

Bay nakht afn altn mark mitn badkhn

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Why is the *Badkhn*, the jester, in the role of the central protagonist in Y.L. Peretz's modernist drama *Bay nakht afn altn mark*? There are two main reasons for this, one which deals with political and historical events that occurred during the period and the other is that of literary device. Historically speaking, it is evident that the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the effects on cultural life in the wake of its failure had a strong influence on Peretz in placing the *Badkhn* in such a prominent position. In the literary realm, the *Badkhn* serves as a mask which allows Peretz to write virtually anything and remain within the realm of Jewish life and culture.

The *Badkhn* can also be seen as being Peretz, who wrote under the pseudonyms "Der lets" and "Der lets fun der redaktsiye" in *Hakhets* and *Yidishe bibliotek*.¹ Peretz also wrote under the name "*Di bin*" in his column *Shtet un shtetlekh* in *Der yud*. As "The Bee," Peretz wrote about the seamy underbelly of Jewish shtetl life, reporting on crime, decline and failure in Jewish life.² This mask of "The Bee" does not seem to bear resemblance to the traditional Jewish *Badkhn*. However, Peretz's tone and style in *Yidishe shtet un shtetlekh* was not unlike the *Badkhn*'s - it was colloquial and often sarcastically humorous:

Nat aykh a hant- es dokh narish, keyn tkiyes-kaf vel ikh aykh nisht gebn, nor azoy a hant, az ir vet haynt bay mir nor nisht trefn, nat aykh!
 Ven ikh vel mikh opshteln un a freg ton: Nu, treft vos vayter vet zayn, mit vos vet es zikh endikn?
 Vet ir trefn oder gornisht, oder kapoyer!
 Ir zogt afile ale yor in der hagode: "kulonu khakhomim, kulonu nvoynim," un es iz emes: same egboyr-moykhes, same shpits-bay-shpits keplekh - nor dos lebn fun yidishe shtet un shtetlekh iz krumer far aykh!
 Afile ayere rabonim, di me'oyres hagedoylim im haketanim, vos trefn ale retenishn in "hapisga" - veln blaybn mit ofene mayler.
 Ir vet zen!
 (*Der yud*, 31 July 1902, p. 9)

Peretz, writing as The Bee or *Der lets fun der redaktsiye* illustrates the possibilities for satiric social commentary behind the mask of the jester. This mask allows the writer more freedom to criticize, to satirize while his true identity is ostensibly hidden from the reader. Because the text is signed by a writer calling himself a jester, the reader knows that the satire is supposed to be particularly sharp or acerbic and the level of nastiness can be raised and reduced at the same time. If, for instance, Peretz had written his *Yidishe shtet un shtetlekh* column under his own name,

¹ Reyzn, Z. *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur un prese*. 1929.

² Wisse, R. "Not the "Pintele Yid" but the Full-Fledged Jew" *Prooftexts* 15, January 1995 Johns Hopkins University Press.

readers would have associated his name with the biting sarcasm that was an element of the column. But writing as "The Bee" freed Peretz from the strictures of civil public discourse. The Bee, after all, has a stinger and is expected to use it when necessary. Peretz used it to satirize Jewish life in his column.

It is of value to note what influence Peretz's writing as "The Bee" may have had on a young Shmuel Yatskan,³ a fellow contributor at *Der yud*, whose first foray into the world of Yiddish publishing was a satire magazine which he titled "The Bee." In fact, an announcement in the first issue (1906) requests that Jews in shtetlekh send in interesting stories of Jewish life, evidently for a column similar to *Di bin's "Yidishe shtet un shtetlekh"* in *Der yud*. Yatskan's "Bee" was typical of the approximately 50 satire magazines that were published in Yiddish between 1905 and 1907. These journals were part of a general trend in journalism in the Russian empire during the two years following the failed revolution. While press restrictions under the Tsarist government were briefly lifted between 1905-1907, between four and five hundred of these journals were published in the major languages of the empire.⁴ This deluge of post-failed-revolution cynicism was rife with satirical jabs at politicians, cultural figures and entire segments of society. Everything was fair game for satire and it was a period during which the Jester ruled the roost in society. With pogroms occurring throughout the period and with four Dumas having been dissolved, the tenor of society at large and Jewish society in particular was that of extreme cynicism with a sliver of hope that life could change. The positioning of the Badkhn as the central character in *Bay nakht afn altn mark* is related to this phenomenon.

The voices that resound in the marketplace reflect those of all manner of different kinds of Jews and their opinions. These voices do not necessarily connect with one another and the different voices feed off one another. This is an example of the role of *Kibits* in Jewish life, an issue that S.A. Abramovitsh complained so bitterly about in his *Hakdomes mendeley moykher sforim*." However unlike Mendeley, Peretz does not ironize against it, but accepts it and utilizes it as a common mode of discourse in Jewish life. Kibitsism in Jewish society, a concept that was exploited by Yoysef Tunkel when he founded the satire journal "*Der kibitser*" in 1908, was conceived of as "no accidental occurrence but a product of evolution and historical necessity" in

³ Yatskan would later found Haynt (1908-1939), Poland's largest and most important daily newspaper.

⁴ Botsianovskii, V. i Gollerbach E. Russkaia satira pervoi revoliutsii, 1905-1906. Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo, Leningrad 1925.

Jewish life and culture (Der kibitser, May 15, 1908, p. 1). Kibits was viewed as having a central role in Jewish discourse. Tunkel's Kibitser was, like Peretz's Badkhn, a character that was built on its ability to react to the discourse of others and make dialogic innovations based on occurrences and commentary wholly unrelated to it. This concept of kibits, unwarranted commentary or advice which often is not heeded or even acknowledged, is the mode of Jewish discourse in which *Bay nakht afn altn mark* takes place. There is no real dialogue. Instead, a large number of characters swirl about the market offering commentary, some of which is refracted by the Badkhn, the true master of kibits. The Badkhn feeds off the comments of others in order to create his own in a sort of parasitic discourse. The kibits is usually perceived as frivolous, however it often has a serious side. Nearly all of the satire journals of the post-1905 deluge, in spite of their mocking, cynical tone, began with programmatic articles that elucidated the necessity of their burlesque expressions of contempt. The first issue of Der bezem, for example, began with an article entitled "*Undzer tsil*," a portion of which explained, "*Der kosherer bezem vet zayn historishe flikht erlekht erfiln; er vet oyskern, oysramen, oysreynikn, oystsikhtikn un oyskratsn di gantse blote, dem gantsn shmuts un shtoyb fun ale byurokratishe vinklen, yidishe kohol shtiblekh un dergreykherishe asifes*" (Der bezem, #47, 4 April, 1906, p.2). While their methods may have been silly and mocking, their goals were deadly serious. During the period following the failed revolution, all the old heroes had fallen and the new heroes were not created in the traditional mold but were the bastard offspring of reaction. Because action in the political and cultural realms was not possible, the only possibility for expression becomes reaction, the only arena in which the Badkhn can exist.

By calling the character "Badkhn" and not "Lets," as such a character was typically called in Western literature, Peretz attempts to fuse Jewish tradition and a Western literary type to create a Jewish jester. The role of the traditional Jewish Badkhn is to humorously and often sarcastically introduce the wedding guests. However another of his roles is to bring the bride to tears by detailing the bitter truths of marriage. This fusion of the Western literary Jester and the Jewish Badkhn bears a similarity to what many of the Yiddish satire journals did: on the masthead of *Der bezem*, the satire supplement of *Dos lebn* (*Der Fraynt*) which began appearing in March 1906, there is an image of a traditional Jew in beard and peyes sweeping away corruption with a broom;

the cover of *Di bin* also has an image of a stern-looking traditional Jew in long beard clutching his arm after having been stung by a bee, which is shown flying off. Many of the journals had titles that related to the holidays during which they were published: *Der afikoymen*, *Der lulav* and *Dos krepl*, for example. Such titles brought in a traditional element that had not previously existed in the Yiddish press. These satire journals wanted to be seen as authentically Jewish guardians of truth, meting out justice in a humorous but caustic manner. Satire and parody, after all, were serious business. The content of many of them points to a serious mission to be achieved by means of a humorous vehicle. These satire journals, with images of Jews on their mastheads and their holiday titles, were the Jewish masks of their clean-shaven, secular writers. They allowed an outward appearance of Jewishness, a disguise which was also required of Peretz. In fact, he begins the play with a behind the scenes peek at those "directing" Jewish life: the Director, Stage Manager, Narrator and Poet. This appears to be a comment on the fact that the producers of Modern Jewish culture did not have positions within Jewish corporate society but present a Jewish life that is "staged."

What is staged in *Bay nakht afn altn mark* is a cacophony of voices which surround that of the Badkhn, who hears them and feeds off of them. Without the lines of the numerous other characters, the Badkhn, due to his parodic nature, cannot have any of his own. As Bakhtin writes regarding such characters, "their existence is a reflection of some other's mode of being - and even then, not a direct reflection. They are life's maskers; their being coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist...Essential to these ... figures is a distinctive feature that is as well as privilege - the right to be "other" in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation."⁵ As such, the role of the Badkhn and his dependence on the other characters for his existence, is similar to that of Peretz and the Jewish intellectuals who feed off the folk in order to create their artistic endeavors. In addition, both writer and character exist as "other" in regard to the folk. It appears that he wonders what will be when the folk disappears or when and if they will be able to enter modernity as they are when the Poet/Playwright says:

Un a vanziniker lets

⁵ Bakhtin, M. *Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas, 1981, p. 159

Flekht tsufusns an altn gets
 A nets
 Fun shotn un shtraln...
 Shotn un fargangenem,
 Koym ibergelebte kvaln...
 Un shtraln
 Vern arayngehoftn
 Fun nokh in nets nisht gefangenem,
 Fun koym gehoftn...
 Fregt dos harts in shtiler payn:
 "Geven", "vet kumen", vu iz zayn?
 Ven kumt zayn fodem arayn in geflekht?
 Entfert ver in fibernekht?
 Der shakal, di hiyene..."
 (231-232)

This appears to be not only the disclosure of the relationship between the writer and folk, but that the answer will appear during the nighttime reign of the mocker. The human cognate of the laughing hyena is the Jester, who will attempt to find answers to the writer's questions. By the end of the play he concludes that there really is no answer, but to arrive at that conclusion he must lead the audience through the world of the Jewish marketplace, where all manner of Jew passes and offers some form of commentary. Their commentary reflects the fragmentation of their society.

In the Marketplace, where Kibitsism exists at its highest level, Peretz requires something that will connect the disparate types of Jews. This is done by the Badkhn, the only character to appear throughout the entire play whose nature is that he requires the lines of other characters in order to create his own. His first line, in fact, expresses his own confusion because it is not connected to the line of another character:

S'iz mir epes arop fun zinen...
 Kh'ob epes a vikhtik vort fargesn...
 (p.241)

Though somewhat obscured, an element of the play is an attempt to find the right word. This "*vikhtik vort*" is one that the Badkhn, because of his role as reactionary parodist, cannot come up with on his own and must wait until another character causes him to consider a word. This search is neglected until the middle of act two, when he arrives at "*shtoyb*," after hearing the *Farhungarter arbeter's* revolutionary call to grind the old order to dust. This mention of dust echoes the lines of the *yinglekh* of the first act who ask "Vos iz der mentsh? Vos iz zayn vert?/ Ash fun der erd! shtoyb fun der erd!/ Haynt - in shtub!/ Morgn - in grub!" (245-246). At that moment,

the Badkhn is attempting to direct the goings on in the marketplace though stops briefly to note that he needs to think a bit, likely about that word. But dust does not suit his purposes and he chooses to let the word go, because it represents the end of life. We will see that by the end he finds what he thinks is "the word," which will be "tants," a concept that brings a brief flurry of lively activity to the dead, only to be extinguished by the dawn.

First, however, it is of value to look at the Badkhn's language and how it is used to connect, subvert and confuse the other dialogue in the play. Bakhtin wrote that "They [The clowns] grant the right *not* to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not to be oneself; the right to live life in the chronotope of the entr'acte, the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage - and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets."⁶ These comments can be applied quite easily to the Badkhn. His numerous addenda to the lines of others are often mocking. When the earnest Yunge-layt ask what important theme about which to speak, "*Vegn seym! - Ikh - vegn shekalim! - A folk, vi a mentsh, muz hobn a heym!*" the Badkhn chimes in with "*Oder a kholem!*" This at once mocks the young people who rattle off such important themes and it hints at a parody of Herzl's "If you will it, it is no dream." The Badkhn, calling them dreamers, sees the futility and uselessness of the Yunge-layt's inability decide on a subject though they have the need to discuss. Instead, each blurts out his own. This hearkens back to the theme of Kibits - one wants to talk about the Sejm, another about money for Palestine, another about Zionism. The Badkhn seems to fit right in and binds them in his mockery.

As the previously cited comment by Bakhtin notes, the Badkhn, as the insider/outsider, has the ability to do virtually anything. With this in mind, he brings statues to life at the onset of Act two and declares himself to be the Fieldmarshal. He says, "*Gots velt vel ikh firn! Loz ikh mikh nor vu ahin dermanen.*" Only during the cover of night can the Badkhn get away with this. There is thus a double mask: that of the Badkhn and that of night. Under this cover, the Badkhn begins a short series of sarcastic comments regarding Jewish hope for the messiah. When the Vaser-treger offers to bring him fresh water, he mocks him with sarcasm: "*Un moshiekhn derlebn / Inem*

⁶ Bakhtin, M. *Dialogic Imagination* p. 163

zkhush fun frishn trunk!" He does the same to the well-meaning Holts-heker, informing him that for his good deeds he will hear the shofar of the messiah. Even harsher, he kibitses in a grotesque line mocking the piety of the Tsnue: "*Un de lendn fun mayn yoyel.../ Zol fun zey aroys der goyel!*" This is followed by a "moshiakh" line addition to the Shmayasers and finally, he cuts off the lines of the Mekubl, adding "*Af moshiekhn fregn!*" In all of this he ridicules the belief in a coming messiah.

Shortly thereafter, the Badkhn mocks the Heymisher dikhter, who announces, partially in Hebrew to add status and historical legitimacy to the lines, the entrance of new heroes: "*Es geyen teg, groyse teg.../ Hiney yomim, yomim bo'im-/Groyse heldn - shoyn in veg!*" This hope for a new heroes in a time where there are none and when, most glaringly, the role falls to the jester, is sarcastically ridiculed by the Badkhn, whose use of Hebrew and comparison to Biblical heroes parodies the Dikhter's: "*Hey, Geboyrim! Khashmenoyem! Vert antplekt!*" When these Kidushim show themselves to be brutally defeated, the Badkhn adds another sarcastic jibe and parodies the Dikhter's Hebrew mention of days when he comments "*Groyse teg! hoykhe teg!*" In the end, the Badkhn's comments are not understood by the other characters. He finally breaks down and asks what the point of the suffering is:

Un er vos hot dermit gemeynt?
 Der, vos hot aykh oysgeveylt?
 Iz es gevezn zayn shtrof?
 hobn im vunder farfelt?
 Far vos zogt er nisht: halt!?
 (p.272)

While logic would dictate that there is no answer to these questions, a voice comes from the shul and gives an answer from a religious perspective. These lines of the Badkhn are later answered by the Porush, who intersperses the comments "*Gevezn nisim alerley.../ Di gute tsaytn zenen farbay! / Farmakht far undz toyer un tir.../ Mir zaynen yesoymim geblibn....*" which affirm the Badkhn's rhetorical questions regarding the situation between the Jewish people and God.

The Badkhn also parodies the language of the recently risen dead who have suddenly recalled the importance of the Shul. The dead cry out "*Heylik, heylik, heylik,*" to which the Badkhn responds, "*Nisht aylik, nisht azoy aylik...*," playing on the similarity of the sounds of the

words and the disparate meanings: holy versus hurry. Also, *nisht ayluk* sounds very much like *nisht haylik* (in Warsaw dialect) or, "unholy." This type of parody and wordplay can only work coming out of the Badkhn. It would make any other character sound like an obnoxious crank. Instead, we understand that because of his role, the Badkhn is allowed a great deal of space.

Having raised the dead from their graves, the Badkhn still searches for the right "word." It hasn't been mentioned since "dust" came up and since that time words have become playthings. The Badkhn is struck near the end of Act three by the word "dance." This is brought on by the rhymes of the small children which evoke an eerie image of interfamilial violence and subsequent joy:

Tsigele migele, rayb di klotskes,
Royte pomerantsn, -
Az der tate shlogt di mamen,
geyn di kinderlekh tantsn...

Latching on to this, the Badkhn turns to a life affirming activity, "tants," for his dead minions. But the question here is whether the dead can be made to dance, or if the past be wed to modernity under the direction of the Badkhn. Though the Broder singers and the Voices offer encouragement to dance, it is the Badkhn who tells them "*Lebt, vos ir hot nisht derlebt! / Filt, vos ir hot nisht derfilt!*" This is his attempt to animate the dead of Jewish life, to bring the past to new activity. It is of note that the first group of living characters to join the dancing circle of dead are Hasidim, who perhaps are closer to "dead" Jewish tradition than the others. The next group who join in the dancing are the women, who are considered to be more spiritual in a natural, untutored way - unlike Jewish men. The Maskilim can only observe - their worldview and position in society does not allow them to partake in the dance - and they quickly disappear from the scene. Eventually, the Badkhn succeeds in convincing the dead that they have it in them to survive. But when cock crows and sun rises, his enterprise ends in failure. He admits defeat to the rooster, whose crow brought the day and the end of the attempt. Following this failure, he tells the rooster that he (the rooster) is the word and the symbol and that now he (the Badkhn) will wake everyone instead of the bird. At the end, the Badkhn is deserted and goes off on his own. There is, apparently, nothing more he can do. This seem to be the point at which the Badkhn would disappear, however Peretz brings him back to explain.

In the epilogue, the Badkhn admits to having overdone it and quits his post as Badkhn. The Perush and the Vanderer conduct a non-dialogue in which the Perush expresses the futility of creating or finding something new in the world and the Vanderer expresses the idea that hope springs eternal, that desire constantly renews hope. Their lines here are clearly representative of their titles. As the fallen hero, the Badkhn has the last word, telling all, "in shul arayn!" The message of this seems to be that the Jews need to go back to that which initially unified them and which is the source of their culture. This is unusual and not typical behavior for the traditional Western Jester. Peretz, in Judaizing his Jester, in fusing him with the traditional badkhn, brings to him the possibility for Tshuva.

It seems evident that the failed revolution of 1905 and the subsequent bacchanalia of satire which it wrought influenced Peretz in placing the Badkhn at the center of Bay nakht afn altn mark. The badkhn, for whom all is up for grabs, anything is a target, whose purpose is tell the truth through in the guise of entertainment, is the only acceptable character who can present the shuddering horror of modernity and revoultion to the Jews. He is the only one who can connect and bind the groups of disparate Jews in order to create a Jewish future in modernity. The irony is that a mask was required in order to do so.