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YIDDISH FOLKLORE MOTIFS IN ISAAK  
BABEL'S *KONARMİJA*

Maurice Friedberg

To a Russian or, for that matter, a Ukrainian reader the locale of Isaak Babel's *Konarmija* is the epitome of provincial backwaters, and the drab little towns in which its action unfolds evoke no significant associations. A student of literary trivia may recall, if only through Čexov's *Trisestry*, that Berdičev is the place where Balzac had married. Not so a reader familiar with the Jewish tradition. Peripheral to Slavic history, the dusty and muddy towns of the Ukraine through which Babel takes his readers occupy a very important place in the annals of East Europe's Jewry. It was there that in the second half of the eighteenth century Hasidism made its appearance—a movement that sprang up in opposition to an overly intellectualized Judaism, emphasizing instead an emotional and joyful communion with God. A map of the Ukraine appended to a recent volume of Hasidic teachings barely notes the existence of some of the Ukraine's major cities and completely ignores others (for instance, Xar'kov, for a time the capital of the Soviet Ukraine, does not even appear on it). On the other hand, the map prominently indicates the towns that Babel's *Konarmija* made familiar to millions of people throughout the world—Berdičev, Ostropol', Belaja Cerkov', Novograd, Brody, Žitomir.<sup>1</sup>

While Jewish subject matter is found in most of Babel's work, three stories from *Konarmija* deal more specifically with the world of the Hasidim. All three, "Gedali," "Rabbi," and "Syn rabbi," are set in or refer to the town of Žitomir, and their central protagonists are, respectively, a follower of the Hasidic *Rebbe*, the *Rebbe* himself and his rebellious son.<sup>2</sup>

To a greater extent than most writers, Babel shows little concern for the authenticity of details in his descriptions of *byt*. We do not refer here merely to *improbable* situations introduced by Babel for the sake of heightened exoticism—which are the hallmarks of his prose—but to virtually impossible ones. Thus, in the story "Rabbi" the *Rebbe's* son is shown smoking in his father's presence on the Sabbath, with his cigarette then

snatched away by the *Rebbe's* court jester Reb Mordxe. Later, Reb Mordxe also accepts money offered to him by Babel's narrator.<sup>3</sup> Observant orthodox Jews, of course, would no more handle fire or money on the Sabbath than they would eat pork. Still, in matters more central to the unfolding of the three stories of *Konarmija*—"Gedali," "Rabbi," and "Syn rabbi"—we may assume that the author exercised greater care in his choice of detail.

*Rebbe Motalè* of Žitomir is described as a member of "the Černobyl' dynasty."<sup>4</sup> It is true that Hasidism was popular in Žitomir since the latter part of the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the existence of a Černobyl' dynasty of Hasidic *rebbe*s is a matter of historical record.<sup>6</sup> Babel's *Rebbe Motalè*, however, is emphatically presented as "the last *rebbe*" of the Černobyl' line, and his son Il'ja as "the last prince of the dynasty."<sup>7</sup> The fact of the matter is that the Černobyl' dynasty is not extinct. It continues to exist, among others, in Europe, Israel, and the Americas. Before hastening to relegate this detail to academic pedantry, let us also recall that members of the Černobyl' dynasty bore the last name of Tverskij (Twersky).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the last name of Babel's *Rebbe Motalè* and his son—Braclavskij—contains a revealing clue. That name is associated with one of the most unusual Hasidic groups, one whose founder, *Rebbe Nahman ben Simhah* of Braclav (1772-1811) was also its last living leader. Alone among Hasidic groups which center around the person of the *rebbe*, the Braclaver (or Breslover) have no living leader. They are led, so to speak, by the memory of their founder. Often taunted by their rivals as the "dead Hasidim," the Braclaver are fond of replying, "better a dead *rebbe* who *lives* than a living *rebbe* who is *dead*." During *Rebbe Nahman's* lifetime the Braclav sect had little success (it consisted but of a few impoverished followers), although, a century later, "Bratslav Hasidim continued to exist in Podolia in the Soviet regime."<sup>9</sup> At present, paradoxically, the Braclaver are among the more successful Hasidic groups, with four religious seminaries (*yeshivot*) in Israel and an impressive number of adherents in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Braclav Hasidim retain strong memories of its geographic origins:

As recently as 1963, a group of eleven young American Breslover Chasidim received special permission from the Russian authorities to visit the burial place of the

Rebbe in the city of Uman.... The cemetery in which the Rebbe had been buried no longer exists.' Small country houses have been created in that place. But the tzaddik's [righteous man's - MF] grave has miraculously managed to survive the change of time. It remains to this day, in the yard of one of the Russian citizens of the area.<sup>11</sup>

Echoes of *Rebbe Nahman's* life and work are scattered throughout Babel's work. Gedali, a name much favored among the *rebbe's* followers, was given to one of Babel's most famous stories and also to its central character, the founder of the messianic International. By contrast, Ar'e-Leib, "the grand old man" of Špolja and Rebbe Nahman's chief detractor, bequeathed his to the old skeptic of Babel's "Kak èto delalos' v Odesse."<sup>12</sup> Our concern here, however, is a more basic one: what was it that attracted Babel' to the Hasidic *rebbe*?

The answer is, of course, that *Rebbe Nahman* was himself no less unusual as a religious leader than his followers were to become as a sect, and Babel' was neither the first nor the last Western intellectual to be fascinated by him. Early in this century the writings of *Rebbe Nahman* were edited and published by the philosopher and theologian Martin Buber, and more recently by the Franco-American novelist Elie Wiesel.<sup>13</sup> There is also evidence that they were admired by Franz Kafka. Babel', who was fluent in Yiddish and could read Hebrew with ease, most likely read some of the works of *Rebbe Nahman* of Braclav that were frequently republished early in the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

*Rebbe Nahman* of Braclav's unique appeal to Babel' (and later also to such authors as Elie Wiesel) was almost certainly the fact that he, too, was a creative writer. In 1806, *Rebbe Nahman* declared, "I can see that my ideas have no effect on you, therefore I shall tell you stories; and I shall tell them in Yiddish, so as not to give you the excuse of having misunderstood." He also said, "If one believes what people say, stories are written to put them to sleep; I tell mine to wake them up."<sup>15</sup>

Babel's affinity for *Rebbe Nahman* of Braclav extended even further. Consider Eli Wiesel's description of the *rebbe's* tales:

...all are inhabited by princes and sages.  
By haunted creatures seeking one another,

Hasidic  
identity of  
2" (1-2) 11.

one in another. By survivors of calamities, refugees, fugitives, messengers and innocent children, orphans and beggars endlessly roaming the world...<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, many contemporaries disapproved of *Rebbe Nahman's* literary activities:

That a Rebbe should waste his time and that of his faithful inventing fables, well, one could accept that. But that his tales should speak not of saints and miracle Rebbes but of princes and shepherds, of anonymous beggars and horsemen, of sages and messengers—and not even Jewish ones at that—could only dismay them.... But Rebbe Nahman was stubborn: he cared about his beggars and his princes.<sup>17</sup>

"Princes and Shepherds, anonymous beggars and horsemen, sages and messengers—and not even Jewish ones at that"—is this not a reasonably accurate list of characters from Babel's *Konarmija*? Is not this, and Babel's other works, concerned above all with "survivors of calamities, refugees, fugitives, messengers and innocent children, orphans and beggars endlessly roaming the world"?

There was yet another feature of *Rebbe Nahman* of Braclav's legacy that probably attracted Babel, and that was the *Rebbe's* insistence on the virtue of joy and the perils of sadness. Thus, in Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov's transcription of *Rebbe Nahman's dieta* we read:

Joy is a vessel to draw fresh understanding.... Even repentance should be attained through joy. We should rejoice so much in God that it will arouse in us regret for having offended Him.... God dislikes melancholy and depressed spirits. Joy is a cure for illnesses caused by melancholy. It is a duty of the joyful person to endeavor to bring to those in sadness and melancholy a portion of his mood.<sup>18</sup>

On another occasion *Rebbe Nahman* was more explicit:

Sadness and depression are extremely destructive and give power to the evil inclination. Therefore, one must vigorously strive to maintain a joyous state of mind

of Babel's cast of characters.

at all times.... Sometimes one must resort to superficial frolic or jest in order to cause the rekindling of inner happiness and joy, for all of our strength is dependent upon this happiness, according to "rejoicing with God, that is our strength" (Nehemiah, 8:10).<sup>19</sup>

The above may help explain an otherwise puzzling scene in the story "Rabbi." *Rebbe* Motalè inquires about the narrator's occupation, to which he replies that he is "setting in verse the adventures of Hershele Ostropoler."<sup>20</sup> Hershele was to East European Jews what Tyll Eulenspiegel was to the Germans or Mulla Nasreddin to the Turkic peoples, and there was nothing remotely sacred or even edifying about his exploits.<sup>21</sup> Astonishingly, *Rebbe* Motalè's reaction is one of awe:

"A great labor," the *rebbe* whispered and closed his eyelids. "A jackal groans when he is hungry and every fool possesses enough foolishness for sadness, but only the wise man rips open with laughter the curtain of existence..."<sup>22</sup>

The incident appears less enigmatic when one assumes that *Rebbe* Motalè was an adherent of Nahman of Braclav. It also accounts for the *Rebbe*'s satisfaction with the narrator's seemingly "irresponsible" goal in life, which is expressed in a single word, "Joy" (*vesel'e*).

Explicit references link the story "Syn rabbi" to both "Rabbi" and "Gedali." In fact, it was in "Rabbi" that we first meet the *Rebbe*'s son. The references to the son's strong physical resemblance to Spinoza are, of course, a signal that the son is a thinker, a heretic and, like Spinoza in the seventeenth century, will be "excommunicated and cut off from the Nation of Israel."<sup>23</sup> When we meet him again in "Syn rabbi" the *Rebbe*'s son is a Red Army soldier running a high fever and on the verge of death. We learn that young Braclavskij was already a Communist when we first made his acquaintance, but would not leave his mother. Curiously, both his rebellion against his father and his love for his mother are echoed in the writings of *Rebbe* Nahman of Braclav.<sup>24</sup> The assumption that young Braclavskij was brought up in the home of a Braclav *Hasid* also necessitates a revealing of the scene in which the dying soldier's belongings reveal, "side

by side," a portrait of Lenin and one of Maimonides. Traditionally, this was interpreted as Braclavskij's attempt to reconcile his religious Jewish heritage with the teachings of Communism—much as Gedali, in the story of the same name, would like to say "yes" to the Revolution, provided this did not also require saying "no" to the Sabbath. If, however, the Braclavskijs were followers of *Rebbe* Nahman, the scene acquires a different meaning. Although Maimonides (1135-1204) is generally acknowledged as Judaism's greatest spiritual leader in two thousand years, and his *Guide to the Perplexed* was intended to strengthen the faltering faith of skeptics, there were those who disapproved of the tractate.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, *Rebbe* Nahman of Braclav forbade his disciples to read philosophical works, "Maimonides included."<sup>26</sup> The choice between Lenin and Maimonides was thus not between heresy and tradition, but between two brands of heresy, each offering advice to the perplexed—with Lenin, ironically, not officially proscribed by the Hasidic master. Similarly, the mention of *The Songs of Songs* contains some ambiguities. Although interpreted by the Rabbinic sources as an allegory of love of the People of Israel for the Lord, in some Hasidic circles it was associated with mystical eroticism.<sup>27</sup>

The younger Braclavskij's name, Il'ja, a Russian version of the Hebrew Elija or Elijah, has three major associations. In the Biblical tradition (Kings I and II), Elijah appears as an intransigent prophet, ruthless and fearless in his defense of the faith from unbelievers. In the oral tradition of the Aggadah, Elijah's appearance heralds the advent of the Messiah; it is also in this role that Elijah appears at the Passover ceremony. Finally, in Jewish folklore Elijah is "portrayed as the heavenly emissary sent on earth to combat social injustice. He rewards the poor who are hospitable and punishes the greedy rich."<sup>28</sup> Clearly, all three associations blend well with Babel's Il'ja Braclavskij, an uncompromising fighter for what he views as a just and happy future.

The death of "the last Prince of the dynasty" is presented by Babel' both as a result of the incompatibility of Il'ja Braclavskij's military inexperience and sentimentalism with the stern realities of the Revolution, as well as an outcome of his overall "exhaustion": readers are shown that *in any case, Il'ja Braclavskij could not possibly sire any progeny.*<sup>29</sup> His death is thus simultane-

ously violent—an outcome of the war—and natural. And if the death of Il'ja Braclavskij marks the end of an old Hasidic dynasty, it may also be interpreted as the death of the *founder* of a *new* dynasty of *Communist* Braclavskijs. Viewed from the vantage point of the tradition of the Hasidim of Braclav, Il'ja's death is not to be construed as the defeat of his cause. Quite the contrary—his cause, weak during his lifetime, shall gain adherents after its founder's death. It is in this sense that one may understand the narrator's closing words—"I accepted the last breath of my brother" (*Ja prinjal poslednij vzdoh moego brata*).<sup>30</sup>

Significantly, neither *Rebbe* Motalè nor his son Il'ja are allowed to theorize on the nature of Hasidism: a leader and a would-be leader, they should be content with the carrying out of functions the movement assigns to them. The honor of commenting on the doctrine of Hasidism falls to Gedali, the frail owner of the old curiosity shop. Before taking the narrator to spend Sabbath eve with *Rebbe* Motalè, Gedali says:

Windows are shattered and doors are smashed in the impassioned edifice of Hasidism, but it remains immortal, like a mother's soul.... Even with its eye sockets empty, Hasidism remains standing at the crossroads of history's furious winds.<sup>31</sup>

Earlier, in the story bearing his name, Gedali shares with the narrator a few misgivings about the Revolution and also his dream of an "International of kind people." Let us examine these in the light of Gedali's self-proclaimed adherence to Hasidism, specifically to the teachings of *Rebbe* Nahman of Braclav, and his acquaintance with the Talmud (*Ja učil kogda-to talmud*).<sup>32</sup>

Gedali's indignance at the fact that the Reds, who came to Žitomir as liberators, requisitioned his record player is no mere concern for private property. Rather, it reflects the fear that this may be a portend of worse misfortunes, for *Rebbe* Nahman taught: "He who is ready to steal is prepared to commit every offense."<sup>33</sup> And conversely, Gedali's readiness to voluntarily give up all record players to kind people (*Privezite dobryx ljudej, i my ot dadim im vse grammofony*)<sup>34</sup> is in full accord with *Rebbe* Nahman's commandment: "Be not ungrateful either to a Jew or a non-Jew."<sup>35</sup> It