

# The Meandering Jew: Joseph Tunkel's Endless Journey

Nikki Halpern

*Der Moment*, a Yiddish daily newspaper, was published in Warsaw from 1910 until 1939, when the Germans bombed the building. Writing as *Der Tunkeler* (the Dark One), Joseph Tunkel (1881-1949) was a frequent contributor. From April 1 to October 16, 1931, the paper ran installments of his trip from Warsaw to British Mandate Palestine. This reportage, augmented with photographs and drawings, subsequently appeared in a single volume, *Fort a yid keyn erets-yisroel: a reyze bashreybung* (1932; *A Jew Journeys to the Land of Israel: A Travelogue*).

*Erets-Yisroel* refers here to British Mandate Palestine (1923-1948). The denomination also evokes an entity that is neither Palestine nor Israel as a geographic and historical reality. This is the Land of Israel, a biblical locus; it is (also) the biblical and the Zionist Promised Land. The land-that-was and the land-to-come. In this sense, the *Yid*—the workaday Jew of sociohistoric reality as well as the *Yid* of popular Yiddish culture—is a time traveler, but the epochs coalesce.

For Tunkel's tourist, the Baedeker, the classic travel guide for the European cities of the Grand Tour, is the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. The signifying force of the figures peopling the Bible is a touchstone of Jewish collective identity (in a sense, all Jews are fellow travelers), a symbolic system responding to existential questions. The result is a convergence of these registers, a symbolically mediated world, itself a concatenation of the perceived, the real, and the social imaginary.

When you travel across *Erets-Yisroel* you are not just on a trip through a country, you're traveling through Bible verses, you're climbing aggadot [the Talmud's nonhalakhic content], you're treading on midrashim [halakhic or aggadic interpretation], you're guided by the Yiddish-language Chumash [Torah]. (64)

*Der Tunkeler* introduces a tourist into the concretization, the realization of the metaphoric and mystical view of our existence in this world and the World-to-Come. The

quixotic interrogation is no longer which is which, but how to negotiate the conflation. In this relation of the imaginary, and of the antique, over and against the real, the present-day, each and neither is authentic. The real bursts onto the scene of the imaginary. The sacred is colored if not contaminated by the real.

This brings us, if not the author, to Jerusalem. *Der Tunkeler* addresses at some length and more than once his decision not to start his visit in *Erets-Yisroel* "directly" with Jerusalem, disappointing while comforting any such expectation, and confirming the centrality of Jerusalem, site of the Temple (an image of Jerusalem's Old City features prominently on the book version's title page). It is about midway through the trip when we find our traveler on *der veg keyn yerushalayim* ("The Road to Jerusalem"). The text elaborates and enacts the geographic and conventional ascent that is this road. While pilgrimage to the Temple was prescribed three times a year (at a minimum), the author's reflections here also translate Jerusalem as an object of desire, an impossible, mystical desire in which encounter may well be both culmination and prolongation.

The travelogue charts a course through Europe by train, to Constantinople by ship, and only then to an exploration of the Land of Israel, crossing paths with an array of people and events—variously Jewish, Arab, Bedouin, Muslim, and Christian.

*Erets-Yisroel* is the eternal and promised homeland, and interrogations of the notion of home underpin the entire enterprise. The last stop on *Der Tunkeler's* trip "to *Erets-Yisroel*" conjures an eternal return. This episode, called *Af tsurikvegs* ("On the Way Back" or "Returning"), features both Cairo and the Pyramids. The story ceases, but without ending, because it cannot end there. The traveler is going back in Jewish history as well as heading back to Europe via Egypt: an ambiguous if not ambivalent choice.

"I'm going back home to *goles* [the Diaspora]" it opens (255). And again, "Now I'm heading home." In a characteristic textual move, this recurrence brings a supplement. "Now I'm heading home. I'm going to Egypt" (258).

This is a purposeful confusion, both for comic effect and from intimate conviction. Tunkel also echoes, if faintly, the Hebrews' lament in the desert. You'll recall their reproaching Moses for their condition, bewailing their home, Egypt, to which they wanted to return (see, e.g., Numbers 11; Numbers 14).



“People of the Book” from Tunkel, Joseph (*Der Tunkeler*). Fort a yid keyn erets-yisroel: a rayze bashreibung (*A Jew Journeys to Eretz Yisrael: A Travelogue*). Warsaw: A. Nomberga, 1932.

Why does the narrator go to Egypt? Because, he says, he retains “some stake” in the country, given his

four hundred years of back-breaking labor. [I’m traveling to Egypt] in order to see what has become of my Pithom and Ramses, and to pay a visit to all the pharaohs who have been dug up, and see how they’re feeling after all the plagues. (260)

Every year at Passover, participants in the seder are enjoined to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt (which starts with Hebrew enslavement there) as if it had happened to each and every one, to relive it. Der Tunkeler strips this idea of its ritual framework and imagines a tourist with the same posture, or goes even further, because the stated intention, in syntax and tenor, might almost be credibly imputed to Moses. If Egypt is the place of slavery for *bnei Yisra’el*, this was a crucial stage on the way not just to freedom but also to the Covenant, Torah, Jewish identity, history, obligations, and practices. The writer has taken diverse facets of Jewish collective and individual identity, levels of accreted social meanings, shaken them all up, and produced an impossible chain of connections. He has reconnected the dots (or pixels) for a picture that is perhaps more cubist, or a

bricolage. Highlighting some key aspects informing Jewish identity, he endows it anew with creative energy: a generative reading of past and current events.

The mystical view of our existence in this world and the World-to-Come, as Der Tunkeler plays it out in this travelogue, is an imbrication of lived (mundane experience) and learned (Written and Oral Law, received Jewish tradition). Rather than a juxtaposition of opposites, of delimited, nonsynchronous states, ideas of the one infuse the realities of the other in a dynamic relationship. That somehow the *Eretz-Yisroel* lodged in the imaginary retains its aura is a compelling argument for the power of the ineffable, the unknown, what escapes us while perhaps elevating us through our search for it. This suggests the impulse of travel writing, travel as writing, writing as travel, as it speaks to the essence of the wondering Jew.

---

**NIKKI HALPERN** is an independent researcher and translator. This essay is drawn from a larger work in progress, “*Jewish Geography: Joseph Tunkel’s Discursive Iconography of the Land of Israel.*”