

Shylock, Friends and Foes: Antisemitism and Philosemitism in English Culture

Avraham Oz

Decades of contending with the text of *The Merchant of Venice*, comprising academic writing, teaching and translating the text, culminated recently in my own stage adaptation of the play.

My production, in the Alfa Theatre in Tel Aviv, is set in 1516, the year the Jewish Ghetto in Venice, the first of its kind in the world, was inaugurated, opens with a caravan of Jewish refugees wandering from the Iberian Peninsula on the ways of Europe. It is an image that corresponds both to the myth of the "wandering Jew," rampant in the popular imagination at the time (and later to be compared to the rootless or artist in general) and to the acute image of displaced refugees in today's Europe.

This opening procession enters the stage to the background of a modern text, Louis Aragon's poem on the precarious life of the alien as permanent wandering, chanted by Salarina, an additional character to the original play (converted from Shakespeare's male merchant, one of the original play's Bobchinsky and

Dobchinsky characters). Throughout the production she accompanies the action like a chorus, both as a singer interfering with the action at key moments in poems by Arragon, Leonard Cohen and others, and as a media presenter investigating plots and motives as an emissary of the spectators.

Once the initial poem is done, the group of refugees, led by Shylock, addresses Venice in the words taken from the traditional Yom Kippur prayer: "Open a gate for us, while the gate is closing, for the day has turned."

clip 1 (after translation)

Their ensuing journey is to proceed throughout the play from their temporary residence in Venice, where their attempts to override their chosen preference to preserve their separation from the Christian community of Venice, by assimilating into the city's mainstream economy and citizenship, fails to work.

It fails, since by insisting on usury as their primal principle of economic conduct they breach the official code of "romantic mercantilism" upheld by Antonio, Venice's "Prince of merchants" and his associates, who,

in spite of being immersed in mercantile trade they still view their *métier* as an art and appreciate the lucrative beauty of Gold or its products. Shylock, for whom property is an abstract accumulating of digits, ironically subverts their positivist faith in the beauty of merchandise by suggesting ewes and rams equivalent to gold and silver as a Pound of human flesh a legitimate pawn.

clip 2 (after translation)

The continual wandering of the Jews into the realm of perpetual nomadism, will eventually provide the play with open ending. It is the effect of the gate, the symbolic abode of passage, which governs the wandering subject, and it is from this stance that it addresses the seemingly stable inmates of the bordered land.

Yet this perpetual, diffused voyage, subversively breaking from the outset the linear proceeding of the original action, involves not only its external perspective in moving between geographical locations, but the internal movement within subject itself. Thus, the major political conflicts implicated by the Shakespearean text find their dramatic expression through the progress of the individual subjects animating the performance, with

Shylock and Antonio as the major axis of the play, informed by the two newly ascending frameworks of capitalism and nationhood. The traditional conflict ascribed to the Shakespearean text between rising capitalism and capitulating Feudalism is transformed in the present production into a newly defined dialectics. Antonio's romantic capitalism is informed by a worship of gold, which he states in words I allowed myself to add to Shakespeare's text:

Commerce is art. I send ships on the water to hunt excitements, not profit. Interest, insurance, warranties all these are blasphemy. I send ships on the water to test my destiny. To carve my fortune from the circles of the world. I send ships on the water to seek my maker's grace

Shylock's dry, abstract capitalism, which turns objects into bonds and digits, for whom human flesh is differentiated from animal's one just by their market value, and the proliferation of metal coins is identical to the procreation of living bodies.

To accompany the nomadic pilgrimage of Shylock and Antonio into the core of their subjectivity, the external plot may be assisted by a few fresh readings of the

Shakespearean characters and moves: a scheming Duchess of Venice, using her troops of pirates to abduct Antonio's ships, the aforementioned Salarina as a TV presenter accompanying the narrative as a sharp interviewer and cabaret singer; a Tubal commonly accepted as an appreciated economic commentator providing historical insights and perspectives.

With Antonio and Shylock's conflict exemplifying the polarity of romantic and coarse mercantile capitalism, the plot of Shakespeare's play, clad in modern imagery of golden capital, stock exchange fluctuations, political machination and biased media coverage, is grasped as a nucleus and blueprint for present day's world.

The play is often considered Antisemitic. Let us look into the historical facts regarding Jews in England which may serve as a background to the creation of this complex figure of Shylock. This is going to be very brief and generalized review, yet crucial to our argument.

Jews were not present in England till the 11th century: they came to England only in 1066, with William the Conqueror, as merchants and bankers. It stands to reason

that local Saxon merchants, who may have been the cause of their absence from England for fear of economic competition regarded them as part of the conquering regime and became hostile to their presence on economic reasons. After 200 years of precarious residence in England, targeted by blood libels and discriminating laws and impoverished by loads of taxes, King Edward I, in a populist act intended to appease the demand of the Middle Sort and gain from Parliament an alternative funding through taxes for his military expenses, expelled in 1290 all 16,000 members of the Jewish community from England.

For the following 350 England was to be devoid of Jews. Even though the impact of the blood libels, the Anti-Jewish myths still echoed in literature and popular ballads, the actual absence of Jews from England failed to enable hatred toward Jews as it did in the Continent. Indeed in Shakespeare's time the presence in London of about a hundred Marrano families might have brought to extreme cases of anti-Jewish outbursts, such as the one following the execution of Dr Rodrigo Lopez for treason, which may have had its impact on the revival of Marlowe's Jew of Malta and perhaps the invention of the character of Shylock by Shakespeare.

However, Shylock is not entirely and exclusively a villain. He is also a betrayed, broken father and a voice of the minority within the Venetian thriving mercantile recently formed nation state. The newly, fast emerging trend of Philosemitism, informed by cherishing ancient Israelite tradition as a spiritual ancestor and model of the British self-awareness, emphasized by preachers, millenarians and writers, swept the country. Shylock's passionate "hath no Jew eyes" speech may have been influenced by such a trend, shared by many Anglicans before Cromwell let Menashe Ben Israel persuade him to let Jews back into England. It was not before the returning Jews started to gain financial, economic and political powers before modern, genuinely racial antisemitism started to spread in England, as it did throughout the Continent.

Back to our play: while Antonio is undergoing his nomadic experience into a vision he never reaches, Shylock's realization he could never fully integrate into Venetian citizenry without relinquishing his own heritage is symbolized by the Carnival of Venice which Shakespeare's Shylock openly detests.

clip 3 (after translation)

Shylock's case is thwarted in the trial scene by the disguised Portia, who did not manage to sell him the Christian doctrine of Grace and Mercy, allegedly reflecting the Spirit of the Law. She pronounces her sentence using a precarious ruling addressing aliens and foreigners, which is based on the very reading of the letter of the Law for which Shylock is reproached by his adversaries.

In our production, Shylock came to trial expecting that solution. His only vehicle to win his day in Court is to expose the hypocrisy of his unwelcoming hosts.

This is the moral riddle he presents to the mercantile community of Venice, which is ready to take advantage of his financial resources, yet not to grant him equal rights. According to a radical reading of 16th century's Machiavelli, and in our production of the play, the Nation State of Venice could offer Shylock national rights without coercing him to convert his faith. Would Machiavelli himself accept this solution?

Where I come from, over four centuries since Shylock presented his riddle to Venice, fear will not allow yet this vision to materialize.

Nor did Shakespeare allow it, yet. Rather than transport our consciousness into an Apollinian dream beyond phenomenal contradictions, the official adoption of Shylock's bond by hegemonic Venice's Court of Law, which confiscates his property by laws separating aliens from indigenous citizens and coercing him to convert his religion, leaves us in a world in which culture is arranged by a multiplicity of discourses and identities, subject and other, desire and bonds.

And it is significant, as it is curious, that this reinstatement through subversion is brought about by an "alien" of a different order: a woman disguised as a man; a country feudal who comes from afar in order and in time. An alienating riddle is cracked by a strategy of alienation.

Our production ends with a gesture towards a complex concept of nomadic deterritorialization. Jessica, Shylock's daughter, tried at the beginning of the play to turn a blind eye to the rift between races, beliefs and heritage. In a symbolic, delusional added scene, she celebrated in a personal dance her elopement with Lorenzo, with her broken father perhaps imagining her doing so, which will lead him into his "hath no Jew eyes" speech:

clip 4 (after translation)

Now, disenchanted by the cold shoulder reception she gets from Venice and Lorenzo, deeply immersed in his capitalist transactions and demanding of her the same "gentle" conformity, defies her new "country" and joins her father, Tubal and the rest in a renewed voyage toward an unknown destination.

This time it marks the simultaneous failure and triumph of marginality to the background of Leonard Cohen's dark, subversive words of ironic conformity: "You want it darker... I'm ready, my Lord." Will this political and economic rift be ever substituted by a more humane

attitude whereby subjects of differing colors, genes or belief will accept the other and tolerate the harmony of disunity? Shakespeare did not answer this riddle, nor does our production, delineating the riddle, yet not its ultimate solution. YET.