

MIRACLE ON THE SLOWPOKE EXPRESS

Jonathan Karp
Jewish Literature
Prof. David Roskies

December 3, 1987

Classic Jewish literature as well as Jewish folklore contain^(s) numerous examples of a community's miraculous salvation in the face of imminent catastrophe. The Bible, for instance, offers the case of Nineveh which, while not a Jewish city, was able to avert disaster through fasting and abstinence. The citizens went so far as to cover their beasts with sackcloth and ashes, perhaps marking Nineveh as the Chelm of the ancient Near East. The Mishnah presents an agenda of communal procedures designed to fend off evil decrees or end droughts. Jewish accounts of Medieval persecutions, such as the Crusade Chronicles, describe in detail how the Mishnah's program was scrupulously followed by various communities, usually, alas, without achieving the desired result. By the time of the Crusades, the Jews had learned to supplement their appeals to God with more worldly measures such as self-defence, hiding and most prominently, the bribing of secular and religious officials.

In Sholom Aleichem's two stories of the "Slowpoke Express," we have fictionalized accounts of how a Jewish community deals with impending disaster. Though these tales ostensibly describe miracles, both the actions taken by the townsfolk and the instruments of their salvation are eminently worldly. An examination of the nature of these "miracles" will reveal much about how Sholom Aleichem's "religious" outlook was largely a function of his conception of Yiddish culture.

In "The Miracle of Hoshana Rabbah," the Jewish God is called upon to reveal His might and prevail against the priests of Baal.

right on!

But what kind of Elijah do we have here? The story's hero, Berl the vinegar maker, is a man of faith -- that is, he has complete faith in his own understanding of God's machinery. We are first formally introduced to Berl Vinegar by our storyteller, "a businessman from Heysen," in somewhat apostolic terms:

Berl Vinegar -- that was the Jew's name. Why Berl Vinegar? Because, don't you know, he makes vinegar, the best money can buy hereabouts. He learned the business from his father, but he himself -- I have this directly from Berl -- invented a machine that turns out a superior product. If he wanted to, he told me, he could corner the market in three whole provinces. You know what, though? He says he's got time, he's no get-rich-quicknick. That's our vinegar maker. He never studied a day in his life, but there's nothing he doesn't know and no machine he can't take apart..."

Through this thoroughly admiring portrait we learn primarily that Berl presents himself, and is received, as a man with total confidence in his own abilities. Moreover, in contrast to most of the other locals, the would-be Poliakovs, whose greatest aspiration is "to get rich quick," Berl is in no rush to cash in. We have here a sort of anti-Menachem Mendl, at once comfortable (in his own mind, at least) with the technical side of modernity, and relaxed enough to exploit his reputed knowledge slowly.

The contrast with Menachem Mendl is telling, for as Max Erik astutely observes, that peculiar hero is representative of the

Jew's failed and farcical encounter with the modern social economy. Berl himself comes from a place filled with potential. Menachem Mendls, as we learn from the disastrous attempts of the townsfolk to capitalize on the construction of the region's first train line, soon to be dubbed The Slowpoke Express:

"Our Jews pawned their wives' pearls and their Sabbath suits to go into the railroad business and ended up by losing every penny and warning their children and grandchildren never to go near a railroad again."

For Berl, the train's attraction is not as means of wealth, but rather as a mechanical miracle. We learn as much from his own words and actions. On Hoshana Rabbah "nochen kvitl," after God has sealed the holy book in which the fate of every person is indelibly written, Berl makes a pilgrimage to the Sobovlivke station to look upon "one of God's wonders." Wondrous as the train is, however, the knowledge of how it works is not, for Berl, esoteric. He doesn't doubt that "the principle of the thing" is no different from that which underlies his vinegar machine.

Berl's scientific pretensions, which set him apart from his fellow Jews, also offend the sense of propriety of a non-Jew, a "priest from Golovonyevsk," who has, like Berl, come down to the station to witness this marvel. He becomes infuriated by the very "idea of that little Jew giving him pointers on anything." For his part, Berl is not the least bit intimidated by this threatening figure. He won't stand for the priest's attempts to

ridicule him, nor will he retreat one inch from his claim to understanding the "principle" of how the train works. Upon boarding the train, the two contestants stand poised to re-enact the ancient confrontation between Jew and goy. The train, that 19th Century symbol of progress, becomes the staging ground for this battle.

The irony of setting this religious contest on the level of technology is further twisted by the unusual nature of the train which the two combatants have boarded. Since this is the Slowpoke Express, the beloved line of the local Jewish population, we know, at least in retrospect, that the conflict has been decided in advance. For these shtetl Jews, the Slowpoke Express is "the best train of all." It perfectly suits the condition and the temperament of its Jewish passengers who, harried and disorganized, never need to worry about missing the train; it runs so slowly that "whenever you arrive at the station, it's still there." This anxiety-free train, we should note, contrasts sharply with some of the other trains found in Sholom Aleichem's stories. The exactitude with which the train in "On Account of a Hat" follows its time-table is a source of disaster for that story's Jewish hero. In fact, the conclusion reached there by the chain smoking narrator is that "in a word, we were better off without the train." In opposition to the Jewish passengers met in many other of Sholom Aleichem's train stories, frequently despicable and sometimes dangerous characters, the regulars on the Slowpoke are good-natured local businessmen who like nothing

better than to stretch out and engage in a leisurely "shmooze."

We might go so far as to say that the Slowpoke Express is a Jewish train in much the same way that Tevye's is a Jewish horse. Just as Tevye's horse, unexpectedly and at the worst possible moment, takes off with an uncharacteristic gallop, so too the Slowpoke, "just to show [our two rivals] who was boss...suddenly put on a mad burst of speed." The Slowpoke may be temperamental, but it is not unfriendly. This of course works completely to Berl's advantage.

Berl, man of science that he is, does not put his faith in the "Jewish" nature of the train. Nor does he express the belief that God will impose His will on technology in order to save him when the train runs out of control. When the priest suggests that they jump off the speeding train, Berl backs his refusal with a short sermon. Noting that this is, of all days, Hoshana Rabbah, when God has made his final determination of who shall live and who shall die, Berl emphasizes that a man's efforts to save himself are futile if God has chosen otherwise. The speech constitutes the story's climax, and represents Berl's decisive victory over the contemptuous priest. But like the miracle of Hoshana Rabbah itself, the speech turns out to be less "religious" than it appears. As an expression of religious fatalism, a la Ecclesiastes, Berl's sermon is comic indeed:

"If it's God's will that I die, there's nothing that I can do about it -- what difference does it make to me if it's in a locomotive, or jumping out of it, or

getting hit by a thunderbolt? Do you think I can't slip and break my back in the street if that's what God's put me down for? On the other hand, though, if I'm down for another year of life, why kill myself trying to jump?"

In other words, everything may be pre-destined and our own actions futile, but don't ask me to do something stupid! The speech, which displays the superiority of the Jewish religion to the Christian religion, does not argue the comparative potency of their deities or who is favored by God -- "what makes you think that my blood is any less red in God's eyes than yours?" Berl's argument is superior because of its logic and irony. These qualities, Sholom Aleichem is telling us, are the very essence of his Jews' faith.

Now Berl can make this declaration precisely because his intelligence informs him that this train trip will not end in disaster. Berl's faith operates at the level of theory. Specifically, he believes that all machinery works on the same principles. Thus the principle of Berl's vinegar machine "is boiling water," while the principle of the train is coal. Both produce steam and steam runs the engine. "And when an engine has no more coal...the water stops boiling, it runs out of steam, and kaput." Berl knows that sooner or later the train will run out of steam and stop. Yet to really hammer in his religious message to the priest he closes with the following words:

"Well, Father, what did I tell you? If God hadn't

written me down for another year of life, who knows how much steam this locomotive might still have and where we might be in it right now."

Everything is in God's hands, all is fate. The victory is secured through Jewish intelligence, the defeat is written in God's plan. A Jew must use his logic and intelligence to outsmart a goy, as Tevye does in "Tevye Reads the Psalms," even though it may not always be enough to stave off disaster. For Berl it was enough, for Tevye it was not.

The qualities which Berl puts to use to outsmart the priest, will not, in fact, work for the citizens of Heysen in their effort to avert a pogrom. In "The Wedding that Came without its Band," the other Slowpoke story, the Jews of Heysen employ traditional Jewish methods to prevent disaster. That is, they do not appeal to God through prayer and fasting, but they do take practical measures such as hiding and bribery. These well-tried devices, however, are rendered inadequate because of an ominous change in circumstances. The local police chief, bribed handsomely by the Jews, has called for a regiment of Cossacks to protect them. But the Cossacks, of course, are coming to Heysen by horse, whereas the ^{nie coinage} pogromnicks are travelling by train. The train is the new factor which tips the precarious balance of survival against the Jews.

"The Wedding that Came without Its Band" is a much more frightening story than "The Miracle of Hoshana Rabbah." The latter functions at the level of a mock myth. The weighty con-

frontation between Jew and goy is transformed instead into a study of panic. If the Jew comes out on top, it only serves to make the priest look more ridiculous, and so less threatening. The story's hero is to some extent in control of the dangerous technology. In "The Wedding that Came without its Band" the hero is the train itself. The train constitutes both threat and salvation. Only the fact that this is the Slowpoke Express -- that wonderfully incompetent Jewish train, the train as the symbol of inefficiency, a lump in the path of history -- saves the Jews of Heysen. The train pulls into Heysen on time, but without any of its cars or any of its pogromnicks.

Though ostensibly more of a miracle story than "Hoshana Rabbah," the religious content in "Wedding" is even flimsier. "God was great," says the narrator, "and the only miracle we asked of him was to make the train a few hours late, which it usually was anyway." In other words, the "miracle" which the Jews ask for is that God will let nature take its course and not interfere to make the train run on time. "Yet for once...the Slowpoke was right on time." Neither their practical measures nor their excruciatingly slight appeal to God saves the Jews. What does? At best we can say that the Jews of Heysen are saved by a technological quirk; they are saved by a joke. For that is what the Slowpoke Express is -- a bit of Jewish humor. The Slowpoke is only possible in an age in which technology moves haltingly but inexorably to impose itself on the rural landscape. But this odd case of Jewish domestication of technology cannot

long stand, as we know and as Sholom Aleichem must have sensed,
against the movement toward unharnessed efficiency. Before long,
the age of miracles would pass completely.

Superb. I must have a copy for my files.

And you, Jonathan, must spend the summer studying
Yiddish at Columbia—like it or not!

A