



Radical Yiddish

In a Moyshenadirish World

In the world of theater, where I come from, you often hear references to playwriting that is “Shakespearean” in its poetic language and breadth, or “Brechtian” in its political engagement, or “Beckettian” in its grim, existential humor. I would like to recommend another adjective to the world of literature, this one coined in April, 1926, by *Frayhayt* drama critic Robert Yukelson. He found a Yiddish play to be “Moyshenadirish,” which is not surprising, considering that Moyshe Nadir wrote the play under discussion. The term connotes a playful, Puckish attitude toward the world — but that playfulness cannot be separated from Nadir’s anti-religious and anti-capitalistic satires, some of which deserve to be celebrated along with their author’s name.

Moyshe Nadir was the pseudonym chosen by the American Yiddish writer Isaac Reiss, born in Galicia in 1885. He arrived in America at the age of 13, and within a few years was writing poems, drama reviews, and satires for leading Yiddish journals. The pseudonym Nadir (“*na dir*,” as in “take this” or “take this and choke on it”) embodies some of the daring, acid humor of his work in leftist Yiddish publications — the *Frayhayt*, *Hamer*, and *Signal* — during the 1920s and ’30s.

Even before Yukelson called his work “Moyshenadirish” in 1926, the satirist was quite well known

in Yiddish literary circles, but at that time he had not yet written some of his best plays and poems. In the ’30s, Nadir’s satire had much in common with the work of a few other gifted New York Yiddish artists — puppeteers Yosel Cutler and Zuni Maud, artist William Gropper, the Federal Theater Project’s Yiddish vaudeville troupe, and Artef (*Arbeter Teater Farband*, or Worker’s Theater Alliance) director Benno Schneider, all of whom would become Nadir’s collaborators.

When he coined the term “Moyshenadirish,” Yukelson was reviewing Maud and Cutler’s Modicut Puppet Theater premiere of “The Other World.” Nadir’s script featured a golden-bearded divinity lordling it over the archangel Gabriel and other inhabitants of the next world. That is not to say Nadir believed in the next world; his portrait of that realm in the puppet play suggests there is no more justice, charity or compassion in “the other world” than on earth. The Lord demands praise from his subjects, and a parody of Jewish prayers surfaces in a litany offered to the ruler of the universe, who displays high self-esteem, to put it mildly, in this anti-religious satire.

God’s voice: Hey, Gabriel.

Gabriel (*trembling*): His voice! (*obsequiously*) What is it now, God?

God: Who is great?

Gabriel: You.

God: Who is smart?

Gabriel: You.

Joel Schechter is the author of *Messiahs of 1933*, a book about Yiddish theatre, and *Rivington Street*, a collection of comic strips illustrated by Spain Rodriguez.

God: Who is strong?

Gabriel: You.

God: Who is eternal?

Gabriel: You.

God: How do you know?

Gabriel: You told me so yourself.

God: That's right.

Gabriel: The whole day, the whole day he's nagging me with those questions. And I have to answer him. What can you do? We're in His hands. Ah, if only God could help me get out of here. (*Exit*)

(Translation courtesy of Harvey Fink)

I once heard the late Yiddish writer and editor Itche Goldberg, who knew Nadir personally, quote these lines as a sample of Nadir's comic sensibility. Goldberg knew the lines by heart, and smiled as he recited them. "Moyshe naderish" thus means (in my reading of Robert Yukelson's Yiddish) playful or pranksterish to the highest degree. You might even say that Nadir's iconoclastic humor reaches to the heavens. It certainly reached to big topics like modern capitalism and traditional messianism in some of his exemplary works.

As a satirist in the tradition of Aristophanes, Ben Jonson, and S.J. Perelman, Nadir deserves to be known beyond the world of Yiddish and Jewish

studies. Unfortunately, however, his plays and epic poetry remain largely out of print and untranslated into English. My colleague Harvey Fink has begun to remedy that situation by translating one volume of Nadir's early poems (*From Man to Man*) and a volume of Nadir's short stories (*That Is How It Is*).

In my book *Messiahs of 1933* I have written at length about his masterful play, *Messiah in America*, and about *Rivington Street*, his epic and politically-charged poem about New York's Lower East Side. *Messiah in America* is a remarkable comedy about false messiahs hired by theater producers. It mocks the excesses of monopoly capital, religious fervor, celebrity worship, and sports extravaganzas all in one play — quite a feat.

"Moyshe naderish" humor contains within it a secular wariness of misguided and blind faith — excesses that had an unfortunate counterpart in his own "worship" of Soviet leaders for several decades, a faith that he renounced in writing around the time of the Hitler-Stalin pact. Nadir's pro-Communist leanings cost him friends and followers over the years, but his political consciousness about a world in which breadlines, unemployment, plutocratic wealth, and profitable war preparations all intersected led him to write some of his most resourceful and appealing creations. A world troubled by economic disaster, injustice, and false messiahs in modern dress is still too much with us for Moyshe Nadir's satiric writing and activism to be forgotten. **JC**



Thoughts About Forty Cents by Moyshe Nadir

Translated from the Yiddish by Max Rosenfeld

With the fish course, my wife also served me a bit of news about a town called Roosevelt, where they had shot into a crowd of strikers without any rhyme or reason. I felt my blood begin to boil, seethe, spill over. Picking carefully at the bones of my carp, I chewed the delicious fish and talked to myself.

"Those vile capitalists! We ought to twist their

heads off! Such swinish cannibals! Such cannibalistic swine!"

When my wife handed me the plate of soup and I saw amidst the noodles the kind of marrow bone I love to chew on, my wrath cooled down somewhat. Blowing on the tasty soup, I murmured to myself:

"Who knows, after all, which side is guilty?"

It's impossible that they would just go and shoot innocent people for nothing. For instance — has anyone shot at *you* lately?" (I said to myself).

This logical argument pleased me immensely and I considered myself a thoughtful individual, a wise man, a radical thinker, and so on.

When my wife brought the meat to the table and I saw the two chicken wings and a sweet chicken liver and a splendid chicken leg, I began to see the situation in a completely new light. Munching on the white wing and washing it down with a glass of good wine, I began to see that the whole thing was not so terrible as it had appeared during the fish course, and that you have to give the other side a chance to tell its story, too.

"Who knows!" I asked myself as I chewed on the chicken leg. "Who knows whether those strikers aren't really dangerous? And why (I thought further) should poor people strike anyway? Who asked them to? If the Law (I said) *ordered* them to strike, well, that would be a different story. But as long as the

Law allows you to live on a dollar-and-sixty-cents a day, and doesn't bother you — then why should you go out and strike for a lousy forty pennies a day? Really! It's ridiculous!"

When my wife brought me the wonderful apple compote and a piece of fresh strudel, I took another look at the piece of news about the shooting of the strikers in the town of Roosevelt, and sipping the last of my Turkish demitasse, I said to myself (and I could feel my blood starting to boil again):

"What the hell is the matter with those strikers, anyway! What are they making such a fuss about! They must have exactly two dollars a day? In the first place, how do they know the bosses can afford two dollars a day? Maybe they don't have it. Maybe they don't want to. Maybe they don't have the time to bother with the whole thing.

"And in the second place, if they *do* go out on strike — why *not* shoot them? If (I said to myself as I cleaned my teeth with a toothpick) in Europe they are shooting thousands of people who are *not* striking, then why shouldn't we here be allowed to shoot a couple dozen foolish workers who are striking for a lousy forty cents a day? It's ridiculous, that's what it is!"

And only at this point (when I lit up my fine Havana cigar and made myself comfortable on my soft easy-chair) did I see with brilliant clarity how silly, how trivial those workers are. For a measly forty cents a day, to make all that commotion and even risk their necks!

I couldn't help laughing, really I couldn't . . . **Jc**

Max Rosenfeld was active on our editorial board and conducted "Our Secular Jewish Heritage" until shortly before his death in 1997. "Thoughts on Forty Cents" appears in *Pushcarts and Dreamers*, a volume of Yiddish stories that he translated, published by the Sholem Aleichem Club of Philadelphia in 1967 and 1993. The book is now available through the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, www.csjo.org.



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