

S.Y. Agnon's 'Rothchild's Luck': An Introduction

The 1963 short story appears in Tablet for the first time in English translation

By [Jeffrey Saks](#) | June 10, 2016 12:01 AM

"If I were Rothschild, I'd be even richer than Rothschild," said the *melamed* of Chelm, in a well-known Jewish joke.

"How can that be?" asked the wife. "If you were Rothschild you'd have the same amount of money as he."

"Naturally," answered the school-teacher, "but I'd do a little teaching on the side!"

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"If I were a Rothschild" [sings](#) the dairyman, Tevya, in the Hebrew and Yiddish versions of the song better-known in English as being about an anonymous "[rich man](#)."

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While any other wealthy Jew's name might have been substituted with similar comic effect, these snippets demonstrate the degree to which "Rothschild" (without even singling out a specific member of that [famed banking family](#)), served as a stand-in across Europe for the supremely wealthy Jew in Jewish humor. This trope about the wealthy—not focused on making them the butt of the joke; quite the contrary—focused on the inherent humor and joy in the idea that any Jew could achieve such wealth. While for European Christians there were other avenues that allowed one to escape his social station (the military or the church, for example), for the Jew, the path up and out was usually only through money, the joking about which becomes almost synonymous with the name "Rothschild."

In fact, the very first joke (exhaustively) examined in Freud's *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* is a pun relating to Rothschild's fortune. But that's not all: the [joke being dissected](#) is one that appears in the writings of Heine, who understood perhaps more than most early-modern Jews what the "price of admission" to European culture was for the Jew—one he willingly paid at the baptismal font. Heine's satire, an 1829 story called "The Baths of Lucca," depicts Hirsch-Hyazinth the lottery collector, a Jew who remains honorable amidst corruption, and loyal to Judaism by not converting like so many other German Jews. The story skewers most of its characters, yet voices approval to "Moses Little Lump," a poor ghetto Jew, whose poverty is compensated by his joy of the Sabbath.

Moses Lump is happy, he need not torment himself with self-cultivation, he sits content in his religion...even if his candelabrum burns a bit dimly. If Rothschild the Great happened by at that very moment with all his agents, wholesalers, and *chefs de comptoir*, with the aid of which he conquers the world, and Rothschild said, "Moses Lump, you may have a single wish, whatever you want it shall be done," I'm quite sure Moses Lump would promptly reply, "Polish my candelabrum!" and Rothschild the Great would reply in wonderment, "If I wasn't Rothschild, I'd want to be a Little Lump like this!"

Scholar of Jewish literature (and humor) [Ruth R. Wisse](#) observes, that "this ironic vision of Rothschild

bending to the whims of a little Jew became a staple of Jewish comedy... It was a fantasy, designed to mitigate the actual growing rifts between rich and poor within Jewish communities, and demonstrating Jewish unity against double threats of anti-Jewish aggression and assimilation.”

One of the consequences of emancipation was the ability of certain Jews to attain unimaginable riches allowing them to escape the confines of the Jewish community and at least appear to transcend “the Jewish condition.” “Rothschild” becomes the short-hand symbol of what a Jew could now become, but for many this only begged the question: If Rothschild could become Rothschild, why can't Tevya become Rothschild, or even richer than Rothschild? Sholem Aleichem (who, admittedly, often used the character of the Jewish sugar magnate Lazar Brody within a more specific Russian context), in his [monologue of a Kasrilevka melamed](#), demonstrates the use of this trope when the poor Jew fantasizes:

If I were Rothschild, I might do away with money altogether. For let us not deceive ourselves, what is money anyway? It is nothing but a delusion, a made-up thing. Men have taken a piece of paper, decorated it with a pretty picture and written on it, Three Silver Rubles.... But then the problem is, without money how would we Jews be able to provide for the Sabbath? The answer to that is—How will I provide for the Sabbath now?

An additional implication of the Rothschild-specific drive of the humor is the tenuous “insider/outsider” position the Rothschilds held in Jewish society. Sholem Aleichem scholar [Jeremy Dauber](#) suggested to me that Moses Montefiore does not generally figure in this catalog of jokes because he was perceived to have remained “Jewishly Jewish.” If wealth helps one transcend the limits of the ghetto (where one's concerns are existential, yet manifested on a small scale: Who will polish my candelabrum? How will I provide for the Sabbath?), the extension of the question for the “insider” is the simultaneously unknown wonder and danger of what happens to the Jew once he leaves. The comedy about Rothschild is that one did not really know whether he was truly in or out.

Like so many other staples of Jewish humor and literature, when the Rothschild trope reached the pen of Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon, it underwent a revision. (Click [here](#) for another such example of thematic transformation.) Agnon very deliberately kept the models of his predecessors in mind, and was in the habit of paying back-handed literary tributes to the likes of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, Brenner, and even Kafka. As Hillel Halkin [put it](#), it was Agnon's way of saying to the literary giants in whose steps he followed, “Good idea, and now let me show you how to do it!” In his 1963 story, appearing for the first time in Tablet in English translation, “Rothschild's Luck,” we enjoy a satire on Jewish life and class tension, but through the perspective of Rothschild himself. (“Rothschild's Luck,” was first published for Passover in *Ha'aretz*, and was anthologized in Agnon's posthumous collection, *Takhrikh shel Sippurim*)

In Agnon's version the model has been turned on its head: Here, Rothschild is still an “insider” to the world of Jewish observance. Borrowing a plot element from Hasidic tales, in which rebbes and righteous men would wander about the towns and villages incognito, experiencing the world as a simple Jew might, Rothschild arrives in town late on Sabbath eve, victim of a broken carriage wheel. Checking in at the local inn he sets off as an anonymous traveler to the synagogue for Sabbath prayers, only to encounter the pompous, high-handed local *Gvir* (a Hebrew term meaning the local rich man, someone who is deferred to in light of his wealth; here translated as “Patron”). In reality the patron is but a pauper as compared to the great Rothschild, who financed the crowned heads of Europe. Rothschild allows the patron to make a fool of himself only to later expose him as a charlatan and swindler. By extension, the townsmen are ridiculed as well, depicted in their obsequious fawning over the man and his presumed wealth.

In Agnon's iteration, Rothschild is not merely above being the object of the satire, but is the one who reveals the Patron's corruption and townsmen's ridiculousness. Perhaps standing (and writing) on the other side of a historic chasm led Agnon to reverse-engineer the story. Sitting in Jerusalem in the 1960s, instead of Odessa in the 1890s at the time of the birth of Tevya (as a literary character), he likely saw issues of Jewish power and powerlessness, wealth and poverty, and the manner in which money is, was, should, and shouldn't be, determinative of leadership, in ways that Jewish authors had not encountered in the decades and centuries before 1948. In the tale, the Patron can lead (and milk) his little town with an iron fist through the mere illusion of wealth. As Tevya sings, "When you're really rich they think you know."

From Agnon's time and place, when a young nation was grappling with Jewish autonomy on a world-scale, and not merely within the walls of the synagogue, the consequences of the small-town Jewish mentality of slavishly following a demagogue because of his wealth became too catastrophic to ponder. But the danger remains ever-present, as the narrator warns the reader, "What would you have done in Rothschild's place? You would have relied on what others say, and you would have **lost**."

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