

Two Kinds of Belief: A Comparative Study of Two Jewish Literary Characters

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Sholom Aleichem (the pen name of Shalom Rabinowitz) and Shemuel Yosef Agnon were both Jews born in Eastern Europe; the literary work of both predominantly focuses on the Jewish small town (*stetl*) in Eastern Europe. Sholom Aleichem was born in Pereyashev, in the Ukraine, in 1859 and died in New York in 1916. Agnon (originally Czaczkes) was born in Buczacz, Eastern Galicia, in 1888 and died in Jerusalem in 1970. Sholom Aleichem wrote in Yiddish and has been one of the most popular and widely read writers in that language. Agnon was a prominent Hebrew writer whose literary work was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1966.

While time, location, and language separate the two writers, they are both distinctively Jewish and their characters belong to the East-European Jewish world. That Jewish world, and the tradition it embodied, was rich enough to allow a variety of types and approaches. We shall single out a central character of each of these writers. These characters represent two Jewish types and symbolize two different kinds of Jewish faith. The common and opposing elements of these types shed a light on the Jewish *stetl*, on Jewish tradition, and reflect the distinctive genius of the two writers.

Reb Yudel is the protagonist of *The Bridal Canopy*, Agnon's first novel, published in 1931. Armed with credentials provided by the sage Rabbi Apta of Brod, he sets out on a journey by wagon through the Galician countryside, to solicit dowries for his daughters from the congregations of the faithful.

Reb Yudel represents a typical Hassid of the premodern era.¹ His pious point of view affirms the existence of a Benign Providence. The world of appearances is in a mystical relationship with the Holy Writ, the Torah, and the Kabbala. The phenomena which Reb Yudel sees on the way, the occurrences which befall him, nature, time, the miraculous happy ending—all fit neatly into a preordained pattern, as revealed and established in the Holy Scriptures. The setting in which Reb Yudel moves is described in terms of his religious vision. Thus, it merges with the character, and the universe and all its creatures are in a blessed communion with the Omnipresent One:

Within a few moments they were out of the town and its dust, and the face of the world was revealed, with the heavens a half-globe above the earth, as though land and sky were akissing one another. Rabbi Yudel crossed his legs, gazed about him, sang, "Lord of the World," nodded to the passers-by . . . and marveled at the great light which the Holy and Blest One had, by His loving-kindness, spread over the entire Universe; as though the Holy and Blest One had brought out sparks and gleams of His hidden store of light in order to deck and array the world.²

The marvels of the natural world present themselves to Yudel as so many manifestations of the glory of the Lord. The seasons come and go in order to bring the holidays connected with them. Thus spring is recognized through the smells of the traditional herbs and vegetables which are prepared in the kitchen

for the *seder* (the ceremonial Passover meal and ritual). And the two horses which pull Yudel's wagon participate and assist him, in their humble way, in his prayers: "They pricked their ears and slowed their paces, so as not to confuse Yudel's quotations from the Torah with the sound of their hoofs" (p. 8). Time is measured in Hebrew months—" . . . the greater part of Kislev was over but the snow had not yet fallen . . ." (p. 43)—and in nearness to Sabbath or to a prayer. Time and nature are thoroughly Judaized in Yudel's view of the world.

Reb Yudel looks at the phenomenal world as a manifestation of the Holy Writ. What does not fit into the text does not exist. Yudel rules out the possibility of chance, and the discrepancies between the world and the Holy Word he interprets either as temptations conjured by the devil to test man's faith or as a temporary evil which, for some hidden reason, known only to the Almighty, is a necessary phase leading towards the eventual Good. Everything has a purpose and is part of the cosmic jigsaw puzzle.

What in common language is referred to as reality and fact is to Reb Yudel illusion. The daily rounds connected with the basic necessities, like food, lodgings, and clothing, are a regrettable complication contingent on temporal existence. The world that really counts, the real world, is that of the spirit, and Reb Yudel tries to rescue as much time as possible, from that wasted on his journey, for prayers, pious reflections, and occasional "escapades" into the sanctuary of a *beit-hamidrash* (house of holy study and prayer).

The gap between the private world of Reb Yudel and the factual events which he is forced to face is a source of comical potentialities. The discrepancy could be tragicomic, as it is in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. But Reb Yudel is not, strictly speaking, a quixotic figure. For, while Don Quixote, as Baruch Kurzweil puts it,³ is a man isolated from God and acting in a world in which values and forms crumble, in Reb Yudel's world values are absolute, and the Omnipotent One provides for the righteous even by means of miracles. In addition, Don Quixote is placed in an inimical world in which he is derided and vilified, whereas Reb Yudel lives in a world which is sympathetic and responsive to his vision, his mission, and his ultimate aspirations. The quixotic discrepancies between facts and Reb Yudel's interpretation of them are treated on a comical and ironical level only. This Agnon achieves by placing his hero in a world of semi-legend, where the bumps and jostling of hard facts are softened by the protective padding of a pliable imagination.

On the face of it, Agnon's hero is a paragon of selflessness, piety, and unequalled virtue. He is a living embodiment of a philosophy which strives to go beyond material limitations. Reb Yudel, in his way, achieves an enviable degree of perfection. He is in full control of his passions and appetites, and his belief is proof against the corrosive influence of doubt. Reb Yudel is "of a piece," and Agnon is not indifferent to this harmonious mode of existence. When Agnon says that his hero, racked by pangs of hunger "would sustain his intellectual self on the Story of Manna and the like" (p. 3), he is not saying it all in jest. There is a note of awe at the power of will and wealth of spirit that can subdue the desires which "rebelled and turned too strongly toward matters of food and drink . . . with a page of *Gemara* according to the prescriptions of the verse in *Proverbs*, 'Come break of my bread'" (p. 4). The triumph of transmuting a symbol into an earthly language, and of vanquishing matter with spirit, is Reb Yudel's daily privilege. This alone elevates him from the pedestrian standards of our quotidian notions. Morally, Reb Yudel is without blemish. He lives up to the rarified ideals of religious doctrine. The blemish is within the frame of reference of the doctrine itself. It is exactly this separation of the material from the

spiritual, of the quotidian from the other-worldly, which carries the germ of discord and dissonance. Reb Yudel's flaw—though also his strength—is his failure to distinguish between the symbol and the symbolized. This failure becomes comical in Agnon's hands and is responsible for the undercurrent of a comedy of errors which runs throughout the novel. Because Reb Yudel's sole interest is in the other-worldly, while physically he lives on earth, the two spheres juxtapose. Significantly, Reb Yudel is unaware of this clash: for him, reality blends into legend and myth. Thus, when dressed in borrowed clothes and met by an acquaintance who vaguely recognizes him, he answers the latter's question "haven't I seen you before?" in the following manner: "Of course you have . . . since all the souls of Israel were present at Mount Sinai when the Torah was given us; so now that our two souls meet again you recognize me" (p. 10).

Reb Yudel is not a character in the strict sense of the word. Though sufficiently individualized not to shrink into a stock figure of an innocent, or a symbol of a philosophy of life, he nevertheless is more of a type than a character. For one thing, we know very little of his inner, psychological world. The plane of existence on which we meet him is always that of the relationship between him and his Creator. It is in his professional, or vocational capacity, namely that of his being a Jew (or rather a Jew in a diminutive form, as his name Yudel suggests), that we get to know him. Of his personal, intimate self, we know next to nothing.

Yudel's devoutness turns into a source of blessing as the phrase "perfumed the air with holy words" (p. 8) suggests. He marvels at the world and is convinced that it was created for the express benefit of all the Yudels that fill it. Whatever he sees, hears, or goes through will not shake his conviction that this is, to use Leibniz's famous dictum, "the best of all possible worlds." This sublime resistance to the lessons of experience suggests that Agnon wants to portray his hero as an innocent whose simplicity borders on callousness:

And then . . . he would begin thinking . . . of his travels . . . of the things that had befallen in the places he visited: such as the tale of the sweet and the lovely and pleasant, when the lord of the manor robbed away the bride from under the canopy and slew her bridegroom; or the tale of the Jews of Osonovski, whom the lord of the manor drowned in the river when they came to pray in town . . . or the tale of the grandfather of Kalman, the tailor, whose blood was shed by the lord of the manor like any beast or bird, or the tale of Patiel's father who was slain in the forest, or of Peretz, his father-in-law, on whom they overturned a cauldron of boiling tar. (p. 327)

This is the best of all possible worlds where "nothing happens in vain" (p. 326). Not once does a bitter word or a spontaneous cry of horror escape his mouth. Not a scar is left on his soul, nor a doubt in his mind. The opposite seems to be true. All he has seen and heard on his travels has strengthened his implicit belief, and his saintliness has risen one rung higher: "Reb Yudel now denied the existence of troubles altogether . . . never even feeling that there was suffering in the world" (p. 325). Reb Yudel lacks a sense of tragedy.

Yet, Agnon's implicit censure and explicit irony cannot obliterate the author's fascination with his hero and the world he represents. The strength, confidence, completeness, and even beauty of the naive belief are admired, despite the flaws. Agnon's ambivalence to his hero is reflected in the ambiguity with which Reb Yudel is presented.⁴

The character of Sholom Aleichem who represents the backbone of the Jewish *stetl*, and whom he sees as the rock of Jewish tradition, is Tevye. He is the protagonist of Sholom Aleichem's popular book (recently dramatized in *Fiddler on the Roof*), *Tevye the Dairyman*, written between 1895 and 1916.⁵ The book narrates the life—with its fortunes and misfortunes—of a poor Jew and his family in the Russian Pale of the Settlement round the turn of the century. Alfred Kazin writes that the great thing about the Jews of Sholom Aleichem's world is that they enjoy being Jews. They enjoy it “as if it were a gift, a marvel, an unending theme of wonder and delight.”⁶ This delight in one's identity seems to be the broadest common denominator which Reb Yudel and Tevye share.

Tevye is as permeated with his Jewishness as is Reb Yudel. The letter, the written word, the Sacred Books, are as real to him and as indispensable as they are to his fellow Jew from Galicia. He derives his spiritual sustenance from them as does Agnon's hero. Both are men of the Word. But while Yudel adjusts reality to fit the written word, Tevye adjusts the word to fit reality: “Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house (Right! I take it, O Lord, that Thy house is somewhat more spacious than my hovel! . . .) . . . I will extol Thee, my God, O King (what good would it do me if I didn't?) . . . Every day I will bless Thee (on an empty stomach, too) . . . The Lord is good to all (and suppose He forgets somebody now and again, good Lord, hasn't He enough on His mind?) . . . Thou openest Thy hand and satisfies every living thing (so You do, Father in heaven, You give with an open hand; one gets a box on the ear, and another a roast chicken . . .)”⁷ Tevye recites the same prayers as Reb Yudel, and he does it with the same fervor, but his mind works on two levels: on one he is a praying Jew, on the other he is an embittered, bewildered human being. Yudel accepts the world as it is and rejoices in “the box on the ear” as much as in the “roast chicken.” He abnegates his judgment before God's decree and says Amen to all His doings. Tevye, in the no less Jewish tradition of Abraham, Moses, and Job, pleads and argues, remonstrates and even calls to account the All Wise One: “Lord of the world! Those others, the rich Jews of Boiberik, who do not have to lug wood to the station for a rouble a day, but live on the fat of the land in their country cottages, *they* know Your grace and kindness, Father in heaven, why not I? Am I not a Jew, too? Where is justice, I ask, where is fairness?”⁸

Tevye uses the Word, the only but mighty power to which he has recourse, and turns it in irony against his Creator. He recites the prayer, “Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed,” and adds under his breath, “Send us the cure, we have the ailment already.”⁹ Such familiarity with God would have been tantamount to blasphemy in Yudel's code of good manners towards the Almighty.

Reb Yudel symbolizes unconditional faith. Such a faith precludes not only judgment of God, but also despair. One must never doubt the maxim that it is all for the best, that after the temporary travails—and temporary may mean for the duration this side of paradise—the final reward and all the answers will be given. Reb Yudel's confidence (*bitahon*, in Hebrew) is a veritable pillar of strength. In Sholom Aleichem's *Kasrilevka bitahon* takes on a different shading. “As long as your teeth are chattering, you know you're still all right,”¹⁰ is Samuel's characterization of the homely brand of confidence which typifies Tevye. This faith is more like an instinctive clinging to life than a theological dogma. On the level of analytical reflection Tevye's approach differs altogether from Yudel's. Only, unlike Yudel's blind trust in God, Tevye's is a critical trust, and criticism implies a degree of self-assertion in the face of God. His *bitahon* is both trust in human dignity and in God's tolerance which allows argument and

disagreement with Him. The argument with God can even be expressed in a sarcastic comment on the Jewish lot: "The main thing is—hope! A Jew must always hope, must never lose hope. And in the meantime, what if we waste away to a shadow? For that we are Jews—the Chosen People, the envy and admiration of the world."¹¹ Yet this is not an expression of atheistic doubt. It is only an argument with God-determined destiny, an argument which infuses confidence, *bitahon*, into the flagging spirit of Tevye. The rational argument with God, the Dialogue, reasserts the dignity of man.

Both Tevye and Yudel are rewarded for their faith by a miracle. But just as Tevye's faith is qualified by his humanity, so is his miracle qualified by reality. While Yudel's daughters find a treasure of silver and gold, jewels and precious stones, Tevye's miracle consists of the unexpected acquisition of thirty-seven roubles and a cow. In Tevye's scale of things this was a veritable miracle, and he knew at whose door to put the credit for it: "I tell you, Mr. Sholom Aleichem, if a man is destined to win the great lottery in life, he needn't lift a finger in his own behalf. He just sits and waits, and it comes on its own four legs right into his house. It doesn't call for an ounce of brains. And if it's the other way round, if a man is destined to live out his life on Pharaoh's plagues, he can plead and argue till he's blue in the face; it won't do him a bit of good. This I know from personal experience, and from the miracle of my own life."¹²

Yudel, on the other hand, displays a sublime equanimity and just as no disaster could shake him, so also no miracle can move him. As Agnon tells us tongue in cheek: "You will remember that when he was wandering the world he saw people digging and toiling to find treasures and laughed at them, saying, 'Doesn't the Talmud tell us plain and clear in so many words that finds come unawares'"¹³ For Yudel the essence of a miracle is that it is not a miracle at all! It is in the natural order of things, in this most perfect world of ours, that those who merit it will be rewarded by default!

Yudel believes in predestination, and on the face of it, so does Tevye. But for all practical purposes, the two are talking about two entirely different things. For Yudel, predestination is part of the wise, good, Great Design. Man's helplessness in the face of inexorable destiny is nothing to fret about. Tevye's acknowledgement of destiny, however, includes an implicit criticism of the injustice which goes with it. "If a man is destined to live out his life on Pharaoh's plagues, he can plead and argue . . . it won't do him a bit of good." This is an indictment of senselessness which is an outrage to his simple humanity. The ruthlessness of mindless fate teaches cynicism, and not submission. The imbecility of such a "design" is emphasized by the image of a four legged creature, a sort of primordial beast which "comes . . . right into his [the lucky, the chosen one's] house." ". . . to win the great lottery in life" is suggestive of blind chance and accident—the two heresies which Yudel categorically rules out from his world view—rather than of divine providence. Tevye's faith is tinged with skepticism which he expresses in a picturesque language which draws on the vivid imagination of the people—"argue till he's blue in the face"—and on the wealth of traditional lore—"to live out his life on Pharaoh's plagues." The language gives an additional dimension to his arguments, and its concreteness lends them weight and persuasiveness, particularly when contrasted with Yudel's pious abstractions.

Tevye, unlike Yudel, knows a miracle when he sees one. This is because it is precisely by miracles that he lives from one day to the next. For him it is not self-evident that they should happen, because he knows from watching his wife, how much ingenuity, anguish, and sheer hard work it takes to bring one about:

"My wife, Lord bless her, is so resourceful, she makes noodles out of almost nothing, adds water and we have noodle soup. Every week she performs a miracle: we have food for the Sabbath!"¹⁴ It takes Tevye's genuine modesty and humility to appreciate a happening out of the ordinary, and he savors it with full gratitude. His "if a man is destined" may amount to Yudel's "Doesn't the Talmud tell us," but the points of departure are worlds apart. To Yudel, God's ways are crystal clear because he does not try to unravel them, giving the Almighty an a priori benefit of the doubt, or rather, an unconditional acquittal, even before the trial begins. Tevye pesters his Benefactor with questions and insinuates that His benevolence is no more than whimsical chance, a capricious, inscrutable, omnipotent play of probabilities: "O God, All-powerful and All-merciful, great and good, kind and just, how does it happen that to some people you give everything and to others nothing? To some people butter rolls and to others the plague?" But then I tell myself, 'you big fool, Tevye! Are you trying to tell Him how to rule His world? Apparently if he wants it that way, that's the way it ought to be. Can't you see? If it should have been different it would have been? And yet, what would have been wrong to have it different?'"¹⁵ Sholom Aleichem makes one suspect that indeed Tevye thinks—and with very good reason—that he could have ruled this world more justly. Occasionally, Tevye's criticism is mollified by a note of forgiving tolerance towards the Almighty: "The Lord is good to all (and suppose He forgets somebody now and then, good Lord, hasn't He enough on His mind?)."

Baruch Hochman speaks of Agnon's "subversive sympathy" for his heroes.¹⁶ This paradoxical attitude seems to describe exactly Agnon's technique in his treatment of Reb Yudel. What Agnon seems to indicate is, that virtue, piety, and moral conduct are naturally linked with a certain self-assertion, with the need to make decisions and, implicitly, with judgment. Yudel rejects self-assertion, moral judgment and discrimination, and consequently he argues himself out of existence. He lacks the dimension of existential defiance and this lack deprives him of a human image. Yudel, the perfect believer, is also Yudel, the perfect nonentity.

Tevye, on the other hand, has enough dignity, kindness, and philosophical acumen for a truly heroic role. In his interminable soliloquies, officially directed to "Mister" Sholom Aleichem, Tevye unloads his heart, reflects upon the world, argues for and against the Almighty, and quotes and ingeniously misquotes the Holy Scriptures to suit his particular argument. Tevye personifies the tragedy of a man who lives in full knowledge of his mortal limitations, has serious doubts about Providential wisdom, and yet manages to retain a love of life and man, humor and moral rectitude. Tevye's greatness is that adversity and disillusion do not turn him bitter or desperate. His existential awareness is not followed by the logical conclusion of absurdity and destructive negation of the world. On the contrary, fully aware of what he is doing, he averts his eyes from the yawning nothingness, and bravely carries on with the show. His compassion is all-embracing, and in spite of little learning, he is truly tolerant and capable of rising above his own prejudices and selfish impulses. The fact that Tevye averts his eyes from the void does not mean that he is blind to reality, in the fashion of Yudel. Indeed, his prayer shawl and the yellowing scrolls of the Torah turn into a shield gallantly maneuvered to cover up God's grand fiasco. Tevye sees through man's motives and God's aloofness. In his artless way he knows how to "reduce everything to fundamentals, strip all values to their bare essentials, expose all pomp and vanity to their relative futility."¹⁷ Tevye, the ingenuous rustic, reminiscent somewhat of a figure from Tolstoy's folk tales, remains loyal to his God *in spite* of the absurdity of it. Yudel clings to his God *because* absurdity is just another manifestation of His ways, and is inevitably meant to serve the ultimate end, the best of all possible designs.

In his presentation of Reb Yudel, Agnon is playing a game of hide-and-seek with the reader. He pits reality against imagination, and punctures the prevailing tone of mock-seriousness with passages of delicate lyricism and nostalgic idealization. Though eventually Yudel fades off into ballad and legend, he nevertheless retains his hold on us as an individualized type. Reb Yudel is the whole believer—simple, homely, naive, and predictable to the point of staleness, but surprisingly comforting and refreshing. His mode of consciousness and world view embody the Jewish *stetl* in the faraway period when the idyl of the Austrian Kaiser, the sanctity of the *Torah*, and the meaning of being a Jew were self-evident and beyond dispute. Though Agnon is ambivalent to this half-mythical world, confirming and contradicting it almost in the same breath, he nevertheless lavishes on it great love and admiration, mingled with nostalgia for its wholeness and coherence.¹⁸

Tevey represents another *stetl*: it is the *stetl* touched by the alien spirit of doubt and the wisdom of lost innocence. And yet, it is also a *stetl* of stiffnecked loyalty to a wayward God, and a clear-eyed conviction that all the other Masters—including Reason, Progress, and Freedom—are neither wiser nor kinder.

Unlike Agnon's attitude to his hero, Sholom Aleichem loves his Tevey unequivocally. His style attests to it: it is simple, colloquial, and imbued with a humor which laughs with and not at. Sholom Aleichem's humor does not expose his Tevey, but on the contrary, it shields his humanity and affirms his dignity. Tevey comes off a warm figure, watching his fellowmen with curiosity, sympathy, but also with a bewildered alienation. Essentially, Tevey is a modern, lonely man, grappling with his horse and his God, with his wife and the puzzle of existence. At the height of his tragedy, when Job-like he loses one by one all his loved ones, he does not embark on a grandiose invective. He even refrains from a suitable misquotation. He also—one might say tactfully—omits to bring the Almighty into the picture. Rather than follow his biblical prototype, Job, he chooses to anticipate the modern commentator on man's condition, and striking a Chaplinesque posture, he quips wryly: "And now, let's talk about more cheerful things. Tell me, what news is there about the cholera in Odessa?"¹⁹

NOTES

¹See Avraham Kariv, *Iyunim* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1950), pp. 42-48.

²S. Y. Agnon, *The Bridal Canopy*, translated by I. M. Lask (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 8. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurei S. Y. Agnon* (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1962), p. 24.

⁴See Dov Sadan, *Al Sha"Y Agnon* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1967), p. 26.

⁵*Tevey the Dairyman* is a collection of short stories which combine into one sequel. The collected stories were published in a volume under the title *Ganz Tevey der Milchiger* by Folsfund Edition, New York in 1918. There have been various English translations from the collection of these stories. The bulk of the book, under the title *Tevey's Daughters*, was translated by Frances Butwin (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949). In subsequent quotations the English version source is indicated.

⁶See the "Introduction" of *Selected Stories of Sholom Aleichem* (New York: The Modern Library, 1956).

⁷Maurice Samuel, *The World of Sholom Aleichem* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), pp. 11-12. The quoted passage is Samuel's translation from the Yiddish text. Samuel is exceptionally successful in rendering into English the spirit of Sholom Aleichem's writing.

⁸Maurice Samuel, *The World of Sholom Aleichem*, p. 12.

⁹Sholom Aleichem, *The Old Country*, trans. Julius and Frances Butwin (New York: Crown Publishers, 1946), p. 25. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁰Maurice Samuel, *The World of Sholom Aleichem*, p. 43.

¹¹*The Old Country*, p. 23.

¹²Maurice Samuel *The World of Sholom Aleichem*, p. 46.

¹³*The Bridal Canopy*, p. 358.

¹⁴*The Old Country*, p. 36.

¹⁵*The Old Country*, p. 32.

¹⁶Baruch Hochman, *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 57-64.

¹⁷Charles A. Madison, *Yiddish Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), p. 95.

¹⁸On the difficulties and contradictory opinions in "placing" Reb Yudel, see Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 132-136. Cf. also Hochman, *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon*, p. 75.

¹⁹Sholom Aleichem, *Tevye's Daughters*, trans. Frances Butwin (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949), p. 68.