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Contraband: Performance, Text and Analysis of a Purim-shpil

by Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett

In the fifth century B.C., the Jews of Persia were saved from a plot to murder them. Their deliverance, narrated in the Scroll of Esther, is celebrated each year on the holiday of Purim in the Hebrew month of Adar (February/March). The holiday includes a variety of performances: masquerade, pranks, intoxication and general licentiousness pervade the holiday and contribute to the inversion of the social order that is its hallmark. One major performance is the ceremonial public reading of the Scroll of Esther, where the raison d'être for the holiday is retold. During the reading, the villain Haman is smitten by the listeners, who make loud noises to kill the sound of his name each time it is mentioned. A second opportunity for performance is the festive meal, which may feature extended parodies and folk plays.

Though Yiddish folk plays were also presented at other times, Purim was the occasion for the most frequent performances of them. The earliest references to Yiddish Purim plays, or Purim-shpiln, date from the 16th century and indicate that the repertoire was diverse. From the early period to the present, the plays have been based on topical and humorous subjects as well as on Biblical themes.

According to nineteenth and twentieth century accounts, the major settings for the performance of Purim-shpiln were public houses of study, yeshivas, and private homes. The preferred times for performances were the afternoon and evening of the holiday. Performances in public settings could last up to five hours, as they do today.
among the Bobover Hasidim in Brooklyn. In private homes, where the play was performed during the festive meal, the performance could be abbreviated to a song or humorous monolog, or could extend from 15 minutes to an hour, depending on the receptivity and expected generosity of the audience. Players might abridge or race through their performance in an effort to reach as many homes as possible and to collect more alms. The wealthiest homes were visited first, both because the rewards would be greater and because there would be more space in which to perform. Sets and props were generally minimal and improvised, and elements of the room might be incorporated into the play.

The actors were traditionally boys and unmarried men. Those who performed in homes tended to come from the poorer segments of society, and to depend on the alms they received to pay for Passover provisions. Some players performed expressly to raise money for those poorer than themselves, and might officially represent a charitable organization. The same people generally performed each year, unless they had a falling out, typically over how the income was to be divided. Speaking of the Vilna area, one scholar claimed that the actors tended to come from one family in the town and to rehearse in their own home. In larger towns, there might be several troupes, each performing its own play, or even two plays at a time. A "troupe" might be as small as two players, or as large as 10 to 12 actors, not counting a few musicians on fiddle, flute, or tambourine, and extras who sang in the chorus. Reasons for keeping the troupes small included the desire to divide up the rewards as few ways as possible and the cramped quarters in which the players might have to perform, particularly given the hordes of children that followed them around and squeezed into the room in an effort to see the performance. One actor might play several parts, including female roles, which were a source of hilarity because boys with young voices, who were too young to have beards, were chosen to dress up as women. Costumes were homemade, and there was a penchant for military finery and the glitter of silver and gold paper, which was the single biggest expense. Actors often took great pains to disguise themselves beyond recognition, to avoid the shame of receiving alms and to protect their freedom to be licentious.

Though the texts for the plays were generally transmitted orally, they were sometimes preserved in handwritten scripts. Some of the early scripts were even printed. Siegfried Kapper remembered [in J. Shatzky, Arkhiv far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame (Vilna, 1930)] that in 1825 or 1826, his friends wrote down a text remembered by an old fiddler, later performed the play and saved the manuscript. As Shatzky notes, since the texts were preserved in the memories of the actors, no one person necessarily knew the entire script. As a result, the actors depended on each other, or improvised, to reconstruct a full play from the parts they had. Sometimes children who chased after the players learned their parts, hummed along and caught them on mistakes. Liberties were taken with the script, particularly in an effort to increase its topicality and humor. The music was generally not written down, but learned from oral tradition, since few, if any, of the players could read music. Songs and melodies sung on other occasions were often incorporated straight, or in parody. And songs associated with the Purim-shpil were also sung at other times, and are occasionally all that remains of what was once a full play.

Rehearsals for the play might have begun as early as Hanukkah, in December, or as late as a few weeks before the holiday. The cast would meet regularly on Saturday afternoons or during the evenings, in someone's home. They would shroud their preparations in secrecy so as to capitalize fully on the intense anticipation of their prospective audiences.
A rather full description of a performance in the vicinity of Lodz in central Poland at the turn of the century is provided in the memoirs of Mikhl Gelbart, a famous composer and music critic. Born in 1889, Gelbart was one of 17 children in a very poor family. His career as a musical protegé began at the age of five, when he first served as a cantor’s assistant. Gelbart explains that the town’s performers—meshoyrerim (cantor’s assistants), klezmorem (instrumentalists), and badkhonim (jesters)—tended to spend a lot of time together, forming their own subculture, with their own language and proclivities for joking around. For the most part poor, these performers depended on charity, other kinds of work and the small returns from their performances to survive. In the purim-shpil production described by Gelbart, these skilled performers were recruited for the cast.

Gelbart’s description (translation from Yiddish):

Early on Purim, we all came together at the Griskes’ place and made the last preparations. Zrilke tried on a dress that was a little tight on him and came up to his knees, so that his long trousers showed. This was how everyone tried on his costume.

On Purim evening, the time of the festival meal, the troupe of players made their way out, disguised in “vinegar and honey,” made up and smeared with soot, so that they would not be recognized, and a gang of little kids dragged along behind them with shrieks of laughter.

The first stop was Shloyme Okshnendler, the richest man in town. We threw open the doors. First the two clowns [masters of ceremony] entered and yelled out: “Make way, the Purim players are here!…” Then all the players flooded in with joyous singing. “Hannah,” that is Zrilke, sat himself down on a chair, behind a
stretched out sheet carried by two tall boys. Then entered Khayml, that is “Samuel,” who was pushed behind Hannah’s stool, so no one could see him, because he was yet to be born.

[NOTE: Gelbart described the performance, *Hannah and Peninah and Their Sons*, which culminated with Hannah going into labor and giving birth to Samuel, the biblical prophet. Samuel was born from behind the chair and appeared in a long white beard and fur-trimmed hat, with a sack on his back and a thick stick in his hand. The “infant” sang with the voice of the twelve-year-old actor, whose voice was changing.]

In each wealthy household where we presented the *Purim-shpil*, the festive happy audience enjoyed it very much and rewarded the Purim players generously: handfuls of money without measure. They added to that other good things from the Purim feast: *homntashn* and *shtrudel*, oranges and nuts and boiled chick peas, and what not? So that when we were done with all the “performances,” Berl Ortschik and Yakhtsi Koval, the two strongest boys in town, could hardly carry the big basket, which was full of all the loot.

Finished, we headed for the Griskes’, who had prepared nothing that day, knowing that we would soon bring good things, as we did each Purim. We entered the Griskes’ with cries and shouts and announced our presence in rhyme:

*Make way! We are carrying good things.*

*Prepare the table, the long one,*

*And we will serve you the good things.*

We locked the door behind us to keep the gang of kids out, who trailed after us to catch one last glimpse of the Purim players. We cast off our costumes, washed off the soot which we had used to disguise ourselves so no one would recognize us, sat around the table, laid out the goodies in the basket, assigned Mendi Khrup, the oldest cantor’s assistant, the role of dividing things up, and the gang stuffed their faces with a veritable feast. Having eaten, we then undertook the true performance, an imitation of all the householders whom we had visited that Purim.

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**The Smuggler-Play Genre as Purim-shpil**

The Purim repertoire is rich in plays about lawbreakers, particularly brigands, bands of highwaymen and robbers. These plays are known by such titles as *Royber-bande-shpil* or *Gazlin-shpil*. The entire genre focuses on the interaction of a lawbreaker, his victim and/or the authorities. In the robber plays, an innocent victim aligns with the law in an unsuccessful effort to resist the lawbreaker. In contrast, the smuggler plays present the ineffectual alliance of the lawbreaker and innocent landlord against the law. The smuggler plays may be seen as a topical adaptation of the genre of plays about lawbreakers. As such they shed light on the relation of innovation to tradition within the form.

The robber theme was immensely popular in the European folk and popular theatre of the 19th century. According to Leopold Schmidt, an authority on German folk drama, the robber theme gave rise to the greatest number of improvised folk plays in the East German region, which is not far from the areas where the Yiddish plays are found. The lawbreaker plays within the Yiddish repertoire also draw from the Gothic melodrama tradition of “bandit-forest-cottage,” to use Michael Booth’s phrase. A favorite in the Yiddish repertoire, the *Royber-bande-shpil*, appears to be based on a widely translated 19th-century chapbook about Rinaldo Rinaldini, an
“Italian” count, and his wife, who are murdered by highwaymen. This subject was used by J.C. Cross in 1801 in his Gothic melodrama *Rinaldo Rinaldini, or The Secret Avengers*, and in the folk plays of colliers in the mountain towns of Hungary during the 19th century. The Yiddish plays are clearly part of a larger European folk and popular theatre tradition. They were also but one form of theatrical activity in the towns where Lehman recorded them; plays from the popular and classical Yiddish repertoire were performed by amateur theatrical groups formed before World War I and by traveling troupes.

As a whole, the smuggler play genre and the related plays about brigands and highwaymen suggest that justice resides outside the official system, that law enforcement is often ineffectual, and that nonviolent breaches of the law, whether smuggling or bribery, may be necessary for survival in an unjust and capricious world—themes found in the original Purim story. In a children’s song on the brigand theme, which the Yiddish theatre historian Schipper considers a survival of a Purim play, one other possibility appears—the victim is saved from the bandit by a divine miracle, after calling for God’s help as a last resort. This conclusion is more typical of the *Purim-shpil* than the tragic endings of the robber plays.

**Contraband: Two Purim-shpiln from the Warsaw Region**

In 1923, Shmuel Lehman published two folk dramas in M. Vanvild (ed.), *Bay undz yidn: zamblukh far folklor un filologye* (Warsaw) about the unsuccessful efforts of a smuggler to escape the authorities. The investigation, which is the focus of the play, provides ample opportunity for humorous dialog between the Yiddish-speaking smuggler and the Russian-speaking police officials.

The two smuggler plays transcribed by Lehman are evidence that the folk drama tradition in the towns of Sochaczew and Lowicz was alive and well. Each of these towns in the Warsaw region had a population of over 10,000 by 1908, more than a quarter of which were Jews. Lehman does not indicate when he recorded them or when they were performed. However, three features of these plays suggest that they were probably performed after 1915, but during World War I. First, the emphasis on contraband is consistent with the sharp rise of smuggling in response to the severe hardships precipitated by the war. Second, the Russian authorities presented in the play were in power in Congress Poland prior to 1915, when the German army defeated the Russian army and occupied Poland. Third, the scathing insults hurled at the Russian authorities are more likely to have been uttered without fear of retribution during the period of German occupation, which was permissive in comparison with the severity of Russian censorship.

The two smuggler plays draw not only from the popular genre of plays about lawbreakers but also from a well-established convention of humorous dialog between characters speaking different languages and consistently misunderstanding each other. The comic situation created by this exercise in linguistic and cultural unintelligibility provides ample opportunity for bilingual puns, obscenity and insult. In the smuggler plays, the dialog is between a Russian-speaking authority and a Yiddish-speaking Hasid. Other plays feature dialogs between a Yiddish-speaking Hasid and an assimilated Jew, who speaks either German or a Germanized Yiddish, or between an Austrian army officer speaking German and a Yiddish-speaking recruit, who misunderstand each other on such subjects as marching and shooting.
Judging from the texts, the only props needed were chairs and tables. Since these brief plays were most probably performed in private homes during the festive meal, the players no doubt used the furniture already there.

One traditional figure, the herald, is missing from these two plays. Known as payats (clown), loyfer (runner), torredner (announcer), aynshayer (crier) or onfirer (director), this figure is described in one bandit play as having reddened cheeks and as wearing a high, pointed hat topped by a bell that tinkled as he walked. Using a formulaic rhymed prolog, this character might herald the arrival of the players, announce the subject and characters of the play, bless the audience, request alms, remind the mistress of the house that the players had been there the year before, ask the guests to shift the furniture and make place for the players and to be quiet. He might also collect alms at the end of the play, in connection with the epilog, while the players arranged themselves in a line.

Although there is no indication of any prolog in the first text, it is very likely that upon bursting into the house, the players announced their presence by means of one of several traditional greetings or formulaic requests for alms used by masked pranksters wandering about the town. Sometimes the host offered the players a little something from the table before they began, though refreshments were generally offered after they were done. If the announcement of the players’ arrival was made immediately upon entering the house and if the performance did not begin immediately, Lehman may not have considered their greeting as part of the play. The first play does have an epilog, which is sung by the entire cast in unison. In the second text, the prolog appears to be the responsibility of the contrabandist, the star of the play, and the epilog, which is reduced to one line—“A good Purim,” is recited by the entire cast.

Though Lehman presents the text in standard Yiddish, the players no doubt spoke their local Yiddish dialect. The colloquial Yiddish of the texts contrasts with the elevated style of the older plays, which use an archaic Yiddish, often described
as daytshmerish (Germanized), and more Hebrew-Aramaic elements. In his transcriptions, Lehman retains the non-standard features of the Russian spoken by the characters.

Rhyme, a pervasive feature of the older texts, appears sporadically in the smuggler plays. In the first play, the rhymed sections are also sung. These passages do not advance the action, but constitute a lyrical outpouring of feeling. Recurrent rhyme schemes include aa, abab, and abcb. Bilingual rhymes, assonance and loose internal and end rhymes contribute to the rich texture and wit of the discourse.

Among the works consulted that were not listed in the body of the article are Shifra Epstein, The Celebration of a Contemporary Purim in the Bobover Hasidic Community (dissertation, 1979); Mikhi Gelbart, Fun meshoyrerim lebn (N.Y., 1942); Chone Shmeruk, Yiddish Biblical Plays, 1697–1750 (Jerusalem, 1979) [in Yiddish and Hebrew]; M. Vanvild (ed.), Bay undz yidn: zamlbukh far folklor un filologye (Warsaw, 1923), and Zalman Zylbercwajg, “Purim-shpiler,” Leksikon fun yidishn teater, vol. 3 (N.Y., 1959). I am deeply grateful to Lucjan Dobroszycki, Shoshke Erlich, Elliot Klein, and Wolf Younin for their invaluable assistance.

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Contraband

First version from Sochaczew, Warsaw District

Note: Title in Yiddish, *Treyfene Skhoyre*, means “non-kosher merchandise.”
Italicized words are in Russian. Those in boldface are bilingual puns.

(Into the room rushes a Jew, a contrabandist with a sack on his back.)

JEW: Jews, Children of Mercy, let me hide a package of hot goods! I'm the father of small children. Don't tell them where I am. (He hides himself.)

(A police commissioner enters with a policeman.)

POLICE COMMISSIONER: *Master of the house, where is the Jewish contrabandist? Isn't he here?*

MASTER OF THE HOUSE (or mistress of the house performed by a male): *Not here.*

POLICE COMMISSIONER (to the policeman): *Search for him.*

(They search for the Jew and do not find him. They leave, come back in and ask the same questions again. The master/mistress of the house replies that he is not there. This is repeated several times. Finally the Jew inadvertently coughs and the policeman finds him. He drags him out from his hiding place, and the police commissioner blows his whistle. In come three more policemen and they circle the contrabandist. Then the district commissioner also enters. With pomp and ceremony they clear a passage for him, and the police commissioner yells out): *Make way for him! The district commissioner is coming through!*

POLICE COMMISSIONER (to the contrabandist): *Do you have a passport* [pashport, Russian for passport]?

JEW: What do you want a *belt* [pasikl, Yiddish; pas, passport, Yiddish] for? I have no belt. What kind of belt? I know nothing. What?

POLICE COMMISSIONER: *Turn over the passport!*

JEW: Are you going to give me a *smack*? (patshe, Yiddish) I can give you two smacks (and he gives him a smack).

(The policeman takes the sack of goods and he gives it to the police commissioner for inspection.)

OFFICER (to the Jew): *Do you have a certificate* [shvidestvo, Russian] *for these goods?*

JEW: What do you want from me? A pair of *soles* [podeshvelek, Yiddish]? I just resoled my shoes, and you want to tear the soles off?

POLICE COMMISSIONER: *Present the certificate for the goods.*

JEW: What do you want from me? It's raining outside, and you want to tear my *soles* off? Jews, Children of Mercy, he is confiscaing my prayer shawl and phylacteries.

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER: *Arrest him!*

(The guards seize him.)

JEW (sings):
Once I was a brave man, a brave man,
With goods did I come to this land.

ALL (chorus) [sing melody].

JEW:
I came to this land, to this land,
The trusty police seized me and my contraband.
Ikh Bin Amol Geven
Once I Was . . . .

JEW (sings):
Since there is no news to relate, no
news to relate,
I sing alone of my troubled and
miserable fate.

ALL (chorus) [sing melody].

JEW (sings):
Round the whole world have I traveled,
I could have had cause to regale.
Money gives me no satisfaction,
I yearn to return to the jail.

Kh'hob Arumgerayzt di Gantse Velt
I Wandered Around the Entire World
POLICE COMMISSIONER: What is your name?

JEW: Eenie Meenie Minie Mo.

POLICE COMMISSIONER: Eenie Meenie Minie Mo—what kind of a name is that?

JEW: Moses-Mordecai, Jack the teacher, Moses find me if you can.

POLICE COMMISSIONER: Where are you from?

JEW: Warsaw Boondoggle region.

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER: Put him down for five years hard labor.

(The clerk sits at the table and writes.)

JEW (sings with the same melody):
I have lost 10 percent,
I heard [my sentence] clearly.
Alas, my heart is on fire.
I am extinguishing it with my hot tears.

Jews, Children of Mercy,
Take me out of their hands.
See what is happening,
A five-year sentence is planned.

A prisoner am I already,
Wife and children have I at home.
Beloved Jews, give me alms
For each member of my family.

(The clerk stands up.)

ALL (sing):
May all of you stay well, each and every one,
We are about to leave you, leave you, leave you.
May God give you
Pleasure and joy,
And us a little money.

May all of you stay well, each and every one,
We are about to leave you, leave you, leave you.
May God give you
Dew and rain (or: health and life),
And us the happy path.
Blaybt Shoyn Mir Gezunt
May All of You Stay Well

Contraband
(Second version from Lowicz, Warsaw district)

JEW: Good Purim, dear master of the house.
May you have joy this time next year.
May God bring every good thing your way.
From help and comfort, may your year never stray.

(The inspector enters, and the contrabandist hides under the table.
[possibly, the host's dining table.])

INSPECTOR: Did a man with smuggled goods come into this house?
MASTER OF THE HOUSE: Not here.
JEW: Cock-a-doodle-do!
I'm right here.

(The policeman starts looking for him and finds him under the table.)

INSPECTOR: Do you have a passport?
JEW: Dear master of the house,
May you have joy,
You have a belt; I myself have a string.
Maybe you have one—I'll give it to me,
I'll give it to him.

INSPECTOR: Where is your passport?
JEW: I have a string; he insists on a belt.

INSPECTOR: By what [kak, Russian] name are you known?
JEW: Shit [kak, Yiddish] with blood and pus.

INSPECTOR: What is your last name?
JEW: Shit free of charge.
INSPECTOR: **What** [tshto, Russian] kind of merchandise do you have?

JEW: I have a few times 60 [shok, Yiddish] eggs and rags, Rubbish! And throw in your head and feet, It'll be even heavier.

INSPECTOR (to policeman): *Write it down!*

(The policeman sits down and proceeds to write.)

POLICEMAN (to Jew): **What is your last name?**

JEW: *Shit* with blood and throw in your hands and feet.

INSPECTOR (to policeman): *Seize him!*

JEW: Master of the house, dear, ransom me; they are going to imprison me.

(The contrabandist takes money from the master of the house and presents it to the inspector.)

INSPECTOR: *Go away! Policeman, seize him!*

JEW: Master of the house, dear, give me more money. They are about to imprison me.

INSPECTOR (pushes him): *Forward!*

ALL: A good Purim.

**Note:** The English translation that appears with the music is slightly different from the translation in the text, due to an effort to make it “singable.” The photographs are of the Sochaczew production.