

Lewis Warshauer

Prof. D. Roskies
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I.B. SINGER'S THE MIRROR AS MIDRASH ON
PERETZ'S A PASSION FOR CLOTHES

Like I.L. Peretz's A Passion for Clothes, I.B. Singer's The Mirror is a tale of the devil, temptation, and fall. But where Peretz is light and playful, Singer is dark and sinister.

Bashe Gitel, heroine of A Passion for Clothes, is a fairly uncomplicated character. She is described as a pure soul, and even if this designation is ironic, it does reflect a certain simplicity about her. She reads holy books in Yiddish translation. Her lust that Satan catches her with is for clothes and jewelry. Bashe Gitel is a case of the *yetzer ha-tov* gone wrong; Satan tricks her by appealing to her sense of wanting to beautify holidays and please her husband, and this good instinct leads her to a consuming and distorting passion in which her accoutrements become her downfall. Even when Bashe Gitel begins to slip, her actions are within the bounds of ordinary meanness. She treats her orphan servant girl as many harsh taskmistresses do. When Bashe Gitel sends the girl away, she could have claimed that Sarah the matriarch also sent away her servant girl, Hagar.

Bashe Gitel is an exemplar, rather than a fully-developed character on her own. The first description of her is not about her, but her background: she comes from a fine family and is married to a Hasid. In Zirel, the heroine of The Mirror, the reader finds a more developed character. Zirel is beautiful and well-educated. Her manner is more secular and sophisticated than that of Bashe Gitel: she reads German song books and calls her dressing room a boudoir. While Bashe Gitel develops a frenzy to acquire and wear clothes, Zirel's hoards the clothes her husband has given her, and prefers to contemplate herself naked in her boudoir.

good | On this point hinges Zirel's character, as Singer develops it in distinction to Peretz's Bashe Gitel. Zirel is Bashe Gitel with a passion differently directed. If Bashe Gitel is basically good, as her name would indicate, then Zirel, the ornament, is flawed from the start. Her mirror, unlike what one would expect a pious housewife to own, is decorated with poisonous snakes. It is cracked. Her lust immediately turns in the direction of the flesh; Bashe Gitel would never have succumbed to, as Peretz puts it, so gross a sin. Zirel, in her self-contemplation, longs for a man to intrude on her nakedness and for, as Singer describes, love to be betrayed and the sacred to be desecrated. yes!

As David Roskies would have it, Zirel in "The Mirror" is no match for the devil; she is doomed from the moment she looks into the mirror.

The devil is an irresistibly likable fellow, and Zirel's seduction is just an episode for the devil. There is the case to be made, however, that Zirel's seduction is not inevitable. She backs away many times, and the imp appears and reappears in the mirror. Bashe Gitel's fall, on the other hand, does have an air of inevitability to it. Peretz notes that at a certain point Satan stayed aloof from her while she, like a well-hurled stone plunging downhill with the force of the initial throw, went down of her own accord.

Let she does
get a 2nd
chance

Unlike Bashe Gitel, Zirel falls prey to a more direct approach on Satan's part. The devil had to trick Bashe Gitel into sinning by appealing to her religious sensibility. Zirel's Satan spins a sad tale about being rejected and homeless, but at no time does he cloak himself with piety. Zirel provides a mirror, and Satan appears in it, in all his ugliness. He tells her, without pretense, that everything is lust and that he specializes in adultery. When Zirel's Satan tells her that he has no alternative but to tell the truth, he is believable. He owns up to nothing but sins: blasphemy, pride, spite, and arrogance.

All this repels Zirel at first, but eventually attracts her; it is she who summons Satan back after sending him away. Bashe Gitel is punished for dismissing the orphan girl; she loses the use of her legs. When she dies, the rebbe assures her she is forgiven. Zirel, however, meets a harsher fate, and arrives there by a more roundabout road. She doesn't simply succumb to her satanic imp; once she is tempted, she takes the active role and summons him with a ditty. She hesitates to take the final plunge with the imp, but when he threatens to leave, she agrees to do anything to hold him. The imp then gives her a recipe for blasphemy and desecration which she presumably fulfills as she disappears from the world. Zirel's descent to hell makes Bashe Gitel's fall from grace look virtuous.

Does it
really?
Isn't her
reaction to
laugh?

The Satan who appears in A Passion for Clothes is workmanlike. He has a job to do -- leading Bashe Gitel into sin -- and does it. Peretz provides little sense of Satan as a character. Satan tempts Bashe Gitel by suggestion, and comes arrayed as the Good Instinct. Similarly, when Bashe Gitel and Elimelech encounter the demonic wedding, the party is relatively tame. The greatest depravity that the revelers sink into is spilling food and liquor on their clothes. In contrast, Zirel's imp, while describing himself as harmless, presents a loathsome picture. He speaks the language of magic and incantations. But he isn't dull. His description of a perverted heaven, where the Shekhinah lays eggs, is entertaining.

I like that

Why does the devil continue to waylay humankind? As a counterpoint to God. As Roskies points out, there is no use for tales of seduction once the parameters of good and evil fall away. In order for evil to act, there must still remain a concept of blasphemy. (1) As Singer states, What is God without Satan? Roskies holds that I.B. Singer reflects a post-Holocaust world in which Peretz's formula of redemption at human hands no longer holds. (2). Thus, for Singer, evil has become post-demoniac.

Can The Mirror be considered a midrash on A Passion for Clothes? The similarity of characters, and the structure of the two stories, argue for this interpretation. The differences, however, are striking, enough to argue for consideration of the two stories as outgrowths of a similar tradition, rather than one being a midrash on the other.

The similar tradition is the morality tale -- in this case, a story of a woman who is tempted by the devil and falls prey to him. Such a story would serve to admonish audience to uphold the strictest piety and beware of temptations to sin. Peretz takes this story form and, while preserving its structure, turns it into a parody. A Passion for Clothes ends with the marriage of Elimelech and the orphan girl who proceed to have children who grow up with learning and are happily married off. The narrator then, as it were, comes up to the footlights and says, "so may it be with all Jews." The story ends as a comedy, but the taste Bashe Gitel's fate -- a combination of tawdriness and ridiculousness -- remains in the mouths of the audience. Still, the tale ends fairly cheerfully.

Singer presents a far different tone, both in the body of his story and in the ending. It is as though he is saying, "The stock drama Peretz has taken and contrived to end a certain way, I will take and twist almost beyond recognition." Singer moves beyond the world of the ridiculous and drags the audience into the realm of the grotesque. Peretz's Bashe Gitel is a character of this world. In spite of her encounters with the supernatural, she is rooted in a this-worldly passion. Singer's Zirel, from the first, goes beyond this world. Her mirror is the passageway to the beyond.

Peretz leaves the reader with the suspicion that temptation and fall will continue to occur, but in the immediate future, all is right with the world. Singer, though, holds out no hope: one generation follows another, one Zirel after another, in a myriad of mirrors. Everything that appears is but a reflection; only evil is real.

Singer's closing question -- Is there a God? Is He all-merciful? -- is left unanswered and subject to serious doubt, if not outright rejection. The Yiddish original makes this even clearer -- *Gott is a teiku un a sfek sfeka*. God is a maybe, but the *sitra ahra* has substance.

NOTES

1. Roskies, David, A Bridge of Longing, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 299-300.
2. *ibid*, p. 301.

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