

Sholem Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/sholem-aleichems-account-hat>.

Introduction

"On Account of a Hat" was written in 1913 by Sholem Aleichem, one of the most famous Yiddish writers and humorists, at a time of resurgent anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire on the eve of World War I and the subsequent collapse of the Tsarist regime. It is a hilarious yet devastating story about travelling by train—that preeminent symbol of the modern age. It is also about leaving home and attempting to return there, a clash between the traditional sense of time associated with Jewish religious practices and a sense of time associated with living in the modern world, and the disintegration and breakdown of identity under the strain of these and other conflicts. Sholem Shachnah—nicknamed Rattlebrain—emerges as the story's hapless hero with one foot firmly out of the shtetl but the other foot only tentatively in the bigger world that he thought he understood until it became clear to the story's readers that he didn't.

Cover image: Detail of a map of the Russian railway system, illustration from *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary*, circa 1890–1907.

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Eastern Europe, Fiction, Gender, Jewish Holidays, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- You can read a short biography of Sholem Aleichem—the pen name of the writer Sholem Rabinovitch (1859-1916)—written by the scholar Dan Miron in the [YIVO Encyclopedia](#).
- For the writer's first comprehensive biography, read Jeremy Dauber's *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem: The Remarkable Life and Afterlife of the Man Who Created Tevye* (Shoken, 2013).
- Sholem Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat," in Isaac Rosenfeld's translation, was first published in English in *A Treasury of Yiddish Short Stories*—a landmark collection edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg. The same translation was also included in *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* edited by Moshe Waldocks and William Novack, first published in 1981, as well as in all of the book's subsequent editions.
- For the original Yiddish text of the story, consult the short story collection *Fun peysekhn biz peysekhn* [From Passover to Passover] in the second volume of Sholem Aleichem's collected works in the Yiddish Book Center's digital library: [Ale verk fun Sholem-Aleykhem, vol. 2](#) (Folksfond, 1920), ("Iber a hitl," pages 243-254).

Resources

1: Map of the narrative in Sholem Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat," 2021.

How many stories are there in "On Account of a Hat"? Like a set of Russian nesting dolls or an onion with its many layers that can be peeled back one by one, Sholem Aleichem's story contains multiple stories within it. The more cognizant you are as a reader of how the story is structured, the more aware you can be of both what happens in its plot and subplots and of how to begin to interpret this complex text. The more you can peel back the layers—or unnest the dolls—the more the story will surprise you.

Suggested Activity: As you read—or, ideally, as you re-read—Sholem Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat," take a look at the "map" of the story, and mark up your copy of the story so that chunks of the text are color-coded to correspond to the map as follows:



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- The story that you—the reader—are reading, the published story “On Account of a Hat” written by the famous Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem (in this case, in Isaac Rosenfeld’s English translation). Color-code: blue.
- The story in which Sholem Aleichem becomes a protagonist of the story that you—the reader of “On Account of a Hat”—are reading, in which he tells you that he has once heard, from a paper merchant from the town of Kasrilevka, a tale about a man named Sholem Shachnah and that man’s journey home for Passover by train. Color-code: orange.
- The tale, as it is being told to Sholem Aleichem by the merchant from Kasrilevka, when Sholem Aleichem is in a hurry to get home for Passover. As the merchant tells this tale, he keeps asking Sholem Aleichem “do you hear what I say?”—indicating that he’s worried that Sholem Aleichem can’t hear him because he might not be listening attentively and/or perhaps because it’s too noisy where the two are speaking. Color-code: green.
- The story about Sholem Shachnah: the merchant from Kasrilevka claims that this is a story widely known in the hometown he shares with Sholem Shachnah. This story is an account of how Sholem Shachnah tried to get home in time for Passover by train after somehow succeeding in making some money during his mostly failed foray into the world of real estate. Color-code: purple.
- Sholem Shachnah’s dream, in which the story about Sholem Shachnah’s attempt to get home for Passover is compressed into a nightmare, in which the general contours of the story are the same but key details—the means by which the protagonist travels home, in a horse-drawn carriage rather than on a train—are different. Color-code: red.

Now that you’ve looked at the story’s narrative map and now that you’ve marked up and color-coded your text, refer to these materials in subsequent activities. When referring to what any one protagonist says or does, for example, be sure to contextualize a quote or an action within the appropriate layer of “On Account of a Hat”—within the correct story-within-the-story. Separating the different layers of the story from one another—who tells what to whom, when, and where—should help you better understand a good deal of the complexity of the text.

Source: Narrative map of Sholem Aleichem’s “On Account of a Hat,” created by Sasha Senderovich, 2021. This map was inspired by David G. Roskies’s chart of the story’s different linguistic layers in his article “*Inside Sholem Shachnah’s Hat*” published in *Prooftexts*, vol. 21, no. 1, Winter 2001.

2: Audio recording, Sholem Aleichem’s “On Account of a Hat,” read by Peter Riegart, 1995.

Many fans of Sholem Aleichem during the writer’s lifetime would have been not his readers, but his *listeners*. His stories—originally published in newspapers and literary almanacs—would have been read aloud in Yiddish by one member of the household to the others, or at other intimate gatherings. Sholem Aleichem composed many of his works to be heard; many of his stories were marked by what literary scholars refer to as “orality”—a way of writing fiction so as to convey in printed form the patterns of the spoken word.

Suggested Activity: After reading the short story in printed form, listen to the twenty-minute recording of Sholem Aleichem’s “On Account of a Hat”—without following along in the printed text. Does your experience of listening to the story differ from your impression of reading it on the printed page—and, if so, how? Are the patterns of speech, the intonations of the performer’s voice, and the flow of the narrative on audio similar to how the story “sounded” in your head when you read it on paper? How might your understanding of the story have changed from one way of encountering it to another?

Source: Sholem Aleichem’s “On Account of a Hat,” performed by Peter Riegart, recorded 1995, on *Jewish Short Stories from Eastern Europe and Beyond*, National Yiddish Book Center and National Public Radio station KCRW, accessed online at <https://archive.org/details/onAccountOfAHatBySholemAleichem>

3: Song and lyrics, Golem’s “Train Across Ukraine,” 2009.

Who is the Sholem Aleichem who shows up as a protagonist in “On Account of a Hat”?

“On Account of a Hat” opens with a frame story, narrated by Sholem Aleichem, who claims to have heard a story about one Sholem Shachnah—nicknamed Rattlebrain [*drey zikh* in Yiddish]—from a merchant from Rattlebrain’s hometown, Kasrilevka, who himself remains nameless. But why does the unnamed merchant from Kasrilevka tell the story about his hapless townsman Sholem Shachnah Rattlebrain to, of all people, Sholem Aleichem?

Sholem Aleichem—a pen name of the writer Sholem Rabinovitch—was widely known among a vast Yiddish-language readership

across the **Pale of Settlement**, as well as in America and elsewhere where readers of Yiddish began to migrate from the Russian Empire in the 1880s. In particular, in a series of stories set on railroads, the author Sholem Rabinovitch who published under the pen name Sholem Aleichem invented the literary persona of Sholem Aleichem—and *that* Sholem Aleichem was a traveler, along with simple Jews, in the same cheap third-class seats of overcrowded trains crisscrossing the Pale of Settlement, conversing with the regular folk about their thoughts and troubles, and relaying their stories to the public.

Suggested Activity: Listen to the song “Train Across Ukraine,” by the New York-based Klezmer punk band Golem. The lyrics of the song include a first-person narration which is attributed to Sholem Aleichem, popularizing the figure of the writer-traveler to audiences in the twenty-first century. What are Sholem Aleichem’s motivations—as they are relayed in this song—for his way of traveling? What kinds of things does Sholem Aleichem, as imagined in this song, pay attention to as he travels across Ukraine? “On Account of a Hat” is one of many stories in which the writer Sholem Aleichem conveyed the tales of railroad passengers; if you’re feeling inspired by Golem’s upbeat tune, consider reading more of Sholem Aleichem’s **railroad stories**.

Source: Golem, “Train Across Ukraine,” 2009, track 1 on *Citizen Boris*, JDub Records, 2009, accessed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwR2xwxsRZc>, February 5, 2021.

“Train Across Ukraine” lyrics by Annette Ezekiel, 2009.

4: First sentence of Sholem Aleichem’s “On Account of a Hat” (1913), translated into English by Isaac Rosenfeld (1953).

After you’ve thought (using resource #3 of this kit) about the song “Train Across Ukraine”—and the portrait it creates of Sholem Aleichem as a railroad passenger keeping his ear perked up for the stories of his fellow travelers—take some time to examine the very beginning of “On Account of a Hat.” The first sentence of the story is attributed to the merchant from Kasrilevka: “*Did I hear you say absent-minded?*” [*Alts heyst bay aykh tsetrogn?*]

As becomes clear later in the same paragraph, this monologue is addressed directly to Sholem Aleichem, whose name the merchant mentions as the subject of his second-person address: “...what I could tell you, Mr. Sholem Aleichem...” The merchant from Kasrilevka, it would seem, had been standing near another group of people—a group which included Sholem Aleichem. These people were speaking about an issue entirely unrelated to the unfortunate Sholem Shachnah—in fact, the reader of the story is never told what they had been talking about. We as readers are left to assume that Sholem Aleichem must have said something about someone else being “absent-minded,” and, at that very moment, the merchant from Kasrilevka seized upon this utterance as an opening to join the conversation—and launched into his tale about his absent-minded townsman, Sholem Shachnah Rattlebrain, which he had been dying to relay to the famous writer Sholem Aleichem.

Suggested Activity: Read the story’s first sentence—or, better yet, its entire first paragraph. Why does the merchant of Kasrilevka essentially butt into a conversation? Put yourself in his shoes: how would you feel if you ran into a famous person, or just some person you’ve always wanted to talk to, just standing around in a public place talking with other people? The merchant from Kasrilevka must have recognized Sholem Aleichem, a popular figure widely known to so many Jews in the Pale of Settlement from his portraits in literary periodicals; an opportunity to tell a story about a hapless townsman to a famous writer known for retelling narratives attributed to fellow Jews must have seemed incredibly enticing. Imagine that you are in a group of peers you perceive to be “cooler” than yourself—they are all having a conversation, and you’re struggling to get a word in edge-wise, and suddenly one of the “cool kids” says a word that gives you the perfect opening and you jump in and begin talking. Have you been in a situation like this? This is one way to imagine how the Kasrilevka merchant’s story begins, and how Sholem Aleichem, the famous writer posing as an attentive listener, first hears the story that he later claims to share with his readers.

Source: Sholem Aleichem, “On Account of a Hat,” trans. Isaac Rosenfeld in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Penguin, 1990).

5: An illustration of the Jewish calendar, 1973, and an archival Russian train schedule, Saint Petersburg–Vitebsk line, 1908.

If you take another look at the first activity in this resource kit—the “map” exercise—you’ll notice that what is common to all the layers of the narrative in “On Account of a Hat” is their timing. Always, in each layer, it is the eve of Passover: Sholem Aleichem’s story in the Yiddish original is subtitled “*a mayse lekoved peysekhn*” (“a tale on the occasion of Passover”) and is one of numerous

stories that Sholem Aleichem wrote for specific Jewish holidays; the merchant from Kasrilevka tells Sholem Aleichem that “[i]t’s a pity [that he is] in such a hurry on account of the Passover”; Sholem Shachnah Rattlebrain tries to get home in time for Passover, and the Kasrilevka merchant relays this story to Sholem Aleichem on the eve of Passover as well; Sholem Shachnah’s nightmare of not being able to get home, which he dreams up while he is asleep at the train station on Zlodievka, is also set on Passover eve.

Passover in “On Account of a Hat” is not merely a single occasion or a holiday, but a way of thinking about time. “On Account of a Hat” stages a kind of dramatic clash between two entirely different ways of understanding how time works.

On the one hand, there is “Jewish time”—the time marked by the Jewish holidays that occur at the same time of the year every year, at regular intervals as specified by religious sources such as the Hebrew Bible. In “On Account of a Hat,” events unfold on the eve of Passover, one of the most important holidays in the Jewish year. The Jewish year itself unfolds according to a lunar calendar, in which the changing of months is tethered to the cycles of the moon and the changing of the seasons and agricultural cycles in nature: Passover always occurs in the spring, a time of renewal. The multiple narratives in “On Account of a Hat” all occur at what the Yiddish language may colloquially refer to as *peysekh-tsaytns*—Passover time.

On the other hand, “On Account of a Hat” also runs according to what is customarily known as “railroad time” or “railway time.” First introduced in England in November of 1840, **railway time** was the standardized time necessary to operate an expanding network of trains; prior to the construction of railroads and the standardization of time, different towns would observe less formal local conventions of time—marked, for example, by a sundial. As railroad networks began to expand, time became standardized so that passengers in different towns could know when the trains were going to arrive and depart (and so that trains didn’t crash into each other while en route).

Suggested Activity:

- First, scan the story and make a list of all references to Passover and particularly of references to Passover in terms of time, as an event that is imminently around the corner. Look at the illustration of the Jewish calendar. It is a circle and Passover, no matter how much time a person might need to get home, will arrive when it must no matter what, as the yearly cycle rotates the way it always has and always will—the start of Passover, in other words, cannot be delayed. Put yourself in Sholem Shachnah’s shoes—or, for that matter, in the shoes of the Kasrilevka merchant or Sholem Aleichem: what kinds of feelings would you experience if you desperately wanted to get home in time for Passover, which is about to begin, so you can spend the holiday with your family?
- Second, scan the story and make a list of references to the train, especially its schedule and timing. How does the merchant from Kasrilevka think about the extension of the rail line from the main railroad to his small hometown that had, before the arrival of the train, been in the middle of nowhere? What kind of schedule is the Kasrilevka train supposed to run on—and how is the planned schedule different from the train’s actual schedule in terms of the experience of passengers? Consider the Russian imperial train schedule from 1908. Note how the passengers have to read this timetable linearly (from top to bottom, in the case of this particular train schedule), noting the progress of the train according to specified intervals of time as it moves forward from one station to another.
- Now, put yourself in Sholem Shachnah’s shoes again: what do you think Sholem Shachnah experiences as he is caught between the two ways of understanding time—the cyclical calendar of Jewish holidays and the linear calendar of the train? As Sholem Shachnah tries to get home for Passover—an imperative based on the cyclical calendar of traditional Jewish observance—the train moves on an entirely different schedule that is in no way tethered to Passover and Jewish time. How might we think about the stakes involved in making this journey—especially if trains on Sholem Shachnah’s route are known to be delayed?

Sources: *The First Jewish Catalog*, eds. Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 99.

Archival Russian train schedule, 1908, from the website of **Pskov Railways**, http://www.pskovrail.ru/2008/059_060v_Peterburg_Vitebsk.jpg.

6: Text excerpt, W.E.B. Du Bois’s “Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil,” 1920.

Note: the W.E.B. Du Bois excerpt used in this resource contains a racial slur—the n-word—and we have reprinted it here as it was in the original.

The environment in which Sholem Aleichem's protagonist finds himself is saturated with discomfort and fear. At one point in the story, Sholem Shachnah fears that a man with whom he shares a bench in the waiting room of a provincial train station could be an important Russian official and perhaps "even Purishkevitch himself, the famous anti-Semite, may his name perish." To boot, the train station is located in the fictional town of Zolodievka, which translates approximately from the Russian as Evil Town. Now, Sholem Shachnah's fellow passenger is most certainly *not* Vladimir Purishkevitch (1870-1920)—a right-wing politician in imperial Russia who was well known for his nationalist, anti-Semitic views. But at the same time, the fact that the hero of "On Account of a Hat" thinks that this *might* be Purishkevitch betrays the fear and anxiety that would have haunted someone like Sholem Shachnah traveling among non-Jews at the time the story was first published.

The story came out in 1913 around the time of the trial, in Kyiv, of a Jewish man named **Mendel Beilis**. Beilis's arrest two years earlier on the made-up charges of ritual murder of a young Christian boy and his subsequent trial attracted large-scale attention and was widely covered by the press both in the Russian Empire and around the world, including in the *New York Times*. Beilis was acquitted of all charges by a jury in a ruling that did, nonetheless, leave intact the anti-Semitic myth—known as the **blood libel**—that Jews killed Christian children for ritual purposes. Since the Middle Ages, accusations of blood libel tended to circulate in Europe right around the time of Passover: central to the accusation was the charge that Jews killed Christian children so as to use their blood for baking Passover matzo.

It is, then, hardly a surprise that Sholem Shachnah, traveling right around Passover and with the Beilis case in the public eye, would suspect that the non-Jews surrounding him on the journey were anti-Semites who were out to get him. Fears of being surrounded by hostile forces permeate his experience as a fictionalized member of the Jewish minority in imperial Russia.

In "On Account of a Hat," Sholem Schachnah is portrayed as a cultural and racial "other," who experienced the fear of being discriminated against while outside the confines of his familiar surroundings; in fact, his experience as a member of a persecuted minority is so ingrained as to dominate his perception of the world around him.

Writing just a few years later about traveling in the South of the United States during the era of racial segregation known as Jim Crow, the writer and historian W.E.B. Du Bois vividly described the discrimination and venom Black Americans experienced in train stations and on trains. According to Du Bois, the experience was so awful that many preferred to shun travel altogether.

Suggested Activity: Read the excerpt from W.E.B. Du Bois's *Darkwater* and pay attention to how the author describes the encounter of Black Americans with different aspects of train travel, from purchasing a ticket to waiting for the train to finding their seats in the train compartment. Compare these descriptions to Sholem Shachnah's narration of his own experience waiting for and getting on the train that was going to take him home for Passover in "On Account of a Hat." In both of these accounts, the experiences of travel are determined by the traveler's contextual/historical circumstances, and by their perception of those circumstances. What insights about the experiences of "traveling while Black" in the United States during the Jim Crow era do you take away from Du Bois's excerpt? What light, if any, do those insights shed on Sholem Shachnah's experience of traveling as a member of a persecuted minority in the Russian Empire? How is his experience similar? How is it different? How does Sholem Shachnah articulate his own individual travails with an eye toward the larger context in which he finds himself?

Source: W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920), accessed online through Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210.txt>.

7: Excerpt from Sholem Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat" (1913), translated by Isaac Rosenfeld (1953).

Suggested Activity: First, read the passage about Sholem Shachnah's encounter with the man the story refers to as Buttons, and try to reverse-engineer how Sholem Shachnah might have arrived at the numerous assumptions in this description, starting with the protagonist's moniker—which is not his name (neither the reader nor Sholem Shachnah knows this man's name!)—and ending with how Sholem Shachnah imagines the life of Buttons leading up to his arrival at the train station. Buttons is not Jewish, and he wears a cap of some sort that Sholem Shachnah takes for a sign of the man's social status and his place in the social hierarchy. How might Sholem Shachnah—a member of a persecuted ethno-religious minority without a real way to access or socialize with members of the Russian Empire's ethno-religious majority—have come to stereotype the man he encounters in the way that he does?

Second, look for the descriptions of the two other prominent non-Jewish characters—the porter Yeremei and the horse-drawn

wagon driver Ivan Zlodi—and consider how Sholem Shachnah understands these two men. How, for example, is Sholem Shachnah's communication and contractual relationship with Yeremei shaped by what Sholem Shachnah assumes about Yeremei's intelligence, as opposed to his own? How do you understand the origins of Ivan Zlodi in Sholem Shachnah's psychology as a character who appears in Sholem Shachnah's dream/nightmare and is thus a kind of manifestation of his fears about non-Jews? (Note that Ivan's nickname, Zlodi, has the same Russian-language root—which means "evil"—as the name of the train station, Zolodievka.)

Finally, how might Sholem Shachnah's mocking assumptions that Buttons is most certainly a drunkard and Yeremei is most certainly not too bright—as compared to Sholem Shachnah who credits his *yidische kop* (a Jewish head on his shoulders) with his superior intelligence—themselves be a product of a kind of defense mechanism by a member of a persecuted minority who elevates himself in his own mind by demeaning those in the more powerful majority?

Source: Sholem Aleichem, "On Account of a Hat," trans. Isaac Rosenfeld in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Penguin, 1990), 113.

8: Excerpt from Sholem Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat" (1913), translated into English by Isaac Rosenfeld (1953).

Early in the story, when he makes a little money, Sholem Shachnah sends his wife a telegram. In that message, he informs her that he plans to get home in time for Passover "without fail": like the whole text of the telegram, the word in question is in Russian (the language of the wire service), *bespremenno*, and it communicates Sholem Shachnah's fatefully confident reliance on the steady workings of Russia's imperial railways. It is this single Russian word—which becomes a two-word phrase in Isaac Rosenfeld's translation—that is said to cause the anger of Sholem Shachnah's wife. It's worthwhile to consider a range of possible reasons.

Suggested Activity: Consider both the text of Sholem Shachnah's telegram and the journey that this message makes from an unnamed city, where Sholem Shachnah makes a little money, to his home shtetl of Kasrilevka, located a considerable distance away. Sholem Shachnah is a man, moving through a world of men with whom he tries to strike real estate deals and among whom he must navigate his journey home; his spouse, however, is a woman at home, in provincial Kasrilevka, looking after the couple's children. First, consider the issue of gender and how the worlds of men, on the one hand, and of women and children, on the other, determine the opportunities (and lack thereof) for movement—including, as in Sholem Shachnah's case, the movement out of the shtetl and into the world beyond. How has Sholem Shachnah's world begun to change because of his mobility compared to his wife's? Second, why do you think Sholem Shachnah's wife gets upset at the language of certainty in which Sholem Shachnah communicates his travel plans? In what ways does the story define Sholem Shachnah as a transgressor against Jewish customs and his wife as the upholder of a traditional lifestyle and set of mores?

Source: Sholem Aleichem, "On Account of a Hat," trans. Isaac Rosenfeld in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Penguin, 1990), 117.

9: Excerpt from Sholem Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat" (1913), translated into English by Isaac Rosenfeld (1953).

The humorous mishap at the center of the story couldn't, at first glance, be more straightforward: by accident, Sholem Shachnah picks up a hat that belongs to Buttons—supposedly, an official of some sort—and is immediately transformed in the eyes of those around him from a hapless Jewish traveler into a person who is somehow believed to occupy a position of some esteem in the social hierarchy. But it's worthwhile to think about the eponymous hat—or, rather, the hats—in more detail.

Suggested Activity: First, re-read the story and note all the sentences and passages that allude to hats. There is, of course, the hat that belongs to Buttons, but it functions very differently on the head of the official as compared to on the head of Sholem Shachnah. However, that's not the only hat in the story: there is also the hat that Sholem Shachnah wears initially—which readers can fairly assume to be the traditional headcovering worn by observant Jewish men. What do you make of the switcheroo itself—the exchange of one kind of head covering for another, especially given the fact that Sholem Shachnah loses his own hat twice, both while waiting at the train station in Zolodievka and during the ride home in his dream?

Second, how do you understand what happens to Sholem Shachnah when—after being treated as though he were a Russian official of some sort and not a simple Jew because of the hat on his head—he fails to recognize himself in the mirror? Think

beyond the joke here: what can we say about Sholem Shachnah and his ability to travel through the world dominated by non-Jews that he literally stops recognizing himself the minute he begins to resemble someone who dresses differently from him? Didn't Sholem Shachnah feel entitled to be treated equally to Buttons? Why, then, does he lose his sense of self once his wish is granted?

Source: Sholem Aleichem, "On Account of a Hat," trans. Isaac Rosenfeld in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Penguin, 1990), 116-7.

10: Song and lyrics, "Train" by Anthony Russell and Veretski Pass, 2018.

A century after Sholem Aleichem published "On Account of a Hat" in the Russian Empire, the U.S. musician Anthony Russell released his album *Convergence*, which features the song "Train." Like the rest of Russell's album, "Train" ponders—musically and linguistically—what the interweaving of two distinct traditions—African American spirituals and East European Jewish poetry and song—would look like. Russell's "Train" brings together in one musical and poetic work the African American spiritual "*When the Train Comes Along*" and the song "*An ayznban*" ("A Train") by the Yiddish poet Elyokum Zunser.

Suggested Activity: Russell's "Train" renews and amplifies the questions that Sholem Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat" first asked at the turn of the twentieth century. These questions, which are explored elsewhere in this kit, include: How does the sense of time associated with modernity relate to the sense of time associated with a world centered on tradition and God? In what ways does travel outside one's home and community—especially by members of minority groups facing discrimination—put travellers at the mercy of others? Listen to Anthony Russell's "Train," following along with the lyrics, and think about how the song addresses issues of movement, migration, time, and identity today, as Sholem Aleichem's story addressed these issues in relation to his own time and place.

Source: Anthony Russell and Veretski Pass, "Train," 2018, track 2 on *Convergence*, accessed online at <https://anthonyrussellbass.bandcamp.com/track/train>, February 25, 2021.