Project Narrative Jan 16\_mixdown

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Eyal Segal: Mind you, you'll excuse me for saying so, but you're all a lot of cattle you are. What's so special about Ashev? What bunkum! The whole world's up in arms about him. But who the devil is he? A young punk, a no good bum, a nobody, a stool pigeon, a nothing, a big fat zero. If you'd like, I can tell you a story about a stool pigeon and a hometown boy from Kamenka at that, who makes Ashev look pale by comparison.

Jim Phelan: This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me. Today, I'll be talking with Eyal Segal, who has selected Sholem Aleichem's &quot;Baranovich Station&quot; for the story to discuss.

This story was written in Yiddish in 1909, and published in Aleichem's [00:01:00] collection entitled \_Railroad Stories\_ in 1911. The translation that Eyal will be reading was done by Hillel Halkin. Eyal Segal is an independent scholar based in Tel Aviv. He's published articles on narrative closure, which is also the topic of his dissertation, on beginnings and endings, on temporal experimentation in narrative, narration in the modernist novel, the poetics of Kafka, and on the Tel Aviv School of Poetics and Semiotics.

These essays have appeared in a range of journals and other outlets, including \_Poetics Today\_, the journal \_Narrative\_, and \_The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory\_. I especially want to single out Eyal's article in \_Narrative\_, published just about a year ago, January 2024, entitled &quot;Narrative Beginnings: Relations between First Full- Fledged Scenes and the Beginning of the Main Action&quot;. Eyal, welcome to the podcast. Is there [00:02:00] anything you'd like to say to contextualize your reading of &quot;Baranovich Station&quot;?

Eyal Segal: Yes, so I will say something about Sholem Aleichem, the author, and also about the collection of short stories. I think it might help a bit.

Sholem Aleichem is one of the classics of Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem was his pen name, the name of his literary persona. This couple of words are actually a popular expression, a greeting in the language. his real name was Sholem Naum Rabinovich. He was born in 1859, died in 1916, so didn't live very long, died in his late fifties, spent most of his life in Russia, to be more precise, places that today are part of Ukraine, but at the time were part of Tsarist Russia.

And following the mini revolution of 1905, and many persecutions of Jews at the time, he emigrated to the United States, like many Eastern European Jews, and he spent the last decade of his life in New York. [00:03:00] Very popular and much beloved author in Yiddish culture, and by extension Jewish culture, has always been a major part of what Franco Moretti calls the social canon, in addition to the academic canon. This has a lot to do with his qualities as a humorist.

He is one of the great masters of what is sometimes called Jewish humor, if there is such a thing. It certainly includes a lot of self deprecation and self mockery, but also, at least in his case, mixed with a huge dose of empathy. And somehow, altogether, this quality is always endowed, his writing, with what one might call a therapeutic effect of the first order, which his readers and listeners, and I'm saying listeners, because he used to do a lot of public readings, which were major cultural events at the time. So, his readers and listeners always appreciated that and still do.

Jim Phelan: That's very helpful. Yeah, a little bit about the collection?

Eyal Segal: Yeah, the collection, it's called The Railroad Stories, [00:04:00] with the subtitle, Tales of a Commercial Traveller, which, as you mentioned, published in 1911, so it's one of his late works, including 20 short stories.

All of these stories are told by the same narrator, this commercial traveller, and they take place on a train, which lends some kind of unity or continuity to the collection. And two more specific points which are relevant for &quot;Baranovich Station&quot;: first, in quite a few of the stories, there's a clear frame structure of a story within a story, since the narrator is mostly reporting or quoting a story that he heard from someone else, and also, in most of the stories, the situation of the train ride relates organically to the narrative dynamics, so, the train is more than just a mere device for summoning characters together.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, terrific. That's very helpful.

Alright, so now here's Eyal Segal reading Sholem Aleichem's &quot;Baranovitch Station&quot;.

Eyal Segal: [00:05:00] Baranovitch Station. This time there were no more than a few dozen of us Jews, and we sat in the third class car in comparative comfort. That is, whoever had found a seat had one; the other passengers stood leaning against the walls of the compartments, enjoying the conversation from there. And what lively conversation it was!

As usual, everyone was talking at once. It was early in the day, we had all had a good night's sleep, said our morning prayers, grabbed a bite more or less to eat, and even managed to light up a few cigarettes, and we were all in the mood to talk. Very much so, in fact. About what? About anything and everything.

Everyone tried to think of some fresh, juicy item that would make all the others sit up and listen, but no one was able to hold the stage for long. The subject changed every minute. No sooner did it light on the recent harvest, that is, the wheat and oats crop, than it shifted, don't [00:06:00] ask me why, to the war with Japan.

While after barely five minutes of fighting the Japanese, we moved on to the revolution. From the revolution, we pass to the constitution. And from the constitution, it was but a short step to the pogroms, the massacres of Jews, the new antisemitic legislation, the expulsion from the villages, the mass flight to America, and all the other trials and tribulations that you hear about these fine days: bankruptcies, expropriations, military emergencies, executions, starvation, cholera, Purishkevich, Azef...

&quot;Azef!&quot;

The name of that secret police spy who had informed on so many revolutionaries, only needed to be mentioned for the whole car to be thrown into a turmoil. Azef, and more Azef, and still more Azef, and Azef once again.

Mind you, you'll excuse me for saying so, but you're all a lot of cattle you are. What's so [00:07:00] special about Ashev? What bunkum! The whole world's up in arms about him. But who the devil is he? A young punk, a no good bum, a nobody, a stool pigeon, a nothing, a big fat zero. If you'd like, I can tell you a story about a stool pigeon and a hometown boy from Kamenka at that, who makes Ashev look pale by comparison.

These words were uttered by one of the standees who loomed over us from his place against the wall. I glanced up to have a look at him and saw a generously proportioned individual with a good silk cap on his head, twinkling eyes, a rosy, freckled face, and no front teeth. That is, his two front incisors were missing, which was apparently why he whistled when he spoke, so that Azef came out sounding like a Ashev.

I took a liking to the fellow right away. I liked the broad girth of him, the way he talked, even the names he called us. In fact, I like such Jews so much that I'm actually jealous of them. Having been [00:08:00] unexpectedly branded as cattle by the Jew from Kamenka, the whole car was as dumbfounded for a moment, as if a bucket of cold water had been pulled over everyone's head.

It didn't take long, however, for the passengers to recover, exchange a few glances, and say to the Kamenka Jew, You want to be asked to tell us a story? All right, we're asking. Tell us what happened in Kamenka, we're curious. Only, what are you standing for? Why don't you have a seat? There aren't any, you say?

Jews, shove over a bit, make room, please. Whereupon all of us, though we were already squeezed tightly together,

squeezed together even more to make room for the Kamenka Jew. He sat himself broadly down, spreading out his knees like a godfather at a circumcision when the baby is placed in his lap, pushed back the cap on his head, rolled up his sleeves,

and commenced in his broad manner of speaking. Listen well, my dear friends, because what I'm about to tell you, I want you to know, is not some opera or fairytale. [00:09:00] It's a true story, mind you, that took place right in Kamenka. My own father, God rest him, told it to me himself, and he heard it more than once from his father. I've heard it said that the whole thing was even written down in an old chronicle that was burned long ago.

You can laugh all you like, but I tell you, it's a crime it was, because it had some fine stories in it, a sight better than what's printed in your magazines and storybooks these days. In a nutshell, it happened in the reign of Nicolai I, back in the days of the gauntlet. But what are you smiling at? Do you know what the gauntlet meant?

The gauntlet meant getting flogged while you ran it. You still don't know what it was? In that case I'd better spell it out for you. Just imagine that. Two rows of soldiers with iron maces stand facing each other and you go for a little stroll between them some twenty times or more and in your birthday suit, mind you, while they do what the rabbi did in the schoolroom when you [00:10:00] weren't paying attention to your lessons.

Do you know what running the gauntlet is now? Then we're ready to begin. Once upon a time, it so happened, that the governor, Vasilchikov it was, I believe, ordered a Jew named Kivke to run the gauntlet. Exactly who this Kivke was, or what he had done, are details I can't tell you. Some say he was no great shakes, just a tavern keeper, and an old sourpuss of a bachelor at that.

One Sunday, though, when he was chatting with some Russians in his tavern, God put it into his head to argue religion with them. Your God, our God. Until one thing led to another, and the village elder and the constable were brought and charges of blasphemy drawn up. All he had to do, that barman, was give them a barrel of vodka, and the whole thing would have been forgotten.

But on top of everything else, he was stubborn. No, he says, Kivke takes nothing back. What must he have thought? He must have thought he'd be slapped with a three ruble fine and [00:11:00] business would go on as usual. Who could have guessed that he'd be made to run the gauntlet because of a few foolish words? In short, they took the old boy and threw him into the cooler until an honor guard could give him 25 good whacks of the mace, as God in his wisdom had decreed.

Well, I hardly need to tell you what went on in Kamenka once the story got out. And when did the bad news break? At night. And not only at night, but on a Friday night too. The next morning, when everyone came to the synagogue for Sabbath services, the place was in an uproar. Kivke's in the clink. He's been given the gauntlet.

The gauntlet? How come? What for? For nothing. For a few words. He's been framed. What kind of framed? He's a Jew with a mouth that's too big for him. It can be 18 sizes too big, but the gauntlet? How can they do that to him? Since when do Jews run the gauntlet? And a local Kamenka Jew yet? All day long, the Jews of Kamenka stewed as if in a pot. [00:12:00]

On Saturday night, as soon as the Sabbath was over, they ran crying to my grandfather. Reb Nissel Shapiro was his name. Why don't you say something, Reb Nissel? How can you allow a Jew and a Kamenkan, no less, to be flogged? You must be wondering why they all ran to my grandfather. I don't mean to boast, mind you, but I have to tell you that my grandfather, may his soul dwell in paradise, was the richest, most important, most cultured, most highly thought of Jew in town, and a very brainy man with high connections.

When he heard what the trouble was, he paced up and down the floor a few times. When he was thinking, my father told me, he always liked to pace back and forth, then stood still and announced, Children, go home. No one will be hurt. God willing, it will turn out alright. Here in Kamenka, the Lord be praised, we've never had a Jew flogged yet, and with his help, we never will.

Those were my grandfather's very words, God bless him, and it was common [00:13:00] knowledge in town that whatever Reb Nissel Shapiro said was as good as done. He just didn't like being badgered about how he intended to do it. When a Jew is rich and has connections, you understand, and is as brainy as my grandfather, you learn to trade lightly with him.

And you know what? It turned out exactly as he said it would. What did? Listen and I'll tell you. Seeing that the whole car was waiting with bated breath to hear what happened next, the Jew from Kamenka paused, took out a large tobacco pouch from his pocket, and slowly rolled himself a cigarette. So important had he become, that several passengers jumped up to offer him a light.

Having taken a few puffs, he resumed his story with fresh vigor. Now, see how a clever Jew operates. I mean, my grandfather, God bless his memory. He thought the matter over and cooked up a little plan, which is to say, he persuaded the authorities that the sentenced man, Kivke, should take time out to die, while still in the [00:14:00] prison.

But why are you staring at me? Don't you get it? Do you mean to tell me you think he was poisoned? Relax, that's not how it's done in Kamenka. What did happen then? Something much more elegant. It was simply arranged for the sentenced man to go to bed fit as a fiddle one night and wake up a corpse in the morning.

Do you follow me now, or do I have to feed it to you from a bottle? In a word, early one morning a messenger arrived from the prison with a message from my grandfather. Whereas notification is hereby given that a Jew named Kivke died in prison last night, and whereas Reb Nissel Shapiro is the president of the burial society, he, Reb Nissel, is requested to dispose of the deceased, that is, to see to his interment in the Jewish cemetery.

How's that for a neat piece of work? Not bad, eh? But don't rush out to celebrate yet. It wasn't as easy as it sounds. Keep in mind that the departed wasn't just another dead Jew. There was military [00:15:00] brass involved, and a governor, and a gauntlet waiting to be run. Do you suppose all that's a laughing matter?

The first order of business was preventing an autopsy, which meant going to the doctor and getting him to sign in black and white that he had examined the dead man and determined that the cause of death was, uh, conniptions of the heart that is to say, general apoplexy, shouldn't happen to you, after which there were various other authorities to be taken in hand too, because they all had to sign the same document.

Only then was the dead man really dead. Bye bye Kivke. Needless to say everyone in this car would be glad to make in a month what it all cost the Jews of Kamenka. And if you have any doubts about the wager, I'd be happy to come in as your partner. And on whose say was the money laid out? On my grandfather's, may he rest in peace.

That was a man you could trust. I tell you, the way he had it worked out down to the tiniest detail was a masterpiece. That evening the sextons of the burial society came with a [00:16:00] bier to receive the distinguished corpse in grand style and transport it with the highest honors from the prison to the graveyard.

That is, with a detail of two soldiers followed by the entire town. You can well imagine that Kivke never dreamt of such a state funeral in his life, and when they reached the gates of the cemetery, the two soldiers were given some vodka to drink, and the late departed was brought inside, where Shimon the coachman, I'm passing on his name to you as my father did to me, was waiting for him with a team of four swift horses.

Before the cock crowed, mind you, our dead hero was well across the town line on his merry way to Radiville, and from there, lickety split across the Austrian border to Brody. It goes without saying that no one in Kamenka sleep a wink that night until Shimon the Coachman returned from Radiville. The whole town was beside itself with worry, and my grandfather, most of all.

What if our dear dead Kivke was apprehended at the border, and brought back to Kamenka as alive and well [00:17:00] as you and me? Why, an entire community might be banished to Siberia. With God's help, however, Shimon the coachman and his team of swift horses returned safe and sound from Rediville, with a letter from Kivka that said, I wish to inform you all that I have arrived in Brody.

And there was great joy in Kamenka. A banquet was given at my grandfather's house, to which the jailkeeper and the constable and the doctor and all the authorities were invited, and a gay time we had by all. A band played music, and everyone, mind you, got so drunk that the jailkeeper kissed my grandfather and his whole family as hard and as often as he could, and the constable greeted the dawn by taking off his unmentionables and dancing on my grandfather's roof.

After all, ransoming a Jew is nothing to sneeze at, and one's saved from a flogging yet. Not bad at all, eh? Well, take a deep breath, my good friends, because the real fun is yet to begin. If you want to hear the rest of it, though, you'll kindly wait a few minutes, because I have to ask the [00:18:00] stationmaster here how much time we have left to Baranovich.

That's not where I'm going, mind you, but I have to change trains there. There was nothing to do but wait. The man from Kamenka went to talk to the stationmaster, while we passengers, in the car, discussed him and his story. What do you think of him? A swell fellow. No nonsense about him. He sure can talk.

And no need to be coaxed. What about the story? It's a damn good one. Let's hope it's a long one, too. Incidentally, there were even a few passengers who claimed that the same thing had happened in their towns. That is, not the exact same thing, but something more or less like it, and since every one of them was keen on telling it, the car soon turned into a free for all, but only until the Jew from Kamenka reappeared. As soon as he did, we all quieted down, crowded together to form a human wall and gave him our undivided attention. Now, where was I? We just thanked God, [00:19:00] said goodbye to a Jew named Kivke, hadn't we? You agree? Well, then you're wrong, my dear friends. A half year or a whole year went by, I can't tell you exactly, and our Mr. Kivke, mind you, sat down and wrote a letter and addressed it to my grandfather. In the first place, he wrote, I wish to inform you that I am in good health and hope to hear the same from you. And in the second place, I've been left high and dry here, without a cent to my name, and no way of earning one, surrounded by Germans in a foreign land.

They don't understand my talk, and I don't understand theirs. If I can't make a living, I'll have to lie down and die, and so, wrote Kivke, please be so kind as to send – a subtle fellow, no? What he wanted to be sent, of course, was money. Everyone, mind you, had a good laugh. And then, that letter was torn up into little pieces and forgotten.

Before three weeks were up, another letter arrived, again from the late [00:20:00] Kivke, and again addressed to my grandfather, with an I wish to inform you at the beginning, and please be so kind at the end. But this time, the end had a postscript. Could it be, Kivke wanted to know, that the Kaminkans had something against him?

Better to have been flogged and gotten it over with, because his wounds would have been healed long ago, and he wouldn't have been left penniless among Germans, with nothing to do but watch his own belly swell from hunger. When my grandfather, may he rest in peace, received this letter, he called a meeting in his home.

What should we do? We can't let a Jew die from hunger. Well, when you were asked to fork up by Reb Nissel Shapiro, you couldn't be a pig about it. A fine collection was taken up, the biggest contributor to which, needless to say, was my grandfather himself. The sum was sent to Brody, and once more Kamenka forgot that there was such a person as a Jew named Kivke.

Kivke, however, did not forget that there was such a place [00:21:00] as a town called Kamenka. Another half a year passed, or maybe it was a whole one, I can't tell you exactly, and guess what? Another letter arrived. Once more it was addressed to my grandfather, and once more it had an I wish to inform you with the, please be so kind at the end, this time accompanied by some good news. Insofar and inasmuch , wrote Kivke, as he had recently become betrothed to a fine young lady from the very best of families, would the town kindly sent him the 200 rubles he had pledged as a dowry because otherwise the marriage was off. What a tragedy! Just imagine, Kivke would be left without a bride.

I hardly need to tell you that the letter made the rounds of Kamenka as though it was a pearl of great price, and people laughed at it until their ribs ached. It became a running gag around town. Mazel tov! Kivke is engaged! Have you heard? She's a steal at 200 rubles. And from the very best of families too, ha ha.

The ha ha ing, mind you, didn't last very [00:22:00] long, though, because a few weeks later came another letter from

Kivke to my grandfather, and this time without the I wish to inform you, just with the please be so kind. He failed to understand, Kivke wrote, why the 200 rubles for the dowry had not yet arrived. If he didn't receive them at once, the wedding would have to be called off, in which case, his disgrace would be so great, that only one choice would be left. Either to drown himself on the spot, or to come hell bent back to Kamenka. Those threats of his. mind you. wiped the laugh off everyone's faces. That same evening, the town's leading Jews got together at my grandfather's house and decided that the most respected of them, my grandfather too, should go from door to door to raise dowry for kivke.

What else could they do? And so, as not to keep you in suspense, let me tell you that they not only sent him the money, they sent it with a mazel tov, and [00:23:00] wished the lucky bridegroom, as is the custom, many long years of happiness in which to raise children and grandchildren with his wife to be. What were they counting on?

They were counting on his being so busy with his new marriage that he'd forget all about Kamenka. But do you think he did? A fat chance of that. Half a year didn't go by, or maybe it was a whole one, I can't tell you exactly. And what do you think came along? Another letter from Kivke. What did he want this time?

In so far and inasmuch as he was now married, he had God given wife who would be the envy of any Jew. Nothing was perfect though. In this case, the bride's father. who was such a liar, such a chiseler, such a gangster, such an out and out crook beside whom the biggest sinner could be mistaken for a saint, that he had defrauded our Kivke of his 200 rubles and thrown him into the street with his wife.

And so he wrote, Please be so kind as to send. Would his fellow townsmen have the goodness to forward [00:24:00] another 200 rubles to make up for what he had lost? If not, he could either throw himself in the river or come hell bent back to Kamenka. This time everyone was good and mad. Two dowries? Why, that was already a swindle, and so it was decided to let the letter go unanswered. Well, hm, Kivke waited a week or two, mind you, or maybe even three, and then sent another letter, addressed once again to my grandfather. What, he wanted to know, did they take him for? Why hadn't they sent him the 200 rubles? He would give them, he wrote, another week and a half, and if he still hadn't received the money by then, they could look forward to having him, God willing, as their guest in Kamenka.

Yours, etc. Amen and amen. He sure was some shegetz. Don't think they didn't kick up a storm. What could anyone do, though? Once more, there was a meeting at my grandfather's house, and once more it was decided to send the most respected Jews from door to door. This time, mind [00:25:00] you, people made a face, because, who wanted to dish out still more money to such a scoundrel?

But the fact of the matter was that when Reb Nissel Shapiro said give, being a pig was out of the question. Nevertheless, everyone swore that this was the last time. And my grandfather himself, mind you, didn't think otherwise, because he wrote Kivke back in no uncertain terms, that he wasn't getting another cent, and shouldn't dream of it.

No doubt you think that put the fear of God into the rascal, eh? Well, suppose I told you that one morning, and a Jewish holiday it was too, another letter arrived from the fine gentleman, addressed, naturally, to my grandfather. In so far and inasmuch, he wrote, as he had struck up a friendship in Brody with a German, a most excellent and honorable fellow, and decided to go partners with him in the China business, which was a very good, very solid line that could support a person nicely, please be so kind as to send 450 rubles.

And for [00:26:00] heaven's sake, be quick and don't dawdle, because the partner refused to wait. He had ten other candidates lined up, and if he, Kivke, was left without a business, he could either go for a long swim in the river, or come hell bent back to Kamenka. In short, the usual. And he signed off with a gentle hint that if he did not have the money in two weeks time, there would be the devil to pay, or more precisely, his round trip ticket from Brody to Kamenka, and back.

He sure was some shyster. I don't have to tell you what kind of upside down holiday it was, and most of all, mind you, for my grandfather, may he rest in peace, because he bore the brunt of it. At the meeting that was held at night, the whole town was griping and grumbling. Enough! How long do we have to go on shelling out?

There's a limit to everything. Even chicken soup with kreplach can get to be too much. This Kivke of yours will make

paupers of us all. Why is he my Kivke?, asked my grandfather. Well, whose Kivke do you think he is? [00:27:00] was the answer. Whose idea was it in the first place to have the little bastard go die of a stroke while in prison?

My grandfather, he was one smart Jew he was, saw right away that it was a waste of time to hope for more money from the town. So he went to the local authorities, after all they were in the same boat as he was, and asked them for a donation to the cause. Do you think they gave him a kopek? Not a chance.

Your Goy is not your Jew. Such things don't faze him in the least. And so my poor grandfather, mind you, had to swallow his medicine and stake that damned cutthroat to some more cash from his own pocket. You should have seen the letter he sent with it, though. My grandfather, God rest his soul, could give as good as he got.

Mind you, he gave that sheygetz hell in it. He called him a scoundrel, a degenerate, a know nothing, a leech, a bloodsucker, a fiend, a traitor, a disgrace to the Jewish people, and whatever else have you. He also told him [00:28:00] once and for all not to dare write any more letters or ask for another cent, reminded him that God above sees everything and pays back tit for tat, and ended by begging him, a Jewish heart is still a Jewish heart after all, to have pity on an old man like himself, and not ruin a town full of Jews, in return for which the Almighty would surely assist him in all his endeavors. That was the letter my grandfather sent, and he signed it with his full name, Nissel Shapiro, which was, mind you, the biggest mistake he ever made in his life, as you'll shortly see for yourselves.

The Jew from Kamenka paused again, reached for his tobacco pouch, slowly rolled himself another cigarette, lit it, and took a few deep puffs without even noticing that the whole car was dying of curiosity. When he had breathed in and coughed out enough smoke, he blew his nose, rolled up his sleeves again and continued in the same tone as before.

You must be [00:29:00] thinking, my friends, that my grandfather's letter gave that son of a bitch a good scare. Don't kid yourself. Half a year didn't go by, or maybe it was a whole one, mind you, when along came another letter from the turncoat. In the first place, it said, I wish to inform you that my German partner, may his life be one bad dream, had cheated me out of house and home, and out of my share of the business.

I would have sued him if it hadn't been clear that I didn't stand a Chinaman's chance. Taking a German to court around here means taking your life in your hands. Why, I wouldn't touch one of those bastards with a ten foot pole. So, I went and opened a store near his, right next door to him, in fact, and went into business for myself.

And with God's help, I'll bury that kraut yet. I'll see to it he ends up eating dirt. The problem is, I need an advance of at least a thousand rubles, so please be so kind as to send. That's what Kivke wrote in his letter, [00:30:00] which concluded, If you don't come up with the money in eight days, I'm taking your last letter signed Nissel Shapiro and forwarding it straight to the provincial governor with an unabridged account of all that happened.

How I died of a stroke in prison, and how I was resurrected in the cemetery, and how Shimon the coachman brought me to Brody, and how you've kept sending me hush money. I’ll write him everything. I’ll let him know that we Jews have a great God above who rescued Kivke from the grave. Now how's that for a greeting card?

Mind you, as soon as my grandfather, God rest his soul, read those sweet sentiments, he had such a fright that he fainted dead away. It shouldn't happen to anyone, but he lost all control of... Jews, where are we? What station is this?

Baranovich station, cried the conductors, running one after another, past the windows of our car.

All out for Baranovich. Hearing the name Baranovich, the Kamenka [00:31:00] Jew jumped from his seat, reached for his belongings which were in a kind of sack stuffed with God only knows what, and barely able to carry it, headed for the door. In another minute he was standing on the platform with the sweat pouring off him, struggling through the crowd and asking whomever he stumbled into, Baranovich?

Baranovich! He made me think of a Jew blessing the new moon in the synagogue courtyard, bumping into his fellow Jews in the darkness and inquiring of each, is that you? Yes, it's me. Several passengers from our car, myself included, ran after him and seized him by the coattails. Hey there, you can't do this to us.

We won't let you go, you have to tell us the end of the story. What end? It's barely begun. Let go of me. Do you want me to miss my train? A strange bunch of Jews you are. Didn't you hear them say Baranovich? And before we knew it, the Jew from Kamenka had vanished into thin air. I wouldn't mind if Baranovich station burned to the ground.

Jim Phelan: [00:32:00] Okay, Eyal, thank you for reading that. I think a good place to start is, maybe with that ending, seems kind of abrupt and it's so open ended. What kind of thoughts do you have about that ending and its openness?

Eyal Segal: Yeah, so, as you were saying, that's a very obvious effect or quality of the story that's also particularly interesting from an narratological viewpoint and it has to do with the way the narrative is suddenly being cut off.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Eyal Segal: But having said that, it's also worth mentioning right away that the story has a frame structure, and this radical open endedness that you rightly mentioned belongs mostly to the embedded level, that of the story about what happened in Kamenka. There is also another narrative level, that of what happens in the train, where the Jew from Kamenka is telling the story to his audience, and on this level I think there's something more covert that's happening in this context, but let's start with the more obvious thing.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Yeah. No, I think we want to talk about the relationship between [00:33:00] those two things, but yeah. Yeah. So let's talk about the more overt thing. Right.

Eyal Segal: So addressing, the provocative open endedness first, to try and explain how it is produced. I'd like to sketch as briefly as possible a theoretical framework for dealing with the question of how the ending of a narrative is open or closed.

Jim Phelan: Okay, yeah. Go for it.

Eyal Segal: So, I'm relying here on Meir Sternberg's approach to narrativity, namely what constitutes the essence of narrative or separates it from other types of discourse. So, Sternberg defines narrativity in rhetorical communicative terms as consisting of narrative interest of three master types.

It's suspense, curiosity, and surprise, and this rather than, as most approaches do, define it in mimetic terms, namely the representation of a sequence of actions. Now, that's a definition which I believe can be very conveniently applied to the question of endings. A closed ending, or closure [00:34:00] in these terms, would be produced by killing off or terminating the narrative interest, whereas open endedness results in...

Jim Phelan: Satisfying. You might say satisfying. killing off seems like kind of loaded, but go ahead.

Eyal Segal: Yeah. Whereas open endedness results from narrative interest that remains alive, so to speak, or unresolved, unsatisfied, even at the end of the text. In operational terms, the narrative interest that Sternberg talks about results from the manipulation of informational gaps, relating to any aspect of the story world. So, so again, applying this to the question of closure, the termination of narrative interest would have to do with the filling in of these gaps. In other words, answering all the important questions about the story world. Sternberg makes, in this context, a distinction between temporary gaps and permanent ones, and openness would result from permanent gaps. Important unanswered questions that remain with regard to the story world, and as far as the types of interest go, we can talk here about both [00:35:00] suspense and curiosity gaps, suspense concerning narrative future, curiosity concerning some mystery in the narrative past.

Jim Phelan: Right. Yeah.

Eyal Segal: And also I'll just say that I think it's clear from this definition that we should think about the opposition closed versus open with regard to endings, not as a rigid dichotomy by any means, but rather as a continuum or a scale, because, because a narrative can have many gaps of different kinds, of different levels, they can be filled in or not in different ways with different degrees of certainty.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. matters of degree, matters of scale. Right. So, if we look at that internal story, the story of Kivke, what kind of openness do we have?

Eyal Segal: So, coming back to it, I think that, at least at first glance, it does produce the impression of being far into the pole of openness, because we are left with some major unresolved suspense gaps that are particularly heightened.

So it's worth examining the dynamics of the story that produces this effect. The plot [00:36:00] involves an initial act of deception in order to save Kivke from the punishment of the flogging, the running the gauntlet that he was supposed to receive from the Russian authorities, and this act ironically backfires on its perpetrator, the narrator's grandfather, thereby causing increasingly serious complications that threaten to lead to a very different result from the one initially hoped for.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Eyal Segal: And there's an increasing level of suspense that develops mostly in the second half of the story when Kivke's blackmail letters begin to arrive.

Jim Phelan: Yes.

Eyal Segal: There's a dynamics involved here, which is very typical of Sholem Aleichem stories in general, by the way, of what I would call repetition plus escalation.

Jim Phelan: Yes, yes. That's a good description, I think. Yeah.

Eyal Segal: On the one hand, there's a clear and elaborate repetitive pattern to Kivke's letters, as well as the responses to them, but it also gets continually worse, so to speak, because as time goes by, for example, Kivke's letters become more blunt, his threats become more explicit, the sums of [00:37:00] money, of course, he demands get bigger.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, he's up to a thousand rubles by the end.

Eyal Segal: Yeah, yeah, he's making progress, yeah. The time he allows for receiving the payments gets shorter, and of course, Reb Nissel's position as the person chiefly responsible for saving Kivke in the first place and getting the town into all this trouble gets increasingly awkward.

Jim Phelan: Yes, right. Yeah. Then we have the other side of that, so the grandfather is able to get the community to help, but eventually then he's on his own, right?

Eyal Segal: Yeah, yeah. At the point where the story about what happened in Kamenka is cut off, we seem to have reached a point of crisis.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Eyal Segal: Because there's an accumulation of factors in the final letters and surrounding them that I think prevent them from being perceived as just another repetition. There is the town’s people categorical refusal to keep helping Reb Nissel and raising funds.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Eyal Segal: There is the additional trap that Reb Nissel gets himself into by the signed letter he sent to Kivke, an act that [00:38:00] is explicitly evaluated by the narrator as the biggest mistake he ever made in his life. So that obviously raises expectations about seeing what was the mistake.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, what the consequences will be, absolutely.

Eyal Segal: Yeah, yeah, the consequences. And there is his shock, Reb Nissel's shock upon receiving Kivke's response, emphasized by the very last words of the embedded narrative, he lost all control of.

This is cut off in the middle of a sentence, in the text there's a three dot ellipsis, so the effect of abrupt finish is heightened grammatically as well.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Eyal Segal: And then the words of the narrator shift to the current situation on the train where he asks about the station. Jim Phelan: Yeah, we're here, we've arrived, right, I could stop telling my story.

Eyal Segal: Yeah, yeah. So, I think all these factors kind of join forces to intensify the suspense, and they create a cliffhanger effect and bring it to a degree perceived as a point of crisis, which demands some sort of resolution, a resolution which we don't get.

Jim Phelan: Right. I think, yeah, that's nice, sets up a lot of things. So, just another feature of that, right, is the sort of [00:39:00] the doubling of responses in the sense that the narratees, the Jew from Kamenka's fellow passengers are very frustrated by this, right, and they run after him and so on.

And then Aleichem's readers are also in, share a similar position, right? It's open ended for us to the extent that we've been invested in this, what's happening with Kivke and the grandfather and so on. We feel the same way. Well, wait, you can't end here, right? Or at least initially that's part of our response, yeah.

Eyal Segal: Before getting there, I want to mention one more element that I think contributes to this effect in terms of the dynamics of the plot, the kind of open endness that we get here, because one might say that compared to other types of openness, the one in Baranovich Station is especially provocative, I would say, since the internal dynamics of the narrative does allow for a strong closure.

What I mean is that sometimes the nature of the plot structure or of the gaps [00:40:00] result in sort of inherent or natural openness. For example, if you have a plot structure that's very loose and episodic, you might say that strong closure is kind of impossible and the author commits to openness from the start or alternatively, if the gaps, relating to something like say the deep motifs of a complex character, it's kind of natural that it's difficult to fill them in.

Such openness often tells us very seriously, things like the world is complex, the world is mysterious. Not everything can be known or understood, et cetera, but in our story, that's not the case at all, actually. There's a very tight plot with what looks like a straightforward possible route to closure.

So, the author flaunts his choice of not providing us with such a closure as if saying to us, I could have provided you with strong closure, but I choose, I choose not to.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Eyal Segal: Yeah. The nature of the openness here is more playful. Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah.

Like, I'm really teasing you. I'm really putting you through it and, [00:41:00] yeah. And so, then I think the question becomes, well, in addition, is there something beyond the playfulness? Is there some way in which we could think about this as a, you know, some other things that are going on with, that openness?

Maybe there's more than just, just that. And there I think we can start to think about the second level, the story of the storytelling, right?

Eyal Segal: Yeah, yeah.

Jim Phelan: So, yeah, what are some of your thoughts there?

Eyal Segal: So, considering the effect of open endedness, besides the structure of the story told by the Jew from Kamenka, we should note what happens indeed on the other level, the one that takes place on the train, because, first of all, the direct reason for cutting off the story is that the narrator has to get off the train. Now, one could say this is merely what the Russian formalists would call a realistic motivation for what is ultimately the author's aesthetic design. I mean, it might be an accident that the Jew from Kamenka has to get off exactly this point, but it's clearly not an accident on the authorial level.

I mean, we assume [00:42:00] that Sholem Aleichem wanted to cut off the story at exactly this point. For him, it's not an accident. But when we start thinking on the level of what happens on the train, that of the frame or the dramatized storytelling situation, we can see there's a lot more than that going on, indeed. First of all, there's the significant reaction of the audience in the train expressing their frustration about the lack of an ending. One might say that they function as surrogates for the reader, dramatizing our frustration.

Jim Phelan: Right. Yeah.

Eyal Segal: And also this is, I mean, this is not an isolated component because there's in fact a full fledged plot of the frame or the dramatized storytelling situation that develops throughout the story from the very beginning, in fact, from the very title.

Jim Phelan: So, right, right. In the beginning, we have this, everybody's on the train, there's two dozen or so passengers, and everybody's talking at once and, or talk about this, talk about that, There's no clear direction, the Jew from Kamenka intervenes and says, ah, you know, you want to know a real story, I'll tell you a real story, [00:43:00] right?

Eyal Segal: Yeah. So, yeah, so we should really follow this, this story as well, the story of what happens on the train and not just the story of what happened in Kamenka. So, but, but, I mean, generally really there are like two levels of narrative interest running side by side in this story, there's interest in what takes place on the train, which develops alongside the interest of what is generated by the content of the story told by the Jew from Kamenka.

Jim Phelan: And the pauses, and the storytelling, you know, when Aleichem sort of, you know, features that story, the dramatization, right? There are coming in sort of critical points, right? So he pauses after Kivke is safely escorted to Austria, right, and then he pauses again, after the first one.

It's like he knows that he's building suspense, and so we've got a pause and then we get commentary on how the passengers are reacting to this, right? When he goes to check on, you know, how much more time do they have, right, and he's not in their company, then they start [00:44:00] competing with, with their stories, which are kind of imitations of what his story is.

Eyal Segal: Yeah. So, these things that you mentioned are really like, important points or stages in this plot of what happens the train, and from what you already said, I think it's, it's clear that this plot revolves around the theme of storytelling and the relationship between the narrator and his audience.

So, it definitely has a metafictional nature. One might call it a story, a story about the power of storytelling.

So, let's follow the story. You already mentioned some of the points, so let's just mention shortly that indeed from the, from the beginning of the story, we can see that the situational context of speech comes to the fore.

Each of the speakers in the third class train compartment attempts to put himself and his topic of interest at the center of the group's attention. To quote from the text, everyone tried to think of some fresh, juicy item that would make all the others sit up and listen. Everyone wants to be a narrator, yeah.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, right, right. But he wins the competition.

Eyal Segal: Yeah, yeah, no one succeeds. At [00:45:00] first, no one succeeds. He said, no one was able to hold the stage for long, but then, yeah, when the Jew from Kamenka comes, he's the one who manages to gain control of the conversation and capture the attention of the other passengers by promising to tell a particularly interesting story.

Jim Phelan: In that sense, we think about what the sociolinguists have taught us about turn taking and storytelling, right? So he succeeds in getting the floor, but there's also a kind of implicit promise, right? If we give up our attention, we'll get rewarded by giving it to this storyteller.

Eyal Segal: I mean, before getting the floor, he's getting a seat. Notice that he's given a sitting place instead of having to stand, which, you know, in a crowded compartment during a long ride is certainly something. I mean, that's, that's like immediately how his status improves, right?

Jim Phelan: Exactly, right, the power of storytelling right there. Yeah, he gets a seat. He doesn't get the floor, the metaphorical floor, he gets the literal seat. Yeah, yeah.

Eyal Segal: Going back to the floor, indeed, [00:46:00] talking of the social importance or power that someone gets by becoming a narrator, it's interesting to look at what the branch of study known as conversational analysis has to say on the topic of turn taking in conversation.

I mean, the procedures for regulating how participants in conversation get what's called the floor. Now, the interesting point that's relevant to us is that a storyteller get some special privileges in a conversational situation. A speaker who wants to tell a story is asking permission to take a turn in the conversation whose length his audience will not be able to control by the normal turn taking techniques.

So, in ratifying a speaker's request to tell a story, we as hearers agree to allow him an enormous advantage in the competition for terms. We waive our right to preempt the floor until the storyteller himself offers to give it up.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Eyal Segal: Let's recall that in Baranovich Station, the speaker even manages to get the audience to ask him to tell the story, which throws into even sharper relief his newly gained status.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, [00:47:00] right.

And that gets reinforced in various ways, you know, when he wants to light a cigarette, everybody wants to help him, you know, all that kind of stuff. You know, the narrator calls attention to sort of how rapt the audience is.

Eyal Segal: Yeah. There are several places like this. Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Eyal Segal: We can see indeed later, that's already the development of this plot that whenever there's some pause in the storytelling, the power that the Jew from Kamenka has gained by his narration is manifested by some situational details.

Jim Phelan: Exactly.

Eyal Segal: Like for example, he pauses for the first time, to roll himself a cigarette, the main narrator says, so important did he become, already, that several passengers jumped up to offer him a light.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah. So in that sense, right, his failure to give closure, in a way makes him, he doesn't sort of keep his part of the bargain, right, of the turn taking bargain, right? And he doesn't seem concerned about it, it's like, okay, Baranovich Station, I'm done. Wait, wait, the story's barely begun. I gotta get off, right?

Eyal Segal: He doesn't even recognize the problem of the end, so [00:48:00] he says it's barely beginning. Jim Phelan: Yeah, right.

Eyal Segal: I mean, I mean, returning just to what I said about these passages where he's pausing in the narration. So it's also made, very clear that the source of this power that he gained is the raw narrative interest the story arouses, the desire to hear what happens next, again, to quote, seeing that the whole car was waiting with bated breath to hear what happened next, what happened next, that's like the pure, pure narrativity, the Jew from Kamenka paused. Yeah. Seeing that everyone was waiting – he paused.

Jim Phelan: Exactly. Right, right.

Eyal Segal: And, and later paused again, without even noticing, we might doubt if he doesn't even notice that the whole car was dying of curiosity.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah.

Eyal Segal: In Sternberg's terms, that would be suspense. But yeah, yeah.

Jim Phelan: So I think we've done a good job of sort of highlighting the way in which sort of both levels are pointing to the power of storytelling, right? That can be one way to say, okay, this is the payoff for Aleichem's readers, to be frustrated, right?

We could say, alright, we can convert our lack of [00:49:00] satisfaction, the flaunting of the openness into a kind of lesson about, you know, the power of storytelling, the power of narrative interest.

Eyal Segal: Yeah. I mean, I mean, I mentioned earlier that we see the passengers as our surrogates when they get so frustrated and try to stop him and say, you have to tell us the end of the story. But obviously the similarity is not complete because we as readers that read the, from an aesthetic distance and read a fictional story, we are supposed to have a more complex reaction. On one level we're frustrated, but we're also on another level supposed somehow to enjoy this frustration or think about the metafictional lesson from that, etc. Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Right, right, right. Yeah. So yeah, from another rhetorical perspective, it's like that the relation between the narrative audience and the authorial audience or the target audience.

Yeah.

Eyal Segal: We talked about the stages of this plot. Another interesting development, just worth mentioning before the very end of the story, it's where the Jew from Kamenka leaves his audience for a short while, in order to inquire about the time [00:50:00] left until the train reaches the station.

There's an eruption of a renewed struggle, which is kind of analogous to the one that was described at the beginning of the story over the narratorial position that has been momentarily vacated. It's as if Sholem Aleichem is reminding us that society abhors a narrative vacuum, so various people try to tell their own stories, but none succeeds in becoming the substitute, and when the Jew returns from Kamenka, his command is immediately resumed since the competing narratives turn out to be inferior versions, failed attempts at imitation. They say that something similar happened in their towns.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. But it's not the real thing, and so he's going to come back and tell us the real thing. Yeah. Yeah. Eyal Segal: Another twist in the power struggle, yeah.

Jim Phelan: Absolutely. Yeah. We're coming towards the end of our time, but I want to at least take a minute and ask a

question or maybe discuss with you some of my ideas about a story like this, I think, invites readers to start to look for some kind of [00:51:00] analogies between the two plots, right?

So here we have the plot about Kivke, and then we have the plot of the storytelling. Are there ways in which the openness of the story even invites, you know, speculation about how there might be parallels or analogies between what's happening at one level and what's happening at the other.

Eyal Segal: You can talk about parallels certainly, but I would also like to mention some kind of contrast between the two levels of the story, the embedded and the embedding. I think we can see that the withholding of closure on one level by the narrator, the Jew from Kamenka, I mean, constitutes in itself an effective closure on another level.

That is the level of the developing relationship between the narrator and his audience, because at the end of Sholem Aleichem's story, the reader is left with no further expectations regarding the continuation of this line of interest, as opposed to the other one.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, good.

Eyal Segal: Because on this narrative level, the interest is resolved. Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Eyal Segal: I would say quite powerfully resolved. [00:52:00] We might go on to ask, is this closed ending happy or unhappy, and I think this crucially depends on whose perspective we're taking because from the viewpoint of the frustrated audience, it may be characterized as unhappy, but from the narrator's viewpoint, it is arguably a happy ending, the best possible one, perhaps, because, the way his power is actually permanently established. He didn't give them the ending, so they're not satisfied, so they remained under his rhetorical power, so to speak.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, exactly. Right, right. and then,Aleichem's readers could say, you know, we get it both ways, right? So there's something satisfying about that, right? So anyway, I just wanted to throw out a couple of ideas. Because the storyteller is so prominent, in the story of the storytelling, I think then we could look at, are we invited to compare him to either the grandfather or the Jew, right, the, the powerful figures, the characters in the embedded story, right?

And I think, I don't think there's a perfect sort of fit. It's like, okay, you [00:53:00] know, but there is something maybe with the grandfather. Like, so the grandfather is so powerful, you know, the community responds to him, initially, and he's able to, you know, pull the wool over the eyes of the Russians and so on.

And just as he's in command, the storyteller's in command of the narratees, but, you know, the grandfather's, as the story goes on, he loses that, whereas our storyteller, the Jew from Kamenka, sort of maintains that, although maybe he loses something there at the end when he breaks off that way.

And then there's something about, you know, Kivke, who's able to exercise all this power, that may be analogous to the kind of power that this storyteller has over the audience. But again, I don't think it's perfect, partly because of the different kinds of ethics of it.

Although there's something, if we want to say there's something unethical about breaking off that way, then there might be, [00:54:00] you know, lines for further thought. But, if you have any thoughts on those ideas.

Eyal Segal: I didn't think so much in these terms, but of course the structure of the story encourages us to this kind of analogical thinking of all kinds of relations between the two levels.

So yeah, that's, that's definitely an interesting direction that the interpretation can take.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. And I don't think it was one that we just sort of moved towards definitive answers, but the power of storytelling opens these things up and then we can speculate and, you know, compare, contrast our possible

hypotheses.

Yeah. Okay, great. Well, this was very lively, and I think it was a great story to talk about, and I think you had, you know, some wonderful comments on it, so thank you very much.

Eyal Segal: Okay, thanks, Jim. Thank you.

Jim Phelan: And I want to thank our listeners, and I also mentioned that, as always, I appreciate your feedback, which you can send to us at, email projectnarrative (one word) @osu.edu, or on our Facebook page or our Twitter/X account [00:55:00] @PNOhioState. And I'll also mention that you can find more than 30 additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts. And if you listen on Apple, I invite you to rate and review us.

Thanks again for listening.