



# SHOLEM ALEICHEM READING ACTIVITIES

*“Select one of my stories, one of the really joyous ones, and read it aloud... and let my name be mentioned... with laughter rather than not be mentioned at all.” —Sholem Aleichem [1916]*

Sholem Aleichem's **Ethical Will**, published in full in the New York Times in 1916, laid out his key personal and collective concerns. He asked to be memorialized not with grandiose statues, but instead through his work. Specifically, he requested that readers enjoy his works by reading them aloud every year on the anniversary of his death.

The reading activity below, designed by sholemaleichem.org in collaboration with project partner Professor Jeremy Dauber of Columbia University, invites students to honor Sholem Aleichem's ethical will by reading his work aloud. This activity offers students a fun and participatory way to engage with the writings of Sholem Aleichem.

Included in this packet are five excerpts from Sholem Aleichem's most famous stories:

**“If I Were Rothschild”**

**“My Brother Elye’s Drink” from Motl the Cantor’s Son**

**“The Pot”**

**“On Account of a Hat”**

**A conversation between Tevye, Chava, and Golde in “Chava”**

These excerpts cover some of Sholem Aleichem's most beloved characters and explore some of the core themes of his work, offering a window into the world of Eastern European Jews as they began to confront the forces of cultural, political, and religious modernity that tore through the Russian Empire in the final decades of the 19th century.

As part of your educational programming, invite students to read the excerpts below aloud, either in groups or as a single unit. Follow these student readings with a group discussion inspired by the prompts listed under each reading.

If you would like to share your experiments and successes with other educators and the wider community, please email photos, videos, or written reflections to [sholem@citizenfilm.org](mailto:sholem@citizenfilm.org), or share on social media using the hashtag **#sholemaleichem**. We will curate a selection of this content to feature on sholemaleichem.org.



# IF I WERE ROTHSCHILD

If I were only Rothschild, guess what I would do. First of all, I would pass a law that a wife must always have a three-ruble piece on her so that she wouldn't have to start nagging me when the good Thursday comes and there is nothing in the house for the Sabbath. In the second place I would take my Sabbath gabardine out of pawn—or, better still, my wife's squirrel-skin coat. Let her stop whining that she's cold. Then I would buy the whole house outright, from foundation to chimney, all three rooms, with the alcove and the pantry, the cellar and the attic. Let her stop grumbling that she hasn't enough room. "Here," I would say to her, "take two whole rooms for yourself—cook, bake, wash, chop, make, and leave me in peace so that I can teach my pupils with a free mind."

This is the life! No more worries about making a living. No more headaches about where the money for the Sabbath is coming from. My daughters are all married off—a load is gone from my shoulders. What more do I need for myself? Now I can begin to look around the town a little. First of all I am going to provide a new roof for the old Synagogue so the rain won't drip on the heads of the men who come to pray. After that I shall build a new bathhouse, for if not today, then tomorrow—but surely soon—there is bound to be a catastrophe: the roof is going to cave in while the women are inside bathing.

And while we are putting up a new bathhouse we might as well throw down the old poor house too and put up a hospital in its place, a real hospital such as they have in big towns, with beds and bedding, with a doctor and attendants, with hot broths for the sick every day . . . And I shall build a home for the aged so that old men, scholars who have fallen upon hard times, shouldn't have to spend their last days on the hearth in the synagogue. And I shall establish a Society for Clothing the Poor so that poor children won't have to run around in rags with—I beg your pardon for mentioning it—their navels showing...

And perhaps, even—if I were Rothschild—I might do away with money altogether. For let us not deceive ourselves, what is money anyway? It is nothing but a delusion, a made-up thing. Men have taken a piece of paper, decorated it with a pretty picture and written on it, Three Silver Rubles. Money, I tell you, is nothing but a temptation, a piece of lust, one of the greatest lusts. It is something that everyone wants and nobody has. But if there were no more money in the world there would be no more temptation, no more lust. Do you understand me or not?

But then the problem is, without money how would we Jews be able to provide for the Sabbath? The answer to that is — How will I provide for the Sabbath now?

## ***Discussion Prompts:***

- » "If I Were Rothschild" went on to become "If I Were a Rich Man" in Fiddler on the Roof. What changed along the way?
- » What is Sholem Aleichem's perspective here on wealth and poverty, which would be such a major theme in his work?

# **“MY BROTHER ELYE’S DRINK” FROM MOTL, THE CANTOR’S SON**

*This story is written in first person from the point of view of Motl, a 9-year-old Jewish boy who lives in Kasrilevke with his mother and brother, Elye. After Motl’s father, the village’s cantor, passes away of a long illness, Motl realizes that being fatherless allows him to get away with more mischief. Motl describes the daily life of his family and friends with humor, even when the events are quite serious. The following excerpt is Motl’s description of his brother Elye’s latest get-rich-quick scheme, a desperate attempt to lift his family out of poverty.*

*“For One Ruble! A Hundred!*

*Earn one hundred rubles a month or more*

*Just by knowing what’s in this book.*

*The cost is one ruble plus postage.*

*Hurry! Offer Limited!”*

This my brother Elye read in a newspaper somewhere just after he’d left his father-in-law’s table. He left the table not because his time was up — he’d been promised three whole years’ board and got not even three-quarters of one year — but because of tragedy. Yoine the baker went bankrupt and instead of a rich man was now a poor one. How had bad luck fell upon him I’ve already told you, and I don’t tell a story twice unless asked. This time even asking won’t help because I’m so busy. I’m earning money. I carry about a drink my brother Elye makes with his own hands. He found out how to do this from a book that costs only a ruble. With this book you can earn a hundred rubles in a month and more.

My brother Elye, soon as he read that such a book existed, sent off the ruble — our last — and told our mother she had nothing more to worry about: “Mama, thank god, we’re saved. We’ll have,” her said, pointing to his throat, “money up till here.”

“What’s this?” She asked. “You got a job?”

“Better than that,” my brother answered as his eyes lit up, apparently from joy. He told us to wait a few days until a book came.

“What book?”

“Wait, you’ll see,” he answered and asked if she could use a hundred rubles a month. She answered that she could live on one hundred a year so long as she could count on that amount. My brother Elye told her that her reach was too small and went off to the post office. He goes there every day now to inquire about the book. Over a week has passed and still no book. In the meantime, says my mother, we still have to live.

“You can’t just spit out your soul,” she says. How you spit out a soul I have no idea.

All right, calm down — the book’s here. No sooner did we unpack it than my brother Elye sat down to read it. And he found there any number of different ways to make money. You can earn a hundred rubles by making the best inks or the best black shoe polish; or by driving off mice, roaches, and other pests; or by manufacturing

liqueurs, sweet brandies, lemonade, soda water, kvass, and still cheaper drinks.

My brother Elye settled for the last idea. First of all because he'd earn over one hundred rubles a month. It says so, right there in the book. Second, that way you can keep away from ink, shoe polish, mice, roaches and other pests. The only problem is which drink to choose. For liqueurs and brandies you need Rothschild's fortune. For lemonade and soda water you need a kind of machine, some kind of stone that costs you who knows how much. What's left is kvass. Kvass is the kind of drink that costs little and sells fast, especially in a summer month as hot as this. From kvass, you should know, our kvass-maker, Boruch, has grown rich. He makes bottled kvass. It's known all over the world. It shoots out of the bottle like a cannon. How it shoots nobody knows. That's Boruch's secret. They say he puts something in there that makes it shoot. Some says it's a raisin, others say hops. When summer comes along he doesn't have enough hands. He makes a bundle.

The Kvass that my brother Elye makes from the formula isn't bottled and doesn't shoot. Ours is a completely different kind ... if you promise to keep a secret I'll tell you what's in the drink... There's lemon peel, loose honey, something called cream of tartar that's more sour than vinegar; the rest is water. There's more water than anything. The more water, the more kvass.

***Discussion Prompts:***

- » Is this a children's story or a story about children? What's the difference?
- » Sholem Aleichem was sometimes referred to as "The Jewish Mark Twain." What are the parallels - and differences - to a story of American boyhood like Tom Sawyer?

# THE POT

Rabbi! A question's what I want to ask you. I don't know if you know me or if you don't know me. Yente's who I am, Yente the dairy vendor. I deal in eggs, see, and also geese, hens, and ducks. I have steady customers, two-three households — may God give them health and long life, because if they didn't support me, I couldn't buy the bread to make a prayer over. I manage, see — grab a gorschen here, grab a gorschen there, sometimes here, sometimes there, give a little, take a little — manage, if you can call it that. Of course, if my husband (may he rest in peace) were with me now, in the flesh — well! ... Though to tell the truth, life with him was not what you'd call milk and honey. A wage earner (you should pardon the expression) he wasn't. He'd just sit and study, sit and study, while I slaved away...

Now, what were we saying? Yes, you said, died young ... When my Moishe Ben Zion died (may he rest in peace), he was all of twenty-six years old. Huh? Twenty-six? Let's try that again. Nineteen he was at our wedding; eight years it's been since he died; that makes it, altogether, nineteen and eight ... Seems like it's as much as twenty-three! So how did I get twenty-six? Because I forgot about those seven years he was sick. Though as for being sick, he was sick much longer than that. He was always sickly. I mean he was always healthy except for that cough. It was the cough see, that did him in. He was always coughing (may it never happen to you Rabbi) Not always, of course, but at times when the cough got into him he'd start coughing, and once he'd start, he'd cough and cough and cough...

But what were we saying? Yes, you said, a widow ... I became a widow (may it never happen in this house) when I was still young, a girl you might say, with a small child, and half a house on Pauper's Street, the other half of Lazer the carpenter's place. Do you know it? It's not far from the bathhouse. But you're wondering, aren't you, why only half a house? Actually it's not mine. It belongs to my brother-in-law; Ezriel's his name. You must know him - he's from Vesselikut, some sort of town somewhere, and as for a living, he makes a living from fish, quite a good living depending on what the river's like....

What were we saying? Yes, you said, bad neighbors ... Bad isn't the word! I hope God Almighty won't think I have an evil tongue. Anyway I don't have to be the one to spread rumors. What do I have against her? She's a woman who likes to give bread to the poor. But who can figure her out? When she gets in one of her moods, God help and defend us all! It's a shame to talk of it — I wouldn't say it to anyone else, but with you, I know, it'll stay a secret ... Shh ... She beats him up — her husband, I mean, when no one's looking! "Oy," I said to her, "Gnessi, Gnessi! Aren't you afraid of God? Of God, Gnessi, you're not afraid?" So she said, "Whoever keeps an eye on someone else's pot, let that person be the scapegoat!" So I said "Whoever has nothing better to watch than that pot, should have his eyes taken out." So she said, "May every eavesdropper drop dead!" S What do you say, Rabbi, to such a big mouth?

## ***Discussion Prompts:***

- » Sholem Aleichem was well known for his monologues, featuring both male and female protagonists. What can you say about his representation of a woman's voice?
- » What is Yente really talking about when she mentions the pot? (Hint: it's not just a pot.)

## ON ACCOUNT OF A HAT

The walls of the station were covered with soot, the floor was covered with spit. It was dark, it was terrible... [Sholem Shachnah] finally discovered one miserable spot on a bench where he had just room enough to squeeze in, and no more than that, because the bench was occupied by an official of some sort in a uniform full of buttons, who was lying there all stretched out and snoring away to beat the band. Who this Buttons was, whether he was coming or going, he hadn't the vaguest idea, Sholem Shachnah, that is. But he could tell that Buttons was no dime a dozen official. This was plain by his cap, a military cap with a red band and a visor. He could have been an officer or a police official. Who knows? But surely he had drawn up to the station with a ringing of bells, had staggered in, full to the ears with meat and drink, laid himself out on the bench, as in his father's vineyard, and worked up a glorious snoring. It's not such a bad life to be a Gentile, and an official one at that...

All of a sudden he remembers—he's supposed to be home for Passover, and tomorrow is Passover eve! What if, God have mercy, he should fall asleep and miss his train? But that's why he's got a Jewish head on his shoulders—are you listening to me or not?—so he figures out the answer to that one too, Sholem Shachnah, that is, and goes looking for the porter, a certain Yeremei, he knows him well, to make a deal with him. Whereas he, Sholem Shachnah, is already on his third sleepless night and is afraid, God forbid, that he may miss his train, therefore let him, Yeremei, that is, in God's name, be sure to wake him, Sholem Shachnah, because tomorrow night is a holiday, Passover. “Easter,” he says to him in Russian and lays a coin in Yeremei's mitt. “Easter, Yeremei, do you understand, goyisher kop? Our Easter.” The peasant pockets the coin, no doubt about that, and promises to wake him at the first sign of the train...

“Get up,” said Ivan, “time to get up.” Time? What time? Sholem Shachnah is all confused. He wakes up, rubs his eyes, and is all set to step out of the wagon when he realizes he has lost his hat. Is he dreaming or not? And what's he doing here? ... Now what? No hat. The carpetbag is right where he left it, but his hat? He pokes around under the bench, reaching all over, until he comes up with a hat—not his own, to be sure, but the official's, with the red band and the visor. But Sholem Shachnah has no time for details and he rushes off to buy a ticket. The ticket window is jammed, everybody and his cousins are crowding in. Sholem Shachnah thinks he won't get to the window in time, perish the thought, and he starts pushing forward, carpetbag and all. The people see the red band and the visor and they make way for him. “Where to, Your Excellency?” asks the ticket agent. “What's this Excellency, all of a sudden?” wonders Sholem Shachnah, and he rather resents it. Some joke, a gentile poking fun at a Jew... “Which class, Your Excellency?” The ticket agent is looking straight at the red band and the visor...

“Is this third class?” asks Sholem Shachnah, putting one foot on the stairs and shoving his bag into the door of the compartment. “Yes, Your Excellency,” says the conductor, but he holds him back. “If you please, sir, it's packed full, as tight as your fist. You couldn't squeeze a needle into that crowd.” And he takes Sholem Shachnah's carpetbag—you hear what I'm saying?—and sings out, “Right this way, Your Excellency, I'll find you a seat.” “What the Devil!” cries Sholem Shachnah. “Your Excellency and Your Excellency!” But he hasn't much time for the fine points; he's worried about his carpetbag. He's afraid, you see, that with all these Excellencies he'll be swindled out of his belongings. So he runs after the conductor with the lantern, who leads him into a second-class carriage. This is also packed to the rafters, no room even to yawn in there. “This way please, Your Excellency!” And again the conductor grabs the bag and Sholem Shachnah lights out after him...

Sholem Shachnah rubs his forehead, and while passing down the corridor glances into the mirror on the wall.

It nearly knocks him over! He sees not himself but the official with the red band. That's who it is! "All my bad dreams on Yeremei's head and on his hands and feet, that lug! Twenty times I tell him to wake me and I even give him a tip, and what does he do, that dumb ox, may he catch cholera in his face, but wake the official instead! And me he leaves asleep on the bench! Tough luck, Sholem Shachnah old boy, but this year you'll spend Passover in Zlodievka.

***Discussion Prompts:***

- » Critics have seen this story as a wry comment on the process of Jewish modernity. What does Sholem Shachnah's failure to get home say about the Jewish possibility of success in a modern framework?
- » What does this story tell us about stereotypes of Eastern European Jews at this time?

# CONVERSATION BETWEEN TEVYE, CHAVA AND GOLDE IN "CHAVA"

**TEVYE**

What was Fyedka doing here?

**CHAVA**

Nothing.

**TEVYE**

What do you mean nothing?

**CHAVA**

We were just talking.

**TEVYE**

What business have you got talking with Fyedka?

**CHAVA**

We've known each other for a long time.

**TEVYE**

Congratulations! A fine friend you've picked for yourself.

**CHAVA**

Do you know him at all? Do you know who he is?

**TEVYE**

No, I don't know who he is. I've never seen his family tree. But I am sure he must be descended from a long and honorable line. His father must have been either a shepherd or a janitor, or else just a plain drunkard.

**CHAVA**

Who is father was, I don't know and I don't care to know. All people are the same to me. But Fyedka himself is not an ordinary person, of that I am sure.

**TEVYE**

Tell me, what kind of person is he? I'd like to hear.

**CHAVA**

I would tell you, but you wouldn't understand. Fyedka is a second Gorky.

**TEVYE**

And who, may I ask, was the first Gorky?

**CHAVA**

Gorky is one of the greatest men living in the world today.

**TEVYE**

Where does he live, this sage of yours? What is his occupation and what words of wisdom has he spoken?

**CHAVA**

Gorky is a famous author. He is a writer, that is, a man who writes books. He is fine and honest and true, a person to be honored. He also comes from plain people, he was not educated anywhere, he is self-taught ... here is his portrait.

**TEVYE**

So this is he, this sage of yours, Reb Gorky? I can swear I have seen him somewhere before, either at the baggage depot, carrying sacks, or in the woods hauling logs.

**CHAVA**

Is it a crime then if a man works with his hands? Don't you yourself work with your hands? Don't all of us work?

**TEVYE**

Yes, yes, you are right. We have a certain proverb which says, "When thou eatest the labor of thine own hands" - If you do not work, you shall not eat. But I still don't understand what Fyedka is doing here. I would be much happier if you were friends at a distance. You mustn't forget "Whence thou camest and whither thou goest" - Who you are and who he is.

**CHAVA**

God created all men equal.

**TEVYE**

Yes, yes, God created Adam in his own image. But we mustn't forget that each man must seek his own kind, as it is written: "From each according to his means..."

**CHAVA**

Marvelous! Unbelievable! You have a quotation for everything. Maybe you also have a quotation that explains why men have divided themselves up into Jews and Gentiles, into lords and slaves, noblemen and beggars?

**TEVYE**

Now, now, my daughter, it seems to me you've strayed to the sixth millennium...this...[has]...been the way of the world since the first day of creation.

**CHAVA**

And why should this be the way of the world?

**TEVYE**

Because that's the way God created the world.

**CHAVA**

And why did God create the world this way?

**TEVYE**

If we started to ask why this, and wherefore that, "there would be no end to it" - a tale without end.

**CHAVA**

But that is why God gave us intellects, that we should ask questions.

**TEVYE**

We have an old custom, that when a hen begin to crow like a rooster, we take her away to be slaughtered. As we say in the morning blessing, "Who gave the rooster the ability to discern between day and night..."

**GOLDE**

Maybe you've done enough jabbering out there. The borscht has been standing on the table for an hour and he is still out there singing Sabbath hymns.

**TEVYE**

Another province heard from! No wonder our sages have said, "The fool hath seven qualities" - A woman talks nine times as much as a man. We are discussing important matters and she comes barging in with her cabbage borscht.

**GOLDE**

My cabbage borscht may be just as important as those "important matters" of yours.

**TEVYE**

Mazel-tov! We have a new philosopher here, straight from behind the oven. It isn't enough that Tevye's daughters have become enlightened, now his wife has to start flying through the chimney right up into the sky.

**GOLDE**

Since you mention the sky, I might as well tell you that I hope you rot in the earth.

***Discussion Prompts:***

- » What are the philosophical and political undercurrents to Tevye and Chava's argument?
- » How do Tevye and his wife Golde interact? What might this say about romance and marriage in the Eastern European Jewish world, in contrast to the ideas posed by Tevye's daughter?