

PERETZ AND SINGER:  
A COMPARISON OF THE PREMISES BENEATH THEIR STORIES

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Peretz and Singer wrote their stories "A Passion for Clothes" and "Zeidlus the Pope" (respectively) 39 years apart, and yet they are so similar that they appear to be two versions of the same tale. They have parallel characters, parallel themes, and parallel plots. It is, therefore, surprising that two such similar stories give rise to such strikingly different reactions in their readers: Peretz's tale is received calmly and cheerfully while Singer's sets the reader uncomfortably on edge. Though it may initially be puzzling how such effects are created, it is clear that they are introduced intentionally and skillfully by each author. In order to explore this contrast, to see how and perhaps why the writers cast their similar tales in such dissimilar lights, we must look to those points where the plot elements or style elements of the two stories diverge. It is in the differences which do exist that a significant underlying contrast between the worldviews of the two authors is revealed.

But first, to confirm that these two stories are indeed parallel, the commonalities can be merged into one generic tale, a tale of successful temptation, of the corruption of a righteous person: There once was a person of good ancestry, great wealth, and significant traditional knowledge whose life was only troubled by a less-than-ideal marriage. For some reason, a demon became determined to lead this person into sin. He presented temptation not in the form of the supernatural, but rather in whispers and dreams, quietly coaxing the person into compliance. The demon made evil action into something which could easily be rationalized by the person's finely tuned mind. The evil thus successfully took root, and although the person had the power to say "no" at any time, the evil passion

became uncontrollable. Once this was the case, the demon was practically superfluous, and the person's sins snowballed independently to excess. Sins which initially had brought pleasure eventually became crippling, incapacitating the person in a fashion which made it impossible to derive any further benefit from the evil which had been done. And ultimately, when condemned to die on account of these sins, the person accepted death as a just sentence.

On all of this, the Peretz and Singer stories both agree. Yet the fact is that in the end, Peretz's Bashe Gitel is forgiven while Singer's Zeidel is sent to face the horrors of a grotesque and cruel hell. Were their sins so qualitatively different? After all, Bashe Gitel, in the course of her growing passion for clothes took advantage of the orphan, depleted the poor girl's energies, and then humiliated, abused, and abandoned her. Zeidel, on the other hand, ruined only his own life; though his apostasy may have been a loss to the Jewish community, he never completed his definitive anti-Talmud polemic and thus was never the source of any direct harm to anyone else. Furthermore, Zeidel is the one who ultimately abandons his passion and seeks Truth while Bashe Gitel undergoes no such self-evaluation even when she becomes ill. Why, then, is Bashe Gitel the one who apparently escapes punishment?

It seems clear that the different punishments which the authors meted out to their characters must reflect something other than the characters' actual sinful activities. Exactly what they do reflect, however, is not yet clear. Looking back to the beginning of the stories, it is evident that whereas

BasheGitel is "truly a pure soul," Zeidel is not. He is described as "righteous" yet not perfect. For example, "he was a miser and never took a poor man home for a Sabbath meal." Another dissimilarity is that though we are given little description of Bashe Gitel's character, we have no reason not to like her, while Zeidel, who is described at length, appears to be an unfriendly, unfeeling, undeveloped, and unlikable man. Thus, from the start, Zeidel is depicted as less deserving than Bashe Gitel, despite his erudition and expertise.

Another noticeable difference lies in the way the seeds of sin are planted in these two characters. Since Bashe Gitel is so truly pure, Satan sets about "to kindle within her a lust for clothes and jewelry," a lust which heretofore had not existed. Furthermore, Satan cannot be blunt with Bashe Gitel; he has to introduce his evil ideas in the guise of goodness. He therefore encourages her to buy and make new clothes only to honor the Holidays and her husband; "he presented his cunning as fear of God." This approach works very effectively. She is duped into thinking that all her actions are indeed for the sake of goodness, she wants clothes only as a means to a worthy end. Only when the means become an end in themselves does Satan know that he can step aside and rely on her own momentum to carry her down the path to self-destruction.

This sequence is quite different in "Zeidlus the Pope" wherein the seeds for sin need much less cultivation. Satan does not need to kindle any lust within Zeidel because he discovers "that Zeidel possessed one human weakness: haughtiness." Satan can thus prey upon an existing weakness -- a passion for pride --



without needing to go to the trouble of creating a new one. Consequently, Satan does not need to be as subtle in his approach. Instead of presenting his sinful idea in the guise of good, he feels free to present it as the self-aggrandizing quest for fame that it indeed is. In the night-time conversation between Satan and Zeidel, Satan openly and harshly criticizes Zeidel's wife, his town, its rabbi, the Jewish people, and Torah while extolling the value and worth of Zeidel himself. Most other characters in similar test tales (Bashe Gitel, the rabbi of Chelm in Peretz's "All for a Pinch of Snuff," the rabbi of Tishevitz in Singer's "The Last Demon," and Nathan in Singer's "The Unseen"; to name a few) would at least have recognized this temptation as demonic. But Zeidel shows either no acknowledgment of that fact or no concern. Zeidel is under no illusions that his actions further any end other than his own, even as he begins to put his thoughts into action.

With all this in mind, Bashe Gitel and Zeidel no longer seem so similar. In fact, there is some fundamental difference between their personal natures. Having noted that their sinful actions per se cannot account for the differences in their respective punishments, Zeidel's torturous sentence in contrast to Bashe Gitel's amnesty, perhaps it is their very unlike natures, the striking differences in their relationships to and their acceptance of evil that can be held accountable. Regardless of who was hurt along the way, Zeidel's evil seems far more insidious than Bashe Gitel's. What is emerging here is an opposition in the two authors' views of human nature. Each author has depicted his character in a personal battle against evil, yet the

distinctions between the authors' presentations of these battles disclose the fact that Peretz and Singer have contrasting opinions regarding the human proclivity to evil.

The clues to this appear throughout both tales. It has already been established that while Bashe Gites is a paragon of virtue at the outset, Zeidel is not. While Peretz, in his folktale style, leads us to believe that this woman is actually "truly a pure soul," Singer, in a style that is equally folktale-like, indirectly tells us that no living being would be so pure. Even the "righteous souls" to whom his demonic narrator refers at the beginning can be corrupted through their "inner passions." Whereas in Peretz's tale, evil preys on Bashe Gitel's desire to do good, in Singer's, evil preys on these "inner passions" which each person has. This contrast alone conveys a sense that Singer perceives the human potential for evil to be far more deeply, internally rooted than does Peretz. After all, inner passions are what provide the basic motivation for most human activity. If this is where evil takes root, then all people potentially have some evil at their very core.

Singer's opening works imply this same idea: "In ancient times there always lived a few men in every generation whom I, the Evil One, could not corrupt in the usual manner." In addition to adding a "once upon a time" quality to the story, these words tell us that in order to find some men whom it was difficult (though not impossible) to corrupt, Satan had to search all the way back to ancient times. In other words, now, in our contemporary world, everyone is readily accessible to Satan's influence. Everyone is corruptable and therefore corrupted.

This is not to say that both characters don't have the freedom to choose their actions. Both Bashe Gitel and Zeidel step into evil, knowingly or unknowingly, of their own free will. What differs in the two authors' perspectives, however, is the relationship between the person and evil. This is illustrated in the manner in which Bashe Gitel and Zeidel both come to the point of increasing their own involvement in ~~win~~ sin without further demonic prodding. In "A Passion for Clothes," Peretz makes this transition point explicit: "Satan saw he had gotten the best of her, she was like a well-hurled stone plunging downhill with the force of the initial throw, he simply stayed aloof now, and she went on of her own accord." As thus presented, Satan and Bashe Gitel are two clearly distinct characters. Evil is an external force that influences and affects people but is not intrinsically human. Truly pure souls can and do still exist.

The same transition is not evident in "Zeidlus the Pope." Satan's words make "so great an impression" on Zeidel that Zeidel takes over and begins ~~sinning~~ sinning immediately. Satan continues to tell the story but has no further direct role until he appears at the time of Zeidel's death. Not only is the evil more obvious in Singer's tale than in Peretz's, but it is more human; the human character "owns" his evil actions from the start. The Bashe Gitel - Satan dichotomy finds no clear counterpart in the Singer story where the boundaries between evil and human nature are blurred.

The style of narration itself is one further clue as to the authors' views of the place of evil in the world. In Peretz's story, the third person observer narrator merely tells of the interaction between the separate characters of Bashe Gitel and

Satan. Moreover, heaven seems to play a role and to affect the course of events as Bashe Gitel becomes lame and as other supernatural events occur. Evil is not the only power which exists in the universe. With Satan himself narrating the Singer tale, quite a different effect is created: since we hear everything from Satan's voice, evil appears to occupy a far more central position in the world. In fact, we hear nothing at all of heavenly intervention. Satan as omniscient participant narrator exists both inside Zeidel's mind (as yeytser-hore) and in the world at large, making him quite a powerful cosmic force.

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Satan indeed seems so powerful in "Zeidlus the Pope" that the whole world is sinful. "Even among the Gentiles things were far from perfect. The clergy cared more for gold than for their God," nepotism outweighs merit in determining promotion, and the old woman -- whose job it was to help Zeidel -- robs him at her first opportunity. Note the glaring contrast between this bleak situation and that of Bashe Gitel who is lovingly attended by her husband and rebbe until the end. Singer has painted a grim picture: unless Zeidel sins, he cannot advance; Zeidel chooses to sin; yet his advancement is then blocked by the sins of others. Hence in a world of sinners, there is no hope of success -- an ultimate trap. And Singer does see ours as a world of sinners.

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Cosmic Justice thus becomes an issue correlative to the issue of evil vis a vis humanity. Zeidel is in a trap, and he has nowhere to turn.

But the way back was blocked: first because he doubted all faiths now; second because it was the law of the land that a Christian who returned to Judaism should be burned at the stake.



Also, as Satan reminds Zeidel, "It won't help you to repent or confess, so don't try." This universe appears cruel, unrelenting, and harsh. It permits no second chances and allows for no mistakes.

The sense is quite the opposite in Peretz's tale. When Bashe Gitel lost the use of her legs, "It would appear to have been the best time for her to recover from her lust. When a woman is bedridden. . . what good are clothes and jewelry?" It is as if heaven made her lame so as to give her a chance to return to her old and good ways. That she did not take advantage of this opportunity was her mistake, but the fact is that Peretz portrays a fair and forgiving universe. In fact, before her death, the rebbe assures Bashe Gitel that she is forgiven, and she performs one last act of generous kindness before dying.

It seems much clearer now why Bashe Gitel is forgiven while Zeidel is sent to suffer in hell. What is the determinant here is not what each character does so much as what each of them is. Bashe Gitel is a fundamentally good person (in a just universe) whose goodness resurfaces at the end, and she is thereby spared. Zeidel is a fundamentally sinful person who lives in a world which allows neither success nor forgiveness. Punishment in hell is the only possible conclusion.

Both authors have written their metaphysical worldviews into their "simple" folktales. Their different premises as to the place of evil in the world and the quality of human nature have shaped one basic storyline into two markedly different pieces of literature. Certainly the times during which Peretz and Singer wrote these stories (1904 and 1943, respectively) helped mold their philosophical premises; how could Singer, who

was no doubt aware of the events in Europe, be expected not to write starkly about the human potential for evil? Timing alone, however, does not suffice to explain the different metaphysics which Peretz and Singer bring to their works, since each of these writers had contemporaries who wrote from the opposite vantage point. Even if the reasons for which Peretz and Singer held such divergent philosophical views cannot be ascertained, <sup>\*</sup> it is nonetheless essential to recognize these contrasting worldviews in order to understand the literature itself. The deaths which Bashe Gitel and Zeidel meet can only make sense in the context of their creators' philosophies of life, evil, <sup>\*</sup> justice, and human nature.

\* ah, but they can!

Excellent, so would.

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