



Speech Impairment and Yiddish Literature, or: On the Obligation to Communicate and the Responsibility to Listen

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Abstract

This essay presents the reaction of major Yiddish authors to the pathologization and marginalization of their linguistic community. In the late 19th century, as authors and activists were seeking to create a Yiddish modern literature as a vehicle of modern artistic and political expression for the Yiddish speaking masses of Eastern Europe, the language came under attack from political opponents seeking to delegitimize it as a vehicle of national expression and even to delegitimize it as a language at all and to pathologize its speakers. This essay would look at a response to these attacks by three major Yiddish writers, SH. Y. Abramovitch, I. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, a response that did not try to disprove the slanders but rather embraced the languaging and ways of communicating that were pathologized and marginalized. They did that by creating dramatic characters who are marked by perceived speech impediments, characters who were revered by generations of readers as national heroes.

Keywords

Yiddish; minority languages; social justice; power imbalances; speech-language pathology

Positionality Statement

The author of the current article wishes to make known the position from which he offers his commentaries. The author in this article is an Israeli Jew of eastern European descent, living in New York. The author's past and present lived experience have contributed to

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his commitment toward interrogating linguistic assimilation, colonized monolingual ideologies, and raciolinguistic epistemologies. The very engagement with Yiddish, a minor language in Israel and elsewhere, forced the author to confront the distance between his position, as a citizen of a majority group in a sovereign occupying state, and these often-stateless Yiddish authors who were exposed to the effects of inequity, exclusion, and othering. This distance guides the author's research and teaching.



This article deals with perceptions and representations of language use in Yiddish literature. The field of comparative literature has a legacy of being a prescriptive, remedial discipline that engaged in the comparison and evaluation of national literatures vis-à-vis an abstract universal ideal of communication, an ideal which manifests itself in major national literatures and that peripheral ones aspired to imitate (Mufti, 2011). This practice relies on a wide-held belief: that the nation state is the fundamental unit of human organization and that in such a state there is (or ought to be) a congruence between the territory, the political unit, the ethnic group and the national language, or the mother tongue (Kamusella, 2001). This approach has been severely criticized. The definition of a strictly modern, and European condition - the congruence between the nation state and national language - as natural and universal entails the assumption that any divergence from this condition is unnatural and particular. This assumption marginalizes and/or pathologizes people and groups for their languaging and ways of communicating, as one form of communication -the standardized use of the

national language – is valorized and rendered canonical and all others are considered substandard and symptomatic.¹

In recent decades the wide-held scholarly opinion is that national identity is a modern political construct; a construct that is created as a political project, promoted by intellectual elites, which disseminate national myths through modern technologies of press - literature, newspapers etc.- across a given territory in a dominant idiom. The project attains its political viability as it is cemented through the apparatus of the state, its legal and education systems.² Numerous studies have equally demonstrated that the unique mother tongue is a modern myth and that monolingualism has never been and still is not the norm.³ These assumptions regarding language and nation are almost commonplace in many fields of the humanities, and yet the notion that the use of a standardized model of the national language is natural, beneficial and desired is embedded deeply in our thinking even as we know that our environment is composed of so many other forms of languaging. The notion of nation and national language is persistent because we have a

¹ For discussions of the system of literature and the relations between the canon (the officially sanctioned institution of Literature) and other forms of “sub-canonical” communication such as minor literature (literature written in a dominant language other than one’s own), macaronic writing (the mixing of several languages with the dominant one), orality (ignoring literary conventions distinguishing between speaking and writing), etc.,

see Even-Zohar (1990), Gluzman (2003), Deleuze (1986), and Domínguez et al. (2014).

² These issues and others were elaborated in seminal studies such as Anderson (2006), Chatterjee (1986), Gellner (2008), Hobsbawm (1992), and Sand (2020).

³ See for example Gellner (2008, pp. 11-13) and Berman (1984, p. 13).

hard time imagining an alternative. The manner in which national identity and language ideology are integrated into every aspect of the state apparatus makes it very hard to imagine a reality in which multiple languages are heard, regardless of their relation to power.

Following scholars such as Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin and Amnon Raz-Karkotzkin, I would like to present a critique of this notion, a critique that can be found in works of minority literatures or diaspora literatures. Such literatures, which are written in complex conditions of multilingualism, cannot pretend to represent the aforementioned congruence as they contradict the coincidence of citizenship, language, and identity. Boyarin and Boyarin (2002) question the hegemonic logic of nationalism, which sees “the ethnic, territorial nation as the proper unit of polity and collective identity” (p. 10) and offer a different vision of space and human relations where diaspora, displacement, hybridity and plurality can be seen “[...] as a ‘normal’ situation rather than a negative symptom of disorder” (p. 5). The examples I will use come from modern Yiddish literature and articulate a clear position vis-a-vis the question of the pathologization of languaging and communication. Jewish authors who entertained a unique and critical relation to the major language/culture, “a position that exists in the given world but maintains a critical distance [from it]” (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2017, p. 389) had to be critical of hegemonic myths, even as they were moved by them and yearned for them. As we shall see, these central texts of Yiddish literature

articulate a radical position, which criticizes not the pathology of the speakers but rather the need of mainstream society to pathologize and other it.

Yiddish literature, or: “One language was never enough for us.” (Shmuel Niger)

Yiddish literature as a modern institution came into being in the second half of the 19th century (Krutikov, 2016). It was conceived as a vehicle of modern artistic and political expression for the Yiddish speaking masses of Eastern Europe, and as such found itself always on the defensive, vis-à-vis other cultural movements that denied its legitimacy as the language representing the Jews⁴ or even as a language at all. For instance, The Hebrew national poet, Hayyim Naḥman Bialik, wrote this to a friend in 1898:

For finally, the zhargon [Yiddish] would be eradicated from under God’s skies. The tongue of the land would expel it from life, and our language [Hebrew] would drive him out of literature. May its end come swiftly and in our lifetime, amen! (H. N. Bialik to Y. H. Ravnitski, 8 August 1898, in: Bialik, 1935, pp. 126–27)⁵

The roots of the fight against Yiddish are to be found in the political changes taking place in Europe, as it was changing to suit a nationalist fantasy, according to which, “Since every people is a People, it has its own national culture expressed through its own language.”⁶ The Jewish diaspora, living as

⁴ Hayyim Naḥman Bialik (1873–1934) was the foremost modern Hebrew poet at the turn of the 20th C. He was born near the city of Zhitomir in Ukraine and passed away in Tel Aviv, Palestine. Even though the canonical corpus of Bialik’s Hebrew poetry contains only 130 poems, these works still form the foundation of modern Hebrew

poetry. He also wrote poetry in Yiddish (Holtzman, 2017).

⁵ For further discussion see Elhanan (2015, pp. 1-2, 4-6).

⁶ Anderson uses Hedrer’s words in his history of nationalism, quoting him in the original German: “In blithe disregard of some obvious extra-European facts, the great Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-

minority communities, multilingual, multi-cultural and by definition uprooted from their homeland, came in direct confrontation with the nationalist discourse that defined them as aliens and foreigners in the countries where they had lived for centuries. In fact, the Jewish relation to language was seen by critics as a telling symptom for a deeply rooted pathology. Thus, racist and antisemitic authors claimed that Jewish inferiority is evident in their impaired vocal organs, which are capable of parroting other languages but always in a telling way, full of lisps and sighs (Gilman, 1993, p. 3-4). Others, who were more sympathetic of the Jews, proposed certain “reforms” needed so that the Jews would be tolerated, reforms that often dealt with Jewish multilingualism, which was seen, like circumcision, as another primitive marker of difference that Jews insist on clinging to (Gilman, 1993, p. 7).

Many Jewish intellectuals interiorized this definition as a valid explanation of their plight; for example, Lev Pinsker wrote of the Judeophobia plaguing Europe.⁷ His explanation was simple: who could tolerate the Jew, the Other, in their midst? According to Pinsker, at the heart of Jewish Auto-emancipation was the transformation of Jews

from Others into foreigners. The foreigner, as opposed to the Other, is identifiable by language and place of origin. The attitude toward the foreigner is governed by conventions of hospitality and agreements between nation-states. However, none of these things were true in regard to the Jews (Hertzberg, 1997, p. 180-183). Pinsker’s positions aside, his text, written in German, serves as a wonderful illustration of the paradoxical situation this discourse produced: Individuals who are multilingual both internally (using Yiddish daily and Hebrew and Aramaic for scholarship and prayer) and externally (using local vernaculars and state languages), use that very multilingualism to define it as a pathology to be redressed.⁸

The question of the emancipation and modernization of Jews in Eastern Europe came to depend, to a large extent, on the resolution of what Bialik (1935) called “the plague of multiple tongues” (p. 226).⁹ Jewish reformers and activists argued for the transformation of the special *mélange* of languages used by East European Jews - Hebrew, Yiddish, the local language of Polish or Ukrainian, in addition to the state language of Russian or German - into a “normal” and “healthy” monolingual national existence.¹⁰

1803) had declared, towards the end of the eighteenth century, that: 'Denn jedes Volk ist Volk; es hat seine National Bildung wie seine Sprache.' This splendidly eng- European conception of nation-ness as linked to a private-property language, had wide influence in nineteenth-century Europe and, more narrowly, on subsequent theorizing about the nature of nationalism” (Anderson, 2006, pp. 67-68).

⁷ Lev Pinsker, a doctor and activist, was born in Tomaszów, Poland to Simḥah, a scholar of minority languages. He settled in Odessa in 1849. There he held a leading role of the reformist Society for the Promotion of Culture among the Jews (OPE), whose aim was to help Jews integrate into Russian society- mainly through language education. In 1882, following pogroms in southern Russia and the anti-Jewish attitude of the Russian state, he

published (in Vienna) a German-language brochure: *Autoemancipation. Mahnruf an seine Stammesgenossen von eimem russischen Juden (Autoemancipation: A Call to His Brethren from a Russian Jew)* calling for the settlement of (some) Jews in a territory of their own. This brochure became very popular and made Pinsker famous as one of the forefathers of Zionist nationalism. The English translation can be found in Hertzberg (1997, pp. 179-198); for more discussion see also Shumsky (2011).

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the polyglot nature of Yiddish and its semiotics see Harshav (1990).

⁹ Unless otherwise noted all translations are by the author.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the special attention language received in the thought of Jewish

The political debates of the time proposed several paths toward this desired “normal” national existence. The most common one was assimilation into the local language, according to the western model of legal emancipation. On the radical fringes of the Jewish society, however, another path was discussed: enlisting to a nationalist movement that embraced a Jewish language. The issue was, of course, that due to the aforementioned “plague of multiple tongues” there was not one nationalist movement but two: Zionism, which championed Hebrew and the colonization of Palestine, and Yiddishism, who championed Yiddish and advocated for a cultural autonomy in Europe, a form of self-determination without territory or sovereignty (Fishman, 2005, p. 53).

Against this background a “language war” took place between the Hebraist Zionists and the Yiddishists. Hebrew was described by its champions as a model of classicist perfection. As the ancient language of the Hebrews, of religious scholarship and tradition, it was also the logical vehicle for Jewish self-determination (Anderson, 1999, p. 20). Yiddish underwent a process of de-legitimization, framed by the enlightened Jewish elite as “jargon,” a “bastardized” or even a corrupt idiom, as the language of women and simple folk, an expression of the ghetto psyche. Yiddish became the heart of an identity crisis, representing being Jewish, a signifier trailing a long list of other signifiers such as exile, passivity, smallness, femininity, mimicry, disorder, or traditionalism (Elhanan, 2015, p. 2). Thus, the conditions were set in order to marginalize and/or pathologize an entire people for their languaging and their ways of communicating. Zionist Hebraists or assimilated Jews conceptualized Yiddish

language, its culture, and manners of communication as that very thing that needed to disappear in order for the *Yid* – the word Jews used to designate themselves in Yiddish was terribly close to *Zhid*, the Russian antisemitic slur – to become an unlabeled modern citizen of the world (Fishman, 2005, p. 37-38).

In the reading that follows, I shall present three texts, authored by the “Klassikers,” the three founding authors of the modern literature in Yiddish: SH. Y. Abramovitsh (1835–1917), I.L. Peretz (1852 – 1915) and Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916). I would like to concentrate on the reaction of these writers to the pathologizing discourse, a reaction that did not try to disprove the slanders but rather embraced the languaging and the ways of communicating that were pathologized and marginalized. In all three texts the drama revolves around dramatic characters who are all portrayed as having speech impediments, and the readers are placed in a moral dilemma: to reform them or to accept them? I would like to think that it is because of the power of this drama that these characters were revered as national heroes by generations of Jewish readers.

SH. Y. Abramovitsh and *Fishke the Lame* or: “Let Fishke go on with his story”

Fishke the Lame, hero of the famous Yiddish classic novel of the same name, is such a character.¹¹ In this novel, two fellow book peddlers take an adventurous road trip across Ukraine: Mendele - who also narrates the story - and Alter. They liberate a captive from a gang of criminals, and it turns out to be *Fishke the Lame*, an old acquaintance from

modernizers in Eastern Europe see, for example, Bartal (2005, pp. 90-101).

¹¹ *Fishke der Krumer* appeared in several versions between 1869 and 1888. This paper refers to the

1888 canonic version which appeared in volume one of Mendele Mokher Sefarim, 1888. For the English translation see Mendele Mokher Sefarim (1996).

their hometown: a disabled person whom they believed to be simpleminded, due to his manner of speaking. Fishke tells the two the story of his life and love in the Jewish underworld. At the outcome of the novel, the two men are of course transformed by Fishke's tale.

SH. Y. Abramovitsh (1823-1917) was a Jewish-Ukrainian author writing in Hebrew and in Yiddish. A genius wordsmith, he is acknowledged almost universally as the founder of modern artistic prose in Hebrew and Yiddish (Miron, 2017). Abramovitsh, who started out as a reformist author in Hebrew, embraced in this novel and others a radical position as a Yiddish author. This change in language also signaled a change in tone and in subject matter. In Hebrew, his interest was on the Jewish middle classes. In Yiddish he became focused on the lower depths of society and explored moral issues related to poverty. His tone, which in Hebrew was authorial, omniscient, objective, became something else in Yiddish. In Yiddish, the different stories were always presented as if they were found, edited, and prefaced by a fictional character, Mendele the Book Peddler.¹² Mediated by Mendele, Abramovitsh's authorial tone changed to a colloquial, monologic-dramatic, subjective one (Miron, 2017). It is this change in register that allowed Fishke to be heard. Now, the authorial voice, masked as Mendele's but still marked by the mastery of language, is just one voice in a polyphonous environment with which it entertains complex relations. The objectivity of the author is thus undermined and his attempts

to redress Fishke's speech would appear as attempts to silence.

The reformist writers in Hebrew, Haskala authors in Eastern Europe like the young Abramovitsh, held a fervent belief that in order for Jews to be treated as equals they had to achieve self-realization through learning and aesthetization. In other words, they had to be educated in western settings and accept western norms of beauty and propriety in order to fit in the new capitalist order.¹³ In *Fishke the Lame*, Abramovitsh presents a strong critique of his past beliefs. Not only does he write in Yiddish, the hated 'jargon,' his hero is disabled and unappealing, poor and unambitious and worst of all, illiterate and unintelligible. But it is this character who stands out as a singular human being: not the only one with impediments but the only one capable of emotionally engaging with the world.

Fishke, who lisps and slurps as he talks, is ironically cast as a national symbol when he is presented here as a Jewish version of Tatyana - the female character from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (Pushkin & Mitchell, 2008).¹⁴ Tatyana is a teenage girl who writes a childish love letter in French to Onegin, which is then lovingly translated into Russian by the poet. Tatyana came to represent, with her broken tongue and wild desires, the soul of Russia. Abramovitsh seems to claim that Fishke and Mendele can be the same: the yearning soul and its loving mediator. Throughout the story, whenever Fishke is talking, Mendele translates his speech:

¹² It is worth noting that the ruse worked a bit too well. Publishers and readers identified the fictional persona of Mendele with the author, making no distinction between him and Abramovitsh (Miron, 2017).

¹³ For a detailed description of this historical movement see Harshav (1993, pp. 3-27).

¹⁴ Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), Russian poet, novelist, dramatist, and short-story writer; he has

often been considered his country's greatest poet and the founder of modern Russian literature. His masterpiece *Eugene Onegin* (1833) is a novel in verse, a panoramic picture of Russian life which depicted and immortalized different characters—among them Tatyana, a "precious ideal," in the poet's own words (Blagoy, 2022).

"MEMA WOIF WE 'uz hirifery po-pes, 'n' jewskin jest pitcheress, shuzh, owifJ ma crewtet pigs, a nabeam blime, d' bcifus inchlong, no fasten paya c-cr-r-rabs, siphon difense." - Well that is pretty much how Fishke resumed his telling, after his fashion. Which, with a bit of assistance on my part, may be construed: "Me'm my wife we was infan'ry paupers, and yous kin jus' pitcher us, sirs [...]." (Abramovitsh, 1996, p. 155)

Mendele claims to not completely reform Fishke's speech but rather to cultivate it, redress it. However, this benevolent position of the clinician is critically examined as we come to suspect that Mendele's desire is not to assist Fishke but to control him. His incessant interruptions and explanations disrupt the story rather than advance it, to the point where Mendele himself has to be redressed:

"Oh, foo, Reb Mend'le!" says Alter, though maybe a shade too indignantly for the occasion [...] Let Fishke go on with his story and don't be interruptin' all the time like you always do. It's all very well promptin' the lad now and then, when he's bitten off more of a word than he can chew [...] And I am sure none of us will mind when you improve his style in the way of language. But otherwise, well, just don't you be sticking your shovel in all that much . . ." (Abramovitsh, 1996, p. 153)

The redressing, correcting urge that is experienced in front of the unintelligible, which in essence stresses the obligation to communicate rather than the responsibility to listen, is called into question here as Mendele occasionally mistranslates Fishke, not due to a linguistic error or faulty pronunciation on Fishke's part but because he is not sensitive enough to understand the emotional depth of the situation. In the example below, Mendele

attempts to explain Fishke's emotional commitment yet, reverting to colloquial language he belittles and makes light of it. It is Fishke who sets the correct emotional register:

"Know what, Alter?" says I cheerily breaking in on the silence. "I think Fishke gone and fall head over heel for that hunchback young lady. I mean only look; for all the signs there by golly-" "WELL, SIRS, I shan't deny it," says Fishke. "No. Nor why ought I? For truly I come to love her [...]." (Abramovitsh, 1996, p. 188)

This novel presents a sharp turning over of the power dynamic, as Mendele, the educated reformer, is forced to listen to the disabled man and recognize the mutual need that binds them. Mendele, who is intellectual, bypasses his emotions by way of profound analyses and verbal outbursts. Alter, who is libidinal, escapes emotion and reflection by way of lust and violence. In any case, both men are emotionally impaired. Unlike them, Fishke is all heart and love, compassion, and bravery. He is, however, physically disabled, and speech-impaired, aspiring for great things but unable to liberate himself on his own. Through the mediation of Fishke's emotional soundness, an impossible, unattainable synthesis occurs, and the two other men grow. One attains reflection, the other action. It is Fishke's speech that moves the protagonists to radical steps: Alter would set out on a quest to save Fishke's true love from the criminals (in a surprising twist, she is also Alter's forsaken daughter) and Mendele would put his own story to words.

I.L. Peretz's Bontshe Shvayg, or: "In that world your silence went unrewarded, but it is the world of lies; here in the world of truth, you'll receive your reward"

I.L. Peretz (1852–1915) is another founding author of Yiddish literature, who used figures of unintelligibility and Speech impairment to convey sharp social criticism. Itzhok Leybush Peretz was a Yiddish and Hebrew poet, writer, essayist, dramatist, and cultural figurehead, in part because of his method of adapting Jewish ethnographic materials to a range of ideological and narrative ends, in support of socialism and Yiddish national culture (Wisse, 2010). Like Abramovitsh, Peretz was also a Hebrew reformist writer who turned to radical Yiddish writing. In his apartment in Warsaw, he created a literary salon, in which he entertained and instructed many writers. The form of ethnographic inquiry he practiced dictated a fine-tuned attentiveness to voices deemed as Others, in this case the popular culture of the impoverished Jewish masses.

The story "Bontshe the Silent" was first published in 1894 in NYC, and it remains one of the most known and translated works in Yiddish literature. It attained the familiarity of a folk story shortly after its publication, being included in curricula and being performed on stage in schools and later in Ghettos and concentration camps. It was staged in the US as a successful protest against senator McCarthy's committee by blacklisted actors and received a television adaptation (Mahalel, 2015, p. 205). It tells of Bontshe Shvayg (Bontshe the Silent) who: "was born in silence [...] lived in silence [...] died in silence. And he was buried in a silence greater yet." (Peretz, 2002, p. 146). Bontshe, a poor Jewish man dies, and no one knows or cares. Bontshe, who never said a word in his life, passes away unnoticed: "like a shadow [...] no one noticed

when the wind whirled him off and carried him to a far shore" (Peretz, 2002, p. 146).

In the heavens however his coming is celebrated, his soul is greeted by angels and the patriarch Abraham, and he is carried before the heavenly tribunal in a gilded chariot. In the trial his humility is hailed: "Not once in his whole life ... did he complain to God or to man. Not once did he feel a drop of anger or cast an accusing glance at heaven" (Peretz, 2002, p. 148). And he is rewarded: "All heaven belongs to you. Ask for anything you wish; you can choose what you like" (Peretz, 2002, p. 152). At which point Bontshe speaks, for the first time ever. He says: "Well, then, what I'd like most of all is a warm roll with fresh butter every morning." These are the story's last words: "The judges and angels hung their heads in shame. The prosecutor laughed" (Peretz, 2002, p. 152).

Over time this story was interpreted in a variety of diverging ways—as a story about disempowerment, persecution, or humility; either as a story of Jewish perseverance and saintliness which: "suggests possibilities of holiness and piety beyond even those sponsored by the official religion" or, quite on the contrary, as a condemnation of Jewish passivity: "Bontshe Shvayg, [...] is actually a socialist's exposure of the grotesquerie of suffering silence..." (Miller, 1974, p. 41).

I would suggest here that we can read this story not as an evaluation of Bontshe's character or actions but rather as an evaluation of those who would judge him, and through that reach a critical reflection of us, as a public. The story is a remarkable representation of the farce that takes place when those who are silenced, either by their social circumstances or by affliction, have to express themselves before power, in a language that only speaks of them, never with them. This is a farce that Peretz was familiar with. Once a radical lawyer, Peretz lost his

license to practice law after he was arrested by the Russian secret police for socialist activities. This story shows a deep mistrust of the legal system, the system that is supposed to redress wrongdoings. While the first part of the story condemns this world as cold and uncaring, the next world, described in the second part of the story as redemption and acceptance, is hardly better. The angels in heaven rejoice, not for Bontshe but for the entertainment his trial will provide:

In the other world [...] Bontshe's death was an occasion. A blast of the messiah horn sounded in all seven heavens: Bontshe Shvayg has passed away [...] Bontshe Shvayg – it doesn't happen everyday. (Peretz, 2002, p. 148)

It turns out that the Heavens are not more attentive than the earthly world. The almighty only becomes aware of Bontshe when the noise and din of the angels disturb him. It seems that what is going on is not really a due process. The saints in heaven, as they see the honors bestowed on Bontshe, ask with envy:

“What, before the heavenly court has even handed down its verdict?” “Ah!” answered the angels “everyone knows it is a mere formality.” (Peretz, 2002, p. 148)

The story highlights the linguistic difference experienced in relation to power. The complex, playful, multifaceted discourse of the angel-defender alienates Bontshe, and the court's disinterest in any aspect of his story terrifies him:

[The presiding angel:] “Read but keep it short [...] No similes! [...] No rhetoric!... Facts, dry facts!... Proceed! [...] No aspersions on third parties... Get to the

point! [...] Facts [...] No realism!” (Peretz, 2002, p. 150)

No one talks to Bontshe, and he doesn't understand what is going on. The Heavens, like Earth, are not a linguistically safe space, so Bontshe falls back on his familiar linguistic relations with the world. Like a predecessor of Kafka's Josef K.,¹⁵ he is convinced he stands accused, but is not sure of what. If he speaks, he will be condemned; or maybe this is a case of mistaken identity and if he speaks, he will be exposed. So, he opts for silence. As the court is not at all interested in conversing with Bontshe, in explaining to him the situation or in creating a safe space for him to speak, it is no wonder that when given the chance he would pronounce the most innocuous thing he could imagine, something that cannot be used against him: “a warm roll with fresh butter” (Peretz, 2002, p. 152)

“Bontshe Shvayg,” written some ten years after *Fishke the Lame*, presents a world that is darker and meaner. Fishke was rooted in the backward Jewish rural community, which was the object of criticism for Jewish reformers. Suffocating and brutal as it was in its struggle for survival, that community still offered some protection and warmth in the form of traditional institutions and through familiarity and intimacy. Fishke, in return, could offer the community a way to redemption. In Peretz's story, Bontshe is a part of modern times; not in the way Jewish reformers hoped but as could have been expected. The story is set in grim urban Dickensian settings that reflected the experience of many who were driven from their communities to the cities by violent processes of pauperization and urbanization. It is a critique of the naïve belief in progress and liberal institutions, which replaced the old oppressive structures with a

¹⁵ Joseph K., protagonist of the allegorical novel *The Trial* (1925) by Franz Kafka. A rather ordinary bank employee, he is arrested for unspecified

crimes and is unable to make sense of his trial (Kuiper, 2022).

reality of cynicism and greed, devoid of all grace. It would seem that Peretz, like Abramovitsh, is suggesting that the key to unlocking this situation passes through Bontshe and our willingness to learn from him. This story is an ethnographic test for the readers: in analyzing the situation, how do we treat Bontshe? Do we explain him, diagnose him, place him in a neat arrangement of phenomena, or are we attentive to his experience? that is a challenge, as hearing the message embedded in his form of communicating would mean, like in the case of Fishke, renouncing the status of experts and risk changing the social order that determines who can speak and how. Listened to in that manner, there is something edifying about Bontshe's manner of (mis)communicating. Like Fishke before him, what suffering that befell him in life is not due to his perceived or real disability. It is due to the manner he was treated, to a reality of poverty and exploitation, in which difficulties in communication are seen as a license to abuse. The prosecutor sees that. As an indignant Atticus Finch-like character, who is completely useless in this sham trial, the prosecutor adopts Bontshe's posture: "He kept silent. I will do the same" (Peretz, 2002, p. 151). His silence echoes that of Bontshe and his laughter at Bontshe's predictable minute request is a condemnation of the court, which is willing to reward Bontshe's silence but not to take responsibility for the circumstances that produced his suffering.

Sholem Aleichem and Kopel, or: "The crowd laughed and I wept"

Sholem Aleichem's short story, "The Flag,"¹⁶ presents another example of the use

of a speech impaired character as a critical figure, exposing faults in the Jewish modern national and social politics. This story is in a way the darkest of the bunch and takes as object of criticism the very idea found in the heart of these narratives. If the other texts promoted the idea that the impaired and unheard can be the vehicle for human and political redemption, Sholem Aleichem's story concentrates on the tragic price a person, in this case a boy, would pay for assuming such a role.

Sholem Aleichem was the pseudonym of Sholem Rabinowitz (1859-1916), a Ukrainian-born Yiddish writer. Together with Abramovitsh and Peretz, Sholem Aleichem is considered as one of the founding fathers of modern Yiddish literature and is mostly remembered as a supreme humorist (Miron, 2013). His stories are said to reflect the steadfast optimism of Jews in conditions of poverty and persecution, brightening their grim setting through humor, absurdity and revealing monologues. These qualities were enshrined in his public figure, via adaptations, such as the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, and via an industry of Sholem Aleichem in translation. He is often presented as a simple "recorder" of Jewish life, who focused on the cheerfulness of the characters, on the practice of laughing through tears as a way of transcending life's endless adversity (Wiener, 1986, p. 41).

However, this view is partial and misleading. Unlike Abramovitsh and the socialist Peretz, who were both passionately humanistic, Sholem Aleichem was a profoundly existentialist writer, fascinated with the gap between human aspirations and the limited possibilities afforded by society, a gap he expressed through the very same absurd situations and humorist description. These

¹⁶ Originally published in 1900. There are numerous English translations, but most omit substantial chunks of the text. I used Aliza Shevrin's recent

unabridged translation, "The Simchas Torah Flag," in Aleichem (1996, pp. 1-17).

descriptions expose deep nihilist misgivings rather than fortitude or perseverance as their language betray a nihilist enjoyment derived from the fragmentation of life (Miron, 2003, p. 16). Sholom Aleichem's fame as the recorder of the "popular voice" of Ukrainian Jewry derived from his celebrated artistic practice, to present his characters in their own idiom with seemingly no intervention from a narrator. By his own admittance, Sholem Aleichem was attracted to the verbose "insanity" (*mishigas*) of the Yiddish language and felt compelled to capture it (Miron, 2013). However, this "insanity" was not the expression of a living vibrant language. Quite on the contrary, it was a record of an impossible human condition. The "insanity" of Yiddish was caused by the unique circumstances of Jewish life in Tzarist Russia: the Russian state expected the Jews to evolve and change, acquire better education and assimilate, an expectation shared by young Jewish reformers such as Sholem Aleichem. However, Jews had limited opportunities due to their language practices: while being literate in Hebrew and Yiddish, the vast majority did not read Russian well and did not have access to higher education. These limiting language practices, which, as the reformers claimed, were caused by irrelevant traditional Jewish education, were also held in place by the very same state that demanded Jews to change while enacting racist legislation that barred Jews from acquiring education or joining the workforce. Thus, Jews lived in an absurd situation in which they were expected to change their language practices so that they would fit in but were not allowed to do just that. In that contradictory reality that would render anyone a bit *mishigas*, Jews tried to mediate their reality in a number of

languages, without really knowing any of them all that well.

This reality, which is often described as "pathological," was also Sholem Aleichem's own: Sholem Rabinowitz, the Russian-speaking author, aspired to be a serious Russian novelist, or barring that, a respectable reformist Hebrew writer. Forced both by his passion and social circumstances, he was "stuck" with the Yiddish language, and in recording it he found great success (Sholem Aleichem, 2009, pp. ix–x). The "pathological" nature of the language was for him a treasure. He did agree that Yiddish was a hodgepodge language, a "bastardized" jargon, but therein lay its creativity, its beauty, its art. Jews developed a highly colloquial and idiosyncratic manner of relating their life stories, using freely and nearly obviously numerous linguistic and cultural troves - Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, Ukrainian, rabbinical texts, folk wisdom, and current affairs. These bits of languages, uprooted and decontextualized, can very easily lend themselves in the hands of a modernist artist to the creation of dazzling tableaux, collages which generate meaning and beauty from their fragmentation and discontinuity. The laughter, derived from these linguistic creations, has a dark side, a tragic undertone; it displays doubt: it is akin to whistling in the dark - it helps a bit, making one feel fortified and silly at the same time, without in any way changing the situation (Wiener, 1986, p. 41). It is a laughter that betrays helplessness and even complicity, as we shall see.

In the story "The Flag," a poor boy, Kopel, who is tormented and ostracized because of a speech impairment, comes into a small fortune through hard work, resists temptation and spends it on a handsome Simkhas Torah flag,¹⁷ complete with apple and

¹⁷ Simkhes Toyre (Simchat Torah): "Rejoicing of the Torah," Jewish religious observance held when the yearly cycle of Torah reading is completed, and the

next cycle is begun. Torah scrolls are carried through the synagogue a joyful procession, sometimes followed by children waving flags. The

candle. A rich, jealous boy maliciously has it set on fire. This simple story is transformed into a chilling tale of symbolic castration, in which, via the mediation of laughter, the reader stands accused.

The setting of the story frames it as a monologue, a grown man telling children his story: "Children! let me tell you a story of a Simkhas Torah flag [...] that [...] brought me untold suffering!" (Sholem Aleichem, 1996, p. 1). As an introduction, the man tells of his childhood, when he experienced mockery and physical punishment because of his speech impairment: "Everyone under the sun thought it a good deed to beat me: my father, my mother, my sisters, my teacher, my classmates. They all tried to get me to talk properly." (Sholem Aleichem, 1996, p. 2). A deep discontinuity settles in on the text at this point as the narrator, who speaks with no impairment, recreates it when ventriloquizing the young boy:

When I was young... they called me Topele Tootaritoo... because I had a little thin voice like a half-grown rooster ...[and]... I couldn't pronounce "g" or "k." (Sholem Aleichem, 1996, p. 2)

Much of the humor of the piece revolves around the manner in which the narrator makes young Kopel go through daring tongue twisters, in the tradition of vaudeville and slapstick. These tongue twisters in turn reveal how the simplest facts of life can be insurmountable challenges. The habit of attaching the father and mother's name to that of the child can be a nightmare for Kopel son of Gittl and Kalman:

"Little boy! What is your name?"
"Me? Topel Dittl Talman's" (Sholem Aleichem, 1996, p. 2)

rejoicing is meant to express the joy of the observance of the words of the Torah (the "Law") (Zeidan, 2022).

The special nature of the Yiddish language adds to the difficulty, being full of teeth-breaking words from different languages that no one understands, yet Kopel is mocked for mispronouncing. The name of Kopel's teacher is Gershon (Hebrew) Grogel (Adam's apple in Yiddish) Dardaki ("of the children" in Aramaic) from Galaganovka (Ukrainian town). But when asked, Kopel answers:

"With whom do I study? With Dershon Drodel Dardati from Daladanovka!"

The crowd laughed.

The crowd laughed and I wept.

(Sholem Aleichem, 1996, p. 2)

The story of the speech impairment is only the introduction. We are swiftly told of several "healing" attempts, the last one by a carpenter, who pronounces Kopel a waste of time as nothing will help him. But the boy is far from a waste of time, and he can help himself. Much in the spirit of self-improvement professed by the reformers mentioned earlier, Kopel works hard, saves, and acts reasonably altogether, until he comes into a small fortune. He loves having money and dreams what to do with it. He resists temptation and hopes to use the money to better his social position. Paradoxically, this level-headedness is his undoing. Kopel's resistance to temptation angers Yoelik, the son of a local rich man, who attempts and fails to sell Kopel various goods. As they fight, Kopel decides to embarrass the rich kid and to out-donate him at an upcoming festival.

The rest of Kopel's fortune finds a symbolic, life-changing outlet in the form of the beautiful Simkhas Torah flag. It is an object of ritual and cultural importance, which appears parodically similar to a national flag, decorated with distorted national symbols, such as cats blowing whistles, who are meant to be lions

blowing ram-horns. Kopel crafts it in an amusing quest-like process where he purchases and makes the different components. When he finishes, he takes this comically phallic construction to the synagogue with the express desire to make everyone envious:

For Simchas Torah I took my flag, stuck a red apple on the tip, put a lit candle atop the apple and set out for the shul [...] I imagined I was already in shul, sitting next to the eastern wall with all the rich children. The lights were kindled. My flag was the most beautiful. My apple redder than all the rest. My candle the biggest of all. (Sholem Aleichem, 1996, p. 11)

This fantasy doesn't last long. Kopel's overstepping his station is met with anger and the rich Yoelik, whose flag is smaller than Kopel's, sends one of his cronies to touch a candle to the Kopel's flag, and that's that. With the loss of his flag Kopel is devastated and the episode ends with these words:

From deep down within me, I cried, "Woe is me, my flag, my flag, my flag." [...] Everything became dark. The stick, the apple, and the candle fell from my hand [...] And I asked God a question: "Is it fair? O Eternal Lord! Did I deserve this? Why did you do this to me?" (Sholem Aleichem, 1996, p. 16)

Sholem Aleichem delivers here a powerful symbolic condemnation. In his vision, modern Jewish politics is carried on in conditions of dire hardship and poverty; unity is undermined by baseless hate and resentment and petty jealousies, born out of unbearable lives, and leading to internal strife and self-destructiveness (Dauber, 2013, pp. 232–233). Sholem Aleichem produces here, as the dramatic kernel of the story, the utopian opportunity for salvation, and more than that, the exact moment that this opportunity is

missed. It is an existential crisis that of course revolves around language. The utopian opportunity appears in the image of a savior. Kopel, like many of the child-heroes in Sholem Aleichem's stories, represents the living, impulsive, joyous, libidinal aspects of the nation, not yet crushed by life, not yet bridled by education. As such, all children are messiahs – they heed the call for change, they aspire beyond; they may yet live in a better tomorrow, as they might lift their families from poverty or bring about a revolution. Anything can happen to them. For the same token, if one casts children as saviors, then they are also martyrs. Taming their vivacious, potentially disruptive energy would be a mission all of society is set upon (Sholem Aleichem, 2009, pp. xxxii–xxxv).

Kopel's role as a national savior is comically underlined by his flag, stick apple and all. It is also tragically underscored by his speech impairment that connects him to the biblical Moses, the founder of the Hebrew nation, who delivered his people from Egypt and gave them the Law, the Torah, and was himself "slow of speech, and of a slow tongue" (*King James Bible*, 2018 exodus 4:10). This phrase was often interpreted as referring to a medical condition Moses had. Some interpreters went as far as identifying the exact consonants Moses had difficulty pronouncing. In the biblical story, Moses receives better aid and assistance with his communication difficulties than Kopel did. After expressing misgivings at the possibility that a man like him could lead, God replies:

Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say. (*King James Bible*, 2018, p. exodus 4:11)

However, later on, God disappoints. When Moses addresses the people of Israel, it seems that god's promise to aid him with his speech was not fulfilled:

And Moses spake before the Lord, saying, Behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips? (*King James Bible*, 2018 exodus 4:16)

Scholars provided various explanations to this lapse in divine power, but one explanation rings true to me with regard to Kopel's story. According to the rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter,¹⁸ Moses experienced himself as having "uncircumcised lips", because he was not listened to. In a dialogue, interlocutors must be willing to hear the other, as they might speak. The children of Israel, hard at labor and crushed by life, did not find the way to hear him and rendered him maimed and muted.

Kopel, represents the road to salvation, as proposed by liberal reformers: hard work and levelheadedness, coupled with as national identity celebrated with the passion of youth. It is these qualities that produce disaster as his peers resent him and cut him back down to size, so to speak. Kopel, speech impaired, cannot address his anger to the public, he would be ridiculed. In his despair he turns his anger to God, but as we know even God cannot make the children of Israel listen.

Conclusion, or: Are you not entertained?

In the stories reviewed here, a special approach to the topic of speech disability can be seen. In all these stories the question is not

at all the recovery or correction of the impairment. Rather the core of the story is a critical inquiry, comic but still piercing, of the listening self. Thus, for example, the fact that Kopel did grow up and learned to talk properly takes up very little space in the story. In an epilogue, the narrator briefly describes his cure and recovery:

Children, [...]for the most part, Jewish stories have sad endings [...] When you grow up, you'll understand. But [...] since today is erev Simchat Torah we have to be merry and happy, and so I'd like to end this story on a happy note. First of all, thank heaven, as you can see, I recovered. Second of all, for your information, the following year my flag was even nicer, my stick more beautiful, my apple redder. (Sholem Aleichem, 1996, p. 17)

This "happy" ending does not ring quite genuine. We get a hint that maybe this is vain boasting and that Kopel didn't really recover in the fact that the festive scene he says took place the next year sounds more nightmarish than joyous:

Reb Melekh, [...] led the procession like a field marshal. His metallic voice quavered as he sang out: "Hel-per of the poor and weak, sa-a-ve us!" As endless streams of women and girls pressed forward to [...] shrill into his face, "Live and be well until next year at this time." And Melekh replied, "The same to you and yours." (Sholem Aleichem, 1996, p. 17)

The clearest marker that Kopel's recovery was more disastrous than healing is found in the manner in which the older Kopel recreates his transformative trauma in the

thorough discussion of his life and work see Alter (2020).

¹⁸ Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (author of the famed *Sefat Emes, or True Language*, 1847 –1905) was a Polish rabbi, Chassidic master, and head of the Gerer Chassidim of Góra Kalwaria, Poland. For a

telling of the story on its anniversary. This masterful example of the dark side of Sholem Aleichem's laughter is the core of the story: we assist here in a dark and strange scene as a grown man tells of his most painful moment. Whenever he speaks in the voice of young Kopel, he is compelled to reproduce, perhaps relive, the trauma of his childhood speech. The laughter inspired by the segments in which Kopel's tongue stumbles, places us in a very complicit and precarious position: we recreate the central trauma of the story. Kopel speaks, and we can't listen. We laugh and his calling is again not heard. Carelessly, we laugh, and a child weeps.

Maybe not with the dark intensity of Sholem Aleichem, but all three stories place

the reader in the position of those who listen and judge. All three stories stress the listener's reasonability, rather than the triumph of overcoming the impairment. In doing that they force the reader to consider the social circumstances that cause the difficulties in communication. Bontshe, Fishke and Kopel, three physically disabled and socially ostracized individuals, are, as they are, worthy of hearing out. For that we must understand the reality of their language. In these stories we are invited to experience the reward of listening to those whose speech was pathologized as well as the price of being too busy to do so.

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