

Deb Kovsky
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I.B. Singer & the
Art of Creative Betrayal

Gimpel and Zeidel: The Triumph of Faith over Reason

Gimpel the Fool and Zeidel Cohen seem in many ways to be binary opposites. One is the town fool, the other the greatest scholar Poland has ever known. One believes in everything, the other in nothing. They start out from radically different points and take completely divergent paths. And yet, somehow, they end their lives in virtually the same condition—as beggars. It is part of Singer’s genius, I think, that despite the fact that both stories end in poverty and death—one with its hero being dispatched to hell!—the reader comes away with the sense that each story has the happiest ending possible, given the nature and situation of the characters.

Gimpel is by far the more sympathetic of the two characters. The first-person narration in “Gimpel the Fool” contributes in no small measure to the Gimpel’s likability. Had Singer chosen to narrate the story through the point of view of the *Yetzer Hara*, as he does in “Zeidlus the Pope,” Gimpel’s behavior would have seemed so idiotic as to be incomprehensible. A third-person description of Gimpel’s acceptance of Elka as a wife, of her children as his own, of her denials of obvious extramarital affairs, would have painted Gimpel as a half-wit.

With access to Gimpel's interior world, on the other hand, a very different picture emerges. Gimpel's real problem is not that he is stupid or even uneducated, but rather that he is overly willing to believe anything and everything. Gimpel, by the third line of the story, hints to the reader that he is not entirely an ignoramus by comparing his seven names to those of the Biblical Yitro¹—a reference we probably wouldn't expect from a real "fool." True, he is no scholar, but neither is he a boor.

Singer's epithet for Gimpel, *tam*, also indicates that the character is not necessarily stupid; though the word in Yiddish means "simpleton," it is colored by its less pejorative Hebrew origin: simple, innocent, honest. Gimpel's self-described "*narishkeit*," then, consists primarily in being an honest and faithful man among liars and cheats. He is the classic "sainted fool," with the most obvious literary comparison being I.L. Peretz's Bontsha the Silent, though there are some important differences.

Whereas Bontsha the Silent never evidences any kind of self-awareness, perhaps the most remarkable thing about Gimpel is his consciousness of his own gullibility. He knows that he is easy to fool, and that the people of his town constantly make him the butt of their jokes, yet he manages to accept his lot with complacency. Even his self-chastisement is mild—"And I like a *golem* believed everyone" (32)—and further tempered by justifications of his naïveté: "In the first place, everything is possible, as it is written in the Wisdom of the Fathers, I've forgotten just how. Second, I had to believe when the whole town came down on me!" (32) Gimpel is not so foolish that he doesn't see that

¹ Singer, Isaac Bashevis, "Gimpel the Fool," xeroxed course copy, p. 31. All quotations from both "Gimpel the Fool" (Saul Bellow, trans.) and "Zeidlus the Pope" (Joel Blocker and Elizabeth Pollet,

the townspeople are cruel and perhaps even evil. When, in describing his resignation to his own gullibility, Gimpel adds, “I believed them, and I hope at least that did them some good” (32), we can hear in his statement at least an oblique assertion of his own moral superiority over the society in which he lives—another major departure from the Bontsha’s paradigm, which functions as a ringing indictment of Jewish meekness.

This moral superiority may help us understand why Gimpel constantly goes along with the townspeople, even when he is perfectly aware that the wool is being pulled over his eyes. Regarding Elka, the bride that the matchmakers choose for him, Gimpel knows from ^{her} ~~that~~ start that she is no virgin and that her young “brother” is actually her bastard son. He even voices his objections, though the townspeople refute his accusations. Why doesn’t he simply put his foot down and refuse to marry her?

In the first place, it is easier to give in to everyone’s insistence than to go against the current. As Gimpel reflects, “...when you’re married the husband’s the master, and if that’s all right with her it’s agreeable to me too. Besides, you can’t pass through life unscathed, nor expect to” (32). When, under the wedding canopy, Gimpel discovers that Elka has been both widowed and divorced, his response is the equivalent of a shrug: “...what was I to do, run away from under the marriage canopy?” (33) He is willing to live with compromises and less-than-perfect scenarios.

In the second place, with his perfect faith, Gimpel is somehow able to know what he knows and yet still give Elka the benefit of the doubt. He *knows* that she is a whore,

trans.) are taken from the course xerox and will be cited with parenthetical reference to page number only.

and yet on their first meeting he gives her the opportunity to deny it. He *knows* that the first child that she bears during their marriage comes far too early to be anything but a bastard, but allows himself to be persuaded that it is his: “—they argued me dumb. But then, who really knows how such things are?”

Gimpel’s acceptance of all that comes his way, so typical of the anti-heroically passive Jewish hero, may be frustrating, but it is an amazingly powerful tool for survival. And it is important, further, to emphasize that Gimpel’s simplicity and faith are not a default condition, but rather, at some level, are a calculated *choice*: “All kinds of things happened, but I neither saw nor heard. I believed, and that’s all” (37). Obviously, he has some awareness that there are unsavory things going on, but the strength of his faith allows him to reconcile conflicting realities.

Gimpel *chooses* to determine the course of his life, ultimately, not through reason but rather through intuitive faith. In his character we see the rejection of the rational, perhaps even of the secular, in favor of something less tangible. And though Gimpel himself is not an especially devout Jew, his choices are vested with religious significance by the town rabbi’s repeated affirmations that Gimpel, and not the townspeople who mock him, is in the right. “Belief in itself is beneficial,” the rabbi tells Gimpel. “It is written that a good man lives by his faith” (37). The world itself is simply not rational—Gimpel’s philosophical observation on the eve of his marriage that “a whole town can’t go altogether crazy” (33) is resonates with special irony for anyone who has read Singer’s novel *Satan in Goray*—and perhaps the only strategy for coping is an

abandonment of rationalism in favor of belief. In his limitless capacity for belief he finds real joy in a marriage to a faithless wife, in a life in a faithless society.

Gimpel's faith is only truly shaken once, after Elka's death. In one of the only two appearances of the supernatural in the story, the *Yetzer Hara* comes to Gimpel in a dream and persuades him to revenge himself on the entire town of Frampol for all the deceptions it has practiced on him, by selling the townsfolk bread baked with urine. Gimpel, concerned about punishment in the world to come, is initially hesitant to do such a thing. The demon in his dream convinces him that the world to come, and in fact God himself, are only more lies perpetrated on the gullible Gimpel by the town. "They've sold you a bill of goods and talked you into believing you carried a cat in your belly. What nonsense!" (37)

Gimpel actually goes so far as to urinate in the risen dough and bake it into bread. It is the turning point in his life: he is poised on the brink of disaster, on the verge of throwing away a lifetime of goodness and belief and moral superiority. But at the last moment Gimpel's unflagging faith is rewarded and vindicated all at once: in the second instance of the supernatural, the recently-deceased Elka appears and warns her husband that he was right to be faithful after all. "You fool!" she said. "...Because I was false is everything false too? I never deceived anyone but myself. I'm paying for it all, Gimpel. They spare you nothing here" (37).

Gimpel buries the bread and saves his soul. He decides to go out into the world, where he finally begins to understand the nature of truth—something that the townsfolk of Frampol could never understand.

I heard a great deal, many lies and falsehoods, but the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn't really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn't happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year. What difference can it make? Often I heard tales of which I said, "Now this is a thing that cannot happen." But before a year had elapsed I heard that it actually had come to pass somewhere. (38)

It turns out, in the end, that it is wiser to believe everything, since everything really is possible and all of reality is relative. The so-called fool realizes (though he has almost certainly never read Plato) that "No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world" (38).

Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, in their introduction to *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, remark that "in the end, [Gimpel's] foolish innocence triumphs over the wisdom of the world."² I think, though, that they miss the point: it is not Gimpel's foolishness that allows him this triumph at the end of his life, nor is it really innocence—for he is very much "in the world" as an itinerant *schnorrer*. Rather, the story posits a triumph of faith, intuition, the *anti-rational*, over reason and rationalism. Even though the supernatural makes only a brief cameo appearance in this story, the sensibility of the fantastic informs the last portion of it. Gimpel's faith in people extends to faith in otherworldliness, allowing him to exclaim: "When the time comes I will go joyfully.

² Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, New York: Penguin Books, 1990, p. 41.

Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived.” Though his life has been more tragic than not, at least its end is optimistic in Gimpel's certainty of impending happiness.

Zeidel, on the other hand, is like a negative picture of Gimpel, though Singer also negotiates a “happy” ending for him. Where Gimpel is pure-hearted, Zeidel has no discernible heart at all. Whereas Gimpel is viewed as a fool, Zeidel is a great scholar. To the extent that Gimpel is led into difficulties, it is done primarily by *outside* forces, by evils in society, though the fault might appear to be with his own believing nature. Zeidel is led astray by a more metaphysical sort of evil—the *Yetzer Hara*—which, though externalized in the story as a kind of independent demon, can certainly be understood to be Zeidl's own vanity, his desire for widespread recognition of his genius.

The structure of Zeidel's story also provides a counter-point to Gimpel's. Gimpel's tragicomedy is spun through the protagonist's own point of view; Zeidel's tragedy is told entirely by the *Yetzer Hara* himself. So while we become acquainted with the inner workings of Gimpel's mind—with the constant justifications, negotiations and compromises that allow him to live in the world and to be a little less the fool he outwardly appears to be—we have little such insight into Zeidel, especially in the early part of the story.

What we do learn about Zeidel from the narrator makes him a powerfully unattractive figure. He is strangely hairless, even from a young age, and possesses

womanlike hands and feet—though, the demon-narrator concedes, “as he never visited the ritual bath it was not known if he was a eunuch or an androgyne” (16). His wife never conceives, lending credence to the idea that there is something wrong, sexually, with Zeidel. Zeidel’s ambiguous gender is typical of Singer’s code as an element of the grotesque, and is in stark contrast to Gimpel, who might not have great success with his wife but certainly *not* for lack of desire or effort.

Zeidel's behavior is made out to be as unattractive as his physical appearance. Unlike Gimpel, who runs a business, is part of his community, and is close with his irregular family, Zeidel chooses to be almost completely isolated—“He had neither the desire nor the patience to converse with friends” (16). Furthermore, his father’s wealth makes work—and thus forced contact with the outside world—unnecessary. His isolation feeds his near-total self-involvement; though a wealthy man and a Torah scholar, he “never took a poor man home for a Sabbath meal. He never took the trouble to make friends, and since neither he nor his wife ever invited a guest, no one knew what the interior of their house looked like” (16)—except, of course, the narrator, who has just provided us with a detailed description of the Cohen home. As we know from other Singer tales—and as the narrator hints by slyly reminding us that Zeidel can’t bar *him* from his house—this kind of isolation and self-involvement is a dangerous state, leaving one ripe for the plucking by an enterprising demon.

The poor demon in question, though, has had no luck in previous attempts to corrupt the appetite-less, sexless, financially secure Zeidel. Since food, women and

money are of no use in tempting Zeidel, the only option left to the demon is heresy. The first effort, the demon relates, was a failure. “‘Let’s assume that, God forbid, there is no God,’ he had answered me. ‘So what? Then His non-being itself is divine. Only God, the Cause of all Causes, could have the power not to exist’” (17). The demon, though clever, is clearly out of his league trying to match wits with the former child prodigy. The hyper-rational Zeidel is intellectually gifted enough to reason his way through anything, even the (non)existence of God. But his reconciliation of existence and non-existence differs from Gimpel's reconciliation of reality as it is and reality as he prefers to believe it is: whereas Gimpel’s ability to hold two contradictory realities as true is a result of his pure faith, Zeidel’s “faith” is really based on reason.

The *Yetzer Hara* learns from his mistakes and appeals not to Zeidel's intellect, but to his single passion, his vanity. In doing so, he also manages to demolish Zeidel's reason-based faith.

“Is there no hope ever to know the truth?” Zeidel asked in despair.

“The world is not knowable and there is no truth,” I replied... “Just as you can’t learn the taste of salt with your nose, the smell of balsam with your ear, or the sound of a violin with your tongue, it’s impossible for you to grasp the world with your reason.

“With what can you grasp it?”

“With your passions—some small part of it. But you, Reb Zeidel, have only one passion: pride. If you destroy that too, you’ll be hollow, a void.” (18)

The *Yetzer Hara* encourages Zeidel to reject reason for emotion, passion and intuition. But relinquishing reason as the guiding principle in his life also means, for Zeidel, relinquishing his faith in God, for that faith has no deep basis in Zeidel's emotions or intuition. Though he converts to Christianity, he is no better equipped to develop a deep,

sustainable faith in the Christian religion than he was to maintain his Jewish faith. It comes as no surprise that after conversion he realizes that “he had never loved the Talmud” (19)—love of Talmud would suggest a connection to Judaism deeper than that of mere intellectual prowess. Zeidel is *unable* to love—quite the opposite of Gimpel, who loves against all odds and reason.

Zeidel tries to apply his old intellectual, rational model to his new life as a Christian and to write a great treatise on Christianity. He scorns the works written by other Jewish converts: “The authors were ignorant, plagiarized from one another liberally, and all cited the same few anti-Gentile passages from the Talmud” (19).³ But his own efforts are doomed to failure. He cannot produce the work that he hopes will catapult him to fame and glory because he has turned his back on both reason *and* on faith (since one stemmed from the other); he is left without a leg to stand on. The demon records that Zeidel reaches the point, after years of fruitless effort, at which “he could no longer distinguish between right and wrong, sense and nonsense....Nor did he believe any more in what is called truth and falsehood” (20). But it seems to me that that point actually comes much earlier, when the demon persuades Zeidel that there is no truth and that the world is not, after all, knowable through reason. Once Zeidel accepts that premise and converts, there is no returning to his old reason/faith. But it takes years of failure for him to realize it.

³ Zeidel's attitude toward the writings of his colleagues—that is, his fellow Jewish converts—sounds suspiciously similar to Singer's attitude toward other writers. Consciously or unconsciously, the author seems to be parodying himself here.

Finally Zeidel comes to his real crisis. He has already lost reason and faith, and finally the last thing to which he could cling—his one passion, pride—also deserts him. “His hope to become famous among the nations vanished. He came to regret his conversion. But the way back was blocked:...because he doubted all faiths now...” (20) To top everything off, he loses his eyesight—but, just as the prophet Tiresias of old, he only truly “sees” when blind.

Like Gimpel, Zeidel deals with the crisis by going out into the world. But whereas Gimpel traveled and spun stories to earn his bread, the blinded Zeidel has no choice but to stay put. Gimpel continues to connect with other people, even as a wandering beggar; Zeidel, sitting on the steps of a cathedral and incongruously muttering passages of the Gemara, Mishnah and Psalms to himself, speaks to no one. Gimpel discovers the truth of the world while wandering in it; Zeidel’s moment of revelation and restoration comes only at the moment of his death, and is provided—ironically—by the very same demon who first tempted him to stray. Although he is blind, Zeidel can see the demon who has come to carry him off, and is overjoyed that he has arrived.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked
“Straight to Gehenna.”
“If there is a Gehenna, there is also a God,” Zeidel said, his lips trembling.
“This proves nothing,” I retorted.
“Yes it does,” he said. “If Hell exists, everything exists. If you are real, He is real. Now take me to where I belong. I am ready.” (22)

Unlike Gimpel, who finds his way to from faith to truth, Zeidel is handed truth—the incontrovertible fact of Hell—and finds his way back to faith: a precise mirror image of what occurs in “Gimpel the Fool.” Zeidel's story is not about triumph, but rather about

the failure of reason. And yet we are left feeling that Zeidel's life has been resolved at least somewhat satisfactorily, for no matter how he has arrived or what torments may await him, Zeidel, like Gimpel, finally grasps both faith and truth.