

A Century in the Life of Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye*

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THE B. G. RUDOLPH LECTURES IN JUDAIC STUDIES

New Series, Lecture One 1993–1994

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Syracuse, New York 13244-5160

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ISBN 0-8156-2727-0

Manufactured in the United States of America

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In the fall of 1894, Sholem Aleichem informed his friend and editor, Mordechai Spektor, that he was writing a short story entitled “Tevye the Dairyman.”¹ After Spektor read and criticized this work, Sholem Aleichem responded: “Please don’t be offended—the world will certainly like it. I don’t know whether this is because the world knows more than you do, or because it knows nothing at all.”² A century later, it is clear that Sholem Aleichem’s confidence in *Tevye*’s popularity was justified. *Tevye the Dairyman* has experienced innumerable transmigrations since his arrival on the literary scene in 1894. His credits in myriad languages include remarkable appearances in print, on stage, and on the silver screen. This essay reconsiders the literary source (1894–1916) and three film adaptations in Yiddish (1939), English (1971), and Russian (1991).³

1. See Sholem Aleichem’s letters of 21 and 26 Sept. 1894; 20 Oct. 1894; and 4, 7, and 10 Nov. 1894. They were published in *Der tog* on 23 and 30 Sept. 1923 and reprinted in *Di goldene keyt* 56 (1966): 16–21. After this lecture was written, Sholem Aleichem’s collected Yiddish letters were reprinted. See *Briv fun Sholem-Aleichem 1879–1916*, ed. Abraham Lis (Tel Aviv: Beit Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz-Farlag, 1995).

2. Letter of 24 Nov. 1894, printed in *Der tog* on 7 Oct. 1923.

3. In addition to these cinematic versions, a noteworthy Hebrew *Tevye and His Seven*

Formally, the predominant literary feature of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is first-person monologue, in the style of an oral presentation. Much of the character and drama of these stories derives from Tevye's way of narrating them in Yiddish. According to the fictional pretense, Tevye tells his tales to Sholem Aleichem, who purports to have transcribed them word-for-word. The stage and film renditions dispense with this aspect of the narratives, while to varying degrees they retain the colloquial aura of Tevye's speech. A contrasting element of Tevye's oral delivery, usually present in film and stage versions, is his practice of quoting Hebrew phrases from traditional sources. This practice reflects the resourcefulness of the Yiddish language, which permits virtually unlimited borrowings from Hebrew.

We should recall that, as the rabbis said about the biblical Job, Tevye never really existed, even if (as we know) the author based his character on a living model. Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is no historical figure, and so it is inaccurate to speak of Tevye as having a "life." But it makes sense to speak about the life, or the afterlife, of Sholem Aleichem's fictional work. The time is right to look back over one hundred years in the life of Sholem Aleichem's masterpiece, the collection of stories known as *Tevye der milkhiker* (*Tevye the Dairyman*).⁴

Daughters (*Tuvia u-shiv'a benotav*, 1968) was produced in Israel by Menachem Golan. Hillel Halkin created the most readable English version of the Tevye stories, although he places his translations from Tevye's Hebrew sayings in endnotes, leaving italicized Hebrew phrases in the text to emphasize their distinctness. See Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, ed. and trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken, 1987). For comparison, see *Tevye's Daughters*, trans. Frances Butwin (New York: Crown, 1949), and *Tevye the Dairyman and Other Stories*, trans. Miriam Katz (Moscow: Raduga, 1988). Katz's translation has been reprinted in the United States by Joseph Simon/Pangloss Press.

4. The metaphor "life" does apply to Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye*. In an essay called "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin discusses the "afterlife" (*Fortleben*) of literary works. Benjamin concentrates on certain aspects of literary reception, in particular the way a book finds new readers and new meanings in translation. In readers' perceptions of *Tevye* throughout the past several generations, this literary work has lived for a



מביה דער מילכיגער

א וואונדערליכע מעשה, ווי אזוי מביה, א יוד איין ארעמאן.
 א קטופל מיט קינדער, איז פלוצים געגליקט געווארען דורך
 א קשוונה ווילדען פאל, וואס איז גדאי מע זאל דאס
 געשרייבען אין א ביכל. דערצעהלט פון מביה'ן אליין אונ
 איבערגעגעבען ווארט ביי ווארט

דרך

שרום עליכם.

זא לעגען סגרי סרדכי ספעקטאר שיינקט דאס (וערק - א פאנה - דער מספר)

Title page of Sholem Aleichem's first story told by the fictional character Tevye. Courtesy of Ken Frieden.

Sholem Aleichem did not originally intend to produce a full-blown epic of Tevye's trials and tribulations. He started with a modest story some fifteen pages long, which he wrote late in 1894 and which was published the following year.⁵ This text opens with a letter from Tevye to Sholem Aleichem explaining how they supposedly came to know one another. Their meeting is also a meeting of representatives from the Kiev bourgeoisie and the working class from the countryside. In Sholem Aleichem's fiction, Kiev is called "Yehupetz," and Boyarka, the town where people from Kiev take their summer vacations, is called "Boiberik." Tevye describes the situation in his fictional letter addressed to the author: "In a village, alas, one becomes boorish. Who has time to study a sacred book or to learn a weekly reading of the Torah together with Rashi's commentary? It's lucky that summer comes along and the rich people of Yehupetz travel to their cabins in Boiberik. Then one can sometimes meet up with a refined person and hear wise words. Believe me, I remember well those days when you sat beside me in the forest and listened to all of my foolish stories."⁶ Ac-

century. See Walter Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," in *Charles Baudelaire: Tableaux parisiens*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), vol. 4-1, 11. In English, see "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 71.

5. Sholem Aleichem, "Tevye der milkhiker" in *Der hoyz-fraynd*, ed. M. Spektor (Warsaw: Schuldberg, 1895), vol. 4, 63-80. A copy of *Der hoyz-fraynd* containing "Tevye der Dairyman," found in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, is clearly dated 1895; compare *Guide to Yiddish Classics on Microfiche (Di yidische klasikers af mikrofish)*, ed. Chone Shmeruk (New York: Clearwater, 1980). In "Tevye der milkhiker"—le-toldoteha shel yetzira," *Ha-sifrut* 2 (Apr. 1978): 26-38, Chone Shmeruk gives the original date of publication as 1894 (27n. 9). According to information provided on the verso of the title page, the volume passed the censor on 14 June 1894, but this was months before Sholem Aleichem had written his Tevye story. See his letters to Mordechai Spektor from September to November 1894, and especially his reaction to *Der hoyz-fraynd* 4, on 28 Jan. 1895, printed in *Der tog* on 7 Oct. 1923. Hence we might have celebrated the centennial of *Tevye* in 1994, based on when the first story was written, although its publication date was 1895.

6. *Der hoyz-fraynd* 4 (1895): 64.

According to the premise of the story, Tevye respects Sholem Aleichem as an educated man, and Sholem Aleichem values Tevye's narrative powers. This encounter between different social milieus is part of the meaning of the work.

Not until several years after he brought Tevye into the world did Sholem Aleichem publish the second and third installments in what then became a series.⁷ With his third Tevye story, "Today's Children," he opened the five-act drama of fathers and daughters. From 1899 to 1909, Sholem Aleichem experimented with five distinct scenarios, each of which revolves around one of Tevye's strong-willed daughters. Collectively, the younger generation renounces the matchmaking institution and the traditional world it represents. Tsaytl, the eldest daughter, falls in love and marries a tailor instead of the butcher who makes Tevye a lucrative proposal.⁸ Against the backdrop of Russia's political turmoil in 1904, Tevye's second daughter, Hodel, decides to marry her tutor, a revolutionary who is caught and exiled to Siberia.⁹ Few of the subsequent adaptations retell the stories of daughters number four and five, Shprintse and Beylke, each of whom experiences a tragic failure associated with money and the hierarchies of social class.¹⁰ By 1914, the

7. Sholem Aleichem, "A boydem," *Der yud* 1, no. 1 (1899): 11–14 and no. 3 (1899): 8–11; "Hayntike kinder," *Der yud* 1, no. 10 (1899): 6–8, no. 11 (1899): 5–7, and no. 12 (1899): 5–7.

8. In the first Hebrew version, translated by Y. D. Berkovitch and approved by Sholem Aleichem, this story was entitled "Tevye's Daughter Who Married an Ignorant Man." See *Kitvei Sholem Aleichem* (Warsaw: Ha-shachar, 1911), vol. 1, 47–67.

9. See "Hodel," in *Der fraynd*, 2, 4, and 6 Sept. 1904. "Hodel" immediately became a bestseller. The story was reprinted the following year as a ten-kopeck pamphlet; see *Hodel* (Warsaw: Bikher-far-ale, 1905), 3–26. The Hebrew title given by Berkovitch, presumably in consultation with Sholem Aleichem, was "Tevye's Daughter Who Followed Her Husband." See *Kitvei Shloem Aleichem* 1, 69–89.

10. See Sholem Aleichem, "Shprintse," *Unzer lebn*, 16, 17, 21, and 22 May 1907, and "Tevye fort keyn Erets-Isroel," *Der fraynd*, Feb.-Mar. 1909. The Hebrew titles of these tales became "Tevye's Daughter Who Was Sentenced by Water" and, with comic irony, "Tevye's Daughter Who Rose to Greatness." See *Kitvei Sholem Aleichem* 1, 109–27 and 129–49. By employing these titles for the tales about Tevye's daughters, Berkovitch evi-

author was sufficiently disillusioned by life in Czarist Russia that he penned the bitterest of the Tevye stories, "Get Thee Out" ("Lekh-lekho"), in which all the Jews are evicted from Tevye's village.¹¹

Tevye's unfolding narrative revolves around his conflict with the modern world, as illustrated by each daughter's successive rebellion. That conflict reaches its climax in the story "Chava," when Chava marries a non-Jew.¹² No Yiddish text has evoked more intense emotions, and each generation of readers has responded to Chava's story in light of its own circumstances; these responses to Tevye reveal much about Sholem Aleichem's readers. The meaning of Tevye's history is inseparable from the ways in which he has been received at different times.

When Sholem Aleichem printed four volumes of his collected works in 1903, he could include only the three Tevye stories from 1894–99.¹³ Neither this edition nor that of 1913 includes Tevye's letter to Sholem Aleichem that opens the 1894–95 story. It was, however, included in the posthumous "Folksfund edition" of Sholem Aleichem's work published in New York. The 1913 edition of his work includes the first seven stories; "Get Thee Out" ("Lekh-lekho") was not printed until the following year, and the final and weakest piece—called "Slippery" ("Vekhalaklakoys")—was published in 1916.¹⁴ Like other adaptors, Sholem Aleichem placed the drama of Tevye's daughters in the lime-light when he prepared his dramatic version of *Tevye*.

dently intended to impose a kind of continuity or coherence upon Sholem Aleichem's episodic succession of texts.

11. See Sholem Aleichem, "Lekh-lekho," *Di yudishe velt* 3 (1914): 367–83.

12. Berkovitch gave the Yiddish story "Chava" the Hebrew title "Tevye's Daughter Who Was Trapped [*nishbeta*] Among the Gentiles." Like "Hodel," it was reprinted in a popular pamphlet, entitled *Chava: Tevye dem milkhiker's* (Warsaw: Familien bibliotek, 1909).

13. See *Sholem-Aleichem's ale verk* (Warsaw: Folksbildung, 1903), 99–167.

14. See Sholem Aleichem, "Vekhalaklakoys," in *Varheyf*, 9 Jan. 1916. This title alludes to a phrase in Psalms 35:6, "Let their path be dark and slippery." For a helpful overview of the text history, see Shmeruk, "'Tevye der milkhiker'—le-toldoteha shel yetzira."

To understand why the greatest humorist in Yiddish literary history occasionally painted such tragic pictures of Jewish life, we should note some relevant details in his own experience.¹⁵ Sholem Aleichem was not eligible for higher education in Russian or Hebrew, and so, instead of studying, he accepted employment tutoring the daughter of the Loyevs, a family of wealthy Jewish landowners. His pupil, Olga, and Sholem Aleichem then enacted a drama like that of Hodel and her tutor. When the Loyev family discovered the real-life affair between student and teacher, they dismissed Sholem Aleichem. In spite of obstacles posed by her father, Olga Loyev and Sholem Aleichem eventually married. A few years later, they inherited the estate of Olga's father. Soon after, in 1890, Sholem Aleichem lost everything on the Kiev stock exchange and fled from his creditors. (This reversal is reflected in Tevye's first two stories about gaining and losing a fortune.) Fifteen years later, the author left Kiev permanently, after witnessing the failed Russian revolution and subsequent pogroms in 1905. He reached New York in 1906, the same year that his story "Chava" was published. Although he remained in New York for two years, he never achieved success in the Second Avenue Yiddish theater. After returning to Europe in 1908, Sholem Aleichem was weakened by illness and shaken by the Beilis blood libel trial of 1913; the latter event probably influenced his decision to make the Chava story and "Get Thee Out" central to his dramatic version of Tevye, which he prepared in 1914–15.¹⁶ By 1914 Sholem Aleichem was back in New York, but he had

15. The author's real name was Sholem (or Solomon) Rabinovitch. He chose the familiar pen name and persona "Sholem Aleichem" as a vehicle for most of his Yiddish writings. But we should not confuse the author Rabinovitch—who received a strong Russian education in a public high school—with the folksy Yiddish persona of Sholem Aleichem. For convenience, because this has become the accepted practice, I refer to both the flesh-and-blood author and the persona/pseudonym as "Sholem Aleichem." Compare Dan Miron, "Sholem Aleykhem: Person, Persona, Presence," *The Uriel Weirich Memorial Lecture 1* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1972).

16. See Jacob Weitzner, *Sholem Aleichem in the Theater* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dick-

no luck in bringing Tevye to the Second Avenue stage. He even tried his hand at writing a silent film script of *Tevye*. Not until 1919, three years after the author's death, did Tevye appear in a silent picture and on the New York Yiddish stage. Y. D. Berkovitch, Sholem Aleichem's son-in-law and literary executor, prepared the significantly altered 1919 stage script using the author's posthumously published version.¹⁷

A century later, we see Tevye as an archaic type; he reminds us of the *shtetl* world that no longer exists. But even in his prime, Tevye was already out of date. Sholem Aleichem invested him with the ambiguous distinction of embodying a moribund species of patriarchy. His belief, his customs, and his appearance all make Tevye a representative of the old order. Even more essential is his language: Tevye speaks a sonorous Yiddish laced with Hebrew phrases. Discussing Tevye and his potential effect on stage, Sholem Aleichem refers to his language

inson Univ. Press, 1994), 76. The archives of the Beit Sholem Aleichem in Tel Aviv contain two Russian manuscripts by Sholem Aleichem, dated 1914 and intended to serve as the basis for silent films, as well as two Yiddish manuscripts of his dramatic version (1914–15).

17. Copies of Y. D. Berkovitch's adaptation of *Tevye* for the Yiddish stage may be found in the archives at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and at the Beit Sholem Aleichem in Tel Aviv. Compare Sholem Aleichem's dramatic version of *Tevye the Dairyman*, which is contained in *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem*, 28 vols. (New York: Folksfond Edition, 1917–23). Berkovitch discusses his extensive revisions of Sholem Aleichem's stage version of *Tevye the Dairyman* in the introduction to his Hebrew translation, contained in *Kitvei Sholem Aleichem*, ed. and trans. Y. D. Berkovitch (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1942), vol. 12, 5–6. Berkovitch's earlier Yiddish rendition served as the basis for Maurice Schwartz's 1919 staging. According to A. H. Bialin, *Maurice Schwartz un der yidisher kunst teater* (New York: Biderman, 1934), 116, the Yiddish *Tevye the Dairyman* was premiered with Maurice Schwartz as Tevye at the Irving Place Theatre on 29 Aug. 1919. Compare David S. Lifson, in *The Yiddish Theatre in America* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965), 577, and Zalman Zilbertsvayg, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, unbound galleys for an unpublished volume, 135.

"which no actor has ever dreamed possible—Tevye's language, with Tevye's Torah, and Tevye's sayings from the commentaries."¹⁸

The earliest Tevye story includes a description that Sholem Aleichem omits from later editions: "Tevye is a healthy Jew, with broad shoulders, and dark, thick hair; his age is hard to guess; he wears heavy boots. . . . Tevye is always ready to talk. He likes an honest saying, a parable, a bit of Torah; he's neither a great scholar nor an ignoramus when it comes to the fine print."¹⁹ Because Tevye's Hebrew quotations are central to his character, Sholem Aleichem makes Tevye an obsessive quoter of Scripture, Midrash, and the prayer book. Tevye takes the art of quotation to such lengths that his wife and daughters complain that his learning fails to solve their mundane problems. The real issue is not what Tevye has in mind when he is quoting, however, but what Sholem Aleichem's goals may have been.

Berkovitsh describes his work in 1910 as Hebrew translator of the Tevye stories. He recalls Sholem Aleichem's attachment to Hebrew quotations: "At the start of my work, dealing with the first story, I had a hard battle with Sholem Aleichem himself. He read pages of the first draft by my side and occasionally brought me complete additional verses from the Bible and the Midrash; he begged that I incorporate them into the course of the story just as they were, with their flowery language. I opposed this with all my force."²⁰ Berkovitsh gives the impression that Sholem Aleichem caused unnecessary problems for the translator by trying to place new quotations in the mouth of the He-

18. Letter to David Pinsky of 6 Feb. 1914, in *Dos Sholem Aleichem bukh*, ed. Y. D. Berkovitsh (New York: Sholem Aleichem Book Committee, 1926), 251. Compare Ruth R. Wisse, "Sholem Aleichem and the Art of Communication," the B. G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies (1980), reprinted in *Judaism in the Modern World*, ed. Alan Berger (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1994), 177–94.

19. "Tevye der milkhiker," 67.

20. Y. D. Berkovitsh, *Ha-rish'onim ki-vnei adam*, 2d ed. (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1976), 846–47.

brew-speaking Tevye. Yet difficulties inevitably beset every translator who attempts to convey Tevye's borrowed Hebrew quotations in a language other than Yiddish. Even without Sholem Aleichem's meddling, as described by Berkovitsh, Tevye's Hebrew quotations present special problems for the translator. In the original text, Tevye speaks a fluid, colloquial Yiddish that is punctuated by frequent allusions to Hebrew sayings. When Tevye's spoken language is already Hebrew—that is, in a Hebrew translation—these interlinguistic inserts lose much of their effect. In English translation, or in any other language, the reader misses the disparity between Tevye's Yiddish speech and his Hebrew quotations. The translator may employ quotation marks, italics, or resort to an archaic style in the language, but the true linguistic resonance is lost.

The artful use of quotations enabled Sholem Aleichem to overcome one of the main obstacles that confronted nineteenth-century Yiddish authors. Early Yiddish fiction lacked literary models, because Hebrew dominated the textual landscape. For centuries Yiddish had been the predominant language of the home and marketplace, while Hebrew was the language of the Bible, of rabbinic scholarship, and of prayer. As a result, Ashkenazic Jews refer to Yiddish as the mother tongue (*mame-loshn*), while Hebrew is recognized as the Holy tongue (*leshon ha-kodesh*).

This state of affairs presented peculiar problems for Yiddish writers in the late nineteenth century. Their language was best established as a medium of oral communication. Yiddish writing lagged so far behind speaking that the rules of orthography were disputed well into the twentieth century, and some spellings are still being debated. This partly explains why Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz are best remembered for their oral-style narratives. But the question remained: how could they carry Yiddish fiction beyond mere emulation of daily speech patterns?

Sholem Aleichem had the insight to see that the technique of quota-

tion could provide an answer. By making Tevye an incessant quoter in Hebrew and Aramaic, he situates him in relation to the dominant traditions of Judaic literacy. Hence Tevye's monologues masterfully combine the inflections of oral speech with the intricacy of intertextual allusions. This gives literary depth to what might otherwise come across as a naïve, or even a primitive, rendition of life in the *shtetl*. That is the weak point in some later adaptations. They make Tevye out to be a lovable, unreflective ignoramus, whereas in Sholem Aleichem's texts he is a traditionally schooled Jewish man who sometimes doubts tradition. His rebellious daughters act out the dilemmas of modernity, which he himself recognizes and debates privately.

In 1939, Maurice Schwartz introduced Tevye into (talking) film history. The Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof* was a 1964 hit, and the Hollywood movie starring Topol was released in 1971. Since then there have been countless stagings. An interesting cinematic twist came in 1991, when the Russian director Dmitri Astrakham produced an innovative adaptation of *Tevye* entitled *Get Thee Out!*

Maurice Schwartz played the role of Tevye in the 1939 Yiddish film. This remarkable movie was based on two prior works by Schwartz from two decades before: the 1919 silent picture called *Khavah* (or *Broken Barriers*) and the 1919 stage production of *Tevye* in which Schwartz starred.²¹ J. Hoberman, in his discussion of the 1939 film *Tevye* emphasizes its historical context: "After three weeks of rehearsal on the stage of the Yiddish Art Theater, shooting began on a 130-acre potato farm near Jericho, Long Island. On August 23, midway through the shoot, Hitler seized Danzig. A Nazi invasion of Poland seemed imminent.

21. See J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Schocken, 1991), 53–54. See also Judith N. Goldberg, *Laughter Through Tears: The Yiddish Cinema* (East Brunswick, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1983), 97–98.

The next day, the newspapers carried the mind-boggling news that German foreign minister von Ribbentrop was en route to Moscow to conclude a nonaggression pact."²² This political environment directly affected the actors. Hoberman also explains the impact of political events on the film production: "Political tensions and the deterioration of the European situation were felt, as well, on the set of *Tevye*. Many of those involved in the production had family in Poland; some were anxious to return. Leon Liebgold booked passage on a boat leaving for Poland on August 31. But *Tevye* had fallen behind schedule—a number of scenes had been ruined due to the location's proximity to Mitchell Airfield. Although his visa had expired, Liebgold was compelled to postpone his departure. The next day, the Nazis invaded Poland."²³ The animosity toward gentiles that characterizes parts of the film is probably an indirect reaction to the Nazis' rise to power in Europe.

In the 1939 film, as Tevye returns home from his work delivering dairy products, he greets the family with his usual barrage of quotations. When his wife objects to Tevye bringing a book for Chava, he responds:

TEVYE. My dear Golde, we've already agreed that one doesn't meddle in my affairs. As it is written, *sheli shelokh, shelokh sheli*. What is yours is mine, and what is mine is yours.

GOLDE. Nu, let's go eat. Come, eat. You're probably hungry . . .

TEVYE. You're right, my wife. As it is written, *im eyn keymekh, eyn toyre*.²⁴

22. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 304–5.

23. *Ibid.*, 305.

24. Tevye's final Hebrew phrase means, "If there is no bread, there is no Torah" (*Ethics of the Fathers* 3:17). His prior quotation, *sheli shelokh, shelokh sheli*, derives from *Ethics of the Fathers* 5:13. Translations of the dialogues are based on the 1939 Yiddish film *Tevye*, directed by and starring Maurice Schwartz. It is available in video format from the National Center for Jewish Film, located at Brandeis University.



The Rabbis say "if there is no bread, there is no learning."

In the 1939 Yiddish film *Tevye*, Maurice Schwartz as Tevye regales his family with ancient rabbinic quotations. Courtesy of the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University.

Later, as they sit to eat, Tevye resumes the conversation. Chava's bookishness poses a potential threat of secularism, so Tevye asks about the books she is reading:

TEVYE. Nu, Chava, what do your books preach?

CHAVA. Father, we've already agreed that one doesn't meddle in my affairs. As it is written, *sheli shelokh, shelokh shelokh* . . . (All laugh.)

TEVYE. Spoken like a true ignoramus!²⁵

25. The film script in the Maurice Schwartz Yiddish Art Theatre Archives at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 20–22, shows that Schwartz increased Tevye's and Chava's use of quotations in these scenes as he produced the film, drawing upon the earlier stage rendering.



In the 1939 Yiddish film *Tevye*, Miriam Riselle as Chava tries to copy Tevye's Hebrew quotation. Courtesy of the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University.

In an exchange that is based on the stage version rather than on the established screenplay, Chava (Miriam Riselle) evades her father's inquiry by attempting to emulate his speech.²⁶ But in failing to do this correctly, she shows that she is out of touch with Tevye's Hebrew references.

Chava's subsequent rebellion against tradition becomes the focal point of most adaptations. When Tevye quotes Scripture and rabbinic sayings, he underscores his link to the Jewish past. In contrast, when

26. See the typescript of Berkovitch's version of *Tevye der milkhiker* in the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research archives, play no. 17.3.2 from Tsile Adler's collection, 12–14.

Chava becomes attracted to Russian culture, she reflects the dilemma of modern Jewish identity. Tevye, however, is inclined to see intermarriage as the point of no return. When Chava converts to Christianity and marries a non-Jew, he performs the *havdalah* ritual and then mourns her as if she has died.²⁷ In the 1939 film, Maurice Schwartz plays the pathos of this moment for all it is worth.

European anti-Semitism in 1939 influences Schwartz's Tevye to see no prospect of reconciliation with his daughter. But as the Jews are being thrown out of town, Chava leaves her husband, returns home, and reasserts her bond to the Jewish tradition. She does this by using Tevye's own technique of quotation. Tevye, as played by Schwartz, recognizes Chava's allusion to the biblical Book of Ruth, although he mistakenly associates it with Ecclesiastes:

TEVYE. I tell you that whoever leaves our people never returns. The branch that is torn off from the tree must dry up, and the leaf that falls must rot.

CHAVA. Father, I wasn't torn off. I didn't fall. Nothing the priest said touched my soul. My soul has remained yours, as it always was.

TEVYE. But she converted to Christianity. Go away!

CHAVA. No, I didn't convert. Every minute I thought of you and longed for you. It seemed to me that out there [with the non-Jews] everything was more beautiful and better than among us. But this was a mistake. Your ancient faith is truer and deeper. Only now do I know this. Only now do I understand this. Father, I want to come home. I can't live without you any longer. My soul belongs to you. Wherever you go, I will go. Your life is my life, your misfortune is my misfortune.

27. See "Chava," in *Gants Tevye der milkhiker*, in *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem* 5, 133.



A sobered Chava in *Tevye* reaffirms her bond to her family, alluding to the Book of Ruth. Courtesy of the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University.

TEVYE. Our life is her life, and our misfortune is her misfortune. Master of the Universe, that's exactly what we say in the holy Book of Esther [*megile*]. What am I saying, in the Megile? I think it's in Ecclesiastes, yes, in Ecclesiastes: *Ami amekh*; our God is her God. Those are words. That's how Tevye's daughters should speak!²⁸

28. Translated from one of the concluding scenes in the 1939 Yiddish film of *Tevye*, directed by and starring Maurice Schwartz. In this emotional reunion, the film closely follows the screenplay. *Megile* literally means "scroll" and could also refer to the Book of Ruth, but it more commonly denotes the Book of Esther. There are two obvious reasons for Schwartz's decision to show Tevye incorrectly identifying the scriptural allusion in this scene, which draws from the stage version (YIVO script, 85). First, like Berkovitch,

By alluding to the Book of Ruth, Chava reaffirms her Jewish identity. In the Book of Ruth, Naomi tells her two Moabite daughters-in-law, whose husbands have died, that they should return to their gentile families. But Ruth insists on remaining with Naomi, and at this point she says that "wherever you go, I will go . . . your people are my people and your God is my God."²⁹ Chava poignantly figures herself in the tradition of a prominent convert to Judaism. Before returning home, however, Chava has had to renounce the non-Jewish world of her husband. Her allusion to Ruth is the decisive means of reaching Tevye, who cries out: "That's how Tevye's daughters should speak!" Quotation comes across as the primary means of preserving a link to Judaism.

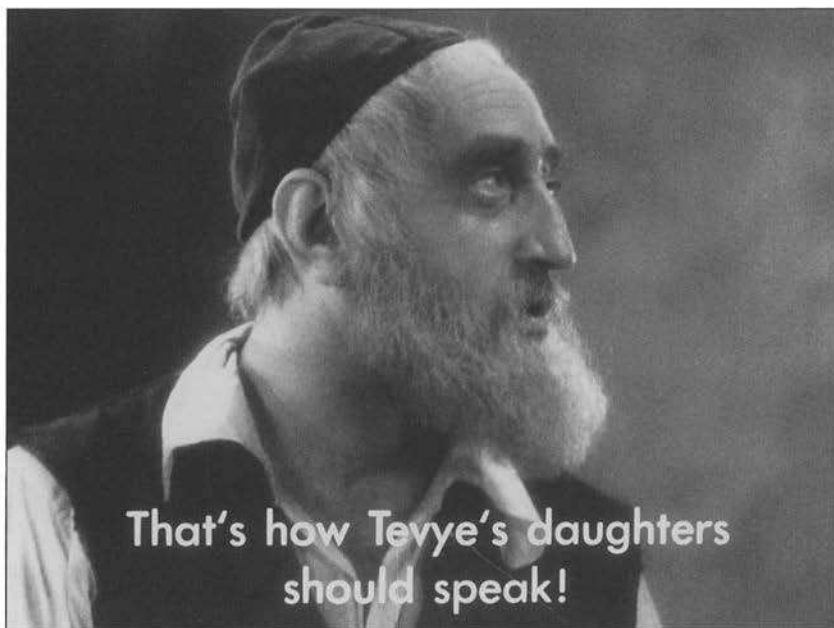
Fiddler on the Roof parts ways with the Yiddish Tevyes of Sholem Aleichem, Berkovitch, and Schwartz. In the 1971 film (based on the 1964 Broadway musical by Joseph Stein and Jerome Robbins), Norman Jewison takes a more liberal approach to intermarriage and its consequences. Not only had times changed, but the English-language film was intended for a broader audience than the 1939 Yiddish-language film.

The Chava story "reveals most sharply the evolution of Tevye and how each new adaptation struggled with the problem of breaching tradition."³⁰ As in the 1939 film, Tevye, played by Chaim Topol in the 1971

he did not want to distort the image of Tevye by making him appear as a full-fledged Bible scholar. Second, he chose to lighten this scene, lending it a measure of comic relief even at the moment of greatest seriousness. Sholem Aleichem's original stage version contains Chava's allusion to Ruth but not Tevye's misattribution. See *Tevye der milkhiker*, in *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem* 25, 234.

29. Ruth 1:16.

30. Seth L. Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye, or Boarding the Jewish *Mayflower*," in *American Quarterly* 40 (1988): 528. Compare Eric A. Goldman, *Visions, Images, and Dreams* (Teaneck, N. J.: Ergo Media, 1988), 124–27.



Tevye accepts Chava's biblical allusion as evidence of her renewed Jewish identity, in *Tevye*. Courtesy of the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University.

film, initially rejects Chava after she converts to Christianity. Chava approaches him and is rebuffed:

CHAVA. Papa. Papa? Papa, I've been looking everywhere for you . . . (*Tevye begins to turn away.*)

CHAVA. Papa, stop! At least listen to me. Papa, I beg you to accept us.

TEVYE. (*Inwardly.*) Accept them? How can I accept them? Can I deny everything I believe in? On the other hand, can I deny my own daughter? If I try and bend that far, I'll break. On the other hand . . . (*Aloud.*) No. There is no other hand! No, Chava. No . . .

CHAVA. But, Papa!



In the 1971 Hollywood film *Fiddler on the Roof*, Topol as Tevye rejects Chava after she marries a non-Jew: "No, Chava. No." Copyright 1971 by Mirisch Productions, Inc., and Cartier Productions, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

TEVYE. No, no.

CHAVA. Papa! (*Tevye turns away pushing his cart.*)³¹

Camera angles suggest the emotional meaning of this scene. As Tevye decides to reject his daughter, the camera moves back from close-ups to long shots.

At the conclusion of Jewison's film, Chava and her non-Jewish hus-

31. From the 1971 film directed by Norman Jewison. Compare the nearly identical scene in the musical theater version, *Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1992), 135–36.



In the 1971 Hollywood film *Fiddler on the Roof*, Chava and her husband leave the village: "Papa, we came to say goodbye." Copyright 1971 by Mirisch Productions, Inc., and Cartier Productions, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

band are determined to stay married. Although they decide to leave the village because of its cruelty to the Jews, they leave together. The American milieu perhaps demanded this partial legitimization of inter-marriage:

CHAVA. Papa, we came to say goodbye. We're also leaving this place. We're going to Cracow.

FYEDKA. We cannot stay among people who can do such things to others.

CHAVA. We wanted you to know that.

- FYEDKA. Some are driven away by edicts; others, by silence.
(Tevye struggles to ignore them as he packs the wagon.)
- CHAVA. Goodbye, Papa, Mama.
- FYEDKA. Come, Chava.
- TSAYTL. Goodbye, Chava, Fyedka.
- TEVYE. *(Under his breath.)* And God be with you.³²

Topol as Tevye gives Chava a blessing, but he does so in a way that escapes her notice. This is at variance with the Broadway script, in which the stage directions indicate that Tevye speaks these words to Tsaytl, “prompting her [to repeat this blessing] under his breath.” In the film, it is Golde who makes the gesture to Tsaytl after Tevye speaks the words.

Fiddler on the Roof is not the only remake that takes liberties with Sholem Aleichem’s text. Each successive generation has created a new Tevye to suit its needs, and Chava’s rebellion has different implications for every adaptation.

The most recent, and in some ways the most interesting, film inspired by Tevye was made by the Russian director Dmitri Astrakham in 1991. The Russian title *Izydi!* is archaically translated in the subtitled version as *Get Thee Out!*, reflecting the biblical allusion to Genesis 12. In turn, this title is drawn from Sholem Aleichem’s penultimate Tevye story, “Lekh-lekho.” Like Sholem Aleichem’s 1914 Yiddish story, the Russian film narrates events leading to the destruction of Tevye’s community. Among other historical contexts, the anti-Semitic actions of Pamyat may have influenced the filmmaker, who focuses on the pogrom violence more than any other producer had done. Prior to showing the expulsion of the Jews, however, the film retells the story

32. Here again the film replicates the dialogue in the Broadway *Fiddler on the Roof*, 150–51.

of Chava. The names have been altered. Tevye becomes Motl Solomonovitsh Rabinovitsh, which means "Motl, Son of Solomon Rabinovitsh." That is, Motl is a newborn progeny of the man Solomon Rabinovitsh—and of the author Sholem Aleichem. A century later, Tevye lives on in this rendition and in other new forms.

The Russian film conveys the impression that the Jews are not so different from their neighbors. From 1914 to 1939, Chava renounced her non-Jewish in-laws before she regained Tevye's acceptance; in the 1960s and 1970s, a strong-willed and Americanized Chava could keep her non-Jewish husband and go into exile with him. In 1991, As-trakham tells us that Jews and non-Jews can live together and even join forces in opposition to destructive elements. At the same time, the Russian adaptation alludes to the fiction of Isaac Babel and reworks many elements of the stage and film history. Visually, one striking instance involves the use of idyllic river scenes in connection with the romances of Tevye's daughters Hodel (in *Fiddler on the Roof*) and Chava (in the Russian film *Get Thee Out!*).

Both families are shocked initially by the young couple's clandestine wedding. But they soon come to an understanding and the families are reconciled. Raising his hands in a kind of blessing, Tevye/Motl pronounces his two Hebrew words in the film: *Mazel tov!* Chava and her husband step forward to receive his blessing. The tensions have been smoothed over until there is a resurgence of anti-Semitism.

As pogromniks approach the village on a slow-moving truck, the gentile father-in-law helps the Jewish family load up a wagon and prepare to steal away through the forest, because the non-Jewish in-laws plan for them to hide at a farm. Thus, in 1991, the Russian-Jewish daughter need not leave her husband to brave exile with her family. Nor, like Chava in the 1964 Broadway and 1971 Hollywood versions, must she be separated from her family. Instead, the enlightened plan is for the couple to stay together—with support from both families.



In the 1991 Russian film *Get Thee Out!* Chava's father accepts her marriage and wishes her "Mazel tov!" Courtesy of First Run Features.

At this moment, the Russian filmmaker opts for an even more radical break from the original stories by Sholem Aleichem. Overcome by rage against the hoodlum pogromniks, Tevye/Motl stands up against them. Accompanied by the eerie music of a marching band, the truck edges forward through the mist; the music then abruptly shifts to a heroic, apocalyptic roar. In the final scene, after the in-laws try to hold Tevye/Motl back from what seems like a suicidal effort at resistance, they ultimately join him.

The new Tevye, alias Motl, no longer relies on faith alone. His courage and the non-Jews' solidarity displace Broadway and Hollywood nostalgia with collective heroism. The key issue is neither prox-

imity to the literary source nor historical accuracy. In conformity with its implicit ideology, the Russian adaptation strives to show that the divisions between Jews and non-Jews can be overcome. Moreover, this film concludes with a plea for joint resistance against nationalistic violence. Some viewers may be skeptical of this message, but it is legitimate for the filmmaker to recreate *Tevye* for his own time and place. As we have seen, each version conveys an ideology; in any event, readers always reimagine fictional characters to suit their needs.

What has happened to Tevye's Hebrew quotations? Maurice Schwartz as a Yiddish-speaking Tevye was able to imbed Hebrew quotations in his portrayal. But the American and Russian Tevyes would have lost most of their audiences if they had used Hebrew extensively. And too much religious content would threaten to undermine the universalistic message of the Russian film. Its quotations are visual rather than scriptural, referring back to the history of prior Tevyes on stage and screen.

To Seth Wolitz, Tevye "appears as the quintessential Eastern European Jewish folk type defending 'tradition' to his peers yet privately questioning God's ways. His hopes, doubts, experiences and reactions reflect a traditional culture under siege internally and externally."³³ He adds, astutely, that Sholem Aleichem "chose the theme of romantic love as the narrative ploy most likely to reveal the disruptive force of the new at the very heart of the traditional Jewish collective: the family."³⁴

Thus quotation and intermarriage represent two sides of the conflict between generations. In the 1939 film, Tevye rejects Chava after she intermarries, but he accepts her when she returns repentant and alludes to the Bible. In the 1971 film, Tevye retains his link to tradition and re-

33. Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye," 515.

34. *Ibid.*, 517.

jects Chava, but she never renounces her independent path. In the 1991 film, a Tevye who no longer quotes Scripture quickly accepts the intermarried Chava. As the importance of quotation diminishes, the acceptance of intermarriage increases.

Viewers of these film adaptations may wonder what happens in the original *Tevye* written by Sholem Aleichem. In his 1914 story "Lekh-lekho," or "Get Thee Out" (like the Russian film), Tevye leaves the conclusion of the tale up to Sholem Aleichem and the reader. After he relates the scene in which Chava comes back and begs forgiveness, Tevye asks: "What do you say, Mr. Sholem Aleichem? You're a man who writes books and gives the world advice—so you tell me, what should Tevye have done?"³⁵ This open-ended literary source left it for later playwrights, directors, and filmmakers to create their own endings. In his stage version, Sholem Aleichem himself opted for a reconciliation.

This trajectory takes us through some turning points during "a century in the life of Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye*." Sholem Aleichem's fiction continues in forms that speak anew to audiences around the world. These very different images of Tevye may not correspond to what the author had in mind, but—as rabbinic tradition uses great ingenuity in reinterpreting Scripture—our evolving literary, stage, and film traditions recreate the classics for future generations.

35. See "Lekh-lekho," in *Di yudishe velt* 3 (1914): 383, and *Gants Tevye der milkhiker*, 220.

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Front: Maurice Schwartz (at left, in costume) directing *Tevye der Milkhiker* (USA, 1939)
near Jericho, Long Island. *American Museum of the Moving Image/Lawrence Williams Collection.*

Produced and distributed by



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY PRESS
SYRACUSE, NEW YORK 13244-5160

ISBN 0-8156-2727-0

