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ON ACCOUNT OF A HAT

Sholem Aleichem is always with me here in Israel, not only because I'm teaching him at Tel Aviv University, in Hebrew translation; not only because I've been peddling my lecture on his "polyphony" here, there, and everywhere, but also because this country was invented with Sholem Aleichem in mind. The last speakers of folk-Yiddish are taxi drivers of Sephardic descent, who offer you their solutions to the world's problems, even while they engage the dispatcher over the intercom, take orders from their wives, arrange to meet their buddies for a drink after work, and instruct their children, over the cell phone. They use actual Yiddish expressions like "ot-ot-ot," meaning, "imminently, at once;" and "budke," usually meaning "kiosk," and pepper their speech with formulaic expressions like "sheyehi bari, may he live and prosper" (in reference to Aryeh). Last week I took a cab to Bar Ilan with a woman driver who filled my ears with the latest research about the superiority of female drivers (she got paid to be one of the informants). When it came to the Arabs, though, she was every bit as tough as any other taxi driver I ever met. Last month, for example, I was subjected to a harangue about Yaffa Yarkoni, who had just compared the treatment of Palestinians to that of inmates in a Nazi concentration camp. My driver would gladly have sent her to a concentration camp! So what Sholem Aleichem would have thrived on is the verbal intensity, the cacophony, and above all, the multilingualism. This last is so delicious, because it defies the Zionist dream of creating a Hebrew-speaking polity, of achieving cultural "hegemony," as my academic colleagues like to put it, for the Jews, bless their soul, refuse to homogenize, and they keep coming--from Ethiopia, from the Former Soviet Union, from South Africa, from Argentina (alas and alack), from France, from Brooklyn. Even in the media you hear every conceivable accent of non-Sabra Hebrew, especially now, when Palestinian suicide bombers choose Russian discotheques as their military targets, and Passover seders, and yeshivas. Last night on the news, driving back from Beer Sheva, they interviewed witnesses and survivors of the bus attack. A Russian-born soldier, his mother and girl friend were recorded in the intensive care unit. They spoke in Russian, each narrating another piece of a story like the stories that Sholem Aleichem wrote during the last decade of his life (1907-1916). The soldier had just picked the women up at the airport, they were on their way to his apartment, and his plan, his hope, was to convince them to make aliyah. What bad timing! What a "marred celebration!"

It goes without saying that the Israeli passion for high tech--the ultimate luft

gesheft--would have been grist for Sholem Aleichem's word mill. Not to speak of the political scene. He also would have had a good laugh at me. "So, Dovid," he says, as we walk down Jabotinsky to visit the street that carries his, Sholem Aleichem's, name, "you were disappointed, I understand, that Dov Elboim didn't invite you to appear on his program? Admit it! You were secretly relieved. Because how would you have appeared? With a yarmulke or without? Your friends in Jerusalem have never seen you without a head covering, while your Tel Aviv students (those of female persuasion in particular) have never seen you wear a kippah. Aren't you better off just the way you are? The ultimate Stranger in Paradise?" "Speaking of," I reply, "would you like to know in how many Israeli universities Yiddish is being studied? In all five of them: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Bar-Ilan, Haifa, and Beer Sheva, but except for Bar Ilan, where they buy students with full scholarships, the biggest attendance by far--70 students--is in Beer Sheva." "Is that so?" says Sholem Aleichem, his curiosity piqued. "Yes," says I, pausing for effect, "and most of them are Bedouin. You know why? Because they need a foreign language, and everyone who takes Yiddish gets an automatic 90." "So Yiddish comes in handy after all," says Sholem Aleichem as he removes his dapper straw hat to wipe his brow. There's a hamsin today in Jerusalem, and he's still not used to the weather.

Jerusalem, June 6, 2002

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