

America and the *Shtetl* in Sholem Aleichem's *Di goldgreber* [The golddiggers]

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Sholem Aleichem, the most famous Yiddish classic writer, albeit not strictly speaking an American-Jewish author, went to America twice, in 1906-1907 and 1914-1919 with the clear intention to live and work there, and in particular to conquer the American-Yiddish stage.¹ He died during his second visit and was buried in New York in 1916, when over 50,000 people attended his funeral (Kellman). At the time of his first visit to America, Sholem Aleichem was already immensely famous, thanks to his many novels and humoristic stories set in the traditional world of Eastern European Jewry. But he had almost never written for the stage, mainly because the development of Yiddish theater had been drastically impeded in Czarist Russia through a ban on Yiddish language performances instated in 1878, just a few years after Abraham Goldfaden had almost single-handedly created modern Yiddish theater. As a result, a Yiddish theater geared to the popular entertainment of the immigrant Jewish masses had developed independently in America, and was flourishing on Second Avenue. *Shund*, a derogatory term designating a sensationalist popular literature, was the most represented genre, with authors such as Shomer, Latteiner, and Hurwitz. In 1905, the ban on Yiddish theater was finally lifted in Russia, and Sholem Aleichem immediately supported its renaissance, starting to work on several plays. However, the failed revolution was followed by a wave of pogroms, of which he was personally a victim. Sholem Aleichem turned to America, attempting simultaneously to flee antisemitism, to straighten out his financial situation, and to conquer the "golden land." Given the sociology and the taste of the American Yiddish audience, which was often uneducated, if not illiterate, this conquest had to be made through the stage. Through the intercession of Dr. Fishberg from New York University, Sholem Aleichem attempted to place two newly written plays (*Stempenyu* and *Der letster korban* [The Last victim]) with the theaters of Second Avenue (Shulman). In a letter to Dr. Fishberg, he even asserted, by way of prevention, that he would "never allow himself to give in to American

taste and bend the laws of art" (Berkowitz 208). In October 1906, Sholem Aleichem arrived in New York. He was first greeted lavishly and celebrated both in the Jewish and non-Jewish press as the "Jewish Mark Twain." The staging of his two plays was, however, completely unsuccessful. *Stempenyu*² and *Der oysvorf* [The Scoundrel]³ ran for not more than two or three weeks. Sholem Aleichem was sharply criticized, or even ignored, by the radical socialist and anarchist Yiddish press (Warnke). He left a few months later, in June 1907. His first attempt at conquering the American Yiddish stage definitely ended in failure. For all that, he did not give up. During the same year, in exile in Geneva, he wrote *Der oytser* [The Treasure], which he later renamed *Di goldgreber* [The golddiggers],⁴ a play in which he deals with the confrontation between America and the *shtetl* and which is the focus of this paper.

Sholem Aleichem addresses the American-Jewish experience in many of his works,⁵ in which he most often describes the situation of the new immigrant on the American soil, the illusions and the disillusionment of the new immigrant in America, "the economic and social degradation of parts of the Eastern European Jewish intelligentsia and middle-class in America" (Shmeruk). In *Di goldgreber*, however, the situation is reversed: Beni, who left Europe as an orphan to go to America, is coming *back* to the *shtetl*, the East European Jewish small town, as an adult and a self-made man. He, as an American Jew, is confronted with the Jews of his home town, who, having remained behind in a state of economic deprivation, nourish the hope of being saved from it by finding a treasure. His predicament follows the pattern of the "traveler disguised" (Miron), a motif typical of the *Haskalah*⁶ literature of the nineteenth century, in which the hero comes back to the *shtetl* after his edification abroad, America here replacing Germany as the educating country.

I would like to argue in this paper that *Di goldgreber* offers more than just "signs of Sholem Aleichem's *maskilic* aspirations for productivity," as noted by Khone Shmeruk (62). In fact, the very structure of the *Haskalah* drama is fundamental to the play. The careful reader will notice that there is an incongruity between Sholem Aleichem's use of specific genre structure, that of the *Haskalah* drama, and his treatment in the play of the topic of messianic utopia, a content which, from the historical and ideological point of view, stands in radical conflict with a *maskilic* form. The confrontation between the *shtetl* and America will be explored in the interaction between those two models.

In this, as in all *Haskalah* plays, the *shtetl* is described as an unhealthy society, totally impoverished. Its Polish landlord, who incarnates the type of the *porets* [nobleman], is gambling away all his money in Monte Carlo and will soon have to sell his estate to the Russian state. The

Jews, who had traditionally relied on trade for their sustenance, find themselves deprived of any source of income, as the archaic *shtetl* declines as an economic institution. Nobody buys anything from the Jewish shops. The only one thriving is the money lender, who preys on the general poverty.

In this disintegrating society, wealth has become a *myth*. There is no possible way to achieve wealth, so richness is being relegated to the realm of fantasy and superstition. The legend that Napoleon once buried thirteen barrels of gold in the old cemetery is revived, and the whole town rushes in a state of mass hysteria to find this treasure.

The treasure motif is traditional in many *Haskalah* plays, from Aksenfeld's *Der oytser oder di genarte velt* [The Treasure or the Deceived World] and his novel *Dos shterntikhl* [The Headband],⁷ to Pinski's *Der oytser* [The Treasure] (in Dramen). It stands in each instance for accumulated, static wealth, wealth mythical rather than economically productive, and accessible only through magic or supernatural means. As such, the treasure will naturally become the bait through which the "cheating," which is the central element of the plot, will occur. In *Di goldgreber*, it is Mozgovoyer, the chief representative of the *shtetl*-establishment, who launches the whole illusion, which comes to assume mythical dimensions. The treasure, linked to the legendary figure of Napoleon, is buried in the old cemetery, which endows it with an aura of sacredness. Its discovery has been prophesied by Mozgovoyer's grandfather on his deathbed, and is supported by Mozgovoyer's superstitions, visions and dreams, in which his father appears to him. Yet, Mozgovoyer constantly claims not to believe in "*puste Bove-mayses, vayberishe pizmoynes*," [empty fairy tales, women's litanies] and other superstitions (556), even should they assume mythical dimensions:

Oykh loz mikh oys fun di puste mayses. Tsen por leydike emer, hundert shvartse kets, toyznt galokhim megn mir ibergeyn dem veg tsen mol hin un tsurik, iz blote! Ot aza mentsh bin ikh! (620)

[Leave me alone with these vain stories. Ten couples of empty buckets, a hundred black cats, a thousand priests can pass my way ten times in both directions, it is nonsense! This is the kind of man I am!]

This pattern is again typical of the *Haskalah* plays in which it is always the figure of the rich merchant (Reb Henokh in Isak Euchel's *Reb Henokh oder Vas tut me damit* [Reb Henokh or What Do You Do With It] or his homonym in Aharon Halle-Wolfsohn's *Laykhtzin und fremelay* [Frivolity and Hypocrisy]),⁸ who will fall prey to superstition and false beliefs, because he is the representative of an archaic economic order which does not really obey the laws of rationality.

But mythical treasures are no more than myths. In contrast, the

word *oytser* [treasure] is sometimes used humorously to designate a "real treasure," whose value is tangible but escapes the inhabitants of the *shtetl*: Beni boasts of the fact that he became rich through the work of his own hands, and adds: "*ot iz mayn oytser*," [this is my treasure]. While the entire *shtetl* is waiting for the treasure to be dug out of the cemetery, Beni is waiting for "his" treasure, Esther, the woman he plans to marry: "*nokh eyn tog, nokh tsvey, un der oytser vet zayn mayner*" [one more day, two more days, and the treasure will be mine] (623). Bas-sheva calls Beni "*aza shtik gold*," [such a piece of gold] (686), and not by coincidence, Beni's deceased mother was called Zlate.⁹ The word *oytser* thus recurs as a *leitmotif* throughout the play.

We also find the *maskilic* theme of the "*genarte velt*" [the deceived world]. The *shtetl* is presented as a world of lies and corruption. Everybody is cheating everybody for the sake of finding the treasure, including the finest *balebatim* [heads of household], the Polish nobleman and the Russian *gorodovoy* [police officer]. Sholem Aleichem uses exactly the same pattern as Aksenfeld does in his play *Di genarte velt* [The Deceived World]: the cheaters will be cheated by the young enlightened hero, he will use their superstitions about the treasure in order to realize his own goals, and, by deceiving them, defeat them with their own weapons. Beni, Sholem Aleichem's American hero, is staging a "comedy within the comedy," what Shtshupak, Aksenfeld's hero, calls "*a komedye fun der genarte velt*" [a comedy of the deceived world]. Beni's expression "*me darfzey shmaysn mit der eygener rut*" [you have to beat them with their own whip] (685) corresponds to Shtshupak's expression:

Di genarte velt hot genareray liber fun altsding un ikh hob oykh ayngenart in der genarter velt arayn. (Di genarte velt, 304)
[The deceived world loves deceit more than anything else and I also surreptitiously introduced deceit into the deceived world.]

Sholem Aleichem's play follows the typical five-step structure of a *Haskalah* drama, which is originally based on the definition of the "complex plot" in Aristotle's *Poetics* (14, 43, 217): 1) *Exposition* of the unhealthy society and its dreams of wealth. 2) *Mystification*, with disguise, cheating, the appearance of ghosts, according to what Meyer Viner calls the "*traditsye fun der Haskole tsu virkn oyf breyte masn durkh stsenish teatrale zhanern*,"¹⁰ ["the tradition of the *Haskalah* to impress the broad masses by means of scenic dramatic genres"], now reactualized to stir the audiences of the New York Yiddish theater for which Sholem Aleichem intended his play. 3) *Reversal* (peripeteia) and *recognition* (anagnorisis). 4) *Catharsis*, literally in its original, medicinal sense of purge. The necessity of the cure can be summarized by Beni's

sentence: “*me darf zey ale heyln bikoz zey zaynen kranke mentshn*” [They have to be cured because they are sick people”] (618). 5) *Denouement* (coinciding with a happy marriage).

Beni, the young American hero, is descended from the various heroes of the *Haskalah* dramas. He has the ingenuity of Nakhman, the handsome hedonist and good-for-nothing who likes to drink and sing in Aksenfeld’s *Der ershter yidisher rekrut* [The First Jewish Recruit]. But he rather resembles Mikhl in *Dos shterntikhl* or Shtshupak in his *Di genarte velt*—all three correspond to the type of the poor young orphan who becomes an autodidact and a self-made man, whose success is possible because he has managed to leave the *shtetl* in one way or another: Mikhl joins the army and is exposed to German culture in Breslau; Shtshupak, although he does not leave the *shtetl*, distances himself from tradition, learns Russian and gets a job at the post office; Beni goes to America.

Beni’s ideals are typically *maskilic*: first a marriage of inclination (a recurrent idea in all *Haskalah* dramas) instead of a marriage of convenience arranged by a matchmaker, and, second, a healthy relation to money and work: he earns his living instead of being a *luftmentsh*¹¹ and waiting for a hypothetical treasure.

As it appears, the structure of Sholem Aleichem’s drama reproduces that of a *Maskilic* drama, and his American hero is an heir to the traditional *Haskalah* hero. Does this mean, then, that America has merely supplanted the ideals of the *Haskalah*, and that the values of the Enlightenment can be replaced by those of a modern, non-traditionally minded society such as America? The question is now to determine whether Sholem Aleichem really has as much faith in America as the nineteenth-century Yiddish writers (Aksenfeld, Gottlober, Levinson, Dik, Linetski, the early Mendele) had in the *Haskalah* movement. For this, it is necessary to analyze in detail the terms of the confrontation between the traditional Jewish *shtetl* and its new opponent, America.

Mozgovoyer is the main representative of the *shtetl*. He defines himself and his behavior exclusively in terms of the traditional values of family, ancestry, and community. He affirms his attachment to his family house from the beginning of the play, as the rumor spreads that the State might require people to destroy their wooden houses and build stone houses instead:

Far mir iz dos di greste gezeyre, vorum mir hobn beyerushe funem elterzeydn, az mir zoln unzer shtub nit tshepn...un *dem zeydus a vort iz bay undz koydesh*. (556)

[For me this is the worst decree, because we have inherited from our

great-grandfather, that we should not change anything in our house....and *the words of the grandfather are holy to us.*]

Mozgovoyer will give absolute credibility to the prophecy about the treasure, precisely because it has been transmitted from generation to generation in his family and was made to him by his grandfather on the old man's deathbed. Mozgovoyer is absolutely devoted to the community. He does not yearn for the treasure as a material gain for himself. On the contrary, he constantly stresses the idea of *akhdes* [unity], the idea that the community has to unite in the search. This corresponds to the last words of his grandfather:

Kinder mayne, ir zolt zikh firn laytish, unterhalten eyns dos andere un hitn yenems koved, vi ayer eygenem koved, vet aykh der eybershter baglikn, ir vet zoykhe zayn tsu gefinen dem oytser vos der groyser Napoleon hot do bahaltn. (556)

[My children, you should behave properly, help each other and keep your brother's honor as your own, and the Lord will make you happy, and you will be worthy of finding the treasure which the great Napoleon has hidden here.]

This idea of *akhdes*, unity, is the cornerstone of the play. Sholem Aleichem explains in the introduction to the play published in the monthly journal *Di tsukunft* that the idea of the play originated in the little story "An oytser" [A Treasure] contained in the collection *A bintl blumen* [A Bunch of Flowers].¹² He summarizes it as follows:

A gants shtetl mit yidn zukhn yornlang untern shtot bagrobn an oytser, nor zey kenen im nit gefinen, derfar vos zey kenen zikh nit oysglaykhn, un beyerushe hobn zey fun zeyere eltern, az nor demolt veln zey gefinen dem oytser, ven es vet vern sholem veshalve in shtetl. Dos shtetl ober hert nit oyf tsu krign zikh un me zukht, un me zukht dem oytser, un der oytser geyt alts tifer un tifer in der erd arayn. (585)

[All the Jews of a town are looking for years for a treasure buried outside its walls, but they cannot find it, because they cannot reconcile themselves, and it was transmitted from generations that only then, will they find the treasure, when there will be peace and serenity in the *shtetl*. But the town doesn't stop quarrelling, and they search, and they look for the treasure, and the treasure sinks deeper and deeper into the ground.]

This idea that the unity of the community will bring salvation is a messianic expectation. Mozgovoyer justifies his will that everybody have a share of the treasure by quoting one of the treatises of the Talmud, *Pirke ives* [The Ethics of the Fathers] (1:1): "*Kol Isroel yesh lahem kheylek*" [All Israel has a share] (560). However, the complete quote in

the *Ethics of the Fathers* actually reads: "*Kol Isroel yesh lahem kheylek leoylom habo*," [All Israel has a share in the world to come]. What he proposes to share is no earthly treasure, but the world to come, the coming of the Messiah. The treasure is always referred to in messianic terminology: "*Di yeshue iz gekumen*," [Salvation came], "*Mir zaynen oyfgerikht gevorn*" [We have been redeemed], "*Az me vet visn vu, vet efsher kumen di tsayt fun Meshiakh*," [When we will know where (the treasure is buried), perhaps the time of Messiah will come] (p. 557).¹³ The initial description of the crisis of the *shtetl* can now be viewed on a higher level, as a description of the *hevley Meshiakh*, the sufferings that are supposed to precede the coming of the Messiah.

Beni, the American hero, on the other hand, has very materialistic ideals. His philosophy can be summarized in two of his lapidary sentences: "help yourself" (in English in the text) and "*dos lebn iz a kamf*," [life is a combat] (619). He doesn't believe in a hypothetical treasure. For him, his hands are his only treasure: he made it in America through the work of his own hands.

It is legitimate to ask why Sholem Aleichem chose to make Beni a farmer, thus sacrificing any verisimilitude. Very few American Jews actually "made it" in farming. The choice of this occupation is more symbolic than realistic: Mozgovoyer digs in the old cemetery, a dead place par excellence, to find a mythical treasure. Beni digs in the earth and grows an orchard with its fruit crop, symbolizing life, youth, and growth. Interestingly, Beni also refuses to join the gold-rush in the Klondike. The title of the play, *Di goldgreber*, first suggests to us the gold diggers in America, and only then applies to the treasure-diggers of the *shtetl*. Both are ironically equated in the title of the play. Beni also describes his orchard as an earthly paradise "*a gan eydn*" [a Garden of Eden], contrarily to Mozgovoyer who refers to "*oylem habo*" [the world to come]. Beni wants *Messiah now*, and his choice has to be seen in the context of the many contemporary political movements which advocated that the Jews should return to the earth and build agricultural colonies, in Russia, in America, or in Israel. Thus, in a way, Beni is a Zionist.

However, there is one detail of importance that invalidates Beni as an unquestionable hero. Beni is a total *amoret*s, an ignoramus; he is unable to recognize a sentence from the Talmud, he has no regard for Jewish culture and tradition, and it is quite clear that for Sholem Aleichem, this is an unpardonable lack.

It appears now that Sholem Aleichem's image of America is ambivalent: on the one hand, America is the land of the realization of the Zionist ideal of return to the earth, of the *maskilic* ideal of a healthy occupation, but it is also the locus of assimilation and loss of Jewish identity. The play, written after Sholem Aleichem's disastrous first

season in America and his rejection by the directors and the audiences of the Yiddish theater on Second Avenue, contains the conclusions of Sholem Aleichem about American Jews and their lack of understanding for his work. It is, indirectly, a play about the reasons for the lack of success that his plays suffered in New York. Unfortunately, *Di goldgreber*, albeit a masterwork of much higher quality than Sholem Aleichem's first two plays, did not fare any better in New York. Sholem Aleichem had asked his son-in-law I.D. Berkowitz to present it to the directors of Yiddish theaters. In turn, Yakov Adler, Dovid Kessler and Boris Thomashevsky refused it on the account that it was "too literary." One of them would have been ready to take it, if only he could transform it into an operetta with "songs and dances" (Zylbercweig). The play, which found no takers during Sholem Aleichem's life, was finally performed in the *Yidisher Kunst Teater* (Yiddish Art Theater) of Morris Schwartz in 1927, in an adaptation by I.D. Berkowitz that turned it into a farce, but was well-received by the audience. This last betrayal of Sholem Aleichem's text by his own son-in-law again demonstrated the lack of understanding between the author and his intended public, the American Jews.¹⁴

The confrontation between Mozgovoy and Beni, between the *shtetl* and America, takes place in a number of areas, (linguistic, social, cultural and national, and eventually spiritual), which I would now like to examine more closely.

It is a constant feature of the *Haskalah* to present people using "deformed language" (including Yiddish, which was seen by the early German *maskilim* as a corruption of standard German)¹⁵ to indicate a corrupt mind. *Di goldgreber* presents us as well with an infinite variety of deformed speech. Vlotslavski, the Polish Nobleman, tries to speak Yiddish and "*loshnkoydesh*" [the Holy tongue], but actually uses a specific stock of words derived from the Hebrew-Aramaic component of Yiddish inappropriately and only to curse the Jews: "*malakhmoves*" [angels of Death], "*fayne berye balabuste*" [clever housewife], "*apikoyres*" [heretic], "*shalakhmones*" [Purim presents], "*azesponem*" [impertinent], "*arbekanfes*" [ritual undergarment] are extracts from his vocabulary of invective. To Holovetshke, who protests: "*Ikh heys Holovetshke, nit mayofes*" [My name is Holovetshke, not *mayofes*]¹⁶, he replies: "*du bist a mayofes glyakh mit ale, shabes, kugl, balaboste*," [you are a *mayofes* as the rest of you, *shabes, kugel, baleboste*]¹⁷, thus summarizing in a lapidary formula his rather simplistic understanding of the three pillars of Jewish life.

Holovetshke, the corrupt Russian *gorodovoy* [policeman], was born Jewish but was converted by force as a "cantonist" in the Russian army. He speaks a Yiddish mixed with petrified Russian administra-

tive terminology, a tragic reminder that the loss of the capacity to express oneself in a living language corresponds to a loss of identity. Beni, the American Jew, mixes English into his Yiddish, which also points to his loss of identity. A climax of comical effect is reached when Beni and Holovetshke are disguised as ghosts in the old cemetery, but even as ghosts they do not lose their linguistic idiosyncrasies: Beni, who plays in front of the terrified Mozgovoyer the role of his deceased father, ends his speech with "*vest zayn olrayt*" (683), [you'll be *alright* (in English)] (683), and Holovetshke claims in front of Yidl Torbe "*Dos rozgovorevet mit dir der alter rov*" [This is the old rabbi *speaking* (a Russian root) to you] (684). One of the ghosts speaks an Americanized Yiddish, the other one a Russified Yiddish.¹⁸

The Jews in the market place use a crypto-language, so as not to be understood by the Polish nobleman: "*Fun vos dabert der odn mitn khalfn?*" [About what does the *Sir speak* with the *moneylender?*] "*Der odn is meyv n kol dibur.*" [The *Sir understands all words.*] In these sentences, the italicized words are not part of the usual Yiddish vocabulary, but are actually plain Hebrew woven into the Yiddish sentence. By inflating the Hebrew component of their Yiddish, the Jews assert their common Jewish identity and draw a partition between themselves and the non-Jewish world: this process is the reverse of the de-judaization of the language of Beni and Holovetshke.

The Jews of the *shtetl* form a Choir (as in a Greek tragedy) around Mozgovoyer. This includes the voices of the different types of Jews: Bord [Beard], the symbol of a *Yiddishkayt* devoid of any content, merely repeats the last words of the former speaker, and seems to be a living incarnation of the Yiddish proverb: *Beser a yid on a bord vi a bord on a yid* [Better a Jew without a beard than a beard without a Jew]. Baremdiker [The merciful] uses religious exclamations such as "*Got zol shoymer umatsil zayn*" [God should keep and save us] "*riboyne shel oylem*" [Lord of the Universe]. Lakirde, the *Litvak* [Lithuanian Jew], is named after a word meaning "smoked herring," a meal typically eaten by the poor in Lithuania. He questions everything in his essential disbelief (a mental quality associated with Vilna in Lithuania, a center of Jewish learning and of opposition to the pietism of the Hasidim), his favorite expression being the Talmudic query "*Fun vanen iz gedrunge?*" [Wherefrom is this drawn?].

The main linguistic tension exists of course between Beni and Mozgovoyer. Each time Beni uses an Americanism, Mozgovoyer replies with a Hebrew, or rather Aramaic, term: Beni claims that in America, one can "*makhn a lebn*" [literally: make a living], Mozgovoyer reacts by treating him as a *peyre-odem* [a savage, from Genesis 15:12]. When Beni describes his orchard with "*epl un barn, tsheriz un pitshiz un greyps*" [apples and pears, cherries, peaches and grapes (in English in the text)]

Mozgovoyer turns to the rest of the audience in disgust: "*Vos zogt ir oyf dem Targum Onkelos?*" [What do you say about this gibberish? (literally: "this Aramaic translation of the Bible")],¹⁹ paradoxically rejecting Beni's Americanisms by comparing them to Aramaic, which has become, to him as to most Jews, an incomprehensible language.

The two characters' differences of speech obviously correspond to two different world views. Even when their words seem to convey the same idea, no communication is possible between the two: when Beni praises the American philosophy summarized in the phrase "help yourself," Mozgovoyer refers him to the similar sentence in the Talmudic treatise *Pirke Oves* [The Ethics of the Fathers] (1:14): "*im eyn ani li, mi li?*" [If I am not for myself, who will be for me?]. However, the philosophy of the *Pirke Oves* is much less crassly individualistic, since we know that the continuation of the sentence is "*ukhshe-ani leatsmi, ma ani?*" [But when I am alone, what am I?]. Mozgovoyer's world of references stresses once again the idea of community. The divergence of their philosophy bursts out when Beni suggests to Mozgovoyer that his citation from *Pirke Oves* might be a translation from the English: "*Well, mistome hobn zey dos transleytet, ibergemakht fun eyngleshn?*" [Well, perhaps they have translated this and taken it from the English?] (620). The linguistic insufficiency revealed by the comment again exposes the pathetic lack of culture of the Americanized Jew.

The examples above indicate how deeply the linguistic games pervade every sentence of the play, and how much Sholem Aleichem's humor is actually based on playing with language. Nobody is exempt from speech deformation, and the drama epitomizes a world of misunderstanding, cacophony and linguistic alienation. Any attempt to bridge languages and cultures only demonstrates once again the problems of untranslatability contained in diglossia, incommunicability, and the nontransferability of cultures.

The gap between Beni and Mozgovoyer is also based on a social disparity. Mozgovoyer represents the social and economic establishment of the *shtetl*, while Beni is his poor orphaned nephew. But now the tables are turned; the *shtetl* is impoverished, and Beni returns as a *parvenu*. His professional choices have always seemed socially unacceptable to Mozgovoyer. As a child, Beni wanted to learn a trade and become a *balmelokhe*, an artisan. As his tutor, however, Mozgovoyer had then objected to this desire, asserting: "*Bay undz in der mishpokhe iz nokh nit geven nit keyn balmelckhe un nit keyn meshumed*" [In our family, there has not yet been an artisan or an apostate]. Social change is equated with apostasy, which in a way it is. By virtue of his desire to be a farmer, a *poyer*, (a typically non-Jewish occupation), Beni is seen by Mozgovoyer as a traitor to *shtetl* values, and to Judaism altogether.

The core of their confrontation resides in the loss of Jewish cultural

and national identity. The problem is illustrated in the figures of both Beni and Holovetsshke (whose name means "Burned beam"), the apostate, who have much in common. Both are ignorant of Jewish tradition, both mix Yiddish with another language. In addition, both are looking for a "*heymshe froy*" [a wife from back home]. In the introduction to the American edition of his works, Sholem Aleichem derides this concept of "*heymshekeyt*" [homeyness, like-home] as the last idea of Jewishness assimilated American Jews stick to:

A *heymshe nign*, a *heymshe shidekh*, a *heymshe khazn*, a *heymshe maykhl*, a *heymshe broyt*, *heymshe fish*, *heymshe khreyn mit rosl*, a *heymshe tsimes*,—*ikh hob geton dank got mit mayn kind a heymshe shidekh.* (*to his readers in America*)

[A homey melody, a homey betrothal, a homey cantor, a homey dish, a homey bread, homey fish, homey horseradish with potroast, homey *tsimes*,—Thank God, I made a homey match for my child.]

Several other details allude to the national Jewish problem. The action takes place on the 17th of Tammuz, a fast day commemorating the breaking through the walls of the besieged Jerusalem and the beginning of a three-week period of mourning over the destruction of the Temple. On the other side stands the mythical figure of Napoleon, the archetype of national strength, who also addressed the issue of the Jewish national problem by creating the "Grand Sanhedrin" in France to regulate the affairs of the Jews. However, Jewish national grandeur is past, and has left no other traces than in the dreams of Mozgovoyer.

The symbol of the treasure conveys an ambiguity: on the one hand, the treasure represents a materialistic greed for wealth, for accumulated, unproductive wealth, as it was branded in the *Haskalah* plays; but on the other hand, the treasure stands as mythical symbol for spirituality. As C.G. Jung demonstrates in his analysis of Siegfried and the hoard of the Niebelungen in *Symbols of Transformation*, the "treasure hard to attain," a common symbol of the unconscious, stands for a hidden source of spiritual wealth buried within ourselves. To reach the treasure, the Grail, the goal of the quest, is to reach "a center of the total personality, of the psychic totality" (363). Sholem Aleichem's treatment in his play of the theme of treasure and wealth bears this ambiguity, as it does in his other works *Menakhem Mendl* and *Dos groyse gevins* as well. There is a desire for the riches of myth and of the unconscious underlying the search for the treasure. Of such wealth, Mozgovoyer has some sense, whereas Beni remains totally unaware of it. Beni sees only the materialistic aspect of the treasure, while Mozgovoyer sees its spiritual side.

The dramatic opposition between Beni and Mozgovoyer becomes

one between secular, materialistic, positivist values, and spiritual, idealistic, religious ones. This contrast can be seen again in the fact that Beni tries to conquer *space* (by moving to America, domesticating the earth), while Mozgovoyer is living and expressing himself in terms of *time*. His constant references to tradition and ancestors, a vertical legitimation, link him to the past, while his projection into messianic times links him to future and utopia. This distinction between the conquest and sanctification of time and memory rather than space is precisely one of the distinctive features of Jewish thought.²⁰ Mozgovoyer sticks to his belief in the treasure as he does to his belief in Jewish tradition. The treasure thus stands in this context for *Yiddishkayt*, for the values Beni has abandoned or rejected.

The main difference between *Di goldgreber* and the typical *Haskalah* drama is that the recognition by the entire community that the young hero is right, the Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, actually fails to take place. At the end of the play, Beni again summarizes his position:

Ayer zukhn iz aroysgevorfn, bikoz es iz nito keyn oytres oyfn altn beys-oylem. Oyf an altn beys-oylem zaynen do alte kvorim, tsebrokhene matseyves...

[Your search is a waste of time, because there are no treasures in the old cemetery. In an old cemetery, there are old graves and broken grave-stones...]

But he doesn't convince Mozgovoyer, who replies:

Nor dos, vos du vilst undz aynshmuesn, az s'iz nito keyn oytser, dos vestu dertseyln *dortn in Amerike, nisht undz* (686).

[But what you want to convince us about, that there is no treasure, that, you can tell to the people *there in America, not to us.*]

Here all the Jews agree. There are clearly two sets of values involved. One is valid for America and *is* a kind of positivism directly inherited from the *Haskalah*; the other is idealistic, messianic, and based on a belief in a higher spiritual world. Beni is unable to convince the *shtetl* Jews to give up their beliefs and their adherence to Judaism, symbolized by the treasure. But even more he needs this spirituality himself: he needs to come back to the *shtetl* to find "his treasure," a wife from the "old country," who has been educated in Jewish values and will mother Jewish children. Unlike the hero of the *Haskalah* play, Beni is not independent. In Sholem Aleichem's mind, American Judaism still needs the spiritual influx from the old country, Eastern Europe, to survive.

The entire play is based on the ambiguity of the symbol of the

treasure, falling as it does between the mythical hoard and the American material paradise, between "to be" and "to have," between time and space. This ambiguity, which is expressed in the clash between generations, countries and mentalities, is never resolved. The world of the *shtetl* is doomed, but American Judaism is not yet able to survive independently. Sholem Aleichem's sympathy, however, goes clearly to the *luftmensch*-type of the old *shtetl*, a character much deeper and more spiritual than his American hero. In this, he clearly departs from his early Hebrew story *Ha-otsar*,²¹ a *maskilic* didactic farce about a con-woman selling shares of a treasure, in which the gullibility of the *shtetl* Jews and their unwavering belief in nonexistent treasures is flatly ridiculed. In a quite sophisticated way, Sholem Aleichem retains in *Di goldgreber* the structure of the *maskilic* drama, only to empty it of its revelatory content: the play's apparent revelation, the one staged by Beni, gains no recognition among the *shtetl* Jews. Sholem Aleichem quite subversively uses the disenchanting form of the *maskilic* drama to advocate reenchancement. The actual revelation, for the reader or the spectator, is that the *maskilic* drama structure itself is a fake, a *trompe-l'oeil*, and that for the *shtetl* Jews, the only valid revelation is still that of Mozgovoyer's dreams of a messianic utopia. America, on the other hand, referred to ironically in many of Sholem Aleichem's works as "goldene medine," [Golden land], "yenem land vos Got hot bashafn fun Yidns vegn, zey zoln hobn vuhin tsu antloyfn, az es treft zikh a tsore sheloy tovoy, an umglik, a pogrom, a milkhome" [that country created by God for the sake of the Jews, for them to flee to, in case of a problem—may it not arise—a disaster, a pogrom, a war] ("Mayses" 137) is here revealed as a false messianic utopia, except for one who is prepared to trade material wealth for total de-judaization—that is, for spiritual death. America, unable to replace the ideals of the *Haskalah*, therefore, is a fake: fake Enlightenment, fake Messiah, fake utopia, but, unlike these, it is...reality.

Notes

1. See *Sholem Aleichem in America: The Story of a Culture Hero* (exhibit catalogue), (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1990).
2. The play is a non-sophisticated adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's 1878 novel by the same name. Sholem Aleichem even altered the end, with much reluctance, to fit American taste.
3. The play was based on Sholem Aleichem's first play, *Yaknehoz*, which Sholem Aleichem himself had already attempted to have staged in America as early as 1894. Sholem Aleichem's letter to Hilel Malakhovksi, the editor of the weekly *Di Toyb* in Pittsburg, about this possibility is reprinted in the New York daily *Der Tog*, 23 September 1923.
4. Published in 1927 in three installments as *Di goldgreber* in the New York socialist Yiddish literary monthly *Di tsukunft*, (October-November-December 1927: 555-

- 568, 618-623 and 682-687). All references are to this edition.
5. The most important are the second part of *Motl Peysi dem khazns* [in English: *The Adventures of Motl, the Cantor's Son*, trans. Tamara Kahana, (New York, H. Schuman, 1953)], the last chapters of *Menakhem Mendl* [in English: *The Adventures of Menahem-Mendl*, trans. Tamara Kahana, (New York: Putnam 1969)], the third part of *Blondzhende shtern* [in English: *Wanderina Stars*, trans. Frances Butwin, (New York: Crown Publ., 1952)], the unfinished novel *Der misteyk* [The Mistake], the one-act-play *Oylem Habo* [The World To Come], as well as dozens of monologues ("*Mister Grin hot a dzhab*" [Mr. Green Has a Job], "*A mayse mit a grinhorn*" [A Story of a Greenhorn], and serialized stories.
 6. The *Haskalah* is the Jewish Enlightenment movement, which started in Germany around Moses Mendelssohn, and then spread to Eastern Europe. Its proponents, the *Maskilim*, sought to emancipate the Jews from religious obscurantism and isolation.
 7. *Der oytser oder di genarte velt* written 1842, was first published in Y. Aksnfeld, *Zemtlekhe verke* [Collected Works], 4, (Odessa: Beylinson, 1869), republished as *Di genarte velt*, in *Aksnfelds verk*, ed. Meyer Viner, vol. 1, (Kiev: Melukhe Farlag "Literatur un kunst," 1931), 1: 239-317. See also Y. Aksnfeld, *Dos shterntikhl*, (Buenos Ayres: Musterverk, 1971).
 8. Yitskhok Aykhl [Isak Euchel], *Reb Henokh oder vas tut me damit* (manuscript, 1791?), *Arkhev far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame* [Archive for the History of Yiddish Theater and Drama], ed. Y. Shatski, (Vilna and New York, 1930), translated into modern Yiddish by Dovid Hofshyteyn in *Di komedyes fun der Berliner oyfklernung* [The Comedies of the Berlin Enlightenment], ed. Maks Erik, (Kiev and Kharkov: Melukhe-Farlag far di natsyonale minderheytn in USSR, 1933). Aharon Halle-Wolfsohn, *Laykhtzin un fremelay* (Brussels, 1796), reprinted in Z. Reisen, *Fun Mendelson biz Mendele* [From Mendelssohn to Mendele] (Warsaw, 1923), also in *Di komedyes fun der Berliner oyfklernung*.
 9. *Zlate*, a Slavic-origin name meaning "gold," equivalent to the Yiddish name *Golde*.
 10. Meyer Viner, *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19tn yorhundert*, 1, (New York: Ikuf, 1945). He adds: ["The comedy of the Enlightenment is not reluctant to use devices from the popular comedy, such as disguisements, deceits, unexpected or fortuitous events, substitutions, misunderstandings, recognitions and even buffooneries borrowed from the Vaudeville."]
 11. The type of the *luftmentsh* [man of air] is one who literally lives on hopes and miracles. He has no craft or trade, but will try to function as middleman in various (never productive) deals, as commercial or real estate agent, matchmaker, or circumcisor.
 12. Sholem Aleykhem, *A bintl blumen*, (Berditshev, 1888). Actually, the story does not appear in this collection, as shown by Khone Shmeruk, ed., in Shalom Aleichem, *Ktavim Ivriim* [Hebrew Writings], (Jerusalem: Mosad Byalik, 1976), but was published in Russian in *Odesskiye Novosti* [Odessa News] in 1893, and then in Yiddish. It can be found in Sholem Aleykhem, *Ale verk*, vol. 2 [Moscow: Ogiz, Melukhe Farlag "Der Emes," (1948): 244-245]. A longer, Hebrew text, *Haotsar* [The Treasure] preceded it, republished in *Ktavim Ivriim*, of which a Yiddish version can be found in Sholem Aleykhem, *Fargesene bletlekh* [Forgotten Pages], (Kiev: Melukhe farlag far di natsyonale minderheytn in USSR, 1939): 62-78.
 13. In a broader, universal sense, Mozgovoyev wants to recapture the primordial time when the brothers remained in faithful harmony with the father (no parricide) and among themselves (no fratricide). Messianic times are supposed

- to re-install this primordial harmony.
14. The play was later performed in Kovno and Paris in 1928, in Kiev and Kharkov in 1929, in Lodz in 1930, in Warsaw in 1934, where it played over 160 times and then toured all over Poland, in Montevideo in 1937, and in Tel Aviv by Habimah in 1938. For recensions see Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*.
 15. The prototypes of such plays are Euchel's *Reb Honokh oder Yas tut me damit*, and Etinger's *Serkele* in which German is the normative language. Of course, in Sholem Aleichem's play, good Eastern European Yiddish is the norm.
 16. Name of a Sabbath hymn Polish landlords would often force Jews to sing and dance to, as a form of humiliation. From there, a *mayofes*-Jew is one who bows to non-Jewish authorities in a servile manner.
 17. *Shabes* or *Shabbat* [the Sabbath], *kugel* [a potato cake prepared for Shabbat] *baleboste* [Jewish housewife].
 18. The linguistic comparison between the Slavicized Yiddish of the assimilated Jews in Eastern Europe and the Americanized Yiddish of the Jews in the United States is addressed in several works of Sholem Aleichem. See "Tsvay leshone-toyve-brivlekh" [Two New Year Letters], an epistolary exchange between two tailors in the old and the new world (*Folksfond-oysgabe*, 22: 142-147), the sketches "Vos iz Khanuke?" [What is Hanukkah?] and "Khanuke oyf der 5.ter Evenyu: der yidisher 'hay-laif' in Nyu York." [Hanukkah on Fifth Avenue: the Jewish High-Life in New York] (*Folksfond-oysgabe*, 2: 185-208) and two similar sketches about Passover, "Ma nishtane?" [What is the Difference?] and "Di fir kashes fun an amerikaner boy" [The Four Questions of an American Boy], (*Folksfond-oysgabe*, 23: 7-17).
 19. The Targum Onkelos, the translation of the Bible into Aramaic, was made at a time when Jews had forgotten Hebrew and were using Aramaic as vernacular.
 20. See Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956); Josef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982); Olivier Revault d'Alonnes, *Musical Variations on Jewish Thought*, (New York: Braziller, 1984).
 21. See note 12.

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