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**The Final Word/s: Finalizability and
Unfinalizability in *Satan in Goray***

Satan in Goray is a narrative concerned throughout with the idea, and problematic nature, of endings. In the first place, the main bulk of the narrative—the part we might term the “epic chronicle”—is driven by the disastrous Sabbatean messianic heresy and revolves around the idea of the end of days. Secondly, the fact that the novel ends not once but twice, and in two radically different and quite contradictory ways, draws further attention to the troublesomeness of endings. I will examine the ways in which endings and resistance to endings—what Mikhail Bakhtin would call finalizability and unfinalizability—permeate the epic chronicle, as well as how these concepts play out within the second, “*mayse-bukh*” ending. I will also explore the relationship of the two disparate narratives to one another in light of Bakhtin’s concept of unfinalizability.

It will be useful, first, to consider a working definition of what Bakhtin means by "unfinalizability." In *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson provide a distillation of the broad category of ideas covered by the term. They note that Bakhtin uses "unfinalizability" as

...an all-purpose carrier of his conviction that the world is not only a messy place, but is also an open place ...It designates a complex of values central to his thinking: innovation, "surprisingness," the genuinely new, openness, potentiality, freedom, and creativity...His paraphrase of one of Dostoevsky's ideas also expresses his own: "*Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.*" (MB, 36-37)

Contrast this concept with the concept of the messianic end of days—the *ultimate* "ultimate word." The Sabbatean movement, in positing a finalization of history itself, eventually must destroy all freedom, creativity, the very essence of the humanity it sets out to save. The end of the Exile is necessarily the end of the narrative, if not of all humanity, at least of the Jewish people. For the People of the Book, the only hope for continuation rests with unfinalizability, with not speaking the ultimate word.

Rabbi Benish Ashkenazi, the saintly and beleaguered rabbi of Goray, is among the very few to recognize the dangers of finalizing impulses. From the very first he is

opposed to the study of kabbalah; it is due to his influence that the effects of the messianic hysteria are so long in reaching Goray. Recognizing, as Ruth Wisse points out in her introduction, that "no suffering will compare with the consequence of 'forcing the end' of history" (SiG, xl), Rabbi Benish instead merely asks "How will it end?"

(26) He does not pretend to have an answer.

He is, however, vigilant in trying to keep the finalizing forces from penetrating into Goray—though he is not always successful, and becomes even less so over time. A "highly respectable" itinerant grass widow comes to town bearing tales of miracles, but leaves as soon as Rabbi Benish comes looking for her; later, the legate from Jerusalem arrives and stays long enough to announce that the redemption has come, to stir up the entire study house and to arouse Reb Mordecai Joseph to open rebellion against the rabbi before Rabbi Benish is able to drive him out.

Rabbi Benish does drive the legate out, but his powers are already on the wane. He cannot prevent the Sabbatean ascetic Itche Mates from settling in Goray. A lengthy, flowery and archaic letter from a fellow rabbi, warning Rabbi Benish against both the Sabbatean movement in general and Itche Mates in particular, only serves to highlight the growing ineffectiveness of rabbinical authority in the face of utopian zeal. And once Rabbi Benish is gone, the

floodgates are opened and there is nothing to prevent the arrival and influence on the town of the charismatic ritual slaughterer and Sabbatean Reb Gedaliya. Whereas Rabbi Benish represents the unfinalizability and continuing vitality of the Law, Reb Gedaliya sounds its death knell.

The other ritual slaughterer in the epic chronicle, Rechele's uncle Reb Zeydel Ber, says of his mother-in-law's protracted dying, "'Ah, well, it's a story without an end!'" (62) It is a remark that resonates beyond its context: the story of the protracted Jewish exile and suffering is also, for the traditional Jew, a story without end. But its unfinalizability is also its blessing and its saving grace: as long as the suffering goes on, the Jew goes on as well. The definitive word has not yet been spoken; the conclusive act has not yet taken place; the final and finalized Jew has not yet been realized. These are the same things that Rabbi Benish struggles, unsuccessfully, to protect, and the things that Reb Zeydel Ber's dark counterpart, Reb Gedaliya, attempts to overthrow.

It is no coincidence that Reb Gedaliya arrives in Goray, proclaiming the messiah, just before Purim, the most carnivalesque of all Jewish holidays. Like a Purim celebration gone awry, the finalization of history in the epic chronicle involves a degeneration into absolute

abandon, lawlessness, grotesqueness and the carnivalesque. The end which Reb Gedaliya envisions and tries to achieve is one in which "not only would Rabbi Gershom's ban on polygamy become null and void, but all the strict 'Thou shalt nots,' as well" (147). This kind of social and moral anarchy is, as Bakhtin rightly points out, just as paralyzing as total finalizability. "[W]ithout constraints of the right sort, he believed, neither freedom nor creativity, neither unfinalizability nor responsibility, can be real" (MB, 43).

Furthermore, the eschatological impulses motivating the characters in the epic chronicle drive them toward the total psychological, religious, ethical and physical destruction of their own society. Their destructiveness undermines the possibility of salvaging something meaningful from the experience: "According to Bakhtin, creativity cannot proceed entirely by destruction if it is to be genuinely creative: mere negation, he suggests, can never produce a meaningful word" (42).

Later on, however, Bakhtin comes to view the experience of the carnivalesque in a more positive light. "Carnival is now described not as a pure force of antinomian destruction, but as a clearing away of dogma so that new creation can take place" (MB, 95). This seems to be strikingly analogous to an idea embedded within the

kabbalistic/messianic enterprise: the notion that one must sink to the depths of vulgarity in order to purify them and make way for a new, sacred creation. If we look only at the epic chronicle, however, we are bound to be sorely disappointed. There is no sacred new creation, no divine redemption, nothing but the failure of the finalizing impulse to do anything but explode its own narrative. Carnival may have cleared away dogma, but where is the unfinalizability of the epic chronicle? Where is the openness, the freedom, the creativity?

I would suggest that it lies not within the narrative of the epic chronicle itself, but rather in the bizarre and utterly unexpected second ending of the novel, what David Roskies terms the *mayse-bukh*, or storybook. Taken by itself, the storybook in some ways seems to be the very antithesis of what Bakhtin would consider unfinalizable. It is profoundly ahistorical, making no attempt at all to assimilate "real historical time and space" (MB, 372); the issue of demonic possession precludes the possibility of human responsibility and hence of agency, creativity or freedom; and the storybook itself announces its own purported *finalizability*—that is, it claims to get the last and ultimate word in, even as it warns us against trying to "force the end": "CONCLUDED AND DONE" (SiG, 239).

Even the characters, familiar from the epic chronicle, are themselves less unfinalizable in the storybook version. No character in the epic is completely black-and-white: each has his good and bad points, sympathetic and unsympathetic elements. Even Rechele, in the epic chronicle, is permitted a fleeting moment of grace. These characters are not, in Bakhtin's terminology, "monads." Rather, they are (as individuals should be) "much looser, 'messier,' and more open than that" (MB, 50). In the storybook the characters are overfinalized. Reb Mordecai Joseph—ultimate good. Reb Gedaliya—ultimate evil. Rechele—ultimate victim. It seems incredible that this purposefully overdetermined morality tale could possibly restore the narrative to a condition of unfinalizability, one in which "[t]ime is open and each moment has multiple possibilities" (46).

When we compare the storybook and its ending to the epic chronicle, however, some interesting things emerge. First and foremost, we are struck by the fact that the storybook deals with precisely the same events as does the chronicle, but gives us a completely different record of those events. This seems to me to be a very literal example of a major principle of unfinalizability—that each moment has multiple possibilities. In the storybook, one of those multiple possibilities that exists in every

unfinalizable moment is yanked from potentiality to actualization. And I would argue that it is that actualization that rescues the narrative and the town. In order to examine how, exactly, the storybook accomplishes this, let us first consider some of the major discrepancies between the two accounts:

A major contradiction between the two is the subject-matter of each. The chronicle is completely wrapped up in the historical moment of the Sabbatean disaster. The epic is all about the false messianism of Shabbetai Zevi. In the storybook, on the other hand, Sabbateanism is almost totally censored. It is mentioned in passing, as a known historical marker to date the story, but it has nothing to do with Goray. The storyteller makes a clear distinction: terrible things are happening Out There; meanwhile, back here, the *real* story takes place.

The chronicle is concerned with the very specific evils of heresy and of "forcing the end." In the storybook, conversely, we are presented with general, formulaic evils straight out of folktales.

In the chronicle Rechele is a prophetess (or, in the Freudian reading, a sexually repressed hysteric). She is susceptible to prophecy/madness because of something within her—her history of abuse, coupled with her unusual mental curriculum: highly educated, she is the only woman in town

who, in a state of hysteria, might believably start spouting Biblical quotations! In the storybook, on the other hand, Rechele bears little or no responsibility for what happens to her: she is a randomly-chosen victim possessed by the dybbuk of an apostate. The dybbuk has nothing to do with Rechele per se; he comes with his own name and biography entirely independent of his victim! What blame there is to be doled out in the storybook is placed on the shoulders of Rechele's second husband, the evil Reb Gedaliya, whose transgressions made it possible for the dybbuk to gain hold of Rechele.

In one of the most extraordinary discrepancies, in the epic chronicle, Rabbi Benish is the hero while Reb Mordecai Joseph, at best, marginally redeems himself at the very end. In the storybook, Rabbi Benish is not even mentioned and Reb Mordecai Joseph is the hero! He champions the dybbuk against Reb Gedaliya (his mentor in the chronicle) and Rechele against the dybbuk. He manages to save Rechele's soul, if not her life, and to banish the evil that has invaded Goray.

Finally, we must consider the voice of the chronicle against the voice of the storybook. The epic narrator of the chronicle adopts an antiquated voice, but sounds positively sophisticated and modern in contrast to the archaic diction and tone of the medieval-style storybook.

Whose voice is this, and why does the voice subvert everything in the earlier chronicle? What should we make of this "ending" that doesn't tie up the loose ends introduced earlier in the novel, and that so plainly contradicts what we know (or believe) to be "true"? As Roskies points out in *A Bridge of Longing: the Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*,

Primed by all the data and detail to expect a resolution on the plane of history, the reader is left baffled. Whatever happens to the town proper? To the rabbi's sons? Does Reb Mordecai Joseph, the penitent sinner, become the community's new spiritual leader...? Why does the arch-villain Reb Gedalye get off scot-free? (BL, 278)

We still have as many—if not more!—questions after the end of the storybook as we do after chapter 12, the end of the epic chronicle. Chapter 12, if we consider it closely, really does not provide an ending in the sense of closure— all the loose ends and unresolved issues are simply crushed under the weight of the disaster. It really does seem to be (for the Jews of Goray at least) the end of the world— though not quite the end they had envisioned.

True, the second "ending" does not tie up the loose ends either. Instead it steadfastly looks the other way, pretends that questions like those that Roskies poses simply do not exist. The history presented by the epic chronicle is not truly unfinalizable, but rather collapses

in definitive disaster and total chaos. It *should* be the end of the Jews and the end of the Jewish story—but the storybook does not allow this to happen.

The storybook is a stroke of absolute, creative (in Bakhtin's sense) genius: it tells an entirely different story—the story that *might have been*, even if it *wasn't*. The dybbuk of the storybook externalizes the evil of Sabbateanism. In the storybook, only Rechele—rather than the entire town—is (blamelessly) possessed by the spirit of apostasy. Rechele serves as the single sacrificial victim whose death cleanses the town of guilt so that it can go on.

If we consider that the voice of the storybook can be construed as the voice of the town itself, telling its own story as it wants the story to be told, then the brilliance of the strategy becomes even clearer. The storybook does not subvert the chronicle out of a sense of shame. It is not the act of a criminal covering his tracks; it is an act of sheer, bold desperation, for Jewish survival and Jewish unfinalizability itself are at stake. If Sabbateanism is permitted to provide the "ultimate word" then the Jewish narrative is over. Instead, the storybook ingeniously transforms the tragedy into a *usable past*—an unfinalizable past with a future still possible.

And the voice of the dybbuk, who conveniently appears just in time to salvage the narrative and transform the historical evil of Sabbateanism into a familiar and surmountable folk-evil? I would suggest that the voice is that of none other than Isaac Bashevis Singer himself, who, when faced with the bleakness of Europe in the 1930s and the precarious position of Jews there, stepped in and created perhaps the only strategy capable of rescuing and ensuring Jewish unfinalizability.

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