



Ruth Wisse  
*teaches*

# SHOLEM ALEICHEM'S ***TEVYE THE DAIRYMAN***

**A STUDY GUIDE**

Sponsored by the Tikvah Fund

קרן תקווה  
**TIKVAH**

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# INTRODUCTION

How did a village dairyman become the most famous character in a culture that prides itself on literacy and refinement? Why did a traditional father emerge as the hero of a work that highlights the momentum of modernity?

When the legendary Yiddish writer Sholem Rabinovich—better known by his pen name, Sholem Aleichem—created Tevye in 1894, he sought to show how a simple Russian Jew could deal with challenges like poverty, inequality, and religious doubt. By the time Sholem Aleichem wrote the final episode of the Tevye stories in 1916, his spokesman had become a Samson in reverse, holding together a disintegrating Jewry and a toppling civilization. Tevye was the character to whom Sholem Aleichem returned whenever he felt the need to speak to the contemporary Jewish condition. As we see Tevye gain and lose a small fortune, face the trials and tribulations of marrying off his strong-willed daughters, and finally face expulsion from his home, we get a glimpse of the increasingly difficult challenges that Russian Jews faced at the turn of the century, as nearly a thousand years of Eastern European Jewish civilization began to come to an end.

Through the lens of these seminal Jewish stories, this online course will explore Judaism's confrontation with modernity and the push and pull between tradition and freedom. Tevye is a comical Rashi who navigates between quotations and their homespun application; he is the first Jewish stand-up comic in a comedy with an exceptionally serious purpose. Since Tevye is known nowadays primarily through his adaptation in *Fiddler on the Roof*—the musical that enchants audiences from Topeka to Tokyo—the course will also explore the difference between kosher and kosher-style, or what happens when a Jewish work goes universal.

We hope you enjoy and profit from this penetrating study of one of Jewish literature's most remarkable works.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE

This course was originally recorded in New York City during the summer of 2017 before a live audience at one of Tikvah's summer programs. The lectures were followed by smaller discussion groups, guided by senior instructors, which allowed students to explore, analyze, and debate the issues raised in each class. While no study guide can replicate the atmosphere of a vibrant classroom, this booklet aims to enhance your experience of this online course by posing the same kinds of questions our teachers and students explored when this course was first taught.

# MEET RUTH WISSE

Ruth Wisse is Martin Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature and Professor of Comparative Literature Emerita at Harvard University and a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Tikvah Fund.

Her books on literary subjects include an edition of Jacob Glatstein's two-volume fictional memoir, *The Glatstein Chronicles*, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Literature and Culture*, and *A Little Love in Big Manhattan*. She is also the author of two political studies, *If I am Not for Myself: The Liberal Betrayal of the Jews* and *Jews and Power*. The latter was recently translated into Hebrew and published by the Toby Press as *The Paradox of Jewish Politics: Why Is the Secret of the Jewish People's Strength Also Its Weakness?*. Her most recent book, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*, was published as a volume in the Tikvah Fund's Library of Jewish Ideas. She is currently working on her memoirs, excerpts of which are being published in *Mosaic*, where she is a regular contributor. Her columns and essays have also been published in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Commentary*, and *Tablet*.



# ABOUT SHOLEM ALEICHEM

Sholem Naumovich Rabinovich, better known by his pen name, Sholem Aleichem, was born in 1859 in Pereyaslav in the Russian Empire and grew up nearby in the *shtetl* of Voronko. While the first few years of his childhood were pleasant, his father lost much of the family's money in a failed business affair, landing them in poverty, and at the age of 13, Sholem's mother died of cholera. He was given a traditional *cheder* education and later entered a Russian gymnasium, from which he graduated in 1876.

Sholem Aleichem's first major work, written in Yiddish, was a dictionary of the curses employed by stepmothers. He began publishing in 1879, and for three years, he wrote reports and articles for two Hebrew publications. During this time, Sholem worked as a tutor for the children of a wealthy man and subsequently married one of the man's daughters, Olga Loyev, in 1883.

From this time on, he decided to focus on writing in Yiddish rather than in Hebrew. As was common for Yiddish writers of the time, he wrote under a pseudonym. He chose the pen name "Sholem Aleichem," which translates to something like "Mr. How-Do-You-Do." His first Yiddish novella, *Tsvey Shteyner* (*Two Gravestones*), in which he fictionalized his romance with Olga, was published serially in a Yiddish newspaper. After the birth of his first child, the family moved to Kiev, where Sholem continued to write at a dizzying pace. His output—written in Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish—spanned many genres.

Due to a lack of time and financial resources, he wrote and published little in the early 1890s. But the decade eventually proved most fruitful for him: in 1894, Sholem Aleichem published his first story featuring his most iconic character, Tevye the Dairyman. In the decade that followed, he wrote four of the eight stories that would come to constitute the *Tevye the Dairyman* collection.

In 1905, after witnessing the pogroms that swept through Russia, he and his family emigrated, first to New York City and Geneva, and then throughout Europe. Following the death of his son Misha in 1915, he fell ill and eventually died on May 13th, 1916. In the century since his death, his fame has only grown larger. Already in 1910, his works had been translated into several languages, and in the 1960s, the *Tevye* stories were dramatized in the Broadway classic, *Fiddler on the Roof*.



# LECTURE 1:

## THE CREATION OF TEVYE

In this lecture, Professor Wisse introduces both Tevye the Dairyman and the man who created him: Sholem Aleichem. In 1894, Sholem Aleichem published “Tevye Strikes it Rich,” the first in what would become of a series of short stories offering a window into the lives of Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement.

Tevye, the narrator and protagonist of the series, bears a striking resemblance to his author. Like Sholem Aleichem, Tevye is a Jewish father who struggles to provide for his daughters. But Tevye is not your run-of-the-mill *shtetl* Jew. His misapplied biblical quotations, his lack of involvement in the middleman-heavy *shtetl* economy, and his decision to live in the town of Boiberik rather than the nearby *shtetl* of Anatevka all reflect an atypical way of life, more reflective of Sholem Aleichem’s proto-Zionism than traditional Jewish custom. At the same time, however, Tevye is steeped in tradition, narrating his story in Yiddishisms and Jewish references sure to be familiar to Sholem Aleichem’s audience. In this first lecture, Professor Wisse unpacks these complexities, shedding new light on the stories that have captivated Jewish audiences to this day.

### DISCUSSION PASSAGE:

“If you’re meant to strike it rich, Pan Sholem Aleichem, you may as well stay home with your slippers on, because good luck will find you there too. The more it blows the better it goes, as King David says in his Psalms—and believe me, neither brains nor brawn has anything to do with it. And vice versa: if it’s not in the cards you can run back and forth till you’re blue in the face, it will do as much good as last winter’s snow. How does the saying go? Flogging a dead horse won’t make it run any faster. A man slaves, works himself to the bone, is ready to lie down and die—it shouldn’t happen to the worst enemy of the Jews. Suddenly, don’t ask me how or why, it rains gold on him from all sides. In a word, *revakh vehatzoloh ya’amoyd layehudim*, just like it says in the Bible!”

#### “TEVYE STRIKES IT RICH”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tevye believes that the Jew “has already died a thousand deaths” but is also one of “God’s chosen people.” In other words, Jews are subject to horrendous misfortune, even as they believe themselves to be chosen. How should Jews grapple with this contradiction of Jewish history and identity?
2. Tevye meets the women who are lost in the forest after he finishes praying, but does not receive his reward until after he brings them home. What sort of relationship does this scene imagine between prayer, good deeds, and good fortune?
3. Do Tevye’s beliefs about luck—“you may as well stay at home with your slippers on, because good luck will find you there too”—reflect what actually happens to him in “Tevye Strikes it Rich”? If not, why might Sholem Aleichem have attributed this view to Tevye?
4. In what ways is Tevye different from the average *shtetl* Jew? What qualms with the *shtetl* lifestyle might have caused Sholem Aleichem to write Tevye this way? In what ways might Tevye’s breaks with traditional *shtetl* life be a reflection of Sholem Aleichem’s proto-Zionism?
5. Tevye’s liberal use of biblical quotations often leads him to take words out of context or misapply them. Is he a hapless fool or a knowing comedian? Are we supposed to laugh *at* Tevye or *with* Tevye?
6. The first verse Tevye quotes is “*revakh vehatzoloh ya’amoyd layehudim*,” from the Book of Esther, which is read aloud in synagogue every year on the holiday of Purim and would have been very familiar to Sholem Aleichem’s audience. What is the significance of Tevye applying this verse as he does?
7. Do any of Tevye’s struggles sound familiar to Jews today? In what ways?



# LECTURE 2:

## MAKING THE CENTER HOLD

In the second of the Tevye stories, Tevye encounters a character already familiar to Sholem Aleichem's readers: Menachem Mendl, the luckless, reckless, but ever-optimistic Jew who leaves behind his wife in the *shtetl* to play the markets in the big city of Yehupetz. In this lecture, Professor Wisse explores the rich symbolism behind the meeting of Menachem Mendl and Tevye, two very different characters.

There is a great deal of symbolism in seeing the contrast between Menachem Mendl—the unyieldingly enthusiastic, odds-ignoring, solo speculator—join forces with Tevye—the cautious, humble, family-first dairyman. Professor Wisse explores several interpretations of the story that have been offered since its publication. Is Tevye's reckless business partner a subtle Marxist critique of capitalism in an unequal society? Or is he the embodiment of an essential and necessary Jewish characteristic, defiant optimism in the face of overwhelming odds? Is the story intended to disparage Menachem Mendl, or should we, like Tevye, forgive him and accept what he stands for?

### DISCUSSION PASSAGE:

“And whose fault is it? It's my own, for having been taken in by a lot of hot air. Take it from me, the only way to make money is to work your bottom off. Which is where you, Tevye, deserve to get a swift kick! But what good does it do to cry about it? It's just like it says in the Bible, *vetso'akoh hane'aroh*—you can scream till you burst, who says that anyone is listening?”

**“TEVYE BLOWS A SMALL FORTUNE”**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does this story invite deep and subtle interpretation, perhaps through a Marxist or Zionist lens, or is it simply a comedic Yiddish tale?
2. In what way(s) is Menachem Mendl's optimism particularly Jewish? Is Menachem Mendl "satire run amok," the embodiment of the Jewish messianic impulse, or both?
3. Why might this story have first been published in a Zionist weekly? What point(s) might Sholem Aleichem have been making to his Zionist readers?
4. Is this story simply a critique of Menachem Mendl's reckless optimism, or does it imply that Tevye needs to balance some of his traits with Menachem Mendel's?
5. Menachem Mendl tells Tevye, "If you'll just let me explain it to you, you'll understand how a man can live here and not live here at one and the same time." What does he mean by this? How does this theme of opposites coexisting reappear throughout the story, and what is Sholem Aleichem trying to tell us with it?
6. Do you agree with Sholem Aleichem that Zionism is most effective when it is based on the traditions, language, and shared culture the Jews had in exile? Why or why not?

# LECTURE 3:

## TODAY'S (MODERN) CHILDREN

In this third story, “Today’s Children,” we finally begin to explore the famous romances of Tevye’s daughters and the effect they have on Tevye. Tevye is eager to marry off his girls to wealthy and learned men. But Tevye faces a dilemma when Tsaytl, his eldest daughter, begs him not to force her to marry Layzer Wolf, a wealthy butcher. Instead, Tsaytl has fallen in love with Motl Komzoyl, a lowly patch tailor at the very bottom of the Jewish social and professional hierarchy.

In this lecture, Professor Wisse introduces the conflict between tradition and modernity as it takes shape through the generational divide between Tevye and his daughters. Tevye comes from a world where parents choose their daughters’ spouses; Tsaytl seeks to break this mold. Tevye wants wealth and status for himself and his daughter, but Tsaytl is content with love and the modest life of a tailor’s wife. But this story has a happy ending. When Tevye looks closer, he realizes he and Tsaytl are not all that different. He, too, likes Motl more than Layzer, and he appreciates the value of a simple, honest living. And so this rift between Tevye his daughter can be bridged, and the chain of tradition can remain relatively unchanged—for now.

### DISCUSSION PASSAGE:

“But when I saw my Motl standing there with his head bowed contritely, looking so serious and sincere, I couldn’t help thinking that maybe I had the wrong attitude. What was I being so snooty about and who did I think I was, the great-grandson of Rabbi Tsatskeleh of Pripichek?”

**“TODAY’S CHILDREN”**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When Tevye first meets with Layzer Wolf, he thinks he is there to discuss slaughtering a calf, but Layzer believes he is there to discuss Tsaytl's marriage. What is the significance of this miscommunication? Think about why, in a traditional Jewish setting, a dairyman and a butcher might be incompatible.
2. Layzer Wolf is a wealthy butcher, with relatively high social status, while Motl Komzoyl is a lowly patch tailor. Beyond their status and wealth, what might each man's profession say about his character? Why might Sholem Aleichem have chosen these two professions, specifically?
3. What does Tevye's sympathy for animals say about his character? How does it distinguish him from *shtetl* Jews of the time?
4. This story, like the last, was first published in *Der Yid*, a Zionist weekly. What Zionist themes does this story contain?
5. When Tsaytl broaches the subject of her marriage with her father, she does it with affection and sorrow, rather than anger or distance. Were you surprised at Tsaytl's closeness with her father? How might you have expected a typical Jewish daughter at the time to react to this situation?
6. The story ends on a hopeful note, but it is clear that there is some tension between Tevye's way of life and the life his daughters want. What does the younger generation want that their elders might be unprepared to give?
7. When all is said and done, does this story end with the status quo preserved, or has tradition been irrevocably breached?

# LECTURE 4:

## ASSAULT: REVOLUTION

Sholem Aleichem's fourth installment in *Tevye the Dairyman*, "Hodl," was published in 1904, as imperial Russia was undergoing the first pangs of revolution. Reflecting the political milieu of the time, Sholem Aleichem incorporates a young Jewish communist into the story. When Tevye comes across this young idealist, Pertchik, he is drawn to Pertchik's grit, intellect, and honesty—so Tevye invites him to dinner. Soon, Pertchik meets Tevye's second daughter, Hodl: an avid bookworm and budding intellectual. The two fall in love.

However, unlike the first three Tevye stories, this one ends in heartrending tragedy. As Professor Wisse points out, the prospect of revolution often split Jewish communities and families—and Tevye's home is no exception. When Pertchik is arrested and sentenced to time in a labor camp for his revolutionary activities, Hodl decides to go with him, leading to a heartbreaking ending in which she bids her father farewell for the final time.

In this lecture, Professor Wisse guides us through the rich emotional subtext in this story. We will explore Tevye and Pertchik's similarities and differences, the prevalence of Marxism within Russian Jewry, and the impact of modernity on Hodl—a daughter who is more interested in scholarship than homemaking, and who rejects a traditional Jewish life in favor of revolutionary idealism.

### DISCUSSION PASSAGE:

"At the station were a few youngsters, born-and-bred Kasrilevkites to judge by the state of their boots, who had come to say goodbye. One, wearing his shirt down over his pants and looking more like a Russian than a Jew, stood whispering with my wanderbird. I do believe, Tevye, I told myself, that you've married into a gang of horse thieves, or purse snatchers, or housebreakers, or at the very least, highway murderers...On the way back from Boiberik, I couldn't restrain myself any longer, and I told my Hodl what I thought of them. She laughed and tried explaining to me that they were the best, the finest, the most honorable young people in the world, and that they lived their whole lives for others, never giving a fig for their own skins."

#### **"HODL"**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Tevye call Pertchik “Peppercorn”? How does this name suit him?
2. Pertchik is the son of a cigarette maker and doesn’t have any particular career aspirations himself—he says he’s going to study at university, but doesn’t know what he will study. Yet, Tevye approves of and takes a liking to the young student. What does this indicate about Tevye’s priorities? How and why have they shifted in the years since his experiences with Tsaytl’s suitors?
3. Through the quotations he uses in this story, Tevye implicitly associates Hodl with Queen Esther. In what way does Hodl resemble Queen Esther? How are their challenges similar?
4. Pertchik thinks only revolution can bring about a brighter future, but Tevye – while sympathetic to Pertchik’s goals – has a more conservative outlook. Which character’s philosophy is better suited to adapt to changing circumstances, and why?
5. Hodl is, in some ways, a product of modernity: she is a bookworm and an intellectual and is attracted to Pertchik’s revolutionary mindset. But by leaving her family and committing to her husband, Hodl is actually *following* tradition. Should we celebrate Hodl for breaking the mold, or for her ultimate embrace of tradition?
6. Why didn’t Sholem Aleichem make Pertchik a member of the Jewish Bund? What is the significance of Pertchik’s disinterest in Jews and Judaism?
7. This ending is the most tragic thus far, and it comes as a direct result of political conflict and revolution. What message about revolution is Sholem Aleichem trying to send with this story?
8. This is a heart-wrenching account of how political turmoil can divide Jewish families. Is this sort of division still present now? How has it changed since Sholem Aleichem’s time?



# LECTURE 5:

## ASSAULT: INTERMARRIAGE

The fifth episode in Sholem Aleichem's Tevye stories records the shattering of Tevye's relationship with his once-favorite daughter, Chava. Chava falls for a Chvedka, a decent man—Sholem Aleichem even compares him to Maxim Gorky, a Russian author and activist he admired—but not a Jew. In Czarist Russia, where civil marriage did not exist and the Orthodox Church and the Czarist government were heavily intertwined, Chava must convert to Christianity if she wants to marry Chvedka. She does so, irreparably severing her relationship with her father and family.

While Chava appears to best Tevye in every argument, Tevye does not budge. Here, we finally see where Tevye draws the line with his daughters, as he decides to mourn Chava and break off all contact, ignoring her pleas. In this lecture, Professor Wisse explores Tevye's response to his daughter's conversion and intermarriage and contrasts it to the more conciliatory conclusion in the American dramatic adaptation, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Drawing on the themes of Sholem Aleichem's original, Professor Wisse discusses how even in an era in which we prize universalism, it is vital to defend the particularistic attachment to Judaism and Jewish peoplehood, even at the highest of prices.

### DISCUSSION PASSAGE:

“Why did being a Jew or not a Jew matter? Why did God have to create both? And if He did, why put such walls between them, so that neither would look at the other even though both were his creatures? It grieved me that I wasn't a more learned man, because surely there were answers to be found in the holy books...”

**“CHAVA”**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think that, unlike her elder sisters, Chava cannot reconcile with her father at the end of the story?
2. Professor Wisse notes that Chava seems to win her verbal back-and-forths with her father. However, rejecting intermarriage might simply be the duty of the covenantal Jew, even if Tevye can't formulate an argument against it. Do you agree with this assessment? Can we make strong arguments against intermarriage? Should we reject it, like Tevye does, even if our arguments against it fail to be fully convincing?
3. Does the “spirit of love and universal brotherhood” that we strive for in modern, liberal societies make intermarriage a more valid choice? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think Sholem Aleichem fails to show off the beautiful and compelling elements of Judaism, like Shabbat and the festivals? Would Jewish rituals and values be a good argument against intermarriage? Why or why not?
5. Chava makes her arguments on the basis of universalism, but is forced to convert from Judaism to Christianity before her intermarriage—which is a rejection of Judaism, rather than a move toward universalism. Professor Wisse argues that even today, one can never abandon Judaism for true universalism. Rather, someone who tries to do so is abandoning Judaism to belong instead to the prevailing majority. Do you agree? Why or why not? Would your assessment of the story change if Chava did not have to convert?

# LECTURE 6:

## ASSAULT: MATERIALISM

When Sholem Aleichem published the sixth of his Tevye stories, Jews in Eastern Europe were in dire straits. Violence against Jews was escalating, and pogroms led to a large, fleeing refugee population. During this time—1906-1907—Jewish immigration from Russia to New York reached its peak, largely because of these worsening conditions. However, given the number of wealthy refugees coming through town, Tevye’s business is booming. The story almost seems to have a happy start, despite its bleak setting, when Tevye meets a wealthy widow and her immature son, Arnold, known as Ahronchik. Tevye gives Ahronchik a talking-to about responsibility, one thing leads to another, and soon enough Ahronchik has come over and fallen in love with Tevye’s daughter Shprintze. Though Tevye knows that this match will not sit well with Ahronchik’s upper-crust family, Arnold takes responsibility for bringing his family around to the marriage and claims that all will be well.

But all is not well. As Professor Wisse explains in this lecture, Ahronchik and his family are not the sort of Jews Tevye has met before, and they feel no affinity with the poor dairyman. Ahronchik’s uncle accuses Tevye of seeking financial gain by luring Arnold into falling for Shprintze, and rejects the match. Depressed and rejected, Shprintze makes a tragic decision: she drowns herself.

In this lecture, Professor Wisse explores various interpretations of this strange and awful tale, examining explanations that range from the historical to the Freudian.

### DISCUSSION PASSAGE:

“What was it I wanted to ask you? Oh, yes: have you ever seen a drowned man? Never? Well, mostly one dies with one’s eyes shut, but a drowned man’s eyes are always open. I just thought you might know why that was...”

**“SHPRINTZE”**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that Tevye's mangling of the word "Constanttution" is due to his ignorance, or is he intentionally slighting the new system? What makes you think so? How does this affect your understanding of the rest of the story?
2. When Tevye is faced with Arnold's uncle's excoriation, he has no response—he leaves and breaks down in tears. Why do you think Tevye is unable to keep his chin up in this situation, the way he so often does?
3. When this story was published, the Jews of Russia were in dire straits—yet Tevye's business is booming, in part due to the influx of refugees. In what ways does this chapter—and especially its conclusion—reflect the state of Eastern European Jewry at the time it was published?
4. What do you think about the theory that Shprintze's depression is caused by her out-of-wedlock pregnancy? If Shprintze is not pregnant, what do you think leads her to take her own life? Do you agree with the Freudian interpretation that Shprintze is acting on Tevye's unconscious wishes?
5. Do you agree that Jewish humor is often the result of Freudian repression? What about Tevye's habitual quotations and idioms might support or undermine this conclusion?
6. In a sense, it is Arnold's inability to stand up to his family that leads to Shprintze's suicide. In what way is Sholem Aleichem criticizing the young, irresponsible Jew in this story? Why might this criticism have been particularly relevant in his time, and how is it relevant today?
7. Until this point, even the wealthy Jews Tevye meets largely share his values. Arnold's family, however, see no special relationship between themselves and Tevye. What exactly is Sholem Aleichem criticizing about Arnold's family that was not true of the other wealthy families we've seen in the series?

# LECTURE 7:

## AMERICA: THE FALSE HOPE

In 1909, after returning from a stay in America, Sholem Aleichem released the penultimate chapter of the Tevye narrative: “Tevye Leaves for the Land of Israel.” This story tells the tale of Beilke, Tevye’s youngest daughter, and upends many of the tropes we have come to expect. With her mother dead and her father in need of support, Beilke marries not for love, but for the status and wealth that Tevye once thought he craved. However, when he visits his new son-in-law’s home, he finds that wealth might not bring him or his daughter all for which he had hoped. Podhotzur, a social climber, is embarrassed by Tevye’s low social status, and asks him to leave town. Tevye refuses to go to America, and so instead he heads for the holy land, his travel funded by his son-in-law.

In this lecture, Professor Wisse explores the mixed results of the sort of marriage Tevye had thought he wanted for his daughters. Beilke is treated well by Podhotzur, and he even goes out of his way to use his wealth and status to help her family—but he is embarrassed by her origins and makes up new ones. Podhotzur is successful in business, but also ignorant of tradition: he has never opened a Talmud. He represents, as Professor Wisse points out, the worst aspects of Jewishness in the New World that Sholem Aleichem encountered in America.

### DISCUSSION PASSAGE:

“‘It means,’ I say, ‘that you can’t make a fur hat out of a pig’s tail.’”

‘And what,’ he asks, ‘am I supposed to understand by that?’

‘You’re supposed to understand,’ I say, ‘that I’m not being shipped off to America.’”

**“TEVYE LEAVES FOR THE LAND OF ISRAEL”**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Sholem Aleichem chose to title this piece “Tevye Leaves for the Land of Israel” instead of “Beilke”?
2. What is the symbolic meaning of Podhotzur having so many clocks in his house? Why do these mechanical timekeepers make Tevye so uncomfortable?
3. Beilke asks not to be compared to her sister Hodl, who abandoned her father to follow her revolutionary husband. Which daughter’s path is more praiseworthy? Should we applaud Beilke for her devotion to her father and willingness to marry someone she does not love in order to take care of Tevye’s material needs? Or should we admire Hodl for her devotion to a cause that is greater than her family?
4. Did Beilke make the right choice in marrying and staying with Podhotzur? Why or why not? If not, is Tevye to blame for raising her to value the material over the spiritual or traditional?
5. Why do you think Tevye refuses to go to America, but agrees to go to Palestine? What do America and Land of Israel symbolize to Sholem Aleichem?
6. Initially, Tevye fantasizes about becoming Podhotzur’s business partner; soon enough, however, he changes his mind. Why do you think that is?



# LECTURE 8:

## CONCLUSION: LEKH-LEKHO

Five years after the publication of “Tevye Leaves for the Land of Israel,” the situation of Russia’s Jews was continuing to worsen. On top of widespread pogroms, they were being expelled from many Russian towns, and the infamous blood libel had made a reappearance in the form of the 1913 trial of Menahem Mendel Beilis. In “Lekh-Lekho,” the last of Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye stories, Tevye finds himself in similarly dismal circumstances. Motl the tailor has died of tuberculosis, forcing Tevye to abandon his journey to Palestine in order to return home and take care of his widowed daughter and her children. Meanwhile, Podhotzur has fallen on hard times, and he and Beilke have been forced to move to America and work in a factory.

In this last lecture, Professor Wisse looks at the stubbornly hopeful and redemptive side of Tevye. Refusing to be defeated even as his home is ransacked and he is expelled from his village, an elderly Tevye still recites the mangled Bible quotations and Yiddish idioms he always has, and refuses to lose hope. Perhaps the brightest ray of hope in this otherwise tragic ending is the return of Chava, who leaves her husband and rejoins Tevye’s family in its bleakest moment. This lecture explores how Tevye’s forgiveness of Chava and uplifting outlook as he is expelled from his village affect his status as the quintessential Jewish character. As Tevye puts it, even after all he and the Jewish people have been through, “the old God of Israel still lives!”

## DISCUSSION PASSAGE:

“Today, Pan Sholem Aleichem, we met on the train, but tomorrow may find us in Yehupetz, and the next year in Odessa, or in Warsaw, or maybe even in America...unless, that is, the Almighty looks down on us and says, ‘Guess what, children! I’ve decided to send you my Messiah!’ I don’t even care if He does it just to spite us, as long as He’s quick about it, that old God of ours! And in the meantime, be well and have a good trip. Say hello for me to all our Jews and tell them wherever they are, not to worry: the old God of Israel still lives!...”

**“LEKH-LEKHO”**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The title “Lekh-Lekho” is taken from the Torah portion that describes God’s commandment to Abraham to leave his birthplace and go to the Land of Israel. In what ways does Tevye’s story fit this positive archetype, and in what ways does Tevye’s story subvert it?
2. Why do you think Sholem Aleichem, a Zionist, ended Tevye’s story this way, rather than allowing him to complete his journey to Palestine?
3. In this story, Tevye reveals that Beilke has had to flee to America and work in a factory there to avoid her husband’s creditors. This is similar to Hodl’s fate: she is forced to leave Tevye to be with her husband in a labor camp. In the previous lecture, we compared Beilke’s loyalty to her father to Hodl’s dedication to her revolutionary husband. With Beilke’s ultimate fate in mind, which daughter’s approach do you think Sholem Aleichem favored? Why?
4. Was Tevye right to forgive Chava? Why do you think he was willing to forgive her now, but not earlier?
5. What draws Chava back to Tevye and her family during this time? Why would she choose to return only now, when her family faces expulsion?
6. Professor Wisse sees Tevye “more as a comical Rashi than as a modern Job.” Do you agree? In what ways is Tevye’s story about belief in the face of tragedy, and in what ways is it a comedic and lighthearted commentary on Jewish life?
7. Why do you think Tevye tells Sholem Aleichem to pass on the message that “the old God of Israel still lives”—a hopeful message in a time of great pain and adversity? Is this a particularly Jewish message? Why is it important?
8. At the end of this episode, Professor Wisse is asked whether Tevye is a good father. What do you think?
9. Looking back at the trajectory of the Tevye stories, how do you think Tevye’s journey was influenced by current events in Sholem Aleichem’s time? Would Tevye’s tale have ended differently if Sholem Aleichem were writing today? What might that ending look like?

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## TRANSLATION OF *TEVYE THE DAIRYMAN* USED IN THIS COURSE

*Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin, (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1987).

## SELECTED WORKS AND COLLECTIONS OF SHOLEM ALEICHEM

*Favorite Tales of Sholom Aleichem*, trans. Julius and Frances Butwin, (New York, NY: Avnel Books, 1983).

*From the Fair: The Autobiography of Sholom Aleichem*, trans. Curt Leviant, (New York, NY: Viking Penguin Inc., 1986).

*The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor's Son*, trans. Hillel Halkin, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

*The Best of Sholem Aleichem*, eds. Ruth Wisse and Irving Howe, (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1979).

## SELECTED REFERENCES FOR THIS COURSE

“Sholem Aleichem: The Critical Tradition,” special issue, *Prooftexts* 6, no. 1, (1986).

Jeremy Dauber, *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem: The Remarkable Life and Afterlife of the Man Who Created Tevye*, (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2013).

Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990).

Janet Hada, *Passionate Women, Passive Men: Suicide in Yiddish Literature*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).

Dan Miron, “Introduction” in Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son*, trans. Aliza Shervin, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009).

Maurice Schwartz, *Tevye*, (1939; USA: Maymon Films). Available with English subtitles at: <http://www.jewishfilm.org/Catalogue/films/tevyeh.html>.

Ruth Wisse, *Sholem Aleichem and the Art of Communication*, B. G. Randolph Lectures in Judaic Studies, (Syracuse, NY: 1979).

———, “What’s Wrong with ‘Fiddler on the Roof,’” Mosaic, June 18, 2014. Available online at: <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/uncategorized/2014/06/whats-wrong-with-fiddler-on-the-roof/>.

———, “The Comedy of Endurance: Sholem Aleichem” in *The Modern Jewish Canon*, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2000).

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