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The Image of the Shtetl

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Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening...the Darkest Evening of the Year¹

Imagine viewing a village from a distance, from the safety of a carriage. We may ache to join the families in cozy houses with lit windows; to long for a nearly forgotten intimacy. Or, do we sometimes mistakenly turn to look back at a sinful town—but it is ours and so we yearn for it anyway. Memories of childhood, of the land we come from, remain some of the most potent draws in our well of ideas, motivations and fantasies. The Yiddish writers from the late 19th century and *fin de siècle* had to decide firstly to write in their mother tongue, to create a literary language out of a spoken “slang.” They had to describe their memories, as inaccurate as they had become, and when they had spread all those mimetic exercises widely, then they could evolve another more sophisticated literary form, where metaphor could reign. The two stories discussed here have in common the traveler/narrator who is looking from a safe distance. They speak to us, but they were intended for readers who were our grandparents or older. They were aimed at the former inhabitants of these towns and ones like them.

In *Dreyfus in Kasrilevke*, Sholom Aleichem’s Little People² engage passionately with the world that doesn’t know they even exist. The shtetl of Kasrilevke is of the world, yet dramatically separate from it, but at least they know they have a direct line to God.

“You know very well how to make a miracle if only You want to. Perform a miracle now that Lambori may live!”

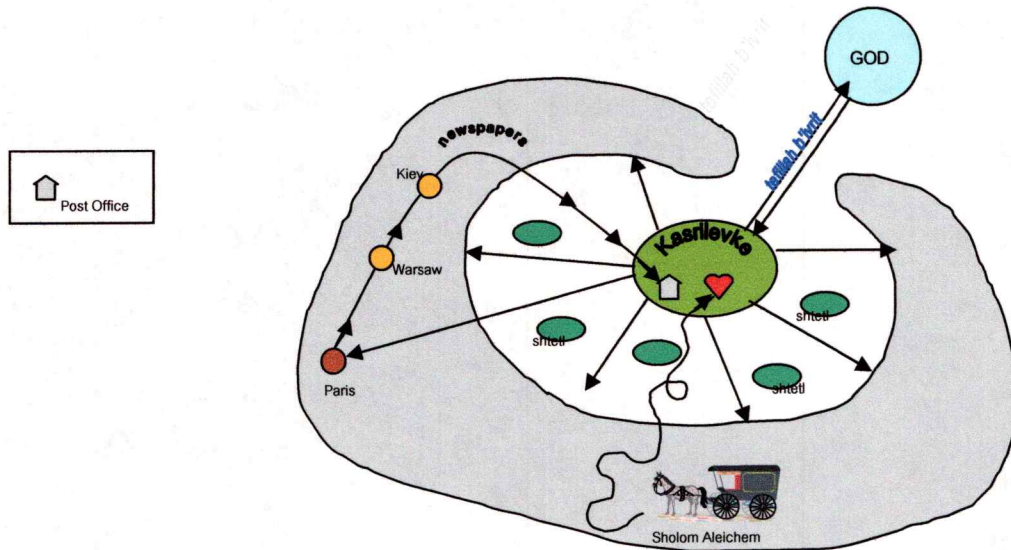
¹ Poem by Robert Frost

² This is the name Sholom Aleichem gives to the inhabitants of Kasrilevke in his stories *The Town of the Little People* and *The Great Panic of the Little People*.

Although, they first learn about Dreyfus a few years after his first trial, now that they hear that he is being framed, he becomes one of theirs. His every movement, his trip back from Devil's Island for his second trial, his wife, his children, they all become the intimate concern of the Jews of Kasrilevke who, in turn, seem to have little else to do besides rush to hear his news read and translated for them by Zaidle, the only local who subscribes to a newspaper. He is the link to the outside world and the author underscores his authority by calling him by his full name: Zaidle son of Shem.³ Despite his important role in the life of the shtetl, and despite his being merely a messenger, when the news he reads turns bad at the end, he is adamantly not believed. The Little People believe in the efficacy of their prayers and the power of truth to overcome. The news that Dreyfus's guilt is confirmed in his second trial is inconceivable. "It cannot be!" they scream, accusing Zaidle of lying. They turn their anger on the messenger rather than the distant world or toward God. The author winks at us in the last line asking, "Well, and who was right?" The story was written in 1902. The trial in the story took place in 1899; in September of that year Dreyfus gets pardoned and later in 1906 he will be exonerated. We and the author know that the Little People were prophetically and morally right: "Such things cannot be!" Zaidle can only report what he reads; his important (horizontal) link to the outside world seems to preclude his having that special (vertical) link to God that his fellow citizens have. Like Zaidle's newspaper, their link is also made of words—words of Hebrew prayer. The cast of characters include two non Jews, the postmaster and Yarmo, the Post Office janitor, but mostly, the Jews don't interact with them. They seem to live in a parallel universe and care nothing or little for their opinions, requests and even their insults. Although the postmaster is dismissed as "a fly buzzing about their earlocks," it is the Jews who seem more like a swarm of bees "murmur(ing)" Hallel and easily driven out *en masse* by the Janitor. These two non-Jews

³ Biblical genealogy lists Shem as Noah's eldest son and as the progenitor of Abraham.

have personalities and motives for their behavior. The nameless Jews barely notice them. The Jews of Kasrilevke only have eyes for their own—whether in Paris or in Heaven.



The diagram describing their relationships shows a strong vertical line for practical give-and-take with the Divine, some intense local horizontal lines, and one long distance horizontal that lassoes the whole world. There are vectors, too, but they go in one direction only—out toward the world. No reciprocal vectors exist except for the nostalgic one created by the narrator/author.

After an introduction that sets the stage and the frame for the story, the words “One day...” alert us that we are in the world of fantasy where Dreyfus’s return to France is a “Holy Moment” in Kasrilevke. The central part of the story is about frenzy, sleeplessness, hysteria and hyperbole over distant “important” events. These become part of a way of life, a distraction, a choral plea to be part of the greater world in an otherwise hopelessly impoverished and isolated existence. The citizens of Kasrilevke are more redeemable than those of Dik’s Heres who also

get carried away by bits of distant news. In Heres, it is chaotic and ridiculous. In Kasrilevke, there is real concern, empathy and interest in being properly informed about life outside.

We are in a world of myths and metaphors where people and towns have meanings that describe them, where prayers of a Jewish chorus demand from God and He responds. Kasrilevke is not a real place. It is a symbolic world where the cemetery is the only piece of land that the Jews truly own, where individual personalities represent whole segments of society, where parts of the town or institutions, like the baths are stand-ins for Eden or spiritual life, and others, like the market, mean corruption, and where a mountain can be the dividing line between the two.⁴ The post office is the actual link to the outside world and therefore looms larger than life in the symbolic landscape. It is controlled by goyim, and the news itself is controlled elsewhere far away, and by Zaidle's "translation." Our Little People don't read for themselves the "foreign" language of the newspaper. They are hopelessly adrift from the world, even from their Ukrainian neighbors with whom they barely share common vocabulary. Yet, they seem to understand and misunderstand each other as needed. They are pathetically dependant on others for information, yet "they often give (Zaidle's) words exactly the opposite meaning." They reinterpret as they see fit. The author hints broadly that they have a better understanding of the world. He mocks them, but he also believes it.

The author loves his Little People. They are not only the citizens of Kasrilevke; they are the Jewish People, who also fervently care about the world yet this attention is also not reciprocated except in slurs. They also converse with God and know what must be and what "cannot be." They are All-Jews struggling for survival in exile. Sholom Aleichem is nostalgic for a time and place that is disappearing: the *kehillah kedoshah* and the homey small

⁴ "Geography" taken from other stories by Sholom Aleichem (The Town of the Little People, The Great Panic of the Little People).

community.⁵ His descriptions are full of affection, nostalgia and gentle mockery set against a bittersweet backdrop knowing that this is the end of a special time and culture.

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Five years after writing *Impressions of a Journey Through the Tomaszow Region* (1891), I. L. Peretz confirms his ultimate despair over the state of Jewish shtetl life in his story *Dead Town*. What at first appears to be a figurative description of a dying or unsuccessful town becomes, by stages, a real ghost story of a literally dead town—or a town of dead people. Peretz uses this grotesque tale to illustrate the state of the Jewish people in what we know is the region of Tomaszow.⁶

The first part of the story describes a town and its institutions that exist in mythic non-geography. “There are Jews who don’t live in geography at all,” can be understood two ways. The town is not registered and therefore does not exist on any map, which is what has happened in our story. But, metaphorically, it is also about a people who do not belong, are not wanted, and whose cultural life in Eastern Europe has come to a dead end. One can prove that a place is real when the rabbi corresponds with learned Talmudists, but this rabbi makes decisions that are irrelevant to the living, like freeing an aguna who has already died. It’s the reasoning, not the woman that counts. All human meaning has evaporated. There once was a great synagogue with painted ceilings; now there remains spider webs and “a chain carved from a single piece of wood that hangs down from the ceiling to the ark,” an embroidered curtain...things that hint at grandeur gone. It has what a “town should have:” certified madmen, a place for business, an

⁵ This is based on the two possible spellings of Kasrilevke and therefore two possible meanings for the word: one based on the root ‘keter’ signifying a sacred or holy community and the other based on the word *kasrilik* meaning ‘a happy pauper’ and thus giving a collective identity to the town.

⁶ Peretz says in the first line that he is “traveling ... in connection with a Jewish census.” This is precisely the *raison d’être* for his story *Impressions of a Journey Through the Tomaszow Region* (1891).

internal economy, infighting, mutual charity, a shul where only illiterate workers attend (the rest divide themselves up my trade, income, education and, of course, the Hasidim), a bes medrash, a bathhouse, mikvah, sick ward/morgue, and the cemetery where democracy reigns. The description of this forsaken place ends when the narrator recongnizes it and names it. The storyteller begins the second part by proposing to “tell the whole story” about why this is a ghost town.

The storytelling technique begins at the beginning with “Once...” and includes a narrator/author meeting a man on the road, giving him a ride and hearing his tale. What could be more traditional fairytale fare? As the passenger proceeds with his story, the narrator’s responses and questions show a cautious curiosity. The storyteller/passenger is also cautious. They are assessing each other and so do we. Pauses are like musical beats and anticipate the strangeness to follow: “I remained silent.” “After a pause,” “What’s that?” he asked uncertainly.” In an otherwise flowing text, these slight hesitations are notable and make us hesitate, too. Our narrator becomes eager for details and his comments and questions move the storyteller along. He becomes progressively enthralled and taken in. His comments, such as “I suppose you have poverty too, then,” and “I hope the town kept good records,” become encouragements rather than stances. He goes from thinking there is “something decidedly odd about his (the storyteller’s) voice,” to “my companion... seemed... now, so sad and earnest, simple, yet utterly dependable.” This is when we enter the “eerie” second part. The setting changes, the “moon swims into sight,” we enter a forest, “there is magic in the air,” and we get the entire complicated story of the illegal nature of the town.

Legal entanglements are the cause and the result of having built a town haphazardly with no permit when ten Jews settled near a town. The Jewish institutions—

*“It’s
a
place
that
hung
from a
thread
from
the
day
it
was
founded
—and
now
that
the
thread
has
been
torn,
it’s
hanging
in air.”*

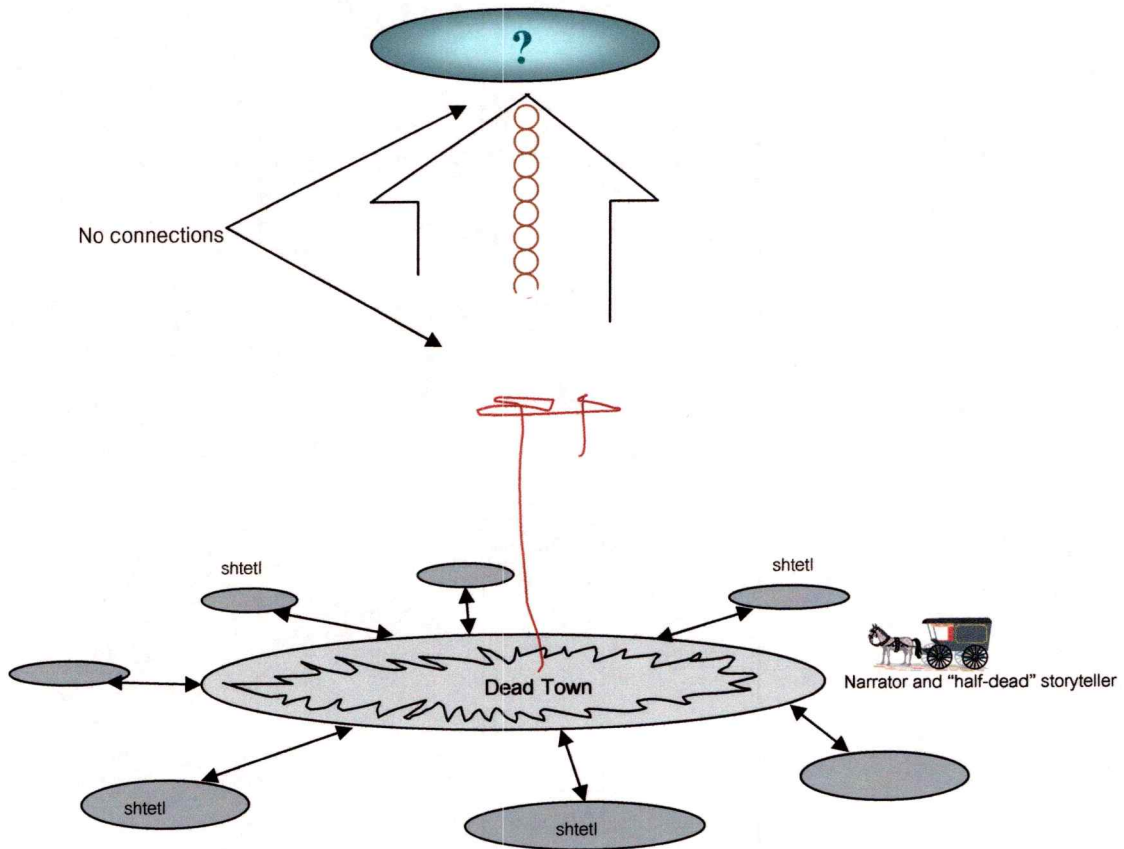
mikveh, shul, bath, and cemetery were created. Before long a comedy of errors, a rich man, an “operator” large sums of bribe money, and more, brings more chaos and no resolution. Another round of shenanigans ends with a court case and the institutions mentioned above being attached. After years the towns people find out finally that they are not a legal town and that they do not own heir own institutions.

This turn of events bring us to the third part of the story that now becomes ghoulish. Our storyteller warns that it is “too much to expect you to believe,” and yet the narrator believes and so do we. The cemetery is about to be sold so the dead crawl out from under their gravestones and return to their homes. A discussion about souls and reincarnation reveals that a soul who has never done anything, never chosen a good path nor a bad one, has not lived and it goes to the World of Illusion. It never leaves the body. “No one in our town ever really died, because no one ... ever lived.” Peretz is at his most cruel and cynical. Angry at his people for not “living,” for not moving on with their lives, joining the world and changing what can be changed, making choices instead of subsisting passively. When he asks what kind of commerce do they have, the storyteller is uncertain and asserts “we export tfiln and import earth from the Holy Land. But that’s just on the side.”

They live on nothing, on air—luftmenschen. They hang from a thread or rather from the carved wooden chain in their dusty shul. No one remembers what hung from it; they do. They recycle their poverty and have no concept that there are other possibilities. Religious life has become routine, base, and meaningless. They own nothing, not even their burial plots. Abject poverty does not seem to motivate change.

The last part of the story is absurd. The dead are more numerous than the living. They serve every function in the town: the rabbi and ba’al tefilah, judges, public benefactors, prominent citizens. No one objects; no one seems to notice. No one is surprised to see dead relatives at dinner. Spoons disappear and that is how they can tell that they are starving. Rational

logic has flown the coup. If there is one spoon per family member and now there aren't enough spoons, it's not because there are more people (dead) at the table; "it was decided there must be a famine in the land, in which case there was no choice but to go hungry." The problems of the living do not concern the dead. "They ask no questions, have no doubts, feel no anguish, never eat their hearts out over anything." Peretz seems at his wits end. Deep frustration has pushed him to this heavy-handed absurdist tale. This is his condemnation of the Jews of the shtetl. They are happy knowing little in the World of Illusion.



The diagram of the story is full of disconnects. The town doesn't even hang from a thread anymore; it hangs in air. The wooden chain dangles from the ceiling of the shul and doesn't

reach the town or the people. We do not even see a vertical connection between what might be the domain of God and this chain. The links are broken—literally and metaphorically. There is a lot of business and activity in the Dead Town and even among neighboring shtetlach, but there is no connection to anything beyond. Even the carriage that carries the narrator passes by. We do not know if the passenger's destination was the Dead Town because he jumps off and runs into the woods. Broken verticals and futile dead-end horizontals is Peretz's vision.

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Two Visions

Peretz's vision is monstrously unredeeming. Sholom Aleichem observes the same problems but seems to cluck his characters under the chin. They both use Chelmic humor, one to mock gently in Kasrilevke and the other to destroy in the Dead Town. The folkloric elements are rampant in Peretz's story, full of magic, goblins, and ghosts. Sholom Aleichem's Jews actually pray to God who is as much a part of their lives as their neighbors. Both authors are modern Europeans returning to their childhood shtetlach. They are watching from outside and yet they are part of "the watched." The rift is enormous and their position is poignant. They are attracted and repelled by what they see. On a spectrum, Sholom Aleichem is less extreme and more forgiving than Peretz, but they are both recording the end of an anachronistic, provincial, and stifling shtetl civilization. In these two stories, there is no nostalgic view, lovingly recording intimate Jewish life, a soulful Jewish Jerusalem in exile. But they are loyal to their past; they returned and wrote about what they saw. Sholom Aleichem's Jews are like a colony of bees and Peretz's Jews are dead, or rather, they have never lived.

The "unexpected visitor/traveler" in the Peretz story and the "unexpected passenger" are what make the story available to us. We could not have understood the events better from within

the town; a certain distance is necessary for such bizarre goings-on. In *Dreyfus in Kasrilevke*, we watch from a closer distance; we see the struggle, the frenzy, the little details that make us care about these Little People. Both authors have given us accurate understandings of what structural and organizational elements were the critical ones to Jewish shtetl life: mikvah, shul, bes medrash, baths, cemetery. No Jewish community could survive without these features. But they were not intending, in these stories, to paint any real shtetl. They were trying to awaken their fellow Jews to the need for change. Among the principles that form a gestalt of the shtetl is that it is temporary.⁷ The citizens will somehow transplant their exile community back to the Eretz Yisrael. In these two stories, I see none of that. They may be so far gone that they have lost that traditional messianic vision. Did the authors lose that secularized vision as well? According to Ruth Wisse, Peretz tried to “straddle the two worlds that were fast moving apart: then he recorded his failure.”⁸ The returning sons can only call the alarm.

⁷ Miron, Dan. *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000) p. 40-42.

⁸ Wisse, Ruth (editor). *The I. L. Peretz Reader* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990) Introduction, p. xv.

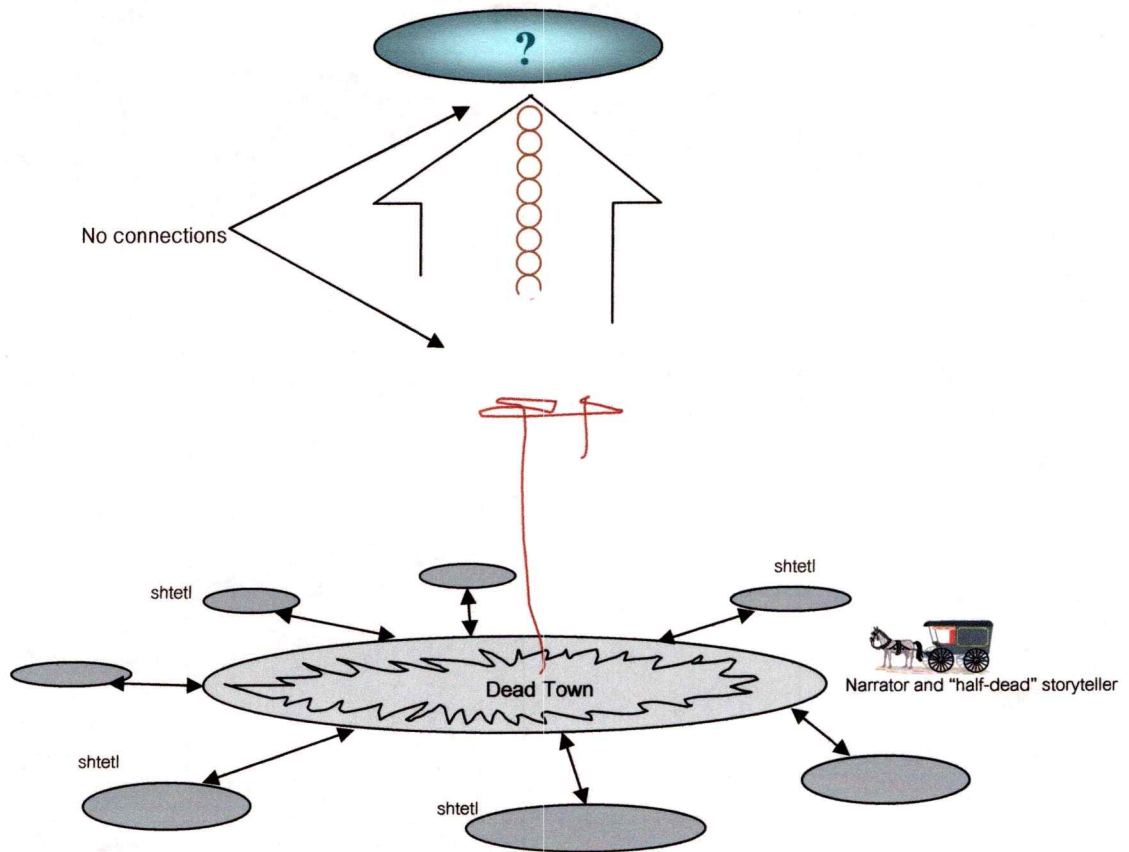


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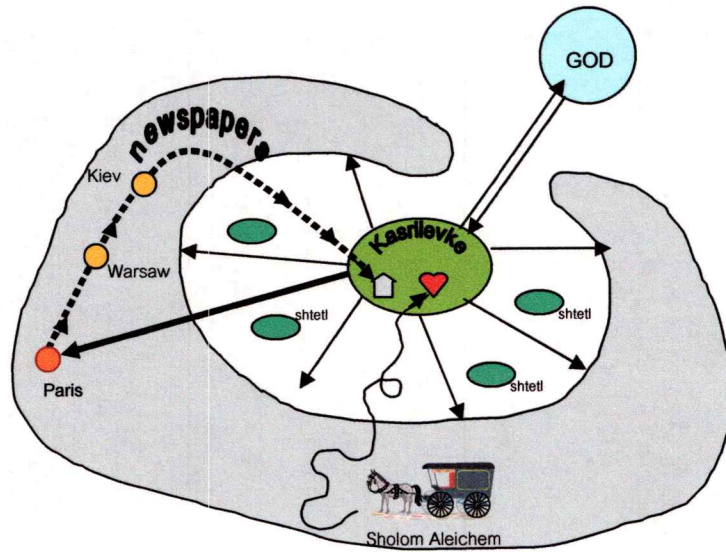


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