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*Nayn mos reydt*: Language in the works of Sholem Aleykhem

Consisting primarily of monologues transmitted to the reader through a variety of devices, Sholem Aleykhem's Menakhem Mendl, Tevye der Milkhiger, and Di Ayznbangeshikhtn rely on the reproduction of natural discourse in order to reflect the social and economic changes which shook Jewish life in Eastern Europe at its foundations in the early decades of this century. Through both the language itself of his characters and the ideas and attitudes which they express, Sholem Aleykhem depicts a society in rapid evolution, one in which revolutionary concepts and business practices have violently penetrated the shtetl and threaten to tear asunder the traditional occupational and extended family structure. While linguistic borders are frequently permeable, the departure from Shprakhfolklor and traditional narrative structure in general reveal the modernization and secularization of Jewish life.

The remnants of traditional shtetl culture are most easily remarked in the language of that last generation raised in its narrow world - the generation of Tevye and Golde, Menakhem Mendl and Sheyne Sheyndl. Since Sholem Aleykhem concentrates mostly on the speech of men in the aforementioned books, the sheer volume and verbosity of Sheyne Sheyndl's letters to her *luftmentsh* spouse provide an opportunity to establish norms of female speech with the speech of other female characters may be compared. Despite the use of the formalized salutations of the *brivnshteler*, Menakhem Mendl and Sheyne Sheyndl correspond in their every day voices in the body of the letters, each "speaking" as if the other stood before him. Thus, each letter takes the form of a monologue duplicating natural, colloquial speech, although devoid of the unfinished sentences and mumbled words which characterize spoken exchanges.

Wholly unfamiliar with the outside world of large cities, stock markets, and illusory business schemes into which naive Menakhem has plunged headfirst, Sheyne Sheyndl has no comprehension of his activities:

Az du shraybst shoy<sup>z</sup>n yo, <sup>z</sup>solstu shraybn vi a mentsch! Far vos zolst du nit aroysshraybn akurat, vos iz far a min skhoyre ot dos, vos du handelst mit dem? Vi tayer leyzt men dos eyn arshin? Tsi efsher farkoyft zikh es oyf der vog? Freg mikh bekerem vos dos iz, un mit vos me est dos! Haynt farshzey ikh nit, du zogst, az ot hostu ayngkoyft skhoyre, un ot iz shoy<sup>n</sup>n do reyakh. Vos iz dos far a min skhoyre, vos vakst bay dir azoy geshmuedik? "Petsheritses, zogt di mama, badarfn oykh a regen!"... Oyf vos vartstu? Oyf a yakres?

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However, she is not entirely to blame for this. Equipped with but a shtetl education, Menakhem Mendl is hampered in his ability to explain unfamiliar terminology and events to his wife by his own superficial understanding. Angered by her virtual abandonment by a husband whom she must repeatedly save from debt and the social discomfort it causes her, the miserable Sheyne Sheyndl relies on citations from her domineering mother - a figure from whom Menakhem has taken refuge outside the shtetl - and a colorful selection of curses and complaints to vent dissatisfaction with her fate and futilely attempt to curtail her husband's business failings and gain his return. Moreover, her language is rich with *shprakhfolklor* - a symbol of the social and economic primitiveness and oppression of the shtetl - for she lacks the exposure, vocabulary, and modes of abstract thought necessary to support a discussion of urban life and modern economic systems. Instead, she employs chains of curses, idioms, and folk sayings legitimated through the authority of her mother to express her meaning or provide an additional source to corroborate her opinions. Psycho-ostensive expressions, such as "es zol oyf dem kumen a khileria", "kholila", "im mertsashem", "nito gedakht", "tsu lengere yorn", etc. frequently serve in her speech as a superstitious precaution against harm and misfortune or as invocation of providence. Elsewhere, they replace direct statements, expressing in exaggerated form generally negative attitudes, as when she wishes that Odessa burn. Moreover, she frequently deflects the psychic pain of her own troubles onto those things and persons who bring her displeasure, taking the final words of a mundane complaint and placing them at the head of a curse: "az ikh hob shoy<sup>ton</sup>n vider tsu mit di tsey<sup>n</sup>n, oyf dayne odeser 'dronzshikes' gezogt gevorn" (London, VI). Another favorite technique of hers is to

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she speaks of her husband in the third person, as if talking about a child not responsible for his actions or in order to disassociate herself from "his" children when they distress her.

Sheyne Sheyndl makes use of folk wisdom in much the same way as Tevye cites from Tanakh and Midrash, although she does not reinterpret citations for ironic effect. For Sheyne Sheyndl, most likely deprived of the kheder education which boys typically received in the shtetl, folk sayings and proverbs comprise the canon upon which she depends for daily support in interpreting the calamities of life. Indeed, her speech generally contains less (although not much less) of the *loshn koydesh* component of Yiddish than that of her husband, who prefers the Hebrew salutations of the *brivn-shteter* to the Yiddish ones selected by his wife. Thus, whereas he employs "reyses bati lehoym diekh" and "vehasheynes," she is more comfortable with "ershtens kum ikh dir tsu meldn" and "tsveytns." Similarly, he occasionally sprinkles his letters with such mixed-component phrases as "haynt loy kol <sup>shkeyn</sup> ~~sol~~ a yidene" and "hiney <sup>z</sup> zey visn" (London, III) whereas she is more apt to include a Slavic proverb from her mother's seemingly inexhaustible repertoire. Although Sheyne Sheyndl seldom expresses an idea directly or without employing emotionally charged language (fraught with seemingly unrelated references, repetitions, etc.), she does possess in her discourse an inner logic which her rambling husband lacks.

Incapable of envisioning commerce which does not involve visible, tangible goods ("Ikh farshtey nit, khotsh nem mikh arop dem kop, vos iz dos far a min skhoyre vos me zet zi nit? A kats in a zak.", London, IV), her instinctual distrust of such means of earning a living ("Nur lomikh shoyne derlebn zen epes fon dir oyf der rikhtiger emes, nit oyf papir..." (Papirlekh, VIII) are nevertheless well founded in the case of Menakhem Mendl, who himself does not understand their essential functioning:

Al ken vel ikh dir klor makhn, zolst farshteyen dos gesheft akurat. <sup>2 VISN</sup> (Henei zey veysn, az dos "london" gufe iz eyn ideale materye. Farkoyfn farkoyft zikh es oyfn vort, un zen zet men dos nit. Ale minut bayt zikh es: ot iz tayer, ot iz dos volvl. Ot iz "hos", ot iz "bes"...es loyfn di kursn oyf meshugenevayz. (London, III)

Then, Menakhem, captivated by the wealth and frenetic activity which the city represents to him in contrast with petit-bourgeois life of the shtetl merchant which he so desperately

- 3 \* The *joie de shtet* normally introduces a sharp energetic distinction. It is almost *legalese*. It underscores the unbridgeable gap between rhetoric / reality.

(although not consciously) seeks to escape, remains only one step a head of his wife in understanding business dealings. He too must rely on simplistic language and concrete illustrations in order to explain, for example, the complicated operations of the bourse to her:

"Stalazhen" iz nit, vi du rufst es on, "deleshansn." Deleshansn iz dos, vos me fort oyf dem keyn radomishl un keyn zhitomir, un "stalazh" iz a shtikl papir, vos yener shraybt on un khasmet zikh unter, as s'vet kumen "ultimo", dos heyst sof khoydesh, iz er mekhöyev azoy fil un azoy fil funtn tsu dem un dem kurs dir gebn un bay dir nemen...un me tut, lemoshl, a shmues oyf di bleter mekoyekh milkhome, falt dos rusishe kerbl arop in der erd arayn, un dos "london" tut zikh mit a mol a ruk, az me derkent nisht dem plats." (London, V)

Nonetheless, Menakhem's language is far more open to the "foreign" influences of urban life and large commercial markets than that of his wife. This is reflected in his integration of French, English, and German terms into his speech, terms for which his wife has no use and typically deforms, as in the case of "hes" and "bos." His language, however, still bears the markers of traditional folk-speech - entreaties for G-d's help and other psycho-ostensive expressions, repetition, exaggeration, and metaphor - although with lesser frequency than that of his wife. Thus, he laments, "London' iz take gevorn mit gold glaykh, un dos kerbl iz take gefaln in shoul <sup>del + akht</sup> ~~te~~ arayn, un s'iz arop a moyrediker bes!" (London, XI). Although he has entered (unsuccessfully) the world of big business and speculation, Menakhem remains a shtetl-Jew in his vocabulary and cultural frame of reference.

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That traditional shtetl women are more inclined to certain varieties of *shprakhfolklor* than men is borne about by the few other female characters, as well. When Golde heaps exaggerated abuse upon Teyve for his late-night return from the Boiberik *negidim* in "Dos groyse gevins," he comments, "zogt tsu mir mayn vayb un shelt, leyent di toykhekhe, vi geveyntlekh a yidine" ("Dos groyse gevins") Similarly, the embittered, teary-eyed female peddler in "Konkurentn" opens her mouth to let loose

= ABC of his stepmother's curses

a fontan, a kval fun kloles:

In gantsn er - brekhn zol er haldz un nakn, beyn un leyb oyfn glaykhn veg, liber got! Alsding nemt zikh fun im - nemen zol im di erd, ziser foter! Er zol gor nit derlebn kumen ahaym, kumen zol oyf im a mise-meshune, a kholerye, a sereyfe, a meeyfe, an oyskhapenish! An oyfloyfenish! An ayndarenish! A Tsunoyfshrimpenish! ("Konkurentn")

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Again, like Sheyne Sheyndl, she displays a talent for transforming her own dissatisfaction into a curse upon her enemy, in this case her second husband:

Vos zhe zol ikh geyn ganvenen, az ikh hob finf kinder, finf kholeres im in boykh, un aley n bin ikh krank, krenken zol er in hekdesht, liber Got, fun haynt on khotsh biz iberayor rosh-khoydesh elul, vi er hot gemakht a tel, bagrobn dos gesheft, bagrobn zol ikh im!  
("Konkurentn")

Nor does one hesitate - somewhat incongruously - to invoke the assistance of the same G-d in whose name the characters beg mercy, sustenance, and good fortune or that of the despised devil in granting such violent wishes. These exaggerated invectives are not to be taken at face value, but rather understood as an expression of general dissatisfaction with the character's lot in life. Dependent on the wealth and reputation of their husbands in order to attain recognition in their communities, it is not surprising that these women, bound to the home and children, rely solely on their venomous tongues for self-assertion and frequently attempt to dominate their men. Indeed, Sheyne Sheyndl reminds Menakhem how fortunate he is to have her as his wife rather than her despised rival Blume-Zlate, whom she does not fail to curse with every mention of her name. Ironically Blume-Zlate seems to share much in common with Sheyne Sheyndl's beloved mother, particularly her advocacy of keeping tight reigns upon a husband:

Nur gey, az s'iz bay mir a teyve, ikh ken nit zayn azoy grob, vi Blume-Zlate; ikh ken nit sheltn, araynlegn a man in der erd arayn, azoy vi zi, ikh ken nit! Zolst hobn Blume-Zlaten, nit derharn zol zi, far a vayb, volstu shoy n gevust vos far a Got mir hobn." (London, XII)

In their perpetual concern for material security, however, the shtetl women are unfailingly joined by their husbands. Far more pragmatic and level-headed than her husband, who is intoxicated with the prospect of amassing a quick fortune, Sheyne desires a simple, financially secure existence rather than dreams of great riches. She recognizes a certain order in society and the world, one which she sees no reason to challenge, and exhorts her husband to abandon his illusions of succeeding outside their element:

Vos glaykhstu zikh tsu Brotskien? Host mit zey in eynem khazerim gepasht? Me git dir far dayne papirlekh epes geld - nem! Vos makhstu onshteln? (Papirlekh, VIII)

It is a preoccupation of this entire class of Jews to economically evaluate an individual, that is to provide an estimation of his wealth upon his introduction into the story. Hence, Tevye's description of a man for whom he transported wood one summer: "Dort iz gezesht<sup>n</sup> eyner a gvir a groyser, fun Yehupets, a milyontshik fun avade a meye elef karbn fun reysh <sup>zlotm</sup> ~~elefm~~." ("Dos groyse gevins"). While members of the lower middle class of Jewish artisans and merchants are depicted as generally honest and traditionally religious, all are preoccupied with *parnose* and nearly all activity is conducted in its pursuit. Thus, the narrator of the *Ayznbangeshikhtn* compares the tales he has collected to commercial goods:

Un ikh hob mikh avekgezest un hob tselegt di skhoyre oyf mustern, dem "brak" aroysgeshmishn, ibergelozt nor dos beste, prima shebeprima, ayngeteylet oyf bazundere geshikhtn, geshikhte numer eyns, geshikhte numer tsey, un azoy vayter. Yeder geshikhte hob ikh gegeben eyn andern nomen, fayntshik, vi es geher tsu zayn - mayse soykher. Ikh veys nit, tsi vil ikh inem gesheft fardinen, tsi ikh vel brekhn ruk un lend. Halevay ikh zol khotsh aroys mit mayn kern ("Tsu di lezer")

In Tevye's speech, however, this constant concern with earning a living is even more acute. Accustomed to poverty, he even regularly employs money as a unit to measure things not normally measured in this way:

Ikh bin in Boyberik vi bay zikh in der heym. Lomikh farmogn di <sup>zlotm</sup> ~~elefm~~, zog ikh, vifil kletser ikh hob ahintsu arayngefirt. ("Dos groyse gevins")

Perhaps more than any other character in his class, Tevye exemplifies a gift for digression and redundancy, perpetually prefacing a long anecdote with a "bakitser". His language, described by Harshav as "rambling, round about, associative chains telling not about events proper but about other, similar dialogues in the past." (Benjamin Harshav, The Meaning of Yiddish, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 103), contrasts most conspicuously with that of the class of wealthy Jews, who deem him their inferior. As exemplified by the uncle in "Shprintse", who attempts to bribe Tevye in order to preclude a marriage between his nephew and Tevye's daughter, when conversation turns to business, matters are addressed in brutally direct, undecorated speech:

Vos toygt unz lange deborim? Lomir, zogt er, geyn glaykh tsum inyen, gesheft heyst es. ("Sphrintse")

While normal speech for Tevye's class is sprinkled with insults and invectives, which provide little offense to anyone, the uncle wounds Tevye to the core with pejorative accusations that Tevye, a mere dairyman, is attempting to rob a wealthy widow of her fortune via a girl who may not even be his true daughter. To these doubts cast upon the integrity of Tevye and his daughter, the uncle adds the insult of a bribe. Podhotser, a nouveau riche who has married Tevye's cynically pragmatic daughter Beylke, speaks in similar terms when requesting that Tevye the dairyman disappear for the sake of his reputation as an affluent and influential business man:

Ir zent, zogt er, a yid nisht keyn nar un vet keyn faribl nisht hobn, vos ikh vel aykh redn ofntlekh...Ikh vil aykh, zogt er, unterhelfn mit geld, vifil me vet badarfn, abi, zogt er, ir zolt vem oys Tevye der milkhiger. ("Tevye fort keyn erets-yisroel")

The curt, candid speech of these men conceals in no way their lack of esteem for Tevye's class of shtetl Jews. When discussing business, their language is bare and direct, utterly denuded of the subtleties of shprakhfolklor, which often serve to soften one's words. And, worst of all in Tevye's eyes, religion and respect for traditional lermen has almost entirely disappeared from the vocabulary of such men. Podhotser has no need for the Gemora, amused by his own ignorance of it ("Tkh vel aykh zogn, zogt er, dem reynem emes, zogt er, ikh hob, zogt er, keyn gemore keyn mol nisht gelernt, zogt er, un ikh veys afile nisht, zogt er, voser a ponem zi hot." ("Tevye fort keyn erets-yisroel") and Arontshik, Shprintse's spoiled fiancé, and his friends are similarly devoid of any religious education.

As a final comment, it must be remarked that the wealthy, however, are not the only characters whose language departs from shtetl norms. Tevye's own children, whom he adores and praises above all things just as all other Jews in his class laud their progeny, have absorbed revolutionary ideas foreign to the shtetl - romantic love, irreligious social justice and the abolishment of "artificial" barriers between Jews and Gentiles, and socialism - and now speak a language their father fails to comprehend. Their language is clear and unpretentious, yet devoid of the coloring with which their father's generation regale the reader. Despite his having betrothed himself to Tsaytl without Tevye's permission, Motl

Komzoyl is the last of the daughters' suitors who speaks the language of the shtetl. for he shares Tevye's apolitical emphasis on honest labor and *parnose* ("Arbet iz faran, barukh hasem, genuk", "Hayntike kinder") and inclination toward longwinded rhetoric. The furthest extreme from Tevye's speech is that of his youngest daughter, Beylke. Her cynical pragmatism is excessive, for she abandons all hope of happiness for the sake of material security. Disillusioned by the events of the failed revolution of 1905, she accepts marriage to the pretentious ignoramus Podhotser with fateful laconism:

"Tsu Hodln<sup>2</sup>, zagt zi, zolstu mikh, zagt zi, nit glaykhn. Hodl iz geven, zagt zi, in a aza tsayt, ven di gants velt, zagt zi, hot zikh gevigt, zagt zi, gehaltn ot-ot bay iberkem zikh, hot men gezorgt, zagt zi, far di velt, un zikh hot men fargesn: un itzt, zagt zi, az di velt iz a velt, zagt zi, zorgt zikh yeder far zikh un di velt hot men fargesn."...ot azoy enfert zi mir deroyf...un get farshtet, vos zi meynt! ("Tevye fort keyn erets-yisroel")

Thus, the language of Sholem Aleykhem's characters reflects a widening social, ethical, and ideological gap separating Tevye's class of lower-middle class shtetl Jews from its own children, as well as from those wealthy Jews who scoff at traditional shtetl values. Provincialism in speech diminishes with intellectual and ethical distance from the shtetl; however, what is gained in precision and directness is often lost in terms of emotion. (empathy) traditional piety, and colorful folk humor.