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Yiddish Love Stories

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The Wheels of Knowledge

In today's day and age, communicating with people halfway around the world is as simple as making a phone call or sending an email. Increasingly sophisticated technology has globalized the world in such a way that people with different cultures, religious beliefs, and geographic locations are now sharing ideas, trading with each other, and exploring different ways of life. However, I.L. Peretz's story *In the Mail Coach*, takes place during a time when the lack of communication with different people oftentimes made communities suspicious of outsiders. The metaphorical and literal purposes of the mail coach, however, started to break down barriers by becoming a vehicle for transferring ideas to different communities while bringing diverse people together inside the horse-drawn carriage. Peretz's story is appropriately named *In the Mail Coach* because the stories and interactions that occur represent the inevitable shift towards the acculturation of communities-- even those that wish to shield themselves.

From the very beginning of time, humans have always held a natural desire to learn different ideas even when the community forbids it. Even though the *Gemara* teaches that women are not supposed to study Talmud, Chaim's wife still begged to read sacred texts. The quote, "she begged me, she cried, she swooned, she carried on for so long" illustrates the same desire for knowledge that Eve displayed in the Garden of Eden (109). Even though God specifically told Adam to avoid eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Eve eventually disobeyed believing that the fruit would give her knowledge about good and evil. Drawing upon the lessons learned from the Garden of Eden, one could argue that the transfer of ideas, even those that may threaten a community is an inevitable process. The mail coach merely speeds up the process of bringing different communities together.

As anti-Semitic ideas begin to spread throughout Europe, Polniewski brings up the novel idea that interacting with other cultures may quell violent rumors. When talking with the narrator, Polniewski articulates the well-known fact that people are less likely to be violent or harbor hatred towards people who they have talked to and shared positive interactions with. Indeed, Polniewski admits that it was not his character alone that enabled him to steer clear of anti-Semitism but that it was his interaction with a Jewish woman.

“And I don’t think that this woman I met was the heroine of the novel, some steely character who breaks fences and walls and then proudly on her way...Not at all. I met a simple Jewish woman...and when I hear or read something bad about Jews, she floats out of my memory and with her limpid, melancholy eyes implores, ‘don’t believe it, I am not like that’ (113)!

The fact that Polniewski by all accounts connected to an average Jewish woman indicates the possibility for all people to connect to people of different cultures. But perhaps the most powerful image comes when Polniewski described that when he hears an anti-Semitic remark, the Jewish woman leaves his memory and reminds him that Jews are not like that. Communication between different people, as made possible by the mail coach, helps prevent anti-Semitism because people become familiar with the Jewish religion and therefore no longer view it as threatening.

Even though people may no longer view Judaism as threatening, the inevitable process of acculturation gradually starts to erode aspects of Judaism that the majority of society deems foreign. After Chaim describes that the *Gemara* forbids women from reading most Jewish texts, the narrator observes:

“When he reads, she falls asleep; when she reads, he falls asleep. It’s not enough that we have different sects... not enough that every one of these parts is further separated into different sections--- Hasidim, misnagim, Germans—but we are also divided into males and females, so that in each and every narrow, damp, squalid Jewish home there are two distinct worlds...At least I think we ought to unite the two worlds. It is the debt of every Yiddish writer” (111).

It is interesting that the narrator, who is probably a secularized Jew, hopes that through his writings he will unite the Jewish community. In today’s world, the process of acculturation is so

powerful that the Reform movement has picked up a tremendous amount of steam and many Jews no longer keep kosher or regularly attend synagogue. Moreover, one could argue that this shift has taken place because few American restaurants or supermarkets tailor their food to small Jewish communities but instead provide for the masses. This creates a bandwagon effect where many Jews will water-down their beliefs in order to fit in with the group and live an easier life. Chaim follows this principle by agreeing to ride in the mail coach even though he needed to sit on a “mixture of forbidden cloth,” and was forced to interact with members outside of his community. However, Chaim attempted to maintain his individuality in the face of acculturation by stepping out of the wagon to say his morning prayers. This is the exact compromise that the narrator hopes to achieve with his writings. On the one hand, Jewish communities will continue to study the Talmud and read the Torah but will adapt so that their beliefs, such as the role of women, will keep in line with modern times.

The ending of the story *In the Mail Coach* is one that leaves the reader wondering why a romantic relationship between Polniewski and the Jewish woman never materialized. I believe that I.L. Peretz made a conscious decision to prevent the romantic relationship to illustrate the extent to which the acculturation process works. In the story, Polniewski had little in common with the Jewish woman but was still willing and able to form a friendship to learn about her culture. This shows a gradual meshing of the two communities. But while communities will acculturate somewhat, they will each try to maintain their own heritage as illustrated by the religious community preventing Polniewski’s relationship. While the mail coach may blur the line between communities, each individual will ultimately remain distinct.