

POETRY OF THE HOLOCAUST: Resources

This talk will focus on two iconic poems of the Holocaust—one by Dan Pagis and the other by Paul Celan.

[NOTE FROM PROFESSOR DREIFUS: PLEASE READ THE HIGHLIGHTED ITEMS IN TIME TO RESPOND TO THE WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT DUE ON TUESDAY, APRIL 6; YOU ARE ENCOURAGED, BUT NOT REQUIRED, TO CONSULT THE OTHER ITEMS AHEAD OF PROFESSOR KUSHNER'S VISIT.]

I.

“Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car” by Dan Pagis, in the original Hebrew and in three translations:

- 1) Published in the original Hebrew and in English translation by **Stephen Mitchell** in *Poetry International*

<https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/18706/auto/0/0/Dan-Pagis/WRITTEN-IN-PENCIL-IN-THE-SEALED-RAILWAY-CAR/en/tile>

- 2) Another translation appears at the **Belzec camp memorial** near Lublin, Poland:

https://inthiscarload.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/dscn3105_blog1.jpg

- 3) And here is a third translation by **Daniel Utley** that originally appeared in *Reform Judaism*:

Here in this shipment
I [am] Eve
with Abel my son
If you [shall] see my older son
Cain the son of Adam
Tell him that I

More on this poem by Dan Pagis

- 4) Short video from Yad Vashem about this poem:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1ey70isP44&ab_channel=YadVashem

- 5) You'll notice that this poem by Dan Pagis makes use of some Biblical passages and mentions Eve, Abel, Cain, and Adam. Here is a cheat sheet to three spots in Genesis that Pagis uses in case you haven't thought of Adam and Eve lately:

Genesis 1:27-28

(27) And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (28) God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."

בראשית א': כ"ז-כ"ח

(כז) וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ
 בְּצַלְמֵם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא
 אֹתָם: (כח) וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם
 אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבָּשׁוּהָ
 וּרְצוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיַּי
 הָרֶמֶשׂוֹת עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

Genesis 2:18-25

The LORD God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him." 19 And the LORD God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name. 20 And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for Adam no fitting helper was found. 21 So the LORD God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. 22 And the LORD God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, "This one at last Is bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, For from man was she taken." 24 Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh. 25 The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame.

בראשית ב': י"ח-כ"ה

ויאמר יהוה אלהים לא טוב היות האדם לבדו אעשה-לו עזר כנגדו: ויצר יהוה אלהים מן-האדמה פל-תית השדה ואת פל-עוף השמים ויבא אל-האדם לראות מה-יקרא-לו וכל אשר יקרא-לו האדם גפש תיה הוא שמו: ויקרא האדם שמות לכל-הבהמה ולעוף השמים ולכל תית השדה ולאדם לא-מצא עזר כנגדו: ויפל יהוה אלהים | תרדמה על-האדם וישן ויקח אחת מצלעותיו ויסגר בשר תחתונה: ויכו יהוה אלהים | את-הצלע אשר-לקח מן-האדם לאשה ויבאה אל-האדם: ויאמר האדם זאת הפעם עצם מעצמי ובשר מבשרי לזאת יקרא אשה כי מאיש לקחה-זאת: על-כן יעזב-איש את-אביו ואת-אמו ודבק באשתו והיו לבשר אחד: והיו שניהם ערומים האדם ואשתו ולא יתבוששו:

And for more on Eve, Adam, Cain and Abel, here is Genesis 4:

<https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.4?lang=bi&aliyot=0>

If you are more used to the King James Version of Genesis 4, here it is:

<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Genesis-Chapter-4/>

Last but not least, here is an audio recording of an American rabbi reading this poem out loud in Hebrew. I'll read it for you in class!

<http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/3-poem-written-pencil-sealed-railway-car-dan-pagis-1981-two-translations-and-audio-recording>

II.

“Deathfugue” by Paul Celan; it’s titled “Todesfugue” in German.

1. Paul Celan himself reading “Todesfugue,” probably the most famous poem in the Holocaust. He wrote it in 1944. (!) Note how his voice changes at the end of the poem:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVwLqEHDCQE&ab_channel=paulantschell

2. “Deathfugue” by Paul Celan, translated from German into English by John Felstiner

<http://mason.gmu.edu/~lsmithg/deathfugue.html>

3. “Deathfugue” by Paul Celan, written in German; translated by Pierre Joris

<https://poets.org/poem/death-fugue>

4. Major American poet Galway Kinnell reading “Deathfugue” in a translation by John Felstiner, Michael Hamburger, and “tweaked” by Stanley Kunitz, and Galway Kinnell

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUVMi1e8wDE&ab_channel=splitthisrock

BONUS:

If you get super-into it, and become one of the many people obsessed with Celan, here is the wonderful critic Ruth Franklin on the life and work of Celan, in *The New Yorker*

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/11/23/how-paul-celan-reconceived-language-for-a-post-holocaust-world>

Really into it? This is an amazing biography of Paul Celan by the incredible translator Joh Felstiner. It's called *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*.

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/150269.Paul_Celan