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Senior Seminar: Journals of Exploration

The topic of home and homelessness has always fascinated me. I have moved too many times to count in my life and somehow, through every single move, I was unable to find a home. I searched and searched to no avail. For my admissions essay to JTS, I discussed my struggles of trying to find where I belong in the world—am I Jewish or Israeli or a combination or just an anomaly with no real home? So when I found out that this senior seminar would be based on home and homelessness and that for the final project we could do a creative project, I got excited. Finally, I had my chance to find the answers to the questions I raised in my admissions essay.

My main point of inspiration was a web series and basic format called *Mortified*<sup>1</sup>. *Mortified*'s basic goal is to get people to go on stage and share their embarrassing childhood and adolescent moments. There are many formats to view the *Mortified* experience, including a web series that can be found on YouTube, a slew of live club shows where anyone can go up and read or perform something from their past, and a movie. I liked how *Mortified* allows people to connect to their past. By sharing their embarrassing diary entries on stage, the performers are able to enjoy their youthful spirit and let go of the past. It is almost a cathartic ritual. Part self-shaming, part self-embracing, the *Mortified* experience seemed like the perfect way to dig up my old memories and random essays to create a cohesive understanding of my perception of home.

Because *Mortified* is mainly based off journal entries, I was inspired to create a journal of my path toward this incredible discovery of home. I like the idea of a journal because a journal is fluid and honest. I don't have to pretend to be someone else—even if I am writing under the

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<sup>1</sup> Mortified Media Inc., "Mortified Angst Written," Mortified, 2010, Web, October 14, 2013.

pseudonym “juju.” I also liked the fact that each journal entry is autonomous. The views expressed in one does not need to match the views in another. There is a type of fluidity about the structure, which allows one to put pen to paper and see what happens. If I contradict what I have said before that’s ok, because the journal is supposed to reflect a process, not an argument. So as my view changed throughout the course, I was able to convey it in the journal entries. The journal format not only allowed me the most flexibility, but also truly let me flush out my ideas in writing. Each entry is based on a specific short story that I felt had an intriguing understanding of home, where I not only discuss how I relate to the story, but also try to delve further into the story itself and extract a new idea of what home is.

My major, Modern Jewish Studies, allowed me a wide range of sources to choose from. I decided to choose five of my favorite short stories that I have read over the years at JTS to base my journal around. I choose three stories by S.Y. Agnon: *Agunot*, *The Tale of the Scribe*, and *The Lady and the Peddler*, as well as two stories by Sholem Aleichem: *Baranovich Station* and *The Man from Buenos Aires*. I felt that each of the stories discussed home in a new and interesting way. I wanted to explore the stories and relate them to my life in order to broaden my understanding of home. I felt that if I analyzed each story, really researched each one and wrote a journal entry around the text, I would be able to find a definition of home that I would be comfortable with.

For every story, I delved headfirst into researching all that I could about it. While some had a wealth of information, some were standalone. I also looked into the biography of each author in order to understand more about the stories they wrote. Sholem Aleichem, whose given name was Solomon Rabinovitsh, worked and published under the guise of his persona, Sholem Aleichem. As he stated, “Four hours out of every day Solomon Rabinovitsh, praise God, is a

doer, a *dreyer*, a sometimes crackerjack, at the stock exchange. But from 5PM until 3 to 4AM I am ‘Sholem Aleichem.’”<sup>2</sup> Influenced by contemporary writers and classics of the day, Sholem Aleichem inspired an entire era of modern Yiddish writers. Eventually, Sholem Aleichem moved to America after the pogroms in Eastern Europe started to take over the nation. Although mainly known for his Tevye stories, Sholem Aleichem also left behind an impressive array of short stories known as the *Railroad Stories*. These stories are taken from the perspective of a traveling salesman who encounters various characters during his train travels. The *Railroad Stories* are diverse in content and style, creating an ultimate collection of stories for the ages: “...in 1934 Max Erik, one of the chief Yiddish scholars in the Soviet Union, declared: ‘The writings of the traveling salesman (the ‘Railroad Stories’) should be counted among Sholem Aleichem’s best creations.’”<sup>3</sup> One of the interesting characteristics of the *Railroad Stories* is the fact that they are based around the railroad:

The content of the stories, like the structure of the modernist narrative and meta-epistemology of the railway system, is determined by the contingency of connectivity. That is to say, not only are the specific stories determined by the comings and goings, arrivals and departures of the train, but the entire collection of *Railroad Stories* is also organized by the possibility of linkages within an always moving system.<sup>4</sup>

The train offers the writer the ability to not only move from place to place, but also create communities and meet fellow modern Jews along the way. The *Railroad Stories* allow for the modern to converge with the traditional. Sholem Aleichem gets to explore the white slave trade in Argentina while also retelling a traditional story of the great grandfather of a Jew from Kaminka. Sholem Aleichem was able to capture the modern Jewish imagination in these short poignant stories, two of which—*Baranovich Station* and *The Man from Buenos Aires*—I explore

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<sup>2</sup> Roskies, David G, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1996, 148.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000, 264.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Presner, *Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Trains*, Columbia University Press, 2013, 109.

in the journal entries. Sholem Aleichem's home varied, but it seems that he believed that home was in modernity, not traditionalism. The train in his series represents the new Jew, the free Jew who can move around and is not limited by the constraints of the past. His home was in the future.

On the other hand, S.Y. Agnon's home was set in the traditional past. S.Y. Agnon was born in Eastern Europe as Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes and was lucky to be educated in both traditional Jewish studies and liberal arts subjects. In 1908, when he was nineteen, he moved to Israel and published his first short story, *Agunot*.<sup>5</sup> Although he left Israel for Germany where he met his wife and established his family, he returned to Israel in 1924:

Today it is quite clear that Agnon's precipitate but final decision to get out of Germany in July 1924 took shape almost incidentally after a fire broke out in his home in Bad Homburg had completely destroyed his rich library and all his manuscripts. This highly traumatic event was interpreted by Agnon as an omen of even a punishment for his long stay in *galut* (after having made *aliyyah*) and pushed him to go back to Eres Yisra'el.<sup>6</sup>

Upon his return, Agnon returned to Orthodox Judaism and claimed that he learned to write the way he did by the vast Jewish texts—although this is clearly ludicrous. This need to return to Israel and to proper Judaism is reflected in his stories. In the stories I chose to write journal entries for, the narrator is always pushing for the audience to understand the importance of proper Judaism. In *The Tale of the Scribe*, the narrator shows the importance of creating family and fulfilling God's commandments, but not to take it to the extreme. In *The Lady and the Peddler*, the narrator shows the circular nature of life and the importance of traditions and religion, and the fact that they are permanent. And finally, in *Agunot*, Agnon stresses the importance of Israel and the love of God and Israel that must be restored for the satisfaction of all. Agnon emphasized the importance of Israel and criticized the Diaspora in many of his

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<sup>5</sup> S.Y. Agnon, *A Book that was Lost and Other Stories*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Laor, *Agnon in Germany: 1912-1924: A Chapter of a Biography*, AJS Review 18 1993, 76

writings—specifically *Agunot*—because he felt betrayed by the *galut*, or Jewish exile, and believed that Israel was the true answer. His life and his home of Israel are clearly reflected in his stories.

Through the journal writing process, I was able to sort out my own thoughts and come to a basic understanding of what I think home means. The writing process was cathartic and incredibly insightful. In addition to understanding what I think home is, I was able to explore what the collective Jewish community of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries believed home was. Attached is a list of all sources consulted for this project.

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