

SOULS ARE FLYING!

A Celebration of Jewish Stories

Jewish short stories by
Sholem Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem,
I. L. Peretz, and Jacob Dinezon

Collected and retold by Scott Hilton Davis

Introduction

The stories you're about to read were written over a hundred years ago by four Jewish writers: Sholem Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, and Jacob Dinezon. Though we rarely hear their names today, these four writers were once very famous and much beloved by Jewish readers all over the world.

The reason they were so beloved was because they wrote these wonderful stories about a place we now call "The Old Country"—the tiny towns and villages of Russia and Eastern Europe, where, for many of us who are Jewish, our *alte bobes* and *zaydes*—our great grandmothers and grandfathers—were born.

They wrote about *dos Yiddishe folk*—the common Jewish people—about their conflicts and struggles, their hopes and their dreams. How they lived their lives, how they loved, and how they tried to remain faithful to their Jewish way of life. And through their stories, these four writers have left us a cultural legacy of how to live a Jewish life, of how to hold on to our Jewish values and identity in a world that seems constantly in turmoil.

Coping with a world in turmoil was a way of life for Jews living in Russia and Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. Extreme poverty, oppressive taxation, anti-Semitism, and *pogroms*—vicious attacks by peasants and government soldiers—made daily life difficult and dangerous. Many Jews moved from rural *shtetls* to urban cities to find work and pursue modern education. Jewish stories helped people stay connected to their religious roots and traditions in a rapidly changing world.

As you read these stories, don't be surprised if they seem a little old-fashioned to you. Unlike modern literature, the stories in this book tend to wander around a bit, changing directions sometimes, and often ending with a twist or punch line. Remember, these stories were written a long time ago, and are taking you on a journey to "The Old Country." Though you won't need your passport, you will need your imagination!

Now I have to tell you something: I have a special wish for these stories. I hope you will read them aloud—like a storyteller—to your family and friends. Why read them aloud? Well, for one thing, I wrote them to be performed in front of an audience.

But there's another reason: back when they were originally published over a century ago, Jewish families read stories aloud as a form of entertainment.

Of course, in those days, people didn't have the entertainment choices we have today. It would take decades before the invention of radio, television, computers, video games, smart phones, iPads, and internet streaming and downloads. People had to entertain themselves in other ways, and reading stories to each other became a very popular pastime, especially at night and on *Shabbes*—the Sabbath.

Sometimes, when Jews were too poor to buy books, they would rent them from traveling book peddlers who were required, like all Jews, to rest on the Sabbath. If a book peddler couldn't travel on *Shabbes*, he could at least make a little extra money loaning out his merchandise. This made books of short stories especially popular because reading time was limited, and because books had to be returned to the book peddler as soon as *Shabbes* was over.

Jewish literature became very popular during this period. In addition to religious works written in Hebrew, a large number of books and newspapers were published in Yiddish because, back then, Yiddish was the common language of the Jewish people.

Of course, we don't hear much Yiddish anymore, but it was once a rich and vibrant language—a language used to create a thriving and dynamic Jewish culture filled with poetry, plays, songs, and stories.

Unfortunately, time and tragedy have had a devastating effect on Yiddish and the people who spoke it. A great deal has been lost, but we are fortunate to have a number of stories by Sholem Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, and Jacob Dinezon available in English translations.

Which brings me to a word about my versions of these Jewish stories. Sadly, because I do not read or understand much Yiddish, I have based my versions on new or previously translated stories. I have adapted these stories to be performed, often working and reworking them like a tailor, adding a little here, snipping a little there, and moving things around until I had something that reflected what I believed was the author's original intent.

To justify my tampering with these great writers' stories, I comforted myself with a story by I. L. Peretz called "The Reincarnation of a Melody." In this tale, Peretz relates the journey of a Jewish song through various incarnations. The melody begins life as a joyful wedding song for an orphaned bride. A small-town musician hears it and plays it as a memorial song at a funeral. Next, it finds itself in a Yiddish theatre being played by a *klezmer* band. The melody becomes so popular that organ grinders play it on street corners. Then a blind girl hears it and uses it to beg for charity. A famous rabbi is so moved by it, he sings it as a *Shabbes* song to his followers. And at the end of the story,

the melody is redeemed when it is again played as a wedding march for an orphaned bride.

In all its incarnations, the melody never loses its essential Jewishness, its essential goodness, or its ability to touch the heart. These are the qualities I have tried to retain in these “reincarnated stories.” And these are the qualities I hope will shine through when you share these stories with your family and friends!

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