

Nokhem Oyslender

Sholem-Aleykhem

excerpts

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What exactly are the conceptions of a Kasrilevke Jew?  
S-A's eye made a great find in Kasrilevke: here it discovered an appetite for life.

In the midst of the many characters in Mendele's work whose entire historical experience seems to have consisted in learning to overcome their "craving for food," Sholem-Aleykhem introduced his Kasrilik who, having totally forgotten this age-old practice, suddenly revealed a tremendous appetite for life.

Sholem-Aleykhem added a sub-heading to his monologue "Milkhiks": "A monologue of a Kasrilevke glutton." Who was this ordinary Jew, this glutton whom Mendele apparently

overlooked when he reported that the Jews had all suppressed their craving for food? The purpose of the sub-heading was to imply a general trait characteristic of all Kasrilevker... Not an appetite for dairy goods but an appetite for life in general is the determinant of a Kasrilevker.. And in fact this is what we see in the entire first series of Kasrilevke types.

Enter the Jew from "Nakhes fun kinder" (*The Joys of a's Parenthood*). In an exquisite manner Sholem-Aleykhem provides us with a summary statement on the social relations in Kasrilevke and we notice at once that they are still the same relations as in Mendele's *Kaptsansk*. But highlighted in bold relief against this background is a Jew with a deeply-rooted conception: he lives by the precept "*The Joys of Parenthood*."

"I like to <sup>watch</sup> them eat. I get great satisfaction from this." So says the "glutton" of "Milkhiks" about his children. The Jew in the monologue "Nakhes fun kinder" is not a glutton but he too speaks of a certain "satisfaction." Similarly we meet a character like Noyekh the Notions Seller whose mind is so set on his "great joy," the musicians of Yehupets, that without them, the wedding of his youngest daughter is no wedding, but a funeral, as he complains to the crowd of in-laws (A *farshterte khasene* [A Bungled Wedding]).

There is a chapter in Blondzhnde shtern (Wandering Stars) called "A New Character -- Hotsmakh." Hotsmakh is one of the "actors" or "ne'er-do-wells" (farshlepte krenk) who throw such a comic light on the shtetl population of Holoneshti. Through Hotsmakh, Sholem-Aleykhem reveals the make-up of a Kasrilevke-like character and the ties that bind him to the entire Jewish collective. In a way, the chapter outlines the biography of a Kasrilik.

"Tall, thin, sickly, with a cough and short of breath; a white pock-marked face, with a pointed nose, pointed breath, pointed ears and even pointed eyes; hungry, piercing, sharp eyes -- this is what the fellow looks like."

Later Sholem-Aleykhem describes this same character as follows: "A jolly fellow, this Hotsmakh! Leybl cannot understand how he came to be so cheerful."

As we read on in the novel, we find that his cheerfulness has nothing in common with a jester's pose and that Hotsmakh's humor is not the witty repartee of an empty soul. Sholem-Aleykhem describes this character in loving detail and Hotsmakh's letters to his mother reveal such intimate aspects of his life, that no one could possibly mistake him for a superficial clown. Sholem-Aleykhem does not stop there but penetrates further until he reaches Hotsmakh's "conception," his love of the stage. The comedian Hotsmakh was seized by the same obsession that took hold of every Kasrilevke soul.

From now on, Hotsmakh and the Kasrilik are bound by a common motif. There is something in Kasriliks that renders them free, untrammeled, bohemian. Something about them makes them all into "actors" and "ne'er-do-wells" of a sort. Their inner freedom, the untrammeled nature of their spirit, gives rise to the passion, to the "conception" which each of them must always possess, and also gives rise to their characteristic humor.

We can see how in his first period of creativity, Sholem-Aleykhem was drawn to a Stempenyu and a Yosele Nightingale. He sensed that these bohemian types possessed something new in contrast to the stereotypic Jew. Just as Mendele realized that Stempenyus "do not observe the precepts of Judaism," so Sholem-Aleykhem found in them a source of the healthy human spirit. With artistic boldness that aimed at capturing the "extraordinary," Sholem-Aleykhem invested an entire segment of the Jewish collective with the same bohemian freedom and independence: he gave us the Kasriliks.

The humor grows out of a free-spirited and abandoned Kasrilik-type who did not subdue his passion for food, in whom obsessive desires are ever-active, be it for pleasure from one's children, for dairy goods, or for Rothschild's millions. This Kasrilik-spirit, however, has not yet experienced a tragic confrontation.

Sholem-Aleykhem's children represent a transition to the second period of his creativity. Once more we have a tale of obsessions. A penknife, a fiddle, a flag -- these are the objects of a child's desires, just as we have dealt thusfar with the objects of a Kasrilik's desires. Now for the differences.

A child gives in to his passionate desire for a penknife and in the course of the story he assumes truly tragic proportions. He wanders about, unseeing, secluded within himself, hearing only the dictates of his passionate desire until he reaches a confrontation with the world at large. It then emerges that his entire psyche has become implicated in this struggle of the passion and so deep are its traces, that in order to repudiate this desire the child must denounce himself. This is expressed in the distinctive climax of "Dos meserl":

"I pressed the Gemore to my heart, tightly, ever so tightly, and rushed off to kheyder keenly, ever so keenly, and I swore, I swore by the Gemore, never to lay my hands on someone else's things, never, never to steal any more, never to lie any more, always to be honest, honest, ever so honest..."

The Kasrilevke humor is no longer present. The child does not pick himself up; he denounces himself. And the same thing

happens in "Oyfn fidele" (On the Fiddle). Here we have a true "sinner," a favorite motif in Perets' plays. The scope of the child's experience is so vast, the experience itself so direct, that it too must end in an outburst of ethical force. We read:

"For the first time in my life I saw my father cry. My heart contracted and my soul grieved. I gave my word never to make father angry again, never again to cause him any grief--- no more fiddle...."

Sholem-Aleykhem's intention in concluding the story with an outburst of penitence was not to provide a climax specific to childhood but rather to depict an obsession that so pervaded the child's mind that it had to explode in an ethically-charged climax. The same thing will later be true of Sholem-Aleykhem's grownup heroes. Human desire, the obsession, permeates the depths of his emotions, becoming an almost irrational force, and it "purges" the human matter, making the hero worthy of rebirth. This pattern is highly characteristic of Tevye's transition from one story to the next.

Sholem-Aleykhem's trust in human nature, his deep-felt faith in the ethical forces latent in each human being take us by surprise. Sholem-Aleykhem does not back away from any form of obsession, from the most petty of petty desires. He knows that where there is passion, a human personality will flourish, there ethical motives are already blossoming

quietly. This faith allows Sholem-Aleykhem to reveal a more profound dimension in his characters. Human desire is no longer expressed as "an appetite for life" as was the case among the inhabitants of Kasrilevke, but as a more universal, tragic element. This is what raised Menakhem-Mendl above the flock of Kasrilevker and made him into a synthetic figure of a Jewish Don Quixote, into the "fool" of the Yiddish proverb.\* Sholem-Aleykhem had intended Menakhem-Mendl to be a caricature, but what emerged was something altogether different. Wherein lies his secret? Here, once again, is the typical Sholem-Aleykhem character, whose desire, whose obsession for "Millions" seduces him just as the penknife seduced the child. But Menakhem-Mendl, remarkably enough, is no Kasrilik. He doesn't spout witticisms. He is incapable of clever repartee. Despite his self-delusion, deeply-rooted ethical feelings are ever-present in him and they force him to judge his actions just as the child did. In this he is no longer a Kasrilik and he is the first character after the child whose "conception" is born out of the depths of his ethical being. This is also what saves Menakhem-Mendl from becoming a mere caricature.

The very first letters in the "London" series already reveal much of his character. The basic tone of his optimistic nature which is so clearly articulated at the end of the book ("and I will surely succeed. I am as certain

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\*See Oyslender's chapter on the Yiddish proverb, Gruntshtrikhn pp. 11 - 43. The subsequent discussion of Tevye's "folk consciousness" hinges upon this chapter (trans.).

of this as I am that the sun is shining all over the world"), this tone can already be heard in the first letters. What surprises us about Menakhem-Mendl is his seeming indifference to the injustice he sees being perpetrated all around. Having just arrived from Kasrilevke where people are so angry at the British for their war with the Boers and with the French for the Dreyfus Case, Menakhem-Mendl remains indifferent not only to the general injustice, but even to that which involves him directly:

"With us in Yehupets, money plays first fiddle. A human being is not worth a straw -- his origins, his ancestry, have no value at all. You may be anything and nothing -- so long as you have money" (Milyonen, letter 1 ).

Has Menakhem-Mendl already become so implicated in this idolatry that he can discuss it with utter dispassion? Elsewhere we hear him say just the opposite:

"In short, I've come to the conclusion that the game is not for me: You have to have tremendous impudence, disregard the calendar, tell lies, talk speculators into believing that they don't know chalk from cheese, and keep talking until they get sick of listening and are driven into cold sweat.... God alone knows, I haven't got it in me. I like to earn my ruble honestly" (Milyonen, letter 5).

There is a world of difference between the words just cited and his previous aloof stance. Even though Menakhem-Mendl was intended to be a caricature, an embodiment of all the demons who thrive among the Jewish merchant class, Sholem-Aleykhem could not forego the moment when a moral impulse suddenly comes to life within his hero and he begins to judge his own actions in the same way as the child in "Dos meserl." Menakhem-Mendl writes:

"You can't imagine the state I'm in, and I'm so homesick I am wasting away! A hundred times a day I curse the day I was born. Better to have broken both my legs before I came to Odessa, where a human being counts for nothing. You can drop dead walking in the middle of the street and nobody will even stop to look.... Things have come to such a pass that nobody talks about me anymore -- I might as well be dead! And I wish I were dead rather than face such disgrace.... I'm so sick of Odessa, its stock exchange, its Fänconi, and all those petty people, I'd be glad to run away anywhere!" (London, letter 11).

Menakhem-Mendl is homesick. He longs for a refuge for his trusting nature, for the place where "a human being counts for something." The "state he's in" is all the more tragic because it is being described by Menakhem-Mendl himself, by the "sinne-" in person; because to "run away anywhere" means fleeing from oneself, from the spirit of Menakhem-Mendl. Although his figure emerges against a backdrop of of a mock epic on "stocks, millions" and match-making, it is far removed from the typical Kasrilik by

virtue of the profundity of his experience, the incessant, ever-vibrant process of self-judgement. Herein lies the key to understanding the characters whom Sholem-Aleykhem depicted in so many monologues.

The Jew of the monologue "Der nisref" enters into a characteristic exchange with the investigating magistrate. The man whose store burned down argues his case as follows:

"Why? Why? I cried. Why take a person, I said, who is totally innocent and ruin his life? What's so hard about framing a guy? I said. You want a frame-up -- frame me! But don't forget, I said, that there's a law and a God in this universe! He blew up at me: What, you have an in with God?"

And wasn't the magistrate justified: could this little Jew have an in with God? After all, this Jew put himself and his God in the stakes in order to win this devil's game, a game of obsessions, just as the Jewish "hot-head" who admits: "I like to fool around."

The Jews of the monologues, these hot-heads, crooks and busy-bodies all have the same conviction, that "your worst enemy wouldn't do to you what you would do to yourself." (Gimnazye).

We see before us a whole array of "sinners" who gambled on their God, just as Menakhem-Mendl played and lost

his "refuge," his trustfulness. For these characters whose desire goes far beyond the basic "appetite for life" and takes hold of their entire psyche, Kasrilevke humor can no longer be therapeutic. Instead, they must experience a tragic moment in which they judge their actions. We see this in Menakhem-Mendl as well as in his fellow-travelers:

"I feel," says the Jew of "Finf un zibetsik toyznt," "that I'm cramped for space over here, I can't sit still, there's a fire inside of me, I must, I absolutely must come out with it.... Do you understand, or don't you?" And we understand the "fire" which consumes both the Jew and his monologue.

Here ends the second stage of Sholem-Aleykhem's "conception." Starting with the Kasrilevke, the free, bohemian-spirited Jew who in the last analysis remained a superficial entity, the "conception" moved on to Menakhem-Mendl, the Jew who followed his obsession blindly, threw himself and his God into the stakes and reached an explosion of ethical forces which ultimately revealed his true self to himself.

But Sholem-Aleykhem was destined to discover a hero in whom the process of human conception reached the highest possible level, where the revelation opened out into the world at large. This figure who concealed the great spirit within him behind a myriad of layers and external details was Tevye the Dairyman.

The scope of Tevye's "conception" is defined first and foremost by his attachment to his daughters. "Inside of me," he says, "I harbor a wound. I'm a father, after all. In the words of the prayerbook, As a father has mercy on his children; once a father, always a father."

On the surface, each of his tales is an illustration of this very passage, a story of his fatherly obsession. Remaining true to his artistic credo, Sholem-Aleykhem here too follows the pattern in which the evolution of a human obsession is the evolution of a human nature and this path leads to the redemption of the individual, to his spiritual rebirth. This, in fact, is Tevye's path from one story to the next. The episodes are structured according to the scheme of "Dos meserl." Tevye is misled, blinded by his desire which seizes control of his psyche, whereupon he bemoans his state, saying "my life is undone, and I too am undone." This is the point at which a reversal always occurs, when his "human matter" is purged, when an inner moral force restores and rejuvenates his soul.

Sholem-Aleykhem's artistic credo remains true to itself. His faith in human nature celebrates its triumph through Tevye the Dairyman. But this raises the question of how Tevye's conception compares with that of Menakhem-Mendl the Kasrilik. At one point Tevye says: "Then I remembered

and a great anger seized me. I burned with anger against her and against him and against the whole world, but mostly against myself..." (Khavé).

It is this "fire" which burns in Tevye, the great intensity of his experience that differentiates Tevye from the Kasrilik. But Tevye has an eclectic nature which absorbs some of the traits of a Kasrilik. Tevye absorbs his freedom, his bohemian spirit, the feeling of no-holds-barred that the orphans Hotsmakh and Motl enjoy.

The source of Tevye's humor, and with that his similarity to the spirit of a Kasrilik lies in Tevye's great interest in his own life, in the way he indulges his own human qualities which observe themselves and speak for themselves. Tevye enormously improved upon and refined the Kasrilik's humor, but most important, he made Jewish humor into a vital, life-giving force.

The Kasrilik's humor is the product of a human being in whom the healthy "appetite for life" is very much alive but who lacks the stubborn will that can satisfy this very appetite. The Kasrilik is humorous because he is too insignificant to be tragic. The folk mind, until a certain point in its development, associated the figure of a comedian or a "ne'er-do well" with someone who was unprepared for life, who was not vital and creative.

Tevye as a true folk-hero who ought to gather in the best that the folk has to offer, acquires their humor and

adds to it a will that is capable of giving rise to tragedy. Herein lies Tevye's uniqueness. What is he: humorous or tragic? It is almost impossible to answer this question.

Reading any one of Tevye's stories, one hardly notices the point at which he stops rattling off proverbs and all his senses are set on edge. Only after the crisis has passed and he has already "rubbed in" another biblical quotation, do we notice that Tevye has just undergone a change before our very eyes. This change occurs in each one of his stories. Suddenly the "fire" within him begins to speak and at that moment the "hot-head" or the "nisref" in Tevye emerge -- those characters who threw both themselves and their God into the stakes for the sake of their obsession.

Though Tevye internalizes the humor of the Jewish folk-type, he also adopts Menakhem-Mendl's tragic manner, the manner of a person who denounces his own deeds. And so the two continue to coexist in Tevye's make-up: the humor of a free, bohemian Kasrilik spirit and the tragic manner of Menakhem-Mendl and his likes, those who nurture a "fire" within them, an enormously intense experience. Thanks to these elements in his nature, Tevye's Job-like existence becomes tragic, his conception becomes universal and his character becomes the cumulative essence of a folk-hero.

We begin to understand Tevye's fatherly obsession and how this obsession comes to have such universal relevance.

For Tevye's passion is indeed his fatherly obsession, and this is what provides the plot of all the stories. Each and every time this passion clashes with the most basic developments in the social and cultural life of the Jewish collective, questions arise of their own accord: Will Tevye's "conception" prove itself so resilient that it will pave a way through the entire labyrinth of the great social crisis of these times? Will Tevye's fatherly obsession not degenerate to the level of a "little man" and be transformed into the Kasrilevker desire for "The Joys of Parenthood"? No, Tevye's biography takes a different route. Tevye has an heroic nature and he confronts all the crises head-on.

"I don't know about you," says Tevye, "but I for one hate a secretive person." This is soon followed by: "There's a proverb that says 'Where there's a secret, there's a theft.' " This in fact characterizes Tevye very well, because he is by no means taciturn by nature and he never holds his tongue or kept quiet about any development in the world around him. Secrets are beyond him. Thus, wherever the Jewish masses were directing their vital forces during his lifetime was where Tevye expended his own.

Perets, who wrote the History of the Vital Jewish Forces throughout our entire past, saw only weak manifestations of this force in our present. Sholem-Aleykhem's Tevye, however, is the living embodiment of this force in our present times. Since this vital energy of the Jewish masses can be

discerned (1) in the social concern that began to be expressed in the folk consciousness; (2) in the breakdown of old attitudes to peoplehood and God; and (3) in the maturation process of the Jewish individual, the Jewish personality, therefore Tevye --- the folk-hero -- expends his own energies in the same directions.

This is not the place to analyze exactly how Tevye's "conception" prepared him to cope with each of these complex social processes, but what should be noted is the extent to which Tevye embodies their development in a progressive direction. Motl Kamzoyl the tailor, Menakhem - Mendl and his fiasco, the millionaire contractor Padhatsur, Feferl the revolutionary are all pioneers, the harbingers of the social changes that will soon take place in Jewish life. Imbued with the social protest so inherent in Jewish folk consciousness, Tevye confronts the deeds of each of these pioneers. The first expression of his response is the lyrical monologue "Dos groyse gevins" [translated as "Tevye Wins a Fortune"]. Later on, the vicissitudes of life bring Tevye face to face with Padhatsur, the "rich uncle" of the Shprintse story. What begins as a vague premonition about the "stocrats," gradually evolves into a clear understanding of their nature. It is significant that sitting in Padhatsur's mansion, Tevye so fondly recalls the memory of Feferl. Tevye's vague awareness of social injustice becomes a clearly-defined viewpoint. This, therefore, is an example of how Tevye's fatherly obsession, confronted with the

contradictions of social change in Jewish life, undergoes the vicissitudes of this change while remaining true to its progressive trend.

Tevye makes no secret either of the crisis that takes place as the folk consciousness parts ways with the old attitudes to peoplehood and faith. It is Tevye's "conception" that confronts this crisis, and prompts him once again to make significant forward strides. As a product of the folk who so recently championed the chosen people concept, Tevye, in responding to his daughters, must first pass through the Kasrilik stage in which dialogues with God were mostly a matter of habit until he reaches the Tevye stage in which God is addressed only in a moment of crisis in expectation of a benevolent response. Clearly, it is not the national fervor of a faith in chosenness that prompts Tevye to question the divine plan. Tevye always addresses his plea to God in a personal moment of great human emotion.

"As soon as you see death you become a heretic."  
So says Tevye and indeed this is what transpires each time he experiences a death or a crisis. To this his own words bear witness: "And after I had a good cry, sitting there in my wagon, and after I beat my poor horse for all he was worth, I began to question God's actions just as Job once did...."

Tevye does this all the time: he brings all the heavenly forces to bear upon his personal experience. Here the driving force is not an overly developed mental faculty but the profundity of his emotion. It is for this reason that Tevye's life, the story of "once a father, always a father" evolves into a Jobian parable. This is why we so often see Tevye, the "most Jewish Jew" as he calls himself, release his feelings toward God by taking Him to task: "What is the purpose of life and death, of this world and the next and what is man and what does he live by...."

These are not abstract issues with which Tevye would probably not make much headway. His thoughts are always the epilogue to his emotions. Therefore they carry so much weight and represent the summation of an entire people's experience. This explains why Tevye comes on so strong in the crisis of religious thought.

In the Berylke story, Tevye says: "It's not God I'm angry with. One way or other I've made my peace with Him. It's people I'm angry with. Why are they so evil when they could just as well be good?" But Tevye's "peace with God" is somewhat problematic. Golde, overhearing Tevye's peace overtures is quick to reprimand him: "It's a sin to speak this way, you musn't sin Tevye."

Tevye makes his peace with God with an embittered reticence that is reminiscent of the way in which the folk "takes leave of the Lord." Driven by his fatherly obsession, Tevye the true folk-hero, undergoes the entire gamut of folk experience until "one way or another," he makes his peace with God.

Tevye's life-giving energy takes him in yet another direction as well, a direction that goes from the world and from God himself, to the forging of his own will or personality.

"Tevye knows how to deal with Satan the Opponent." Tevye makes no secret of his life and confronts everything openly. This points to an eternal inner struggle that also serves to raise him as an individual high above the "ordinary Jew." This struggle constitutes the third aspect of Tevye's vital energy.

"I blame myself and I told myself, 'I do not deserve to be pitied' -- I am not worthy of the earth I walk on. What! What are you getting so heated up about, you stubborn fool? What's all this caterwauling?" (Khavel). Once again we see a Jew who is intent upon how crazy he is, a Jew who goes into seclusion within himself and begins to denounce his own actions.

"I wonder if all men are like me," he says, "or if I am the only crazy one" (Khavel). This is the same testimony that all of Sholem-Aleykhem's characters make. The tragedy of Tevye's conception that accompanied him through all his tribulations and "one way or another" made its peace with

God, now reaches its ultimate source -- the individual himself. After Tevye's futile effort which he sums up as pouring out all his knowledge to his older daughters and still remaining a fool, he reaches the conclusion in one of the last chapters of his life that the whole Beylke episode may well have been his own fault.

"And yet if we look at this more closely, if we dig beneath the surface, we might find out that I am to blame as much as anyone" (Tevye fort keyn Erets Yisroel [Tevye Goes to Palestine] ).

It can no longer be argued that Tevye's heroic nature has nothing to fall back on. His power, his inherent courage is directed not so much externally as internally. He is a hero born of the folk who takes himself to task and forges his will within his own self. This process is expressed in the constant development of his personality.

Yet another of Tevye's traits now falls into place. This process binds Tevye with invisible threads to each and every individual in whom he detects the same "fire," the crucible of the human will.

"And as I talk to him," <sup>says</sup> Tevye describing his first encounter with Feferl, "I feel myself drawn to the fellow somehow; I don't know why" (Hodl). In the same way Tevye may not grasp why he is drawn to Motl Kamzoyl when the latter stands before him "with lowered head, like a person who has

sinned." In the very same way Tevye is drawn anew to his daughters when each of them in turn becomes creatively alive and individualistic. The moment he passes judgement on himself that "I do not deserve to be pitied," he is immediately rewarded with that rare talent of his: to detect in someone else the very fire that has just been burning in his own heart, to detect the individualized life in his midst.

Tevye's harmonious nature provided a basis for the heroism that he possessed. It propelled him towards other people; it prevented him from secluding himself in the four cubits of his own exaltation; it activated his emotions, made his self-involvement into a creative force and made his conception into something grand.

Tevye became a folk-hero.

But the folk-hero who grew out of the "little man with the little mind" ended his career with a deed characteristic of his origins. In violation of his standing practice, Tevye agreed to accept money from the ugly likes of Padhatsur and off he went to Palestine.

As anyone can predict, Tevye in his later years will denounce himself, as he is wont to do, for making his peace with Padhatsur, just as he denounced himself for his fiasco-relationship with Menakhem-Mendl. But Tevye's life comes to an end here.

"Leykh-lekho" (Get Thee Out), the last Tevye story, does not depict any internal crisis or another death which, according to his own words, makes him into a heretic. The life of the folk-hero returns, after struggling with the whole world and with God, to itself, to the naked individual and his conception. Once more life dictates: "It is incumbent upon man to ..." as Tevye begins to cite yet another proverb. But this time it is left unfinished.