In 1869, Shalom Jacob Abramowitz, using the name of the persona Mendele Mocher Sefarim, published his Yiddish novel *Fishke der krumen* (*Fishke the Lame*). With the help of Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Mendele published a transmutation of the story in Hebrew under the title *Sefer haqabtsanim* (*The Book of the Beggars*) in 1909. The first paragraph of the novel introduces a contrast between the natural world and the Jewish condition through an introduction by the bookseller narrator:

Now the wind blows warm, and sunny days are on the way, and all God’s world is full of light and joy—we Jews will soon be facing days of...
mourning, tears, and fasting, one after the other, from the spring sowing at Passover until the autumn rains. This is the busy season for me, Mendele the Bookseller, when I do the rounds of the little townlets in the Pale, providing all that is necessary for a good cry, namely, dirges, supplications, penitential prayers, rams' horns, solemn lectionaries, graveside elegies, pietistic tracts, and whatever else is happily conducive to tears. Our fellow Israelites lament and spend the summer weeping—and I make my living from it. But that's another story. (91)

The lightheartedness and gentle humor of this opening paragraph disguise the important message that the natural order of the seasons and the cycle of the Jewish religious year are clearly out of sync. Just when the natural world is at its most appealing, with warm and sunny days when all is light and joy, and with the trees in blossom and the countryside at its very best in this fertile Eastern European milieu, Jewish life is plunged into deep gloom as the days of mourning, tears, and fasting follow hard upon each other's heels. Mendele's business year is also out of sync with the annual cycle. For Mendele the Bookseller this is the busy season in which he travels round the little towns of the Pale of Settlement providing all the liturgical texts and ritual objects suitable for mourning: the tools for crying. He makes his living from the laments and summer weeping of his people. The formulaic "but that's another story" is repeated constantly throughout the novel and suggests the possibility of an additional important narrative.

From the very beginning, therefore, it is clear that whatever message the author intends to convey he will not make recourse to the didactic tub-thumping of his immediate Haskalah predecessors but will use irony and literary strategies that both delighted his audience and created some artistic rounding that enriched the story's hermeneutics. The author's clear intention is to arouse self-awareness and the realization of their situation in the minds of his readers in Eastern Europe. But his imaginative use of language prompts richer readings.

Driving slowly through the lovely countryside in a wagon pulled by a sad, moth-eaten mare, Mendele is increasingly conscious of the gulf separating his own gloom from the joys of nature all about him. It is the seventeenth of Tammuz, one of the blackest days in the Jewish calendar, when, according to tradition, the walls of Jerusalem were breached by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E. and by Titus in 70 C.E. With the seventeenth of Tammuz the three-week mourning period over the destruction

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of Jerusalem begins, ending on the ninth of Av. Hence, fasting and faint with hunger, Mendele is trying to concentrate on the sad liturgical poems appropriate to that day, while all about him the beauties of nature are attempting to seduce him and divert his thoughts from sadness and prayer.

While dozing in the driver’s seat, his wagon collides with another wagon, and the event unleashes an episode, simple enough, but complicated by Abramowitz’s textual dexterity.

I must apparently have nodded off asleep, right in the middle of my prayers—may such a thing never befall you! I see my wagon sinking in a pond, with the axle of another wagon stuck in one of its rear wheels. One of my horse’s legs is standing outside the traces, and he is being pulled and pressed and squeezed, and is in a very bad way. From the far side a stream of piercing curses in Yiddish rises aloft punctuated by coughs and groans. So you’re a Jew, are you!—I say to myself—in that case, there’s nothing to fear. So I get to my feet at once and go round the other side full of rage. There I see before me a Jewish fellow entangled
in his prayer-shawl and phylacteries squirming under a wagon. The
straps and whip are all tied up, as he struggles to free himself with all
his might. "What's going on!" I shout at him in astonishment. And he
replies at the top of his voice: "You might well ask what's going on!" I
vent my wrath on him, heaping all the insults on him I can conjure up,
and he hurl them back at me, without either of us seeing the other's
face. I say to him, "Are you not ashamed to be a Jew and fall asleep in
the middle of your prayers?" And he replies, "How can a Jew be so lit-
tle God-fearing as to doze off like that?" I curse him by his father, and
he throws my mother into the bargain. I beat his horse, and he manages
to free himself and gets up and starts beating my horse. The horses take
fright and rear up, while we angrily take each other's measure like
fighting cocks, preparing to grab each other's sidelocks. For a little
while we stand in silence gazing into each other's faces. What a speca-
tcle we make! Two Israelite heroes in their prayer-shawls and
phylacteries under the open sky, furiously preparing to box each
other's ears. What a sight for sore eyes! A rain of blows is just about to
descend—when suddenly we both draw back, each of us crying out in
simultaneous surprise:
Oy, Reb Alter!
Oy, oy, Reb Mendele! (92)

The lighthearted and humorous description portrays the aggravation
of these two poor Jews, dressed in prayer-shawls and phylacteries strug-
gling to free themselves from the mire. But the text's richness reveals
disturbing undertones that the author is clearly anxious to convey to the
reader. The phrase that I have translated "while we angrily take each
other's measure" is ko'asim umista'arim in the Hebrew. Here the rhythms
work with the assonance and lead to strong association. For the person
familiar with Jewish liturgy the phrase ko'asim umista'arim is strongly
reminiscent of the phrase kor'im umishtahavim (we bow and bend the
knee), which appears in the Aleinu prayer recited daily.

The phrase "what a sight for sore eyes" is ashrei ayin ra'atah elleh (lit-
erally: happy is the eye that saw these things) in the Hebrew. This phrase
appears in the additional Musaf service for the Day of Yom Kippur as a
response to the dramatic depiction of the High Priest entering the Holy
of Holies in all his splendid finery on the one occasion in the year when
he was permitted to do so.

Mendele's language helps to contrast the present miserable state of
Jewish life with the glory and dignity of the ancient Israelite kingdom. I
would suggest that in order to foster self-awareness in his readers of the
degradation of their lives, and perhaps even to call attention to the need
to strive for something better, Mendele uses the above two instances
along with the following third instance of intertextual contrast between
past and present reality.
In this third passage Mendele’s friend Alter has begun to complain about the misfortunes that have befallen him in his recent visit to the fair at Yarmolinitz:

But while Alter was cursing Yarmolinitz together with its fair, a number of farm-carts drew near, with the farmers clearly wondering why our wagons should be standing there blocking the road. No sooner were they close enough to see us wearing our prayer-shawls and ritual-fringes, with phylacteries strapped to our heads and on our arms, than they started mocking us aloud and crying: “Look at those fancy boys! The devil take their fathers and mothers. Hey! Make way there, you fringy Jews!”

We at once bestirred ourselves and set about moving our wagons. As for the gentiles, in spite of their not belonging to the seed of Israel, I can testify to the fact that they observed the commandment, “Thou shalt go to the help of thy neighbor,” and they stood by us in our hour of need. By dint of their mighty efforts our wagons emerged safely from the pond. Had it not been for them, who knows how long it would have
taken us to get them out. Perhaps we might never have managed it. Our coats were all muddied and our prayer shawls torn. For indeed, what are we and what is our strength? But the strong hands of these sons of Esau made light work of it. They did all the pushing, and from the way they went about it, it was obvious that the hands were the hands of Esau. But as for us, all our strength is in the mouth—the voice is the voice of Jacob. So while they pushed, we shouted: “Together heave! Together heave!”—because shouting goes well with pushing. We, ourselves, were groaning and twitching in every limb, and we looked just as though we were pushing—but that’s another story. Once the road was clear, those sons of Ham went their way, turning back to look at us in mockery and scorn because we were tending our horses in priestly vestments and serving our creator with sticks and reins. Some of them screwed up the corners of their coats to look like pigs’ ears and pushed them under our noses to aggravate us. Alter paid no heed to them, dismissing them with the remark: “Who cares about hooligans like them?” But for me—their mockery pierced me like a scorpion’s sting. God in heaven! Why all this mockery? Why? Why? Why? … (92–93)

Here, as well, the degradation and helplessness of the two heroes is emphasized by the description of clothing as “all muddied with our prayer-shawls torn.” For indeed, what are we and what is our strength? The gentiles are portrayed as strong and competent, and they do all the pushing, and from the way they go about it, it is obvious that the hands “are the hands of Esau.” But as for us, all our strength is in the mouth—“the voice of Jacob.” The biblical references are obvious and apposite. But the phrase that I have translated “together heave” is daḥafı hetev, hetev daḥafı (literally: push well, well push) in the Hebrew. The rhythm and assonance call to mind a passage in the talmudic tractate Keriṭot in which the young priests, preparing the incense for the Temple service, encourage each other with the cry hadeq hetev, hetev hadeq (pound well, well pound), corresponding to Mendele’s “push well, well push,” once more emphasizing the striking contrasts of the miserable present with the glorious past.

This remarkable exercise in self-awareness with the consummate artistry and gentle self-deprecating humor of Mendele clearly illuminates his purpose to arouse readers from their lethargy and their willing acceptance of their miserable plight by indicating the former dignity and nobility of Israel’s status in biblical and rabbinic times. Not the didactic tone of the Haskalah, but artistry with a social purpose, nonetheless. How sad, he seems to indicate, that a nation of priests has been reduced to a nation of beggars, and how desirable it would be to restore that former glory.