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# Speaking for the Shulhojf: The Vilna Voices of Ayzik-Meyer Dik<sup>1</sup>

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*Annotation:* When the Maskil Ayzik-Meyer Dik (ca. 1807–1893) retooled as a *kritiker*, a writer of satire, he did so by keeping it local. Most effectively, he exposed the evils and failings of the Jewish body politic by locating his satires in and around the crowded shulhojf, the Great Synagogue and Courtyard, of his native Vilnius. Endowed with a phenomenal memory and a wicked sense of humour, there was no end to the gallery of *schnorrers*, *shnorrerkes*, rogues and misfits whom he could rescue from out of the recent, unenlightened past. But to speak for Jewish Vilna the way that Eugène Sue had spoken for Paris meant learning a new set of skills. To write popular fiction meant to draw upon the dialogical nature of language itself: the way low-lives and charlatans mimicked the speech of the learned class, while uncensored speech betrayed their boorishness, voracious appetites and debauchery; the way the speech of servant girls trafficked in the speech of their mistresses and outperformed them. Who spoke for the shulhojf was the *folksshrayber*, the popular writer. Speech was dialogical, because to become a responsible *folksshrayber* required that one allow others to do the talking. Willy-nilly, and despite his professed ideology, Dik became the first writer to turn Ayalon-Linove-Vilna into the natural habitat of Yiddish.

*Keywords:* Yiddish speech, women, Ayzik-Meyer Dik, Vilna, Great Synagogue and Courtyard, Yiddish popular fiction.

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## 1. Covenantal speech

‘*Ikh heys AMaD, ayn geboyrener vilner, un lebe biz yetst in Vilne*’ (My name is AMaD. I was born in Vilna, and still live in Vilna).<sup>2</sup> Thus wrote Ayzik-Meyer

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

Dik, in his affected literary Yiddish, when he emerged from behind his acronym for the first time.<sup>3</sup> By 1871, AMaD was a household name wherever Yiddish storybooks were read, which meant essentially everywhere that the distribution network of the famed press of the Widow Romm & Sons could reach, whether at bookstalls in the marketplace on Fridays or through the book peddlers who plied their trade over the treacherous roads of tsarist Russia. Never one to pass up a learning opportunity, AMaD explained to his *tayere lezerin*, dear lady reader, why it was important for her to know his birthplace. Unlike his ever-popular stories, whose fictional plot and characters spoke for themselves, here was an eyewitness account of an historical occurrence from the recent past, and as such required of its author to present his bona fides. And so, dear lady reader, ‘My name is AMaD. I was born in Vilna, and still live in Vilna, and was thirteen years old at the time of the First Levy of [Jewish] Recruits.’<sup>4</sup> What is more, God had endowed him with a phenomenal memory. ‘I remember clearly and accurately all remarkable events that occurred in my circle, and I remember all trivial occurrences that loomed ever so large in the eyes of a child.’

How sensitive and perceptive a child he was, the reader would discover soon after the obligatory preface. AMaD remembered being inducted into the Hebrew alphabet by his *bahelfer*, or teacher’s assistant, and the groschen that an angel threw down to him from heaven; his father carrying him to heder wrapped in a huge *tallis*; Zelig, his *rebe*, teaching him the first chapter of Leviticus and promising him a beautiful bride when he grew up, a promise he later kept in his capacity as matchmaker. Recapped herein was the early education of your average East European Jewish male, followed seamlessly by childhood memories that were place-specific: the chanting of the opening prayer of ‘Mah tovu’ (How goodly [are your tents]) that AMaD had recited on the steps of the Great Synagogue along with hundreds of other heder boys who were gathered there to mark their first day at heder; the awe that coursed through his childish body when he bowed down at the words ‘and I bow down and prostrate myself’; and (jumping ahead now to the story itself), the terror he experienced as a 13-year-old during the Musaf service on the Yom Kippur of the First Levy of Recruits, when the liturgy warned that the fate of each person hung in the balance. As a

3 AMaD, *Der erster nabor vos var in dem yor TaKPaH (1828)*, Vilna: Romm, 1871, p. 4.

4 Ibid.

child, in short, Vilna represented the sacred centre of Jewish civilisation, with a direct line to heaven.

A more awesome setting than this *mikdash m'at*, or Temple-in-Miniature, could hardly be imagined. Fifteen huge steps led down to its entrance. Despite its many windows, it was always dark inside. A source of spiritual succour, the Great Synagogue substantiated the words of Jacob at Beth-El (Gen. 28:17): 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.' Having served as a place of refuge and miraculous rescue in the past (as documented in a lengthy historical footnote), the Great Synagogue would most certainly work its magic in the present hour of crisis as well: the Tsar had just issued an imperial decree making Jewish boys from the age of 12 to 25 eligible for the draft.<sup>5</sup> How great, then, was the boy's astonishment when, upon entering the main sanctuary, he was met with hundreds of men standing in silent grief, a silence that was suddenly broken by an astonishing occurrence: 30-odd *remiznikes*, coachmen, burst in and headed straight for the Holy Ark. Throwing open its doors, they prostrated themselves before the Torah scrolls, and in a great and terrible voice pleaded with the Lord that they, sinners that they were, be punished in order to spare the whole community of Israel. 'O! Groyser got,' they shouted, 'reter Yisroels, zayn helper in tsayt der noyt. Undz, nor undz zol trefn dayn shtrof gerikht, den nor mir zaynen di zinder! (Oh great God, Saviour of Israel, his helper in times of need. May Thy stern judgment fall only upon us, yes, upon us, for we are the sinners!).<sup>6</sup> Even allowing that to achieve greater pathos the author was heightening, which is to say, Germanicising, the register of their actual speech, he vividly remembered this display of folk piety and public penance heard as a child over 40 years earlier, just as he recalled the *hazzan* immediately launching into Psalm 20, 'May the LORD answer you in time of trouble,' which prompted indescribable wailing from the men below and the women seated above.

A Jewish child of the merchant class who grew up a stone's throw from the Great Synagogue of Vilna was socialised 24/7 into a world of intense piety, where the addressee in good times and bad was one and the same, the Guardian of Israel, to whom the simple folk cried out in Yiddish and to whom the

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5 Olga Litvak, *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

6 AMaD, *Der erster nabor*, p. 12.

congregation prayed in a Hebrew understandable to all. As it happened, news of the *ukaz* arrived in Vilna during Selichot, i.e. at the start of the penitential season, so the confluence of historical crisis and the liturgical calendar made the communal outpouring of penitence and prayer an immediate and universal response. Later, from his bedroom window, the child could hear poor artisans and scholars doing the rounds of the streets at night, calling Jews to repent: ‘*Vos shloft ir? Di velt shteyt in flamen! Yisroels tseltn brenen! Shteyt oyf tsu avoydes haboyre! Gist oys vi vaser ayere hertser far got un betet vegn ayere kleyne kinder!*’ (Why are you sleeping? The world is on fire! The tents of Israel are ablaze! Wake up to serve the Lord! Pour out your hearts to God like water and plead for [the rescue of] your little children!)<sup>7</sup> It was utterly credible that poor artisans and scholars could produce such poetry-in-prose, because two speech genres were here combined into one: the *shulklaper*’s call to morning prayer, and the emotionally charged and highly stylised language of *tkhines*, petitionary prayers usually recited by women.<sup>8</sup> At such dramatised moments, the child’s identification with adult behaviour and belief was complete. Swept up in the apocalyptic fervour, he too visited the cemetery almost every day, there to plead with the sacred dead to intercede with God on behalf of the living, and on the climactic day of Yom Kippur, father-and-son relived both the Akedah of Isaac on Mount Moriah and the Hurban, the Destruction of the Temple.<sup>9</sup>

Dik had intended ‘First Levy of Recruits that Occurred in 1828’ to be a historical farce, in which the author used the past as an object lesson in communal folly and cultural backwardness. But there was something about the Great Synagogue and Courtyard that transcended the historical moment, and so animated and amalgamated the Jewish body politic that the tenor and substance of their speech expressed great religious fervour. By his exposure to group speech, the autobiographical author demonstrated how a Jewish child was socialised into a Covenantal Community where all barriers between history

7 Ibid., p. 14.

8 Ruth Rubin, *Jewish Life: The Old Country*, Folkways FG 3801, 1958: A1. <http://www.folkways.si.edu/jewish-life-the-old-country/judaica/music/album/smithsonian>; Tracy Guren Klirs, *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women’s Prayers*, Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1992; Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

9 Litvak, op. cit., p. 78–79.

and myth, the living and the dead, were eliminated. The tears of the House of Israel, these voices broadcast through the streets of Vilna, were endowed with the power to extinguish the flames of national catastrophe. Communal speech bespoke complete solidarity among all classes of society, as when the unlettered *remiznikes*, the lowliest of the low, took upon themselves the communal burden of sin, and their sacrifice was acknowledged. If these were not the lessons that AMaD, the enlightened author, would have his lady readers learn – what happened to a body politic when grown-ups behaved no better than children – then he had only Yiddish to blame. Thanks to direct, historically authenticated and culturally coded speech, the voice of the faithful community of Vilna broke through the author’s Baroque style and explicit ideological agenda.

## 2. Speaking for the shulhojf

Who spoke for the Vilna shulhojf, the Great Synagogue and Courtyard? Whoever it was would control the hearts and minds of Russian Jewry. Of this, the Vilnius-born writer Ayzik Meyer Dik (ca. 1807–1893) was firmly convinced, as were the first generation of Jewish reformers in Eastern Europe, for they named the first weekly newspaper in the Hebrew language *Hamaggid*, (The Preacher, founded in 1856). The maggid was a species of ‘professional talker’.<sup>10</sup> Maggidim plied their trade mostly indoors, in synagogues and study-houses, but if Dik’s storybooks were to be believed, Linove–Ayalon (both anagrams for ‘Vilna’) was simply crawling with *zogers* and *zogerlekh* competing for air space; so many fly-by-night preachers who could set up shop anywhere and anytime, whenever there was a crisis brewing, for alas, this is how events unfolded in the sorry tale of ‘First Jewish Levy of Recruits in 1828’. Thus, Dik’s first response was to fashion the persona of an enlightened maggid, a teacher-instructor-moralist-reformer, modelled on his illustrious precursor Yaakov Kranz (ca. 1740–1804), better known as the Dubno Maggid, who had also delighted in a good story to drive home his homiletic message.<sup>11</sup>

10 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Michael Wex, ‘Professional Talkers’, *Yivo Encyclopedia*, 2010, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Talk/Professional\\_Talkers](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Talk/Professional_Talkers).

11 David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, Chap. 3.

Something much more potent than homilies was needed, however, to address the rapid impoverishment of the Jewish urban masses brought about by the collapse of the Medieval, corporate structure and the old agrarian economy. That someone was the *kritiker* (the satirist). ‘*Di kritik virkt mer vi di moral,*’ Dik assured his readers, satire was more potent than moral instruction, because *di kritishe beshraybung* (the satiric narrative) of an out-and-out rogue, someone beyond hope of reform, would serve as object lesson; one good story could awaken the hearts of readers still possessed of moral scruples and ethical principles far more effectively than ten ethical tracts.<sup>12</sup> What better way, then, to drive these lessons home than to begin at home, in and around the Synagogue Courtyard of Vilna, which was revealed to be the seat of folly and the refuge for rogues: ‘*Khaytsikl Himself*’ (1856), ‘*The Stepmother*’ (1859), *Yekele Goldshleger*, also known as *Yekele Daytsh* and *Yekele Mazl-tov* (1859), or ‘*Reb Shmaye from the Town of Alite*’, aka *Reb Shmaye der gut yontef-biter* (‘*Reb Shmaye the Happy-Holiday-Wisher*’, 1860). Satire mandated not only picaresque plots, grotesque characterisation, a socially dense landscape and the exposé of outrageous behaviour. Effective satire required characters who spoke and interacted, the more diverse and discordant the better.

And so, a traveller arrives in the city of Linove in the land of Suria [Russia] with a population of roughly 40,000 Jews, ‘who speak Yiddish the same as we do’, and to all appearances are God-fearing, hardworking and intelligent.<sup>13</sup> He finds that there is even an educated class of people like himself, but unfortunately, they do not mix in communal affairs, leaving it to the *hamoyn-am*, the common folk, to regulate their social, religious and educational institutions as they see fit. Exploiting the presence in Linove of so many learned Jews, our traveller decides to have a Torah scroll copied for his personal use, and so he locates a highly reputable scribe named Reb Daniel Hartsulinke, stipulating that the latter submit his handiwork to inspection, one parchment sheet at a time. When Reb Daniel stops his deliveries, however, our traveller must take matters into his own hands, and pays a visit to his home, inside the Vilna shulhoymf.

12 [Ayzik-Meyer Dik], Anonymous, *Reb Shmaye der gut yontef biter*, Warsaw: Bamberg, 1860, p. 4–6.

13 [Ayzik-Meyer Dik], Anonymous, *A gants naye geshikhte fun Yekele Daytsh mit Daniel Soyfer in tales-kotn*, Lviv: J.M. Ehrenpreis, 1873, p. 3. This is a pirated edition of *Yekele Goldshleger oder Yekele Mazltov*, Warsaw, 1859.

The satiric stage is set. An educated traveller from abroad visits the cultural capital. It may not be Paris, but it has its special attractions. In his spare time, he undertakes a task that testifies to his wealth, learning, and religious commitment, which, in a surprising turn of events, brings him into the Jewish heart of darkness. Endowed with a keen eye for grotesque descriptive detail, and a gift for social discourse, the traveller rises to the challenge.

*‘Vos iz epes di **mayse**,’ hob ikh gefregt dem **soyfer**, ‘vos ir hot zikh oyfgeherht tsu brengen mir **yeries**?’*

*‘Keyn guts zol nit hobn mayn liber **shokhn**,’ hot er mir geentfert ontondik zayn rok un farglaykhdik dem bord mit di **peyes**. ‘Fardreyt zol im vern zayn lebn vi er hot mir fardreyt dem kop a por vokhn mit **din-toyres** un mit **mishpotim**.’<sup>14</sup>*

‘What’s the story here,’ I asked the scribe, ‘that you stopped bringing me the sheets of parchment?’

‘May nothing good come to that dear neighbour of mine,’ he replied while putting on his jacket and straightening his beard and *peyes*. ‘May his life be turned inside out, the way he’s been driving me crazy the last couple of weeks with rabbinical lawsuits and trials.’

When the traveller agrees to arbitrate the dispute between the scribe and his neighbour, Reb Daniel launches into a self-incriminating monologue about the sorry fate of his 13-year-old son Elyokumke, the wife he married him off to, the melamed he took in as a tenant, and his other misdeeds as landlord. The verb *fardreyt*, employed in two different ways, the one denotative (*fardreyt zol im vern zayn lebn*), the other idiomatic (*vi er hot mir fardreyt dem kop*), is key to the meta-Talmudic register and rhetorical nature of his speech. In a later scene, which introduces us to the eponymous villain Yekele Goldshleger, Reb Daniel will start a sentence with ‘**Pshite**, all the more reason,’ or ‘**Poter**, vos fregt ir do?’ (What a question! Why are you even asking?), meta-discursive Hebrew-Aramaic speech markers that are the exclusive domain of the study-house.<sup>15</sup>

14 Ibid., p 7–8; rpt. as ‘Yekele Goldshleger’ in A. M. Dik, *Geklibene verk*, edited with an introduction by S. Niger, New York: Cyco, 1954, p. 66. Here, as in all citations from the Yiddish original, words of Hebrew-Aramaic origin are given in bold.

15 Jordan D. Finkin, *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish discourse in modern Yiddish literature*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.

Inside Reb Daniel's overcrowded hovel that is home to multiple family units, all is chaos and cacophony. The only one who enjoys any privacy is his most coveted tenant Yekele Goldmine, so called because he earns more from his parasitic pursuits than anyone in all of Linove, and for the next few months, our traveller will come across the yellow *paravantshik*, the makeshift partition, that proclaims Yekele's presence wherever he sets up shop with his latest matrimonial conquest. In Reb Daniel's home, our traveller overhears husband-and-wife bickering over the menu for dinner. They settle on *lokshn mit kneyd*. These are the first words we hear Yekele utter. Weeks later, soon after Shavuoth, the traveller enters a tavern to drink a glass of lemon kvass, a local delicacy, and he spots the *paravantshik* yet again. This time he overhears a lengthy repartee between Yekele and his latest wife that begins as follows:

*'Neyn es muz blaybn oyf dos maynike, beyde fusunoges in tsholnt, di Brust mit di kutnitse in tsimes, un oyf shalesudes di flankenshtik. Azoy hob ikh zikh gefirt far mayn driter un ferter vayb un azoy vil ikh zikh firn biz mayn letster vayb.'*

*'Ober vu zet men es,' hot zikh di vayb opgerufn, 'az a mansparshoy'n zol zikh mishn in tepl?'*

*'Poter, gor a naves,' hot er zikh opgerufn. 'Undzere tnoyim flegn dokh oykh aleyn tsurikhnt dem shabes. Eyner hot gezaltsn fish un an anderer flegt smalyen a shepsn-kepl lekoved shabes. Ikh bin, borekh-hashem, oykh a yid a lamdn. Nit farges, ikh bin dokh nit dayn ershter man, vos iz geven, zol er mir moykhl zayn, epes gor a shnitser, a stolyer.'*

*'Nu rekht,' hot zi zikh opgerufn, 'meyle erev-shabes. Ober du mishst zikh dokh in tepl a gantse vokh—a brand in dayne khazerishe beyner!'<sup>16</sup>*

'No, I insist on having it my way. I want both jellied calves' feet in the cholent, the breast and the *kutnitse* in the tzimmes, and for the third Sabbath meal the flank of the beef. This is how I did things with my third and fourth wife, and this is the way I'll do things until my last.'

'But whoever heard,' his wife retorted, 'of a man mixing into the cookin' pot?'

'What a question! There's a new one for you!' came his reply. 'During our engagement, the preparations for the Sabbath meal were all done by different people. One salted the fish and another broiled a head of lamb in honour of the Sabbath.'

16 Dik, *A gants naye geshikhte fun Yekele Daytsh*, p. 30; *Geklibene verk*, p. 75–76.



Praise God, I am, in addition to everything else, a learned Jew. Don't forget, I'm not *your* first husband either, and that one, may he forgive me, was nothing but a carver, a carpenter.'

'All right,' she said in reply. 'I understand [your getting involved in preparing for] the Sabbath. But you mix into what's cooking in the pot all week long. May your swinish bones be blazed!'

The yellow partition may provide some flimsy cover for Yekele's sexual appetites, but it is his speech that gives him away. His daily menu, meticulously enumerated, means more to him than his latest marriage. He is a womaniser, who routinely violates the domain of women. He observes the Sabbath punctiliously only insofar as the meals are concerned. Worse yet, he trades on his learning. Reb Daniel has already apprised the traveller of the many ways in which Yekele insinuates himself everywhere, playing the marriage broker, the hiring agent for servant girls, heder teachers and cantors for the High Holidays. He is invited to the homes of the well-to-do where he is the life and soul of the party and showcases his erudition. And although he began as a *khabadnik*, a Habad Hasid, he has recently begun to pray in the Reform synagogue in town (the very one that Ayzik-Meyer Dik and other young Maskilim had founded back in the 1830s!). Yes, and he also speaks Moldavian and Gypsy. '*Er ken alemen un ale kenen im*' (He knows everyone and everyone knows him). Khyesenke, his latest but certainly not his last wife, should thank her lucky stars for having married up, from a lowly artisan to the likes of Yekele, who wears his intellectual bona fides with pride. '*Ikh bin, borekh-hashem, oykh a yid a lamdn,*' he boasts to her in the idiolect of the learned, and it is this last, fuelled by his masculine charms and bestial appetites, that gives him free rein in the Covenantal Community of Linove, famous for its Torah scribes and Torah scholars. Only when he overplays his hand, pretending to be a zaddik, a hasidic wonder-worker, in a neighbouring shtetl, is he finally exposed, with a little help from our worldly traveller.

For Dik's readers, *Yekele Goldshleger* was a fast-moving, bawdy, and terrifically entertaining read. For Dik himself, it was an opportunity to expose, yet again, the central ills of Jewish society: '*di shlekhte kinder-ertsung bay dem hamoyn-am, un...di untsaytige un unglaykhe khasenes in undzere shtet* (the inferior primary education [of boys] among the common folk and the practice

of hasty and mismatched marriages in our big cities).<sup>17</sup> For the contemporary reader, its multiplicity of characters concentrated within a dense urban enclave, at the heart of which lay the Great Synagogue and Courtyard of Linove-Ayalon, are brought to life through highly differentiated and interactive speech.

### 3. Womenspeak

Who else spoke for the Great Synagogue and Courtyard? Following the live speech of those who spent many hours there but had never been heard from before, AMaD made a momentous discovery. ‘It is of great usefulness for every popular writer’ (*far yedn folksshrayber*), Ayzik-Meyer Dik explained to his lady readers in a footnote to this work, ‘to know and understand the argot [*di reydsnartn*] of all classes of people [...] as is evident from the work by Eugène Sue *Mysteries of Paris*.’<sup>18</sup> Never was his desire to be ranked alongside the likes of Sue so richly rewarded as when he positioned himself at the epicentre of Jewish Vilna: the one-and-only well that ‘*undzere bedek-habayis-layt*’ (those responsible for the upkeep of our holy places) saw fit to maintain in the Synagogue Courtyard of Ayalon, aka Vilna.<sup>19</sup> His finest moment as a transcriber of authentic Vilna speech was when he eavesdropped in ‘Seven Servant Girls at the Pump with Seven Jugs to Draw Water for Tea’. Justifiably proud of this work, Dik hoped that if the demands it made of his readers were greater than usual, the housewives would read it for their own edification, then read it out loud to their servant girls.<sup>20</sup> How surprised the latter would be to read of themselves inside the covers of an 84-page chapbook, twice the length of your average penny-dreadful, each endowed with a proper name, a different backstory, and a very distinct register of speech.

The servant girls meet at the witching hour, when the heavy chores are done, and the last business of the day is to draw water for tea. There is plenty of time to bitch about their bosses, to share the latest gossip, and one of the subjects they are most vocal about is speech. Not only do they quote liberally from the invective

17 [Dik], *A gants naye geshikhte fun Yekele Daytsh*, p. 4.

18 [Ayzik-Meyer Dik], AMaD, *Zibn dinst meydkhn bay dem vaser rer mit zibn krig um tsu nemen vaser oyf tey*, Vilnius: Romm, 1873, p. 18–19.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

20 Ayzik-Meyer Dik, ‘A maskils utopye’, *Yivo Bleter*, Vol. 36, 1952, p. 171.

of their mistresses, they also understand how speech is a measure of the person. Eytke is the most educated (she hails from Goldingen in Courland), so it is she who articulates the (German) proverbial expression *Vos far a her, azoy zayen di dinershaft* (Like master, like servant).<sup>21</sup> Normally, Dik would have woven this pithy expression into the title page, and the masters would have occupied centre stage. Here, in marked contrast, the seven servants and their speech preceded and preempted that of their seven mistresses, who took up the latter half of the volume.

The seven servant girls speak of their domestic service in sequential order, in what can best be described as a satiric colloquy, enlivened by their interruptions and appreciative responses to one another's cues. That they are low-comic characters is evident from the Slavicised (i.e. 'corrupt') form of their names: Sulke for Sarah, Payke for Zipporah, Hanke for Hannah, Minke for Minna, Eytke for Yudis or Judith, Sheytke for Shana, and Bas-Shevke for Bathsheba. Sulke sets the lively conversation in motion; like the soubrette in light comedy, she is happy to engage in intrigue, is thick with Akhsa, the mistress' daughter, and, most importantly for Dik's purposes, can ably differentiate one social actor from another and one role from the other. She is the ideal speech mediator.<sup>22</sup>

Sulke has the inside scoop on romantic love among the merchant classes. She shows up late to the pump because she has been busy delivering love letters to and from her mistress' daughter, Akhsa, and if the chocolates that she was supposed to deliver end up in other hands, Akhsa will be none the worse for it. When Bas-Shevke naively asks about Akhsa's parents, her supposed employers, Sulke has this to say:

*'Vos ployderstu fun eltern? Freg zey **bekheyrem!** Zi di muter iz do a gantsn tog in krom, un als zi iz in shtub zitst zi oykh mit a fardreytn kop fun gesheftn. Un der foter iz nor a vint: kumt af a vayle in shtub, est op, shloft zikh iber, un dreyt zikh avek. Fun zeyert vegn meg zikh umkern di shtub in gantsn kapoyer, un farlozn zikh alzoy mit der gantser virtschaft frier af di Akhses hent un dernokh af mayne. Nu, vi azoy kenen zey shoyn visn tsi zeyer tokhter iz in vemen farlibt oder nit? Mir dukht, ven di Akhse oder ikh voltn bay zey in shtub in kimpet lign voltn zey es oykh nit gemerkt.'*<sup>23</sup>

21 AMaD, *Zibn dinst meydikh bay dem vaser rer*, p. 39.

22 See Asif Agha, *Language and Social Relations: Studies in the social and cultural foundations of language* 24, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, sec. 5.3.

23 AMaD, *Zibn dinst meydikh bay dem vaser rer*, p. 24.

‘Why are you carrying on about her parents? As if they know what’s going on! The mother spends all day in the store, and even when she’s home, her head’s all tangled up in business. And the father is like the wind: comes home for a bit, eats his fill, takes a long nap, and makes himself scarce. So far as they’re concerned, the household can turn itself upside down; it rests entirely in Akhsa’s hands, and then in mine. So how do you expect them to know whether their daughter is in love with someone or not? Listen, if Akhsa or me were to give birth in their very home, they wouldn’t notice that either!’

Sulke’s racy, caustic and clipped speech is a perfect match for her derelict surroundings. The mores of the new merchant class are surface thin, she discovers. The moment her mistress, who is jealous of Sulke’s good looks, opens her mouth, out comes the vituperative speech of Butchers’ Street:

*‘Ver ayngebrokh’n, **khtsufe**, hureshe **tsure**, Faytkes lubovnitse!’ Zi hot es a bisl a zis maylekhl, vi a geborene yatkever gasnitse.*<sup>24</sup>

‘Drop dead, you degenerate, whore-face, Faytke’s lover!’ What a sweet little trap that one has. [Talks] just like someone from Yatkeve Street.

Yiddish has rich linguistic resources for talking bad, available to women of all classes. Most jarring to the refined Yiddish ear, and to Dik’s ear in particular, is the Slavic component. The adjectival *tse*-suffix on *lubovnitse* and *gasnitse* makes each noun feminine, Slavic, and therefore vulgar-sounding. Then there is the Hebraic component. *Khtsufe* (debauched woman) paired with *tsure* (visage, face) means ‘whore-face’, and carries almost biblical censure.

Sulke’s complaint is followed by Minke’s monologue. Serving a rich silk merchant’s wife is bad. Serving a parvenu is far worse. ‘*Der paralis veys zey, di balebostes!*’ is Minke’s opening line, (May they all be struck with paralysis, those lady-bosses!).<sup>25</sup> Minke is doubly vulnerable: her face is pockmarked, and she has no work permit. Otherwise she would long since have sought alternative employment. Her verbal aggression, therefore, is directly proportional to her precarious psychological state.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

*‘Der paralis veys zey, di **balebostes!** Vi men zol zayn, iz alts shlekht. Iz men sheyn, vert men fun zey ongerufn “hureshe **tsure,**” “portselayene partse”. Iz men nit sheyn, ruft men “Bridote. Pamunitse.” Iz men nokh dertsu a bisl geshtuptl un shoavtslekh, ruft men “**matse shmure**”. Iz men rekht pokndik, ruft men Shinoyker **beysoylem–di meysim** zayen tselofn, di griber zayen geblibn [...].’<sup>26</sup>*

‘May they all be struck with paralysis, those lady-bosses! Whatever you are, they dump on you. If you’re pretty, they call you “whore-face” or “porcelain puss”. If you’re not pretty, they call you “hogbeast, slop pail”. And if you happen to be a little bit pockmarked and dark-skinned, they call you “watched-over matzo”. And if you’re badly pockmarked [as I am], they call you “Shinoyker Cemetery, the corpses ran off and left the pits empty”.’

Minke, the most insecure of the seven servant girls, has the most combative voice. Her repertoire of Yiddish curses is as inventive as it is nuanced. There is another culturally coded swearword for every shade of ugly. (Having fed Minke these juicy lines, Dik helpfully provides the etymology for ‘Shinoyke cemetery’ in a wordy footnote.)

Minke may sleep on a torn straw mattress over a worm-infested bench with a filthy pillow, but her speech is alive with caustic humour and native smarts, providing a moral baseline against which to judge her masters’ behaviour, and their speech. It is through their speech, as Minke and later Shetyke will reveal, that the Jewish nouveaux riches try to camouflage their vanity, ignorance, boorishness, and even criminal behaviour. By means of verbal parody and mimicry, the speech of these seven servant girls drawing water from the one-and-only well in the Synagogue Courtyard covers almost the entire social spectrum of Yiddish-speaking Vilna.

Eytke, who serves truly educated masters, is the lone voice of bourgeois civility, progress and religious tolerance. She alone has words of praise for her mistress, and will deliver this brief homily on proper speech. *‘Men hert dortn keyn **klole,** keyn grobn vort’* (You’ll never hear any cursing or any untoward word), she reports to the assembled about her mistress, *‘un ver redt shoy n fun a **trexfn vort un pshite** shoy n iz zi reyn fun dem mindestn nokhreyd’* (not to speak of hearing her utter any vulgarity, and you can bet that she is innocent of ever

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

speaking ill of anyone).<sup>27</sup> In the substance and social register of her speech, Eytke is ‘managing up’; like servant, like master.

But Hanke, the small-town girl from Dričishok, will have none of it. She is outraged by the laxity in religious observance that she has observed among her friend’s employers. ‘*Men zaltst keyn fleysh un men makht dem samovar um shabes*’ (They don’t kasher their meat with salt, and they heat up their samovar on the Sabbath), she says angrily of Eytke’s household, ‘*un zi geyt nit in mikve, un geyt mit eygene hor, un bentsht keyn likht* (and she doesn’t go to the ritual bath, wears her own hair, and doesn’t bless the Sabbath candles).<sup>28</sup> Pious Hanke prefers to toil under bad masters, ‘*den ikh vel hobn groys oylem-habe derfar*’ (for I will be rewarded with the World-to-Come in return),<sup>29</sup> even if Gnese, her mistress, calls her ‘*a shtik fleysh mit tsvay oygn*’ (a two-eyed piece of meat). Eytke is deeply insulted to hear her mistress so maligned, and lets Hanke know it. ‘*Du host gelebt in dayn skripshtetl tsvishn khamoyrim un lebst do tsvishn khazeyrim*’ (You grew up in that two-bit town of yours among donkeys, and now you’re living among pigs).<sup>30</sup>

Eytke’s is the reasoned voice of civility. Hailing from neighbouring Courland, she is the most educated among them, yet she has no problem adopting their vulgar register when need be. She is the counterpoint to Hanke, the atavistic voice of the shtetl outback.

That leaves Payke, Bas-Shevke and Sheytke. Payke’s speech is replete with Slavic proverbs. She is so street smart that she will accept Hershke the stable boy’s hand in marriage. In her behaviour and speech, she knows where she belongs, and how to make the best of it. As the liveliest in the group, Bas-Shevke’s voice is the most reactive and resilient. Perhaps this has something to do with her working at an inn. Poor Sheytke is the unhappiest of them all.

Sheytke serves a rich broker whose wealth comes from exploiting and cheating his clients, with the servant girl forced to be his go-between. Such a servant, especially one advanced in years, must adapt to her circumstances, Sheytke advises the other girls before they break for the night. ‘*Mir elnte kinder darfn in der velt lebn vi eyn yeshive-bokher*’ (We, the lonely children, must live

27 Ibid., p. 38.

28 Ibid., p. 31–32.

29 Ibid., p. 32.

30 Ibid., p. 38.

in this world like a yeshiva student). Drawing out her analogy to the system of studious young men being parcelled out to a different home for their daily meals, she delivers a succinct anatomy of urban homelessness:

*‘Shabes iz er **lemoshl** bay dem per fun der **kehile**, vos men hit bay im in shtub nor **yoshon**, un zuntik est er bay eyn gasman vos hot nit in shtub afile a gantse kendl um tsu vashn zikh dermit tsum tish. Montik est er vider bay aza eynem vos men est dortn keyn **dover min hakhay**, un dinstik bay eynem naye modishn, vos dortn iz eyn kristin di kekhin. Alzo mir dinstn darfn nit zayn frimer als er vos meynt nokh a **rov** tsu zayn. Mir darfn dinen vu mir kenen kumen tsu a shtikl **takhlis**, un dervayle oykh gut lebn, den di yorn fun dinen vern oykh arayngerekhnt in di zibetsik yor.’<sup>31</sup>*

‘On the Sabbath, for example, he eats at the home of the head of the community, where keeping last year’s grain is strictly observed, and Sunday he’s eating at some down-and-out’s who doesn’t even own an unbroken pitcher when it’s time to wash for the meal. Tuesday he’s at the home of someone who’s too strict to eat any living flesh, and Wednesday at someone else of the modern set, who has a Christian cook in his employ. So how can you expect us servants to keep the laws more strictly than some fellow who’s heading for a rabbinical position? We’ve gotta serve wherever there’s hope of reaching our goal, and live it up while we’re at it, because, let’s face it, the years we spend as servants are also counted in our seventy allotted years.’

‘The span of your life is seventy years,’ says the Psalmist (Ps. 90), and Sheytke knows her prayers by heart, as she knows the ins and outs of religious observance. The voice of the folk bespeaks the stoic acceptance of fate; the social order is the moral order, and both are immutable. Sheytke knows this, not from her immersion in Classical Jewish sources, to which only yeshiva students have recourse, but from the school of hard knocks.

Thus, for once in his long and productive career, the enlightened maggid Ayzik-Meyer Dik returned the favour to his dear lady readers, by allowing the servant girls among them to present, individually and collectively, a composite portrait of their urban landscape and difficult social condition solely through the medium of speech.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

#### 4. The natural habitat of Yiddish

Remember that educated class of Linover Jews who chose not to get involved in communal affairs? One of them is Reb Osher Karina, whom our traveller befriended in Vienna, and whose wife, Hannah, happens to be related to Reb Daniel the Scribe. When Daniel's sickly young son dies, of marital stress, no less, Hannah comes to pay a condolence call, and as a member of the family from a higher social class, she is outraged that the boy was sacrificed on the altar of premature marriage to someone 'twice the boy's age and four times his size'. It is Hannah who delivers this summary judgment: '*Linover yidn vern geborn far der tsayt, vern **khakhomim** far der tsayt, hobn **khase** far der tsayt, zenen **moyled** far der tsayt, vern alt far der tsayt, un shtarbn orem far der tsayt*' (The Jews of Linove are born prematurely, gain wisdom prematurely, get married prematurely, give birth prematurely, and die prematurely).<sup>32</sup> These are the six miserable stages in the life of your average Vilna Jew; their collective epitaph. As such, it can be delivered by a woman, but not in her own name. Rather, Hannah is here quoting something first spoken by her late father. This voice-within-a-voice-within-a-voice-within-a-voice (Dik speaking through the traveller, who is transcribing the words of Madame Hannah Karina, who is citing her late father) is the *mesoyre*, the authentic voice of tradition; it is apodictic, heavily Hebraic, and satiric.

The secret of the *kritishe beshraybung*, Ayzik-Meyer Dik discovered when he retooled as a *kritiker*, a writer of satire, was to keep it local. To thoroughly expose the evils and failings of the Jewish body politic, all he had to do was stay focused on the Great Synagogue, its Courtyard and surrounding Jewish neighbourhoods. Endowed with a phenomenal memory and a wicked sense of humour, there was no end to the gallery of *schnorrers*, *shnorrerkes*, rogues and misfits whom he could rescue from out of the recent, unenlightened past.

But to speak for Vilna the way that Eugène Sue had spoken for Paris meant learning a new set of skills. Popular fiction now drew upon the dialogical nature of language itself: the way low-lives and charlatans mimicked the speech of the learned class, while uncensored speech betrayed their boorishness, voracious appetites and debauchery; the way the speech of servant girls trafficked in the

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32 Dik, *A gants naye geshikhte fun Yekle Daytsh*, p. 22; *Geklibene verk*, p. 72.



speech of their mistresses and outperformed them. Who spoke for the shulhoif was the *folksshrayber*. Speech was dialogical, because to become a responsible *folksshrayber* required that one allow others to do the talking. The Yiddish popular writer needed to be rooted both in a storied urban landscape and in the social discourse of an entire polity. Willy-nilly, and despite his professed ideology, Ayzik-Meyer Dik became the first writer to turn Ayalon-Linove-Vilna into the natural habitat of Yiddish, a language at once covenantal and carnivalesque.

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## Kalbant už Šulhoifa: Aiziko Meiro Diko Vilnos balsai

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje aptariami trys iš Vilniaus kilusio XIX a. populiaraus moterų rašytojo Aiziko Meiro Diko kūriniai jidiš kalba: *Der erster Nabor vos var in dem yor TaKPaH* („Pirmieji [žydų] ėmimai į rekrūtus 1828-aisiais“, 1871), *Yekele Goldshleger oder Yekele Mazltov* („Jekelės aukso gysla, arba Jekelės sėkmė“, 1859), *Zibn dinst meydikh bay dem vaser rer mit zibn krig um tsu nemen vaser oyf tey* („Septynios tarnaitės prie šulinio su septyniais ąsočiais vandeniui arbatai pasemti“, 1873). Pirmasis *kūrinys* – istorinis farsas, antrasis – šelmių satyra, trečiasis – satyrinis dialogas. Visų jų veiksmas vyksta greta Didžiosios sinagogos ir Šulhoifo, arba Sinagogų kiemo, žydiškosios Vilnos epicentre, tinkamoje vietoje norint išryškinti jos kolektyvinį balsą ir atskleisti daugialypius žydų bendruomenės trūkumus. Dikas, įkvėptas prancūzų rašytojo Eugène Sue, siekė perprasti visų žydų visuomenės sluoksnių žargoną, taigi šiame straipsnyje stengiamasi apžvelgti įvairius ir kontrastingus kalbos socialinius registrus, Diko vaizduojamus Vilnoje: vaikų ir suaugusiųjų, vyrų ir moterų, tarnų ir šeiminkų, išsilavinusiųjų ir dykinėtojų bei šarlatanų. Autoriaus parodoma, kad Dikas sukūrė naują liaudies rašytojo (*folksshrayber*) tipą. Jo, kaip populiaraus jidiš rašytojo, kūryba buvo susijusi ir su pasakojimais apipintu miesto kraštovaizdžiu, ir su socialinės visuomeninės santvarkos diskursu.

*Raktažodžiai:* jidiš kalba, moterys, Ayzik-Meyer Dik, Vilna, Didžioji sinagoga ir Šulhoifas, jidiš populiarioji literatūra.