

Not Two but Three Goats

Sholem Aleichem's "The Haunted Tailor" and
Der Nister's "The Hermit and the Little Goat"

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There is a Bridge of Longing. Dr. David Roskies wrote it but even he does not know that under his own bridge there dwells a troll who threatens to devour *dos yidishe vort*. On one side of the bridge is a barren plain, like a primeval forest "stripped of its stories and superstitions;" all that remains are stumps of "Yiddish theater melodies without their lyrics [and] a few vulgarisms in the mother tongue."¹ On the far side of the bridge lies a rich and deep forest of Yiddish folk culture where the trees of the first half of the 20th century sprout roots from old and older stories, a forest where "every innovation was legitimated on the grounds that it had been there to begin with."²

It is the task of the troll to stop any who try to cross this bridge by means of what Dr. Roskies calls "creative betrayal."³ Some years ago many yearned to cross this bridge, Sholem Aleichem and Der Nister among them,

¹ David Roskies, A Bridge of Longing, p. 2

² Ibid. p. 6

³ Roskies describes writers who sought to synthesize old and new by addressing contemporary concerns in the language of tradition. A Bridge of Longing p. 4

but things have been quiet for some time now. An occasional Jewish Art and Material Culture Doctoral candidate or a curious Rabbinical School student might take a few hesitant first steps but they are easily frightened away.

The troll under the bridge, like so many characters described by Yiddish writers, waited, deferred gratification, and did nothing for endless stretches of time. Here in this paper, however, now, just now, the troll's slothful rest is disturbed by the intrusion of Three Billy Goats Gruff. They do not belong in Yiddish literature, but perhaps they do? And now the first and smallest billy goat starts out across the bridge, longing for the rich, deep forest. *Trip trap trip trap* across the bridge goes the smallest goat. The troll, "with a big belly and a potato nose and the voice of a wild ox,"⁴ jumps up and blocks the way, threatening to eat the little goat.

The little goat pleads for her life, "I am just a tiny goat and there will come after me a medium size goat. If I tell you my story, you must let me go and wait for the bigger goat." The troll acquiesces and the little goat begins:

I am the little goat in Sholem Aleichem's "The Haunted Tailor," a story with no end. Shimon-Eli, a poor patch tailor, sets out on a mythic quest to purchase a milk-giving goat for his demanding, envious wife Tsippa-Beila-

⁴ Sholem Aleichem, "The Haunted Tailor" p. 4

Reiza, “a Cossack of a woman.” Shimon-Eli leaves in the morning from the claustrophobic *shtetl*, travels through the redemptive landscape of the countryside, stops at Dodi’s tavern where evil spirits lurk and finally arrives at the home of Khayim-Khone, a Talmud teacher who is drilling his pupils on the potential damages caused by a *gemara* goat. Shimon-Eli bargains with the teacher’s wife, Theme-Gitl and leaves proudly with the “prize” goat (“a mother, not a goat!”) who reportedly gives buckets of milk easily and eats very little. Shimon-Eli dreams not only of feeding his family but also of launching a new economic landscape for the greater world – a goat in every shed! The next morning, however, Tsippa-Beila-Reiza finds that the goat gives no milk – it seems that this goat is no mother at all! A feud erupts between the two bargainers who eventually drag in the rabbinic councils and villagers of their two towns. The reality and sanity of the situation unravels to the point where Shimon-Eli has lost his humanity and has turned into something like the goat he has resembled all along.

Our ability to interpret this tale is as thwarted as are Shimon-Eli’s attempts to secure a milk-giving goat. We start out thinking that the she-goat was switched by Dodi at the inn, but later the townspeople talk of a *gilgul*. We have no reason to believe the people of Shimon-Eli’s town Zolodievka any more than we believe the people of Theme-Gitl’s town Kozodoievka. The two towns seem to us to be interchangeable, a consonant here, a vowel there, a Talmud *chachim* here, a shrewd bargainer there. It

turns out that the truth is not lodged in the villagers' natural assumptions but rather in the supernatural. After destroying Shimon-Eli, "his family and the equilibrium of his community,"⁵ the goat simply leaves the scene of our story.

The *gilgul*, seeing the commotion in the town, considered the matter and concluded that it was none of his business. What good did it do him, dying of hunger, to be dragged about here and there after the *schlimazel* of a tailor? How much better to follow his nose into the wide world.⁶

Sholem Aleichem's folktale exposes dissolution and pessimism: fate is inscrutable, and there is no answer to why a *schlemiel* like Shimon-Eli suffers like Job. Ideas about free will are only illusions. In a world where there are no answers, Sholem Aleichem creates a story that has no end.

The troll, well-satisfied with this story, lets the *gilgul* goat escape across the bridge, and it "took off crazily, his hooves not touching the earth," having "discovered the meaning of freedom."⁷

Immediately, the medium size goat enters the bridge, longing for the rich, deep forest. *Trip trap trip trap* across the bridge goes the medium size goat. The troll jumps up and blocks the way, threatening to eat the medium size goat.

⁵ Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing* p. 165

⁶ Sholem Aleichem, "The Haunted Tailor" p. 24

⁷ Ibid p. 24

The medium size goat pleads for its life, "I am just a medium size goat and there will come after me the largest goat. If I tell you my story, you must let me go and wait for the biggest goat." And the medium size goat begins:

I am the "single chaste and silent creature,"⁸ the forest kid in Der Nister's "The Hermit and the Little Goat." A witch is summoned by three bored, impish demons to tell them a story and she spins a tale about a hermit who is on a quest to find a hidden scroll that reveals where truth is in the ground, in a kernel. This hermit, accompanied by a little goat, overcomes three trials whereby he is tempted by riches and lust, frightened by visions and defeated by a laconic state of doing nothing at all. The hermit however meets three donors, the person, the birdie, and the Man in the Moon who guide him along the way. It is the Man in the Moon who reveals the potential solution of the quest:

. . . there lives a witch. . . and in the witch's cave, in her home, there is a servant . . . and tomorrow the servant will be captured by demons, he will plead for his freedom, he will buy his way out, he will send them to the witch. . . And wicked is she and clever is she: And the witch will serve them, she will buy her dear servant's way out, pay the demons with a story, and at its end it will happen there, in the same place where the demons sit. . . seek there, that's where you'll find what you've long been seeking.⁹

⁸ Der Nister, "The Hermit and the Little Goat" p. 239

⁹ Ibid p. 255

In this fashion, the reader together with the hermit and his goat are returned to the outer frame where we began. Roskies explains that the billy goat arrives and calls for the hermit and the goat to complete their quest.

In the time it takes to trudge through the snow, the witch is busy telling her demons the very ransom story we have been reading all along; the ending is interrupted by the arrival of the hermit, who scares the demons away, frees the witch, and liberates the spot where the kernel lies buried.¹⁰

The troll has enjoyed the story and lets the kid with the "wild, pure, and artless eyes"¹¹ escape across the bridge. Loyal to the folklore from which he emerged, he has bought his way out with a story.

Immediately, the largest goat steps up onto the bridge, longing for the rich, deep forest. *TRIP TRAP TRIP TRAP* across the bridge goes the largest goat. The troll jumps up and blocks the way, threatening to eat the largest goat. The goat is confident and powerful as he responds, "I have no other goat story for you, but you are an innovation with no history in my people's folklore. We have no trolls under bridges. Without 'vertical legitimation'¹² you can do me neither harm nor good. You simply do not exist in this world of the fabulists. I can butt you right off of this bridge."

¹⁰ David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing* p. 198

¹¹ Der Nister, "The Hermit and the Little Goat" p. 239

¹² Roskies explains Max Weinreich's conception of the genius of Ashkenazic Jewry as being able to read all creativity back into the past. "In the cultural as in the legal realm, every innovation was legitimated on the grounds that it had been there to begin with." *A Bridge of Longing*, p. 6. I incorporated this concept into my description of the rich forest on the far side of the bridge when I wrote about the trees of the first half of the 20th century sprouting roots from old and older stories.

The troll is clever and prepared. He answers, "Ah, but you are very wrong. I can be called the troll, but I am really Fiend who sat one bright and frosty winter night (Der Nister, p. 237) with Mocker and Prankster. And you say you have no more goat stories? You are *my* goat story; Der Nister gave *you* to me to steal from the witch." The troll who is Fiend promises the stolen billy goat that he will weave together a story of two goats in two stories if only he is allowed to stay under the bridge. Both stories are motivated by a quest, the troll explains, and the quests are the mirror image of one another. The largest billy goat is intrigued and agrees. The troll begins:

The quest in "The Haunted Tailor" begins with laughter and takes us to despair, but the quest in "The Hermit and the Little Goat" moves in an opposite direction, from despair to laughter. Shimon-Eli's quest in "The Haunted Tailor" begins one day when his wife has a housewife's crisis upon her return from errands in the market place:

She threw her basket with her few purchases – a bit of garlic, some parsley, a few potatoes -- to one side and cried angrily, "To hell with it. You need to be smart as a prime minister. Beans and dumplings, dumplings and beans, and again beans and dumplings. May God not punish me for these words. And all the while Nekhama Brukha – a poverty stricken, penniless, indigent, needy pauper of a woman – *she* has a goat. Why does *she* have a goat? Because she has a husband, Lazer Shloimo – also a tailor – but he's a man!"¹³

¹³ Sholem Aleichem, "The Haunted Tailor" p. 2

In this laughable manner, Shimon-Eli sets off into the natural world on a quest to prove his manhood, his ability to support his family, and his desire to change the menu in his home from anything having to do with dumplings and beans. When we set off with Shimon-Eli for Kozodoievka, we expect to continue laughing. Shimon-Eli and his wife are caricatures, a little goat and a domineering shrew of a wife. Their *shtetl* community is claustrophobic but it seems benign in the beginning. Shimon-Eli's particular brand of Torah learning, his passionate *davenning* style, his grandiose dreams about milk all make us smile.

As the story comes to its endless closure, however, we are no longer laughing. Forces are at work in this tale which defy logic and the hope of any human initiative. Shimon-Eli, after a night of being pursued by the goat, is reduced to a catatonic shell of a man. His neighbors take no pity but instead ridicule him until one of them insists that they take him home. Now that he is a living dead man, people begin to talk of valuing him as a saintly fellow. This praise, of course, will be of help to Tsippa-Beila-Reiza and her quest to feed her hungry children. Now she has neither patch tailor nor goat to provide. Soon the insanity is intensified as the townspeople are preparing to go into battle against each other in defense of their mistaken understanding of the purchase of the goat. The author himself must step in and tell us why he cannot finish this story: "Don't press me, friends. It was not a good ending. The tale began cheerfully enough, and it ended as most

such happy stories do – badly.”¹⁴ Sholem Aleichem, the one who makes us laugh, reveals that under the surface of his humor there is a devastating pessimism.

For *Der Nister*, the quest is an interior one, the hermit shows us that the power of imagination is redemptive. The hermit’s quest does not arise from his own struggle, however, he seems to accept his directives as simply as one turns the pages of the story. The hermit’s quest is actually nothing more than the product of the witch’s mind. Yet we do begin the quest with the hermit and his goat with despair. We wonder how we will ever find that kernel of truth when we never leave the circular pattern of waiting, moving, and testing leading to more waiting. The conclusion of the quest evokes an entirely different response. We are delighted to find ourselves back in the outer frame of the story: we have been inside the witch’s tale which now must go without an end because the demons are frightened of the materialization of that end. The closer the hermit and the kid come to the magic circle, the more we laugh. “Whatever life’s ultimate goal, it can be found only within the closed circle of the human mind.”¹⁵

The largest billy goat is satisfied with the troll’s story weaving. As the goat continues on his way over the bridge to the rich forest on the other side, the troll returns to his place under the bridge, prepared to devour *dos yidishe vort*. One might wonder aloud, how do I dare to cross that bridge?

¹⁴ Sholem Aleichem, “The Haunted Tailor” p. 25

¹⁵ David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing* p. 199