

Kids for Calves: Children Against Slaughter in Fin-de-siècle Jewish Literature

by Naama Harel

Abstract

Several canonical works of Modern Jewish literature, written in Hebrew and Yiddish at the turn of the twentieth century, distinctly depict an anti-slaughter stance. Jewish approach to animal slaughter has been largely ambivalent, from the biblical creation story in Genesis 1, where human nutrition was limited to plants only, to various restrictions on the practices of killing and consuming animals—in many cases, due to the religious obligation to care for animals (tza'ar ba'ale hayyim). In this article, I seek to critically analyze three literary works, in which the anti-slaughter stance is voiced by children protagonists: Mordecai Ze'ev Feierberg's "The Calf" ("ha-'Egel," 1899), Mendele Mocher Seforim's "The Calf" ("Dos Kelbl," 1902), and Sholem Aleichem's Motl the Cantor's Son (Motl Peyse dem khazns, 1907). These stories will be examined in the light of the religious ambivalence toward animal slaughter and contextualized within relevant socio-historical conditions.

Introduction

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Introduction

Children's special kinship with animals is often explained by the fact that the former have not been fully indoctrinated into anthropocentrism yet.¹ In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud maintains that "children show no trace of the arrogance, which urges adult civilized men to draw a hard-and-fast line between their own nature and that of all other animals. Children have no scruples over allowing animals to rank as their full equals."² The theme of child-animal bond is common throughout Western literature, depicted in classical works such as Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *The Yearling* (1938), Eric Knight's *Lassie Come-Home* (1940), and Fred Gipson's *Old Yeller* (1956), which all have famous cinematic adaptations as well. This theme also abounds in Jewish literature written in Hebrew and Yiddish at the turn of the twentieth century.³ Yet unlike typical Western narratives, the Jewish stories, which take place in pre-World War II East European provincial towns (shtetls), focus on neither pets nor wild animals, but rather distinctly revolve around animals for consumption, taking a distinct anti-slaughter stance.

Historical studies have described a growing sensitivity toward animals in the Western World since the early modern period, which also coincided with decreased daily contact between humans and animals, due to the forces of urbanization and industrialization. Slaughterhouses were relocated outside of city centers, partially for economic reasons, yet also as modern societies were no longer capable of bearing vicious scenes of slaughter.⁴ This process of separation between humans and animals did not take place among Jews

¹ Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart, *Our Children and Other Animals: The Cultural Construction of Human-Animal Relations in Childhood* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 37-54; Carmen Dell'Aversano, "The Love Whose Name Cannot Be Spoken: Queering the Human-Animal Bond," *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 8, no. 1 (2010): 73-125, 82; Anna Feuerstein and Carmen Nolte-Odhiambo, *Childhood and Pethood in Literature and Culture: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies and Animal Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2; Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 70-74.

² Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 2001), 147.

³ It is important to note that literary works, whose protagonists are children, should not necessarily be considered children's literature. The Jewish works discussed here, which are written from a child's perspective, were not written for children.

⁴ Josh Bersoff, *The Meat Question: Animals, Humans, and the Deep History of Food* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019); Sarah Cockram and Andrew Wells, eds., *Interspecies Interactions: Animals and Humans between the Middle Ages and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Paula Young Lee, ed., *Meat, Modernity, and the Rise of the Slaughterhouse* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2008).

in the shtetls. Due to the requirements of Jewish ritual slaughter, Jews typically kept animals for consumption—and did not have pets—in their homes, and raised them until their slaughter. Such distinct material interspecies relations at the turn of the twentieth century certainly contributed to the unusual literary focus on animals for consumption and their slaughter.

This anti-slaughter stance among *fin-de-siècle* Eastern European Jews was also greatly inspired by Tolstoyan beliefs, associated with the politics of social justice and pacifism.⁵ Moreover, the traditional Jewish approach to animal slaughter is largely ambivalent. In this article I seek to address the Jewish ambivalence towards slaughter and the consumption of animals, and analyze the child-calf relations in three stories, which echo this ambivalence: Mordecai Ze'ev Feiberger's "The Calf" ("ha-'Egel," 1899), Mendele Mocher Seforim's "The Calf" ("Dos Kelbl," 1902), and Sholem Aleichem's *Motl the Cantor's Son* (*Motl Peyse dem khazns*, 1907).⁶

Jewish Ambivalence towards Animal Slaughter

Although animal slaughter and the consumption of their meat is permitted in Judaism, ambivalence about these practices is ubiquitous throughout the Jewish tradition.⁷ This

⁵ Rafi Tsirkin-Sadan, "Tolstoy, Zionism and the Hebrew Culture," *Tolstoy Studies Journal* 24 (2012): 26-35; Jennifer Wilson, "The Revolution Will Not Be Consummated: The Politics of Tolstoyan Chastity in the West," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 60, no. 3 (2016): 494-511.

⁶ The *talush* (uprooted), which is a significant figure in *fin-de-siècle* Hebrew prose of a young Jewish man searching for his place in modern Europe, is in many cases a vegetarian that holds an anti-slaughter stance. Such works include Micha Josef Berdichevsky's "Two Camps" ("Mahanayim," 1899-1900), Uri Nissan Gnessin's "Sideways" ("ha-Tzidah," 1905), Yosef Haim's Brenner's *In Winter* (*Ba-horef*, 1903) and "One Year," ("Shanah ahat," 1908), Devorah Baron's "The End of Sender Ziv" ("Kitzo shel Sender Ziv," 1919), and Shmuel Yosef Agnon's "Hill of Sand" ("Giv'at ha-hol," 1919). Nevertheless, *talush* narratives are not included in this analysis, since their protagonists are not children, and their anti-slaughter stance is not driven from Judaism.

⁷ Anat Ben-Yonatan, "'Yesterday You Slaughtered Animals, Today You Pity Them': Ambivalence and Resolution Among Jewish Israeli Slaughterers," *Anthrozoös* 35, no. 3 (2022): 355-370; Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "Meat-Eating and Jewish Identity: Ritualization of the Priestly 'Torah of Beast and Fowl' (Lev 11: 46) in Rabbinic Judaism and Medieval Kabbalah," *AJS Review* 24, no. 2 (1999): 227-262; Geoffrey D. Claussen, "Musar and Jewish Veganism," in *Jewish Veganism and Vegetarianism: Studies and New Directions*, eds. Jacob Ari Labendz and Shmuly Yanklowitz (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019), 195-216; Aaron S. Gross, "Jewish Animal Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, eds. Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K. Crane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 419-432; Yael Shemesh, "Vegetarian Ideology

ambivalence harks back to the biblical creation story. Interestingly, while humans are granted dominion over all other animals, their nutrition is solely restricted to plants: “And God said: ‘Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed—to you it shall be for food’” (Genesis 1:29). Various commentators from antiquity onward conclude from this verse that eating meat is forbidden. A Talmudic passage states that, “It is derived God told Adam: Eating vegetation is permitted, but eating the animals of the earth is not permitted to you (Sanhedrin 59b). Rashi, the foremost bible commentator of the eleventh century, likewise stresses what God’s first dietary law does not allow: “God did not permit Adam and his wife to kill a creature and to eat its flesh” (Rashi on Genesis 1:29).

Animal slaughter and meat eating have been permitted, according to the Hebrew bible, only after the Flood. Several eminent commentators have regarded this permission as a divine compromise. In his classic work on the fundamentals of Judaism, Joseph Albo, the fifteenth century Jewish philosopher, ponders why eating meat was permitted after the Flood, although “in the killing of animals there is cruelty, rage, and the accustoming oneself to the bad habit of shedding innocent blood.” He then suggests: “the animals that were permitted were merely a concession to human lust and desire, in the same way as the Israelites were permitted women taken in war” (*Sefer ha-Iqqarim* 3:15). This view has received significant religious endorsement from Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, who argues in *Li-Nevukhe ha-dor* (*For the Perplexed of the Generation*):

Let us hold up, for example, the ethical yearning of not killing any living thing for human purposes. It’s impossible to deny something that is sensed by any feeling heart, that there is a general ethical deficiency in the human species that it fails to uphold the good and lofty feeling that it is wrong to take the life of any life for its own needs. And it’s completely impossible that the good God would make an everlasting law in a very good creation dictating that the human species could not sustain itself unless it clouds its ethical feelings by spilling blood, even the blood of animals [...] However, after the generation of the flood, where meat was allowed to be eaten, it certainly wasn’t meant to remain that way forever, for how can there be an ethical situation that changes and becomes nullified after it had already been the way to act? We are to increase holiness, not decrease it!

in Talmudic Literature and Traditional Biblical Exegesis,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 9 (2006): 141-166; Barry L. Stiefel, “Yes, but is It Kosher?: Varying Religio-Cultural Perspectives on Judaism and Veganism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Vegan Studies*, ed. Laura Wright (New York: Routledge, 2021), 194-204.

Rather, the Divine Intellect saw that man had fallen from his ethical state, and until the time comes of recognition and awakening of true ethics, we cannot burden man with an ethical level that does not accord with his value system.⁸

Furthermore, the permission given to Noah to consume meat was not unconditional; there was an immediate prohibition against consuming blood, since blood was associated with the *nefesh*, the animal soul (Genesis 9:4). In addition, various Mosaic laws protect animals not only from physical pain, but also from emotional suffering. In fact, the key term used in Judaism for the obligation to care for animals—*tza'ar ba'ale hayyim*—literally means “animal sorrow.” Maimonides, the greatest medieval Jewish thinker, explains a series of prohibitions regarding slaughter and meat consumption vis-à-vis the commandment to avoid *tza'ar ba'ale hayyim*:

He also forbade slaughtering an animal and its young on the same day, to take care to avoid slaughtering the young before its mother's eyes, for the distress caused thereby to animals is great; there is no difference between the distress felt by human beings and the distress of other creatures, for a mother's love and compassion for the fruit of her womb is not guided by the intellect but by the power of imagination, which exists equally in most animals as in humans. (*Guide for the Perplexed* III:48)

The notion of *tza'ar ba'ale hayyim* was later defined and broadened by the rabbis of the Talmud, which is exemplified in the following Talmudic teaching:

A calf that was being led to slaughter went and hung its head on the corner of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi's garment and was weeping, and the Rabbi said to him: “Go, as you were created for this purpose.” It was said in Heaven: “Since he was not compassionate toward the calf, let afflictions come upon him.” One day, his maid was sweeping the house. There were newly-born rats lying about, and she was about to sweep them out. The Rabbi told her: “Let them be, as it is written: “The Lord is good to all; and His mercies are over all His works” (Psalms 145:9).

⁸ Abraham Isaac Kook, 2014. *Li-nevukhe ha-dor: ha-mekhuneh Moreh nevokhim he-hadash* (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot ahronot, Sifre Hemed, 2014), 65. Sefaria Community Translation. Alongside viewing the permission to eat meat as a moral compromise, it has been also considered as a temporary ecological necessity, since the Flood devastated the flora. See, for example, Isaac Abravanel on Genesis 9:3.

They said in Heaven: Since he was compassionate, we shall be compassionate on him, and he was relieved of his suffering. (Bava Metzia 85a)

Feierberg's Calf

Mordecai Ze'ev Feierberg (1871-1899), a prominent writer of Hebrew Revival Literature (*sifrut ha-tehiyyah*), was born in the Ukraine as the son of a Jewish ritual slaughterer (*Shohet*). Feierberg's father was interested in teaching his trade to his son, who could not handle the cruelty involved in slaughtering animals,⁹ as he later described in one of his prominent short stories, "The Calf," written from the perspective of a nine-year-old Jewish boy named Hofni. The boy is strongly attached to the beautiful calf that the family cow gave birth to, and thus is outraged to realize that his mother plans to slaughter the calf and roast him for Shabbat.

Despite the fact that the story entirely focuses on the child's loving feelings for the calf and resistance to his killing, as well as the clear autobiographical context, critics have tended to read the anti-slaughter theme as a mere vehicle to other concepts, which allegedly stand at the core of the story and have nothing to do with compassion for animals, such as the dismal fate of Jewish children in the diaspora,¹⁰ or—more broadly—pure life and its arbitrary suffering.¹¹ Moreover, some critics have even argued that the story, which concludes with the slaughter of the calf, actually takes the pro-slaughter position, represented by Hofni's mother.¹²

Alternatively, I seek to read Feierberg's "The Calf" as a groundbreaking anti-slaughter narrative, criticizing human dominion over animals, notably in Jewish society. A foreshadow to this concept is found in an early stage of the story, when Hofni depicts the streets of the small Jewish town, in which he and his classmates rush to the synagogue for the afternoon and evening prayers, sharing the road with numerous farm animals:

⁹ Joseph Klausner, *Yotzrim u-bonim: ma'amare biqoret*, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1929), II: 179.

¹⁰ Aharon Ben-Or, *Toldot ha-sifrut ha-'ivrit ha-hadashah*, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv: Hotsaat Yizrael, 1946), II: 140. Rachel Katzenelson-Shazar, *Masot ve-reshimot* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1947), 87.

¹¹ Baruch Kurzweil, *Sifrutenu ha-hadashah: hemshekh o mahapekhah?* (Jerusalem: Shoken, 1965), 164. Alan Mintz, "Mordecai Zev Feierberg and the Reveries of Redemption," *AJS Review* 2 (1977): 171-199.

¹² Aviad Kleinberg, *'Al ahavat em ve-'al mora av: mabat aher 'al ha-mishpahah* (Tel Aviv: Keter, 2004), 147-148. Samuel Werses, *Mi-Mendele 'ad Hazaz: sugiyot be-hitpathut ha-sipporet ha-'ivrit* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987), 123.

Here someone stealing a ride on a billy goat's back and there on a she-goat's, while yet someone else terrorized the animals by stampeding them wildly to let them know he was a man, a scion of that heroic race whose dominion was one with the world. Suddenly, at the herd's edge, I spied our own cow coming towards me by the side of a herdsman, who was carrying a lovely little calf on his shoulder.¹³

Hofni witnesses his classmates' cruelty to animals, when he sees the newborn calf for the first time. The lovely calf was born to this very world, where such power dynamics are at play. Upon spotting the calf, the narrator says: "I wanted desperately to run after him, to throw myself ardently on the calf and kiss him with the kisses of my mouth with love."¹⁴ The boy's first reaction to the newborn calf alludes to Song of Songs 1:2, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," connecting the protagonist and the calf with the strongest love expression in Jewish tradition.

Young Hofni, however, has to restrain his urges, and keep distance from the calf, due to societal norms and restrictions: "But what can I do? What about the rabbi and the afternoon prayer? And what would my mother say if she were to see her son the Talmud student giving in to such unworthy impulses?"¹⁵ In his grand historiography of modern Hebrew literature, Gershon Shaked argues that in Feierberg's writings the Jewish world stands in opposition to the world of nature.¹⁶ This opposition is manifested here, as Hofni draws a clear-cut distinction between two spheres; the Jewish sphere, to which belong his rabbi and mother, prayers, the Talmud, and the synagogue, and the sphere of nature, to which the calf and the feelings the calf evokes in him belong. Hofni defines his attraction to the calf as "unworthy impulses," which seems to reflect his mother's perspective rather than his own.

Reluctantly, yet only temporarily, he chooses the Jewish sphere over the calf: "and so I had no choice but to force myself to go to the synagogue to pray."¹⁷ As soon as the service was over, Hofni rushed home: "I ran impatiently to the barn, where I knelt before the calf on my knees and ran both hands over his limbs."¹⁸ In contrast to his classmates, who have ridden over the farm animals on their way to the synagogue, he falls on his knees before this one and takes him in his arms. Hofni's compassionate approach is highlighted against

¹³ Mordecai Ze'ev Feierberg, *Whither? & Other Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2004), 32.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gershon Shaked, *Ha-Sipporet ha-Yvrit, 1880-1980*, 5 vols. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1977), I: 208.

¹⁷ Feierberg, *Whither? & Other Stories*, 32.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the background of typical behavioral codes in his community. "I fell madly, proudly in love with the pretty calf and pledged myself heart and soul to love him and to repay his love with my own love."¹⁹

The Hebrew word *ahavah*, which means love, is repeated several times in this sentence, underscoring Hofni's feelings to the calf. The word *ahavah* also appears in the next sentence, when Hofni's mother tells his father that the calf is about to be slaughtered next week in order to be roasted and served for the Shabbat, just the way he loves it. Hofni's love for the calf is thus ironically confronted with his parents' love for the calf's meat. Truly shocked, Hofni asks his mother if she really intends to kill the pretty calf, and she scornfully replies: "People would laugh at you if you talk that way in front of them."²⁰ Consequently, poor Hofni does not talk about this issue, but no longer restrains himself from expressing his intense feelings for the calf:

When I returned from the kitchen to visit my calf, my pride and my joy, and saw him lift his eyes to me as though suing for mercy, I burst into tears. I threw myself on him passionately and stroked his sides while the hot tears trickled down my throat. The more I kissed him, the harder I cried.²¹

Hofni also cannot stop thinking. He portrays his thoughts as the voice of a little bird that hatched in his head. The little animal within his head further connects the little boy with the little calf:

Why was such a calf even made? To be slaughtered? But what for? Why slaughter a sweet little calf? And if he really was made to be slaughtered, why was he made so pretty? Wouldn't it have been enough if he had been born just a piece of meat inside a leather bag? Why does your mother want to kill him? Who gave her the right to kill such a pretty calf?"²²

In his dream that night, he sees the calf bound (*'aqud*), and the slaughterer's knife spills his blood. This nightmarish scene alludes to the biblical story of the binding of Isaac (*'aqedah*). While in the biblical story the horrific sacrifice of Isaac is prevented by sacrificing an animal instead, in Hofni's dream the very sacrifice of the animal is itself the horrific act.

¹⁹ Ibid., 33.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

The next evening, Hofni finds the slaughterer talking figures with his mother. Obeying his mother, the child says nothing, but instead holds an internal monologue, constructed as a series of questions that are not to be answered:

Was I really such a fool, I wondered? But why? Who said that I mustn't have pity on the pretty calf? My mother? But I'd heard her say more than once that we were commanded to be merciful to animals and not treat them cruelly! Not treat them cruelly—but slaughter them? Be merciful—and slaughter them? So she said, but who said she was right? Could she be wrong then? Could mothers be wrong too? Dear God, my mother and the calf are both in Your hands—why did You make the calf live and make my mother want to kill him? God! Why should this calf, that You created perfect in all his parts so he should be able to live for years on the face of Your earth, have to be slaughtered?²³

This series of questions delves into the inconsistency in Judaism's treatment of animals—banning cruelty to animals, but allowing their slaughter, which inevitably involves cruelty.

At some points, Hofni's theological quest exposes a family tragedy: “and what about my little brother who died when he was eight days old?”²⁴ The child's questions shift from the forthcoming death of the little calf to the death of his little brother, connecting these two death events, and also presenting the calf as analogous to Hofni's little brother. And, indeed, the calf is about to be killed on his eighth day,²⁵ just like Hofni's little brother. Moreover, in the original Hebrew, this sentence ends with a question: *ve-ani anah ani ba?* (and as for me, whither shall I go?), which is a clear biblical allusion to the words of Joseph's eldest brother Reuben. In the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers, Reuben persuades his brothers not to kill Joseph. Later, thinking that Joseph is dead, Reuben rends his clothes and says to his brothers: “the child is not; and as for me, whither shall I go?” (Genesis 37: 30). Quoting biblical Reuben, Hofni expresses his brotherly love for the calf, whom he regards as his little brother, as well as his wish to save him.

Alas, Hofni could not save the calf. His last thought, before concluding the story with the report that the calf was slaughtered, was whether he should consult with the rabbi about this issue, a thought he raises and immediately dismisses: “No. I wouldn't even ask him. He would just laugh at me like my mother and call me a fool.”²⁶ This closing thought

²³ Ibid., 34.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 35.

²⁶ Ibid., 36.

emphasizes that the conflict over the calf's slaughter is not solely determined by the generational gap between a child and his mother. It rather indicates that albeit the child's anti-slaughter stance stems from the very Jewish thought, it is not accepted by the Jewish community and its leadership.

Abramovitsh's Calf

Three years after the publication of Feilerberg's "The Calf," Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1836-1917) published a short story in Yiddish with the same title, "The Calf." Abramovitsh, better known by his pseudonym Mendele Mocher Seforim (Mendele the Book Peddler), is widely considered the founder of modern Jewish literature. His deep engagement with the natural world has been long recognized by various scholars of modern Jewish literature,²⁷ and the centrality of the theme of compassion for animals in his oeuvre has been also acknowledged by several critics.²⁸

Abramovitsh's short story "The Calf" is narrated from the perspective of a Jewish youngster, who is deeply attached to a calf. It starts, like Feilerberg's story, with the protagonist's excitement when a calf is born in his home. Similarly to Hofni, he also lovingly bonds with the calf and is likewise shocked into realizing that his mother plans to slaughter the calf:

²⁷ David Aberbach, *Realism, Caricature, and Bias: The Fiction of Mendele Mocher Sefarim* (Washington DC: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), 77-79; Joseph Klausner, *History of Modern Hebrew Literature (1785-1930)*, trans. Herbert Danby (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 133; Benny Mer, "Aharit davar: tevat Mendele," in *Massa'ot Binyamin ha-shelishi va-aherim*, ed. Benny Mer (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 2007), 266-268; Dan Miron, *Ben hazon le-emet: nitzane ha-roman ha-'Ivri ve-ha-Yiddish ba-me'ah ha-tesha'-'esreh* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1979), 305-322; Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 136-137; Gidi Nevo, "Kama hirhurim 'al ha-tev'a bi-yetzirato shel Abramovitsh," *Mehkere Yerushalayim be-sifrut 'Ivrit* 18 (2001): 163-185; Theodore L. Steinberg, *Mendele Mocher Sefarim* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 115.

²⁸ Aberbach, *Realism, Caricature, and Bias*, 6; Klausner, *History of Modern Hebrew Literature*, 424; Noam Pines, "A Radical Advocacy: Suffering Jews and Animals in SY Abramovitsh's *Di Kliatshe*," *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 24-47. Gershon Shaked has closely analyzed Abramovitsh's representations of animals, but focused merely on their symbolic function. See Gershon Shaked, *Ben tzhog le-le-dim'ah: 'iyyunim bi-yetzirato shel Mendele Mokher Sefarim* (Tel Aviv: Masadah, 1974), 46-56.

My love for the calf grew stronger every day, and so at the same time did my anguish about his fate. For my childish heart would pound with terror, overhearing talk about slaughtering the calf and bargaining with the butcher. The animal stood and looked at us so innocently, and licked my mother's hand so tenderly, while she was estimating the value of the tongue which licked her. It felt, really, like a murder.²⁹

Killing the calf is described here with the word “murder” (*retzifah*, in the original text),³⁰ which is typically applied to humans only. This choice of word indicates that the protagonist regards the calf as his peer, as someone and not something. “Torn in two directions,” he adds, “I was ashamed to look either at the calf or my mother—forgive me for the comparison—in the eye.”³¹ The boy has already likened the calf to a human by applying the concept of murder to the calf, and now he equates the calf with his own mother. He is torn between these two directions, namely the calf's direction and his mom's direction. Here too, the protagonist's mother stands for the entire Jewish community and world, which is contrasted with the world wherein the calf belongs.

Noteworthy, a decade after the Yiddish publication of “The Calf,” Abramovitch reworked the story into Hebrew, thickening the original text with religious references and overtones, and also gendering the calf from scratch as female. When depicting the rift between his mother and the calf, the protagonist adds: “I try with all my might to divert the calf from my heart [...] she should die, as she was created for this purpose.”³² While this thought seems to religiously justify the calf's slaughter, it echoes the Talmudic teaching of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi and the calf that was cited earlier, which actually challenges this very thought.

The unexpected death of the cow saves her calf from slaughter, allowing the friendship between the young protagonist and the calf to grow deeper. In the Hebrew edition of the story, the protagonist's experience with the calf raises further questions. He ponders over the relationship between man and beast, both flesh and blood made from one material, whether they all have the same breath.³³ The words “they all have the same breath” (*ruah ehad la-kol*) in this context clearly refer to the following biblical verse, which analogizes humans and other animals, refuting human advantage over animals: “For the fate of the

²⁹ Mendele Mocher Sefarim, “The Calf,” trans. Arthur C. Jacobs, *The Jewish Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1960): 34-39, 35.

³⁰ Mendele Mocher Sefarim, *Dos Kelbl* (Warsaw: Ferlag Kultur-lige, 1926), 11.

³¹ Mendele, “The Calf,” 35.

³² Mendele Mokher Sefarim, *Kol kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1966), 124.

³³ Mendele, *Kol kitve*, 126.

sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

When the protagonist is out of school, he spends most of his time in nature, with the beloved calf:

For both of us a new world opened up, a world which was bright and attractive and free, and which neither I shut up in the *cheder* nor the calf in its shed had before now experienced [...] Everything was alive and full of spirit [...] All kinds of birds, bees and grasshoppers flew and leapt high into the sky and happily among the grass were singing, humming and chirping. There was music to be heard, there were scents to be savoured and all varieties of the colours of flowers glittered before my eyes. Everything breathes so freely and easily.³⁴

Just as the protagonist’s mother signifies the Jewish world, the calf represents the natural world. Like in Feierberg’s story, and contrary to gender stereotypes, the mother here also epitomizes the anti-compassionate stance. When the protagonist absentmindedly hums a synagogue melody, while roaming in the fields with his bovine friend, “the calf looked at me and mooed as though its meaning were, ‘Stop! What’s the matter with you?’”³⁵ The young Jew anthropomorphizes the calf, grants her with the common societal perspective, according to which these two worlds—the Jewish world and the natural world—are in opposition, and cannot be incorporated.

This common societal perspective is later critically thrown at him by his family. “What are the fields and your woods making of you?”, his family worryingly wonders, and their conclusion is: “there is only one way for you to become a proper Jew, and that’s to go to the *yeshivah*.”³⁶ The nature-*yeshivah* binary is, however, viewed differently by the protagonist: “I was really sorry to be separated from the calf, and from the piece of God’s world, which had fitted me with a new spirit.”³⁷ Ironically, he identifies the natural world—and not the Jewish world, embodied here in the *yeshivah*—with God’s world.

The abundance of nature stands in stark disparity to the scarcity of the *yeshivah* life. When visiting home, the protagonist contrasts the fine and strong body of the calf with his own “wasted, starved body, with my ashen *yeshivah* student’s face.”³⁸ After being back in the

³⁴ Mendele, “The Calf,” 37.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 38.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

yeshivah, he learns from his mother's letter that the calf has calved herself and became a full cow. "She doesn't want to be milked, but throws herself about and cries after her calf," she complains to her son. "Have you ever heard of such a thing, a cow which can't forget her calf? It's like a human mother and her child."³⁹ While the mother compares cow-calf and mother-child relations as an absurd idea, this comparison is not only valid, but also anchored in Jewish thought, as quoted before from Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*. While reading his mother's letter, the protagonist faints, but cannot share his pain with his friends:

How could I tell them I was miserable over a calf? How could I say I had fainted out of my feeling for a cow, an animal with whom I had been fated to spend my happiest hours, looking at and enjoying the pleasure of God's word. And how to say my blood rushed with pity for the mother whose child had been slaughtered.⁴⁰

Consequently, the troubled *yeshivah* boy begins to hallucinate:

It was fearful. The young calf tore itself out of the butcher's hands, and ran crying, with the butcher after it. Knowing she was about to be slaughtered, and so struggling for life, the calf went wild with fright, then hid under someone's skirts, gasping and crying, as if pleading 'Help!'⁴¹

His mother's account of the cow and her calf is interwoven here with the Talmudic story of Yehudah ha-Nasi and the calf. He seems to experience a mental breakdown, and the story concludes on the day he is taken to the hospital, and a new letter from his mother informs that she lost her financial backing as the cow is dead. This tragic closure, which analogizes the dismal fate of humans and animals, echoes the words of Ecclesiastes, "For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same" (3:19).

Sholem Aleichem's Calf

Compassion for animals is a leitmotif in the writing of Sholem Aleichem, the pen name of Sholem Rabinovich (1859-1916), who is the most well-known writer of Yiddish

³⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

literature. His short piece “Pity for Living Creatures” (“Tsa’er ba’ele khayim,” 1903) focuses entirely on this theme. It specifies many cases of cruelty to animals, narrated by a compassionate Jewish boy, who vainly tries to protect these victimized animals. Here, too, the young protagonist draws his humane values from the Jewish tradition and his Jewish education, yet ironically his Jewish community is utterly indifferent to animal suffering. Viewing a poor little carp that is about to be killed and served for Shabbat, as if begging for his life, he tells his mother:

“It’s a pity,” I said to my mother, “a pity for this living creature.”

“A pity for which living creature?”

“For this little fish.”

“Who put this idea in your head?”

“The rebbe.”

“You’re a fool and your rebbe is an even bigger one!”⁴²

Later, after watching his friend’s father, who is a Jewish ritual slaughterer, he tells his friend:

“your father’s a *goy!*”

“Why is he a *goy?*”

“Because he doesn’t have pity for living creatures.”

“I never knew you were such a sage,” his friend replied, giving him the finger right under his nose.⁴³

Finally, when the protagonist realizes that he is the only one in his community that cares for animals, he wonders about the gap between the compassionate treatment of animal in Judaism and the cruel treatment of animals within the actual Jewish world:

Didn’t the rebbe himself tell me God loves all His creatures? One shouldn’t even annoy a fly on the wall, he declared, because of the precept of pity for living creatures. One Shouldn’t kill even a harmful spider. For when the hour of death comes, the rebbe explained, God Himself will take its life. Well and good. But the problem remained. Why were oxen, calves, sheep and fowl killed every day?⁴⁴

⁴² Sholem Aleichem, *Some Laughter, Some Tears: Tales from the Old World and the New*, trans. Curt Leviant (New York: Putnam, 1968), 101.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

Whereas in “Pity for Living Creatures” the young protagonist is attached to various kinds of animals, in Sholem Aleichem’s last novel, *Motl the Cantor’s Son* (*Motl Peysi dem hazns*, 1907), the young protagonist—like the young protagonists in the calves’ stories of Feierberg and Mendele—builds bonds and affection with a calf. The novel deals with the world of a poor Jewish boy, first in Eastern Europe and then in America, through his own eyes. The novel opens with the following monologue:

I’ll bet you whatever you want that no one on earth is as happy with the warm sunny days after Passover as I, Peysi the cantor’s son Motl, and the neighbor’s calf Meni. Both of us feel the first rays of the warm sun on the first day after Passover, both of us breathe in the fragrance of the first green blades of grass sprouting up from the newly thawed earth, and both of us crawl out of our dark, cramped corners to welcome the first sweet light of the warm spring morning. I, Peysi the cantor’s son Motl, emerge from a cold, damp cellar that reeks of sour-dough and medicines; and Meni, the neighbor’s calf, is let out of a worse-smelling spot—a tiny, dark, revolting, mud-covered stall with crooked, peeling walls through which the snow blows in wintertime and the rain whips in summertime. Escaping into God’s bright, open world, Meni and I are filled with joy and gratitude to Nature.⁴⁵

While his father is dying, and his mother and older brothers neglect him, Motl finds comfort in playing with Meni, the neighbors’ calf, whose name is a nickname for Menahem, which means “comforting.” One day Motl is looking for Meni, and Pessi, the neighbor, says she sold it to the butcher, since she had no other choice. “It’s enough that we have to feed one dumb animal—we can’t manage two!”⁴⁶ Motl’s reaction to this news is: “Now the calf has become a dumb animal to her? A strange woman, this Pessi [...] And Pessi the neighbor talks a long time to my mother while my heart aches for the logs, the little calf—oh, the little calf! If I weren’t embarrassed, I’d burst out crying.”⁴⁷

Alongside the emotional loss that Motl experiences, the loss of Meni also brings the young boy into existential thoughts:

It’s just too bad that Meni our neighbor’s calf isn’t here! He’s no longer a calf, but now a dumb animal, as our neighbor Pessi says. What does that mean? And

⁴⁵ Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor’s Son*, trans. Aliza Shevrin (New York: Penguin, 2009), 171.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

why did they sell him to the butcher? Could it be to slaughter him? Was he born only to be slaughtered? Anyway, why is a calf born, and why is a person born?⁴⁸

This series of questions, that are not to be answered, is interrupted by the cry of Motl's mother, as it turns out that his father has just passed away. Meni is not, however, equivalent to Motl's father; as Dan Miron notes in his introduction to the novel, the analogy is clearly between Motl himself and his only friend, Meni the calf. Like the poor little animal, the little Jewish orphan also cannot be supported by his impoverished family.⁴⁹ As in Feierberg and Mendele's calves tales, here too, the shared vulnerability of Jewish boy and the calf connects them in the fictional world, as well as in the interpretative accounts thereof, inasmuch as the calves are perceived as the Jewish boys' literary doppelgangers.

Naama Harel is a Senior Lecturer at Columbia University's Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies and the co-chair of Columbia University Seminar of Human-Animal Studies. She holds a PhD in Hebrew and Comparative Literature from the University of Haifa, and her scholarly interests center on human-animal relations in Modern Jewish literature. She has published widely on related themes, including her book *Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier* with University of Michigan Press, 2020.

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⁴⁸ Ibid., 182.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 31-32.