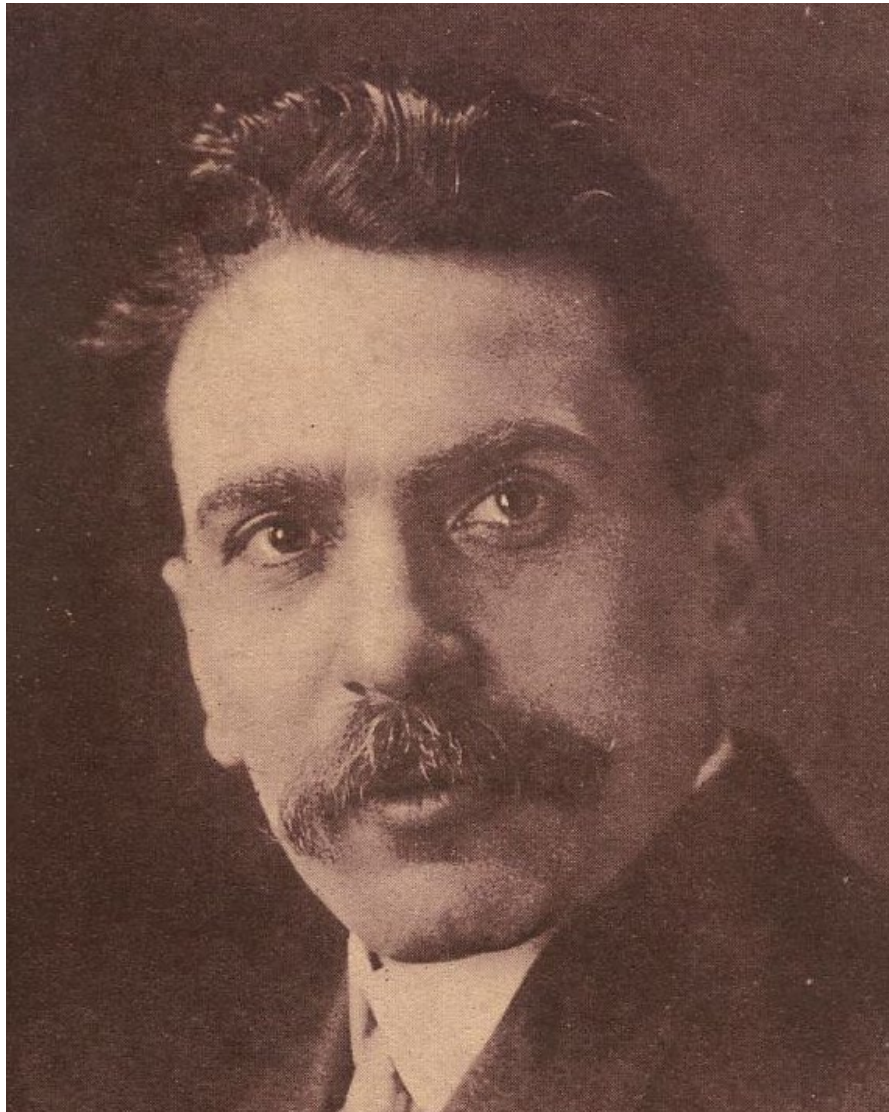


Yom Kippur Beit Midrash
September 25, 2024
Andrew Zangwill



Isaac Peretz (1852 – 1915)

Lightning Biography

- raised in a merchant-class family in Zamość, Poland
- had a traditional Orthodox upbringing
- tutored in Russian, German and French
- worked as a lawyer and then as a Jewish community archivist
- espoused socialism
- embraced the modernizing Jewish Enlightenment
- respected and admired the piety of Hasidic Jews
- wrote essays, stories, and poems in Hebrew and Yiddish
- was an exact contemporary of Sholom Aleichem
- founded an orphanage and school during World War I
- *New Republic* editor Martin Peretz is a cousin once-removed

YOM KIPPUR IN HELL



Once, on a perfectly ordinary day, without a fair or even an auction, a clatter of wheels and a spatter of mud aroused the merchants in the marketplace. Who, they wondered, could it be? It was a horse-drawn carriage. As soon as they saw it, though, they turned away in fear and revulsion. Both horse and carriage were well known. They belonged to a police informer from the neighboring town who was on his way to the provincial capital. God only knew who would be the victim of his talebearing this time.

All of a sudden, the noise stopped. Involuntarily, the merchants turned to look. The carriage had come to a halt, the horse had lowered its head to drink from a puddle, and the informer was sprawled senseless on his seat.

Say what you will, the man was a human being. People ran to help—but he already looked quite dead. An expert stepped up and confirmed the diagnosis. The members of the Burial Society rolled up their sleeves and went to work.

The horse and carriage were sold to pay the burial expenses, the informer was laid to rest, and the little devils who sprout where they

are sown spirited the dead man's soul off to hell and delivered it to the gatekeepers.

The informer was brought for interrogation to the gatehouse, where the chief clerk plied him with wearisome questions and yawned as he wrote down the answers.

Taken down a peg by his surroundings, the informer answered everything: place and date of birth, age when married, length of time supported by father-in-law, number of children, year of desertion of wife, nature of profession and how acquired, and whatever other vital information pertained to his life on earth, which ended as he was driving his horse and carriage through the marketplace of Lahadam.¹

The clerk, who was in the middle of another yawn, sat up.

"Say that again? Laha-what?"

"Lahadam," repeated the informer.

A gleam of interest flared in the clerk's eyes. "Did you ever hear of such a place?" he asked his assistants.

The assistant clerks shrugged and shook their heads, their mouths slightly open. "Never," they said.

"Would you check to see where it is?"

In hell every town has its registry, arranged in alphabetical order. Each letter has its file cabinet. The devils went through the whole *L* file: Leipzig, Lemberg, Lublin, every *L* on the map—Lahadam was not to be found.

"But it exists," insisted the informer. "It's a small town in Poland."

"Since when?"

"Since the local count gave it a charter twenty years ago. It has two fairs a year, a synagogue, a study house, a public bathhouse, two taverns for Gentiles . . ."

"Has anyone from there ever been here?" inquired the clerk.

"Not a soul," answered his assistants.

"Do you mean to tell us no one dies there?" the informer was asked.

"Why should no one die there?" he replied like a Jew, answering a question with a question. "They live packed together in squalor, the public bath can make you gag, the whole place is one big sty." The informer was beginning to feel in his element. "As a matter of fact, they have their own cemetery. And a burial society that charges an arm and a leg. Why, they even had an epidemic of plague there."

The informer received the sentence that was called for and an

inquiry was called for too. Something was not right. How could a twenty-year-old town, and with an epidemic of plague no less, not have sent a single soul to hell?

Devils were sent out to investigate. Soon they flew back with their report:

"It's true, every word of it!"

There was indeed such a place, the devils explained, a town like any other, with here and there a good deed and a considerable lot of bad ones. The local economy? People managed, if not by hook, then by crook. So what was different about it? The cantor of the synagogue, that's what. Not that he himself was anyone special. But his voice! It was pure music, so tender and feeling that it could melt a heart of stone like wax. As soon as he started to pray, the whole congregation repented of their sins with such fervor that all was forgiven and forgotten in heaven above, whose gates stood open for every one of the townspeople. Just say you were from Lahadam and no more questions were asked!

Needless to say, it was a state of affairs that hell could not put up with. And it was a job for the director himself; no one else could be trusted to handle it.

What did Satan do?

He ordered fetched from the world of men a Calcutta cock with a comb as red as flame and had it placed before him on a table. Bewildered to find itself there, the rooster was too frightened to move. The archfiend crouched before it and crowed, fixing his evil eye on it until his black magic was done in a trice and the red comb was as white as chalk. Hearing a distant rumble of heavenly wrath, he quickly finished his spell with the curse:

"Begone, O voice, until he dies!"

There's no need to tell you whom he had in mind. Before the Calcutta cock's comb could turn red again, the cantor of Lahadam had lost his voice. He could barely utter a word; no sound came forth from his throat.

It was no secret who was to blame. That is, it was no secret to those Jews from whom there are no secrets, although perhaps not to all of them. After all, it wasn't something that you talked about even if you knew. But there it was and nothing could be done. Had the cantor been a man of more spiritual substance, there were measures that might have been taken, but he was a no-account, a lightweight. And so, though he went from one wonder-worker to another, none was able to help him.

In the end, he turned to the saintly rabbi of Apt. Indeed, he all

but went down on his knees and refused to leave the rabbi's room without an answer. You never saw such a pitiful sight.

The rabbi sought to comfort him. "I can tell you," he said, "that your hoarseness will last only until you die. Your deathbed confession will be said in a voice that will reach to the far ends of heaven."

"And until then?"

"It's hopeless."

"But why, Rabbi?" implored the cantor. "Why me?"

He pestered the rabbi of Apt for so long that the rabbi finally gave in and told him the whole story.

"In that case," croaked the cantor as he ran out of the rabbi's room, "I'll make sure that I get my revenge."

"How?" called the rabbi after him. "On whom?"

But the cantor was already gone.

This happened on a Tuesday, or perhaps it was a Wednesday. Thursday evening, when the fishermen of Apt went down to the river to haul in their catch for the Sabbath, their nets seemed heavier than usual. They pulled them out of the water: in them lay the drowned cantor!

He had jumped off the bridge. And just as the rabbi of Apt promised, his voice was restored in time for his last confession, since Satan's curse lasted only until his death. Yet since the confession could not be said under water, his voice remained trapped within him—which is, as you will see, exactly what he had counted on.

The cantor was buried behind the graveyard fence, as is the custom with suicides, and the devils whisked his soul off to hell. When asked by the clerk at the gate for his life story, however, he refused to answer. He was prodded with sharp lances, with burning coals—not a word.

"Then take him away!"

As if they didn't know all about him anyway! In fact, they had been eagerly awaiting him. But as he was led off to a cauldron of boiling water that was being stoked just for him, he tapped his throat with his thumb and burst out:

*"Yisgada-al! . . ."*²

The Kaddish—and in the special melody of Yom Kippur!

He sang—and his voice sounded far and wide, as good as ever, no, even better, sweeter and so much more tender. The cauldrons, which had reverberated with howls and groans, grew suddenly silent; then, from within them, voices took up the prayer. The cauldron lids lifted, heads peered out for a look, scorched mouths began to sing along.

The devils attending the kettles did not join in, of course, but rather stood there dumbstruck, mouths agape, tongues hanging out, faces contorted, eyes red as coals, some still holding a log to stoke the fire with, others gripping an iron poker or trident. A few even threw themselves epileptically to the ground while the cantor went on singing. Beneath the cauldrons the fires died down. Here and there a dead man began climbing out.

The cantor sang on and hell's inmates sang with him, fervently, with all their hearts, their bodies made whole again, the flesh healed on their bones, their souls cleansed of all sin. When he reached the prayer in the Shimenesre that praises God the Resurrector, the dead came back to life and answered "Amen" in one voice. And when he sang the words "May His great name be blessed," there echoed back such a chorus of voices that the heavens opened on high, and the repentance of the damned reached the seventh heaven; where God's own mercy seat stands, and the moment of grace was so great that the sinners, now converted into saints, sprouted wings and flew out of the jaws of hell and through the open doors of paradise.

No one was left behind but the devils, writhing on the ground, and the cantor, who never budged from his place.

As in his lifetime, all repented through him but he himself could not repent. A suicide!

After a while hell filled up again. New quarters were added, but still the crowding was great.

1915 (translated by Hillel Halkin)