

by Aaron Rubinstein

Devils & pranksters

Der groyser kundes
and the
Lower East Side



Left: The prankster mascot of *Der groyser kundes* wields his sharp knife of satire, contemplating his next cut.

Opposite: Jacob Marinoff, editor of *Der groyser kundes*, as drawn by Saul Raskin in the pages of the newspaper.



“The custom of the *Kundes* is to break customs. And the custom of breaking customs can, in our opinion, quickly become too customary.”
— JACOB MARINOFF

Jacob Marinoff, cofounder of the Yiddish satire newspaper *Der groysere kundes* (*The Big Prankster*)*, wrote the editor’s note at left to justify publishing an item that was rarely seen in the pages of the paper: a letter to the editor. Though the letter was written by Shmuel Niger, the most important Yiddish literary critic in America at the time, Marinoff had to explain to his readers why the *Kundes* would print such a conventional piece. After years of breaking the rules, of thumbing its collective nose at the standards of the powerful mainstream Yiddish press, even the *Kundes* had found that radicalism can lose its edge. The only remedy? To embrace the traditional. For the *Kundes* in 1920, the traditional had become radical.

This approach was probably familiar to readers at the turn of the 20th century in America. In fact, commentary and satire of this nature had been brewing in Jewish culture for at least a hundred years before the founding of the *Kundes* in 1909. The *haskola*, the Jewish Enlightenment, had helped create modern Yiddish literature by satirizing Jews of the shtetl and their “backward,” superstitious customs. For the *maskilim*, proponents of the Enlightenment, the preferred alternative was literature in Russian, German, and even Hebrew – languages with a proven literary pedigree. To them, Yiddish was a *zshargon*, a brutalized German. However, it soon became clear that the only way to reach the majority of Jewish readers was to write in their own tongue. The *maskilim* had to turn to Yiddish and the traditional East European Jewish folk world, the very culture they wished to leave behind, in order to modernize and educate the average Jew.

As a result of this choice, the likes of Shloyme Ettinger, Menделе Moykher Sforim, and Sholem Aleichem stretched Yiddish into a language of great literary expressiveness, often through the use of satire. They poured Yiddish folk beliefs through the filter of their secular sensibilities. Though Sholem Aleichem wrote of the fictional shtetl of Kasrilevke, he lived and worked in Kiev – writing with one foot in the provincial society where he was born and raised, and one foot in the booming, metropolitan world.



* The Yiddish word “*kundes*” translates best as “prankster.” However, because of its Greek origins as a word meaning “stick,” *kundes* implies someone who literally pokes fun. The English title, *The Big Stick*, riffs on this ancient meaning while recalling Teddy Roosevelt’s famous 1901 line, “Speak softly and carry a big stick.”

The powerful flow of change initiated by the industrial revolution gradually brought the values of the Enlightenment to places the *haskola* could not reach. Virtually all Jews, willing or unwilling, were faced with the paradox of using Yiddish – a language grown out of folk culture – to describe the emerging modernism around them.

This is the paradoxical moment in which 20th-century Yiddish readers in America found themselves, particularly those in the country's fastest growing immigrant city, New York. Today it's hard to imagine the experience of a riving in turn-of-the-century New York, with its teeming streets and towering skyscrapers, and trying to make one's way speaking a language infused with 6,000-year-old words, medieval grammar, and Slavic-flavored folk wisdom. As in these recent immigrants' European homes, the Yiddish press was the bridge that connected these vastly different realms of experience, bringing information about the new world to Jews in their old-world language.

By the time Marinoff's *Kundes* was founded in 1909, the Yiddish press was reaching its zenith as the most powerful Jewish institution in America. As well as providing Jews contact with the world, the Yiddish press served as a Jewish "community center" where Jews could gossip, get advice, be entertained, and express political opinions. In the office of the *Forverts*, Abraham Cahan, the eminent, outspoken, and even dictatorial captain, edited a newspaper that appealed to the average Jewish reader. The *Forverts* published world news, literature, *shund* (serialized "soap operas"), and the still-famous *Bintl brief*. Though there are no accurate numbers to represent the paper's Jewish readership, since most issues were passed from family to family, estimates run as high as 200,000 – a number nearly equal to the circulation of that era's *New York Times*.

The *Forverts*, however, was not the only journalistic voice speaking to Jews in Yiddish at the time. Most of these often fiercely competing dailies and weeklies mounted a specific political soapbox, writing their articles through the perspective of a particular political ideology. The *Forverts'* socialist standpoint contrasted with the *Vorhey's* unflinchingly communist voice, and after the *Vorhey* the *Frayhey* took up the communist cause. Jewish readers in New York could turn to the *Yidische kemfer* for Zionist-flavored news or the *Fraye arbet ershtime* for the anarchist viewpoint. And though most of these newspapers had a very loyal core readership, many people read multiple papers.

Enter the *Kundes* into this marketplace of ideology – a marketplace as cluttered and noisy as the streets of the Lower East Side. The *Kundes'* role in this milieu was as the ultimate prankster, a newspaper that tried to be everything the *Forverts* wasn't. It satirized the earnest output of all the other magazines. No one was safe, especially Abe Cahan and his *Forverts* writers, who were often caricatured as traitors to the socialist cause and peddlers of trashy literature. There was one thing, however, that the *Kundes* had in common with its archenemy – it was immensely popular. In fact, the loyal readers of the *Kundes*, which had a circulation of 35,000 during its first three years, also included readers of the *Forverts*. It seems that Yiddish readers in New York had no trouble bridging the gap between these two periodicals.

What became the *Kundes* first appeared on the scene under the name *Der kibitser* in April 1908. The mastermind prankster who gave birth to this and a family of humor magazines was Joseph Tunkel, an artist who studied in Vilna and Odessa before immigrating to America in 1908. Anyone who met Tunkel was struck by his boisterous and confrontational personality as well as his physical oddities. A very thin man, Tunkel was lame in one leg and had extremely poor eyesight. His most famous writings were all signed with the name *Der tunkeler* – a play on Tunkel's last name, which means dark, sinister, or bleak. This menacing name, "The Dark One," embodied a bizarre and contradictory persona: a man with dimming eyesight who wrote illuminating satire. Soon after arriving in America, Tunkel was able to find work as a lithographer but was forced to give up this profession due to his bad eyes. As a result, he had spare time to write poems parodying his literary contemporaries in America. Tunkel was eventually persuaded by his friends to publish these parodies and was astonished by their instant popularity.

Tunkel's *Kibitser* grew and changed its name to *Der groyser kundes* the next year. After Tunkel was seduced by Shmuel Rozenfeld to move to Warsaw and edit Rozenfeld's humor journal *Der bezem*, Marinoff took the helm. Under Marinoff's leadership, the *Kundes* grew into its best-known form. The masthead of the *Kundes* became an icon of the uniquely Jewish satire found in the journal's pages. The prankster, the jester mascot of *Der groyser kundes*, must have been as familiar as *MAD* magazine's Alfred E. Neuman to its readers, dancing on the masthead as the devil sticks a feather up his nose to tickle out fearless attacks on all hallowed aspects of

Jewish culture in America. The devil, the ruthless prankster, was the only deity this journal bowed to. By endorsing the prankster and the devil on the cover, the *Kundes* advertised its place outside the mainstream Yiddish press, essentially declaring, “Anything goes on our pages; enjoy the prank, but you might be next!” This proved a very tempting offer and worthwhile risk to many Yiddish writers in New York.

The *Kundes*’ challenging nature attracted some of the most colorful personalities in American Yiddish letters. Yitskhok Rayz, who wrote under the pen name Moyshe Nadir, was probably the most popular of the frequent *Kundes* contributors. Nadir in Yiddish means, roughly, “Take this!” and a giant fist in the air to the establishment is apparent in all his work. Nadir applied this all-out attack on every aspect of American Jewish culture in the pages of the *Kundes*.

In the December 24, 1915, “Christmas” issue of *Der groyser kundes*, Nadir devoted his column to an exclusive interview with the hero of Christmas himself – the “*yid mit rakhmonesdike oygn*” – Jesus Christ. In the mock interview, Nadir pries open Jesus’ grave and introduces himself as Moyshe of Knickerbocker Avenue (as distinguished from Moyshe of Egypt), and together they jump right into a *Yidishlekh* conversation. Their subject, of course, is the troubles, the *tsores*, of the Jewish people. For Jews in New York at the turn of the century, there was no avoiding Christian imagery as well as the signs of Jewish assimilation around them. Nadir perfectly conjures the feelings many Jews still experience as citizens of a predominantly Christian country, particularly when the carols begin wafting from every store.

Jews in Nadir’s time were trapped between a longing for the old country, which still existed in idealized form in their language and literature, and the turmoil of modern culture with its sweatshops, labor disputes, and materialism. Nadir’s genius captures perfectly these opposing pulls. In the first paragraph of the interview, Nadir manages to tear apart every institution and value held sacred in America. Both Moses, whose laws guide religious Jews, and Jesus, the Christian prophet, orbit around Nadir in the melting pot of New York and get swatted by his swinging fist.

But Nadir’s strike at the sacred around him is only part of his message. With this interview, Nadir makes a satirical move that is distinctly Jewish. Toward the end of the interview, Nadir reminds Jesus of his coming Christmas responsibilities:

Veystu, Yeyshu, az hayntike shabes iz kristmes, un az

du darfst arumshvebn arum di goyishe hayzer, vi lehavdil Elye Hanovi...

Y’know, Jesus, that this Friday is Christmas and you have to hover around the gentile houses, like *lehavdil* Elijah the Prophet.

The familiar Yiddish expression *lehavdil*, “one should never confuse the two,” is used to separate the gentile Jesus and the Jewish Elijah, two figures that can hardly be contained together in the same sentence. Like the *maskilim* before him, Nadir parodies the Jewish superstition against mixing Jewish concepts with non-Jewish ones. However, Nadir is aware that by using Yiddish, by using a language filled with the ideas he wishes to strike down, he is parodying himself as well.

What can Nadir do? He’s lived in America since he was 13 and barely remembers the shtetl where he was born, but he speaks Yiddish and was raised on the old-world wisdom that helps him navigate his modern environment. For Nadir, Yiddish is a way to assimilate his conversation with Jesus and life in “gentile-dominated” America. Only in Yiddish can he find a word like *lehavdil*, which makes a distinction between the Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and secular realms. For Yiddish speakers, all words are infused with power and have a monumental effect on spiritual and everyday life. Nadir is no *maskil*; he knows the unique, unalterable value of Yiddish.

Nadir’s columns were the perfect example of Marinoff’s editorial axiom. Always searching for more shocking material, Nadir found that traditional topics were the most fertile. He knew that the tension between ancient and modern cultures, between the familiar and the outrageous, accurately reflected the position of his immigrant readers.

Another struggle related to the conflict between tradition and modernity played out in the streets and cafés of the Lower East Side. This wasn’t the typical conflict filling pages in Yiddish newspapers – the struggle of worker against boss or Jew against anti-Semite – but the genera-

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tional struggle of young versus old. It was this battle that Hayim Gutman, an editor of the *Kibitser* and frequent contributor to the *Kundes*, believed lay at the heart of the humor journal's success. Gutman, who wrote under the name *Der lebediker*, The Lively One, describes the scene in Sholem's Café on Canal Street, where tables of writers from different age groups argued like fathers and sons. The older writers' table would spend all day yelling over to the young writers' group, calling them upstarts whose lack of success proved their lack of talent. The young writers would ridicule the older types, telling them they were antiquated and stiff and couldn't appreciate the potential of Yiddish literature. According to Gutman, however, there was a third table, one at which he himself sat. While the young and old dashed, Gutman's *Kundes* table would snicker to themselves and gather material for the next issue.

But it wasn't quite as simple as Gutman described. The proponents of youth were a group of avant-garde poets who called themselves *Di yunge*. "The Young" were just that, twenty-something poets who believed that poetry is meant to be beautiful, an expression of the language at its fullest and most sensuous. Some of the most creative of this group could not find publishers for their work, as their poetry served no ideological purpose. Poetry that did not rally the workers to strike or give sweatshop laborers a voice of understanding and comfort had no place in the pages of the socialist *Forverts* or communist *Vorheynt*.

The *Kundes*, however, stayed true to its mantra of "everyone's fair game." According to scholar Ruth Wisse in her book *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* (Harvard University Press, 1988), the *Kundes*, though at first quick to mock the self-indulgent poetry of *Di yunge*, became a defender of the group's cause, satirizing anyone who would dare take offense at their work. This is partly because many of the radical contributors to the *Kundes* were themselves young men – Nadir was only 25 when he wrote his first *Kundes* article.

The *Kundes'* relatively open-minded attitude toward the poets of the new generation provided a refuge for many of the controversial young voices. Poets like Moyshe-Leib Halpern turned to the *Kundes* as a place where they could publish with relative freedom. Halpern's poetry, rejected by every other periodical because of its mocking obtuseness, could find good company in his friend Nadir's mad genius and in art by fellow *Di yunge* members like Zuni Maud.

Halpern, in his poem "Madame," one of the last works

he published in the *Kundes*, explains to his audience what it's like to be a young writer caught in the swirling cultural storm of the East Side. Halpern's poem works on three distinct levels. On the surface it appears to be a love poem to his muse; *Di yunge* were always trying to imitate classical poetic devices. But true to the *Kundes'* style, Halpern twists the poem just enough to turn what at first seems earnest into subtle parody. He describes his muse, the Madame, as a lovely woman whose power has all the effects of love. This love blooms with "self-indulgent" symbolism like floating doves and bright flames, all very typical of the poetry of *Di yunge*. But his description drips with sarcasm as Halpern pushes this nostalgic style over the top. A perfect example of *Kundes* parody! Halpern, however, takes it one step further. He asks his muse to forgive his attitude and punish him, as he deserves. Why? Because he can't help himself.

For Halpern, the object of his parody is himself, a wild and careless young artist, but one who speaks Yiddish, one who also invokes the ancient gods. Halpern draws on the technique of parody to demonstrate, in a radical way, the complex relationship between modernity and tradition.

Like the poet, the poem's readers were trapped between the demands of the new culture and time-honored customs. Halpern's readers were also questioning the relevance of the old country, whose values they brought to America, as they were swept along by the tide of American life. Halpern in the pages of the *Kundes* is sitting at the third table with Marinoff, but he knows very well that he is inextricably connected, as a Jew in the Lower East Side, to the growing pains of Yiddish and to the questioning young radicals who are trying to find their way in a changing society. In this manner, the *Kundes* itself was an inextricable part of the metamorphosing Jewish identity of the Lower East Side.

By 1927, Yiddish poetry in America started to undergo an economic and creative crisis as a result of European competition and the aging of the original avant-garde innovators. *Der groyser kundes*, as if following this trend, stopped production for good. According to Marinoff, he was just tired of producing it. And why not? Despite its potential for continuing success, the *Kundes* bowed out when it was ready – on its own terms.

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מאדאם

פֿון משה-לייב האלפערן

ווי וויל איר צערטעלט איינער לייב!
יא, מאדאם, איר זענט אַ ווייב
און איר זענט קלוג און איר זענט שיין
כאַטש ציטערדיק איך נאַכצוגיין,
צו היטן איינער יעדען ריר
כאַטש ווי אַ שקלאַף פֿאַר איינער טיר
צו קניען פֿאַר אייך טאַג אויס טאַג איין...
נאַר איך בין אומגליקליך, מאדאם,
איך קען קיין שקלאַף ניט זיין.

ס'איז וואָר, מאדאם, איר שטערט מיין רו,
איר ציט מיך ווי מיט פישוף צו,
און קוים באַרירט מיך איינער האַנט,
בליט אויף פֿאַר מיר אַ ווונדערלאַנד,
אַ ווונדערלאַנד פֿון ליכט געוועבט,
און ווי אַ טויב אַ ווייסע שוועבט
מיין ליבע אין דעם לאַנד אַרײַן...
דער וועג נאַר וואַלט געמעגט, מאדאם,
אַ ביסל נאַענטער זיין.

יא, מאדאם! איך זאָג אייך אויס:
איר ציט בײַ מיר דאָס האַרץ אַרויס.
די שיינקייט איינערע איז רײַך:
צום שענסטן אַווענט-הימל גלייך,
וואָס ברענט אין ווייסטן אַריענט:
די שיינקייט איינערע פֿאַרבלענדט,
פֿאַרבלענדט און שכורט און ווי וויין...
ס'איז נאַר אַ שאַד, מאדאם, פֿאַרוואָס
דאָס קען ניט אייביק זיין.

פֿאַרגיט, מאדאם, מיין פֿרעכקייט מיר
איך ווייס: אומזיסט וואָס איך פֿאַרליר
אַזוי פֿיל רייד... איך בין אַ נאַר
און שטראַפֿן דאַרף מען מיך דערפֿאַר
נאַר נעמט און שניידט מיר אויס די צונג
אַז איך בין פֿאַרט אַ ווילדער יונג,
ס'איז אפֿשר טאקע גאַרנישט פֿיין...
נאַר נעמט דערהרגעט מיר, מאדאם,
איך קען ניט אַנדערש זיין.

Madame

by Moyshe-Leib Halpern

How fine – your touch against your skin!
Yes, madame, you are a woman,
And you are wise and you are fair;
Oh, just to follow tremblingly,
Observing your every move
Just as a slave before your door
Kneeling before you every day...
But, unfortunate me, madame,
I cannot be a slave.

It's true, madame, you plague my sleep,
You pull me in as if bewitched,
And when your hand near touches me
A wonderland bursts into bloom,
A wonderland of woven light,
And as it were a floating dove
My love takes off into the land...
If only the way to you, madame,
Were just a little closer.

Oh yes, madame! I'm telling you:
You pull the heart out of my chest.
Your beauty is extravagant:
Just like the gorgeous evening skies
Which burn in distant Orient;
Your beauty fully dazzles me,
Dazzles and like wine besots...
It's a shame, madame, because
It cannot last forever.

Forgive me, madame, my fresh mouth,
I know this is a waste of breath...
I am a fool who has to pay
For, after all, I'm wild and young,
So go ahead, cut out my tongue
It really is quite unrefined...
So go and murder me, madame,
I can't be someone else.

— Translated by Aaron Rubinstein