
The Poetry of Arno Nadel

Martin Wasserman

Arno Nadel's poetry was well-known in the Berlin Jewish community between the two World Wars, but it has yet to find an audience outside of Germany. The following translation of Nadel's poem represents the first time to my knowledge that his work has ever appeared in the English language.

Nadel was born in Vilna, Lithuania in 1878. As a child, he showed tremendous talent for musical composition. At the age of seventeen he entered the Jewish Teacher's Institute in Berlin, and he became so enamored with that city he decided to spend the rest of his life there. In 1916, Nadel was appointed conductor for the choir of the largest synagogue in Berlin, and soon became the musical supervisor of all Berlin synagogues.

As an adult, Nadel displayed a special aptitude and concern for the writing of poetry. By 1935, a dozen books containing Nadel's poems were published and distributed throughout Germany. With the rise of Nazism, Nadel's books were burned and any further publication of his poetic work was prohibited. In 1943, Nadel was transported to Auschwitz where he was subsequently murdered.

Nadel was influenced by the spiritual philosophy of Taoism. In the early 1920s, a circle of writers, painters, and musicians would gather to hear him read and comment on his work. Actors from the German stage gave periodic readings from Nadel's Taoist poetry at a major art gallery in Berlin. In 1923, some of these poems were published as a chapbook entitled, *Lao Tzu and Confucius (Poems Following a Chinese Motif)*.

While Nadel's Taoist poetry possess a metaphysical quality, his motivation for writing in this vein was also worldly. According to one

observer, the poet intended his material to serve as an antidote to the prevailing attitudes of selfishness and animosity which existed in Weimar Germany. Nadel hoped that the quiet, gentle whispering of his poems would counter the insensitive anger that he witnessed all around him, especially the belligerence connected to a new wave of anti-Semitism that emerged in Germany after its defeat in World War I.



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In Beth Hamidrash

Arno Nadel

Translated by Martin Wasserman

Rabbi Judah speaks—
There are two heavenly spaces,
because it was said:
To the eternal, to your God,
belong heaven
and heaven's heaven.

Rabbi Lakish speaks—
No! There are seven heavens:
Wilon, Rakia,
Shehakim, Zebul,
Maon, Makon, Araboth.

Wilon, the drape,
surrounds the entire divine tent.
In Rakia the world of stars is hidden.
In Shehakim the mills are standing
and grind manna for those persons
who thirst for justice.
Jerusalem is in Zebul,
guarded by the great Law.
In the heaven, Maon,
the prophets congregate,
they sing to the Creator night and day.
In Makon are the chambers and parapets
for hail and snow and stormy torment.
Finally, in Araboth,
fall droplets of lasting wisdom,
their ageless sound being blessed
by each of the awakening dead.