

I. L. Peretz's "Bontshe the Silent"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/i-l-peretz-bontshe-the-silent>.

Introduction

Classic Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz's short story, "Bontshe shvayg" ("Bontshe the Silent") first published in 1894, remains one of the most widely known, anthologized, and translated in all of Yiddish literature. Its central figure, Bontshe, is a man who never speaks up for himself, no matter what indignities he suffers. Peretz, who was called the "father of Yiddish literature," was one of the most influential figures in modern Jewish culture, in part because of how cleverly he could adapt folk and religious materials to a range of ideological and narrative ends, and "Bontshe the Silent" is a perfect example of this skill. The story's reception through time suggests the many different ways that Peretz's work can be interpreted—alternately as a story about disempowerment, persecution, or humility. This kit provides some key resources for teaching the short story.

Cover images: Still of Jack Gilford as Bontshe Shvayg in the final moments of an American television adaptation of the story as part of the program "The World of Sholom Aleichem" (1959); "Bread and Butter - Sourdough Roll and House Made Butter," photo by Shelby L. Bell, from [flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/shelbybell/).

Subjects

Fiction, Religion, Social Commentary, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- The story has been translated into English many, many times; the standard translation is in *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, edited by Ruth Wisse. There are much earlier versions available for free [here](#) (translated by Leo Wiener, 1899) and [here](#) (translated by Helena Frank, 1906).
- The full text in the original Yiddish is [the first story in this volume](#) of Peretz's collected works, and an abridged Yiddish version for children is [here](#).
- A brief, useful [biography of I. L. Peretz](#) can be found in the YIVO Encyclopedia.
- Those seeking a general introduction to Peretz's work should consult Ruth Wisse's 1991 book, *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (1991).
- Adi Mahalel, a scholar who has written extensively about Peretz, discusses the story's adaptation for the American stage in 1953 by a group of blacklisted artists, in a fascinating article for *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, "[We will not be silent: I. L. Peretz's 'Bontshe the Silent' vs. 1950s McCarthyism in America and the story of the staging of *The World of Sholom Aleichem*."](#)

Resources

1: [Source sheet, "Silence in the Tanakh and rabbinic literature," 2017, Hebrew with English translations.](#)

Passages from the Hebrew Bible and the teachings of the Rabbis, in which characters are described as silent, or in which the value of silence is extolled.

Suggested activity: Have students consider the value of silence in Jewish culture. When does Jewish ritual or tradition demand silence, and when does it forbid silence? Examine the examples from rabbinic literature on this source sheet; can we trace



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contemporary Jewish attitudes toward silence back to these texts, or not?

Source: Josh Lambert, based on a source sheet by Jacob Fine, "Silence in the Tanakh and rabbinic literature," Sefaria source sheet (October 2017), <<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/81849>>, accessed May 20, 2018.

2: Nonfiction excerpt, David Biale's "Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History," 1986.

In this excerpt, historian David Biale explains the political situation for Jews in the late nineteenth century, at the moment when Peretz wrote and published "Bontshe."

Suggested activity: First, ask students what they know about what was happening for Jews in the late nineteenth century, when Peretz wrote the story. Some may know about the beginnings of the Zionist movement, about the major wave of immigration from Europe to America, or about socialism and communism. Show them Biale's excerpt and talk about what the political options were for a Jew in the 1890s, and *why* Biale would say that "no one could afford to remain indifferent." Then ask them how they can relate that political situation to Peretz's story; why would he write about a silent person at a time like that?

Source: David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 118.

3: Short story excerpt in printed and audio formats, Peretz's "Bontshe shvayg," 1894 et al., Yiddish with English translations.

Several scholars have pointed out the striking differences among the many English translations of Peretz's story. A few of the most starkly different translations of the conclusion of the story are presented here, along with the original version in Yiddish, as well as audio versions in both English and Yiddish.

Suggested activity: Have the students read along with one translation while playing the Yiddish audio. Have them read aloud the other translations, and, with all the translations in front of them, discuss the similarities and differences. If any students are able to read Yiddish, have them compare the translations to the original. Discuss the elements of the translations that change—most noticeably of all, perhaps, Hilde Abel's addition of the phrase "in shame at this unending meekness they have created on earth"—and ask students which version aligns most closely to their understanding of the story.

Sources: Yiddish text from *Di verk fun yitskhok leybush perets (The Works of I. L. Peretz)*, vol. 4, *Ertseylungen* ("Short Stories") (1904), 14; Helena Frank translation in Isaac Loeb Peretz, *Stories and Pictures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1906), 181; Moshe Spiegel translation from I. L. Peretz, *In This World and the Next: Selected Writing* (New York: Yoseloff, 1958), 65; Hilde Abel translation in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), 230; English audio read by Harold Gould in Joan Micklin Silver, dir., *The Complete Jewish Short Stories from Eastern Europe* (Yiddish Book Center/KCRW, 1995), disc 1; Yiddish audio read by Miriam Kressyn in "Dray matones un andere dertseylungen" (Montreal, QC: Jewish Public Library, 1980s-90s), track 2, Yiddish Book Center's Sami Rohr Library of Recorded Yiddish Books, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/audio-books/smr-2491.L.PeretzDrayMatonesThreeGifts.ReadByMiriamKressynYID_201312>, accessed May 20, 2018.

4: Memoir excerpt, Yankev Dinezon as quoted in Isaac Rozentsvayg's "The Radical Period of Peretz's Career," 1934, Yiddish with English translation.

In this anecdote, quoted in *Der radikaler peryod fun peretses shafn: di yontif bletlekh (The Radical Period of Peretz's Creative Career: The Holiday Magazines)*, one of Peretz's contemporaries, fellow Yiddish writer Yankev Dinezon, recalls in his memoirs what happened when Peretz received a letter from a reader offering an interpretation of "Bontshe Shvayg." Peretz rejects the reader's interpretation of whom Bontshe is meant to represent, saying, "Whom I did have in mind, you obviously know." It seems likely that he meant the poor—Peretz was, at that point in his career, a committed, radical socialist, and the story was originally published in New York's leftist *Arbeter tsaytung (Workers' Paper)*.

Suggested activity: Read the anecdote aloud. If necessary, explain what a "Litvak" is (explanation of the stereotype may be found in this [article](#) from the YIVO Encyclopedia, especially the sixth paragraph). Ask students: if Peretz *didn't* intend Bontshe to represent the "Jewish people," what or whom do you think he *did* want Bontshe to represent? To give them some context for that question, you may wish to tell the students where the story was first published.

Sources: Yankev Dinezon, *Y.I. perets. tsum yortsayt (I. L. Peretz, Upon the Anniversary of His Death)* (Vilna: Vilner farlag fun b. a. Kletskin (Vilna Press of B. A. Kletskin), 1916), 19, quoted in Isaac Rozentsvayg, *Di radikaler period fun peretses shafn* (Kharkiv, Ukrainian SSR: Melukhe-farlag far di natsionale minderheytn in fss'r (Government Press for Ethnic Minorities in the USSR, 1934), translation adapted from Adi Mahalel's in *The Radical Years of I. L. Peretz*, doctoral dissertation (New York: Columbia University, 2014), 94.

5: Essay summary, Adi Mahalel on Israel Rubin's 1948 essay, 2014.

The scholar Adi Mahalel quotes from and summarizes the remarks about Bontshe made by the essayist Israel Rubin, in Yiddish, in 1948, at the moment when the State of Israel was being established.

Suggested activity: Read Mahalel's summary and the quotations, and explain that this was written in 1948, the year the State of Israel was established. Read Mahalel's summary and the quotations, and explain that this was written in 1948, the year the State of Israel was established. Ask students: why does Rubin say that Bontshe is dead, and that no one will say kaddish (the Jewish mourner's prayer) for him? What does it mean to posit noted assassins—who worked outside the law, and murdered people they believed were harming Jews and others—as the opposite of Bontshe?

Source: Adi Mahalel, *The Radical Years of I. L. Peretz*, doctoral dissertation (New York: Columbia University, 2014), 92-93.

6: Nonfiction excerpt, Ruth Wisse's "I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture," 1991.

In this excerpt from her book on Peretz, professor Ruth Wisse describes how over the course of the 20th century, some Jewish readers, including her own mother, viewed Bontshe positively.

Suggested activity: Read the excerpt. Discuss: according to Wisse, why did Jewish readers see Bontshe fondly? How do you feel about interpreting Bontshe as a "model of humility"?

Source: Ruth Wisse, *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 51.

7: Article excerpt, Goldie Morgenthaler's "Bontshe Shvayg in Lethbridge," Pakn Treger, 2010.

In this excerpt from the magazine of the Yiddish Book Center, professor Goldie Morgenthaler explains how her students, at a university in Lethbridge, Alberta, misinterpreted Peretz's story when she first introduced it to them.

Suggested activity: Read the excerpt and discuss: why did Morgenthaler's students think Bontshe is Christian, or Jesus Christ? Does the story support this interpretation? What differences are there, in your experience, between Jewish and Christian ideas of silence and what it means to suffer? Do you think that Bontshe is "saintly"?

Source: Goldie Morgenthaler, "Bontshe Shvayg in Lethbridge: Teaching Yiddish Literature in the Canadian Bible Belt," *Pakn Treger* 62 (Amherst, MA: Yiddish Book Center, Winter 2010 / 5771), <<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/pakn-treger/bontshe-shvayg-lethbridge-teaching-yiddish-literature>>, accessed May 20, 2018.

8: Teleplay excerpt, Don Richardson's "The World of Sholom Aleichem," The Play of the Week, 1959.

Arnold Perl's 1953 theatrical adaptation of Peretz's story appeared as the central act of "The World of Sholom Aleichem," sandwiched between two adaptations of stories by Sholem Aleichem (this is the play, with its cast and production team consisting chiefly of blacklisted artists, of which Adi Mahalel writes in his article mentioned in the "Reading and Background" section of this guide). The play was later filmed for television and broadcast on December 14, 1959. This excerpt is taken from the end of Peretz's story, and shows how its key closing moment was imagined for the stage and screen.

Suggested activity: Watch the excerpt. Ask students how the ending is similar to or different from the one in the story. Why would the playwright or filmmakers have removed the prosecutor's laughter? Why would they include a large Star of David, framing Bontshe, in the final shot? If students have read Dinezon's anecdote about Peretz in Resource 4, ask them how the writer of

"Bontshe Shvayg" might have reacted to this filmic choice.

Source: Don Richardson, dir., "The World of Sholom Aleichem," *The Play of the Week* (December 14, 1959).