

I.L. Peretz's "If Not Higher!"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/il-peretz-if-not-higher>.

Introduction

The enormously influential Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz was born in 1852 to an Orthodox Jewish family in the Polish city of Zamość, an exceptional place where several different ideologies that dominated Jewish Eastern Europe at the time intersected. Peretz's short stories often draw on the intersection of attitudes and beliefs that he was exposed to in his childhood.

In *"Oyb nisht nokh hekher!"* ("If Not Higher!"), a community of Hasidim, followers of dynastic leaders called rebbes who emphasized prayer and spiritual ecstasy, reckons with a "Litvak," that is, a "Lithuanian" Jew, stereotyped as cerebral and hyper-rational, and an opponent to the Hasidism which held sway farther south. Peretz views this conflict of Orthodox ideologies through the lens of the secular *Haskole*, or Jewish Enlightenment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to which he was a major cultural contributor.

In stories like "If Not Higher!", Peretz draws on the formula of Hasidic folktales, with all their reverence for rebbes and wonder-working, but casts on them his distinctly modern and secular glance. The Hasidim of "If Not Higher!" believe their rebbe ascends to Heaven during the Penitential Prayers of the High Holy Days, and though a visiting Litvak—an addition to the Hasidic tale formula that is Peretz's own modern invention—seeks to disprove their belief, he ends up asserting that the rebbe's generous deeds elevate him even "higher." Peretz stands out among writers of the *Haskole* for the high degree of respect he shows for the Hasidic tradition and for the rebbe as moral and spiritual leader. In "If Not Higher!," he uses this figure to make a case for ethical action that might appeal to both religious and secular Jews.

This guide provides text and audio excerpts from "If Not Higher!" and works adapted from or related to it, which are intended to give students perspective on the story and provide context for examining its distinct worldview.

Cover image: *Лесоруб* ("Lesorub," "woodcutter"), a 1912 painting by Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich. Held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Fiction, Hasidism, Haskalah, Religion, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- This classic story, first published in the Polish-Yiddish newspaper *Der yud* (*The Jew*) in January 1900, has been published in many distinct English translations, the first being in the September 1904 issue of the progressive Jewish magazine *The Maccabean*. A recent translation by Ken Frieden, excerpted in this kit, appears in *Classic Yiddish Stories of S. Y. Abramovitch, Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz*, edited by Frieden (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), and can be downloaded [here](#).
- A translation by Marie Syrkin, first appearing in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg's 1953 *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, can be found [here](#) as an audio book, read by Isaiah Sheffer and with an introduction by Leonard Nimoy. If desired, this recording can be used to accompany the reading in Yiddish by Leib Tencer that appears in Resource 1 below.
- The original Yiddish can be accessed freely online in its first publication in the weekly *Der yud*, volume 2, issue 1 (Krakow: January 11, 1900), and in the collection of Peretz's stories written in the style of Hasidic folktales, *Khsidish (Hasidic)* (Vilna: Vilner farlag fun b. kletskein, 134-139).
- Ruth Wisse also contributes a concise and useful [biography](#) of Peretz and summary of the themes that predominate in his life and work to the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, freely available online.



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- To the same encyclopedia, Allan Nadler contributes an [article](#) on the Litvak contrasted to the Hasid, from whose perspective Peretz writes his story. The article provides meaningful context on who the Litvaks were, whence they came, and their relationship to the Hasidim, like the story's Rebbe of Nemirov and his followers.
- The scholar Adi Mahalel writes about how the story compares to the specific Hasidic folktale from which it derives much of its inspiration in his dissertation *The Radical Years of I. L. Peretz* (Columbia University: 2014, 354–362). That original folktale appears in Menakhem Mendel Bodek's Hebrew-language *Ma'ase tsadikim* (*Story of Pious People*) (Lemberg: 1864, 40–41). Another potential source for Peretz's story is the figure of the great Hasidic master Rabbi Moyshe Leyb of Sassov, about whose marvelous doings many stories were told. The idea of a Litvak investigating such wonders, though, is largely Peretz's innovation (and in some ways, a stand-in for the author himself).

Resources

1: Short story excerpt, I. L. Peretz's "If Not Higher!," 1900, English translation by Ken Frieden, 2011, and reading in Yiddish by Leib Tencer, ca. 1990.

The Yiddish text here is taken from the story's original appearance in the pioneering Yiddish weekly *Der yud* (the masthead and article title have been juxtaposed directly above this excerpt, though they do not appear thus in the original). Here, Peretz's Litvak protagonist hides under the bed of the rebbe to see whether or not he really does ascend to Heaven in the morning at the time of *slikhes*, the "Penitential Prayers" recited by Jews in the days leading up to the Jewish New Year, a period of atonement. As Peretz's literary conceit here is that his story is a "*khsidische ertsehlung*" ("a Hasidic tale"), a claim asserted by the subtitle, we find here some gentle mocking at the Litvak's expense.

Suggested Activity: Play the recording of native Yiddish speaker Leib Tencer reading the excerpt and have students follow along in English or Yiddish (or both). First ask students to describe Tencer's style of reading. How would they characterize it? Humorous, conversational, mocking? Does hearing it aloud change their perception of the story at all, after having read the whole text?

Now have the class examine the figure of the Litvak in the excerpt. Is this an entirely mocking characterization of the Litvak, or is there some subtle signaling of his virtues? Remember that though his methods may seem ridiculous here, by the end of the story, he receives a heightened knowledge and understanding of the rebbe's practices, and so perhaps an even greater appreciation for the rebbe than the spiritual leader's own devoted Hasidim.

Ask students to list as many stereotypes of the Litvak's personality and priorities as they can find in this short excerpt. Then ask them to consider: how might these negative stereotypes in fact be advantages? How might Peretz's message, at story's end, be in fact a synthesis of both the Hasidic and the Litvish points of view, in favor of what Peretz may see as a "higher" or more enlightened and modern Judaism?

Sources: I. L. Peretz, "*Oyb nisht nokh hekher! A khsidische ertsehlung*" ("If Not Even Higher! A Hasidic Tale"), in *Der yud* (*The Jew*) 2:1 (Krakow and Warsaw: January 11, 1900), 12, http://jpress.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/?action=tab&tab=browse&pub=DJD&_ga=2...., accessed January 20, 2020.

I. L. Peretz, "If Not Higher!", trans. Ken Frieden, in *Classic Yiddish Stories of S. Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz*, ed. Frieden (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 164.

I. L. Peretz, "*Oyb nisht nokh hekher!*", read by Leib Tencer from Peretz's book *Khsidish* (*Hasidic*) (Montreal, QC: Jewish Public Library, 1980s–90s), track 14, Yiddish Book Center's Sami Rohr Library of Recorded Yiddish Books, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/audio-books/smr-276I.L.Per...>, accessed January 20, 2020.

2: Talmud excerpt, "This, too, is Torah, and I must learn," Aramaic with English translation, ca. 500 CE.

This notorious excerpt from *Berakhot* ("*Brokhes*," in Ashkenazic pronunciation), the first tractate of the Talmud, presents a situation remarkably similar to one in Peretz's story. Here, a curious young student hides out under the bed of an esteemed rabbi to investigate the latter's activities, just as Peretz's protagonist does in the prior excerpt. In the Talmud, the situation is overtly

sexual, while in the latter, it is perhaps only hinted at humorously. (In addition to the clear parallels between the two stories, note also that the protagonist in the relevant excerpt of Peretz is studying Talmud from memory, while emulating a situation found in the Talmud.)

Suggested Activity: Read through the excerpt with students. If someone is able to read the Aramaic, ask them to read it aloud for the class. Begin by asking students what basic parallels they find in the two excerpts. What details of the two situations are alike? Ask them what characteristics they may find in the student, Rav Kahana, and if they are similar to how the Litvak is stereotyped in the story. Do you think Peretz is alluding to this story in his tale, and to what end? (You might wish to inform students that Peretz was afforded private tutelage in the Talmud by his Orthodox Jewish parents, and also privately read secular literature in Hebrew, Russian, German, Polish, and French.) How does he add to it, and to the Jewish tradition of academic inquiry for the sake of inquiry, with the conclusion that the protagonist ultimately comes to (the story's moral)?

Sources: Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 62a, in *The William Davidson Talmud*, source sheet compiled on Sefaria, <https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.62a.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>, accessed January 20, 2020.

Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 62a, from Daniel Boyarin, "Women's Bodies and the Rise of the Rabbis: The Case of Sotah," in *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy* (Studies in Contemporary Jewry: An Annual, vol. XVI), ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94, 99.

3: Radio play excerpt, Norman Rosten's "If Not Higher," 1945.

Norman Rosten, who would later be named the Poet Laureate of Brooklyn, wrote this dramatization of Peretz's story for the religious radio program *The Eternal Light*, a co-production of the NBC Radio Network and the Jewish Theological Seminary that was broadcast from 1944 to 1989. This excerpt invents a character and a dialogue that do not appear in Peretz's story, as the Litvak has an argument with his wife before starting off on his nighttime mission of reconnaissance to the rabbi's home.

Suggested Activity: Before playing the excerpt for students, ask them to conceive of their own conversations for the Litvak and his wife to have on the eve of his espionage. In pairs, they can then write and perform (or improvise) short dialogues for the class.

Now play the excerpt. Ask students to compare it to their own dialogues. Which do they prefer — their own version, or Rosten's? Is the radio scene as they expected it would be, or does it hold any surprises? (Note that the play goes farther than Peretz in referencing the potential homoerotic undertones of the Litvak spending the night in the rabbi's bedroom — perhaps unusual for 1945). Does the radio scene give them any new insights into the protagonist, or reinforce any they had before? What do they think of the wife? Might the playwright have handled this invented character differently to add richness or meaning to the story?

Source: Norman Rosten, "If Not Higher," from *The Eternal Light* (New York: NBC Radio Network and Jewish Theological Seminary, September 16, 1945), no. 47.

4: Essay excerpt, Karl Marx's "Introduction to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," German with English translation, 1843.

This work by Karl Marx, one of the chief philosophers behind modern socialist thought and himself ethnically Jewish, contains one of his most famous quotations on the function of religion, namely, that it is the "*Opium des Volks*," or the "opium of the people." Peretz was active in the socialist movement of his day, and wrote "If Not Higher!" while serving a three-month prison sentence for participating in a political gathering of workers, the right to assembly being denied by the Czarist authorities who then ruled Warsaw. His story comments on the same theme being discussed here by Marx: namely, the role that God and Heaven might have in, as Marx puts it, "*die Welt des Menschen*" — "the world of Man."

Suggested Activity: Read the text together with the students, or have them take a first pass at it alone or with partners. As it is a dense text, ask them to annotate it as they go, highlighting phrases they think are important or revealing. Doing so will help them to isolate ideas that may be key to Marx's argument.

Now discuss what that argument seems to be, and how it is different or similar to the one Peretz presents in his story. Note that Marx calls for the "*Aufhebung der Religion*" ("abolition of religion"). Is Peretz doing the same? What role does religion seem to play for him? Does he, though a secular Jew, seem to have more use for religious feeling than Marx? Peretz, after all, though critical of the Hasidim, wrote many stories in the style of Hasidic folktales, and instead of rejecting their guiding principles outright, instead

molded them according to his own fashion and what he felt to be the demands of his age.

In what way might Marx and Peretz's views of religion be alike, and why do you think Peretz might not go quite as far as Marx? (Or does he?) Whose viewpoint speaks more to the students, Marx's or Peretz's? Or neither?

Source: Karl Marx, "*Zur Kritik der Hegel'schen Rechtsphilosophie - Einleitung*" ("Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right - Introduction"), in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher (German-French Annals)*, 1:1, ed. Marx and Arnold Ruge (Paris: Bureau der Jahrbücher, February 1844), 71–72.

Translation by Mikhl Yashinsky.

5: Cantata excerpt, Maurice Rauch and Itche Goldberg's "Oyb nit nokh hekher," Yiddish, ca. 1940s-60s, English translation, 2020, and musical recording, 2000.

Maurice Rauch composed the music and Itche Goldberg wrote the libretto for this cantata based on Peretz's story. (Sholom Secunda, the writer of the famous Yiddish song "*Bay mir bistu sheyn*"—"To Me You're Beautiful"—also wrote a cantata based on the story, but in English.) Like the radio play in Resource 3 of this kit, this concluding excerpt of Rauch and Goldberg's piece imagines a dialogue that does not appear in the short story: here, the Hasidim (sung in this 2000 recording by the Choral Society of Southern California and the Los Angeles Zimriyah Chorale) tease the Litvak (sung by the cantor Ira Biegeleisen) and insist he tell them where the rebbe goes if not to Heaven. The Litvak gives them his titular response, and the two parties harmonize on the concluding lines in apparent agreement.

The two creators of the cantata were both born in Eastern Europe and, like Peretz (whose funeral Goldberg attended in Warsaw at age 13), believed in the value of Yiddish language and culture as a vehicle for a secular and humanistic, but still spiritually informed, Jewish practice.

Though this outlook informed their writing of the cantata, which was premiered by the Jewish People's Philharmonic Chorus in New York (conducted by Rauch for many years), the piece was denied a performance by a sister chorus in Detroit aligned with the International Workers Order, or as it was known in Yiddish, the "*Ordn*" ("Order"). The Detroit administrators of the branch, when they learned that the piece had been scheduled, rejected it on the grounds that the piece depicts a Hasidic rebbe and the practice of traditional Judaism, while their organization was progressive and staunchly secular. Goldberg, because he so believed in the work's message of beneficence toward one's fellow man being even "higher" than pure religion or devotion to God, traveled to Detroit at his own expense to win over the *Ordn* administrators. Not only does the rebbe achieve something "higher" than religion through doing good works, Goldberg argued, but Hasidism itself was begun as a movement of common people, not unlike socialism. His efforts were successful, and the committee's decision was reversed.

Suggested Activity: Play the excerpt for the students and have them follow along with the text provided, which contains the Yiddish alongside an English translation. Ask them how this composition changes Peretz's ending, in terms of both mood and plot. What happens here that does not happen in Peretz's story?

In the story, the Litvak becomes a disciple of the rebbe, and quietly adds "If not higher!" whenever a Hasid brings up the miracle of the rebbe ascending to Heaven. In this cantata, the Litvak is taunted and called a "*tseylem-kop*"—literally "crucifix-head," connoting a heretical person—and answers by proudly proclaiming his new philosophy to the entire assembly of Hasidim. After initially doubting his answer, the Hasidim end by ardently chorusing "If not higher!" together with him.

What effect does the ending of the cantata have on the narrative and its message? Does it feel like propaganda, with all of the Jews coming to the same conclusion as the Litvak, and being changed by his new philosophy? Is such a strong social imperative evident in Peretz's original story, as well?

Rauch's composition fits comfortably into the category of classical choral-dramatic works. Ask students: if they were to set Peretz's story to music, what genre would they choose and why? How might their choice of style influence or change the story, its characterizations, and its moral? Might they choose a genre that would hold greater appeal for their age group and their era, as Rauch's classical idiom might have done for his mid-century adult listeners? What relevance might this story hold for today's readers anyhow?

Sources: Maurice Rauch and Itche Goldberg, "*Oyb nit nokh hekher*," ca. 1940s–60s, recorded for the Milken Archive of Jewish

Music, vol. 12, album 2, "Legend of Toil and Celebration: Songs of Solidarity, Social Awareness, and Yiddish Americana" (Santa Monica, CA: Milken Archive Digital, recorded 2000, released 2013), track 1. ©Milken Family Foundation, courtesy of the Milken Archive of Jewish Music.

Itche Goldberg, "*Oyb nit nokh hekher*," trans. Mikhl Yashinsky (New York: 2020).