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A Teller of Tales, 1985.

A TELLER OF TALES

SERMON

April 28, 1985

I have a trivia question for you. If you wanted to look up Shalom Aleichem in the encyclopedia how would you go about it? I faced this question several weeks ago. Curt Leviant, a fine writer in his own name and a frequent translator of Yiddish literature into English, has brought out the only parts of an autobiography which Shalom Aleichem completed before his death in 1916. The writer intended his autobiography to consist of ten parts, but completed only the three which have now been translated and published. I had been asked to review this book. In preparation I reread a number of the short stories and novellas of Shalom Aleichem and decided to remind myself of the basic facts of his life.

How do you look them up? Believing as I do that encyclopedia editors are fairly organized folk, I assumed that they would treat a pen name as they would a real name, so I picked up the "A" volume and looked under Aleichem; but no Shalom Aleichem. While at this task I began to wonder why Shalom Aleichem had used a pen name in the first place. After all he was not one of those Jewish writers who in order to pass as an English, French or German literati adopted an assimilated name to give themselves instant cultural credentials. If you are going to write in Yiddish and take the pen name of Shalom Aleichem,

you are, obviously, not out to create camouflage. So why did he take a pen name?

His reasons are telling of that time and place. Shalom Aleichem was born in 1859, in the tiny Ukrainian village of Voronko. His father, Nochem Rabinowitz, a small businessman who would later suffer reversals, was one of a type not uncommon then, but now no longer familiar: the determinedly modern traditionalist. Nochem had been trained in Torah and Talmud, but had become what was called a Maskil. Maskil comes from the same root as sechel, intelligence, good sense. Instead of spending his free time studying Talmud in the shul, the Maskil drank tea at an inn and discussed Pushin and Russian politics. The Maskil knew that there was a larger world out there and was, by necessity, an autodidact as far as general knowledge was concerned. To a man like Nochem Rabinowitz, Yiddish was the language of the marketplace and of women; not of "literature." Maskilim such as he wrote articles in Hebrew even though they could be read only by a limited audience. Few shtetl Jews, contrary to general belief, could speak or write Hebrew. Indeed, the limitations of Hebrew competency to the intelligentsia was one of its major appeals. The Maskil felt himself superior.

A dutiful son, Shalom did not want to disappoint his father, so when he began to write in Yiddish, for pleasure and profit, he choose to hide this fact.

Having reminded myself of pen names, I decided the encyclopedia had listed Shalom under "R", Shalom Rabinowitz.

I pulled out the "R" volume, but no Rabinowitz, Shalom. Now I felt sure I knew where Sholom Aleichem was hiding, under "S" for Sholom. I looked under 'Sho.' I found Sholom Asch, but not Sholom Aleichem. For their own reasons the Israeli editors of the new Encyclopedia Judaica had turned the Yiddish Sholom into the Hebrew Shalom, though I would gamble that few, if any, ever addressed Sholom Aleichem as Shalom Aleichem. A Yiddish writer deserves the Yiddish pronunciation of his name; still, I suspect Sholom Aleichem would find this confusion over a name appropriate. After all, he was of a generation which was never really sure who they were or what their names should be.

Sholom Aleichem was born Sholom ben Nochem. When he was enrolled in the local gymnasium, he became Sholom Rabinowitz. As a writer he was known as Sholom Aleichem. Some of your grandparents and great grandparents had as many names as they had suits. An Itzik ben Mottel was known in the synagogue as Yitzhak ben Mordecai, in business documents as Isaac Motelovitch and upon his immigration to America as Henry Morgan. This constant changing of names is symbolic of the fact that they were constantly exchanging cultures and some of necessity had to place themselves in a new world.

Sholom Aleichem became known to an international audience some forty years after his death when Jules Stein and Harold Robbins put Tevye on Broadway as "Fiddler on the Roof." When

many now think of Sholom Aleichem, they hear the nostalgia of 'Tradition - Tradition' and imagine him as a warmhearted raconteur who reveled in and revealed the colors of the comforting, all encompassing culture of the Jews of Eastern Europe. He did illustrate that world in his writings; but most of his stories, as well as his life story, describe a world which had left tradition and the village far behind. In the 1880's the Czar preemptorily ordered the Jews to leave the small farming village of the Pale and settle in the larger towns where they could be more easily controlled, and their children educated to Russian rather than Jewish values. Unemployment and the pogroms soon returned many of these displaced Jews to the road and a future quite different from their present in the United States, the Argentine and the Union of South Africa. Theirs was a world on the way, a world which had to carry its roots with it and adapt to strange and alien ways. Sholom Aleichem was one of those wandering Jews.

Because of business reverses, his father moved to the larger town of Pereyasl and Sholom was sent to a gymnasium. In heder he had often been rapped on the knuckles, not because he was dull or unable to learn, but simply because that was the way in which education was encouraged in the good old days - wack and you learned -- two wacks and you learned faster -- three wacks and you never forgot. Until his generation a Russian gymnasium was out of bounds to Jews.

For his generation a gymnasium education was the fast track into opportunity. Many families nearly bankrupted themselves to send their most talented son in the hope that their Kaddish would succeed and that having succeeded, he would be able to provide the family with the benefits of the rich outside culture. When a Jewish boy put on a Jewish uniform and a cap, he was immediately labeled as different from other Jews and he was. He now learned in Russian such non-yeshivah subjects as algebra, geography and Russian literature. Inevitably, he became a child of two cultures and not sure in which he belonged. which he belonged.

Later Sholom Aleichem would spin some wonderful stories about the gymnasium. One is simply called "Gymnasium." The cast of characters is a mother, a father and an only son. The father is a traditional Jew, who has managed by hard work and some shrewdness to accumulate a very modest fortune. The mother is a balabusta who is determined that her only child shall have everything. You recognize the type. For this mother 'everything' translated into a gymnasium education. She badgers her husband to allow the boy to sit for the entrance examination. His entrance will be guaranteed. After all, he is the brightest student in heder. The boy sits for the examination and, surprisingly, fails the examination. The Melamed had never taught him algebra or geography or Pushkin.

Mother is sure it is all father's fault. "you didn't hire him a tutor." Tutors are expensive, but the mother persists and a Maskil, a bright Jew who has learned something about the larger world - is hired. The boy is force fed. He sits for the examination. The examination consists of several parts, and he receives five, the highest grade, in all the parts save one. He got a four in literature. His Maskil was an autodidact and his knowledge had some holes in it.

Mother is undaunted. This time they will hire a Russian tutor, a graduate of the gymnasium. This tutor is three times as expensive as the Jewish tutor, but he had been to the gymnasium and studied all the required subjects. The boy sits for the examination. This time he receives fives in every subject. Now surely he will be enrolled. The admission letters are sent out. He is not enrolled. The school will take only two Jewish boys in each class of 100, and any number of Jews received all fives.

Mother will not give up. She hears of a gymnasium which will admit a Jewish student who gets all fives provided the family will pay full tuition for their child and for a Christian child. They locate a family whose child wants to enroll in that school. Everything is now in order. The boy will be admitted. But, lo and behold, the other child fails the examination.

Mother is down but not out. She hears that, if you are a Jew, the way to get your child into the gymnasium is to go to the head master with a full pocketbook and put the pocketbook in the head master's hand. The poor father who has been badgered and pressured for five or six years, takes a full pocketbook bankrupting himself in the process, to the head master who lectures him on Jewish shrewdness, takes the pocketbook and enrolls the boy.

The coveted uniform and the cap are bought and the boy goes off to the gymnasium. A week later he is home, sans cap and uniform. His mother demands to know why. "I went to school. The food was terrible. The teachers were cruel. The dormitory was cold. The students voted to strike. We struck and the government closed the school and told us to go home. They said the school would not be reopened."

When Sholom Aleichem described his world he drew a medieval world whose citizens faced the necessity of entering a world which was modern, a new world which, however, was not willing to make a place for them. The gymnasium youngsters received a "modern" education but the graduates were denied entry into most professions and occupations. There was little for such graduates to do except to tutor the next generation of Jewish boys for the entrance exams or emigrate.

After the gymnasium, Sholom Aleichem found a job as a tutor in the rather unusual household of Elimelech Loyev, an accomplished farmer who had somehow gained permission to own land which he profitably farmed. Loyev's modest but comfortable living enabled him to hire a tutor so that his children would know what their better-educated Russian neighbors knew; and what they did not know; the literature of the Jewish tradition. For Sholom Aleichem this was an ideal situation. Unfortunately, old Loyev had a good-looking daughter who promptly fell in love with this good-looking young man. Not wanting an impecunious son-in-law, old Loyev promptly dismissed the tutor.

Sholom Aleichem found employment as what was called in those days a Town Rabbi. Such men were not ordained, but possessed a Jewish and Russian education and were used by the Russian government in what was in effect the role of a high school principal, to organize low level gymnasiums where Jews would be trained out of Torah and into the larger culture. The ultimate, though unexpressed, aim of this program was conversion.

Sholom Aleichem served in this capacity for three years until Olga wore down her father. The two were married in 1883. Marriage brought Sholom Aleichem for the first time a degree of financial security. In 1886 when his father-in-law died he became titular head of this relatively well-to-do family. Shortly thereafter Sholom Aleichem began to act like a rich man - a role for which he was badly prepared. Tevye is the best known of the characters he


but another, Menahem Mendl, provides us a much closer approximation of the author. Menahem has married the daughter of a rich merchant. We first meet him enroute to the big city to pick up her dowry. What happens? He picks up the money and stops off at Odessa. What happens in Odessa? Menahem Mendl discovers money and the stock market. Money was an object of inordinate attraction in the shtetl. Why? Only money could buy your way out. With money you could buy the right to live in St. Petersburg or Moscow or passage to the New World.

Tevye says at some point "It's no honor to be rich, but it is no honor to be poor either." Tevye had seven daughters, and as a poor dairyman he would not provide them with dowries sufficient to assure them of husbands. This traditional problem is compounded by his daughters, girls of a new spirit, who were reaching their maturity at a time when Jewish girls were beginning to insist that they would decide whom they would marry. His second daughter falls in love with a young revolutionary who frequently lectures Tevye on the theme: "Money is a curse." 'Money will destroy civilization.' Poor Tevye could turn his pockets out and no money would fall out, but he is accused of being a great capitalist. Facing this barrage he reminds himself of the Syrian General Naaman who is cursed with leprosy. According to the Bible, Naaman visits the Holy Land and is cured. Tevye muses: "If the curse were money, I wouldn't mind Naaman's curse, and I wouldn't insist on being cured as Naaman was cured."

Money was redemption, and many bright young Jews trained in the sharp diadectic of the Jewish tradition came to believe that they could make a quick fortune. Why not? They had studied contracts and the Talmud's sections on business law. There were so many opportunities out there. Most of their schemes were more ingenious than realistic.

Manahem Mendl is involved in one hair-brained scheme after another. He speculates on the stock market. He fails. He develops a new business. He fails. Each effort is a greater disaster than the one before. Typically, he hears about the telegraph. The telegraph gets words from here to there without going from here to there. Why not apply the telegraph to the Shadhan business? Until now a marriage broker in Odessa asked to find a rich family who wants a suitable son-in-law who would travel to Kiev to find a rich family with a suitable daughter-in-law. He would then travel back and forth until all the complicated financial arrangements had been completed. Now he could stay in Odessa and use an agent in Kiev. The telegraph would transmit the financial details. Menahem Mendl finds an agent in Kiev who locates a rich Jew in Kiev who has marriage on the mind. They spend a fortune telegraphing the details back and forth. All is arranged. The families will meet at a midpoint to sign the documents. Everyone arrives and guess what happens? The rich Jew in Odessa had a daughter he expects to have married and the rich Jew in Kiev had a daughter he expects to have married. There is no prospective groom. Needless to say, Menahem Mendl lost his shirt as a telegraphic marriage broker.

Sholom Aleichem got caught up in the get-rich-quick fever of Odessa, speculated and lost more than his shirt. His problem was that of the poor who play the lottery. They want to be rich and really don't know how to make money. Almost any scheme seems promising. Sholom Aleichem lost a fortune in the stock market and had to flee his creditors across the border. His mother-in-law paid off his debts and he came back promising 'never again'; yet within a year he was back at it and losing his other shirt. This time the family told him in no uncertain terms; 'No more. Earn your own living.' From that time, Sholom Aleichem turned seriously to writing and for the next twenty years of his life he was a slave to the pen.

The Yiddish writer in the 19th century, like such English writers as Charles Dickens, made their living not from book sales but from weekly installments which were published in popular newspapers. They had to produce so many thousands of words every week. In the next twenty years, Sholom Aleichem relentlessly turned out 5,000, 10,000, 15,000 words a week. He imagined himself a stoker on a train shoveling coal into a great  without relief. Ultimately his health broke down, and he had to spend a good bit of time and money, and that meant extra writing, in the sunshine and clear air of the hills of Italy. He also lectured for fees, even coming to the United States to do so. He finally settled in New York just before the First World War. Here in the golden medina he would earn the money which would make his family secure.

Unfortunately he fell in with some theater sharpes and his life became, if anything, more difficult. Sholom Aleichem died at the relatively early age of 57 of tuberculous and fatigue.

Despite all his tsores, Sholom Aleichem retained an endearing warmth, openness and gentle sense of humor. I love the story of the pogrom in Kasrilevke. Tevye the dairyman had been originally a been a baal-agalah, a wagoner who too, carted lumber from one distant place to another; a difficult and arduous occupation. One day he saved the lives of two modestly wealthy women who gave him a substantial tip. He used this "found wealth" to buy a cow. As owner of a cow, Tevye became a dairyman. Every day he would milk the cow and drive the milk to a resort town a few versts distant and so earn a modest living.

One day when he returned home, he found his Ukrainian neighbors milling in front of his house. "What are you doing here?" "We're here to beat you up." "Why do you want to beat me up?" "The policeman said we have to have a pogrom. Every other town has had a pogrom, and we need a pogrom." "So, why me?" "Why not?" Tevye wonders: "How can I escape the pogrom?" He tells the group "You believe in the Bible. I believe in the Bible. Let's open the Bible and if you can pronounce whatever word I point to, then you can have your pogrom." Tevye opens the Bible and obviously these illiterate peasants can't read one word. "Now, you have to leave me

alone." They have a pow-wow and an elder finally approaches.

"We have to have our pogrom, but I'll tell you what. Give us a bottle of whiskey and take a stick and knock out a few windows in your house. That will be our pogrom." What can Tevye do? He produces his only bottle of whiskey and the Pogromniks drink to his health. Then he knocks out a few window panes. The pogrom has been held and everyone goes home smiling.

Pogroms, of course, were serious business. In other stories he writes about the children who were murdered and the women who were raped; but his strength shows itself in episodes such as this one which point up through simple human feelings the incredible folly of what was going on. Jews had lived in these towns in southern Russia for a thousand years. They had arrived long before the local Christians. The Jews and their neighbors had played together in the fields as children. Yet, when in Moscow the government decides that there must be pogroms, suddenly the mob wants blood.

Sholom Aleichem describes a world that was disappearing even as he described it. The real world was reflected in his hegira from place to place, occupation to occupation and culture to culture. In recent years there has been a tendency on the part of some to rewrite Jewish history. This past week again the Holocaust has been much on peoples' minds. We have been thinking about the scheduled commemorations of the Fortieth Anniversary of the Allied liberation of the camps and our President's unscheduled and insensitive determination to "forgive" - which was not an act of forgiveness at

all but a reward to a government which was willing to accept Pershing missiles on German soil. During these discussions I again heard people talk as if had it not been for the Germans, the traditional world of Eastern Europe would still be there. Obviously, if there had been no Auschwitz, millions of Jews would be alive, but not the world of Anatevke. There was much in this world that had warmth and was culturally important; but make no mistake about it, Tevye's world began to die a century before the Nazis came upon the scene. We can sing "Tradition - Tradition", but Sholom Aleichem, and those like him, had left the Heder and Yeshiva for the gymnasium. The men of his generation had received an untraditional education. The women of his generation were refusing to be married off. The tragedy of our King Lear, Tevye, is not that he lacks money to marry his daughters, but that his daughters are determined that they will decide whom they will marry. Whom do they marry? One marries a Jewish revolutionary. Another converts to marry a young Russian. The world of the late nineteenth century shtetl was not the stable world of some people's imagination but a world which had already been uprooted.

No traditional culture can resist the tides of modernity. Look at the Arab world today. Look at China and Viet Nam. These changes are not necessarily for the better, but they are inevitable and irreversible and affect all aspects of family and communal life and personality structure. It is not true that had it not been for Auschwitz the traditional home would still be a vital and living place. Indeed the ferocity with

which some insist on tradition is a consequence of a Holocaust-born determination to flaunt history.

Sholom Aleichem's tradition is no longer a full tradition but a partially transformed entity called Yiddishkeit. Yiddishkeit is not a scrupulous observance of the halacha. It is not orthodox Judaism or the politics of patience. It is a love of Yiddish; an appreciation of the warmth of the folk community and its culture; an instinctive understanding of "gallows humor" of which Sholom Aleichem was such a skillful interpreter; Chagall painting Fiddler on the Roof. The Chagall who painted Fiddler on the Roof and the Sholom Aleichem who wrote about Tevye and Menahem Mendl were men who had left the shtetl and became acculturated to western Europe. The past was in them, but they lived in the present though they were never completely at home in it.

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Sholem - 2 ^{small} ~~other~~ years - 3 pi. - best in the class
you and pi. - 1 ~~other~~ 3 has S.A. seen there to be under

4 reasons -

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The eldest ~~now~~ determined to be ways to - way 100
most popular of all Yiddish writers - 2 Sholem Cholem -
at Secena -

2 respects ~~to~~ included in under seen needed there
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was being buried - 1 day and not how as under under lies
to the where no just needed Time then - S.A. of see
as a new type of the eye. He see how - a small
Ukrainian shuttle under to just had a reputation for seeing
and a modest secret - He see under to be seen - as as
under - but see other under to just of under
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under to be seen to be seen - S.A. under to be seen
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in the books - I had seen nothing but outside land -

[illegible]

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what are you doing here? - The first was called - The
The first was called - The Tender called in - The first
I decided to go on strike - 8 days could be 3 days -

S.A. And then then was a second fall -
"Tell me, 2 days, yes, who are invited now"

S.A. Know that the number to give us - in a few days out.
Fiddle - but to see any Tender / Tender but also at
or not next year people will be in the state - & many
to very people there but very hard to send . 20 was not
any - The side lights of Tender are in the state , Confortus , Confortus .
many but there are many are in the state - one & the most
Tender are about Tender - send to send pages -
Tender are a 3 days for a person - but on good
figures - but to let one send to see if several
usually send are given to the state and send
her to buy a case - so to find you if day after
Monday are a dangerous side and day
hundred with a new report - - one day are
to come here, to find an actual figure of land
many could be seen
W.A. can, what can be done for you ?

We've come to love you up

My

We have nothing against you - but we're opposed
to just, well, not the idea of Kennedy being here -
I mean - any idea really - I mean no - no with
any sort of love for you - but at least we need
bread - for ourselves -

There's something really: like there are people
wanting to do - like wanting to be good - I'll
open to you - I'll need to (2nd) need to see of
you can repeat it - ~~as~~ you can handle the matter -
if not - not.

My eyes - The Bible you know - I mean - I mean
there is something for - a tongue twisting word - and
then is a whole new world - in not presence -
and also men - someone else is real - I mean
can people find - but they still want to be
and alone - no really, by not having any power - The
these things - you love - for me - one can
and really - no, by a whole lot of people
and by a thing's heart

much of S.A. have - and I mean we
Gutenberg - but I mean - the name of victim -
and we have to put - and we're dying -
the name of the people caught up in that whole thing can

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also around year and the agreement - S.A. U.S.A.S. fund
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 under the 1 found ' ground necessary - ' this Douglas says
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5. C. property as under to Tucker

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-
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1973 as doubt more urgent - S.A.

[illegible][illegible]

Tuesday - Mardi Gras
The band had been to
the school & school in music,
where they were 1 hour in
the afternoon.

Buns - The average W.M. will work 700-800

is referred to the President -
 the Bureau of Public Roads - 1 1917 and 1918 - under
 the Pres. Board, as 1917 and 1918 as the last known

Chlorine in water - The ... , East Coast ...
 near ...
 to ...

[illegible]

as a whole you need community - to help - and
 chess, is another thing - it's no shame to go over, but it's
 no honor either - Things, because you need a good service
 of 7 members together - the city is
 an - idea and we will offer a
 and social group - 8

as a second paper - a separate
 for each - the same length
 more or less from November
 and until December 1st - the
 1st year, 1st year, 1st year

course of the world - Things will be exactly as
the world is now - the money - will not go
world course the will remain as nature was
with
accepted legacy then may I never be cured

[illegible]

the open - the bus to stand outside bus stop to
escape his isolation

the night - sleeping off his drink - & a newspaper
S.A. was home - only to be caught in a trap in the
kitchen - by the door - then the S.A. was off -
& distance to support in days found to useless & useless -
less Dicks' results for the year - so my 1000 and
a day - and also little, each into a money machine

Memorandum

House books - Tuesday - Thursday -
Parker - NY - home - after lunch to read notes in

STUG - from the library for you - with rest of

Thursday ^{mostly} love & unworth

From the native was very better - wonderful
people - under the class - expanded in face of Gully
only a 3rd class train country - us - / 1st class
all alone - 'what's no pleasure of ^{TRAVELING} with no one
to talk to - you might even forget how to
TALK'

2nd class - people who had had you -
just around in a European - few days to
be European - - there was 4 27-year people -
hope to visit about 5 years - after -
Russian mission - many well for mission
to also - in the mission - many mission

and hope to have in Yiddish - Wassher - 2 part left
 from another in Yiddish

The good thing - is S.A. we have been making the
 can see the young man and his father - 'Can
 in the middle of the road - now we have got up to the
 to the north of a small colony - Chandlers
 Sugar - which has been going Riveted, Riveted
 have us here

The case - one to S.A. - under middle -
 England is today - Today you have to see your
 business - First great business - have
 S.A. has nothing - nothing - nothing -
 for the first time in the world - only
 - the one you can see - nothing - nothing - nothing

nothing - nothing - nothing - nothing - nothing
 the - 3rd case

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 and people, who can be to the end -
 But all you can see you are the business -
 You are not at all - But if you go to
 to business - which one of you can see - nothing
 - at least you can see the

My King S.A. we are taking - the N. Capital and 2 cases,
 also - 2 cases of the people nothing - nothing - nothing

and with the 7 to 800000 - 200000 of
the border as the first - and the 2nd
3/4 of a century of new life to the world - 7 of the
first & second & third have been seen as people
in the 100 years

S.A. - was the first to see the world -
and was the first to see the world - the first to see the world -
Columbia was the first to see the world - the first to see the world -
and yet not the first to see the world - the first to see the world -
to be the first -

S.A. died in NYC with Kovetz
You can find him again
in the New York - the first to see the world - the first to see the world -
have - 7 of the new life -

