

Di moderne yidishe literatur
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The Rhetoric Structure of *Hakdomes Mendeli Mokher Sforim*

The introduction to *Dos kleyne mentshele* is a carefully and cunningly constructed piece. It has a dialectical structure and an inner logic which I am going to try to explore in this paper.

Abramovitsh starts *in medias res*: "*mah shmeykhem?*" - "What is your name?" This simple question, which is being put into the mouth of Mendele, "the Jew" hides the central issue of the introduction and the whole of *Dos kleyne mentshele*: how is *name* or *language* related to the essence of the named? It comes up in the work itself in (Yitshak-Avreml or Isaac-Abraham). But the original question is of course rhetorical: the title already tells us that *the teller of the story calls himself* Mendele Moykher Sforim. The author, however, takes the opportunity and answers the question with another question (*Vos iz aykh, reb korev, azoy gelegn tsu visn, vi ikh heys?*) only to engage in a long list of bad habits, which are all connected with poverty, with the fact that one person has something which another one doesn't. To confirm that the unchangeable is right he then leads us from this world to the other one, saying that the angels act the same way. From heaven he suddenly jumps back down to earth, to his wagon full of books and repeats the original question, "*mah shmeykhem?*", only this time specifying the situation when it is asked: "*bay mayn ershtn aroysfor in der yidisher literatur [vi heyst men es]*". This specification spells out the whole truth about Abramovitsh, adjusted to Mendele's occupation, which Dan Miron summarized in the title of his book: we have here a disguised traveller, and we don't know his real name.

Well, what else, if not Mendele! - comes the obvious answer to the question, beginning the second vicious circle (very helpfully numbered by the editor, Luria). He acquaints us with his *yikhes*, his grandfather Mendele who used to earn his honor and living by his *name* and fame ("*dos hot im farshaft in zayn vinkl a nomen un koved*"), just

like Yitshak-Avreml, the writer of the letter within the story and Abramovitsh, who earns his living with the help of somebody else's name.

The third paragraph brings more questions about the story-teller's identity, put into the mouth of the reader, and we are promised to get a brief answer.

The fourth paragraph tells us where our hero lives. Abramovitsh plays with the *names* of the cities, contrasting the names with the qualities of the people who live there, so the inhabitants of Tsviatshits (hypocrisy) are good and pious and the Kabtsansker (poverty) are famous for their treasures.

After these "stable" and "reliable" data, like name, forefathers and place of birth in the the fifth paragraph, Mendele feels the need to substantiate his statements about his age with documents, so he shows us his passport. But unfortunately no matter how the goyish institutions try to keep track of the people living on their land, administration is a concept lacking from the vocabulary of Jews. The Jewish "folks-calendar" commemorates only the great fires and frosts, the good milking year of a cow, at best. In this paragraph we can see most clearly the rhetorical technique used by Abramovitsh: he takes a simple question, which is completely justifiable as a part of his self-introduction and while seemingly answering it, in an unguarded moment he turns to describing the state of affairs among Jews, making it completely ridiculous. The poor reader is trapped: the sad and funny truth is spelled out for him in his own simple terms; he can hardly escape understanding it. Playing on the name theme again, Abramovitsh satirizes not only the way Jewish people conceive time, but also a literary genre of the time, the folks-calendar.

The same thing happens in the next paragraph. Mendele starts talking about his appearance and describes himself as a person almost lacking any kind of distinguishing marks, like a Jewish Grey Eminence. When the reader already starts wondering about the mystery behind the figure he suddenly confronts us with something that has nothing to do with his identity: with the reality of Jewish marriages: after all, a bride usually knows less than that about her husband-to-be up until the day of the wedding!

Paragraph 7 is inserted as a vertical stroke in the course of

description, uttering the ultimate question of Abramovitsh: what is it in Mendele's personal history, that is, in his own history that leads to someone becoming a writer?

Following his original thesis, that all Jews are deeply religious, Mendele tries to draw his own simple conclusion: if so, one can surely get rich by trading with the above-mentioned religious objects. But his thesis is confronted here with his very own existence: he can not live solely out of *sforim*, he has to trade with other things too! The description of things he trades with is used to list all the objects a simple Jew needs for his religious life. Apart from religious books and other objects related to Jewish religious observance Abramovitsh lets Mendele carry wolf's teeth, smuggling in the accessories of folk-belief and thus contrasting Jewish religion and folklore. To reassure his reader about his innocence, Mendele says he himself does not understand how he started to carry alcohol. And once the reader accepts and forgives Mendele his being a fallible man, Abramovitsh suddenly presents a list of other condemned Jewish activities. He dissociates them from the activities of observant Jews and comments on the position of Jews within the division of labour in the external society as well as on the state of affairs within the Jewish society, e.g. the roving using his religious authority for his personal financial advancement.

Has Mendele been carried too far away from his reality and into the world of maskilic ideas, Abramovitsh brings him back down to earth again. Starting the 9th passage with how and where he sells his books he soon ends up describing that while the merchant is doing his business, mischievous kids beat his horse. But this innocent detail is only inserted to allow Mendele describe his horse very similar to a shtetl inhabitant. Here, the satire is getting very sharp. In the first part of the passage, added only in the 1907 version, the actual life story of Mendele is again paralleled with the state of Yiddish literature. There is no need to rent a store to sell Yiddish books, we can do it from the wagon in the courtyard of the shul - meaning Abramovitsh can *only* do it from there, since the concept of a book store is probably unknown in the shtetl.

In paragraph 10 and 11 Abramovitsh ends Mendele's job description, sends him to the shul to sleep and again poses the question uttered in paragraph 7, allowing Mendele his confession (12),

the climax of the introduction. Mendele here voices his pantheism. He confesses that it is his *yetser-hore* that motivates him but in the meantime he seeks justification for his passion for nature by saying it is God's creation as well. The tone of this confession is completely different from the rest of the introduction; it lacks the tricky playfulness, simple, folksy way of expression. It is in this last section of the introduction (which I think is not completely justly divided by the editor) that Mendele comes closest to Abramovitsh. The maskil is almost revealed here. Abramovitsh-Mendele tells the reader the secret of viewing society critically and writing about it. He even goes as far as to provoke them, to ask them to write, implying that a writer is not a strange creature; anyone could become a writer.

To sum up the techniques used by Abramovitsh we could say that he lets Mendele speak according to the logic of his readers. He leads them according to the steps of a waltz: one leg ahead, the other one behind, to enable the first leg to step ahead again. The first section (1-9) is built up like a dialogue, questions followed by answers leading to new questions, etc., while the second part (10-18) is made up of a monologue. Throughout the introduction the actual life story of Mendele is paralleled with the development of Yiddish literature. The same way, he plays with the concept of the name/language consequently. At the end of each cycle and occasionally in the middle too he inserts: "*nor nisht dos bin ikh oysn*". The disclaimer functions both to distance Abramovitsh from Mendele (saying the author doesn't always know what he is talking about) and it is used to pull the reader back from the reality described to the introduction, that is literature. Abramovitsh makes Mendele speak in an informal style, as befits a simple book peddler. By this he creates an intimate atmosphere, puts himself actually into the shtetl, his readers standing right next to his wagon, so they can imagine the situation and distract their attention from the fact that they are reading fiction. The additions to the second edition usually signal a more conscious and emphatic treatment of the material. So the [*vi heyst men es*] at the end of the first paragraph refers directly to the central question of the Haskalah writers - how, under what name do we sell our literature to the simple Jews? Or the repetition of [*a yid*] in the third paragraph, emphasising the impersonal character of the question it is attached to. Occasionally, like at the beginning of

paragraph 7 he inserts [*vi ir kukt mir on*] to remind the reader that they are standing face to face, should he forget that he is not reading fiction but is in a real situation.