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Exhibitor and Exhibited:

Mendele Moykher Sforim's Debut in *Dos Kleyne Mentshele*

Imagine, if you will, the soft light glinting on a tableau in some dark corridor of a grand old museum. In the painted background, a birch forest perhaps, or a riverbank thick with shivering reeds. A host of sloped roofs and smoking chimneys dot the twilight, in the distance. In the foreground—just on the far side of the protective glass—a book peddler, with his wagon, his wares, a bedraggled horse. Exhibit A, the label reads: a Jewish man, roughly fifty years of age. Origin: nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. Features: dark eyes and gray hair, an unremarkable face. Upon closer inspection, the text continues, note the man's high, wrinkled forehead, the large and somewhat oddly shaped nostrils, perhaps a certain ironic smile playing across the lips. Observers, ask yourselves: Is this Jew indeed "A man, the same as most any other"? (126). What is the nature of the Jewish shtetl dweller? Can we be sure this one is typical, after all?

Though reimagined as the label and display in a conjured natural history museum of Jewish life, this image of "Jewish Man" derives not, in fact, from a quiet museum in a crumbling East European city, but from the imagination of 19th century writer S.Y. Abramovitsh. Or rather, this pithy physical self-assessment spills forth from the agile mind of Abramovitsh's consummate creation, Mendele Moykher-Sforim—Mendele the Book Peddler. Mendele is, with this deceptively simple description, introducing himself to the Yiddish-reading public for the first time; *Dos Kleyne Mentshele* constitutes Mendele's debut as a character, the introductory chapter

comprising a selective self-portrait for an audience assuredly clamoring for biographical details—as, Mendele tells us, is to be expected. Jews like to know other people’s personal business, he insists. It’s in their nature.

Indeed, the question of “Jewish nature” is crucial to Mendele’s introductory outing. He circles around and through the topic in the course of the chapter, weaving it through each page as he himself winds through shtetl, field and valley on his daily sojourns. A series of pointed questions courses through his seemingly meandering presentation: What makes Jews, Jews? What distinguishes them from others? Is the distinction radical, complete? And where does Mendele himself fit, according to the rubric he creates?

Mendele’s overarching role as narrative guide and “*conférencier*” (in Dan Miron’s words) is clear from the first page, although the character deftly manipulates his tone and language in order to mask (or at least to obfuscate) his own position in the proceedings. In the opening paragraphs of the introduction, Mendele bursts into view, engaging his audience (and catching it off guard) with a blunt “What’s your name?” This, it turns out, is only a charade; Mendele is actually illustrating his point before he reveals it—namely, that Jewish social interaction is characterized by a kind of boisterous aggression that, far from constituting an offense or aberration (as he suggests one might think), “is an entirely natural thing,” among Jews (120).

On the one hand, Mendele is clowning, teasing; explaining Jewish mores, with a wink and a nudge, to a Jewish audience that can chortle at the familiarity-made-strange of the (mildly) exaggerated funhouse mirror he proffers. The homey intonations of his mock dialogue; the lived-in texture of his examples of “Jewish” cheekiness; the comfortable, folk-ish mixing of high tradition with the everyday (i.e., the angel of the realm of the dead, or the angel who wrestled with Jacob in the Bible, behaving with the same amiable presumptuousness as any other shtetl Jew)—all this is an overture, a way of assuring his audience of his authenticity and even, it would seem, his affability.

From another angle, however, Mendele undergirds his playful, *heymish* soliloquy

with the language of an outsider, looking in. He qualifies the behavior he reports among Jews—whether it be helping oneself to another’s snuff, eavesdropping blatantly on someone else’s conversation, or offering unwanted business advice—as “customary,” “natural,” “usual.” This is, was, and always will be the proper order of things among Jews, Mendele proclaims, not only in this world but in the next. In this sense, his ability to apprehend and relate a culture’s workaday cosmology in a few deft strokes is a sign of Mendele’s very psychic separation from this milieu: a complete insider would take such cultural tics for granted.

And yet, Mendele presents himself, in the course of the introduction, as a sort of native informant. He affords a glimpse of this unnatural natural order—the topsy-turvy world of Jewish Eastern Europe—not only by relaying information about “the Jews” but about himself. Mendele’s allusion to his own checkered occupational biography, for example, as well as his description of the composite nature of his current business, illuminates and lends tangibility to this particular cultural universe, in which nothing quite operates with logic or grace. As is customary (he is careful to inform us), Mendele had engaged in all sorts of occupations before arriving at book peddling. And even this business is something of a catch-all: His wares encompass everything from books to *tsitsets*, wolves’ teeth to brassware to children’s shoes. In this, Mendele illustrates, he is merely following a broader cultural by-law in his dealings with hybrid goods:

Just what brass and copperware have to do with holy books, I alone have no idea. This is just the way it’s done with us, just as a Yiddish author must sometimes also be a bit of a matchmaker, a Polish *shammes* in a little shul must have a small liquor business running there, a community leader [*kahals-man*] must sometimes cook and serve the fish at a celebration thrown by local bigwigs...(130)

Mendele brings his wagonful of disparate wares, his traveling museum of Jewish material culture, both as proof of his own attunement to communal norms (authenticity, again) and as evidence in his larger anthropological project; like the earlier

examples in the text of Jewish social habits, it serves to underscore the hodgepodge, chaotic nature of the Jewish universe.

The question of Jewish nature shifts, in the last part of the chapter, into one of Jews *and* nature. Here, Mendele presents himself as yet another sort of guide: a solitary traveling man, attuned to the delights of the natural world—implicitly offering his Jewish audience a new mode of being at one with God’s creation, if anyone should care to creep along beside him on his wanderings.

Rather than burying his deviant behavior (deviant, of course, according to the portrait of the striving, disordered, and solipsistic Jewish world that he has just produced), Mendele draws the “strangeness” of his desires to the surface and shines a light on them. “Gentlemen, I confess!” he cries suddenly,

Since I was little, I’ve had such a weakness—a Jew shouldn’t know from it!—which is called, in their language, a ‘love of nature,’ that is, a love for everything that grows, sprouts, lives; for everything that’s found on earth (134).

What follows is a breathless catalogue of earthly wonders, from blades of grass to the “pensive, melancholy moon” (134).

This interlude is punctuated by admissions and interjections related to the errant nature of his longings and conduct vis-a-vis Jewish life. Such feelings aren’t fitting for a Jew, he avers loudly, and continually contrasts himself with his assumed “kosher” audience. These interjections, however, float helplessly in a sea of blue skies, fresh air, forests, valleys, and riverlets. The panorama our host unfurls is intoxicating, irresistible; his protestations dissipate in its wake.

Furthermore, the image Mendele presents of his earthly Eden is one of divine order. This is not an encounter with the Sublime, to be greeted with fear and trembling, but, rather, a meeting characterized by quietude and companionability. Mendele’s choice, overwhelmingly, of diminutives (*glezele, beymele, reyzele, feygele*) and gentle verbs (the breeze blows; reeds whisper to themselves) underscores this sense of nature

as benign intimate. Again, Mendele's own characterization of an ordered, lyrical world "out there" chafes (by design) against his exposition of Jewish mores and the texture of Jewish life. As he himself states baldly, Mendele-in-nature is not the same as Mendele-in-the-city; out on the open road, he is stripped of cares and, especially, liberated from the burden of Jewishness. Out in the open, Mendele exclaims, "What does 'wife' mean to me, or 'child,' or 'Jew,' or 'worry?'" (136).

The earlier part of the introduction, then, is marked by a reasoned vocabulary of norms and customs which serves, paradoxically, to highlight the alienness of the culture described. When one steps out of the inviting bath of local color he provides and looks back, the accumulated examples of social behavior, occupational customs and cultural artifacts begin to look quite a bit like ethnography. Mendele appropriates and deploys a subtle, almost social-scientific rhetoric of "objective" cultural assessment in qualifying Jewish behavior. Seen through his ethnographic lens, Jewish culture becomes a parallel universe with its own bizarre logic, that exists somehow alongside but not within the natural world. The latter portion of the introduction, meanwhile, bristles with a lexicon of abnormality and even pathology, which Mendele applies to himself and his lust for nature (the "*geboyrener meykhesh*" that Mendele claims connotes both weakness and disease). The crux of this section, of course, is that Mendele's "abnormality" is normality by any other standard; here too, it is Jewish culture under the microscope, even as Mendele seemingly directs his focus outward, away from the community and toward nature.

As Dan Miron has shown, Mendele performs not only a narrative but a formal, technical function within Abramovitsh's work; it is his task "to set the stage and raise the curtain" (185). Here, Mendele offers himself to his audience, for the first time, as the friendly local *pakn-treger* and, simultaneously, as a kind of extra-narrative signifier, even a cultural impresario. He is both exhibitor and exhibited, arranging his display of people, places, tales like so much tantalizing merchandise. He mediates constantly between insider and outsider status.

Mendele is playing it both ways, and the question lingers: Is he an ethnographer masquerading as a local, or a “native” beating the ethnographer at his own game? In our imaginary natural history museum, Mendele appears behind the display glass one moment, atop his brimming wagon, a Jew among Jews. A moment later, he re-materializes outside the display, a familiar tourguide with dark eyes and gray hair and an unmarked face, shepherding his visitors toward the captivating view.