Mendele as Mirror:

Deciphering the Narrative Voice in

Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's *Hakdomes Mendele Moykher-Sforim*

Marc Caplan (New York University)

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David Roskies

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More than an introduction to the collected writings of Sholem Abramovitsh, the 1907 *Hakdomes Mendele Moykher-Sforim* provides the reader with the fullest introduction and exposition of Mendele's character itself. As the voice through which Abramovitsh frames and narrates his fiction, Mendele's existence is purely rhetorical. The essence of his character therefore consists not so much of the details he provides about his life or his personality, but of the means through which he relates this information. In keeping with a narrative structure that calls on a surrogate voice to relate the author's perspective on his fictional subject matter, Mendele's rhetoric itself is double-voiced, calling for an interpretive strategy capable of negotiating between its manifest content and implicit meaning. A representative instance of Mendele's equivocal narration, the 1907 *Hakdome* conveys its double consciousness through a series of questions, an interview to which Mendele "reluctantly" submits himself. Of course, this question-and-answer structure is itself a conscious choice of Abramovitsh's; no one really poses these questions other than Mendele himself. Through this interior *dialogue*, however, a process of inversion, the characteristic rhetorical feature of the *Hakdome*, takes place. As Dan Miron notes, "To support all these details [of Mendele's character] with a proper rhetorical structure, he devised a highly characteristic scheme, which enabled Mendele to say whatever the author wanted him to say by stating its opposite."[1]

Like the "mirror writing" of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, Mendele's position in relation to the shtetl has to be read backwards, inside-out, to be understood; as Miron states, "When Mendele draws an ironic contrast, he usually does not mean to present one of the contrasted sides or positions as a positive or a true norm and denounce the other as an antinorm; he prefers to let two false positions mutually destroy themselves" (Miron, *ATD*, p.132). Mendele illustrates Miron's point when, in a comparison of the question "what is your name" to other examples of the shtetl's intrusive intimacy, he says that "such

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[1] Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1973; 1996, p.166. (Subsequent references incorporated in text as "Miron, *ATD*.")

things and the like are, among us Jews, entirely expected. Such is the order of the world, from time immemorial, that to protest against them would cause one to be considered entirely odd and perverse." [2] In these remarks he suggests that his own attitude and behavior--and, since these are set in the context of the disclosure of his name, his identity--are abnormal. And yet what he presents as "the order of the world" is itself abnormal, grotesque, and claustrophobic. His examples of "normal" behavior require little explication, and their outlandishness intensifies cumulatively:

> The question "what is thy name?" is a completely natural thing, as much a part of nature as giving a feel to a new overcoat and asking, "How much by the yard?"; or taking without asking a cigarette from someone's open cigarette case; or sticking a finger in someone's snuff box for a pinch of tobacco; or placing a foot in someone else's tub, and dipping your greasy handkerchief there to give yourself a rubdown.... (Mendele, paragraph 1).

The discomforting effect achieved by this list derives from the physical character of these actions, each of which requires, to a much greater extent than asking a person what his or her name is, actual, intimate, contact between people.

The only item on this roster which doesn't involve either physical, financial, or personal and psychological intrusiveness--significantly, the only new item in the 1907 edition--is the habit of looking over someone's shoulder, and even flipping someone else's pages, to find the place in a *makhzor* while praying in *beys-medresh*.[3] More than intruding upon the adjacent person's identity or physical being, however, this practice assaults his spiritual presence and communication with God. As a thematic device, moreover, the reference to prayer and tradition opens up Mendele's inventory of shtetl life to the theological considerations further invoked by the allusions to the *malekh ha-dome* and the Patriarch Jacob which culminate the passage. The contiguity of these encounters with divinity and tradition, which themselves call for further examination, serve not only to subsume the portrait of the shtetl within a universal Jewish framework, but also to

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[2] My source for the *Hakdome* is the in-class handout; the translation is my own. Subsequent references incorporated in text and identified by paragraph number.

foreclose a vertical path of escape; any answer to the confines of shtetl society lies *beyond* that society, perhaps even beyond Judaism. Mendele as a character, however, never crosses those boundaries, but instead reflects their limits through his portrait of the community itself. By means of his inverted rhetoric, Mendele makes clear to his audience that to live at odds with an abnormal reality is, for him, the only available path to an authentic reality.

excellent

That Mendele insists on portraying the shtetl and its discontents in explicitly, exclusively Jewish terms becomes apparent in his treatment of the angels who, like the Jews of Eastern Europe, ask the names of the people whom they encounter at the existential crossroads: "And not just in this world," Mendele states, "but even in the world to come, the first question of the Angel of the Realm of the Dead is, '*What is thy name, kinsman*?' The Angel that wrestled with our Patriarch Jacob, even he didn't break with the order of things, even he inquired of Jacob what his name was" (Mendele, paragraph 1). It is significant that the only direct reference to a biblical figure in this introduction to the works and character of Mendele occurs in the context of the disclosure of his name, and that it invokes Jacob, the Patriarch who gave his name to the Jewish people, at the very moment in the biblical narrative at which he receives the name Israel (Genesis, 32: 25-32). The twin allusions, spoken virtually in the same breath, to the foundation of the Jewish nation and the arrival of the individual Jew at the realm of the afterlife enfold the endpoints of national and metaphysical time into the question, as yet unanswered, of Mendele's name.

Embedded within this question, as well as the response--as Miron's exhaustive reading of the names "Mendele" and "Yudelevitsh" demonstrate (Miron, *ATD*, pp.180; 297, n13)--are intimations, significations, of a universal Jewish experience. This deliberate and extreme expansion of the narrative's context is more than just the stalling tactic of a speaker reluctant to identify himself. Rather, in the Angel wrestling with Jacob, the reader sees an analogy, simultaneously, between Mendele and his culture, and between the author

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[3] Judging from the customs of Congregation Gemiluth Chassodim, in Alexandria, Louisiana, this practice

and Mendele. In the original biblical narrative, the momentum of aggression flows clearly from the questioner to the questioned. "What is thy name?" is for the Angel a rhetorical correlative to the struggle in which he has just engaged Jacob--it is a further act of violence, in that he poses the question only to dismiss the answer, to change Jacob's name as their wrestling has changed his body. Yet recontextualized by Abramovitsh, the (passive-) aggressor is Mendele himself, the questioned, or more precisely, the interrogator and respondent simultaneously; the antagonism between the speaker and the culture is signified not in the answer, but in the reluctance to answer.

With respect to naming, however, an additional tension inevitably surfaces between the author, Abramovitsh, and the speaker (Miron's authoritative arguments against the "pseudonym fallacy" render any other label insufficient and inaccurate), Mendele--which of them is to answer the question? The tension between the two figures only intensifies in the context of the 1907 printing, as Miron explains: "Prior to 1888 the situation [of Abramovitsh's authorship] had...been quite different. Not only Abramovitsh's Hebrew works but also his Yiddish ones...were never referred to in print as having been written by Mendele.... By 1900 the name Abramovitsh had all but disappeared from public use. Henceforth, it was resorted to only by the most pedantic of critics, and even they would drop it as soon as they had finished with the purely biographical parts of their articles" (Miron, *ATD*, pp.148; 153). The *Hakdome*, first written in 1864 as the prologue to *Dos kleyne mentshele*, and reprinted in 1879, belongs to both periods in the history of Abramovitsh's relationship to Mendele. Between the 1879 and 1907 editions, Mendele wrestles with Abramovitsh, so to speak, and Abramovitsh "prevailed not against him." Over the course of this era the author loses his name to Mendele. The question therefore is not who is speaking the reply, *Mendele heys ikh*!; this has never been in doubt in any version. Rather, the rhetorical tension of the passage derives from the question of whom,

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persists among many American Jews in the present day.

precisely, Mendele is. And like the Patriarch Jacob, his identity has changed and grown over time, through struggle.

Professor Miron further elaborates on parallels between Jacob's acquisition of his birthright and Mendele's status before his public, with specific reference to the 1888 prologue to *Dos vintshfingerl*: "Mendele is somehow comparable to the patriarch Jacob, the most 'Jewish' of biblical figures.... Like him, he offers something which is not his 'as if it were mine.' Like him, he must disguise himself. (Are his gabardine, beard, and sidelocks the equivalents of Esau's goodly raiment and of the skins of the kids that the subtle Rebecca put on Jacob's smooth skin lest his father feel him and detect his deception?)" [4] (Miron, *ATD*, pp.198-199). In the *Hakdome*, however, Mendele's reference to Jacob is more than an example of "vertical legitimization"; the parallel lines don't just move from present to past, they move in both directions simultaneously. In this context, one should consider that unlike the neo-classical Hebrew of the *malekh ha-dome*'s question--"*Ma shmekhem?*"--Mendele refers to the exchange between Jacob and the Angel only in Yiddish. The paraphrase of the biblical question, "*Ma shmekha*," consciously places their interaction in a Yiddish milieu when either a Yiddish or a *Loshn-koydesh* one was available to the author. Thematically, Mendele has already established a link between the biblical struggle and the behavior of his own contemporaries. By means of his indirect narration, he additionally removes any linguistic barrier between the two eras. In the contiguity between present-day shtetl Jews and the Patriarch, the two become mirror images of one another, reflected and distorted through the looking-glass of Mendele's rhetoric.

The most explicit guide which Mendele provides for decoding the *Hakdome*'s inverted rhetoric is the description of his own physical appearance and profession--along with his name, the fundamental elements of his identity. Of his personal features, he states:

> My "distinguishing characteristics," according to my passport, are as follows: Stature--Medium; Hair & Brows--Gray; Eyes--Black; Nose & Mouth--Medium; Beard--Gray; Complexion--Unmarked; Other

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[4] It's worth noting the additional irony that the author, Sholem *Yankev* Abramovitsh, is in a sense a namesake of the Patriarch Jacob.

> characteristics--None. But all this means absolutely nothing; I'm a man like the great multitude, not a beast, God forbid.... And really and truly, let's not fool around, what would it profit you to know that my forehead is high and wrinkled, my nostrils are large and somewhat unusual, and my face at a glance tends to look a little perturbed; my eyes are a little near-sighted, so I have to squint when I look at things; and my lips tighten and there seems to hover on them a slightly stinging smile. But I declare! This is pure foolishness! Not even my wife before our wedding wanted to inquire into such minutiae! (Mendele, paragraph 6).

As Mendele quickly points out, the neutral description of his appearance found in his passport reveals nothing. Indeed, these details suggest that the "objectivity" of neutral description is in fact another kind of rhetoric, a rhetoric of bureaucracy. Given the nature of the regime employing it, such rhetoric must count as the most unreliable discourse of them all. Moreover, the fact that this supposedly objective description comes second-hand, by means of indirection, itself suggests distortion, or at least selectivity. The subversive physiognomy which Mendele provides to fill in the gaps of the official account, to translate it into "Mendelese," serves as a personification, an anthropomorphic cartography, of Abramovitsh's fiction, that provides emblems for its astringency, its satirical intent, its close focus on the overlooked details of shtetl culture and life. At the same time, these physical correlatives ironize the perceptions they call attention to; just as the context of a distorted, misshapen world transforms the most ordinary attitudes and actions into another category of the grotesque, Mendele's physiognomy acquires negative, or at least critical, traits even in its most ordinary respects.

Through the metaphysical endpoints of his meditation on the disclosure of names, as well as his negative self-description, Mendele has deployed the "mirror" rhetoric of his inverted narration both vertically, through time, and internally; in the descriptions of his profession, he applies the same principles horizontally, across the social space of the shtetl. To fully understand the implications of this social context, it is useful to compare the 1907 edition of the *Hakdome* with the previous version. In the 1879 printing, Mendele describes his profession by saying:

> For a trade I trade in *ruml*, which means Pentateuchs, High Holy Day prayer books, daily prayer books, penitential prayer books, women's prayer books, as well as various and sundry other types of holy books. At hand you can also find all kinds of tales--and even a few of the new-fangled modern publications. And previously in my life I held a number of other professions: soon after leaving my in-laws' residence I became a money-changer, then a grocer, a tavern-keeper, a grain-merchant, a broker, and a teacher (Mendele, paragraph 7, notes 33 and 34).

Through the parallels between these lists, of books and professions, Mendele links himself simultaneously to the full range of contemporary Jewish books and virtually the gamut of available occupations in the shtetl. Consistent with the rhetorical characteristics of the *Hakdome* generally, this passage both establishes Mendele as a universal representative of his culture and underscores the limitations of that culture. Each of his professions, in keeping with images of the shtetl economy disseminated by both Jewish reform movements such as the *Haskala* and anti-Semitic polemics of the day, places Mendele as a middle-man, an unproductive intermediary in an existing commerce of producers and consumers--even as a *melamed* he transmits the knowledge of others rather than creating new ideas or products. For Mendele to play the role of a Jewish everyman requires that he reinforce the negative image of what the norms of shtetl life were.

Mendele further compounds the irony of this image by listing his various occupations in order of profitability extending, apparently, from the most lucrative (money-changer) to the least (*melamed*), just as his inventory of books go from the most valued to the most dubious. In fact, each list seems to cancel out the other, though they are of course bound as part of the same cumulative effect. Mendele is neither capable of achieving a fully materialist consciousness, nor is he able to maintain the purity of the textual tradition which he represents as a salesman; through their contiguity both lists interpenetrate one another, to the ultimate diminishment of both. And yet this inevitable porousness between spirituality and commerce, *sforim* and *parnoses*, is what enables Mendele's experience to serve as a genuine representation of his culture; it too is a consequence of the over-intimacy among domains of existence in the shtetl.

✓ yes

Moreover, the link between writing and commerce, already implicit in the term *moykher-sforim*, is negatively emphasized by the revision of both lists in the 1907 edition. Over the course of 28 years, Mendele's snickers about modern literature are missing, but the list of religious "genres" he advertises has grown; the ironic edge, as well as the sly sales pitch, no longer resonate in the later version of his inventory. Similarly, Mendele deletes the resume of his previous occupations from the 1907 edition because this list--of professions far from moribund at the turn-of-the-century--no longer balances the roster of books in tracing Mendele's, and his culture's, decline. As modern literature has become normalized in the shtetl culture, the sense that sacred books can be corrupted by their proximity to secular publications has dissipated. The critical issue raised by the 1879 version is the idea that sacred books, when considered honestly, are just another commodity, that "Jews must live." By 1907, the marketplace itself had made that point so pervasively that Mendele's subtle ironies have become redundant. Replacing the function previously performed by his professions are the other items which the book-peddler stocks to support himself:

> For a trade I trade, as one can see by looking at me, in books.... From *ruml* alone--which means in our trade Pentateuchs, daily prayer books, High Holy Day prayer books, penitential prayer books, Lamentations, women's prayer books, daily blessing books, and so forth--one couldn't, as we say, afford water for oatmeal. I'm also obliged to carry along on my routes ~~*tallitim*~~, small ~~*tallitim*~~, *tzi-tzit*, phylacteries, rams' horns, *mezuzot*, wolfs' teeth, charms, little shoes for children, skullcaps, and at times brass and copperware (Mendele, paragraph 8).

talaysim, tsitis

What is juxtaposed in this passage, as an index of cultural decline, is no longer *sforim* and commerce, but knowledge and superstition, learning and ritual--the same dialectic first set forth by the *Haskala* almost a century before.

The cultural stasis reflected in that dialectic underscores the vulnerable position of Mendele's profession in the emerging economy of the new century. In a sense, he must fight the old battles of the *Haskala* because he, Mendele, is a remnant from a previous century--a predicament which certainly contributed to the rapid sentimentalization of his

role and his stories by subsequent generations of the Yiddish reading public. As Miron states: "Mendele knows that his trade is on the wane; that the sale of old-fashioned Jewish books, haphazardly printed by old-fashioned printers, and circulated in an old-fashioned mode (i.e., by the *pakntreger*...the itinerant bookpeddler) is a doomed profession; that his territory is shrinking; that his merchandise and he himself are being superseded. This awareness supplies him with yet another outlet for his irony and satire, and throughout his long career he never gets tired of making the Jewish book trade the butt of his witty comments" (Miron, *ATD*, pp.190-191).

Indeed, part of Mendele's strategy in responding to the fragility of his social position and the limitation of his intellectual territory is to ironize the project of the *maskilim* themselves. As Miron notes, this is an ongoing feature of several Mendele stories, and is further evidence of the sophisticated, productive use to which he puts his contrasts; simultaneously these juxtapositions ridicule both sides of a given dialectic and thereby demonstrate their mutual dependence and entanglement. In the *Hakdome* itself, parody of the *Haskala* as such is quite oblique, perhaps even sublimated. However, one insinuation of its presence appears--again with respect to naming, the generative focus of his inverted rhetoric--in the reference to Mendele's great-grandfather:

> They named me after my great-grandfather, on my mother's side, Reb Mendele Moskver, of blessed memory. They called him "Moskver" in his day because it was said that he once actually went to Moscow, bought some Russian merchandise there, then beat a quick retreat home, before they could chase him out.... But they really say that he set foot in Moscow, and this brought him quite a reputation back in his neck of the woods. Everybody took him for an experienced, worldly man who knew his way around the block, so whenever anybody needed something, like a petition to be written to the government, they'd always think of him for the job (Mendele, paragraph 2).

The emphasis on the respect Mendele's great-grandfather receives from the shtetl community by virtue of his travels immediately renders the significance of his achievement suspect, as does the humble, anti-heroic circumstance of the journey itself.

Nonetheless, the act of travel, particularly of *commercial* travel, is fundamental to the early *Haskala*, which placed its faith in the power of trade to open up the shtetl and thus impress on its residents the need for new forms of learning and thought to accommodate new modes of income. In this regard, it is worth noting, if not belaboring, the fact that the quintessential hero of *maskilic* literature, Mikhl in Yisroyl Aksenfeld's *Dos Shtern-tikhl*, is similarly called the "Moskvitsher" become of his experience with the Russian authorities. Mendele's great-grandfather undertakes the same activities as Aksenfeld's hero, yet no indication whatsoever is given of a redemptive, "progressive" purpose to his travels. Instead, the classic trajectory of the *Haskala* is here rendered in parodic, Mendelian terms as diminutive, ludicrous, perhaps even a little grotesque. Like Mendele himself, the great-grandfather is an inversion of the *maskil*.

Another parodic, if muted, reference to the agents of change and upheaval in shtetl life occurs when Mendele attempts to give a reckoning of his age: "Of my actual age, I can't really be certain, like most Jews. My parents, may they rest in peace, disagreed bitterly on account of my age. According to both, I was born at the first light during the great fire of the stores, of which we no longer speak" (Mendele, paragraph 5). Like the great-grandfather's travel to Moscow, the fire [*sreyfe*] conjures an emblematic, even archetypal association with modernity and social instability, though of destructive rather than constructive significance. In a recent article on the literary function of the shtetl, Miron connects the frequency of fire imagery in shtetl literature to an ultimate mythological source:

> [W]riters could and did express through the fire metaphor a very general sense of vulnerability and the proximity of disaster which for them marked the shtetl experience.... [W]e can hardly get at such an understanding before we realize, through a careful analysis of the allusive language in which the literary shtetl fires were habitually couched, that almost all of these fires are presented as reflections and duplications of the one great historical fire which lay at the very root of the Jewish concept and myth of *galut* (exile): the fire which had destroyed, on the ninth day of the month of Av, both the First and Second Temples of Jerusalem.[5]

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[5] Dan Miron, "The Literary Image of the Shtetl," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring 1995, p.16. (Subsequent references incorporated in text as Miron, *JSS*.")

Instead of describing an incident of great moment, as Abramovitsh elsewhere does, the *Hakdome* depicts the fire as a second-generation memory, an almost comic deflation of the cosmic catastrophe signified in the observances of *Tisha b'av*. Rather than signify the chaotic openness of Mendele's world, the *sreyfe* calls attention to the limits of modernity, in any sense of the concept, available in the shtetl; breaking with these limits would require breaking with the shtetl itself--a rupture which Mendele himself would be unable to endure.

The *sreyfe* therefore functions as a reference to the destruction of the two Temples in reverse; it is an inverted archetype. Like the suggestion that the Angel's encounter with Jacob is somehow echoed in the intrusive conversations of shtetl Jews, the comparison between the implied original event and the manifest incident invites laughter. And yet this laughter itself is fundamentally a laughter of recognition, not ridicule. Using the word *sreyfe* to describe a shtetl fire connects such an event to a network of historical experiences, and thus affirms, however distantly and sardonically, a fundamental continuity to Jewish history and culture. As Miron contends: "Abramovitsh understood that for his shtetl novel to function aesthetically and ideationally, it had to include a mythical or mock-mythical kernel, from which an elaborate metaphorical system could be activated" (Miron, *JSS*, p.38). Indeed, Abramovitsh in the *Hakdome* does not use the parodic relationship between the mythical reference and the mundane referent to demean the sanctity of the archaic ideal. Quite the contrary, by invoking this higher plane of historical and spiritual existence, the author establishes a standard for measuring how far from redemption the contemporary culture was. The shtetl, as this discussion of the preceding examples has attempted to demonstrate, was for Abramovitsh an inverted Jerusalem. Seen through the mirror of Mendele's rhetoric, when cast on himself and his surroundings, the aspirations for Jewish civilization are critiqued and even ridiculed, but they nonetheless remain always in focus.

--Marc Caplan

For more on the שׂרפֿה archetype, see Abramovitsh's שׂרפֿות [illegible], translated in my The Literature of Destruction as "Burned Out."