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*Tsalel the Glazier after the Pogrom: A Tale of the November Days in Vilna, 1936*²

What an autumn we've had this year, one for the history books, no? Vilna's glaziers swore that it had been ages since they could remember such a glum season for them ...

Autumn is the time of year when folks normally take to sealing up their windows, in preparation for a long, difficult winter. It's when glaziers, like squirrels collecting nuts in the forest, stash away a few coins to get them through the rest of the year.

The unseasonably warm weather was one cause of travail for the glaziers. The summer, which began this year right after Passover, was a like a golden ribbon of daily sun that extended well past the High Holidays all the way to the Hebrew month of Kislev, when Jews would mark the festival of Hanukah.

The windows of the half-decaying green, grey and red walls of the Old Town remained open to allow in the thin rays of light, the silver strings of the late autumn sun. Naked trees, which had long since shaken off even their tiniest worries, were leafless. The trees, orchards and gardens that blessed the city fruitlessly awaited the first dusting of winter snow to allow them some time to rest. Castle Hill and its five-hundred-year-old red-brick tower, built



Bentsye Mikhtom, 'Jewish Glaziers,' in Moyshe Levin, *Friling in kelpershtub*, Vilne, 1937, p. 22.

² *Tsukunft*, June 1937, p. 312–314.

by that bearded Lithuanian duke Gediminas, peered down through a lattice of naked branches. The blue sky was pierced by dozens of gold and silver church steeples drenched in the sunlight. In the Jewish quarter around the Synagogue Courtyard and its neighbouring streets, an area marked by remnants of gates and the layout of a Medieval ghetto, tiny old women, coarse like rye dough, peddled winter apples next to the gutters. Booksellers had already begun to hang new calendars in the windows. And from the dozens of traditional study houses, one overheard the heart-rending wintry voices of those in learning.

So, shouldn't it have been clear that after such mild weather, winter would finally arrive with sheets of snow and freeze everything in? For some time now, Vilna's landlords had tried to economise, making as if they couldn't afford otherwise, withholding any generosity towards local bakers, store owners, cobblers, and now glaziers. They left broken panes and unsealed windows to the mercy of the wind. So what if a little winter breeze penetrates indoors? A hazy horizon tinted with red light frames the early morning in the city. Frost settles on the grass. Why should well-off landlords have pity on a few glaziers? It was assumed that the winter would come and go in a flash. Windows would be bolted shut, and all for nothing: spring would soon arrive! This winter promised to be difficult for the glaziers, like a huge white bear. Winter threatened to dig its paws into these poor artisans and torment their hungry bellies. These were times of basic survival. Days of meagre soup cooked with barely any grain. Sabbaths passed without the traditional servings of *tsimes*, buckwheat *kugl*, and *cholent*. Autumn was long gone, together with the storks on the other side of the world.

Tsalel was affected more than most glaziers. For one, he was blessed with a house full of children, who ranged from two to ten years of age. They would come out of hiding along with worms and bedbugs from their basement apartment on to the surrounding Jewish streets, and wander through every puddle of mud of the Durkhoyf, the through-yard that connected the Synagogue Courtyard to Jewish Street, past the thresholds of houses of study. They would hide among the swollen bellies of those in the Gaon's study house and the Strashun Library, and stare with their sad, Jewish eyes at the mountains of books, at the scholars, at the cripples, and at the poor, with whom they might one day compete for destitution. There they waited for their father Tsalel, who never missed a morning, afternoon or evening prayer (it's also possible he needed to escape from the drudgery of the street and the box of glass he lugged along

with him). He would greet the children, gather them up like kittens, and dart home. The children helped him carry the box of glass home, happily dragging after their father's coattails. They would have words with the other children who were lingering around the synagogue courtyard. If Tsalel happened to have had a good day, he would bargain with the old women sitting by the gutters to purchase a bunch of green apples, some rye, and a slice of brown honey-cake, a treat for all! He delighted in their pleasure. He plucked at his magnificent grey beard, and thanked God that today he was able to provide some measure of sweetness to these poor Jews who wait around all day for a customer. He wondered whether it would be even more just if, with God's help, he could one day help out all those poor Jews who hung around the Synagogue Courtyard, on the surrounding Jewish streets, and in the entire world.

It was difficult for Tsalel to walk home through the Synagogue Courtyard with an empty pocket. He was ashamed to meet the gaze of the children. Their greenish-brown faces, like the apples and dark honey-cakes sold at the stalls by the gutter, understood from his body language that these were not easy times.

Crawling through the narrow door into his cramped home, Tsalel falls exhausted into bed, as if a pair of strong hands are pushing him down. His shoulders are breaking from dragging himself over the city in vain. He imagines his side-box containing the glass in bed alongside him, attempting to justify itself: 'So, Tsalel, what an autumn, eh?! Just don't put this on me!' His wife is fussing in the kitchen. He understands from the sound of the spoon grating on the side of the pot that she is cooking with no ingredients. His wife turns around like a mute. She doesn't want to ask him whether he managed to earn anything today, in case his silence might signal a measure of hope, and an answer would reveal their terrifying reality. The little fire in the room hisses from the wet kindling. The first cold autumn rain drums on the green smoky windows. The children circle around their mother's dress, and cry from hunger. Tsalel is lying down, his long lean body like a board, coughing and blowing his runny nose in a rag. All these sounds ring out together, all united in the same tune: what an awful season, what a terrible autumn.

And then, without warning, a completely different season arrived at the beginning of the month of Kislev, like a flood of abundance washing away all the gloom-filled, jobless days of Vilna's Jewish glaziers.

This late autumn came with thunder and lightning, with thick, dark clouds over the Old Town and its silent streets.

This second autumn, like a bizarre, strange-looking bird seeking somewhere to nest, flew in from some quarter of the city where those with means play out their lives.

This second season came for Jewish glaziers from the university.

Tsalel was hanging around his usual workplace near the town hall, holding his side-box of glass like an organ grinder, awaiting a little business. His pale, thin Jewish nose, dry as a bone, sniffed at the air to detect even the faintest scent of business. His moist, fifty-year-old sad eyes were like two diamonds, cutting a path to the rows of windows, glass showcases and doors, to determine whether there was even the slightest crack in need of repair. Because he lacked work, his long veiny arms dangled from his torso aimlessly, as if he suffered from a physical impairment. The wind scooped up pieces of padding from his torn woollen cape, and crawled down his neck all the way to his intestines. But Tsalel remained fixed to the street like a telegraph pole. And as evening fell over the city and darkness set into its windows, Tsalel was taken by an instinctive desire to turn towards the East in prayer, with a sincere request that emerged from the depths of his frozen condition:

‘If I could get just one job, not for my sake, of course, but for the sake of my wife and children, who wander through the Jewish quarter waiting for me, as if for the messiah ...’

Tsalel certainly doesn’t wish that damage should come to anyone’s property. Rather, it would be better if someone were moving into a new apartment and decided upon renovations ...

As he was standing and pondering such matters, he noticed a group of people running at the end of the street. A crowd was pushing forward, screaming and making a racket. Tsalel was fixed to his spot. He was concerned by such a commotion on the city streets. This is something for the police to handle, not a Jewish glazier. But the crowd was quickly rushing at him, like muddy earth in a flood streaming down from Castle Hill. He grabbed his side-box containing a few panes of glass and took off: he wasn’t about to allow them to destroy his last few possessions. But the crowd and the commotion were soon upon him.

It was a crowd of Christians. Tsalel not only heard the sharp word *Zhid*, but his shoulders also felt it when a rock hit them. All of a sudden, the word

became a weapon. Tsalel cast a glance behind him, to see students with beet-red faces, clubs in their hands, sporting green, red and white, blue, and golden hats. A crowd of some three hundred had taken over the street. They were chasing and beating anyone who looked like a Jew. Tsalel started to take longer steps, like a stork, but his shoulder was hurting him. He listened attentively and awaited new blows. His large, hairy ears buzzed with dark cries:

Jews! Jews! Jews!

Down with the Jews! Death to the Jews!

Jews to Palestine!

Out of Poland!

Hey, Jews!

Suddenly, Tsalel was transformed from a simple street glazier into the bruised skin of a Jew caught up in the politics of the street.

He had snorted at the latest political headlines screaming out at him from the daily papers he borrowed from a neighbour: students ... universities ... Jewish students picked on and harassed ... driven from the right side of the hall to the left ... forbidden from learning. It's all a pretext to make Jewish life intolerable. And why, master of the world, to what end? Tsalel could not come up with a satisfactory answer at this hot moment, just as he didn't have a satisfactory answer to why he couldn't find work. At this very moment, he was just fleeing alongside fellow Jews. His heart was pumping fast, the same way it beat when he used to fix putty to a window frame during those bygone days when he didn't have even a moment to catch his breath. He tripped over another Jew and fell down, pulled himself up, hobbled on, and darted off again, until he managed to conceal himself in a gateway.

The students, accompanied by heroes of the underworld, poured into the Jewish commercial centre. The store owners hurried to lock their shutters and doors. Police were nowhere to be found. The students associated with the Endek movement, dressed colourfully like a gathering of menacing wizards, arrived with clubs, crowbars and rocks before the terrified shops. Three-metre-high glass panes crumbled like thin cookies. Cloth, silk, footwear, food, and other forms of Jewish property fell into the street with the lightness of feathers. The underworld gangs made off with the merchandise with lustful yelps of joy. Two young louts could not figure out how to divide a slab of chocolate they came

across. After an argument, it was consumed along with Jewish blood. A Jewish lament took over the street. It carried with it the experience of centuries of suffering. The drunken celebration of the Endek students purposely muffled it.

Tsalel hadn't noticed that a crowd of terrified Jews was alongside him in the gateway. The gate was chained and locked, and from behind it they could take stock of the entire affair: a peddler-woman from the Durkhhoef through-yard, sobbing and dishevelled, was attempting to gather up the few remaining apples that had rolled off her basket when it was overturned. A pious old Jew with a pained expression of naïve incomprehension was groping at the last remaining hairs from his beard that had been violently plucked. Someone else in the corner poured water over a bloodied head. And among them all was a crying boy, hopping around on one foot as if playing hopscotch. His other foot was wounded and dangling from his leg.

From behind the gate, they could hear the distant shattering of breaking glass from the last row of Jewish-owned shops: number eight, number six, number four, number two. Tsalel knew the number of every courtyard by heart, in addition to the name of every shop located in each courtyard. Even though he was stuck behind the gate, he could determine the precise location of the devastation from the sound of the broken glass. He announced to the crowd:

'Now they're breaking the windows of Sobol's fur shop. Now they're probably destroying Arnold Cohen's business. Jews, if I'm not mistaken, they will soon be near the Great Synagogue! For heaven's sake, we must do something!'

Tsalel could not contain himself any longer. He was consumed by an uncontrollable urge. His Jewish heart, his piety, his sincerity, and a fearlessness buried deep inside him, all of which emanated from running around his beloved city to install window panes even in the most dangerous of times, propelled him to act. He jumped towards the bolted gate, started pulling at it, and called out:

'Jews, come with me! What's stopping you? What horrible times! They are destroying the window panes of the synagogue! It's desecration! ...'

'Get away! Don't open it!' the crowd shouted back at him, as handfuls of fingers pulled him away from the gate.

'If they're going to attack us, we don't need to offer ourselves up as a sacrifice!'

'Have you already forgotten the pogrom in Pshitek?'

'Don't you get it? The glazier is in a hurry to get to work!'

Tsalel was stung by the insinuation of the old market woman whose basket of apples had been overturned. Perhaps she drew strength by finding an easy target for her rage.

‘You’re right! What a wretched man!’ the others joined in, as they approached the gate.

‘So get out, if that’s what you want.’

Those were the words of another old woman, pale as chalk, and with a narrow, terrified face, who gave him a shove.

‘Get lost and go benefit from our Jewish misfortune! The world would be better off without Jews like you! ...’

Tsalel stood silently, his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. He had never anticipated that fellow Jews would be the source of his disgrace. Stooped over and overwhelmed, he moved to a corner of the courtyard. His eyelids were batting hard, as if they were covered in mud. He wouldn’t allow himself to respond. He took one glance at this dejected community of fellow Jews hiding behind the gate, and took in the sounds of the street now under attack by pogromists. It occurred to him that this was the pulse of the times. ‘To hell with them!’ he thought. ‘They don’t know what to do, and are prattling on. It’s their desperation talking. We’re living in lawless times. Our lives are up for grabs, our possessions are up for grabs, and even words are meaningless.’

Suddenly, Tsalel’s eyes turned towards the pieces of glass in his side-box. Something ignited in his heart. He was uneasy with the feeling emerging within him, and looked around to see whether he was still being mocked. He wiped his heavily folded brow with the sleeve of his woollen cape. ‘Calm down,’ he thought to himself. ‘So what, if they are correct? Maybe I am suspect? What’s gnawing at me? ... God in heaven, is this some kind of test? Is this really my response to our suffering? Should I accept the accusation of my fellow Jews?’

At that very moment, all the feelings of a seasoned glazier awakened within him. They coursed through his veins and were activated by the sound of breaking glass. He was drawn to them like a hungry wolf is drawn to the smell of fresh meat from miles away.

‘What if they are correct?’ he thought to himself despondently the next day as he entered the vandalised street with his side-box of glass, and folks started pulling at him like a doctor in times of plague. Tsalel had already decided to give

in a little to the temptation: though he wasn't to blame for the events, the power of hunger and the need for work raged within him ... He was overwhelmed by dark thoughts. He had wanted to defend their most sacred site, but he was made to feel like a piece of rotting meat. He could not deny the fact that he could not get his mind off making a living.

Tsalel the glazier rose at dawn. He did not forget his morning prayers, but he forgot to eat his breakfast. He dashed off with a box of glass, returned home for lunch with it empty, loaded it up again, and off he went again.

It had been quite some time since there was so much work for Jewish glaziers. Polished panes of glass of some three metres in length were carried about town, glimmering in the sun like mirrors in the theatre. Boxes of chalk and jugs of varnish filled the vandalised street with the smell of glazier's putty. The coarse voices of glaziers were in command of the street. From one shop to the next, from one sidewalk to the next, the sweaty craftsmen stood on ladders, on benches, or on their knees cutting glass, working the sturdy putty, cursing, shouting, and drowning out even the sound of cars and carriages:

'Zavke! How much are you taking for those ten windows?'

'A meagre windfall ... Barely profitable. Thirty. He won't give more ...'

'And you, Fayvl? You're raking it in?'

'Twenty-five! And he might provide some cheap cloth for a new pair of pants.'

'Baykl, did you already install all the panes in the café?'

'I finished the job yesterday! I've already had time to work in three other places.'

'People are paying?'

'Yes, but I barely earned a thing from Arnold Cohen ... Such a rich man could have spared a bit more!'

The only one who didn't say a word was Tsalel. He just listened in on the simple, happy chatter of his friends, and did not once mention the misfortune that had befallen the Jews. They focused only on the previous drought of work that had now come to an abrupt end. All he could do was sigh. For some time, Tsalel had wanted to take them to task by warning them not live off the blood of others. But when he overheard the words 'I barely earned a thing ...' 'such a rich man ...' 'could have spared a bit more ...', Tsalel sighed heavily. He looked at the glaziers working alongside him, all hunched over, their bone-hard faces showing

the effects of hunger and need. Their pants were just like his own, with torn seats from repeated bending. Their long coats hung down from their britches. And the shop windows they were attending to were now, thank goodness, full of merchandise. A blunt thought occurred to him: perhaps God had orchestrated this so that his fellow Jews would have to provide for him just once?! After all, hadn't this come about after he had prayed to God for a little work? And hadn't these Jewish shop owners on Vilna Street, German Street, Zavalna Street and Broad Street once decided that this winter, a few dozen Jewish glaziers along with their wives and children would die of starvation!? ...

But as Tsalel continued to mull things over, it occurred to him that those dozen or so Jews who had been beaten in the street were innocent victims! Of course they were! ...

After significant consideration, Tsalel concluded the following: the second season that arrived in late autumn for the glaziers had not come from the heavens, but from Satan, from Ashmadai, the prince of demons, from the devil! ...

And with that, Tsalel returned home after a hard day's work. He cheerlessly emptied his pockets, as if his earnings were the result of a swindle. He saw how his children, their faces bursting with pleasure, swarmed like locusts at the plentiful dinner his wife had prepared. They were licking their lips, laughing, having fun, banging on plates with their spoons. Their home had suddenly returned to life. But Tsalel was mortified. He could not restrain himself. He grabbed a piece of putty and smashed it on the table:

'Eat quietly! And let those non-Jewish louts rot in hell!'

And Tsalel the glazier rose for evening prayers. He prayed with such heart and through such tears that it seemed as if he were reciting Psalms...

Translated by JUSTIN CAMMY