

Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh's "The Brief Travels of Benjamin III"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/sholem-yankev-abramovitshs-brief-travels-benjamin-iii>.

Introduction

Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1835–1917) created Mendele Moykher-Sforim (Mendele the Book Peddler), a name that has often been understood as a pseudonym rather than a character in his works. Writing in both Hebrew and Yiddish, and translating his works from one to the other, he is considered to be the first modern novelist in both languages and the most important proponent of the *haskole*—the Jewish Enlightenment. Sholem Aleichem called him “the grandfather” of Yiddish literature.

In 1878, Abramovitsh published the mock epic *Kitser masoes Binyomin hashlishi* (*The Brief Travels of Benjamin III*) which was to be the first part of a longer work that was never written. His re-working of the novella appeared in Hebrew in 1896. It was famously adapted for the Moscow State Yiddish Theater in 1927. Many readers have compared *The Brief Travels of Benjamin III* to *Don Quixote*. Both contain protagonists who engage in a mock-heroic quest; both have sidekicks who travel with them; both are deluded. Abramovitsh's work, however, is focused on the politics of the world in which these Jewish characters find themselves, the intractable political, social, and economic obstacles they face, and their inability to succeed under those conditions. Written during the period of European imperialist expansions, the novella compares the situation of Eastern European Jews with the mobility, political structures, and colonial ambitions of Western Europe and particularly of England. Thus, Benjamin III's proto-Zionist desire to restore Jewish political independence in the Holy Land invokes the powerful political leader Benjamin Disraeli who, just before this book was written, had acquired the Suez Canal for the British and had named Queen Victoria Empress of India. (Born a Jew, Disraeli was converted at the age of thirteen.) Despite his epic quest, Benjamin III never gets far from home.

Most difficult to render into English, the multilingualism of Eastern European Jewish life is alluded to in *Benjamin III*. Russian is used for place names. Some sections begin with an elevated Hebrew taken from the Bible or Talmud that is immediately translated into vernacular Yiddish. Translators usually render this in the interplay of different registers of English: elevated, sometimes stultified English on the one hand, and plain speech on the other.

Cover image: Portrait of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Fiction, Gender, Haskalah, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- The Yiddish original of *The Brief Travels of Benjamin III* can be found [here](#) or [here](#).
- Hillel Halkin's translation of *The Brief Travels of Benjamin III* can be found in *Tales of Mendele the Bookpeddler* (Schocken, 1996). Joachim Neugroschel's earlier translation can be found in *The Shtetl* (Richard Marek Publishers, 1979).
- For an introduction and [brief biography of Abramovitsh](#), see the YIVO encyclopedia.
- The novella is discussed in fullest detail (particularly its politics and multilingualism) in Dan Miron and Anita Norich, “The Politics of Benjamin III: Intellectual Significance and its Formal Correlatives in Sh.Y. Abramovitsh's *Masoes Binyomin hashlishi*,” *Field of Yiddish*, IV (Summer 1981), 1–115.
- For the definitive contextualization and analysis of Abramovitsh's work and its connection to the *haskole* (Jewish Enlightenment), see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Schocken, 1973; reissued by Syracuse University Press, 1996).
- For a comparison of *The Travels of Benjamin III* and *Don Quixote* see Leah Garrett, “The Jewish Don Quixote” in *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 17.2 (1997): 94-105.



- Abramovitsh is often credited with creating the literary image of the shtetl, or small Eastern European Jewish town. You can read about the [history of the shtetl](#) in the YIVO Encyclopedia.
- To learn more about the *haskole*, or Jewish Enlightenment, of which Abramovitsh was a prominent proponent, read [this entry](#) in the YIVO Encyclopedia.
- For a discussion of satire in the work, see chapter 2 of Ruth Wisse's *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (University of Chicago, 1971).
- For a consideration of masculinity, femininity, and gender dynamics in the novella, see Naomi Seidman, "Theorizing Jewish Patriarchy in Extremis," in *Judaism Since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (Routledge, 1997).
- Although written after the Crimean War, the story takes place during it. Chapter 7 of the novella alludes to the positions taken by various nations in the war (e.g., Heikel, who supports Queen Vicky, is England, Itzik is Turkey, etc.) It may be useful to read a [brief overview of that war](#) and to look at a [map](#) that shows the nations involved.
- A brief overview of cantonists (Jewish boys inducted into the Czarist army) and the Jewish *khapsers* (catchers) who feature in the novella can be found [here](#).

Resources

1: Painting, set design for "The Brief Travels of Benjamin III," 1927.

In 1927, the Moscow State Yiddish Theater performed a staged version of *The Brief Travels of Benjamin III*.

Suggested Activity: Have students look at the painting of the set design for this production. (For an enlargeable version of the image click [here](#) and scroll down.) What does this image tell you about how the producers understood Abramovitsh's work? Consider the appearance of the buildings, the people depicted in this painting, the colors, and anything else that attracts your attention. Create your own set design for any scene in the novella.

Source: Set design by Robert Fal'k for Mendele Moykher-Sforim's *Kitser masoes Binyomin hashlishi* (The Brief Travels of Benjamin III), produced by Aleksandr Granovskii, Moscow State Yiddish Theater, 1927. Oil on canvas. (GDC 989. 313889; © Federal State Institution of Culture "A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatrical Museum," Moscow)

2: Chart of the names used by translators Hillel Halkin and Joachim Neugroschel for the places Benjamin and Senderl travel through.

The two translations cited in the "Reading and Background" section above use different translation strategies. For example, Neugroschel translates the Russian names of mythic towns on Benjamin's route, but Halkin does not.

Suggested Activity: What is the effect of translating these names? What is the effect of leaving them untranslated? What may be gained or lost by these different strategies?

Source: Chart created by Anita Norich, September 15, 2020.

3: Text excerpt, Ruth Wisse's "The Shlemiel as Modern Hero," 1971.

Ruth Wisse, a preeminent scholar of Yiddish literature, sees a trajectory in the novella (and, indeed, through all of Abramovitsh's writing) away from satire.

Suggested Activities: Have students read Wisse's observation about Benjamin, noting that in Yiddish, a schlemiel is a hapless, ineffectual, or unlucky person. Then define satire for students. Ask them to find two or three passages in the novella where they see social satire, then to find two or three passages where Benjamin seems more heroic. Analyze these passages. What is being satirized? How can Benjamin be considered heroic?

Source: Ruth Wisse, *The Shlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 30.

4: Definition of *khapsers*.

Benjamin and Senderl were forced into the Russian Army by *khapsers* (literally grabbers) who kidnapped other Jews into military

service in order to fulfill enlistment quotas set by the Tsar.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the definition of *khapers*, and make sure they understand their historical function. How does Abramovitsh depict *khapers*? What does their work say about the Jewish community? Senderl tries to adapt to military rules; Benjamin cannot. To what extent is this a comment on choices Jews might have made in Tsarist Russia? To what extent is it a comment on military might? It is almost unimaginable to think that the Tsarist army would have let Benjamin and Senderl leave. Why do you think Abramovitsh ends his story in this way?

Have students write a different speech than the one Benjamin gives to explain why he should be allowed to leave the army.

Source: Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, "Military Service in Russia," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Military_Service_in_Russia.

5: Text excerpt, Naomi Seidman's, "Theorizing Jewish Patriarchy in Extremis," 1997.

An excerpt from Naomi Seidman's essay about *The Travels of Benjamin III*.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the excerpt from Seidman. Then have them consider: What are the views of masculinity and femininity in the novella? How are the female characters depicted? What do these depictions suggest about gender relations in this society? What do we know about Benjamin and Senderl as husbands or fathers?

Source: Naomi Seidman, "Theorizing Jewish Patriarchy in Extremis," in *Judaism Since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (New York: Routledge, 1997), 43-44.

6: Biblical and Talmudic excerpts referenced in "The Brief Travels of Benjamin III."

Abramovitsh alludes to Biblical and Talmudic texts throughout *The Brief Travels of Benjamin III*.

Suggested Activity: Choose one of these excerpts and discuss how and why Abramovitsh uses these texts in the novella.

Sources: Bereshit Rabba, 10.6 and Job, I:1

7: Text excerpts, Dan Miron and Anita Norich's "The Politics of Benjamin III," 1981.

Suggested Activity: Read these excerpts and consider how and why Abramovitsh uses allusions to British political figures and institutions.

Source: Dan Miron and Anita Norich, "The Politics of Benjamin III: Intellectual Significance and its Formal Correlatives in Sh.Y. Abramovitsh's *Masoos Benyomin hashlishi*," *Field of Yiddish*, IV (Summer 1981), 1-115.

8: Text excerpt, Jacob Sloan's review of an English translation of "The Brief Travels of Benjamin III," 1949.

Jacob Sloan wrote a controversial review of a 1949 English translation of the novella.

Suggested Activity: Read the quotation from Sloan's review. Ask students: Do you agree with Sloan? What do you see as possibly mitigating this view? Then have students write their own reviews of the novella.

Source: Jacob Sloan, "The Travels of Benjamin the Third, by Mendele Mocher Seforim," *Commentary* (Nov. 1949), 510.