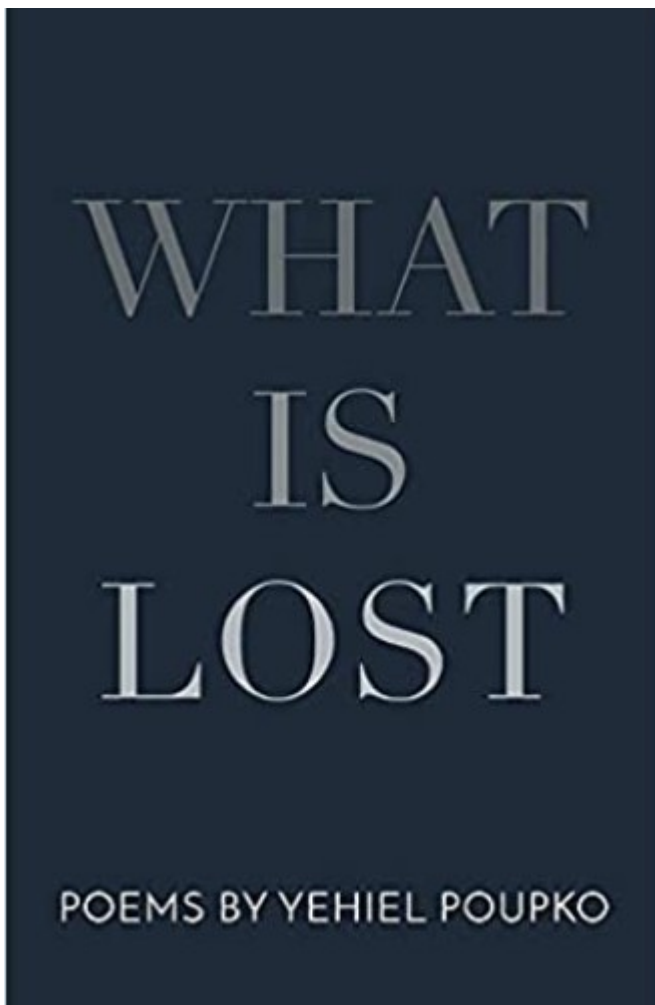


A rabbi's poetic wrestling with faith after the Shoah

## **In Yehiel Poupko's poems, Jewish belief in God groans under the burden of divine silence.**

by [M. Daniel Carroll](#) in the [May 4, 2022](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **What Is Lost**

By Yehiel E. Poupko

Finishing Line Press

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This collection of poems by Yehiel Poupko, rabbinic scholar at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, is a window into the soul of a descendant of victims of the Shoah. Readers are privileged to listen in as he struggles to make sense of unfathomable cruelty and irresolvable doubt.

*What Is Lost* is divided into two parts, with a prologue and epilogue that also consist of poems. The prologue sets the tone. Its opening poem, "Picnics," offers a view from the poet's mother's nursing home window: a riverbank in Pittsburgh, with its abandoned steel mills. They stand "skeletal" as harbingers of death—both hers and others that will haunt the book. Poupko inserts what appears to be a profession of trust into the last stanza:

*blessed are You Lord our God  
Who in His goodness nourishes the world*

Are these her words or his? Are they heartfelt or ironic? Quandaries of faith permeate the sustained lament that is this book.

The eight poems that follow in part 1 are laced with religious themes. The word *sin* appears several times, as do reading and chanting, Yom Kippur, the scapegoat, matza, and Passover. The first poem, "Kol Nidrei—All My Vows," begins:

i am lost  
a wandering jew  
in Yom Kippur  
land of violated promises  
failed oaths  
unkept vows

This is no joyous observance of Jewish ritual. Our poet is rootless, overwhelmed. In "Roster," he recites his sacred texts but wonders if God actually shaped him. Oh, that he could fly away with the birds, he wishes in "Starlings and Pigeons," with those "godless" creatures to warmer climes! "Matza Time" recalls the original Passover, when God kept the people safe, and wishes that God also would have saved those of "another / night and time."

“Sarah’s Witness” describes the miraculous birth of a child to elderly Sarah, who offers her breasts as mother to a people. Yet those breasts are “bared for / many a man / mocked.” Humiliation, not joy, is the fruit of her womb. “So Job Died Old and Full of Days” turns to that biblical character with a profound sense of his dying alone. None appreciate his plight, not even God:

friends certain and smug  
wiseacres knowing all  
everything about this life  
except of course the life of Job  
.....

and near endless silence  
Lordly Master God knowing all  
everything about the creation  
except of course the children of Job  
.....

nature indifferent knowing all  
everything about the world  
except of course the emptiness of Job

In part 2, religious questioning focuses on the Shoah. The first poem’s first line (and its title and refrain) is “*several sorrows ago*”—reminding readers that the suffering of Jews is not new. Once there was a time “when God still knew us,” the suggestion being that God no longer does. The introduction to the second poem, “Ukraine 1919—Epitaph,” rambles on for ten lines, reflecting the senselessness of it all. Thousands of Jews were massacred in 1919 in the pogroms of Ukraine. The pattern for what was to come was set. The title of the book appears in this poem. What was lost? Myriad Jews and a way of life.

The poems move from the rushed leaving of homes to the march toward the camps and the visits to cemeteries years later. Incineration meant obliteration, but the names of the dead must be remembered. If the catchword in the second set of poems is *sin*, here it is *ash*—from the death camp furnaces.

Poupko's poems rebuke the complicity of Christians in the Shoah and the hypocrisy of their faith. From the Torah, Christians learned to "love thy neighbor"—except the Jew, the poet laments in "Bequest to a Berlin Neighbor." "Last Supper" echoes Jesus' words—"this is / my body / daily broken"—but with a twisted purpose: "for transport . . . to chimney / and cross." The words of Mark 10 to bring children to Jesus are interspersed with names of Jewish children and the concentration camps in "Suffer the Little Children. . ."—a poem which, like many in this collection, was first published in the *Century*.

Jews had lived by the word without an image. But then "the word became flesh," notes the poet. Yet Jewish flesh became ash, and one word, *Jude*—German for Jew—brought a sentence of death ("The Word Become Ash"). "Beginning with the Crucifixion" points out that the one Jew who was to save us all is the one through whom skulls were stacked in the camps. While standing among the gravestones of a Jewish cemetery in Poland, the poet writes in "Poland's Jews," he is reminded of that country's patron: "blessed of Madonna / and Virginal blood."

At the same time, Jewish belief in God groans under the burden of divine silence. A poem called "Were You There" turns Job 38:4 on its head. Here it is not God asking Job; rather, the question is directed at God. Was God in the camp "where man become god," where man arbitrarily sent some to death? God was. The next-to-last poem quotes the dreadful scene from Elie Wiesel's *Night* of a small boy hanging on a gallows, a testimony for some to the death of God.

In the final section, which contains just one poem ("Tales of Old"), two Jews rehearse the accounts of the plagues against Egypt, the first Passover, and divine guidance in the wilderness. Connection to that story line is severed. Now, the blood (of Abel) cries out without response; God does not pass over to protect but consumes, and "nary / a Jew voice" announces rescue from Egypt. The volume is bracketed by potential trust in God in the first poem and words of abandonment in the last.

Jews have long wrestled with understanding the person of God and divine involvement in the tragedies of life. *What Is Lost* is a significant contribution to those debates. In its poetry, the Hebrew Bible too constantly wonders about divine responsibility and reliability, as it is in the crucible of calamity that faith in God is tried and forged. In this ongoing quest, *What Is Lost* has much to teach Jew and Christian alike.