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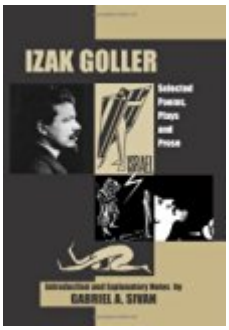
Izak Goller. *Izak Goller: Selected Poems, Plays and Prose.* Ed. Gabriel A. Sivan. Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011. 384 pp. $79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-85303-934-1.



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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

The work of Izak Goller, presented in a handsome volume edited by Gabriel A. Sivan, constitutes something of a time capsule. It represents a view of interwar British-Jewish life from the perspective of the gifted and eccentric Goller, who, as Sivan puts it, "managed to pack three separate careers and nearly a dozen literary works into his short lifetime" (p. 1). The Lithuanian-born Goller was a teacher and minister as well as a writer; he died of cancer at the age of forty-eight in 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Goller's preoccupations--with the senseless slaughter of the First World War, the suffering of Jews in Russia, the church versus the synagogue, and the secular ways of Anglo-Jewry--may not have benefited from postwar hindsight, but they are fascinating for just this reason. However, their necessarily limited focus may account for Goller's falling out of public memory so that his work was all but forgotten by the early 1950s. Sivan notes the poignant fact that this ardent Zionist never visited Palestine nor lived to see the founding of the State of Israel, although Goller's late work of 1936, a history of the Jews "from Abraham of Ur to Herzl of Budapest," shows an awareness of the approaching storm in his substitution of "Germany" for "Ukraine" in the final chapter on contemporary Jewish persecution.

Goller was clearly a dashing and charismatic figure, who was devoted to his wife Malkah, sported a "Vandyke beard," and was so tall that one acquaintance recalls him driving along with his head sticking out of his open-top Austin Seven car (pp. 16, 28). He was described by the United Kingdom's chief rabbi of the time, Joseph Hertz, as a "rough diamond," and this seems an apt characterization of one who wrote, in his book *A Jew Speaks!* (1926), that "a Jewish minister must not degenerate into a tame cat," lest he is "bludgeoned down" by the "materialism" of his congregation (pp. 9, 80, 9).

Sivan reproduces some of Goller's sermons, and it is not hard to imagine the responses that his exhortations must have provoked. Indeed, he was dismissed from his Liverpool post after just a

year, in the wake of a particularly bracing Kol Nidre speech. In 1924, the congregants of Walthamstow and Leyton Synagogue in London were treated to a free verse address--later published in the *Jewish Chronicle*--entitled "Back to the Synagogue," in which they were chastised for whirling "with reeking souls round the gods of the shops and the warehouses / Hollow papier-mâché imitations of the Golden Calf of our ancestors!" while "our Father sits lonely in His house / And waits" (p. 85). In his poem "Ode to the Law," Goller continued the theme in metrical form, declaring that modern Jews bypass "God's book" for their "Chequebook," prophets for profits (p. 88). His poem "Understanding: An Average Jew's pre-Atonement Prayer" shows more evidence of its author's own understanding of other people's thoughts, and, as Sivan argues, is "timeless" as a liturgical contribution, posing such rhetorical questions as "What virtue is absent from me that I am so cold, without that abandon, without that ability to loose my soul from its materialism?" (p. 95).

Some of Goller's work, particularly his poetry, does suffer from its distance from the present-day reader. Sivan likens his subject to William Blake, whose habit of illustrating his poems Goller also follows in the attractive black-and-white "cartoons," often resembling art deco bookplates, that accompany his writing. Sivan also claims that Goller was a devotee of Lord Byron's verse, and at other times points out his debt to Oliver Goldsmith and Israel Zangwill. Yet it is hard, from a twenty-first-century standpoint, to relate to such poems as "1917," "ostensibly written prior to the Balfour Declaration" of that year but, Sivan judges, "most likely composed after the event," in which "Ye nations" are challenged to make

Amends for my hearths devastated
Whose ashes have builded your dome!
Amends for the hatred you hated –
Give back – give ME back my home! (p. 54).

The archaisms and rhetorical exclamation marks tend to blunt the sentiment of this poem.

But Goller's best writing does justify Sivan's wish to restore the author to his "rightful place in Anglo-Jewish literature" (p. ix). As well as Goller's sermons and some of his religious poetry, there are two especially outstanding pieces in this collection. The first is his pantomimic play "A Purim-Night's Dream," in which the story of Esther and Haman is played out in jaunty metrical form. Much ingenuity is expended in finding far-fetched rhymes for its heroine's name, as she herself says:

My name is Esther
Here I'll rest a
Moment (p. 193).

The menu Esther reads out for Ahasuerus's feast is one of virtuoso metrical anachronism:

Kishkelach and lockshelach,
Greipelach and bobbelach,
Farfelach and krepelach,
Bulbeskugel, tzimmis, flomen (p. 211).

Sivan tells us that the play was last performed in South Africa in 1977, and it is clearly due for a revival.

The other outstanding piece is Goller's play ***Cohen and Son*** of 1932, which was performed to acclaim at theaters in London and other British cities. This work combines comic naturalism with melodrama, turning a story of life among recent immigrants to Britain into a meditation on Jewishness and faith. Goller clearly had an excellent ear for the telling detail of dialogue and the rhythms of the "Ainglish" speech of his Yiddish-accented characters, and in this respect he reminds me irresistibly of the British playwright Jack Rosenthal. In some instances, Goller seems almost to have inspired details in Rosenthal's television play ***Bar Mitzvah Boy*** of 1976, although there is no evidence that the later writer knew Goller's work. For instance, in ***Cohen and Son*** the houseproud mother Sarah Cohen berates her son David: "From de plush sofa at vonce! A good smacking

you should have yet, no?" This uncannily prefigures the dialogue in Rosenthal's play, where Rita Green scolds her son: "Eliot, can you try and sit in the chair like a normal human being? Is it too much to ask? Dralon grows on trees?" (p. 280). In both plays, a young man judges his upwardly mobile family for the kind of "materialism" evident here, of just the kind Goller denounced in his sermons and poetry. There are elements of ***Cohen and Son***'s plot that are not "timeless," such as its plot twist ensuring that the heroine does not have to convert but is halachically Jewish before she marries Cohen's son. Yet it is not impossible to envisage the staging of an updated version, given the play's concerns with war, solidarity with human suffering and heredity, while its characters' "Ainglish" might be transformed into the estuary English of today's Londoners.

Although it is hard to imagine that Goller's work will again meet with the acclaim it received in its time, Sivan is to be congratulated for his meticulous research in what has clearly been a labor of love in assembling and annotating this varied material. Among his findings, I was particularly struck to learn that the British educationalist and author Leila Berg, who died in 2012, was Goller's niece, and the rejecting father she describes in her autobiographical ***Flickerbook*** (1997) was Goller's older brother Simon. Both writing and a concern with parentage and heredity clearly ran in the family.