

Celebrate Sholom Aleichem's 150th Birthday: Be More Ironic!

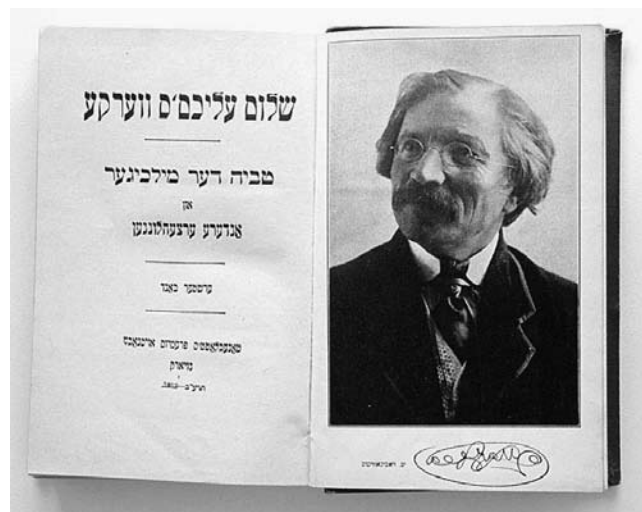
by Harley Schlanger

Oy! Could we use a lot more Sholom Aleichem today. What a world we live in! There are even some allegedly intelligent people who say that irony is dead. Some blame it on Dick Cheney, who is known to have killed a lot of things. But irony? How can you kill irony, especially as long as the memory of Sholom Aleichem stays alive?

Sholom Rabinowitz (Sholom Aleichem was the pen name he adopted) was born on March 2, 1859, in Ukraine, in the town of Pereyaslav. His family moved to a smaller town, Woronko, when he was still very young. Woronko was a *shtetl*, a village in which there were few opportunities for the Jews, who were limited, by Tsarist law, to a few trades, none of which provided much of a living. It was the model for his beloved literary creation, the *shtetl* of Kasrilevka, a name which comes from the word *kasriel*, which means a man who is poor, but proud, who can laugh at his misfortune while maintaining his dignity and self-respect. See—irony!

Sholom's father Nahum was a respected man, not for his wealth—as he was not very wealthy—but for his learning. He resided in the two worlds open to the *shtetl* Jews of his day: He was both an Orthodox Jew, a follower of an Hasidic rabbi, whose studies were concentrated on the narrow, but all-consuming immersion in the Talmud and Torah; while he was simultaneously attracted to the Jewish Enlightenment, a movement founded by the great German Jewish intellectual, Moses Mendelssohn, in which he insisted that Jews embrace the scientific knowledge and social/political dynamic of the world outside the *shtetl*.

Mendelssohn's intervention into the court of Fred-



Sholom Aleichem, a leader of the Yiddish Renaissance, which transformed a “jargon” into a Classical language, used irony to lovingly skewer the entrenched beliefs and traditions that reinforced the isolation of the Jews in the Russian Pale. Shown: an edition of his stories in Yiddish (written in the Hebrew alphabet).

erich the Great had a significant impact on the lives of the Jews of Prussia and other German states, as laws were gradually changed to give Jews access to broader civil society. German Jews took advantage of this access to become leaders in intellectual and cultural life, with careers in academia, science, medicine, industry, business, etc. A central feature of Mendelssohn's intervention within the Jewish community was his insistence that German Jews adopt the German language, to facilitate their integration into German society.

The Yiddish Renaissance

This was more difficult for the Jews of the Russian Pale of settlement, where anti-Semitism was more firmly entrenched, and avenues of advancement quite restricted, even for those Jews who spoke Polish or Russian fluently. Sholom Aleichem joined with a handful of other Jewish writers and intellectuals to initiate what became known as the “Yiddish Renaissance,” a movement to develop the Yiddish language—which was considered a “jargon,” a polyglot of languages, primarily German and Hebrew, spoken within the Jewish community—into a literate language, capable of expressing profound ideas, including ironical ideas.

Sholom Aleichem used irony as a sharply honed weapon, to skewer—in a loving way—the entrenched beliefs and traditions which he believed created an internal control mechanism, that reinforced the isolation of the Jews in the Russian Pale. His protagonists, such as Tevye the Dairyman (made famous by the Broadway musical “Fiddler on the Roof”), the failed but persistent speculator Menakhem-Mendl, and the irrepressible Motl, the Cantor’s Son, allowed his readers to recognize characteristics of thinking and behavior in these characters which they shared, and which reinforced their victimization.

Although there was an environment of real tragedy surrounding Jewish life in general, Sholom Aleichem’s hilarious portrayal of the smallness, and the pretensions of life in the *shtetl*, which perpetuated the tragedy, gave his readers the ability to laugh at their situation, and, perhaps, to develop the courage to act, to change it.

By making his readers self-conscious of what Lyndon LaRouche called those “invisible electric fences” which prevent most people from acting to overcome the littleness which imprisons them (see “The Mask of Nancy Pelosi”¹), he helped to “free” them from the self-imposed chains which had dominated Jewish existence for much of the nearly 2,000 years of exile.

1. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “‘The Mask of Nancy Pelosi’: The Force of Tragedy,” *EIR*, Nov. 9, 2007.



Although there was an environment of real tragedy surrounding Jewish life in general, Sholom’s hilarious portrayal of the smallness, and the pretensions of life in the shtetl allowed his readers to laugh at their situation, and, perhaps, to develop the courage to act, to change it. Sholom’s character Tevye the Dairyman, was made famous in the Broadway musical, and later film, “Fiddler on the Roof.”

‘Remember Me with Joy’

The work of Sholom Aleichem and his fellow literary Yiddish colleagues provided a generation of Jews with the courage and confidence to march back onto the stage of history at the beginning of the 20th Century. Its most prominent impact was in the United States, where the Jewish community took advantage of the American “melting pot,” to become fully integrated into society, to both pursue and help re-create the American dream. The attack on the Jews of Europe by the Nazis in Germany was largely an effort to wipe out the influence of Mendelssohn and the Yiddish Renaissance, as that movement, though dedicated to freeing the Jews, was, like every real Renaissance, aimed at advancing the inalienable rights of all human beings.

Read Sholom Aleichem’s stories, and see for yourself how the use of irony can awaken the innate human capability for self-perfection, and how the humbling ability to laugh at

one’s own flaws, foibles, and pretensions is a necessary starting point for developing the quality of leadership required to overcome adversity, and to adopt a universal mission for the betterment of all mankind. As the master himself wrote, “No matter how bad things get, you got to go on living, even if it kills you.”

In his will, Sholom Aleichem asked his children and his friends “not to weep for me, on the contrary, to remember me with joy...” He encouraged them to commemorate him each year by selecting one of his stories, of the very merry ones, and recite it in whatever language is more intelligible to them; and let my name be recalled by them with laughter rather than not be remembered at all.²

That is good advice for us today, in our era, where irony has been badly damaged by Hollywood and FOX News. Happy Birthday, Reb Sholom Aleichem!

2. To discover the joys of irony in Sholom Aleichem, I recommend reading stories from the collection *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, translated by Hillel Halkin (Schocken Books); and *The Letters of Menakhem Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl*, translated by Hillel Halkin (Yale University Press).