

Deborah Kovsky Apap
Sholem Aleichem & the Comedy
of Dissolution
Prof. Roskies
3.29.00

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL
IS THE HEADLAMP OF AN ONCOMING TRAIN:
COPING WITH NEW TECHNOLOGIES
IN SOHEM ALEICHEM'S "RAILROAD STORIES"

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The traditional venue for Jewish storytelling was, of course, the *beis-medresh*, during the natural break in time between *minchah* and *maariv*. The storytellers fell into the categories identified by Walter Benjamin: either "someone who has come from afar" (or, more likely, the next town over) or else "the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions" (Benjamin, 84). On the train, by definition, that second category has been lost entirely, and the first has been somewhat modified: to say that travelers "*have come from*" afar is to imply that they have now arrived somewhere, yet every storyteller in these tales is in perpetual transit. The journey that once preceded and the story that once followed have been telescoped into a single thing, a new entity—in these tales, the medium literally *is* the message, at times almost exclusively so.

The time-frame for storytelling on the train also differs from that in the *beis-medresh*. In the *beis-medresh*, stories were bracketed between prayers, within well-defined, familiar, predictable, Jewish parameters. A storyteller knew precisely how long he had to tell his tale, and—barring any unforeseen disasters—was reasonably sure of freedom from interruption. Not so on the train: the train's schedule often seems to be designed specifically to thwart Jewish time and storyteller time. It is anti-liturgical, anti-

holiday, anti-Jewish, and often just plain inconvenient. "This chunk of moving metal," writes David Roskies, "was as far removed from Kasrilevke, from the community of the faithful, as a Jew could go" (Roskies, 178). Yet it is in this mode that Jews must travel, whether in exile as Tevye does, on business, or simply to go visiting or get back home.

At the same time, the very strangeness of the train, and the difficulty of many provincial Jews in mastering railroad travel, makes it an ideal setting for the telling (or collecting) of stories. Not only are there endless chance encounters with interesting strangers, but train travel provides tremendous opportunities for mishap and disaster—the stuff of entertaining stories. And even beyond providing grist for the mill of the storyteller, the train environment shows us a fascinating cross-section of a pre-industrial people teetering on the brink of modernity and modernization.

One character who seems apt to tumble in head-first is the unfortunate Sholem Shachnah, hero of "On Account of a Hat." He is the bumbling ne'er-do-well who, having finally managed to get himself a cut of a real estate deal, wires his wife that he will be "*Arriving home Passover without fail*" (BoSA, 147). Initially this seems to be primarily a holiday story, straddling the two sub-genres "King-for-a-

Day" and "Holiday-Ruined-at-the-Eleventh-Hour." But it is also very much an unofficial "railroad story": although it is not clear that Sholem Aleichem himself hears the tale while on a train, the railroad is a major concern of the story itself, and is instrumental in Sholem Shachnah's downfall—for poor, schlimazel Sholem Shachnah, having promised his wife "without fail," attempts to carry out that promise by traveling on the train.

Even the paper-dealer, who relates Sholem Shachnah's tale with obvious relish, admits that the train is not the easiest way to travel:

Just try riding out our way on the new train and see how fast you'll arrive!...You see how it is: until you get to Zolodievka there isn't much you can do about it, so you just lean back and ride. But at Zolodievka the fun begins, because that's where you have to change, to get onto the new train, which they did us such a favor by running out to Kasrilevke. But not so fast. First there's the little matter of several hours' wait, exactly as announced in the schedule—provided, of course, you don't pull in after the Kasrilevke train has left. And at what time of night may you look forward to this treat? The very middle, thank you, when you're dead tired and disgusted, without a friend in the world except sleep—and there's not a single place in the whole station where you can lay your head, not one. (147)

The gentiles who have the running of the train plainly did not have the Jews in mind when they set its schedule. The paper-dealer telling the tale understands this; he knows that technology conspires against the Jews, that the Jews were better off without it. The train, rather than making it easier to get around, makes it more difficult to fulfill Jewish obligations. And Sholem Shachnah, not the most

nice | competent individual even in what is supposedly his area of expertise, has chosen—or been forced to choose—this mode of transportation when Passover is almost upon him! It takes little imagination to guess which, in the clash of railroad schedule and Jewish time constraints, will emerge the victor.

Sholem Shachnah is handicapped by more than a schedule that is at odds with the Jewish time-cycle. He is also linguistically handicapped: the world of the railroad is the world of "high goyish" language and culture. Its technical lingo is in Russian, its important passengers are Russian officials wearing uniforms the significance of which Sholem Shachnah cannot read ("He could have been an officer or a police official. Who knows?" [148]), and its porters must be instructed in Russian. When Sholem Shachnah pays the porter Yeremei to awaken him for the Kasrilevke train, he is clearly worried that he has not made himself properly understood: "'Easter,' he says to him in Russian and lays a coin in Yeremei's mitt. 'Easter, Yeremei, do you understand, *goyisher kop?* Our Easter'" (149). Sholom Shachnah is able to communicate in this world, but just barely—and certainly not enough to master it successfully.

Why, then, is the nightmare he has during his brief nap about pre-railroad, pre-industrial travel, about a situation in which he should have been in his own element, with a

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peasant he can fluently shout at and insult in "low goyish"—
that is, in Ukrainian? I suggest that the terror in the
dream comes from Sholem Shachnah's realization that these
things are all galloping away from him. The wagon is out of
control, and it is being driven ^{by} Ivan Zlodi—Ivan the Thief.
The safe, familiar, pre-industrial world is being *stolen*
from Sholem Shachnah.

The dream incident most upsetting to Sholem Shachnah is
the loss of his hat: "Sholem Shachnah lost his hat.
Another minute of this and he would have lost God knows
what" (150). At first the incident seems to have little
bearing on the modernization of transportation; it seems to
reveal anxiety at having weaknesses exposed, akin to the
sort of dreams students have in which they show up to exams
in their underwear.

But with a second look we realize that the hat
represents both manhood and Jewishness to Sholem Shachnah,
and that he has been unmanned and "un-Jewed" by technology.
How can he be a "real" man if he can't navigate this brave
new world? And how can he be a Jew when Jewish time, Jewish
values, Jewish obligations, are all on a collision course
with modernity? The answer, the story suggests, is that he
cannot. There is no place in the modern world, in the
modern experience, for Sholem Shachnahs.

Which is not to say that there is no place for Jews at all. It is not for nothing that the children of Shem have survived two millennia of exile in all sorts of conditions and climates. As Sholem Aleichem's literary zayde points out in the original railroad story, "Shem and Japheth on the Train": "'Life in exile--this precious gift from God's store--belongs only to the Jews, His chosen people'" (SYA, 134). That is to say, Jews are good at exile. Some Jews, at least, must be able to adapt to changing circumstances, and those who do will survive and thrive.

This is the optimistic message of "The Miracle of Hoshana Rabbah," one of the very few stories in which a Jew finally (more or less) comes out on top. It is also radically different from the story of Sholem Shachnah in a number of important regards. First, the miracle occurs not on the big, fast, impersonal commercial train, but on the slow, manageable, "Jewish" *leydikgeyer*--the Slowpoke Express. This train primarily carries Jews on a route somewhat off the beaten track; it is more leisurely, more domesticated, more *heymish* than the commercial express train. Furthermore, this time the train's schedule is not at odds with Jewish time at all. In fact, Berl Vinegar, the hero of the "Miracle," is totally unconcerned with the train's schedule since he doesn't *plan* to travel on it at all:

One Hoshana Rabbah morning, a Jew was standing by the unhooked locomotive with his hands behind his back—and not even a passenger, don't you know, but a local citizen who had come to have a look-see. How else does a well-off Jew in Sobolivke pass the time on Hoshana Rabbah? He's already waved his palm branch and said his prayers in the synagogue, gone home, and eaten an early dinner. (SA, 187)

It is clear that the train is still enough of a novelty to draw curious onlookers during its tank-up time. Going to meet the train at the station, then, is merely a matter of entertainment for Berl. It does not interfere in the slightest with his observance of the half-holiday. In fact, it is the half-holiday itself that permits Berl the time to wander down to the station, examine the locomotive, and ultimately, to give the skeptical priest a driving lesson in it—otherwise, we might presume, this well-off Jew would be busy with his vinegar-making business.

Berl is also a very different sort of Jew from Sholem Shachnah. He has achieved a measure of success even by the standards of a town where, as the businessman-storyteller from Heysen informs us, "Jews think a lot of themselves" (SA, 188). Furthermore, Berl is no stranger to modern technology. Not only does he work with machines to make vinegar, he has invented one himself! He is truly at home with the secret workings of machinery, and though he has no direct experience with locomotives, he knows enough to make some educated guesses as to how to work one. (It might

appear, from his initial fright once the locomotive starts moving, that, like a first-year medical student or a graduate student of literature, Berl knows just enough to be dangerous, but that would be giving him too little credit. He does, after all, quickly recall how to stop the train.) It is this mastery of technology that enables Berl to succeed and survive his adventure.

In fact, his fearlessness of new technology is what gave him the audacity to embark on the adventure in the first place. The Heysen businessman says as much when he interrupts his own story "to ask ourselves a basic question: exactly who was this Jew from Sobolivke who had the strength of character to board an unhitched locomotive—and with a priest, at that?" and then launches into an explanation of Berl's familiarity with machinery.

So Berl, unlike Sholem Shachnah, knows the technology, knows the lingo (he tosses about technical terms as though they were nothing), and knows how to start and stop the train. Sholem Shachnah, on the other hand, cannot even catch the train.

But it is not merely technological know-how that is behind Berl's audacity. Eventually it comes out in his onboard moral debate with the priest that Berl believes that his fate has already been sealed for the year.

The priest, however, unlike the Jews, has neither an understanding of technology nor, apparently, religious faith behind him. Out of fear and misunderstanding, he prevents Berl from using the brake to stop the train. With astonishing ignorance of even the doctrines of his own faith, he responds to Berl's assertion that God can do great things with a blank question: "'Such as what?'" (193) The priest is as confused and alienated here as Sholem Shachnah is in Zolodievka—a refreshing and unexpected turn of events.

Of course, it helps that the adventure takes place on the *leydikgeyer*, the closest thing there is to a Jewish train. Berl has not after all conquered the foreign, frightening express commercial train, though he *has* taken a large step—or rather, a wild train-ride—in the direction of that Gentile world of modern technology.

And Berl's moral and technological victory is not complete, either: ultimately, the train stops because it runs out of steam, not because he uses the brake, and the priest—though clearly proven to be Berl's moral inferior—cannot bring himself to recognize Berl as an individual with a name, nor to say a kind word about him.

Still, it is a victory, one of the very few any Jew in Sholem Aleichem's Czarist Russia is likely to experience. It is a bittersweet victory, for the *shtetl*, the story recognizes, is dead. There will be no resurrecting it:

modern technology, machines and travel, are the wave and the way of the future. Yet embedded in the triumph is an unexpectedly hopeful spirit: physical victory is possible for the Jews if they make new technologies their own; though some (perhaps many, for there are many Sholem Shachnahs) will be left behind, it is possible to adapt to the alien new world of trains and machines, to *outgrow* the shtetl.

At the same time, survival/success in the Gentile modern world does not mean—and *must not* mean—giving up Jewish values, for that would mean forfeiting the equally important moral victory. The story suggests that for those who are able to ride the trains and manage to “keep their hats on”—to retain some sense of *yiddishkeit* while leaving behind them the insularity of the pre-industrial shtetl—a viable synthesis of Jewishness and modern technology just might be possible.

The businessman-storyteller from Heysen, finishing up his tale in a leisurely manner (on the Slowpoke Express, unlike on the express commercial train, a Jew can take his time, tell his tale, and reach a conclusion without worrying about reaching his station in the middle) adds a coda to Berl's adventure and double triumph:

All of us insisted on hosting Berl Vinegar in our own homes and hearing about the Miracle of Hoshana Rabbah straight from the horse's mouth, and a merry Simkhes

Toyroh was had by all. In fact, we never had a
merrier! (194)

While this ending is somewhat stilted and contrived, the
businessman's point is clear: modern technology and Jewish
observance can enhance one another, if only a Jew learns to
embrace both.

Best! a wonderful card.

A

*May I have a copy of this one, too?
(Made one already)*

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