

Meeting Abramovitsh's Mendele

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The introduction of Mendele Moykher-Seforim by Sh. Y. Abramovitch as a character who will occupy a central role in future writings is carefully crafted. More than a writer's presentation before a potential audience, this introduction reflects Abramovitch's attempt to create a character with whom his readers would form a long-lasting relationship, if only for his own financial considerations. By providing a character for his readers to meet, know--and like--Abramovitch would ensure a continued readership, particularly given his medium of serialized stories in periodicals like Kol-mevaser. Mendele the bookseller, then, becomes more than a affable character; he is Abramovitch's 'corporate spokesman,' the advertising manager's creation designed to reach a target audience.

Various rhetorical techniques facilitate the important relationship between Mendele and the reader. While the reader hears only one voice, Mendele's, the narration is constructed in such a way as to make the reader feel that he too has spoken and been heard. Details such as birthplace, physical description, and profession are balanced by Mendele's personal reflections. Mendele's parlance evokes a communal experience; his repeated references to situations common to the daily life of the contemporary reader provides a context for the reader to form a personal understanding of the character himself. This acts as a technique of engagement for Abramovitch, and at the same time, these devices provide a medium for Abramovitch's subversive irony. As Dan Miron puts it, the introduction provides a "highly characteristic scheme, which enabled Mendele to say whatever the author wanted him to say by stating its opposite" (A Traveler Disguised, p. 166). Rhetorically, Abramovitch uses the Mendele character to subtly criticize his audience. Throughout the introduction, the reader becomes helpless to Mendele's breathless monologue, and thereby subject to its manipulation.



natural one" *הוא טבעי?* (p. 121), and he proceeds to provide several analogies to it from day-to-day life. These situations to which Mendele compares the basic question reveal both Abramovitsh's methodology and his capacity for manipulation.

These analogies reflect how Mendele wins over the reader and convinces him that answering such a question (which he himself will eventually do) is as natural an act as asking it. The first comparison, *לך קופת דקליות ואתה שואל את האדם מה שמו* "14613 216 2 11 6717" (p. 120) touching someone's new kapote and asking the cost of the material, might remind the reader of something he experienced recently. By attaching a positive value ("natural") to this apparently improper, yet altogether common, act, Mendele directs the reader's attention to reevaluating such mundane actions. The question "what's your name" is constructed as parallel to rubbing someone's new kapote, or taking a cigarette without asking. The other examples, snatching a bit of tobacco when someone opens his pouch, washing one's filthy scarf in someone else's tub, are similarly offensive actions. Just as we will see with other rhetorical devices, the reference to familiar daily activities serves Mendele as a means of subtly challenging his reader's behavior. It is a window through which we might perceive Abramovitsh standing behind his puppet, Mendele. Answering the question "what's your name" probably is not such a big deal to the reader, but that Mendele makes it into a major issue, and then compares the question to crass behavior, forces the reader to reconsider his values. The issue remains for the critic to evaluate the function of the criticism of these common occurrences, experiences in which individual privacy or 'personal space' is invaded.

It is interesting to note in this context that one analogy--which compares the question to one who looks over at another's mahzor in shul and asks him to turn the page--was added to the 1907

edition. Many of the revisions, it seems, concern the addition of a religious reference [for example "שבת" in this same section (p. 122) or "היום יום" (p. 124) in paragraph 3 or "היום יום" (p. 124) in paragraph 4]. The string of comparisons to commonplace--even religious--experiences engages the reader in the process of evaluating his own behavior. They undoubtedly alert the reader that this new character is "one of them," that he is familiar with their daily life, but if we dig more deeply, we learn that this character has an opinion about them. Mendele had prefaced these comparisons by describing the original question: "אם זה טבעי?" (p. 121). The question of "natural" behavior is then qualified, in an ironic manner, by the string of comparisons. The grouping of such crass social interactions with an entirely acceptable question diverts the reader's attention from the question itself to those "comparable" activities. Inasmuch as the question is "natural" and to be encouraged, the reader should interpret the other activities as "natural" in that they are common, but offensive and to be discouraged.

Just as we can understand the first sentences of the introduction as serving two purposes, namely to engage the reader and make him believe in a commonality with Mendele, as well as to allow Abramovitsh the artistic distance from which to criticize society and reveal its ironies, so can we read the balance of the introduction as multi-layered. Certainly one of the primary functions of the introduction is to provide the reader with a sense of who Mendele is, so we encounter such detailed passages as "הנהגתו של מנדלה" (p. 122), describing the genealogy of Mendele's name. In the third paragraph Mendele presents the reader with a string of additional "imaginary questions" such as "אם זה טבעי?"

Handwritten notes in Hebrew at the bottom of the page, including phrases like "אם זה טבעי?" and "הנהגתו של מנדלה".

(p. 124), and he does not fail to answer them satisfactorily--from a purely factual perspective.

The process of providing these details, however, demands interpretation.

We have seen that Mendele presents these questions one after another, but he does not answer them in so direct a manner. In paragraph 4, Mendele reveals quite straightforwardly his hometown, even describing the town in some detail:

"אליין בין אוק א געדיה יקט צון  
 זענען זיינע שטייגער און די שטאט און די שטאט (p. 124).

He then proceeds with a discursive description of his passport, complete with a smattering of details ranging from his age (which he can not unequivocally ascertain) to "בראשית עס"

(p. 126) like hair and eye color--surprisingly, no "אויסגאבע פון בראשית עס"

Can it be that there is nothing special or outstanding about Mendele Moykher-Seforim?! We learn from the

discussion of Mendele's age that the passport itself is not a reliable document. As Mendele says,

"אויסגאבע פון די קניאן און די קניאן און די קניאן און די קניאן און די קניאן און די קניאן (p. 126).

Such details have no importance, he declares. Yet why then does Abramovitsh devote so much precious space to them? Immediately following this we do learn a) that Mendele is married, b)

that he in fact has several children, and c) that his business is selling books. So the original

"imaginary questions" of paragraph 3 have been answered. Abramovitsh clearly understood that

through these details his readers would come to know Mendele, to see him, to imagine him, and

even, as Miron argues, falsely identify him with Abramovitsh himself (this point Abramovitsh

might not as clearly have appreciated). This loyalty was hard-earned by Abramovitsh--the cost

being the effort to cast these descriptions in a way that would not jeopardize his artistic aims.

Precisely through this apparently simple description of details of Mendele's life, as we have

already seen in relation to the initial question "what's your name," Abramovitsh was able to subvert his reader's expectations and display a sophisticated degree of irony.

The passport, particularly in its apparent role as a document of identity, becomes in Abramovitsh's hands a sharp weapon of irony. On one level, as we have seen, it serves to provide additional "details" about Mendele's life. In a certain respect, the passport as a written document functions in contrast to the introduction itself, another written document which purports to present the essential characteristics of an individual. By casting doubt on the veracity of the passport, Abramovitsh can not avoid the risk that his entire document could similarly be considered an utter fiction. Mendele's opinion of the passport as useless, as he says:

"די ערשטע, דער געזעצטער שטעלע פון דעם פאספארט, וואס מען האט אים געגעבן, איז פארמאגט" (p. 126)

reveals his own "folksy" discomfort with official documents that attempt to qualify a person.

Much in the same way that he never reveals how many children he has ( "איך האב נישט קיין קינדער" p. 128), Mendele does not want to portray any specificity in his self-

introduction.

We see this very clearly with regard to his age. After criticizing the passport for having falsely recorded his age " ער איז צו פילן געווען געבוירן ווי א זעקס יאריגער " (p. 124), he proceeds to give a number of different explanations for when he was born. Not only do each of his parents have

different recollections of the date, but each of them also refers to two different events: His

father's account has his birthday as " די טאג וואס די קעניג פון פראסיע איז געווען קעניג " (p. 126), which he goes on to say, is " די טאג וואס די קעניג פון פראסיע איז געווען קעניג " (p. 126).

We could, of course, presume these two "events" to have been concurrent and thereby

avoid this snag in Mendele's chronology. Not so with his mother, whose first description is

"... וְהָיָה לָהּ בֵּן אֶחָד וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן מֵנְדֵלֶה" (p. 126)<sup>3</sup> and then continues "וְהָיָה לָהּ בֵּן אֶחָד וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן מֵנְדֵלֶה"

"... וְהָיָה לָהּ בֵּן אֶחָד וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן מֵנְדֵלֶה" (p. 126). The same level of ambiguity recurs in the passport itself:

"... וְהָיָה לָהּ בֵּן אֶחָד וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן מֵנְדֵלֶה" and "רֵיבִי וְהָיָה לָהּ בֵּן אֶחָד וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן מֵנְדֵלֶה" (p. 126). By providing so-called identifying

marks with such unclear, or at least relative, descriptions Mendele tricks the reader into thinking

he could in fact identify him, only to then assert "וְהָיָה לָהּ בֵּן אֶחָד וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן מֵנְדֵלֶה" (p. 126).

Mendele's own attempt to "clarify" is equally evasive: a high forehead with a lot of

wrinkles describes almost every man over a certain age. And a near-sighted bookseller!

Mendele's own frustration with the attempt at self-description comes out most clearly in his

outburst "וְהָיָה לָהּ בֵּן אֶחָד וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן מֵנְדֵלֶה" (p. 128). Abramovitch's use of irony in this situation undermines

his entire introduction. "You think you will know this character? You think you will recognize

him in the shul-yard? Ha, ha ha!" he seems to cry out. How all the more ironic for Abramovitch,

then, that his readers did in fact believe to have seen Mendele himself peddling books, as Miron

describes.

The final rhetorical technique we must address is Mendele's repeated saying "וְהָיָה לָהּ בֵּן אֶחָד וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן מֵנְדֵלֶה"

"וְהָיָה לָהּ בֵּן אֶחָד וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן מֵנְדֵלֶה" (pp. 122, 124 [paragraphs 2 and 4], 126, 128, 132). Dan Miron refers to what

he calls "'this is beside the point' trick" (p. 159) as "Mendele's most conspicuous trademark

throughout Abramovitch's career" (p. 159). This "facade of simple-mindedness" is the "means of

drawing attention to an ironic point that has just been made" (p. 160) according to Miron.

Clearly, in this introduction, this diversionary technique serves to force the reader to jump to the

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<sup>3</sup>This in itself could be interpreted ambiguously, meaning "a year or two after." The ambiguous 'specificity' of this statement emphasizes the utter dirth of qualitative facts.



next topic, without fully digesting what has just been said.

Let us look, for example, at the first use of the device. Mendele, in telling that he was named after his maternal great-grandfather, explains why his great-grandfather was called *המלך הגדול*.

Having once been in Moscow to buy some merchandise, he had managed to sneak out quietly,

*הוא היה במוסקבה לקנות משהו וצדקו לברוח בלילה* (p. 122). Here Abramovitsh makes an apparently veiled reference to the expulsion of the Jews from Moscow in 1891. Immediately after this

statement, Mendele interrupts himself with "this is beside the point." Great-grandfather

Mendele's escapade in the great goyishe city of Moscow would certainly have held interest for the contemporary reader, as it does for readers today. By directing the reader's attention away

from this detail, Abramovitsh plants the seed for future interest. It is almost a teaser or preview to a future adventure that Mendele will describe. The same is true of the second use of the

device, after describing how people would come to great-grandfather Mendele with *ל צרכים*

*"אין צרכים"* (p. 124). The incident proceeded by the "trick" captures the reader's attention and intrigues him to want to learn more about those "needs" or

"solicitations." By pointedly not telling a story that could be told, Mendele captivates the reader.

At the same time, the use of this device provides Abramovitsh with a necessary distance to approach more "controversial" topics such as what a good Jewish man would be doing in

Moscow sixty years ago anyway. As we see in another example, after describing how his horse had once looked in the cart for what to eat and had *אכל מה שיש לו*

*"אכל מה שיש לו"* (p. 132), Mendele once again directs the reader's attention away.

What could be less "safe" a topic for Abramovitsh, a maskil, then a " *אכל מה שיש לו?*

Comparing the horse to so-called intellectuals, Abramovitsh creates an added layer of irony. By

having Mendele shoo the reader's interest from the topic, Abramovitch is able to include it in his literature ever so subtly. While the reader has the choice of seizing upon the radical idea or ignoring it at Mendele's direction, the critic finds these phrases a clear signpost to subversity.

Abramovitch's introduction certainly succeeds as a method for presenting an attractive character to a wide audience. In as much as the reader has the sensation of really getting to know Mendele through it, the introduction meets its aims. Yet when we evaluate the rhetoric more closely, we can perceive a bit of Abramovitch's agenda as well. Sure, the reader should like Mendele, believe in him even, certainly buy his future productions, but he also has the chance to uncover a more subtle manipulation at work. The talent to cloak this advertising launch with an artistic endeavor attests to Abramovitch's tremendous skill, both as media-mogul and writer.