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Content

- 7 *Then and Now*
An introduction by the Editor
Alexander Nachaj

Articles

- 11 *Freeing the Muslim Other to Conform*
Spiritual Group-Based Affiliation and the State in Québec &
France
Anelynda Mielke-Gupta
- 31 *Maskilim in the Mishpuche*
The Changing Family Structure as Portrayed within Yiddish
Literature
Lily Chapnik
- 44 *The Study of Religion as an Exercise in Problematization*
Some Meta-Theoretical Considerations
Elyse MacLeod
- 67 *Analyse structurelle du récit de la Pentecôte*
Pour une interprétation des « langues comme de feu »
Joseph E. Brito
- 91 *Disciplining Yoga*
Foucauldian Themes in Sivananda Yoga Practice
Mark Eaton

Book Review

- 107 ***Male Daughters, Female Husbands:
Gender and Sex in an African Society***
Joanna R. Schacter, reviewer
- 111 ***Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping
of Modern African American Religion***
Vaughn Booker, reviewer
- 116 ***Private Lives, Public Deaths:
Antigone and the Invention of Individuality***
Ildikó Glaser-Hille, reviewer
- 119 ***Queer Christianities:
Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms***
Daniel Santiago Saenz, reviewer
- 123 ***Call for Papers: Sexed Religion***

Maskilim in the Mishpuche

The Changing Family Structure as Portrayed Within Yiddish Literature

Lily Chapnik

Abstract

The turn of the twentieth century signified a period of great change and transition for the Jews of Eastern Europe, as Enlightenment ideals penetrated their sensibilities and challenged the traditional paradigms which had defined them until then. This begs the question: how did the great writers of the period from within the community try to address this dynamic and the manner in which it affected the Jewish community as a whole? This paper analyses the work of four major Yiddish authors from this period, and examines how they used the Jewish family structure as a microcosm by which to analyse the changing nature of Judaism in Europe. Through the work of Sholem Abramovitch (1835-1917), also known as 'Mendele Macher Sforim'; Sholem Rabinovitch (1859-1916), also known as 'Shalom Aleichem'; Israel Joshua Singer (1893-1944); and David Bergelson (1884-1952), the changing relationships of parents to children and husbands to wives are analyzed in reference to the influence of modern Enlightenment culture infiltrating Jewish life. It is asserted that the family structure therefore acts as an important microcosm of European Jewish History within Yiddish literature.

Key Words: Eastern European Judaism, Modernity, Enlightenment, twentieth century Yiddish Literature, Sholem Abramovitch, Sholem Rabinovitch, I.J. Singer, David Bergelson.

The family unit was one of the most important structures supporting the traditional Eastern European Jewish lifestyle, allowing it to exist and function as a culturally distinct entity within its surroundings. Each member of the family had their own role to fulfill in order to maintain a religiously observant household that followed Jewish laws, customs and rituals: the father was responsible for ensuring the Jewish education of his children; the mother kept a Jewish household and enabled her husband to study; the children learned how to fulfill these roles when the time came to get married and start families of their own.¹ However, as the prominence of Enlightenment values increased in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries within Eastern European Jewish communities, the centrality of these

familial rituals and roles began to be challenged. As “women readers [of Enlightenment literature] introduced new ideas into their families which contributed to the undermining of the values of traditional society... [and] schools with curricula based on the educational ideals of Haskalah [began to be] established,”² the basic philosophical and religious tenants that had held the Jewish family unit together began to be tested.

Of the countless Jewish individuals that were affected by these changes within the Jewish family unit, notably were the young men who would grow up to become great authors of Yiddish literature. Each of these authors experienced childhoods that were traditional, and as they became secularized in adulthood—due to this influence of Enlightenment ideals—they chose to comment on these changes in the Jewish family structure in their works. Sholem Abramovitch (1835-1917), also known as ‘Mendele Mocher Sforim,’ was “born...in the tiny provincial Belorussian town of Kapulye into a middle class shtetl family”; in his novella *The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third*, he comments on his childhood experiences through “subject[ing] the shtetl to a scathing exposé and present[ing] its traditional culture as deeply flawed.”³ This is accomplished through his depictions of broken family structures within the world of his childhood. Sholem Rabinovitch (1859-1916), better known by his pseudonym ‘Sholem Aleichem,’ was born into a Ukrainian Hasidic family.⁴ He depicts the challenges that befell the Russian and Ukrainian Jewish family structure throughout the narrative of his serialized work *Tevey the Dairyman*, which depicts the fictional milkman Tevey and his family who represent a “paradigm of the fate of Russian Jewry”⁵ as they slowly modernize. Israel Joshua Singer (1893-1944) was raised in a traditional household with a Hasidic father and a non-Hasidic mother, and he seeks to capture both this tension and the inter-generational tension that characterizes modernization through his dynastic novel *The Brothers Ashkenazi*. David Bergelson (1884-1952)—who received a traditional Jewish education—focuses on the demise of shtetl life in his somewhat nihilistic novel *The End of Everything*, which follows the narrative of a privileged, upper middle class female protagonist, Mirele, as she searches with futility for a sense of meaning in life. These modern authors of Yiddish literature thus deliberately set out to record and comment upon the familial paradigm shifts that were occurring during their era within Eastern Europe, especially those regarding the relation of parents to children and husband to wife.

Within these works a common theme is the evolving nature of the Jewish family structure through the exploration of changes within the parent-child relationship. A paradigm of this can be found within Sholem Aleichem's serialized work *Tevye the Dairyman*, as the stories collectively detail the rejection of paternal authority in favor of independence and self-sufficiency amongst the main character Tevye's five daughters, especially in regards to their romantic and marital lives. Sholem Aleichem published these stories between 1894 and 1916, when this issue would have been especially pertinent to his readers, seeing as "the institution of marriage remained largely traditional until the twentieth century...[it was] understood as an economic alliance between families and was under strict parental control."⁶ As these daughters—living at the beginnings of the modern period of Russian Jewish history—increasingly fall in love and choose their life partners on their own, their father Tevye's authority is increasingly undermined, thus mirroring real-life situations of agency amongst young people across Eastern Europe who were becoming engaged without the involvement of their parents or a matchmaker.

The first daughter, Tsyatl's, insistence on marrying the poor tailor Motl Kamzoyl for love instead of the rich butcher her father arranged is the first—and most basic—challenge to Tevye's authority of the five. Although Tevye never insists that she marry her pre-arranged husband, Lazer Wolf, he does express his wish that the old system of patrimonial authority remain in place when he says to her: "you, Tsyatl, just weren't meant to be a fine lady with a house full of grand things and two old parents who can finally enjoy themselves a bit after keeping their nose to the grindstone all their poor, luckless, miserable, penniless lives."⁷ The parent-child relationship is here shown to have shifted, because the daughter's agency in choosing her own husband negates her former responsibility to marry the mate that is in the best interests of her parents. Hodl, the second daughter, challenges her father's authority a bit more radically—not only do her and her fiancé not ask for Tevye's permission or blessing before becoming engaged, but her fiancé, Pertchik, is involved in communist ideals and Hodl moves to Siberia to accompany him in his exile after he is arrested. When Tevye likens his feelings of abandonment to those of a hen crying out for her young, Hodl replies: "of course, I feel sorry for the hen, but just because the hen squawks, is the duckling never to swim?"⁸ Hodl thus prioritizes her love for her husband and her right to independence over the possibility of spending her life tied to her parents, which displays the increasing level of emancipation available to Eastern European Jewish youth.

In the case of Tevye's third daughter, Chava, the shift towards Enlightenment ideals in their shtetl pulls her away from Judaism entirely and estranges her from her family. Her non-Jewish lover, Chvedka, is attractive to her because he is learned, "like a second Ghoriky,"⁹ which displays the propensity of young Eastern European Jews towards universal ideals rather than exclusively Jewish pursuits. When Chava attempts to explain her choice to her father he chooses to reject her, saying to the reader: "do you think I didn't want to turn around too and take one last look at my daughter? But Tevye is no woman, Tevye puts Satan behind him."¹⁰ He and his family then sit shiva for Chava as if she were dead. Through Chava's rejection of Judaism in favour of modern ideals, the Jewish Eastern European parent-child relationship has been stretched too far for redemption. When the following daughter, Shprintze, defies her family's honour by becoming pregnant out of wedlock by a flighty acquaintance of Tevye's named Ahronchik, Tevye realizes his own lack of control over his daughter's behavior, musing to the reader, "did you ever hear the likes of it? He's there every day and I know nothing about it!" He then chides himself, saying, "if that's how you let yourself be led about by the nose, you'll be bought and sold like the donkey you are!"¹¹ After Shprintze commits suicide from the shame of her situation, the fate of first four daughters' marriages are sealed as being firmly beyond Tevye's control.

Tevye seeks redemption from the marriage of his fifth daughter, Bielke, and almost succeeds: the old techniques of betrothal make a reappearance, and Bielke marries the man that a matchmaker proposed to her, agreed upon by Tevye. However, it is apparent from the beginning that this ancient method of procuring a marriage is no longer viable in the modern world. Although her husband Podhotzur is rich, he otherwise repulses Tevye, who describes him as a "fat, bald, whinnying loudmouth."¹² Ironically enough, although this is the only one of his daughters' matches that he approved, this match turns out to be the worst for Tevye's interests in the end. Shortly after their honeymoon Podhotzur expresses the sentiment that, "with a business like his, a reputation like his, a public position like his, he can't afford to have a cheesemonger for a father-in-law,"¹³ and thus attempts to force Tevye to move to the Land of Israel. So, although Tevye did succeed in exercising authority over the marriage it still turned out to be a massive failure for both him and his daughter, proving that the Old World method of parental control over children's marriages is outdated. The different polemics Sholem Aleichem employs in Tevye the Dairyman against the

old-fashioned practice of parental control over their children's marriages serves to redefine the relationship between the parents and their children.

In I. J. Singer's novel *The Brothers Ashkenazi* the changing relationship between parents and children within the Jewish community is also examined, but in this work both the old-fashioned and the more modern paradigms of parent-child relationships are criticized for their shortcomings. The story's main focus lies in the narrative surrounding the Ashkenazi family, a dynasty of businessmen working in the active and growing garment industry in the Polish city of Lodz. The story opens with the birth of twin boys— Simcha Meir and Jacob Bunem—to a rich and business-savvy yet piously Hasidic father and unhappy mother, and follows their journey into modernization as they embrace secular culture and cast off their religious background. Their father, Abraham Hersh Ashkenazi, is cast as a neglectful father on the basis of his fervent Hasidism: he neglects to attend his sons' circumcision in favour of spending Passover with the Warka rebbe, justifying his absence to himself by insisting that "a number of impoverished Warka Hasidim were looking forward to a trip at his expense...how would it look if he presented the rabbi the silver Elijah's cup on Shavuot instead of on Passover?"¹⁴ To the reader this seems like a poor reason for missing the birth and circumcision of his children, especially as Singer employs pitiful language on the part of Abraham's wife, who 'bleats' in an attempt to convince him to stay, insisting that she "would never endure the shame of it"¹⁵ if she is forced to circumcise her sons alone, which indeed she is when her husband does not heed her concerns. When the children are older Abraham does not attempt to maintain a meaningful relationship with them, instead choosing to "live by one rule—children are always wrong, and a father is always right."¹⁶ This attitude leads him to use corporal punishment on both sons when he perceives them to be misbehaving. This indifferent relationship between a Hasidic father and his sons serves to negatively portray the Hasidic model of parenting, which here seems to be characterized by neglect and harsh, non-constructive discipline.

As the novel progresses and the sons grow up, marry, and start families of their own, their relationships toward their own children are also characterized negatively. For this generation, however, neglect appears as a result of the influence of modernity rather than religiosity. As industrialization took hold in Lodz, especially during the interwar period, the Jewish businessmen who were successful in the textile industry—the second generation of merchants in the novel—were characterized by

affluence and a move away from religiosity towards the more fashionable secularism, which was seen as a means to further their upward mobility.¹⁷ This demographic move is characterized especially through the elder son Simcha Meir, who is described throughout the novel with adjectives such as ‘prodigy’ and ‘genius’, first in Talmudic studies and then in business as he casts off his Hasidic identity. However, for all of his acumen in business, he lacks compassion and skill as a father and a husband. As the novel describes:

*[While at work] he often forgot that he had children, a daughter in addition to a son. He rarely saw them, seldom spoke to them. If they asked him to dandle them on his knee or throw them in the air, he shooed them off to their mother. ‘Frightfully busy’, he mumbled.*¹⁸

Simcha Meir’s indifference towards his children haunts him in his old age, for when he resolves to “do everything he could to begin a new existence, one that would make up for his previous mistakes”¹⁹ towards the end of his life, he finds that “the years of estrangement wouldn’t let themselves to be erased overnight.”²⁰ His relationship with his children remains strained despite his best efforts. He is left feeling profoundly alone and remorseful, being “appalled by the vastness of the rooms, the emptiness of the unused wings”²¹ of the massive house that he procured with his accumulated wealth, that he now cannot enjoy due to the fact that his family treats him with nothing more than cordiality after his mistreatment of them in their youth. The novel therefore seeks to comment on the parenting methods that personify the societal changes occurring within Lodz, as both the first-generation religious Hasid and the second-generation ambitious businessman are neglectful of their children and cause long-lasting suffering.

David Bergelson’s novel *The End of Everything* comments upon the changing relationships of parents towards their children within the Jewish family in late tsarist Russia. A level of uncertainty marked the beginning of the twentieth century for wealthier Russian Jews: as the tsarist regime was coming to an end many Jews were choosing to move out of the smaller shtetls in droves, heading towards the larger cities which offered a greater range of opportunity.²² The instability caused by this demographic shift is reflected in the novel, which portrays a “radical sociocultural change from an old world that was dying to a new world that had not yet fully come into

being.”²³ The uncertainty of this new world is personified by the narrative of the protagonist, a young Jewish woman named Mirele. In her futile search for meaning as her world changes around her, she finds that “both traditional and modern Jewish family life are intolerable to her;”²⁴ and that she is therefore unable to commit to any meaningful relationships within her Jewish community framework, be it with her parents or with any one of her many suitors.

Her relationship with her father, Reb Gedalye Hurvitz—who is described as “an absent-minded Torah scholar with little head for business”²⁵—is weak and insubstantial, as evidenced by the fact that Mirel does not even go to her father’s bedside when she knows that he is dying.²⁶ Mirel’s indifference towards her father can be attributed to several factors, the most obvious one being her constantly unsatisfied personality—“everything around her seems unendurably detestable to her;”²⁷ including her own family. However, another reason for her lack of connection to her father could be the prominent generational gap in values that is obvious between them. This gap reflects a void in the greater Jewish community, a void that separates the older generation, who feel comfortable with tradition, from the younger, who wish to move away from it. While Reb Gedalye considers himself religious, as he is portrayed as practicing Jewish law and reading religious texts throughout the novel, “he fails to bring up his daughter with any sense of religion,”²⁸ a claim which is supported by Mirele herself, who alleges that “from childhood on she’d never been taught how to be religious.”²⁹ Deprived of this method of spiritual fulfillment with nothing else to fill its place, Mirele is left feeling “superfluous and forlorn;”³⁰ without a greater sense of purpose or meaning.

Although she had “always been pampered at home”³¹ materially by her parents, the relationship between them is meaningless. By the time of Reb Gedalye’s death, “Mirel is both unwilling and unable to inherit anything, whether material or spiritual, from her father;”³² due to both his bankruptcy later in life and his lack of willingness to devote his time towards enriching his daughter’s religious education. The level of indifference between parents and children within the novel only deepens when Mirele becomes pregnant and chooses to abort her child rather than devote herself to motherhood. Her aforementioned self-preoccupation prevents her from perceiving any joy in the situation, and she is only able to see the potential child as a “yoke”³³ to her freedom and independence, insisting, “she couldn’t be a mother...she didn’t want to bear a child.”³⁴ Her ambivalence towards her

progeny, and her subsequent termination of its existence, is reflective of Bergelson's literary comment upon the declining quality of parent-child relationships as the Jewish shtetl deteriorates in Russia, to the point where parents no longer even care for the existence of their children.

Another family relationship subject to analysis by Yiddish literature was that of the liaison between husband and wife. As the Enlightenment reached Eastern Europe and women began to be "allowed...to function as significant agents of social change,"³⁵ the previous disparity in power and respect between the sexes began to diminish within the patriarchal framework of Jewish traditional society, greatly affecting the marital dynamic in the household. 'Mendele Mocher Sforim,' the so-called 'grandfather of Yiddish Literature,' subtly voices his support for this sociocultural change within Jewish shtetl life in his novella *The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third*, where his use of satire negatively highlights traditional Jewish marital paradigms. The novella centers on two comical male characters, Benjamin and Sendrel, whose perceived masculinity and competence are challenged through comparison with their wives. Benjamin dreams of travelling to the land of Israel, but lacks the knowledge base or material means that would allow him to have any independence or mobility, as "he didn't have a farthing to his name, having spent all his days in the study house while his wife struggled to make a living."³⁶ Mendele is here criticizing a real-life paradigm within the traditional Eastern European marriage, a paradigm which consisted of "[a] woman breadwinner who lets her husband devote all his time to the study of Torah and to the fulfillment of his religious vocation."³⁷ As Mendele highlights, this old-fashioned marital archetype serves to disempower both husband and wife: the husband lacks many skills that would allow him to be more self-sufficient; the wife is forced to carry the stressful financial and domestic burdens on her own.

As incompetent and fanciful as Benjamin seems in comparison to his wife, however, he pales next to Mendele's colourful description of Benjamin's friend Sendrel, whose relationship with his wife further satirizes the gender roles that characterized traditional Jewish marriage in the shtetl setting. Sendrel is characterized by emasculation and defeat in comparison to his dominant wife—she "wore the pants and let him know it, and his fate at her hands was a bitter one."³⁸ This dynamic forces him to perform all the housework usually delegated to the female of the house, and earns him the status of being "the butt of every joke."³⁹ He is even referred to as

“Dame Sendrel,” and is described as “wearing a calico dress and having a kerchief on [his] head”⁴⁰ on the day that he and Benjamin set out for their journey, which serves to completely strip Sendrel of his manhood and replace it with femininity. Mendele’s cartoonish and somewhat repulsive characterizations of both Sendrel and his wife, combined with the toxicity of their relationship within the context of Jewish gender roles, serves to further criticize the traditional marital paradigm. What emerges is a satire of the Jewish wife’s de facto dominance over her husband due to her relative independence in the workplace, and of the Jewish husband’s dependency due to his Talmudic lifestyle.

Just as the old-fashioned and modern archetypes of parent-child relationships were criticized in *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, so does Singer also negatively comment upon both paradigms with respect to the relationship between husband and wife. Abraham Hersh Ashkenazi’s neglect does not only affect his twin sons, but also touches his wife profoundly. She “hadn’t enjoyed a happy moment since her marriage” due to her husband’s prioritization of both his Hasidism and his business, as “he was [always] either away on business or at his rabbi’s”⁴¹ instead of spending time with his family. However, while Abraham’s wife, the twins’ mother, knew that this “was the woman’s lot, and... accepted it”⁴² due to her own strict Hasidic upbringing, such is not the case with their son Simcha Meir’s wife, Dinele. The daughter of a rich and lenient Hasidic family, Dinele is educated at an elegant, private secular girls’ school, where she is able to gain some perspective surrounding her religious upbringing and her betrothed. She becomes “deeply ashamed... [to be] marrying a Hasidic youth in a long gabardine,” especially as she had already fantasized that “she would only marry a knight, a nobleman,”⁴³ a hope inspired by her interaction with non-Jewish fairy tales and stories. Her exposure to cultural paradigms outside the Hasidic framework and her subsequent internal rejection of the religiosity associated with it, is indicative of the social more that existed in this time period among rich religious families to educate their daughters in secular schools, subverting the traditional Jewish commandment to prevent girls from delving into serious religious text study.⁴⁴ Dinele’s modernized views mark her as different from the preceding generation of women, as she is repelled by her husband not only for his maltreatment of her, but also due to his religiosity at the time of their marriage—she is “appalled by Hasidi[sm],”⁴⁵ much “prefer[ing] her school, a place of decorum and gentility.”⁴⁶ Dinele’s dichotomy between her secular education

and her betrothal to a Hasidic man exposes Singer's criticism of the Hasidic cultural paradigm of arranged marriages, highlighting the practice as not only irrelevant to the modernizing world, but also profoundly hurtful for those who are forced to engage in it.

A particularly profound analysis of traditional Jewish marital paradigms within a modernized context can be found within Bergelson's novel *The End of Everything*. The main protagonist, Mirel, experiences "relationships with men [which] are always paralyzed by her image of life after marriage, which presents itself to her as a vision of endless boredom, isolation, and hopelessness."⁴⁷ This makes her unable to commit to a single man in order to marry him, thus challenging the notion that traditionally raised Jewish women are obligated to marry at all. Her first engagement is to a man named Velvl Burnes at the age of seventeen—she cites "some undefined longing"⁴⁸ as her impetus—however breaks off this engagement on a whim, only to marry Shmulik Zaydenovski, whom she divorces after several months of marriage before she travels to an unknown location at the end of the novel to seek fulfillment in her life. Mirel's unhappiness in her romantic affairs and her constant searching for meaning that cannot be found can be attributed to the fact that in terms of her place in Jewish women's history, she is "nothing more than a transitional point in human development,"⁴⁹ trapped between two periods of thriving Jewish life while belonging fully to neither. The question she asks of herself, "why on earth should one go on living in utter boredom there in that desolate shtetl?"⁵⁰, displays that her modernized sensibilities prevent her from living a fulfilling life through the old-fashioned paradigm, while the fact that she "does nothing to establish an independent life for herself"⁵¹ makes her a sorry candidate for the more modern city life. This sense of groundlessness translates to her romantic narrative, in which she is forced to create a new sexual paradigm, that of a single woman, in order to seek the liberated existence which she craves. This is exemplified by her mother-in-law's remarks surrounding Mirel's prompt and seemingly unreasonable divorce: "there's never been anything like this since the world began. It's unheard of."⁵² Mirel is caught on the brink of changing Jewish marital customs in Eastern Europe, and thus it could well be true that her actions are "unheard of," as she is forging a new relational paradigm for Jewish women in this time of transition. Bergelson therefore renders the traditional sentiments surrounding marriage in the Jewish community as completely irrelevant in the modern day, including the notion that women are even required to marry at all.

The Yiddish literary authors Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, I. J. Singer and Dovid Bergelson all examine, in unique ways, the trajectory of the changing Jewish family unit as it confronts modernity. As the Enlightenment-era ideas of liberation and freedom swept across Eastern Europe, children began to rebel against the paradigms that had allowed parents to control their progeny for generations, while wives struggled against social mores that had previously bound them to the will of their husband. As the bonds that had held Jewish families together for centuries—such as strict interpretations of Jewish law and gender roles—began to loosen and fall away, the Jewish family and its members were forced to reconsider their identities. Who is a ‘Jewish father’ if not a Talmudist, and what defines a ‘Jewish mother’ if not homemaking? These questions of identity follow us to this very day as we are confronted with our own societal changes that affect the Jewish family structure, such as the legalization of gay marriage and the increasing number of interfaith families. The questions that the authors of Yiddish literature asked concerning new methods of Jewish identity within the family structure, and the issues that these questions raised, are still very pertinent today, if only for slightly different reasons than during the period that characterized the turn of the last century.

Notes

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40. Ibid., 323, 328.
41. Singer, *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, 12.
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45. Singer, *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, 80.
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