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Moshkeleh the Thief
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Sholom Aleichem’s lost novel

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The eponymous hero, Moshkeleh, is a robust chap and horse thief. When Tsireleh, daughter of a tavern keeper, flees to a monastery with the man she loves—a non-Jew she met at the tavern—the humiliated tavern keeper’s family turns to Moshkeleh for help, not knowing he too is in love with her.

For some unknown reason, this innovative novel does not appear in the standard twenty-eight-volume edition of Sholom Aleichem’s collected works, published after his death. Strikingly, Moshkeleh the Thief shows Jews interacting with non-Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement—a groundbreaking theme in modern Yiddish literature. This novel is also important for Sholom Aleichem’s approach to his material. Yiddish literature had long maintained a tradition of edelkeyt, refinement. Authors eschewed violence, the darker side of life, and people on the fringe of respectability. Moshkeleh thus enters a Jewish arena not hitherto explored in a novel.

Sholom Aleichem, the pen name of Sholom Rabinowitz (1859–1916), became the most widely read writer in the history of Yiddish literature by the end of the nineteenth century. His stories about Tevye the dairyman became the basis for the hit musical, Fiddler on the Roof.

Curt Leviant is the prize-winning author or translator of more than twenty-five books. His latest novel is Me, Mo, Mu, Ma & Mod; or, Which Will It Be, Me and Mazal, or Gila and Me?

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Jonathan D. Sarna is University Professor and the Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History, as well as the director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University. He is also the chief historian of the National Museum of American Jewish History. Sarna has written, edited, or coedited more than thirty books, including JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture 1888–1988 and American Judaism: A History, and is the winner of six awards, including the National Jewish Book Award’s Jewish Book of the Year.

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Rabbi Neal Scheindlin is an adjunct lecturer in rabbinics and biblical commentaries at Hebrew Union College–Los Angeles and the Ziegler School at American Jewish University. For eighteen years he taught and developed curriculum in Jewish law and ethics at Milken Community Schools.

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David Barak-Gorodetsky is a visiting fellow at the University of Chicago Divinity School and director of the Ruderman Program for Jewish American studies at the University of Haifa. He is also editor of Stripes, Stars, and Magen David: The Jewish American Contribution to the Yishuv and the State of Israel and Connected Vessels: Thoughts in Jewish Education.

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