

SHALOM ASZ IN HIS TWILIGHT YEARS

translated from the Hebrew by Sara Mages

The first meeting of a Jewish child with Asz in Poland before the Holocaust, was already when he attended school, especially in the lower grades. It seems, that even before the youth matured, and knew how to understand his powerful psychological and social plays – "*Kiddush HaShem*," "God of Vengeance," "Motke the Thief" (especially in the performance of the Vilna troupe and the popular talented actor, Eizyk Samberg, who was probably created to play the roles of Yechezkel Gombiner, Shlomo Nagid, Uncle Moses, Zachary Mirkin and Yechiel Baal HaTehilim and the huge list of heroes of Asz's works) – they captured the heart of the Jewish child in Poland and engraved in his memory for the rest of his life "The Village Tzaddik," who, at the height of Yom Kippur, inside the crowd of the holy congregation of Jews praying in the synagogue, put two fingers in his mouth and with a sharp and excited whistle convinced the Heavenly Court to remove the evil decree from the people of Israel.

Already in this short story, from the period of his first work, he revealed the sharp claws of the young lion, who, over the years, will not only occupy his place near the Eastern Wall in our literature with its two languages, but will also be at the center of a turbulent and very bitter controversy that raged around his dynamic and daring personality for nearly half a century. And if on one side, that village youth, deprived of education and acceptable manners – but with a big and innocent heart overflowing with an abundance of Jewish and human emotion – is the symbol of the figure of Shalom Asz, the giant Jewish creator, more than once his appearance in matters of literature and Judaism was a kind of a sharp and strong whistle on opinions that have always been accepted... So it was in the scandal of Chirikov-Arabzhin¹ in the first decade of the century, when Asz's comedy, *Yikhus*, in its Russian translation, provoked several antisemites in the Russian literary and artistic circles to come out strongly against "the Jews' intervention in matters pertaining only to Russians." So it was in the scandal that Asz provoked when he expressed, in those days, his opinion against the custom of circumcision among the Jews, and so it was at the end of his life, when he published his trilogy about the creators of Christianity, and outraged many among the

¹ TN: In 1907, the Russian novelist Evgeny Nikolayevich Chirikov's comments on a Shalom Asz play were seen as a protest against the appearance of Jews in Russian literature.

critics, who pretended to be the righteous guardians of the walls of tradition, and shouted loudly that Shalom Asz is "is acting against the Jewish people," Heaven forbid!, "preaching for conversion from Judaism," and "plotting to destroy the foundations of our national existence." No less and no more!

And interestingly, that within the camp of his rivals and slanderers, Bundists² and Zionists, religious and non-religious Jews, joined together, and the factor that united them into one association was... their hatred of Asz. There were also those among them, who claimed that Asz does not understand the origins of Judaism, is not proficient in them well enough, and does not know how to teach heaps of rules, as is customary, but rather interprets the Scriptures by way of his intuition. There were also those who went so far and asked to disqualify Asz as an artist with a personal gothico-philosophical building and artistic perfection from his essence. Those found that Asz was nothing but a simple writer for the masses, who had never in his work attained such perfection that could satisfy the opinion of those with refined taste.

However, the great critic of Yiddish literature, the late Shmuel Nigier, has rightly said, that those who fight against Shalom Asz's heresy forget that, in the eyes of the true ultra-orthodox, every beautiful literature is "improper," and it is impossible to learn from it whether it has "missionary tendencies" or not. And in any case, he accused all of Asz's critics and opponents of not even trying to analyze his great works in a pure literary-artistic analysis. They abundantly submitted him to cursing, slander, banishment, ostracism and excommunication, almost in a malicious way... as if we were in the Middle Ages and our whole lives revolved solely on the axis of religion and the theological differences between Judaism and Christianity. And they concealed the fact that Shalom Asz has, more than any other creator in our two literatures, opened wide the gates of world literature to our literary works, and thanks to the translations of his works into many languages, millions of readers, on all five continents, became acquainted for the first time with the Jewish subject, and came to know that modern Jewish literature does not have to be ashamed of any other.

And as to the claims of the "scholars," it might have been appropriate to bring one or two sentences from Asz's words in his "Man from Nazareth." He describes there the main protagonist, "Pan Viadomsky," to say: if, for example, a scholar erred in the name of a general, a wise judge, or a Roman philosopher, if he specified an inaccurate date or distorted the name of a certain tribune – in short, when someone had sinned by inaccuracy regarding this or that detail related to a great or small hero of ancient time – an error correction (by Viadomsky) would have appeared immediately in the newspaper. In

most cases, the editor had to rewrite the letter, or even throw it in the bin, because of its wrong and weird style...

Therefore, with his exceptional knowledge of all the treasures of Jewish wisdom and its history, Asz's greatness was not necessarily in his erudition, but in his genial intuition, in his creative imagination that knew no bounds in time, scope and depth, in the fervor of his great love for his people and man in general, and the most important thing the unprecedented creative power in our literature, a power which enabled it to encompass all the layers of life of our people in its diasporas and in his country, at this time and in all the important periods of its history.

In any case, the controversy over Asz caused that the greatest creator of Jewish literature in our generation walked (or rather, wandered) for many years banished and ostracized within his people. Things got to the point where, apart for the exceptional, few were writers, teachers, editors and publishers (most of whom, as is well known, do not excel in excess of courage and moral stature) who feared, some of them out of cowardice and some out of jealousy and hatred, to publish something about his achievements, to teach his stories at school or to include them in chrestomathies and anthologies. The *shtetl*, for example, has been studied for decades in the satirical-sarcastic works of Mendele³, or Shalom Aleichem who mocks it with mischievous laughter, while they completely hid the "*Shtetl*," the poem-in-prose of Shalom Asz who, for the first time, sang the *shtetl*'s song out of a romantic poetic point of view, radiant optimism and complete faith. Even Asz's 75th anniversary did not serve as a reason for reconciliation, neither with him nor with his works.

And indeed, there is no denying, that Asz also has some artistically weak works. But what does this fact prove? Is it possible that in the writings of an author who has managed to create complete literature for nearly sixty years, from the short story and the sketch, suspenseful plays and thick novels of many volumes, there will be no particular works, or parts in any work, that suffer from weakness compared to others?

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With the *aliyah* of Asz to Israel, and his integration into the revival and building enterprise, he seemed to slap on the faces of all his critics-slanderers, who entrenched themselves in their ultra-nationalist viewpoints within the atmosphere of detachment from the central channel of our national life today, and from there they sent him their poisoned arrows. I then found it my duty to come to the house he built in Bat-Yam⁴, and greet him with the blessing, *Bruchim HaBa'im*⁵. I went with awe and reverence and, in fact, I was afraid that I would not find Asz as I knew him before the war, but rather an old man, broken and bitter. I also pondered in my heart, that if the

² TN: member of the *Bund* movement.

³ TN: Mendele Mocher Sforim (lit. Mendele the book peddler), the pen name of Sholem Yankev Abramovich, a Jewish author and one of the founders of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature.

⁴ TN: suburban city, south of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Shalom Asz's house was converted into a Shalom Asz Museum, after his death.

⁵ TN: Hebrew, "Welcome" (lit. "Blessed are those who come.").

tragedy of the loss of the European Jewry is great in the heart of every Jew, probably Asz's tragedy is much greater. After all, Hitler and his troops not only destroyed his brother and his people, his origins from which he drew his vitality and found the thousands of heroes for his work – they also destroyed hundreds of thousands of readers of Asz's works, those who saw him as their poet, who perpetuated and glorified them in literature.

But that meeting with Asz, which was soon followed by more meetings, brought me a pleasant surprise in this respect as well. Indeed, the man was old, and the hardships of fate plowed deep grooves in his face. But, his radiant eyes, his fluent and alert conversation, his heart full of Jewish warmth, immediately removed all the barriers. The great creative talent probably enabled him to overcome and tower above all hardships, and even beyond petty accounts with his rivals. He simply ignored them and did not mention them in a word or a hint. On the other hand, he did not hesitate to say unreserved words of praise for the work of several writers, those who did not show him excessive friendship and even those who showed him explicit hostility.

Particularly memorable was the last meeting which lasted many hours. Then we saw Asz without the European and American fancy clothing, which clung to him throughout his long life, and he was revealed to our eyes almost as a young Beit Midrash man from Kutno, who speaks innocently about matters he is struggling with in the depths of his heart.

It was on one of the Saturdays at the end of December 1956. Outside, the merciful winter sun was still shining, but the fireplace was lit in the small and modestly furnished room in Asz's house in Bat Yam. We, four or five people, sat around the table for three meals. Shalom Asz, who usually spiced up his words with jokes, shone with inspiration that evening, with miraculous power of memory and his immense proficiency. The main topic of conversation was, what is the root of Judaism – *Halacha* or *Aggadah*⁶? Asz, of course, defended, with all his fervor, the legendary element. He expressed his distaste for the method of Rambam⁷ and his students. Among the sages of the Spanish Jewry, he already preferred the Ramban⁸, precisely because he had less talent than his rival, the Rambam. However, closer to his heart were the sages of Ashkenazi Jews – R' Gershom Me'Or Hagolah⁹ and Rashi. And in the same time, Asz went in an analysis of the essence of the Essene¹⁰ sect in the days of the Second

Temple and draw an analogy between them and R' Yehuda HeChassid¹¹, between mysticism in Judaism in general and in the chassidic movement in particular. He came to the conclusion, with all the decisiveness, that the sign of the uniqueness of Judaism among the nations of the world, is not actually in the *Halacha*, but in the *Aggadah* and in Jewish mystery. And he finally concluded: only the peoples, who believe in the dynamic Messianic idea, will be able to understand the spirit of our people, and not the Asian people who have the static ideal. It was not possible to arouse in him a shadow of a doubt in his belief...

Meanwhile, it was getting dark outside, and amidst the chunks of shadows, which scattered in all corners of the room, Asz walked back and forth, in all his height and adorned with a silvery forelock. In our eyes, his image grew at that moment and took the form of a huge tree, magnificent with deep roots – a symbol and highlight of a great and glorious period of the life of our people, a glorious relic of the sufferings experienced by the trunk of the mighty Polish Jewry, which was cut down at the height of its blossoming.

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Suddenly, Asz remained stuck in his place, hung his dreamy gaze into space, as if he were looking for something in the invisible distance. A few moments of silence passed until the old man seemed to remember his guests, rubbed his palms and turned to his wife: let's sit by the table for a proper *Melaveh Malkah*¹² meal. Wine, fish, and meat were brought to the table, and during the meal the small talk flowed again, and in it, too, abundance of sparks of inspiration and delicate humor splattered from his mouth. He told us then about his meetings with Itzik Feffer¹³ in Moscow and later in America. Among others he mentioned, that at a public meeting in Moscow, Feffer once shouted at him: "*A koyl dir in kopf fun mein Browning! Shalom Asz, Sh!...*" ("A bullet in your head from my Browning! Shalom Asz, Sh!...") whereas, when Feffer visited America as an emissary of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Asz replied to him by reading his poem *Ich Bin a Yid* ("I am a Jew"). He told how once Mark Chagall refused to ride in the car that Asz was about to drive, because he feared he would capsize the car... and added more and more such amusing episodes.

However, the old artist reached the peak of his awakening at the end of the meal, when he lit a thick cigar and we all sat in the armchairs to hear him read the first chapter of his memoirs, "My Beginning,"¹⁴ which, a few

⁶ TN: *Halacha* or *Aggadah* – two of the primary components of rabbinic tradition...

⁷ TN: Moshe ben Maimon, commonly known as Maimonides and also referred to by the acronym Rambam, was a medieval Sephardic Jewish philosopher.

⁸ TN: R' Moshe ben Nachman, commonly known as Nachmanides is also referred to by the acronym Ramban.

⁹ TN: Gershom ben Yehuda, best known as Rabbeinu Gershom Me'Or Hagolah (lit. "Our teacher Gershom the light of the exile"), was a famous Talmudist and Halachist.

¹⁰ TN: The Essenes was a mystic Jewish sect during the Second Temple period that flourished from the 2nd century BCE to

the 1st century CE. Some scholars believe Jesus was influenced by them.

¹¹ TN: Yehuda ben Samuel of Regensburg (1150 – 22 Feb. 1217), also called Yehuda HeChassid was a leader of Chassidei Ashkenaz.

¹² TN: *Melaveh Malkah* (lit. "Accompany the Queen"), a festive meal held on Saturday night to escort the departing Shabbat Queen.

¹³ TN: Itzik Feffer was a Soviet Yiddish poet, executed on the Night of the Murdered Poets during Joseph Stalin's purges.

¹⁴ TN: in Yiddish, in the original text.

weeks later, was published in the last issue of the quarterly *Di Goldene Keyt*¹⁵. While reading in his characteristic Kutno Yiddish dialect, Asz's face radiated a spirit of humor and it was as if the burden of the years had suddenly been removed from his shoulders. At that moment he resembled a young faun, who does his magic tricks and amuses himself with lightness and cheerful laughter in the miraculous powers that lie within him. His eyes sparkled cheerfully and from time to time he burst out into loud laughter, as an echo to the laughter of the listeners. This is a masterpiece from the dawn of Asz's childhood, and it describes, among others, how a baby once stormed in front of the whole family, who had gathered for the Purim celebration at his father's house, on his mother's breast and demanded of her, in a loud cry, to breastfeed him even though he had been weaned a long time and his mother had already conceived a new child. The story, full of endearing humor, erotic sensuality and infinitely comic situations, is the last flicker of the mighty descriptive talent of Asz, as was never seen before in modern Jewish literature.

On the way back home, late at night, the poet Abraham Sutzkever said to me: this evening will remain etched in my memory to my last days. And I felt the same. We felt, that we would no longer enjoy many evenings like that with Asz. Not many days later, we were shocked by the news of the first hemorrhage that hit Asz's brain. Thanks to his immense spiritual powers he was still able to overcome the disease and live for a while. But in our last casual meetings, I had seen that the end was not far off.

And death actually got him in London...

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¹⁵ TN: Yiddish, "The Golden Chain."