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# Conceptions of Time and History in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Train Stories

And locomotives run urgently,  
 shines the radio  
 solid iron,  
 the steam  
 wears the intestine of the world,  
 the sweat drops  
 annoying vision.  
 —Uri Zvi Greenberg, “Perspectives,” *Eyma Gedola ve-Yareah* (my trans.)

THE TRAIN HAD A REMARKABLE and meaningful role in the process of modernization and secularization within European Jewish society during the nineteenth century. As historian Israel Bartal suggests (287–88), it had an important influence on the cultural lives of East European Jews, bringing modernized technology to remote Jewish towns and villages. The first appearance of Jewish newspapers in 1860 coincided with the arrival of the new railroad tracks, and both innovations enabled small and distant communities of Jews to connect with the new centers of Jewish nationalism (289).

Not surprisingly, the central role of the trains is reflected in the literature of the period, in what I would like to call “the train genre.” In what follows I examine the role of the train in three works by prominent Jewish writers: S.Y. Abramovitsh’s “Shem ve-Yefet ba-agala” (“Shem and Japheth on the Train”),<sup>1</sup> Sholem Aleichem’s *Di ayznban-geshikhtes* (*The Railroad Stories*) (Rabinovitsh, *Ale verk fun Sholem-Aleykhem*, Vol. 6), and Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s “Bi-kronin shel Rakevet” (“In the Railroad Car”).<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that each of these works was produced in a different time and place (Abramovitsh’s in 1890 Odessa, Sholem Aleichem’s in 1909 New York, and Agnon’s around 1954 in Jerusalem), they all use the train to represent a common experience in pre-World War I Eastern Europe. Moreover, although Sholem

<sup>1</sup> Although the word *agala* means a carriage or a wagon in Modern Hebrew, Abramovitsh uses it to refer to a railway car (in Modern Hebrew, *karon*).

<sup>2</sup> *Ha'aretz* September 27 through November 19, 1954. “Bi-kronin shel Rakevet” is in fact the first and longest of four chapters included in an unfinished work entitled *Sefer Takhlit ha-Ma'asim* (*The Book of the Reason of Deeds*). My discussion focuses on “Bi-kronin shel Rakevet,” which constitutes most of the book, but I will occasionally refer to the other chapters, all of which describe the same trip.

Alechem wrote in Yiddish, Agnon in Hebrew, and Abramovitsh in both languages, their works share many common themes. In each, the characters belong to the Jewish middle class and would likely have conversed in Yiddish. Thus, despite the realistic nature of their works, Agnon and Abramovitsh specifically chose to represent their characters in a language other than the one they actually spoke. Abramovitsh's Hebrew readers could also read Yiddish, and, unlike his protagonists, they probably belonged to the Jewish intellectual elite. In the case of Agnon, however, one might argue that many of his readers could not understand the language of his characters. As a result, although all three works represent a similar experience, Agnon, who published his story decades later than did Abramovitsh and Shalom Alechem, likely assumed that his audience would be unfamiliar with the experience and even the language of his protagonists.<sup>3</sup>

This distance both in time and in language suggests that Agnon's story should be read as a retrospective look at the experience with which the earlier works deal. Complicating this chronology is the fact that, according to Agnon, *Sefer Takhlit ha-Ma'asim* was conceived much closer to the time of the events it describes:

*Sefer Takhlit ha-Ma'asim* was supposed to be an intermediate book between *Hakhnasat Kalah* [*The Bride Canopy*, 1919] and *Ore'ach Nata Lalun* [*A Guest for the Night*, 1939]. When I was in the midst of things and the deeds were rolling and coming and producing and walking and standing in front of me without any barrier and they were asked to be written, along came many unimportant things (*beteylim*) and I ended up not writing the book. And since such an event does not repeat itself for the author, I gave up on completing the book that was complete in thought and vision. (*Ha-ish ve-ha-etzim* 272)

Because he had planned and envisioned the book for such a long time before he actually wrote it, Agnon may have been inclined to omit the major events (World War II, the creation of the state of Israel) that intervened between the story's intended publication date and its actual one. He may also have attempted to be as faithful as possible to his perception of the events as he experienced them at the time. By analyzing Agnon's story in relation to the two earlier works, I will attempt to show how Agnon uses a different mechanism to reconstruct the symbolic role of the train against the collective post-World War II memory that had come to associate it with the Holocaust.

One of the central elements in the transition to modernity represented by all three authors is the new technology encountered by East European Jews. With trains in particular, because of "the speed that this new means of transport was able to achieve," as Wolfgang Schivelbusch has explained, "what was experienced as being annihilated was the traditional space-time continuum which characterized the old transport technology. . . . The railroad did not appear embedded in the space of the landscape the way coach and highway are but seemed to strike its way through" (36–37). If, on the one hand, the railroad opened up spaces that people could not easily visit before, on the other, it destroyed the space between points (37).

The writers I examine all focus in their railway stories on this lost "traditional" travel space, although each imagines it in a different way. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope" provides us with a theoretical tool that captures the

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between the two languages and literatures, see Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* and "Multilingualism." On whether Jewish literature should be read as continuous and unified, see Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*. On the status of Yiddish in Israel, see Chaver. For further reading on Abramovitsh's work, see Benbajy.

unique characteristics of the use of time and temporality in the Jewish train genre. In his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin introduces the term “chronotope” (literally meaning “time-space,” the term is borrowed from Einstein’s Theory of Relativity) to express the intrinsic connectedness of the temporal and spatial relationships expressed in literature: “In literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible. Likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (*Dialogic* 84). The train functions in the Jewish railway stories as a junction of time, space, and history at different levels of meaning. It offers a new kind of mobility and a shared space for Jews and non-Jews, and its speed symbolizes modernity and the changes it brings (see Presner 24). Despite the train’s assumed virtues, however, Jewish writers chose to confront this very fascination, even idealization, with the reality outside the train. Railway stories also allowed Jewish writers to counter old and new understandings of causality and historical processes (on time and modernism, see, also, Ricoeur, Schleifer, and Kern).

In what follows, I examine this chronotope in order to demonstrate that it served as a literary tool that allowed authors both to represent their ambivalence toward modernity and the new technology associated with it and to reflect on this technology’s influence on Jewish self-perception. In Agnon’s and Sholem Aleichem’s works the train also operates as an integral component in the structure of the narrative. Indeed, the assumed linearity of its forward motion is frustrated in these works in different ways. The stories create a fragmented narrative that aims at imitating a fractured reality in the case of Sholem Aleichem and a desired, perhaps ideal, Jewish text in the case of Agnon.<sup>4</sup>

### Mendele Mocher Sforim’s “Shem and Japheth on the Train”

One of the first stories of the train genre is S.Y. Abramovitsh’s 1890 “Shem ve-Yefet ba-agala” (“Shem and Japheth on the Train”),<sup>5</sup> in which Mendele Mocher Sforim (“Mendele the Book Peddler”)—Abramovitsh’s pen name and the narrator’s persona—describes his first trip on the train:

All this business of a railway journey is new to me. Never in my life have I experienced it, and I am surprised at everything I see. My place is so cramped that I am unable to stir, but can only sit cooped up and perspiring. I begin to think that for my sins my innate Jewish character has somehow been transformed, so that I am no longer able to appreciate these same two privileges of the Seed of Abraham.

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<sup>4</sup> Two previous works have dealt with the topic of modern Jewish travel writing. In *Journeys beyond the Pale—Yiddish Travel Writing in the Modern World*, Leah Garrett breaks down the “binary of center-margin by documenting how Yiddish writers, while located in sites that were marginal in relation to literary high modernism, reoriented the world map by making it a Jewish terrain in their stories” (168). Garrett focuses on the question of space and looks at these stories in relation to literary modernism: “If modernization is motion, then to inhabit the realm of the modern is to be in motion, always moving, never ‘home’” (169). Although I have benefited greatly from Garrett’s excellent discussion of “Shem and Japheth on the Train” and Sholem Aleichem’s *Railroad Stories*, my focus is the way the train functions as a literary tool to reflect the tensions of modernity. Furthermore, while Garrett is interested in the question of space, my main focus is the concept of time. See, also, Presner.

<sup>5</sup> Abramovitsh also translated the story into Yiddish, and it appeared in 1910 under the title “Shem un Yefes in a vogn.” See Rabinovitsh, *Ale Verk fun Mendele Moycher-Sforim*, 13: 3–36.

But . . . the change is not in my own disposition, but in this strange mode of travel. For a coach journey in former times was quite unlike today's journeys by train. Then a man was his own master and free to choose for himself. Even if the travelers were crowded in, two facing two with one extra for makeweight, so that their legs were jammed together like herrings in a barrel—well, they could always get out and take a walk, there was nothing to stop them, and they had the world at their feet. Indeed, this very fact that they had a free choice would mitigate their discomfort, so that their afflictions became, as it were, the trails of love. But in the train there is no feeling of independence. One is like a prisoner, without a moment's respite from durance vile. ("Shem and Japheth" 17–18)<sup>6</sup>

The opposition between the coach and the train represents the contrast between tradition and modernity, locating Mendele in a world that is being threatened by innovative technology and new ideas. Traveling by coach is depicted as a pastoral, almost natural, experience, as opposed to the crowded and artificial experience of the train. The train offers speed and saves *time*, while the coach offers *space* and allows free will:

Time flows on for [the coach passengers], here come evening and morning one day . . . a second day . . . a third . . . there is world enough and time to meditate on all things, to satisfy every desire in the course of their travels . . . . But in contrast the railway train is like a whole city in motion, with its multitude and its uproar, its population split into classes and sects, who carry with them their hatred and envy, their bickering and rivalries and petty deals. Such passengers may traverse the whole world without regard to the grandeur of nature, the beauty of mountains and plains, and all the handiwork of God ("Shem and Japeth" 20–21)

Alluding to the biblical story of creation, Mendele stresses the differences between the past and the present by representing time in the mode in which the traditional Jewish world perceived it, as a circular rather than a linear structure (cf. Garrett 101).<sup>7</sup> Mendele also compares the train to a city and the coach to a family, pointing out yet another change associated with modernity: the move from small towns and traditional communities to the city. The story's numerous allusions to traditional Jewish texts serve as yet another form of struggle against the speed of the train and the changes that modernity brings with it.

Although Mendele's opening description of Jews hurrying hysterically to catch their seats on the train—"There is a haste and confusion, our brethren press on, with bundles of every size and shape in their hands . . . . All jostling one another as they perilously hoist themselves up the ladder to the third-class compartments, where a fresh battle will be fought for places in the congested train" ("Shem and Japeth" 19)—serves as an allegory for Jewish attempts to "join the journey" to modernity on both symbolic and concrete levels, it does not take long before Mendele realizes that a journey by train is not that different from a journey by coach:

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<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew original can be found in *Kol Kitve Mendele Mocher Sforim* 399–405.

<sup>7</sup> Abramowitz echoes here, via his storyteller, a view that was common among both German and East European Jewish intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, according to which there is a clear dichotomy between the traditional Jewish understanding of time and a "newer" understanding fostered by the Jewish Enlightenment, which adopted the Christian concepts of time and history in an attempt to reconstruct a "new Jewish time" (see Sorotzkin, Raz-Krakotzkin, and Meyers). This was perceived as different from the "old Jewish time" in that it included notions of progress and linearity, which, according to views common at the time, were absent from the Old Testament and the Talmudic texts (see Kariv, Elior, and Carlebach). The traditional texts and lifestyle were perceived as circular and static, while modernity seemed to offer mobility and progress, which many Jews welcomed (see, also, Finer, Shvied, and Litvak).

In her recent book on modern Jewish theological and political perceptions of space and place Haviva Pedaya gestures toward the crucial historical connection between the time in which Judaism tried to synchronize itself with the historical process of secularization and the time at which the option to "return to the land" became possible (*Merhav u-makom* 40). See, also, Chowers 22. On new perceptions of Jewish history see Funkenstein, Carlebach et al, and Dan.

stories remain the center of his experience. Indeed, once he is settled in his seat, and after his failed attempt to join the “winds of petty commerce” by selling some books, Mendele starts talking with his neighbor, Reb Moishe, who narrates the story of his friendship with an exiled Polish gentile to whom he gives the following advice: “Life in exile—this precious gift from God’s store—belongs to the Jews, his chosen people. It is ours alone, for no other nation or race in the world has the strength to take it and to bear its weight. And since you, my friend, seem to have won a share in this gift, there is no remedy for you but Judaism” (35).

Reb Moishe does not in fact intend to convert his friend to Judaism—the God of the Hebrews, he says, is “sufficiently burdened with His own Jewish paupers” (35). Rather, he suggests that his gentile friend master the Jewish art of living under the yoke of exile. “It is exile,” he says, “that has given [the Jews] the special characteristics that mark them off from all other peoples” (35). Man needs the *midda* (quality or value) of *orekh ruah* (patience) to survive and live in exile, and it is this skill that turns the Pole into Reb Japheth, the gentile-Jew. In doing so, the Pole must also experience time as the Jews do, with patience and with the ability to tolerate dramatic changes.

The story thus takes an ironic look at the nationalism of the Bismarck chancellorship (see Alter 15–18). Reb Moishe’s definition of the “true” Jewish community opposes the German emphasis on an “organic” national community, since it includes both “Shem” and “Japheth” in the same family. (In the Jewish tradition, Japheth is thought to be the ancestor of the Greeks.) Mendele uses an allusion to Genesis 9:27—“God shall enlarge Japheth and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem”—and to the Midrash—a verse from *Megila* 9, b (“Rabbi Chiya Bar Abba said: ‘The beauty of Yefeth will be in the tent of Shem’”)—to present an alternative to the nationalism and anti-Semitism that characterized the Bismarck chancellorship. The Midrash alludes to questions involving the gentiles’ role in the life of the Jewish people and can be interpreted as granting Jews permission, even encouraging them, to enjoy the beautiful and positive sides of gentile culture. In a story that depicts the tragic consequences of Jewish attempts to be part of the world of the gentiles, however, it is perhaps better understood as a call for the opposite: let the gentiles be part of our lives, sharing our tent—or our train—instead of the Jews sharing theirs.

Through his encounter with Reb Moishe, Mendele learns that the train does not really present a threat to Jewish existence: the Jews keep their ways and traditional sense of time even on their journey toward modernity. The lesson that Reb Moishe teaches Mendele is that Jewish identity is an exilic identity: neither the train nor modernity will change the manner in which Jews accept their suffering as if living outside of time and history. Boarding the train—metaphorically adopting the gentiles’ sense of time—will not change the Jewish self. The train, after all, functions as a small *shtetl*, where Jews do whatever they are used to doing. It is not the train, but “the Germans” who “perform miracles of science, [that] have turned the clock back a thousand generations, so that all of us at this day are living in the time of the flood” (29). The real threats to civilization are nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. This helps explain why Abramovitsh also provides an ironic look at the traditional Jewish perception of history. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi describes it, this perception was “guided by the belief that divine prov-

idence is not only an ultimate but an active causal factor in Jewish history itself” (89). Reb Moishe indeed voices this perception, but Mendele points out an alternative causality, noting that Reb Moishe’s and the Pole’s shared fate is the result not of divine providence but of German nationalism.

Abramovitsh exposes here the symbolic role of the train by countering it with what he sees as a threatening reality. The stories heard on the train confront the narrator—and the story’s readers—with the harsh reality from which the Prussian Jews are escaping. In this respect, the train takes part in history, and its linearity helps shape the Jewish passengers’ stories and histories—or at least that is what they hope. The train also functions as a metaphorical tent, uniting Russian and Prussian Jews as well as gentiles in a common fate, perhaps fulfilling the Jewish fantasy of a shared space that takes them, together with their gentile neighbors, forward to a future devoid of both an age-old anti-Semitism and a new nationalist racism.

### Sholem Aleichem’s Train Stories

The train, as the crossroads of time and space and of tradition and change, also stands at the center of Sholem Aleichem’s *Di ayznban-geshikhtes* (*The Railroad Stories*).<sup>8</sup> The stories in the collection were initially published separately between 1909 and 1910 in literary periodicals, and then as a 1911 book that included twenty stories. The frame of the stories is the train itself, where the narrator, a traveling salesman, records the stories told by the passengers in the third-class train car. The train operates as an isolated space throughout, while the passengers’ stories take their listeners and readers to the train’s different stations. Each story offers a panoramic view of the everyday lives outside the train and exposes the harsh reality of the Pale of Settlement (in Czarist Russia) following the 1905 Revolution (see Miron, “Masa be-ezor ha-dimdumim” 242). The new technological changes that are now part of Jewish lives are represented through the journey on the train and are very much admired by many of the passengers. At the same time, the encounter between Jewish society and these innovations is depicted as potentially disastrous. The common theme in most of the stories, as Dan Miron observes, is the decline of Jewish society and the collapse of its social solidarity. According to Miron, the stories depict a society that no longer functions as a supportive community (242–48). The train symbolizes the attempt to adjust to a new reality that is modern and advanced. At the same time, the stories reveal an attempt to hold on to an old and familiar reality that is doomed to vanish.

Each monologue is subordinated to the phase and length of the trip, as they begin and end when the storyteller begins and ends his journey. This method creates a sense of linearity and imitates the train’s forward motion. At the same time, *Railroad Stories* also questions the kind of historiography that is based on linearity and hierarchy. For example, as soon as a trip begins, passengers start telling their stories simultaneously:

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<sup>8</sup> Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916) is the pen name of Sholem Rabinovitsh, a contemporary of Abramovitsh and a much admired Yiddish author during the first decades of the twentieth century. These two authors, together with Y.L. Peretz, are considered the “fathers” of modern Yiddish prose.

Everyone tried to think of some fresh, juicy item that would make all the others sit up and listen, but no one was able to hold the stage for long. The subject changed every minute. No sooner did it light on the recent harvest—that is, the wheat and oats crop—than it shifted, don't ask me why, to the war with Japan, while after barely five minutes of fighting the Japanese, we moved on to the Revolution of 1905. From the revolution we passed to the Constitution, and from the Constitution it was but a short step to the pogroms, the massacres of Jews, the new anti-Semitic legislation, the expulsion from the villages, the mass flight to America, and all the other trials and tribulations that you hear about these fine days: bankruptcies, expropriations, military emergencies, executions, starvation, cholera, Purishkevitch, Azef . . . (Rabinovitch, *Teveye* 152)

Jumping from one major calamity to another, the text becomes, like the train, a long chain of arbitrarily connected events—a chronicle that parodies deterministic conceptions of historical events.

The power of this principle of cause and effect—in life and in literature—figures in many of the stories and is associated with the tension between traditional and modern narration. Although he seems to glorify modernization and the new technological advances that the Jewish community apparently enjoyed, the *Leydikgeyer* (*The Slowpoke Express*) is the narrator's favorite, since it provides the leisure time required by traditional forms of storytelling: "I have been riding the Slowpoke Express for several weeks now, and I'm still practically in the same place. I tell you, it's magic! Don't think I'm complaining, either. Far from it. I couldn't be more satisfied, because I've seen so many fine sights and heard so many fine tales that I don't know when I'll ever get the chance to jot them all down in my journal" (184).

The Slowpoke Express serves as a metaphor for the traditional Jewish perception of time and space. The narrator admits that he uses the train not in order to get to a certain place, but to hear more stories; this is, after all, the main reason he takes the train in the first place. It is, as Leah Garrett points out, "an ideal setting for slow storytelling, versus the frantic, often prematurely ended, stories of the regular train where new characters constantly intrude with new narrative" (Rabinovitch, *Teveye* 109). One of the stories that parodies the modern perception of time and space is "The Miracle of *Hoshana Rabbah*," which begins with a depiction of the long hours it takes for the Slowpoke Express to enter and leave the station. This opening serves as exposition for the main part of the story, which focuses on an episode that took place in one of these stations, "when the railroad was new, [and] we weren't used to the Slowpoke yet and we were all still curious about it" (188). At the beginning of the story, a Jewish vinegar maker named Berl and a Christian priest are staring at the train's locomotive, admiring its sophisticated and advanced technology. Asked by the priest what he is looking at, Berl answers: "I am looking . . . at one of God's wonders. It's amazing how a ridiculous little thing like turning one throttle this way and another throttle that way can make such a huge engine go" (188).

When Berl argues that he knows how to operate the train—we later learn that in his opinion it is the same as producing vinegar—the priest mocks him, claiming that *kugel* (an Ashkenazi Jewish dish) is the only thing with which the Jew knows how to deal. Berl does not give in, and they end up inside the locomotive, each attempting to show the other how well informed and capable he is regarding this new technology. Suddenly, the locomotive starts moving, leaving the rest of the train and its shocked passengers in the station and beginning a frantic and uncontrolled trip along the Slowpoke's line. Berl tries to press the brake, but the priest prevents him from doing so, arguing that he has done enough

harm and that “the only brake that interests me is seeing you break your neck ” (Rabinovitsch, *Tevye* 192). Berl answers this anti-Semitic remark by stating that Jews value the life of others. And when the priest suggests jumping from the train, Berl replies: “We Jews have a day today called *Hoshana Rabbah*. That’s the day on which the fate of every one of us is sealed in the Book of Life for the year and not only who lives and who dies, but who dies what sort of death. Think of this that way, then: if it’s God’s will that I die, there’s nothing I can do about it” (193). Ultimately, the engine stops by itself when it runs out of coal at the station in the storyteller’s hometown.

The locomotive’s engine functions here as a metaphor for the rapid industrialization process and its aftermath: it will take both Christians and Jews on an uncontrollable journey that neither knows how to end, and it presents their claims to technological mastery as a complete farce. In their frantic journey, the Jew and the Christian priest do display their differences: the Jew expresses his trust in God and articulates Jewish morality, while the priest seems to affirm his old anti-Semitic views; the Jew is eager to find a technical solution to the problem, while the priest seems interested only in his own well-being. However, the storyteller also admits that he cannot tell us what actually happened on the locomotive because he was not there; he relies instead on Berl’s account, which is motivated by Berl’s attempts to prove his own technological advantage over the priest. Berl glorifies his attempts to gain control over the engine, comparing his firmness with the priest’s despair and helplessness. Moreover, Berl’s narrative, like many others in the collection, changes depending upon his audience: when talking to the Jewish narrator, he attributes the train’s sudden stop to a mechanical problem; when speaking to the Christian priest, he points to God’s will.

“The Miracle of *Hoshana Rabbah*” is, however, more than a comment on a fascination with the rapid industrialization process and its unpredictable social results that might bring even Jews and Christians together. Sholem Aleichem also uses the train as a metaphor for the art of storytelling. It did not require a long trip, the narrator notes, for the story of Berl’s journey to develop in different directions, “every one adding some new touch of his own, so that the version reaching Berl’s home was so gruesome that Berl’s wife must have fainted a good ten times before a doctor could be brought” (Rabinovitsch, *Tevye* 191). Like the engine, which is no longer connected to the rest of the train, the story develops independently, no longer subordinated to the events themselves. The Jews in the town, who watch from the outside the events as they unfold, can only guess what the two men are talking about, while Berl’s story is supposed to provide us with a look into the trip from within. Yet readers can never be sure of his reliability, since we are reminded time and again of the narrator’s own limitations as well as Berl’s: “What can I tell you? According to Berl, the vinegar maker of Sobolivke, who swears to the truth of his story with so many oaths that you’d have to believe him even if he weren’t a Jew, he can’t remember the exact order of things” (193). Berl’s unsuccessful attempts to control the engine thus seem to anticipate his unsuccessful attempts to control, like many of the storytellers in the collection, the story he tells.

When everything is over and they both climb down from the engine, the priest, who has been mis-remembering Berl’s name throughout the story (calling him Moshko, Hirshko, Yudko, and so on), finally gets it right, adding: “I never would have guessed you were such a . . . ” (Rabinovitsch, *Tevye* 194). His sentence is never

completed. Perhaps he is acknowledging that, in the end, Berl somehow managed to stop the engine and gain control over the trip, or perhaps he is even reconsidering his anti-Semitic views based on this rare opportunity to actually get to know a Jew. There is, however, a third possibility: perhaps Berl, like his neighbors, has added “some new touch” to the story, creating a “happy ending” that only modern technology could permit—one in which the Jew teaches the Christian a lesson and perhaps causes him to overcome his anti-Semitism.

Like Berl, most of the storytellers in *The Railway Stories* try in vain to control their own lives and be the “engine drivers” of their narratives. The repeated motif of an engine separating from the rest of the train in stories that deal with the Slowpoke Express symbolizes the tension between the old way of life and the new fast-moving reality unfolding in front of the Jewish passengers. For, if the Slowpoke Express allows a good story to flourish, it also stays behind, creating a comic, even grotesque, situation in which the “head” of the train (the engine) runs away from its “body” (see Bakhtin 303–67). In “The Wedding that Came Without Its Band,” this separation of the engine from the train saves the Jews of the town from the atrocities of a pogrom. When they learn from the owner of the telegraph shop—another symbol of technological innovation—that a pogrom is about to unfold and that a gentile mob is on its way to kill them, they manage to arrange for a military unit of Cossacks to come and protect them. But, since the Cossacks come on horses while the violent mob takes the Slowpoke Express, everyone knows, as the storyteller notes, that there is no chance the soldiers will arrive before the mob. Fortunately, however, the Slowpoke Express’s engine arrives without its coaches, and so without the attackers. Only later do we learn that everyone on the train got drunk and forgot to connect the coaches to the engine, and the story ends with praise for the Slowpoke Express: “Well, now, suppose you tell me: shouldn’t our Slowpoke be plated with gold, or at least written up in a story?” (Rabinovitch, *Tevye* 99; trans. slightly modified).

Although the Slowpoke Express’s modern technological features are threatening, its advantage, from the Jewish point of view, is that, like the wagon, it is slow and needs a human to operate it. This traditional element is what saves the Jews, brings the Slowpoke its glory, and makes it worthy of being “written up in a story.” Yet even an engine as slow as this one cannot escape being connected to a modernity that moves in a fast and uncontrolled manner that often leads nowhere. The train’s coaches, on the other hand, embody the leisurely nature of the traditional storytelling. These two opposing forces function as a metaphor for the conflicting Jewish attitudes toward modernity and its new technological advances. On the one hand, there is a fascination with this fast and easy ride, but on the other, it is seen as a threat to Jewish society and its traditional mode of storytelling.

The train thus functions in Sholem Aleichem’s stories as both the space in which the stories are told and the causal force behind the stories themselves. The fragmented nature of this work—like the train’s coaches, each story is isolated from the rest, connected only by the traveling narrator—is also analogous to the fragmented communities it depicts (see Presner 109). In this sense, Sholem Aleichem’s stories present modernity as a force that separates rather than unites. The promised communal-national time that modernity was supposed to bring in fact leaves most Jews isolated from both history and community.

### S.Y. Agnon: The Journey as a Rabbinic Text

Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon's story "In the Railroad Car" was first published in 1954 as part of the collection of stories called *The Book of the Reason of Deeds*.<sup>9</sup> While Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem set their stories on the train in order to counter the speed of the train with the slow and old-fashioned mode of storytelling, Agnon depicts a tension between the modern world represented by the train and the traditional Jewish text itself. Agnon was probably familiar with the works of Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem,<sup>10</sup> and the train functions in his work, as it does in theirs, as a symbol of modernity. However, his project is very different. While Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem present the train as the symbol of a rapidly changing future, Agnon looks at it from a nostalgic perspective and attempts to reconstruct the lives of Galician Jews before World War I, lives whose main feature is learning and discussing traditional Jewish texts.

Agnon scholar Baruch Kurzweil has argued that this attempt is doomed to failure: "Is it really possible [after Auschwitz] to tell the stories of our brothers in Galicia as they were living in the Austro-Hungarian empire?" he asks; "Agnon wants to tell the story of a peaceful period but cannot. Into this trip penetrate the echoes of a different journey and the train moves heavily" (*Masot* 321; my translation). Kurzweil bases his argument on what he calls here the "heavy" motion of the story and the journey (321). The fact that the story does not progress and that the passengers do not arrive at a destination leads him to conclude that this is a dysfunctional train that symbolizes an inability to write an epic narrative in the post-Holocaust world (321–22).<sup>11</sup> However, as I demonstrate below, Agnon's fragmented, non-linear narrative does not reflect the world after Auschwitz, but rather imagines this world as if Auschwitz had never occurred. The narratives that fill the story are not an attempt to depict a fractured post-Holocaust world; rather, they constitute a non-linear story that imitates the non-linearity and polyphony of rabbinic discussions.

Agnon's "Bi-kronin shel Rakevet" describes the encounter of three Hassidic Jews who travel together on a train, conversing with one another and telling stories. The journey comprises the main plot, but the different stories and sub-stories that the passengers produce introduce an alternative plot that contravenes the linear regime of the train and, in a sense, questions the superiority of a linear plot over the fragmented and chaotic nature of the competing individual stories. Employing a somewhat humorous tone, the narrator characterizes the three men

<sup>9</sup> The first chapters of *Sefer tachlit ha-ma'sim* (*The Book of the Reason of Deeds*) first appeared in *Ha'aretz's* weekend magazine, *Tarbut ve-sifrut*, between September 27, 1954, and November 19, 1954. Agnon later included them (with some very minor changes) in his 1962 collection of stories *Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* (*The Fire and the Woods*). For a good introduction to Agnon's work, see Band.

<sup>10</sup> Although Agnon intentionally avoided identifying works he had read, given the popularity of both Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem and the fact that Agnon owned a copy of Sholem Aleichem's *Collected Works*, it seems likely that he had read their train stories.

<sup>11</sup> Kurzweil even quotes in this context Theodore Adorno's famous words: "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch" (322). In his first article on "The Book of the Reason of Deeds," Kurzweil does not mention the Holocaust as the reason for the "heavy" nature of this work (see "Ha-epican Agnon u-Tkufato"). Only after the publication of the story in *The Fire and the Woods* (1962) does he link it to the Holocaust, perhaps because this collection also includes stories ("Ha-siman" ["The Sign"], for example) that deal with its aftermath.

(Reb Avraham Yitzhak, Yitzhak Ya'akov, and Ya'akov Yosef) as three different types of people. Reb Avraham Yitzhak is depicted as *ba'al koma* (a tall and honorable man) and *ba'al torah* (learned in the Torah) (*Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* 142). Reb Yitzhak Ya'akov is described as having no shape and of average height. Reb Ya'akov Yosef has "no appearance and no image, no body and no image of a body."<sup>12</sup> This characterization connects each of the three Jews to a different interpretive approach: Avraham Yitzhak represents an openness to new ideas and pluralistic interpretations of the Jewish text; Yitzhak Ya'akov represents a literal approach of understanding things as they are, without an attempt to look for their hidden or symbolic meaning; and Reb Ya'akov Yosef offers a perspective that questions whether there is a direct correlation between signifier and signified—a point of view that suggests there is no limit to possible interpretations.

The three (and later five) passengers are depicted as the famous holy *ushpizin*: the guests who are invited to sit in the *sukah* in the holiday of Sukkoth. That each of their names is a combination of the name of one of the biblical Patriarchs with that of his son signifies a certain linearity that becomes a bit more complex when Reb Ephraim Yosef (in whose name the father-son order is inverted) and Reb Pinhas Ilia join the discussion.<sup>13</sup> This manipulation of linearity continues throughout the story, which keeps deviating from its main plot in a manner that mimics a Talmudic discussion, in which each statement is challenged by another statement and the different interpretations and narratives create a non-linear text that rarely reaches closure (see, also, Hirschfeld 227).

Agnon's story corresponds in this way to traditional Jewish sources, stubbornly eternal texts that stand solidly in a period in which everything is temporary, provisional, and transient. The train keeps moving forward, but its passengers and the texts they produce or to which they allude do not let the vicissitudes of the period carry them from their timeless realm. As Reb Avraham Yitzhak recalls in one of many moments in the story when a character refers to a childhood memory: "I liked this Chumash (Pentateuch) the most because of its large letters and the paper that was like a parchment, and because of its many commentaries. I did not yet know how to read the commentaries, but they amazed me by their shape and manners (*derech erez*). They respect each other and make themselves small for one another (cf. *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate, Bava Metsia, 33a), and they leave space so as not to crowd one another" (*Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* 157).<sup>14</sup>

While the train runs and its cars push one another, the letters of the old Jewish text represent modesty and mutual respect, allowing the child to enjoy their aesthetic and moral qualities even before he can read. This primordial memory will develop later in the story into more elaborate discussions about the relations between commentary and meaning, the world and its representation, and the limits of representation and interpretation. Agnon's text takes us beyond the social realism of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem. The gap of more than forty years allowed him to have a broader historical perspective on the effect of modernity on

<sup>12</sup> This phrase echoes both the popular formulation of Maimonides' negative theology and (perhaps) its popular formulation in the *piyyut* (liturgical poem) "Yigdal."

<sup>13</sup> Rabbinic tradition closely associates the figures of Pinhas and Elijah, the latter being a reincarnation of the former.

<sup>14</sup> All translations of Agnon's work are mine.

Jewish society, which Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem still lacked. The chronological separation might also explain the fact that the question of modernity bothered Agnon as a threat to the Jewish text and its status in contemporary Jewish lives, not to the physical existence of the Jews. In this work, the trip functions as the main text, while the different stories signify the different rabbinic interpretations. In this respect, Agnon's story is an attempt to show that the traditional Jewish text remains a dynamic and vital force that can be an integral part of modernity. Jews can produce traditional discussions, even while on the train and even in the aftermath of dramatic historical changes. Moreover, Agnon's story itself serves as an example of this very combination of tradition and modernity. His "modernistic" story is based on the structure of traditional texts, and its resemblance to modernist and even postmodernist discourse shows the relevance of the traditional discussion for the contemporary Jewish world and vice versa.

For example, in the midst of one of the discussions of the problem of interpretation and its limits, Reb Ya'akov Yosef voices a skeptical perspective that casts doubt on the functionality of interpretation: "All interpretations are useless . . . Why? Because interpretation leads to interpretation of the interpretation, and interpretation to interpretation to interpretation, at the end the interpretations themselves make themselves a matter of interpretation, and meanwhile the years of a man pass and the interpretations are not yet interpreted" (*Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* 163). This comment on the limitless nature of interpretation leads to a dispute stemming from two different views of the role of interpretation and the relation between language and the objects it designates. When Reb Yitzhak Ya'akov argues that sometimes things are simple enough and do not require any interpretation, Reb Ya'akov Yosef responds with an illustrative example: when performing *Tashlich*,<sup>15</sup> sometimes we can see the world in the water and "sometimes those things in the water deflect the mind from the water itself" (164). An entire conversation about the role of the image and the relationship between the object and its reflection as an image in the water follows. Furthermore, the fact that Reb Ya'akov Yosef is described as a man with "no appearance and no image, no body and no image of a body" (133) links his semantic nihilism to Maimonides' negative theology. If everything is a matter of interpretation, which leads in turn to another interpretation, there is no point in interpretation.

This conversation about the role of interpretation is interrupted when the train suddenly stops. "Why did she stop?" asks the narrator, who then proceeds to answer his own question, echoing in the process the competing hermeneutic positions of both Reb Yitzhak Ya'akov and Reb Ya'akov Yosef: "There are many interpretations and none of them makes sense, but it is possible that one of the important people traveling on the train needed to clean his teeth after his meal and that this is why they stopped the train, or maybe there is a simpler reason, since sometimes the real causes are simpler than we think" (*Ha-esh-ve-ha-etzim* 165). In essence, Agnon uses the train as the setting for an accidental gathering of a few Jewish men in order to create a Talmudic-like discussion of meta-poetic questions and different problems of representation. The format of the discussion is that of a main story and commentaries by different voices, and then commentary on

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<sup>15</sup> The annual Jewish practice, taking place at the beginning of a new year, of symbolically "casting off" the previous year's sins into a natural body of water.

the commentary—precisely the kind of interpretation that Reb Ya'akov Yosef resists. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the train stops again a few pages before the end of *Sefer Takhlit ha-Ma'asim*, and this time the reader learns that the cause of the previous stop was indeed simpler than the narrator had suggested earlier: melting snow caused the railroad tracks to sink. This sudden technical problem is shocking for the Jewish passengers: “The train stopped not in its period and not in its place” (232). This unexpected stop reminds us of what we may have forgotten along the way—that despite the passengers’ interest in the stories, the train functions first and foremost as a machine that carries people from one place to another. Yet we are also reminded that this story has no interest in the final destination of its characters. Indeed, even the characters themselves do not show such an interest, as we learn from Reb Ephraim Yosef’s decision to remain on the train, despite its arrival at his station, so he can hear (and tell) more stories (207–08).

In Agnon’s earlier story “Ba-derech” (“On the Road,” 1945), the train also stops in the middle of the trip. The first-person narrator, one of the train’s passengers, reports that all the other passengers have disappeared and that, although he would normally not mind walking, this time he is very concerned, since it is the eve of the Jewish New Year and he must find a place where he can stay among other Jews and pray (*Samulch ve-nire* 211–20). In both stories, the train’s sudden stops remove the Jews from their secure setting and, in a sense, introduce the protagonists to the arbitrary nature of the machine.<sup>16</sup> In “On the Road,” the man wanders around and the story develops because the train has stopped; in “In the Railroad Car” (“Bi-kronin shel Rakevet”), however, the discussions inside the train *are* the story. The train’s passengers do not seem to mind their specific time of arrival at the final destination, and Reb Avraham Yitzhak even expresses disappointment upon seeing the speed of a passing train: “Loudly and in a hurry the train passed. We did not have a chance to say goodbye to its passengers before she had already gone” (*Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* 148). Soon after, the narrator, or maybe Reb Avraham Yitzhak himself, states:

Look and see, railcars full of Jews, may the evil eye not affect them. These travel here and those travel there, and everywhere they go, God is with them . . . . Seemingly [the train] tears close people apart (*meracheket*), but in fact, inside the train she brings people closer [*mekarevet*]. People who never saw each other find themselves suddenly sitting like one. And even if their concerns are different, and even if it is not always for the best, in one thing everyone is united: in favor of the trip. (*Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* 148)

An eternal, even naïve, optimist, Avraham Yitzhak represents a point of view that welcomes modernization and technological changes as long as they can be accommodated within Jewish life. *Meracheket* literally means “tears apart,” but (in traditional language) also “to keep away from God.” *Mekarevet* means “brings together” (or closer to God). Avraham Yitzhak uses the traditional terminology to take a side in the debate not only on the use of the new technology, but also on modernity and its effect on Judaism as a way of life that aims to maintain itself amid technological innovations. In his view, the “train of modernity” will gather Jews together and bring them closer to the Torah and God, rather than keep them

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to compare these episodes in which the train stops running due to mechanical problems to the way Agnon’s stories depict the bus as an unpredictable vehicle whose schedule cannot be trusted. In some cases, the bus does not even stop to pick up the passengers waiting in the station, leaving them in foreign and dangerous places.

away. It provides the opportunity for Jews to meet new (Jewish) people from different places and to be exposed to each other's stories and perspectives. In this view, perhaps Agnon's own (see Kurzweil, Masot 351), modernization and modernity should not be seen as a threat, but rather welcomed as a chance to revive the Jewish pluralism reflected in traditional Jewish texts. This attitude also explains Reb Avraham Yitzhak's comments on the advantages printing provides for adapting the famous Ashkenazi *Siddur* (prayer book) of Rabbi Ya'akov Emden (1697–1776) to Hassidic custom (*nosach Sfarad*): "Come and see how God does better and better with each generation. Reb Yudil Hasid when he received the Siddur of the Shlah had to add with his own handwriting a few things that were not there, because that Siddur was written in Ashkenazi custom and Hasid was praying according to the Sfaradi custom. But Avraham Yitzhak, who is the descendant of Reb Yudil Hasid, found the Siddur that he liked ready for him in the exact way he desired" (*Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* 233).<sup>17</sup>

Reb Avraham Yitzhak sees the technological changes that modernity brings as a blessing, since they enhance religious life and make it easier to pursue. The story about the new *siddur*, which became more accessible through the invention of print, also demonstrates an ideological stance regarding the influence of modern resources on traditional Judaism. From the point of view voiced by Reb Avraham Yitzhak, technological progress contributes to the flourishing of Jewish life and should not be viewed as a threat. The allusion to Reb Yudil Hasid serves as another meta-poetic device, pointing not only at the continuity between the different historical generations, but also at the way his own text functions in this "Jewish narrative" of technological progress and modernization.

The railway in Agnon's story thus has both a thematic role, symbolizing modernity and innovation, and, as in Sholem Aleichem's stories, a structural one: the train dictates the length of the different stories, and when it stops the stories stop as well. Although the different stories and their commentaries, produced by the train's passengers, deal with the relation between the text and the world in general, they also repeatedly allude to the relation between traditional Jewish texts and modernity. By mimicking the fragmented and non-linear nature of Talmudic discussion, Agnon offers a modern version of the traditional Jewish text. Choosing the train as the space in which this text is situated is more than symbolic; it shows that Agnon himself believed that these texts can survive and even be nourished and enriched by modernity.

## Conclusions

Though Abramovitsh's and Sholem Aleichem's works were written less than twenty years apart, Sholem Aleichem chooses to take a somewhat more historical view of the influence of the train on Jewish society, placing his work a few decades after the first use of the train. Abramovitsh, on the other hand, places his story in the early days of Jewish train travel, presenting his narrator as a first-time traveler.

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<sup>17</sup> Reb Yudil Hasid is the main character of Agnon's first novel *Hakhnasat Kalah* (*The Bridal Canopy*), published in 1931. Rabbi Yesha'ya Helevi Horwitz (1558–1630) was a prominent rabbinic author and mystic.

While for Agnon the train is located in the past, for his characters, as for Abramovitsh's and Sholem Aleichem's, the train remains the symbol of a remarkable future.

Like Sholem Aleichem and Abramovitsh, Agnon represents the ambivalence of Jewish culture towards modernity by means of a clear-cut distinction between the train's exterior and interior. Once a person becomes a passenger on the train, he becomes a part of a community of storytellers; he gets a voice. Agnon uses this distinction to parody the different classes. When the train stops for the second time in the journey, not only do the stories stop, but suddenly—and for the first time in the story—the wealthy and always happy Reb Avraham Yitzhak is depicted as the most vulnerable of the five. In a last round of characterizations in the story, Agnon describes each passenger's ability to adjust to the new reality outside the train. The more the character is "heavy with things," the more he finds it hard to adjust. The last episode of *The Book of The Reason of Deeds*, which Agnon never finished, therefore occurs outside the train, when the passengers try to find alternative ways to get to their final destinations. For Kurzweil, this abrupt end is a clear allusion to the Holocaust. However, I would argue that Agnon uses it as yet another commentary on modernity. Reb Avraham Yitzhak, who earlier in the story came to symbolize trust in modernity, is depicted as someone who cannot really function when the machine disappoints. The simplest and "lightest in things," Reb Pinhas Ilia, is the happiest of the five; he can pray and study Torah anywhere. The journey ends, in short, with the figure of the wandering Jew; carrying only a stick, his prayer shawl, and his phylacteries, he is not dependent on modern innovations such as the train.<sup>18</sup> Reb Pinhas Ilia's figure embodies traditional Judaism and its ability to survive modernity and its aftermath.

In all three works the distinction between what is exterior and interior to the train represents the distinction between time and space. The inside of the train becomes a space that is timeless, whereas what is outside—the road—becomes an arena involving time but not space (the train arrives nowhere—or at least, we do not know or care about where it stops). This brings us back to Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope. One of the main types of chronotopes that Bakhtin discusses is that of the path or the road, where coincidental encounters take place at a specific time and place: "The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road, the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people—representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages—intersect at one spatial and temporal point" (*Dialogic* 243).

Thinking of the train as a kind of road-chronotope may provide us with a better understanding of its functions in this specific genre of stories. Bakhtin describes the different kinds of chronotopes as designators of different genres and periods of time and explains that the choice of a specific chronotope is closely related to the historical, social, and economic circumstances of the period a novel addresses. This is why, he says, the salon was a typical chronotope in the nineteenth-century novel and the castle functioned as both a site and a symbol of history in the Gothic novel of the eighteenth century (245–47). In light of this analysis, I suggest that the train is a typical modern chronotope in Jewish stories at the turn of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. The speeding train and the interior of

<sup>18</sup> On the myth of the Wandering Jew, see Hazan Rokem and Dundas.

the railcars symbolize the conflict between dynamic changes and timeless space. These stories reflect the ambivalence that Jews felt toward the rapid changes of modernity and their dilemma about whether to take part in this process or to remain outside of it.

The fact that Agnon can look at these changes in retrospect makes his attempt to reconstruct their perception by his pre-World War I Galician characters even more telling. Throughout the story, his characters comment time and again on changes that reflect a remarkable future. Although he knows that the story's readers could not help but realize that this optimism would be proved tragically wrong, Agnon insists on not allowing this historical knowledge to overshadow the reality of what he depicts. The fact that Agnon meant to write this story before the Holocaust, and that he remained committed to writing it without letting the Holocaust affect it, raises interesting questions about the ability of the author to imagine a more distant past, while ignoring major recent events.

Writing to readers who lived in a completely different reality, remote from the language, culture, and religious life of his characters, Agnon had to overcome an even bigger obstacle. Following the publication of the first chapters of *The Book of the Reason of Deeds*, Gershom Schocken, the editor of *Ha'aretz*, wrote to Agnon asking that he try harder to make his stories more accessible, asserting that "even clear devotees of yours found them hard to read."<sup>19</sup> Agnon's attempt to offer a modern version of such traditional discussions was not welcomed by his Israeli readers, many of whom were not familiar with the rabbinic texts. The fractured and non-linear multiple stories within the work made reading it even more difficult.

In all of these works, the journey represents a collective experience that is often contrasted with an individual narrative. The shared journey is a new experience, and many of the characters find a voice in this new collective space. Each of the writers discussed in this article contrasts the linearity and speed of the train with the forces that slow down or even stop the trip altogether. In each of the stories, the narration itself resists this forward movement and instead represents the traditional, un-modernized element that diverts the train away from its final destination. Agnon's Reb Yitzhak Ya'akov summarizes this tension metaphorically: "Time behaves like the train and the train behaves like time and neither bears the laziness of the other" (*Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* 161).

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<sup>19</sup> A letter written November 25, 1954. Emunah Yaron's archive. Quoted in Laor, *Hayey Agnon*, 692.

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