

# Sholem Aleichem's "Motl, the Cantor's Son"

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/sholem-aleichems-motl-cantors-son>.

### Introduction

In *Motl, the Cantor's Son* (*Motl Peysi dem khazns*), the iconic Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916) explores one of the central experiences of modern Jewish history: immigration from Eastern Europe to the United States. *Motl* was written in two bursts. The first part, taking place in Europe, was composed during and in the aftermath of Sholem Aleichem's disappointing 1906–1907 visit to the United States and published serially in the New York Yiddish newspaper, *Der Amerikaner*. After a long hiatus, he returned to the character of Motl in 1915, picking up with Motl's arrival in New York. Unfinished at the time of the author's death, this second part was serialized in Yiddish in *Di Varhayt* and, in a contemporaneous, illustrated English translation, in the *New York World* and more than twenty other Pulitzer-owned papers. This kit provides resources that will allow teachers to explore how Sholem Aleichem brought his defining humor, character sketches, and attention to the details of everyday life to bear on encounters with immigration, the English language, and American cities.

Cover image: Book cover of *The Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son*, translated by Tamara Kahana and illustrated by Ilya Schor, 1953.

### Subjects

Childhood, Eastern Europe, Fiction, Immigration, New York, Translation, United States, Yiddish

### Reading and Background

- There are several English translations of *Motl, the Cantor's Son*. Two recent versions are included in Hillel Halkin's *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl & Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor's Son* (2002) and Aliza Shevrin's *Teveye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son* (2009). Each volume also includes an informative introduction to the author's life and works.
- Jeremy Dauber's *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem* (2013) provides a vivid and entertaining book-length biography of the author, his works, and his reception in the century since his death. A shorter biography can be found in the *YIVO Encyclopedia*.
- For a filmic treatment of Sholem Aleichem's life and legacy, see *Sholem Aleichem: Laughing in the Darkness* (2011), which blends archival images and recordings, readings of his stories, and commentary from historians and Yiddish experts.
- [SholemAleichem.org](http://SholemAleichem.org) contains information on the author's life and works as well as multimedia archives and other resources.
- The Yiddish Book Center's collections include a wide variety of primary and secondary source material and scholarship relating to Sholem Aleichem and his works. [The Sholem Aleichem finding aid](#) gives a complete overview of the Center's holdings. Images of covers from translations of Sholem Aleichem's work into several languages are included in "[Sholem Aleichem: The Quintessential Yiddish Writer](#)." *Motl* is available as an [audiobook](#) as a part of the Center's Sami Rohr Library of Recorded Yiddish Books.

### Resources

#### 1: Book covers, Sholem Aleichem's "Motl, the Cantor's Son."

It can be difficult to teach the writing of Sholem Aleichem without teaching the history of Sholem Aleichem: how his works have been received and understood over time. While a book's cover may not be able to tell us what's inside with any accuracy, it can tell



The Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, a program of the Yiddish Book Center, is made possible with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. The Foundation, established in 2006, is devoted to fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for youth and young adults in the U.S.

us something about how publishers, marketers, and readers felt about the book in a particular context. This activity works especially well to help introduce a unit on Sholem Aleichem or *Motl, the Cantor's Son*.

**Suggested Activity:** Show students the book covers, one at a time. Ask them to write down when they think each was published and who its target audience was (adults, children, students, etc.). What does each cover lead them to expect about the story it contains: What will it be about? What will its tone, genre, themes, and/or plot be? A follow-up discussion can take place as a full class, in groups, or as partners. Ask students to share their thoughts and responses about the covers. They should also discuss what features led them to these conclusions. What conclusions can they draw about the reception of *Motl* in the century since its publication? Who has read and still reads it—and why? What do students notice about the Yiddish book covers? Do the Yiddish editions seem to be targeting the same audience? Once students have read *Motl*, return to these questions, and ask students which cover, if any, seems to most accurately or artfully represent the book.

**Sources:** Sholom Aleichem, *The Adventures of Mottel, the Cantor's Son*, trans. Tamara Kahana (Henry Schuman, 1953).

Sholem-Aleikhem, *Motl Peyse dem Khazns*, ed. Chone Shmeruk (Magnes Press, 1997).

Sholom Aleichem, *The Adventures of Mottel, the Cantor's Son*, trans. Tamara Kahana (Sholom Aleichem Family, 1999).

Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son*, trans. Aliza Shevrin (Penguin, 2009).

Sholem Aleichem, *Motl Peyse dem khazns: Abridged and Adapted for Students with Exercises and Glossary*, eds. Sheva Zucker and Anne Gawenda (League for Yiddish, 2017).

Sholem Aleichem, *Motl Peysi dem khazns* (Warsaw, 1953).

## 2: Excerpt, Sholem Aleichem's "The Trial of Shomer; or, the Verdict of the Jury on All the Novels of Shomer," 1888.

Two stylistic elements define the narrative structure of *Motl, the Cantor's Son*. One, its episodic nature, is shared with other long Sholem Aleichem works such as *Tevye the Dairyman* and *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl*. The other, that these episodes are told from a child's perspective, is unique. Yet in the author's mind, these qualities were linked. Thinking about this connection will help students to consider the nature of tone, humor, and cause and effect in the novel.

**Suggested Activity:** Read the quotation aloud without mentioning the name of its author. Ask students, working in pairs or groups to conduct a close reading of this quotation. They should ask questions such as: What does it mean to be "naïve, like a young child"? How is this naiveté different from an adult's? Why might believing a novel's plot is essential be naïve? What kinds of knowledge or experience might lead one to believe otherwise? What other elements might be more essential than plot (e.g., characterization, social commentary, theme, humor, language)?

Reveal to students that this was a statement of Sholem Aleichem's. Does this surprise them? Now focus on the content of the statement. Does Sholem Aleichem take a positive or negative stance toward the centrality of plot? What makes you believe this? How essential is plot to this novel? What is the effect of its episodic construction? Have students trace its narrative arc (rising action, falling action, etc.) This can be done individually, in groups, or on the board as a full class. The character of Motl is a child; what effect do students think this has on the plot structure? What other effect(s) does this perspective have on the storytelling? Have they read other works told from a child's perspective? How are they similar or different? Why might Sholem Aleichem choose to tell one of the most important stories of twentieth century Jewish life—immigration from Europe to the United States—in the voice of a child?

**Source:** Sholem Aleichem, *Shomers Mishpet: oder der sudprisyazhne af ale romanen fun Shomer (The Trial of Shomer; or, the Verdict of the Jury on All the Novels of Shomer)*, 1888. Quoted in Jeremy Dauber, *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem* (Shocken, 2013), 58.

## 3: Excerpts, Genesis 29 and Jeremiah 31, with commentaries from Rashi (eleventh century) and Rabbi Joseph Hertz (twentieth century).

The idea of "laughing through tears" has been central to Sholem Aleichem's reputation for more than a century. *Motl* is no exception. From its opening pages, weeping and eyes play important symbolic roles. His father dies on the holiday of Shavuot

when, as Motl's brother reminds the family, they are not allowed to cry. This doesn't stop their mother. She is crying when readers first encounter her, and continues to cry across the two volumes, alternately moving, annoying, and worrying her family. As they prepare to leave for America, the state of her eyes, swollen and red from weeping, becomes a focal point because they know that United States immigration officials check eye health. (The immigration officials looked for signs of trachoma, a bacterial eye disease.) These symbols also give us access to another key aspect of Sholem Aleichem's style, his engagement with traditional Jewish texts, interpreting and misinterpreting them for both comic effect and to make ethical points. When Motl's mother weeps, she recalls two other Jewish mothers known for their eyes and tears: the biblical matriarchs Rachel and Leah. These resources allow students to create a dialogue among *Motl*, the narrative of Genesis, the prophecies of Jeremiah, and two rabbinic sources—the medieval French commentator Rashi (1040–1105) and Joseph Hertz (1872–1946), Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom from 1913 until 1946.

**Suggested Activities:** Your use of these resources can be structured in three ways: around the figure of Leah, around the figure of Rachel, or comparing both.

*Option 1 (Leah-centered):* Read the text from Genesis 29 as a class, in groups or in pairs. Provide students with background on Rachel and Leah, if necessary. Ask students what distinguishes the two sisters in this passage. Zero in on Leah's "weak eyes." What do students think this means? What do we learn about Leah from this description? How does this compare with the attitudes of Motl and his brother toward their mother's "weak eyes"—her constant weeping? If her tears echo Leah's "weak eyes," what does this add to her character?

Now ask students to look at the glosses offered by Rashi and the Targum Onkelos. How do they understand Leah's "weak eyes"? Are they a positive or negative attribute? What might motivate them to read Leah's "weak eyes" in this way? Does this context affect your understanding of Motl's mother's tears?

*Option 2 (Rachel-centered):* This passage comes from the book of Jeremiah, a prophet writing in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian Exile (c. 586 BCE). Here, he imagines the biblical matriarch Rachel looking on at the destruction of his own time.

Ask students to read Jeremiah 31:15. Why is Rachel weeping? How would you describe her tears? How does this compare with the tears shed by Motl's mother—in intensity, duration, or cause? Is Sholem Aleichem making a comparison between the history of ancient Israel and early twentieth century European Jews? Now ask students to read Jeremiah 31:16–17. Why should Rachel stop weeping? Does this affect our understanding of any historical comparisons between Jeremiah's time and Motl's?

*Option 3 (comparative focus):* Have students read and discuss the sources as above. (You may wish to abbreviate this discussion for the sake of time by being selective about texts and questions.) Pose an important comparative question to your students: Who is Motl's mother, a Leah or a Rachel? Do we understand the nature of tears differently depending on her biblical model? What has Sholem Aleichem added to her character by connecting her to these figures from Jewish tradition?

**Sources:** Genesis 29:16–17, Rabbi Joseph Hertz on Genesis 29:16-17, Rashi on Genesis 29:17, Jeremiah 31:15–17. Source sheet compiled by Joshua Logan Wall using sefaria.org, 2019.

#### 4: Film scenario, Sholem Aleichem's "Little Motl Goes to America," 1916.

Sholem Aleichem, like many of his characters, always kept an eye out for new ways to get ahead. After failing to strike it rich in New York's Yiddish theater, he returned to Europe from 1907 until the 1914 outbreak of World War I. On his return to the United States, the new medium of the cinema caught his eye. Together with his son-in-law, Dov Berkowitz, and the journalist Ben-Zion Goldberg, he put together a scenario for the adaptation of *Motl* into a silent film. (Much shorter than a script, film scenarios outline scenes and plot events and would be used to pitch an idea to a production studio.) *Little Motl Goes to America* reimagines the scenes and schemes from the novel's Kasrilevke chapters. It concludes with an early version of Motl's arrival in the United States—one that provides an interesting contrast with the chapters that would begin the novel's second half.

The focus of this resource is on Ellis Island, the immigration processing center open from 1892 to 1954. From 1905 to 1915, approximately 5,000 immigrants arrived each day, making it a central and shared experience of Eastern European Jewish immigration. While most only spent several hours on Ellis Island and approximately two percent were refused entry, the fear of delays, disease, and deportation was widespread.

**Suggested Activity:** Students should read at least through the departure of Motl and his family from Ellis Island in the novel's second part before coming to class. Begin by having students—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—summarize the experiences of the characters at Ellis Island. What are the major events? What themes, concepts, and/or disappointments are present? Now introduce the resource. Note that it was designed to be the closing scene of a film incorporating many of the events from Part One of the novel, not the opening of its second half. Read *Little Motl Goes to America*. Pay attention, as before, to the major events and themes. How does this Ellis Island experience compare with that in the novel? What's different? What stays the same? How is Ellis Island, and the United States itself, depicted here, as compared to the novel? Zero in on the ending of the film scenario: What kind of symbolic importance could the "message from Washington" have? How does it compare with the way the family gets out of Ellis Island in the novel (bribes, the kindness of neighbors from Kasrilevke)? What different commentaries do the two endings offer on the United States, the experience of immigration, and our expectations for Motl's future? How do the specific qualities of each medium—silent film and serialized novel—affect the scenes?

*Additional Activity:* Working collaboratively as Sholem Aleichem did on his film scenario, ask students to outline their own sketch of a short film based on Motl's adventures. Afterwards, ask students to reflect on their choices: What did they include or leave out? How did they make these decisions? Did they need to add any original scenes or characters to make their scenarios cohere?

**Source:** Sholem Aleichem, *Little Motl Goes to America*, trans. Ben-Zion Goldberg (1915). Published in Ber Kotlerman, "Going through the Seven Circles of Hell—Joyfully, à la Motl': Sholem Aleichem's Missing Film Script about *Motl, the Cantor's Son*," (*Jewish Quarterly Review* 105.2, Spring 2015), 171–173.

## 5: Translation excerpts, Sholem Aleichem's "Motl, the Cantor's Son," Hillel Halkin, 2002, and Aliza Shevrin, 2009.

Translation enters into our encounters with *Motl, the Cantor's Son* in many ways. On the one hand, you and your students are probably reading the work in an English translation. In this case, you've needed to choose a version for your class, and the translator's decisions and priorities have shaped your experience with the book.

Translation is important within the world of the novel, as well. When they emigrate, Motl and his family leave one multilingual world for another, and their acquisition of and reactions to English play important roles. In this way, we can think of translation—which literally means "to bring across"—as a metaphor for the larger Jewish immigrant experience. These resources allow you and your students to encounter all of these aspects by comparing two translations of a scene that reveals how learning English transforms Motl's Yiddish.

**Suggested Activity:** Have students read one translation of the excerpt. Ask them to assess its tone and identify its main point or points. What does the passage reveal to us about Motl's Americanization? Repeat with the second translation. (Alternatively, you might assign some students to one translation and other students to the second, and then have the two groups share and compare.) These are translations of the same passage from the Yiddish text. Ask students to identify specific differences in these renderings (spelling, paragraphs, names, words/sentences included or excluded). What effect do these differences have on the translations? Focus on the phonetic words in the Halkin translation. Why might Halkin spell words like this? What effect does he capture? Look carefully at the words. What kinds of things do they name or describe? Can you place them into any shared category? (E.g., "business words" or "city words.") Conversely, what does the absence of phonetic spelling allow students to see or understand more clearly in the Shevrin translation? Remind students that Motl is a young child surrounded by a new language: what does this passage, in either translation, reveal to us about his ability to absorb or move between languages? How does he compare, in this regard, with his relatives and friends?

Now ask your students to imagine that they are translating *Motl*. What are some possible goals or concerns they might have? If forced to choose, would they prioritize clarity, style and tone, fidelity to the original Yiddish, humor, or something else? How does thinking about different audiences—children, students, adults; knowledge of Yiddish or no Yiddish; Jewish or non-Jewish—affect their decisions? If your students have already completed the first exercise of this resource kit, have them think about what the cover to their translation might look like.

**Sources:** Sholem Aleichem, *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl & Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, The Cantor's Son*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Yale, 2002), 270.

Sholem Aleichem, *Tevey the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son*, trans. Aliza Shevrin, (Penguin, 2009), 316–317.

## 6: Song, “The Greenhorn Cousin” (“Di grine kuzine”), 1921.

Much American Jewish literature from the height of the Immigration Era expresses the difficulties and disillusionments of the immigrant experience, from the sweatshop poetry of Morris Rosenfeld to the modernist fiction of Henry Roth. This resource, the 1921 song “The Greenhorn Cousin” (“*Di grine kuzine*”), tells the story of a newly-arrived immigrant through the eyes of her more experienced cousin. It offers a useful point of comparison for the experiences of Sholem Aleichem’s characters.

**Suggested Activity:** Distribute the transliterated Yiddish lyrics and their English translation. Have students follow along as they listen to the song. Ask students to quickly trace the plot arc of its title character. What does she experience? What tone does the song take toward immigration to the United States? Now compare this song with the story of the newly-arrived (“greenhorn”) immigrants in Motl’s family. Does this reflect their experiences? In what ways? How do they respond to these experiences—and if this is different from the song, why might that be so? Think for a moment about the different relationships to “Columbus’ country” presented by the song and by Pinye. Why is Pinye able to retain his idealistic belief in this concept? Sholem Aleichem is known for using humor to approach sorrowful topics, and Motl is no exception. Do students find humor in “The Greenhorn Cousin”? Where? How does it compare to Sholem Aleichem’s use of humor?

**Sources:** Abe Schwartz and Hyman Prizant, *Di grine kuzine (The Greenhorn Cousin)*, Abraham Moskowitz with unknown clarinetist, Abe Schwartz, violin and Sylvia Schwartz, piano, recorded February 1922, accessed through the [Max and Frieda Weinstein Archive of YIVO Sound Recordings](#), 2019.

Lyrics from [yidlid.org](#) with edits by Sadie Gold-Shapiro to match the recorded audio, accessed November 2019.