

On Account of Two Hats

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Et hata'ai ani mazkir hayyom. (I do remember my faults this day.) I came to the Seminary, in the Fall of 1975, with a profound anti-rabbinic bias. Fresh out of Graduate School and armed with (what I imagined to be) the one-and-only method of reading literature, I saw my task as spreading the gospel to majors in the field. I had nothing but disdain for rabbinical students whose only interest (I further imagined) was for sermon material. And the best of them, I was finally convinced (based on my jaded experience in Havurat Shalom), would never go into the rabbinate anyway. If today you hear me singing a different tune, it is because teaching at the Seminary has changed: (1) me, (2) my approach to the classroom and (3) my methodology as a scholar.

The Seminary combines under its roof two distinctly different kinds of teaching environments: one that is scholarly and academic, and the other that is explicitly value-oriented. Unlike our loyal opposition, Prof. Jacob Neusner, I see this as a tremendous boon, not as a structural handicap, for it allows us to develop both sides of our brain—the emotional and the cerebral, the homiletic-engagé side of our personality, and the dispassionate analytic side as well. As long as we know what we're doing, I believe it perfectly legitimate for us to shape the material we teach in the light of these different agenda.

On a more practical level, we have been debating among ourselves, lo these past ten years, what a rabbinical school education should entail and how it is distinct. Since 1977, when our new curriculum went into effect, we've been grappling with Levels III and IV in particular, asking how these courses (in critical methodologies and in "synthesis") actually contribute to our students' professional training as rabbis.

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I should therefore like to add my voice to the choir by teaching a text in two different ways. By presenting a condensed version of how I go about teaching the same story in the Graduate and Rabbinical Schools of the Seminary, I hope to illustrate the advantages of doing double duty with the knowledge that we, the faculty, possess. Nothing here will be invented. Even the digressions are a deliberate part of the script.

For the first setting we come in on the opening class of my graduate course on Sholem Aleichem. The story in question, "On Account of a Hat," serves as my entrée into Sholem Aleichem's narrative art. The second lecture comes at the mid-point in my Level III course in the Rabbinical School on critical methodologies in Jewish literature. This semester is devoted to storytelling as a form of modern midrash and the Sholem Aleichem story is brought to illustrate the theme of identity crisis in the Yiddish and Hebrew modern storytelling corpus.

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Like the Mishnah, let us jump into our subject *in medias res*. Dispensing with a lengthy introduction on the state of Sholem Aleichem scholarship, or on the author's biography, or on the textual variants of his work, I shall lead you through a close reading of a sample text. The story I have chosen is the one most often anthologized, at least in English, beginning with the now-classic Howe & Greenberg *Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1954) up until the *Big Book of Jewish Humor* (1981). As we read it through, we'll look at the story from four angles: the multiple narrations and how they work; the structure of the story; the function of language and style; and finally, time permitting, the matter of interpretation.

The first clue we have that this is not a carbon copy of an actual folktale is that it is told through multiple narrators. In order of sophistication, we begin with the implied author who is none other than the famous "Sholem Aleichem"; so famous in fact, that the second narrator, "who deals in stationery and is surely no *litterateur*," has read the author's previous work (this telling reference to Tevye the Dairyman was unfortunately omitted from an otherwise brilliantly accurate translation). With fame, however, comes a special responsibility to one's readership, as witness "Sholem Aleichem's" disclaimer in paragraph three:

I must confess that this story, which he related to me, does indeed sound like a concocted one, and for a long time I couldn't make up my mind whether or not I should pass it on to you. But I thought it over and decided that if a respectable merchant and dignitary of Kasrilevke, who deals in stationery and is surely no *litterateur*—if he vouches for a story, it must be true.

From here on in, we don't hear from the implied author again, and the story is given over to the merchant whom he happened to meet on board a train as both men made their way home for Passover.

As an occupational type, the anonymous narrator is typical of the Jewish Pale of Settlement at the beginning of the century: he is a petty merchant and *luftmensch*; he chain-smokes; he straddles the Jewish and gentile worlds but is firmly rooted in the former; he knows Kasrilevke from the inside. More typical of Sholem Aleichem's oeuvre: he is a seasoned raconteur, one of many stand-ins for Sholem Aleichem himself. We know this from his syncopated speech rhythm, his verbal tag-line, "do you hear what I say," used at strategic points in the narration. Once we get deeper into the story, we notice how a few choice Russian words function as a comic refrain and as a way of undercutting Sholem Shachnah, the hero. The anonymous narrator's two digressions—on the slowness of the trains and on the tyranny of wives—illustrate both his ironic perspective on modern life and his folk humor. But he, too, gradually bows out of the story as Sholem Shachnah himself takes over (as reported by the anonymous merchant and as faithfully recorded by the famous author).

We hear our central character talking in three different settings: on neutral ground, on alien ground, and on native ground (the categories are taken from an essay by Ruth R. Wisse that I've assigned at a later point in the course). On neutral ground, somewhere in the Pale, Sholem Shachnah clinches the first real-estate deal of his life. On closer inspection, however, the conquest appears to be purely verbal: it was Drobkin, "a Jew from Minsk province, a great big fearsome rattler, a real estate broker from way back—he and his two brothers" who actually clinched the deal. But Sholem Shachnah raises such a ruckus that the two brothers give him a cut of the profits just to shut him up! So elated is our hero that he sends a telegram home . . . in Russian: "*Arriving home Passover without fail.*" Just as this telegram marks his only real achievement, so it foretells his ultimate undoing.

The Zlodievke train station, its walls covered with soot and its floor with spit, is the alien ground that Sholem Shachnah must negotiate in order to make it home on time for Passover. As we already know from the second narrator's digression, the train schedules in Russia conspire against the passengers. What's more, it is here, in the train station, that Sholem Shachnah confronts his great adversary — Buttons, a tsarist official who occupies the last available spot in the whole station:

Who this Buttons was, whether he was coming or going, he hadn't the vaguest idea — Sholem Schachnah, that is. But he could tell that Buttons was no dime-a-dozen official. This was plain by his cap, a military cap with a red band and a visor. He could have been an officer or a police official.

As always in Sholem Aleichem's writings, whenever a confrontation takes place, its arena is speech; more often than not, a monologue. Indeed, Sholem Shachnah is able to overcome his fear of Buttons by means of penetrating existential questions which he poses to himself alone:

It's not such a bad life to be a Gentile, and an official one at that, with buttons, thinks he — Sholem Schachnah, that is — and he wonders, dare he sit next to this Buttons, or hadn't he better keep his distance? Nowadays you never can tell whom you're sitting next to. If he's no more than a plain inspector, that's still all right. But what if he turns out to be a district inspector? Or a provincial commander? Or even higher than that, and supposing this is even Purishkevitch himself (may his name perish)? Let someone else deal with him, and Sholem Shachnah turns cold at the mere thought of falling into such a fellow's hands. But then he says to himself — now listen to this — Buttons, he says, who the hell is Buttons? And who gives a hang for Purishkevitch? Don't I pay my fare the same as Purishkevitch? So why should he have all the comforts of life and I none?

After this pep-talk, Sholem Shachnah still has one more gentile to deal with, the porter whom he speaks to in Low Goyish (Ukrainian) in a rude perfunctory manner. The same speech pattern also holds in the dream sequence that follows. Sholem Shachnah dreams that he is

riding home for Passover in a wagon instead of a train, "driven by a thievish peasant, Ivan Zlodi," at whom he yells to hurry it up, lest they arrive home too late. The last stage of verbal negotiation is still to come. Awakened from his sleep in the dead of night by the porter, Sholem Shachnah mistakenly grabs the official's hat with the red band and the visor and, thus disguised, he is treated with deference by the crowd, the ticket agent and the conductor. Everyone addresses him in Russian as "Your Excellency" but the words make no sense at all; in fact they make him angry.

When he finally does make it home, on the third day of Passover, his wife heaps scorn upon him and the community treats him with mock respect. The words "Your Excellency! Your Excellency!" ring in his ears as a bitter reproach. On native ground, it's almost impossible to talk your way out of a bind.

The structure of the story follows the rise-and-fall pattern that Dan Miron has traced throughout Sholem Aleichem's entire oeuvre. That this is indeed an embedded, mythic pattern, as Miron argues, can be seen by translating the plot into the formula of the standard European folktale. First the hero leaves home and makes good. In order to return he must pass through enemy turf (the Zlodievke train station) where he encounters the giant (Buttons). The hero then steals the giant's weapon (his military cap with the red band and the visor) and is magically transformed. He fails, however, at the final test and is duly punished (by missing the train and by the verbal abuse he suffers at home). And so what we have here is a humorous but realistic story that borders on being a mock myth.

In his best work, as we shall see throughout the course, Sholem Aleichem took conventional plots and well-known anecdotes (remember his disclaimer in paragraph 3!) and turned them into a sophisticated modern narrative. Just look at how many levels of language he managed to introduce into such a skimpy shell of a story: the richly idiomatic speech of the anonymous narrator; the use of High Goyish (Russian) when sending a telegram or addressing officialdom and of Low Goyish (Ukrainian) when talking to a peasant; not to speak of the two "authorial" styles: that of a professional writer and that of his surrogate storyteller. Language is both medium and message in the work of Sholem Aleichem. Speech is a surrogate for action and a shield against the forces of destruction. Some stories are also self-reflexive: they are *about* the workings of language.

Since this is a very open-ended story with a lot of clues as to its

deeper meaning, and since we're running out of time, I can only suggest some angles to think about. The story was written in 1913 and the reference to the notorious Jew-baiter Purishkevitch tells us that this was a time of reaction in the history of Russian Jews. Thus the story can be read as a parable on anti-Semitism. On a social-psychological plane, there is the central issue of identity: what happens to the Jew (or to the modern person) when his identity is reduced to a hat. Finally, there is the metaphysical level suggested by Sholem Shachnah's wife at the end of the story. How could he be so sure, she cries. How could he write "without fail" in his telegram when nothing in (modern) life happens without fail? For all of Sholem Aleichem's surface humor, there is a deep sense of fatalism running through his work, which is why the "laughter-through-tears" formula (borrowed from Gogol) is so appropriate.

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(I would begin the class by asking someone to retell the story in a few sentences. Unlike the previous class, these students will have read the story beforehand, but will only have an English translation to work from.)

The reason this story can be retold so easily is that it's based on a well-known joke. I once heard a more ribald version in which the hero exchanges gaberdines with a Greek Orthodox priest lying next to him in a filthy inn! By looking at how Sholem Aleichem fleshed out this anecdote, how he turned a culturally time-specific story into a universal parable will tell us where it belongs in the corpus of modern Jewish storytelling.

First let's look at the hero. Sholem Shachnah is the typical hero of the modern Yiddish story. He is a normative type: not a rabbi, a rebbe, a zaddik or a scholar. (We've already seen a similar humanistic trend in Peretz.) Neither is he a young revolutionary or a *halutz* (these appear only in the novels or as a foil to a character like Tevye). Sholem Shachnah is your typical member of the Jewish middle class (or the petit bourgeoisie, as the Marxists would have it), which is to say: a down-and-out, unsuccessful middleman. His Jewish profile is similarly standard: like every good Jew, he's going home for Pesah and is afraid to enter town without a hat (*cf.* the dream sequence). But he also knows enough Russian to send a telegram and to talk to officials. His psychological profile is perhaps his most interesting feature

in that he's a celebrated scatterbrain, easily excitable and a hen-pecked husband to boot.

Of the various settings for the modern stylized folktale, this is the first time we've come across a train. Though he got the idea from Mendele Moykher Sforim ("Shem and Japheth on the Train"), Sholem Aleichem was the first Jewish writer to exploit the train as both a traditional and modern vehicle: traditional because that is where Jewish men still meet to swap stories, and modern because it is a battleground between rich and poor, Jew and gentile. In such a world it is easy to lose one's footing. Then there's the matter of the train schedule. The wise men of Kasrilevke joke about it, as we hear in the anonymous narrator's digression, but the point of the joke is deadly serious: instead of the train making it easier for a Jew to make it home on time for Passover, the opposite is true; technology and progress conspire against him.

And so do the goyim. As your typical shtetl Jew, Sholem Shachnah is caught between two classes of gentiles: the Russian bureaucrat personified by Buttons and the Ukrainian peasant represented by Yeremei the porter (in reality) and Ivan Zlodi (in his dream). Each meeting, you will note, is fraught with anxiety. It requires a profound mental struggle just for our hero to build up enough courage to squeeze in next to Buttons on the bench. The porter has to be paid off and is not to be trusted. And Ivan, whose nickname means "scoundrel," drives the wagon out of control on its way home to Kasrilevke, foreshadowing exactly what will happen to our poor Jew in a world run by goyim and their trains: he will lose his hat, and something more.

The dream sequence, of course, is the storyteller's shorthand for the hero's psychic state. It is also the pivotal point in the story, where reality gives way to hallucination. For once Sholem Shachnah awakens, he no longer knows what world he's in. Which brings us to the central theme of the story—the crisis of identity.

At first it's a comedy of errors with everyone mistaking him for some high official. He himself gets progressively more befuddled, vacillating between anger and confusion. The climax comes as the conductor ushers him into the first-class compartment, though he only paid for a third-class ticket:

Left alone in the carriage, Sholem Shachnah looks around to get his bearings—you hear what I say? He has no idea why all these

honors have suddenly been heaped on him — first class, salutes, Your Excellency. Can it be on account of the real-estate deal he has just closed? That's it! But wait a minute. If his own people, Jews, that is, honored him for this, it would be understandable. But Gentiles! The conductor! The ticket agent! What's it to them? Maybe he's dreaming. Sholem Shachnah rubs his forehead and while passing down the corridor glances in the mirror on the wall. It nearly knocks him over! He sees not himself but the official with the red band. That's who it is! "All my bad dreams on Yeremei's head and on his hands and feet, that lug! Twenty times I tell him to wake me and I even give him a tip, and what does he do, that dumb ox, may he catch cholera in his face, but wake the official instead! And me he leaves asleep on the bench! Tough luck, Sholem Shachnah old boy, but this year you'll spend Passover in Zlodievke, not at home."

Can you think of a more brilliant way to portray the modern crisis of identity? A Jew looks into a mirror and sees — the farthest image of himself he could ever imagine! So great is his shock that he jumps off the train to wake his "real" self up and all his plans go up in smoke. Why? Where did he go wrong?

The lack of any clear-cut answer is precisely what makes this story so modern as a parable of identity. After all, Sholem Shachnah wasn't trying to run away, to assimilate; all he wanted was to make it home in time for the seder. Yet the world conspires against him. Is it because of anti-Semitism (note that the story was written in 1913 against the backdrop of the Beilis Trial)? If so, can a Jew be treated with respect only if he's dreaming or if they have the wrong guy? Living under tyranny is grossly reductionist: since a man is known by his buttons or his hat alone, the rigid hierarchy can be toppled only with dangerous consequences. Or perhaps this story is a warning of what happens whenever a Jew leaves his native turf: his soul goes up for grabs and he must be put back in his place by the collective superego. Or perhaps in every modern(izing) society one's identity is reduced to mere externals, which makes it that much easier to lose, confuse or abuse one's hat/identity.

There may yet be another interpretation, that the blame is to be placed not on tsarist tyranny or on the anonymity of a secular world but on the human condition itself. Remember what his wife said to him on his return: How could you be so sure? How could any human

being, in these troubled, tenuous times, enjoy total mastery of his fate?

The assumption of a story such as this, written in a semitraditional mold, is that Sholem Shachnah could never become Buttons. Hence the issue is not the barriers that prevent a Jew from becoming a gentile. But because the vagaries of modern life (the train, the presence of anti-Semites) are so carefully woven into the familiar fabric of the plot, we are made to see how precarious it is to live as a Jew or to maintain any fixed identity whatsoever.

Which reminds me of two episodes in my own life — here at the Seminary. I came here via Israel where I had spent two years finishing up my doctorate and vainly looking for an academic position. There, no one knew me from Adam. I had to fight every clerk just to spell my name the way I wanted. Suddenly, I arrive at 3080 Broadway where they roll out the red carpet: “So pleased to meet you, Prof. Roskies.” “This is your office, Prof. Roskies.” “Should you need any assistance, please feel free to call, Prof. Roskies.” Who was this “Prof. Roskies?” They must have the wrong guy! Soon enough, when you get your first pulpit, you’ll have the same experience. You’ll be coming from Reb School where you feel like an overgrown child and suddenly they’ll be calling you Rabbi This and Rabbi That. So remember Sholem Shachnah staring at Buttons in the mirror.

And the other episode happened a few months after I arrived. I was asked to lecture on my research at a faculty seminar as a way of introducing me to my colleagues. The talk went very well. At intermission the Chancellor, Gerson Cohen, turned to me and said: “You know, I got a lot of flack from the Board of Directors for hiring such a right-winger as Roskies.” I thought he was joking. It was only the next day as I ran through everything that had happened that I realized the truth: Both the Chancellor and his Board considered me (me!) a right-winger and they feared I might tip the delicate religious balance at the Seminary. How in the world did they arrive at that? Why, it must be on account of my hat! In those days I used to go around in a kind of Eastern European cap. I had started wearing it in Israel so as to avoid wearing a knitted kippah (a *real* political symbol). In New York I kept it on as a form of ethnic identification. It made me feel more Yiddish. Needless to say, my whole cap collection has been gathering dust in the closet ever since. I don’t wear hats anymore, except in the winter.

These, then, are the two approaches I take when teaching in the Graduate and Rabbinical Schools. The first approach focuses on what critic E. D. Hirsch calls "meaning," that is to say, the fixed, immutable aspects of a literary text: questions of narrative voice, structure and style. As graduate students these critical categories should be familiar to them even if my particular application is not. Because they have access to the Yiddish original (which the rabbinical students do not), much more can be done with such things as wordplay, speech rhythm, dialect, and the like. I deliberately skirt the issue of "significance" (according to Hirsch, that which is open to change in a literary text), because graduate training deals in a discipline that transcends all boundaries, be they religious or political, ethical or, to some extent, even cultural. On a subtler level, the first approach stresses Sholem Aleichem's modernity — the sophistication of his verbal art — whereas the second seeks to place him within the framework of traditional Jewish storytelling.

The whole first semester of my course on Critical Methodologies in Jewish Literature is designed to reinstate storytelling as a central means of communication and to integrate secular Jewish writing within the classical traditions of Midrash. The second semester makes the opposite case, that modern Jewish literature is totally discontinuous with the past, and can only be understood within a Western, secular context. Here, instead of short stories, we look at poetry and the novel. I arrived at both parts of the equation after several years of trial and error, in an attempt to streamline the teaching of literature for my students' future rabbinic needs. In both I try to isolate the larger units of the literary code: types of heroes, basic genres, central themes. Because I am not training them to be literary critics and because they will most likely be reading Yiddish (and I daresay Hebrew) literature in translation, I am concerned with showing my rabbinical students how all the pieces fit together (Yiddish, Hebrew, Anglo-Jewish; premodern and modern forms; Europe, America and Israel) so that the corpus of modern Jewish literature can be put to creative homiletic use.

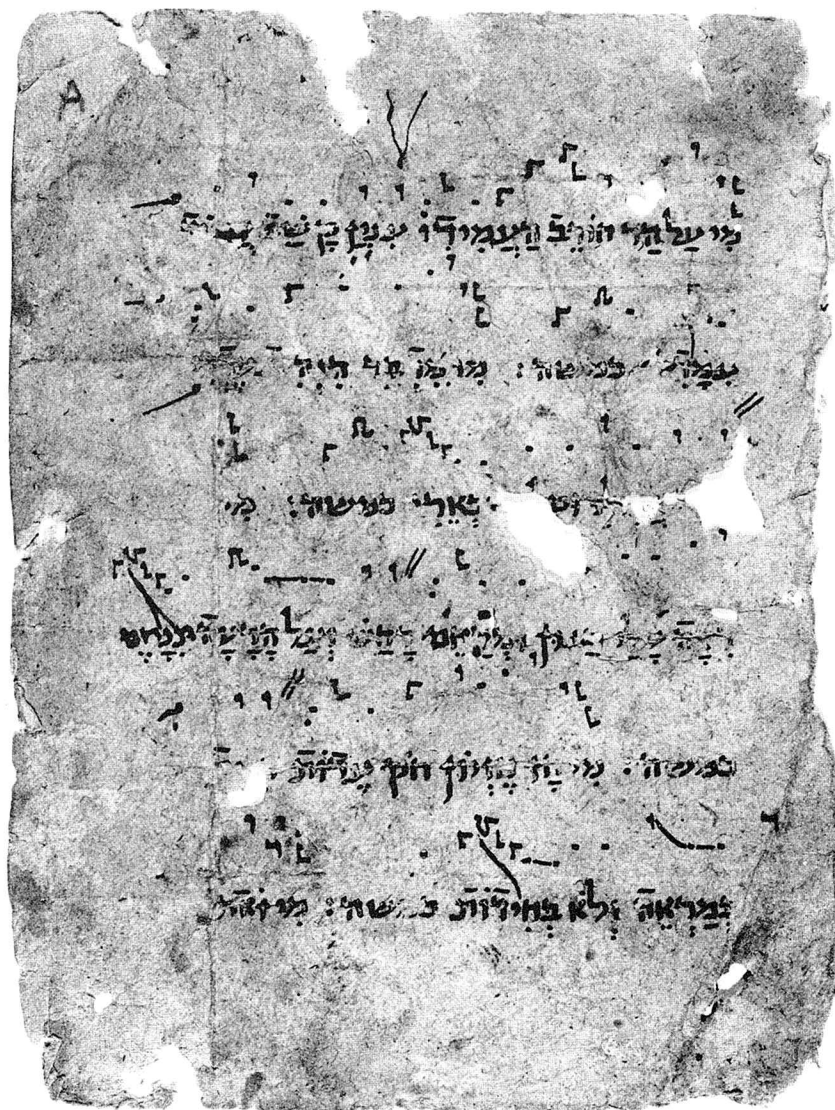
This method of linking literary history to statements of belief is my way of adapting the ideology of the Conservative movement to the classroom. Here I take issue with an illustrious Seminary graduate, my friend and teacher Arthur Green, who recently argued that "It is in faith . . . not in history, where the core of our Judaism must reside" ("Jewish Studies and Jewish Faith," *Tikkun* 1:1 [Summer 1986],

p. 87). As opposed to Green who would dehistoricize the *Akedah*, the Exodus and the Revelation at Sinai for the sake of achieving contemporary religious relevance, I maintain that it is precisely the historical method that vivifies the biblical archetypes, that brings them home to us as human constructs. Seeing how the ancients operated within an historical field can aid us enormously in our own daily application of Scripture.

So, too, the use of Jewish literature as a source of revelation. By locating Sholem Aleichem somewhere between Mendele and Kafka; by identifying the storyteller's code; by suggesting some of the historical and social-psychological issues that the author might have been grappling with, the story comes alive as a modern parable which, in turn, can always be updated in response to ever-more contemporary dilemmas.

To succeed, this method must involve a different teaching style as well, which brings me back to those two sides of our brain. Since the purpose of this course in the Rabbinical School is to teach students how to personalize literature on their own, the teacher must take the lead by making him/herself vulnerable. This explains the comical digressions: I am making my self a commentary on the text. These personal anecdotes are also a wonderful mnemonic: one hat-story will recall another.

And so, teaching at the Seminary, we can have it all. We can wear both hats with impunity and not lose our heads in the process. Wearing both hats we can also sharpen our own methodological assumptions and, true to Sholem Aleichem, can subject the hierarchies of the mind to the dictates of the heart.



From the Seminary's Rare Book collection of Genizah fragments: the oldest surviving Hebrew manuscript with musical notation. The poem, written and composed by Ovadiah the Norman proselyte, a priest who converted to Judaism around 1102, is for Simḥat Torah or Shavuot.