרִיָה נְאֻה אֵלַי בּוֹרְאָה.

וּבְבוֹרְאִים

בְּנֵי אֲבָרְהָם,

פִּיטוֹן סוֹלֵל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.

וּבְעֶרְבַּי בֵּין הַשָּׁמָשׁוֹת יָשׁוּב אָבָא מִסְבְּלוֹתָיו
וְכִתְפֵלָה יִלְחֹשׁ נַחַת:
הִבֵּן יִקְרֵי לִי אֲבָרְהָם,
עוֹר וְגִידִים וְעֶצְמוֹת.
הַלְלִיָּהּ.

הַלְבִּישֵׁנִי, אִמָּא כְּשָׂרָה, כְּתוּבֵי פְסִיִם לְתַפְאֲרַת
וְעַם שְׁחָרִית הוֹבִילֵנִי
אֵלַי עֵמֶל.

Inheritance

The ram came last!¹
And Abraham did not know
it was the answer to the boy's question,
the boy, first issue of his vigor in the twilight of his life.

He lifted his hoary head.
When he saw it was no dream and the angel stood there—
the knife slipped from his hand.

The boy unbound
saw his father's back.

Isaac, we're told, was not offered up in sacrifice.
He lived long,
enjoyed his life, until the light of his eyes grew dim.

But he bequeathed that hour to his progeny.
They are born
with a knife in their heart.

Translated by Stanley F. Chyet



Earlier writings of Chaim Guri extolled the courage and valor of the pre-state pioneers. In later writings, Guri was to question many of the policies and practices of the newly-created State.

[1] Guri begins the poem with a reply to Isaac's question in the story of the binding of Isaac: "And Isaac said to Abraham his father, 'Father!' and he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And he said, 'Here is the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the offering?'" (Genesis 22:7)

ירֶשָׁה

הָאֵיל בָּא אַחֲרוֹן.
וְלֹא יָדַע אֲבָרְהָם כִּי הוּא
מְשִׁיב לְשָׂאֵלֶת הַיֶּלֶד,
רִאשִׁית־אוֹנוֹ בְּעֵת יוֹמוֹ עָרֵב.

נִשָּׂא רִאשׁוֹ הַשֵּׁב.
בְּרִאוֹתוֹ כִּי לֹא חָלַם חֲלוֹם
וְהַמְּלֶאךָ נָצַב –
נִשְׁרָה הַמַּאֲכָלֶת מִיָּדוֹ.

הַיֶּלֶד שֶׁהִתַּר מֵאֲסוּרָיו
רָאָה אֶת גֵּב אָבִיו.

יִצְחָק, כַּמְסָפָר, לֹא הֶעֱלָה קוֹרְבָּן.
הוּא חֵי יָמִים רַבִּים,
רָאָה בְּטוֹב, עַד אֹר עֵינָיו כְּהָה.

אֲבָל אֶת הַשְּׁעָה הַהִיא הוֹרִישׁ לְצִאֲצָאִיו,
הֵם נוֹלְדִים
וּמַאֲכָלֶת בְּלָבָם.