Modern Jewish Women Writers in America

Edited and with an Introduction by Evelyn Avery

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Also by Evelyn Avery:

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To Women of Valor
Shenah Pescha Pittelman, Esther Mandelker,
and Shoshana Feldman
Blessed Be Their Memories

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Preface

The genesis of this book began in the 1940s with a little girl, curled under her grandfather's tallith (prayer shawl), absorbing shtetl tales from her grandmother, struggling against her Yiddish environment to succeed in public school. Years later she would recall her childhood as she read immigrant writers Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska and other Jewish American women authors whose dual heritage shaped their personalities and their works. This book, *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America,* would not have been possible without the "divided selves," the Jewish American women writers who inspired me and my fellow contributors to do this book.

Over the last 30 years, I have been fortunate to reside in Baltimore's thriving Jewish community, and to teach at Towson University, which has allowed me to balance my secular and religious worlds. With support through grants and sabbaticals, Towson University has encouraged my scholarship and my teaching interests in Jewish literature.

When I was planning this book, Carl Olson, a librarian at Towson's Albert S. Cook Library, offered to serve as an indexer. However, his interest in the subject, talents as a copy editor, and expertise with computers made him an invaluable consultant in preparing the manuscript. I am indebted to him for his assistance with my book.

I am grateful to family and friends who shared in this enterprise, offering advice, affection, and diversion, when needed. I especially thank my husband, Don, and sons, Peter and Daniel, for their interest, given the full lives they lead.

I would like to pay tribute to three people who died this past year, but whose influence will remain with me for the rest of my life, three individuals who embraced their Jewish heritage and also their American identities and who contributed to both: my cousin, Esther Mandelker, an Israeli-American, successful psychologist; Arnold Blumberg, acclaimed Towson University professor and scholar of European and Jewish history; and Shoshana Feldman, revered Torah scholar and educator of Baltimoreans (including myself). All three balanced family, professional, and community commitments wonderfully, supporting those around them.

I am grateful for the encouragement and assistance of Senior Editor Farideh Kooli-Kamali and her assistant editor Julia Cohen who made the publication of *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America* possible.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the land of my birth, the United States, which has evolved into a society accepting of ethnic diversity, where public education can transform poor children into college professors who are free to speak and publish their ideas.

Modern Jewish Women Writers in America: An Introduction

Evelyn Avery

Mer ken machen a bech, one can make a book, my *bubbe* (grandmother) sighed, as her eyes took on a far-away look and she made me promise that one day I would record the story of her life. Lacking the talents of a novelist, I never fulfilled her dreams, but her stories have influenced my scholarly interests and perspective and must be shared in condensed form with readers, who are only familiar with feminist approaches.

Not that bubbe's experiences were quite that unique; they had been transcribed in numerous twentieth-century American novels and short stories, but her reactions differed from those of the characters in the fiction I read and from those of my friends' grandmothers, who lacked her warmth and humor. She would recall with a smile of how at 16 she was betrothed to a second cousin, whom she had never seen and who had traveled two days by train from Russia to meet her in her Cracow home.

Moishe Leib, my *zeidie* (grandfather), was a *pitzala* (a little one), thin and short, with a scholar's pensive look. Bubbe, the town beauty, with a crown of brown *tseppela* (braids) towered over him. But the match between the brilliant rabbinic student and the prosperous maiden had been arranged. And despite her misgivings, Shenah Peshah would stand under the chuppah (wedding canopy) in another nine months with a man she had only met once while both families celebrated their mutual good fortune. Years later, it was obvious to all that husband and wife agreed.

Their fates had been sealed before World War I. Together they would produce seven children, one of whom would die during a pogrom. While her husband hid in the basement with their five children, she, Shenah Peshah, separated in the confusion from her family, fled to the rooftop. There she watched in terror as soldiers pillaged, burned and, on the street below, raped her best friend, Chava. Seven months pregnant, my bubbe miscarried alone on the rooftop as Jewish men and women were shot in the square.

In 1921, the Pittelmans, with little but the clothes on their backs, sailed in steerage to New York. They lived, parents and five children (a sixth would be born later), in a three-room flat on Cherry Street, the Lower East Side. Of five sons and one daughter, only the youngest two boys finished high school. The others, including my mother, Fay, the daughter, were withdrawn from grades five and six to help support the family by working in factories. There was no discrimination between brothers and their sister; only the younger ones benefited educationally when conditions became easier, which eventually they did.

My bubbe's plea to me growing up was, "Remember the stories." How could I not, but what was remarkable and what I couldn't understand was the general absence of complaining about a husband, who couldn't make a decent living in the New World or protect her in the Old and the absence of criticism about children, who drifted from Judaism and merely survived in America. Not that she was a saint. For bubbe the world was divided into good and evil, decent people and the greedy, the upholders of God's law and the sacrilegious. Although I never got around to writing my bubbe's stories, her words stayed with me: "Remember who you are, from where you came." Thirty years after her death, her influence on me is still profound.

Though semiliterate, bubbe had had a reverence for learning and encouraged me to attend college, especially since most of her own children had not even finished public school. *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America* was inspired by my grandmother, her experience and perspective on life as a Jewish immigrant woman. It examines the attitudes of a broad range of twentieth-century Jewish American women writers, some early immigrants, some mid-century, others contemporary, in 14 essays. The contributors are scholars who reject shibboleths and focus instead on the writers' tensions between their heritage and self-fulfillment, specifically between *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness) and some version of feminism or assimilation or on these writers' perceptions of such tensions in society. Their only common characteristic is a commitment to clear, critical independent thinking and jargon-free prose. In most cases the chapters cannot be identified

with a particular literary theory or ideology since the magnifying glass is always on the authors and their works. Divided into four sections, the book reflects the chronological and thematic development of significant Jewish American women authors.

The seeds for this book were planted as early as the 1960s and 1970s, when the fiction of Jewish American women writers and critics introduced me to a world far different from the one my bubbe had described. It was an angry world that the authors described, peopled by frustrated women, deprived of their religious, educational, and professional rights, a world in which they believed patriarchy ruled and Jewish women were doubly victimized for their religion and gender.

Immigrant writers such as Mary Antin, Fannie Hurst, and Anzia Yezierska had been rediscovered and their works reinterpreted from feminist perspectives. Brash new writers such as Erica Jong, Anne Roiphe, E. M. Broner, Marge Piercy, and others challenged conventional male-female relationships and family structure while Norma Rosen and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer depicted the horrors of the Holocaust in such novels as *Touching Evil* and *Anya*. The 1990s saw a flood of critical works dealing with Jewish women's experience in concentration camps, a subject hotly contested by Gabriel Schoenfeld in *Commentary* and elsewhere for its suggestion that Jewish suffering could be quantified according to gender. Although bubbe had watched her friend being raped, she had also told me of her husband and sons as well as her daughter cowering in the basement during pogroms. She had described Jewish men being brutalized and humiliated while their families watched helplessly. What would she have thought of authors who "genderize" genocide instead of recognizing, as Lawrence Langer, Alvin Rosenfeld, and others have, that Hitler did not discriminate, that the blood and bones of Jewish men, women, and children provided common fodder for the Third Reich?

Of course, with hindsight, the feminist Jewish movement in America was predictable. Given the middle-class status of many post–World War II Jewish Americans and their traditional emphasis on education, it was only a matter of time before girls were encouraged to go to college, and by the late 1960s and early 1970s, some were challenging the status quo. While many works emerged in these decades that would affect the future of Jewish American women readers and their expectations, I will highlight a few of the more prominent.

In 1964, in the midst of the movement for racial equality, Betty Friedan's explosive *Feminine Mystique* launched the feminist movement, changing both men's and women's lives. Demanding equality

for women in the workplace, not just the home, the book's revolutionary tone spoke to many women, particularly educated underutilized women, a number of whom were secular Jews. There is no question that Friedan emotionally and psychologically touched raw nerves, especially of middle-class women, who were to form the backbone of the National Organization of Women. Tired of the 1950s, of being relegated to the kitchen and the nursery, women gradually demanded more from their lives and their culture. In the process, scholarly perspectives were expected to change as well and were criticized if they did not reflect the new paradigms.

While Friedan's work focused on the oppression of women, Irving Howe's bestseller *The World of Our Fathers* (1976) portrayed the lives of Jews, who sought their promised land in America from the 1880s to the 1920s, and of their children, who became educated at the New York City colleges, entered the professions and arts, and in many but not all cases overcame anti-Semitism by the 1950s. Howe's encyclopedic coverage includes the lowly and the successful, the trade unionists and the intellectuals, the journalists and the scholars, as well as the Holocaust, Israel, and the impact of both on American Jews. What the book does not cover to the satisfaction of many Jewish feminists is "the world of our mothers."

Just a glance at the book's index reveals references to the Women's Trade Union League, to women and bohemians, to a double moral standard for immigrant women. Yet most of Howe's book focuses on immigrant Jewish men and their movements, which shaped life for the community in America. Could it have been otherwise? Were there unsung heroines that Howe could have included? The answer came swiftly. Howe was roundly attacked for ignoring Jewish women and since the book appeared 30 years ago, a veritable outpouring of feminist works have attempted to correct the balance. Not surprisingly, literature and literary criticism have led the field.

In 1976, Elizabeth Koltun edited a collection of essays, *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives,* which eventually became a bible or at least a guide for many Jewish women on a spiritual quest. Although reminiscent of Betty Friedan's *Feminist Mystique,* Koltun's *Jewish Woman* included essays attempting to define the specific problems of twentieth-century Jewish women and to suggest resolutions. The views range from the Modern Orthodox Blu Greenberg, arguing for change within Halacha (Jewish law), to the Reform Judith Plaskow seeking revolutionary transformation. While Greenberg believes women should be religiously educated equally as men, she is uncomfortable with abortion on demand, sexual freedom, self-indulgence at

the expense of the family, and hostility toward men. Plaskow, on the other hand, is more interested in finding a new language for Jewish women to express themselves in a patriarchal religion. Her essay is focused on her experience, her discomfort with male pronouns and liturgy, and the importance of symbolism. She summarizes her essay in a parable in which "G-d and Adam were . . . afraid of the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together" (10).

In her essay, "The Other Half: Women in the Jewish Tradition," Paula Hyman, Yale historian and coauthor of *The Jewish Woman in America* (1976), sounds Plaskow's themes and tone as she charges Orthodox Judaism with reducing women "to second-class status" (107) or worse. "Feminism," Hyman concludes, "can only strengthen Judaism" (112). But how? Of course, the question is universal, having been raised about other religions and cultures too. Is it possible that feminism could have the opposite effect on traditional religion, family, and community, that insistence on role reversal instead of change within tradition would empower women, but at great sacrifice? In their rush to accord Jewish women their rights, many writers in Koltun's collection forget Blu Greenberg's admonition that love, respect, and, certainly civility must be retained between Jewish men and women for the survival of all Jews. Otherwise, women may find themselves left alone to carry on their heritage, which would spell the death of the people.

For a variety of reasons, whether personal, scholarly, professional opportunity, the need for community or commitment to improving women's status, or a combination of all, the academic literary pendulum swung toward feminism. Long excluded from the profession, many women contributed to the groundswell for change. Gone, for the most part, was any pretense of objective literary analysis. Everything became first person: women were the victims, men the oppressors, and the world a bleak, if not cruel, place for Jewish women. In many cases, as in the popular anthology *The Tribe of Dina,* sisterhood takes precedence over Judaism, with the beauty of the latter obliterated. For the poet Irena Klepfisz, raised an atheist and socialist, only the survival of Yiddish and its culture defines her as a Jew in America. With its demise, little is left. On another page, Grace Paley sketches a grandmother's painful recollection of her struggle to survive, but without my bubbe's faith; the portrait is bleak for the whole family that listens. The anthology's title, *The Tribe of Dina,* refers ironically to the biblical rape of Jacob's daughter Dina by Shechem, which was later avenged by her brothers; but the title simply reverses the episode by transferring power

from Jacob's sons to Dina's mythical tribe of sisters, closer and stronger than any group of men.

What would bubbe have said, I wondered, if she had read these searing words, turned these fiery pages? Well into her 70s, my grandmother climbed innumerable stairs to the synagogue balcony, quieting my complaints by whispering that we were closer to G-d and joking that we could also look down at the men below. Nowadays, the balconies are gone except in the older Orthodox synagogues. While some of the newer ones have *mechitzas* (partitions such as curtains, and lattices) between men and women, in others men and women sit apart but can clearly view each other. These changes my grandmother could accommodate, but she would never understand the books I read: for example, *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture,* which includes essayists who "expose images of Jewish women as victims and resisters, onlookers and activists, exotic 'dark ladies' or clumsy 'losers.' They are at once self-reliant, assertive, and risk-taking, proud . . . of their identity; and doubtful, envious, and self-hating, ashamed of their heritage, their bodies, and their intellect" (1). And who is responsible for the Jewish women's angst, or at the very least their confusion? According to the editor, Joyce Antler, and the contributors, it is the media and the Jewish male writers who flourish at their expense, although Catherine Stimpson, for one, believes that Jewish women have resisted the Philip Roth/Herman Wouk/Woody Allen stereotypes embraced by American culture and by their own writing have created "an act of defiance."

Generally, *Talking Back* attacks male writers as insensitive, superficial, and patriarchal, and celebrates women authors as balanced, complex, and caring. In short, the formula is reversed with a few notable exceptions, such as Sylvia Baryck Fishman's insightful reading of Neil Simon's *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and Susanne Klingenstein's perceptive commentary on Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* in which she rejects attempts to "genderize" the work, citing Ozick' s own disdain for those who do so to the Holocaust.

In a departure from the strident tone and formulaic patterns of some anthologies, Marlene Adler Marks's *Nice Jewish Girls: Growing Up in America,* a collection of short stories, provides a balance in which fathers and husbands, as well as mothers and bubbes emerge as decent, loving people in warm Jewish families. There is always the exception such as Letty Cottin Pogrebin's "I Don't Like to Write about My Father" in which she reveals that her handsome, charming, Americanized father had a secret life, an ugly side, which her mother kept hidden from her as a little girl. In "Down on the Farm,"

Shirley Polinsky Fein remembers an authoritarian grandfather who never worked but ordered his family around as if he were one of the Cossacks who had persecuted him and his fellow Jews during endless pogroms. Certainly, there were deadbeat dads; those who forgot their families in Europe and escaped to America; others who depended on their wives and children for support. A glance through the *Bintel Brief,* an advice column run by Abraham Cahan, editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward,* indicates the scope of the problem. However, to judge the past simply by desperate Jews seeking advice or by literary narratives can skew reality.

In fact, of course, both Jewish men and women well into the twentieth-century America bear the historical scars that shape their behavior as individuals and toward each other. Financial struggles and anti-Semitism were evident in Jewish life and literature up through World War II. University quotas, "Sunday Blue Laws," and restricted housing covenants (to name a few barriers) limited Jewish options and encouraged assimilation. It would take two to three generations for the majority of Eastern European Jews until they could feel American. In the process, some eagerly assimilated into the nation, others painfully juggled their Jewish identity and secular American life, while a minority remained Orthodox.

What is surprising is the number of creative, ambitious, independent, women authors, themselves a minority, who remained connected to their Jewish background in different ways, an association ignored or misperceived by critics. Thus Mary Antin, a Jewish immigrant maintaining lifelong connections, has been dismissed as heretical; Anzia Yezierska has been recast as just a rebel from traditional Judaism; and Edna Ferber has long been celebrated as the queen of Americana and a feminist. While there are partial truths in these studies, the omissions or distortions of their Jewish backgrounds, affiliations, and writings makes *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America* an original contribution, a necessary revision to literary scholarship.

Other essays in the book reveal the journeys authors have traveled in their lives and their work toward strengthening their Jewish identities. Occasionally, the spiritual motivation and religious emotion become so intense, so passionate that only complete involvement will be fulfilling. Thus Miriyam Glazer in "Watchman, What of the Night?" imagines herself as Jacob, Joseph, David, and Daniel but hesitates in Hebrew school to lead the *Amidah* (main prayer recited while standing), a rabbinic role she assigns to boys, until one Sabbath morning she volunteers and experiences the joy reserved for men. Years later, the same Miriyam Glazer will take time off from teaching

literature at the University of Judaism to be certified as a Conservative Rabbi, a joyous journey she shares with us in *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America*.

Not all Jewish women, of course, desire to become rabbis, cantors, or presidents of synagogues. Despite the advances within the Reform and Conservative movements and even the interest among some "Modern Orthodox" women such as Blu Greenberg, Ultra-Orthodox women, who include newcomers (*baalot tsheuva*), object to feminism and its effects on Jewish life. An important but overlooked work, *The Literary Imagination of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women* edited by Alyze Fisher Roller, proclaims the strength and beauty of traditional women's role, embraces the Torah and the differences between men and women, and refutes Jewish feminists according to Orthodox Law. Published in 1999, the book is a rarity in its comprehensive treatment of the subject, with analysis of the "scholarly groundbreaking attempt" (77) by Michael Kaufman, Tamar Frankiel, and Lisa Aiken to respond "to mainstream feminism." While all three describe heroic Torah-observant women from the Bible to the present, they also affirm ordinary Orthodox women who embrace their roles as "mothers and caretakers" (63). In fact, the two are often intertwined as the "histories of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Ruth, Tamar, Esther and other personalities" provide the "inspiration [the model] for the Jewish female difference" (67).

Even in the arena of the Holocaust, Orthodox women's narratives differ from those of secular Jewish women. Excerpts repeatedly testify to concern for Jews, for men and women, for children regardless of gender. Moreover, Roller concludes, the evidence emphasizes religious rather than gender persecution. The stark contrast between secular and Orthodox women's experiences may, she suggests, be linked to perception or modesty or more likely to a question of priority and identity. The Orthodox woman perceives herself as a Jew, a member of a community with a historical consciousness, and translates Nazi treatment accordingly. In other words, Hitler and his minions were not concerned with gender but with "race," a fact author Cynthia Ozick demonstrates very well.

In general, the Orthodox women in Roller's book speak a completely different language than popular feminist critiques such as Janet Burstein's *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters: Tracing the Maternal in Stories by American Jewish Women*. If Roller's Orthodox women are the ideal family heroines, respected by their husbands and son, as well as their daughters, Burstein's characters are frustrated women, unhappily adopting some Jewish patriarchal traditions.

For them, the anger transcends generations to secular daughters and granddaughters, for whom the Orthodox Prayer "thanking God they are not created women" symbolizes sexism (9) while the Orthodox women, express the opposite, thanking God they "are made according to His will" (Art Scroll Siddur, 19). Realistically, there are a range of reactions in between. However, since *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters* does not acknowledge the delicate balance of roles and appreciation of differences in loving, observant families, it alters the role of women in Judaism and Jewish literature, limiting all literary relationships to mothers and daughters and ignoring communication between fathers and daughters in order to give women a voice (10). Thus the "devalued" mother and alienated daughter must be reconciled in Jewish American literature. But what if individual works do not fit the paradigm?

Accordingly, Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) are often analyzed as narratives primarily about female protagonists desperate for their fathers' approval, victims of Judaic patriarchal culture, which they and their authors must reject. While duality certainly characterized Antin, it also described Ludwig Lewisohn, a comparison that is dismissed (23). Committed to Freudian and feminist analysis, *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters* omits Antin's adult interest in Judaism and association with a rabbi despite her intermarriage, and attributes her residual ethnicity to insecurity inherited from her submissive mother, a theory that Jules Chametzky challenges in his chapter in this book. That David Levinsky exhibits similar traits of ambition, assimilation, and Jewish memory in Cahan's novel is not mentioned.

Also questionable is the analysis of Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers,* which focuses on the female's emotional dependency on male authority, either a love interest or in the case of Reb Smolinsky, "moral arbiter, judge [and] economically incompetent [father of Sara and her three sisters]" (p. 29). Although the description fits Moshe, it doesn't begin to do justice to the novel. No mention is made of his patriarchal downfall; the sisters' complicity in their own misery; the mother's vindication; the second wife, Mrs. Feinstein's nastiness; and Sara's loving, equal relationship with Hugo Seelig, elements that make *Bread Givers* a complex novel, not merely one of oppressive men versus defenseless women, a perspective to be explored in the chapter on Yezierska.

Several other works on Jewish American women writers deserve attention. A major contribution to both Jewish and women's studies, Ann Shapiro's *Jewish American Women: A Bio-Bibliographical*

and Critical_Sourcebook includes short essays on a variety of major and minor poets, playwrights, and novelists. Each essay includes a useful overview of the writer's work, critical reviews, and recent bibliography. *Daughters of Valor: Contemporary Jewish American Women Writers,* Ben Siegel and Jay Halio's valuable collection of edited essays, generally avoids an ideological approach to Jewish women's writing. Although sensitive, for the most part, to the common historical identities of Jewish men and women, the book reiterates complaints about the patriarchy and the development of distinctive "feminine imagination and feminine energy" (44). The result is slightly uneven, with penetrating critical essays on the fiction of Cynthia Ozick, Allegra Goodman, and Norma Rosen, and random pieces on the peripherally Jewish writer Lynn Sharon Schwartz and the film reviewer Pauline Kael.

A recently published book, Lois Rubin's *Connections and Collisions: Identities in Contemporary Jewish-American Women's Writing* centers on the conflicts of "female and Jewish" identities of post–World War II authors. In contrast to *Modern Jewish Women Writers,* which recovers and affirms the Yiddishkeit of selected women writers throughout the twentieth century, *Connections and Collections* provides a feminist perspective on its authors, highlighting "common themes [such as] women's struggles against men, authorities, and a male-oriented Jewish tradition; women's relationships with other women" (17).

Derek Rubin's *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer,* an anthology of 29 autobiographical essays, signals a new interest amongst Jewish American writers in their heritage. Whereas many earlier works had identified Jews in political, economic, ethnic, social, and most recently feminist contexts, Rubin's book includes a range of authors, some established, others contemporary, both male and female, struggling to accommodate their religious background. A number of the essays explicitly refer to living in two worlds, with titles such as "Forward and Back: A Journey between Worlds" and "Writing between Worlds."

From the mid-1990s, to the present, new Jewish writers, particularly women, have appeared on the literary scene, vividly describing prayer services, kashruth, religious observance, dress and manners, large religious families, and traditional holidays. Whether affirming Orthodox Judaism, balancing the secular and religious, or even satirizing religious extremes, authors such as Allegra Goodman, Pearl Abraham, Dara Horn, Tova Mirvis, Joan Leegant, and Ruchma King, to name a few, are deeply immersed in Judaism, and their novels and short stories are selling.

To appreciate, however, these proud, contemporary Jewish American writers, it is essential to recognize the struggles of their literary foremothers, those "divided selves," who pressured by assimilation, some by fear of anti-Semitism, and gender issues, did not relinquish their heritage, despite public perception. By including chronological, historical, and thematic perspectives, *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America* is distinctive with unique chapters about early, middle, and end of twentieth-century authors and their works. To an extent it reflects the position that many twentieth-century Jewish American writers, including feminists, have never been able to divorce themselves from their Jewish background despite their assimilation and success. Although from different time periods, economic, educational, and religious backgrounds, the authors all reveal in their lives and literature what editor Daniel Walden has called the "ties that bind," the echoes of Jewish tradition from which they fled or for which they yearn, which he recognized in the *Studies in American Jewish Literature* issue devoted to Cynthia Ozick, a quintessential Jewish writer.

Whether foreign or native born, the subjects of this book resisted the pressures to totally reject their heritage and assimilate. Thus Anzia Yezierska, a 1920s ghetto-immigrant Cinderella, the darling of publishers, intellectuals, and Hollywood, and since her death in the 1970s a feminist role model, never emotionally reconciled herself to America or to the loss of her father or his world, though she criticized both.

Likewise, Jules Chametzky questions stereotypes about Mary Antin, the Russian Jewish immigrant who became a sensation with her publication of *The Promised Land*. Although she was both ionized as a model of assimilation by distinguished Americans and criticized as a traitor by some Jews, her long ignored concern for Jewish issues, her Zionism and communication with rabbis, deserve "to be part of her legacy," writes Chametzky.

Certain writers were never even labeled Jewish. A prolific author from the late Gilded Age through the 1950s, Edna Ferber, for example, was popularly identified with her strong heroines and Americana locations. With the exception of *Fanny Herself* and *Peculiar Treasure,* both biographical, Jewish, and until recent interest in ethnicity, forgotten, Ferber was best known for her sprawling works about Oklahoma, Texas, Alaska, and the Mississippi River. However, as Eileen Watts's research and revealing essay discloses, Ferber's tortured feelings about Judaism and Zionism inspired her to act when anti-Semitism loomed and Jewish interests were threatened during World War II and after, when the State of Israel was first created.

Another more recent feminist writer has become increasingly concerned with her Jewish identity and issues in her works. Anne Roiphe, the subject of Melanie Levinson's chapter, now struggles to preserve her feminism and expand involvement with Judaism. In a chronological study of her works from the 1970s to the present, Levinson traces Roiphe's painful attempts to reconcile the two. Denied a Jewish heritage by her wealthy, assimilated parents, Roiphe seeks increasingly in her writing to define herself as a woman and a Jew. Norma Rosen, another writer with a limited Jewish background, was drawn to weighty subjects such as abortion and the Holocaust, considering the consequences of the two for Jews. Through interviews and close readings, Ann Shapiro demonstrates the development of Rosen as a Jewish woman and writer through her marriage to Robert Rosen, a traditional Jewish man and Holocaust survivor.

Several essays focus specifically on Orthodox Judaism. Anna Ronell reflects on Rebecca Goldstein's Orthodox upbringing and its influence on her fiction as she describes the tensions between religion and gender for the author and her work. From her first novel, *The Mind-Body Problem,* to "Raizel Kaidish" and *Mazel,* Goldstein illustrates the impact of Orthodox Judaism and the Holocaust on Jewish women. Although personally comfortable with her practice of Orthodox Judaism, writer Cynthia Ozick has often created characters who are not, who defy sacred commandments, as Sarah Blacher Cohen writes in "Cynthia Ozick's Puttermesser Papers: From Whimsy to Wisdom," which explores the intersection of myth, morality, and feminism. Nahma Sandrow and Carol Iannone illuminate the life and writing of author Johanna Kaplan, who in the feminist 1970s and 1980s was somewhat overlooked, but whose short stories, and novel *O My America!* merit revisiting. Victoria Aarons studies the short stories of Allegra Goodman, an observant Jew, whose short fiction satirizes the traditional and secular and the clash between the two, but who has written *Kaaterskill Falls,* a captivating novel about Orthodox Jews. A lyrically autobiographical chapter by Miriyam Glazer, professor of literature, writer, editor of Israeli and Jewish American poetry, and now an ordained Conservative Rabbi, traces her own journey from religious rebellion to celebration.

Finally, the concluding chapters provide sharp contrasts and surprises. In "Failed Conquests: Jews and Germans in Fictions and Memoirs by American Jewish Women," Susanne Klingenstein indicates that there may be a change in the attitude of some contemporary American Jews toward Germans. Instead of the Holocaust-based hostility of some older Jewish American writers, Klingenstein finds the recent fiction of

Binnie Kirschenbaum, and the works of three memoirists, portraying Germany and Germans realistically and openly. "Jews," Kirschenbaum believes, "are once again thriving in Germany."

However, many more "Jews are thriving" in America, and surprisingly, given predictions, some have turned to Orthodoxy. Partially as a result of prosperity and the spread of multiculturalism, Jews have had more choices available in the latter half of the twentieth century. In this climate, writers such as Tova Mirvis, a Modern Orthodox Jewish woman, can draw on her religious background and appeal to both specific and general audiences. Whereas most early Jewish American authors avoided writing about religion, Mirvis illustrates the act of balancing the religious and the secular in "Writing between Worlds," a chapter included in this book along with her interview. *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America* concludes with Eileen Watts's select annotated bibliography that reviews recent fiction by Jewish American women and suggests that the pendulum may be swinging back, producing a new generation of Jewish American women writers who have learned to appreciate their complex identities.

The "new," proud, Jewish American women writers did not emerge from a vacuum. It took almost a century of literary ancestors, confronting their culture, to pave the way for current authors. A unique collection centering on the Jewish heritage of a broad range of twentieth-century American women writers, *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America* includes groundbreaking essays on authors and their works that are essential for scholars and students of Jewish, ethnic, women, and American studies. Given the impact of globalization on contemporary society, this book should also appeal to general readers who will identify with the universal problem of the divided self.

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Part I

The Early Years—In Search of the Promised Land: 1910s–1950s

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1

Rethinking Mary Antin and *The Promised Land*

Jules Chametzky

Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* enjoyed extraordinary success when it was first published in 1912. It was widely and generally very favorably reviewed, and sold, along with the book that followed it, *Those Who Knock at Our Gates* (1914)—a plea for open immigration at a time of increasingly restrictionist sentiment—more than 100,000 copies. *The Promised Land* made Antin a celebrity, controversial at times as she went on the lecture circuit from 1913 to 1916 and stumped as an ardent advocate for the immigrant, for Progressive party politics (she had a warm relationship with Theodore Roosevelt, who much admired her work), and latterly, for Zionism. *The Promised Land* continued to be printed and sold to enthusiastic readers, libraries, and other institutions through the 1920s, and as late as the 1940s it was often used as a public-school civics text. After 1920, though, with the breakup of her marriage because of emotional and financial stresses caused by World War I and her husband's dismissal from his professorship at Columbia University, Antin endured long bouts of mental illness, withdrew from the public arena, and wrote very little. Her reputation went into eclipse; her work and her character itself were often impugned.

Despite its largely positive reception, from early on *The Promised Land* had its critics from right and left. Some "real Americans" contested Antin's presumption at claiming so completely her Americanness; others, Jews mostly, decried her fulsome gratitude toward the new land, and her apparent willingness to shed her Jewishness. During the era of

ethnic celebration, from the 1960s onward, the criticism increased: the book's detailed and frequently loving view of Jewish life was often overlooked; one sociologist characterized it as part of "a cult of gratitude" and a few Jewish critics derided Antin for her intermarriage and for, apparently, urging full assimilation (a form of ethnic cleansing?), even intimating that her sad end in loneliness and illness was due to these flaws, though whether they were flaws of ideology or of character was not made clear (Kramer, 121–148).

Recent scholarship has occasioned a rethinking of such positions. A closer look at Antin's work and life, based on a careful study of her manuscripts and other writings, especially her voluminous correspondence over a 50-year period—in exceptional research by Werner Sollors and Evelyn Salz—has given us a richer view of a complex, perhaps tragic, but very sympathetic person and writer. On the vexed question of her supposed rejection of Jewishness and her assimilationist motives, Sollors ends his long essay as follows: "Antin's assertion of bonds was based on past experience with 'things Jewish' and a modern sense of democratic humanism and not on what she termed 'sectarian and folk lives.' This was to be her last published word" (1).

As Salz has asserted, "Antin's legacy deserves a new interpretation." For one thing, her bouts of mental illness from the 1920s on, while no doubt exacerbated by the breakup of her marriage, were hardly examples of character flaws or of some ideological failure (not sticking to conventional Judaism, for example), but as Salz suggests, might today be characterized as bipolar disorder and could very well be treated positively with drugs. More significantly, perhaps, Salz's uncovering of Antin's vast correspondence, of which she uses about 150 letters, shows Antin's enduring interest in and concern for Jewish issues and the inner core of her own Jewish identity, however much she sought spiritual wholeness in exploring varieties of Christian and Buddhist spirituality and her final interest in Rudolph Steiner's anthroposophy (which, interestingly enough, seems to have involved Saul Bellow in his later years). When she was agitating for open immigration and Zionism in her early years, Antin engaged in an active correspondence with Israel Zangwill, Horace Kallen, Rabbi Stephen Wise, Theodore Roosevelt, and others. Most interestingly, she corresponded with Rabbi Abraham Cronbach, a Reform rabbi, coworker with Rabbi Wise. Her correspondence with him began in 1915, and, after a 20-year hiatus, resumed in 1937 until 1947, two years before her death, and a decade of intense concern for the fate of Europe's Jews.

Some excerpts from these letters will give a flavor of her mind and spirit. First, to Horace Kallen: "I want to thank you for the inspiration

I received at the Zionist Convention. I doubt if I should have thought of attending it, if it had not been for what you said to me at Madison [University of Wisconsin, where Kallen taught at the time] (August 11, 1916); "With best wishes for the New Year [it was Rosh Hashanah], which should be a great year for Zionism . . . " (September 29, 1916); "Now let me fall back for comfort [they disagreed on the Progressive presidential campaign] on the knowledge that we still have one great cause in common, namely Zionism . . . " (November 6, 1916); and "It is good to know that you are coming to New York. If you are to have a strenuous time, it will do you good to come out to Scarsdale some evening. My sister will make you Hanukkah pancakes ([latkes] to be exact), and the children will dance for you" (December 6, 1916).

And to Rabbi Cronbach: "May I make you my messenger, to carry my thanks to the several members of your Temple family [at the time in South Bend, Indiana] at whose homes I was so pleasantly cared for?" (November 10, 1915). Then after the correspondence was resumed in 1937, nearly two dozen letters that speak to her last illnesses, her spiritual searches, and her continuing connection with things Jewish: "The Hanukkah friends whose singing you recall [in her old home in Scarsdale] were Mr. and Mrs. Henry Gideon. Mr. Gideon has been choirmaster and organist at Temple Israel in Boston, all these years." (May 17, 1937); "I welcome all your kind personal words and appropriate the good teaching of the words of Isaiah which you quote with such fine appreciation in your letter of September 1. We appear to be very close in our view of God's world in its current moment." (September 4, 1937); "I was just out of the hospital, trying to teach myself to walk again, and my small gains in energy were being offset by the terrific blows of reports from the cauldron that was Europe during the last week of September. Like the sound of the Shofar itself, your serene sentences recalled to me those things that are eternal." (October 7, 1938); "I am coming to you for help [she was working on an essay for the *Atlantic Monthly*]. As I wish to convey, in an introductory motto, the universality of the teaching in all scriptures, I am taking a passage from the Sufi poet Kabir . . .[and] a passage from Ephesians, to which I wish to add also a corresponding word from Hebrew mystical sources . . . Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages has long attracted me, from hints and intimations received in my Ghetto childhood, but I have done almost nothing to follow those clues . . . Strange how we are able to go about our private business in a time of culminating anguish for the Jews of the world, a time of peril for democracy." (November 26, 1938); and a final excerpt, "Do not allow yourself

the notion that I am not in need of the prayers of a sincere and devout priest. If I were actually as advanced spiritually as you try to make out, I would still need your prayers to keep me from falling from grace . . . Best wishes for the Passover season. Gratefully," (April 2, 1947).

Revealing and moving as many of these letters are, and an occasion for enriching our view of her, it should be noted that, besides its literary merits, Antin's *The Promised Land* is the first autobiographical account (although some critics have made a case for reading it as a novel, or as a novel memoir) in English of the Russian Jewish immigrant experience, original in its treatment of both its historical and psychological aspects.[1]

Arriving in America in 1894 at the age of 13, a poor girl from a backward part of Eastern Europe, knowing no English, only sporadically Educated, within five years Mary Antin had produced a book in English: *From Plotzk to Boston* (1899). Originally written in Yiddish as a letter to her uncle back in Europe, it was translated (with some assistance) and published with an enthusiastic introduction by Israel Zangwill (later the author of the play *The Melting Pot* [1908]). It received a warm review from Josephine Lazarus (sister of the poet Emma Lazarus), who became Antin's friend and supporter, and to whom *The Promised Land* was eventually dedicated. A little more than a decade later, in 1910, she completed a manuscript version of *The Promised Land*. All in all, it was a remarkable achievement.

Antin was encouraged in her writing by various people, most significantly her husband, Amadeus William Grabau, a well-known paleontologist at Columbia University. She had met him through the Natural History Club she describes in *The Promised Land,* when he was completing his doctorate at Harvard. They were married in 1901, when she was 19 and he 32, and he was the father of Antin's only child, a daughter born in 1907. (Grabau was eventually dismissed from Columbia because he advocated a policy of neutrality during World War I.)

Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly,* which published Antin's first short story, "Malinke's Atonement," to favorable response in 1911, was another champion of her career. He had read the first version of *The Promised Land* shortly after the manuscript was completed, suggested revisions, and, most significantly, suggested the title. By publishing several sections of the work in the *Atlantic Monthly* before its appearance as a book, he helped to assure its wide acceptance.

Though *The Promised Land* did not escape disapproval for its assimilationist leanings and its encomiums to a view of Life Universal—the narrator's embrace of a kind of transcendental oneness with nature and the cosmos—these criticisms ignore much that made the book so distinctive and important in its time. Certainly, Antin makes a strong argument for the immigrant's right and ability to become fully American at a time when nativism was rampant and it was widely held that immigrants (especially the newer ones from southern and eastern Europe) were inassimilable to American life and, in fact, a danger to the country. Beyond that polemical effectiveness lies the strong and vivid evocation of Jewish life in the Old World, the sympathetic portrayal of the Jewish spirit in its hard accommodation to the New World, and, above all, the power, originality, and beauty of the language and the work as a whole. When Antin writes in her introduction, "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. . . . I began life in the Middle Ages . . . and here I am still, your contemporary in the twentieth century, thrilling with your latest thought. . . . I want to be of today," the prose is full of aspiration and joy. In the book's stunning last paragraph, she concludes, "It is not I that belong to the past, but the past that belongs to me. America is the youngest of the nations, and inherits all that went before in history. And I am the youngest of America's children, and into my hands is given all her priceless heritage . . . Mine is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future," thereby offering a challenge to the very notion of what America is. In this country's process of becoming, she envisions for herself a central role. Such chutzpah, while enchanting the likes of Theodore Roosevelt, unsettled certain other "old Americans," as we will see later.

In claiming for the immigrant a rebirth in the New World, a journey from the medieval Old World of superstition and scientific backwardness to modernity and enlightenment, Antin echoes the views of other immigrant intellectuals, including Abraham Cahan, the crusty editor of the Yiddish-language *Daily Forward,* who had, a few years earlier, written in much the same vein a history of the United States aimed especially at the Jewish immigrant reader.[2] Writers such as Cahan were speaking to and for the millions of "new immigrants" from southern and eastern Europe who had come mostly from rural and small-town (shtetlach) life, who had little or no access to advanced education, and who had been caught in the grip of autocratic and repressive states and religious hierarchies. Antin's views anticipate in many ways the current experience of the new millions from Asia, the Caribbean, and other non-European areas. It is surely time for a renewed appreciation of Antin's classic work.

Rebirth in the New World, like all births, is accompanied by pain, but it is also rife with possibilities and hope. As such, this theme has been a staple of immigrant literature, from Crevecoeur through Andrew Carnegie, Jacob Riis, Edward Bok, and Abraham Cahan. Most such literature follows conversion patterns of narrative ("From the Old World to the New," "From Europe to America," "The Making of an American"), familiar from biblical and religious narratives (the conversion of Saul to Paul on the road to Damascus; Augustine's Confessions; "I was blind, but now I see"), and from the autobiographies of former slaves—Frederick Douglass's writings, for instance. Antin's prose and the structure of her work give full-throated evidence of these elements. Almost half of *The Promised Land's* pages are devoted to life in the shtetl of Polotzk (the village was misnamed in *From Plotzk to Boston*), with a glimpse of the larger world of Vitebsk; the rest depicts life in Boston. Although Antin lived mostly in poor neighborhoods—slums, actually—in the book her new home begins to glow like the proverbial City upon a Hill dreamed of by the early Puritans. What makes the Polotzk and Boston scenes, rich with depictions of Antin's intellectual and spiritual growth from childhood through adolescence, so valuable is the author's focus on Jewish life of the past and present as well as on the opportunities for development offered in the New World. In the process, she addresses and seeks to correct then-rampant stereotypes of Jews, and to attack the bigotry and hostility Jews had historically been subjected to; her strategy is to explain some of the social and historic circumstances of Jewish life and thereby deepen the understanding of the non-Jewish reader, whom she often addresses and seems to have mostly in mind.

"Reborn" as an American, Antin can speak as an authoritative mediator between the worlds of Jew and Gentile. In her first two chapters she describes the Pale of Settlement and its many restrictions. Have Jews been regarded as "tricky" and "money-grubbing"? Considering the harshness and vulnerability of Jews' lives in eastern Europe, she explains that accumulating money might have seemed the only way to achieve a tenuous security—while simultaneously showing how impoverished most Jews were at the time. They have been accused of being "Christ-killers," that false and evil epithet that often served as a prelude to pogroms in which Jews themselves were killed. Do Jews seem clannish? The walls within which they seem to live were erected in large part by the czar, the police, and the Orthodox Church. Though the Jews have raised their own walls, Antin explains, as a response to the wrongs done them in the name of Christianity, "This wall within the

wall [of the Pale] is the religious integrity of the Jews, a fortress erected by the prisoners of the Pale, in defiance of their jailers; a stronghold built by the ruins of their pillaged homes, cemented with the blood of their murdered children." One wonders how critics of Antin have not sufficiently noted her passionate defense of Jews and Jewish life.

Of course she is also critical of much in that life she had come out of. She decries its medieval characteristics—the antiquated view of medicine, the superstitious belief in nostrums and miracles. She praises education, and the high place study occupies in Jewish life ("There is never a Jewish community without its scholars, but where Jews may not be both intellectuals and Jews, they prefer to remain Jews"), yet she is critical of its denial, by and large, to women: "A girl's real schoolroom was her mother's kitchen," she notes, with marriage and the family its end product. In her own case, she was proud to be sent to school, though her first one "was a hovel on the edge of a swamp." She persisted, however, in the pursuit of knowledge, "undeterred by the fate of Eve," learning an important and liberating lesson: "What you would know, find out for yourself." She sees in this "the clearing of modernity." America, in contrast, is praised for the freedom women have, to be educated, to marry whom they wish. Antin is not exactly a suffragette—she thought other issues, such as open immigration, took priority, yet she speaks up boldly for women.

Nevertheless she has wonderful and loving images of life in the old country: a wedding in Polotzk; long, delicious Sabbath-day walks in the countryside; public baths and ritual baths; food—the taste of cherries and the Sabbath-night cheesecake. About the last she makes one of her most profound statements: "It takes history to make such a cake." Later, in America, eating strawberries, she has a Proust-like experience, in which all of that past is remembered, alongside her present condition: "Aware of . . . all that I had become—suddenly illuminated, inspired by a complete vision of myself, a daughter of Israel and a child of the universe." A complete vision of herself—the celebration of America, to be sure, and of the Emersonian self she was to become, claiming to be "the heir of the ages" (at an early stage, that was her preferred title for the book)—but, foremost, "a daughter of Israel." The biblical images and references throughout—as in the chapter titles "The Tree of Knowledge," "Manna," "The Exodus," and "The Promised Land"—attest to that. As does her defense of the poor Jewish immigrant—the peddler, the cross-legged tailor, the ragpicker—condescended to and regarded disdainfully, if noticed at all, by "my American friend," as she addresses the reader. She prophesies that the

children of these men will enrich American life. (All this should be seen in the context of a growing resistance to unrestricted immigration—a movement institutionalized in the 1896 Anti-Immigrant League, whose goal was largely successful in the restrictive legislation of 1921 and 1924, which effectively stopped immigration from southern and eastern Europe.) And not only would the immigrant enrich American life: Antin seems to anticipate Oscar Handlin's famous formulation that "immigration *was* American history" (emphasis added).

What grated on certain of her contemporaries, who saw themselves as old and authentic Americans—in contrast, of course, to the immigrants—was the insouciance of Antin's bold claim to America. Professor Barrett Wendell of Harvard, who had befriended Antin, and Agnes Repplier writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* (her criticism printed there was the most unkind cut of all) regarded as effrontery Antin's claim to kinship with the Pilgrims ("our forefathers") and her insistence that as a citizen she was equal to all those who had come before—including George Washington (that irreproachable man who had supplanted the Yom Kippur prayers for her; thus could she antagonize Jews as well as old Americans) and other "Fellow Citizens."

Antin may have been committed to a marvelous ideal of America, but for her the notion of "assimilation" was too simplistic. Her ethnic identity is thickly represented in *The Promised Land*, and she never (then or later, when she turned toward Christian and Eastern mysticism) denied the Jewishness at the core of her being. And yet she did not foresee or desire a fixed and immutable quality to ethnic groups, or at least not to aspiring and talented individuals within such groups. Her broader vision is encapsulated in such phrases as "To be alive in America . . . is to ride on the central current of the river of modern life." That life was opened to her by the great institutions of her adopted city, Boston: the Public Library, "Built by the People—Free to All" (and "the door to paradise"); the public schools (the story ends with her time at the eminent Boston Latin School for Girls); the settlement houses created for the poor to use and grow in; the streets themselves (where she learned "what life is made of"). She concludes, "From my little room on Dover Street I reached out for the world, and the world came to me." Most important for her development was her exposure to the "study of natural history outdoors," which she achieved through the club she joined at the Edward Hale Settlement House. There she met her husband-to-be, and there she discovered Darwinism, the great organizing principle of "evolution," which was to become another

Promised Land for her. She claims that it enabled her to rebuild an integrated world—unifying the two-ness that was inevitably part of the dislocation of an immigrant experience—and find her place in the universe.

Such audacious claims. Chiefly, over and over again, her love affair with America: "my country," she brazenly declares. Polotzk had been *goluth*—exile. The Jews were a people without a country who "at last found rest / In the land where reigned Freedom . . . a nest / To homeless birds your land proved to us." Never mind her later attachment to Zionism—which can be reconciled, in any case, as it was by Justice Louis Brandeis and many others, with an ardent Americanism; for Antin, Zionism was a response to the continued persecutions of Jews in countries other than America. She was glad to change from her immigrant clothes, cast off her old names (the Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian versions of Maryashe, Mashinke, and Mashka) in favor of Mary (though she expressed some disappointment at not being given an exotic, "strange-sounding" American name), declare her love "for the English language . . . this beautiful language in which I think." One can well understand how such phrases and sentiments might irritate celebrants of ethnic persistence. Abraham Cahan—himself often an advocate of assimilation—and many others were to write about the losses incurred in the Americanization process—language, customs, culture, psychological coherence. In 1896, Cahan had exposed just such dangers in the first immigrant novel in English by and about an immigrant, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto,* in which the callow "hero" casts off the old ways and adopts the most superficial values of the new. Antin's work and her vision of the goal at the end of the process are on a much loftier level. The world she and her family lived in here in America was in many respects poor and cruel, but it was full of doors, as she called them, to a better and even more transcendent life. This is no American "rags to riches" myth, as Michael Kramer has shown, but a vision of the transcendence that we should honor.

And one must reflect yet again on the world that Antin left. There is a chilling scene in the chapter "Exodus" when a group of emigrants, her small family among them, are packed into fourth-class railroad cars for the journey out of Russia, through Berlin, and to the embarkation port of Hamburg. On the outskirts of Berlin the train stops "in a great lonely field, opposite a solitary house within a large yard," where they are told to get out quickly, and amid a "scene of bewildering confusion" they are herded by Germans, dressed in white, and barking orders and shouting "Quick! Quick!" The passengers obey

the commands "like meek children." Their things are taken from them, friends are separated, and they are inspected

> [a]s if to ascertain our full value; strange-looking people driving us about like dumb animals, helpless and unresisting; children we could not see crying in a way that suggested terrible things; ourselves driven into a little room where a great kettle was boiling on a little stove; our clothes taken off, our bodies rubbed with a slippery substance that might be any bad thing; a shower of warm water let down on us without warning; again driven to another little room where we sit, wrapped in woolen blankets till large, coarse bags are brought in, their contents turned out, and we see only a cloud of steam, and hear the women's orders to dress ourselves—"Quick! Quick!"—or else we'll miss—something we cannot hear . . . "Quick! Quick!—or you'll miss the train!"—Oh, so we really won't be murdered!

Of course, leaving plague-ridden Russia, they were merely being deloused, as many immigrants often were. Antin originally wrote this passage in Yiddish in a letter to her uncle in Europe—the basis for her first book. Here it is again, intact in *The Promised Land*. No doubt the purpose was to show the difficulties and indignities, even humiliation, immigrants endured en route. Perhaps it can be read, too, as a purification rite—the beginning of the stripping of one's identity, along with their outer garments, preparing for the donning of new identities. Nonetheless, the railroad cars, the herded people, the barked commands, children crying, the terrible fears, the showers, conjure up for the contemporary reader a less-benign outcome. If Antin could say with confident hope earlier in her narrative, "I still hope to make port at last . . . for the ship I sail on is history," other European Jews some years later did not or could not make that journey to the Promised Land. History forced them into similar trains bound for a far more sinister destination.

NOTES

1. The original manuscript for *The Promised Land* has been illuminatingly studied by Kerin R. McGinity in "The Real Mary Antin." Ms. McGinity identifies the mission as, primarily, "to open the minds of Americans" so they will see the potential of the recent Jewish immigrants, and other immigrants, "as contributing members of American society." (p. 307.)
2. McGinity and others point to the important differences between Cahan and Antin based on gender. Cahan, for one thing, as a male already influential as a writer and editor, could handle both editors and audience in a heavily patriarchal era with more assurance than Antin.

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2

Between Two Worlds: Anzia Yezierska, Longing for the New: Bound to the Old

Evelyn Avery

Anzia Yezierska—contemporary icon of feminism; her novel *Bread Givers,* a staple in American, ethnic, and women's literature; her fiction, the subject of feminist sessions at literary conferences—would have been astounded at the critiques of her writing and the perspectives on her life.

Born sometime in the 1880s in Plinsk, Russia, Yezierska immigrated with her Talmudic father, devout mother, and eight siblings to America, specifically to the Lower East Side, home to thousands of impoverished Jews who became the subject of her fiction. Desperate to escape the plight of other immigrants, the confinement of the ghetto, and the limitations of Orthodoxy, she sought opportunity through education and writing. Despite her talents, intellectual connections, and Hollywood success, however, Yezierska never found the happiness or peace she was seeking as an American woman.

Two failed marriages, an abandoned daughter, and short-lived affairs with distinguished Protestant intellectuals tormented the author, who, contrary to contemporary feminist thought, did not suffer just because she was a victim of a patriarchal religion and a cruel father, but rather because she, like the male authors Abraham Cahan, Henry Roth, and Ludwig Lewisohn, was caught between two cultures, and possessed a unique personality and strong will. Yezierska illustrates in most of her fiction and in her memoir, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), the

need to reconcile the Old World and the New, her Jewish heritage and American freedom, her desires and her father's needs. A moving novel, and her best work, *Bread Givers* is often reduced to the story of a heartless father, Reb Moishe Smolinsky; his long-suffering wife, Shenah; and victimized daughters, all of whom he tyrannizes. While this summary may have some truth, it doesn't capture the complexities of the novel, the variety of male and female characters, their choices, and careful plot development, which shall be discussed later. In fact the novel's conclusion is often dismissed as a tacked-on piece of romantic drivel. But careful readers discover that despite Moishe's oppressiveness, he has had a profound influence on his youngest daughter, Sara, whose love of learning, strong will, and perseverance stem from him, her "blud un eisen," or "blood and iron." More than her affection for her mother and sisters, Sara's connection to Moishe defines her life, just as Yezierska's similarity and attachment to her father shapes her personality and her future as a woman and a writer. *Bread Givers* is not just a fictional clash between the Old World and the New; it partially reflects Yezierska's life as revealed in *Red Ribbon,* where the author confesses many of her youthful mistakes and her desire to correct them. Her longing for her father, for the old ways, her recognition of the vanity of materialism, and her selfishness confirm what some readers of *Bread Givers* had realized years earlier and what Louise Levitas Henriksen, her daughter, validates in her biography, *Anzia Yezierska, A Writer's Life*. Yezierska was not a simple victim of her heritage. If her life reflected some poor choices, the best of her fiction reflects the intelligence to make good ones, to reconcile both the Old World and the New. Unfortunately, much contemporary criticism has appropriated Yezierska for the feminist movement and to a significant extent, misinterprets her and her fiction.

Even Carol Schoen, in her mostly balanced *Anzia Yezierska,* allows her sympathy for Yezierska to color painful biographical details, attributing divorces and her desertion of her only child to a "stultifying marriage." Nor is the description of the author as a devoted mother quite realistic. Henriksen's biography clearly provides a different portrait of her mother, willfully choosing her husbands, lovers, friends, and manipulating them and her family to achieve professional success. Schoen, who had access to Henriksen's papers, does not mention husbands exploited for money and status, or a daughter dumped on her father's doorstep, to be summoned over the years when Yezierska needed companionship or felt guilty.

Another scholar, Alice Kessler-Harris, who deserves credit for first discovering and then promoting Yezierska's works, acknowledges the author's "willful and solipsistic nature," described by family and friends,

in her expanded 1999 foreword and introduction to *Bread Givers.* Conceding the writer's self-centered, "aggressive, demanding, forceful" personality, she even quotes Henriksen: "It was not so much that she was a feminist, she was just herself" (Introduction, xxvi). Kessler-Harris seems to acknowledge Yezierska's responsibility for her short-lived marriages, the fate of her child, and her tumultuous social relationships described in Henriksen's biography. However, like Schoen, she sympathizes with Yezierska, providing a personal identification or a sociological context that colors many feminist analyses. On the first page of the foreword, Kessler-Harris explains her attraction to Yezierska and *Bread Givers:* "Like Yezierska, I am an immigrant: a young woman in a world where ambition seemed designed for men. My father, like hers, though for vastly different reasons, could not bear to see his daughter tread a path he thought foolhardy. In his eye, universities were for males; girls might aspire to teachers' colleges. Nothing more. So like Sara Smolinsky [*Bread Givers*], I broke away . . . [and] I read [her story] as an immigrant, a woman, a Jew, and a 'person'" (Foreword, viii).

Significantly, "Jew" comes second to "woman" in Kessler-Harris's self-definition and given such priorities, certain generalizations are predictable. Thus, Yezierska's portrayal of her tyrannical Orthodox father becomes representative of Jewish life and the author's fiction is transformed into reality: "In the name of religious duty, husbands . . . who were otherwise dependent on their wives and children tyrannized them . . . and [saw] that women were merely the servants of men, the extensions of their husbands" (Introduction, xxii, xxv). It is unfortunate that an otherwise-useful introduction slips into perpetuating stereotypes of both immigrant Jewish men and women. Not surprisingly, no sources are cited, producing generalizations about "women peddling in the market place. Their husbands spen[ding] long hours in the synagogue, . . . contemptuous of non-Jews, deal[ing] with them as little as possible" (xxiii). This picture of beleaguered women and arrogant men leads Kessler-Harris to assert that if Yezierska "was not typical of immigrant women, neither was she unique. [Yezierska's] struggle in lesser proportions went on everywhere" (xxix). Yet she should know otherwise, for elsewhere in the introduction she reveals that Yezierska's sisters "had not been forced into marriages . . . and were for the most part happy," unlike the characters in *Bread Givers,* supposedly based on the author's life.

Despite some attempt to separate fact from fiction, sociology from literature, the introduction is weakened by a feminist agenda, which casts women as victims of the patriarchy. Unfortunately, Kessler-Harris's case rests on a common but somewhat-flawed interpretation of *Bread*

Givers, in which Sara (read Yezierska) escapes a "self-righteous father" [who had] successively drive[n] off the suitors of each of her three sisters . . . and marr[ied them] to men of his own choosing" (xxxv). While that much is true, Kessler-Harris avoids describing the daughters' true loves, the "suitors" they would have married, if allowed. According to feminist criticism, only the men make choices while Sara's sisters shed tears, pathetically relinquishing their boyfriends. No questions are raised, however, about the poor quality of their beaus, their potential as husbands, or the wisdom of the daughters' romantic choices. Significantly, Mashah, the second daughter, granted another chance with Jacob Novak, "g[i]ves in to [Moishe's] will" and rejects him (64). Similarly, Mrs. Feinstein, Moishe's tyrannical female alter ego, whom he marries 30 days after Shenah dies, is not analyzed in discussions of *Bread Givers.* Why not? Perhaps such scholarly commentary would reveal that Sara's sisters are weak and foolish, and that the author has created a female villain even more selfish and outrageous than the miserable Moishe. For by introducing Mrs. Feinstein, whose behavior mocks her name, Yezierska complicates gender analysis and undermines feminist theory. What irony that a Lady Macbeth type topples Moishe and usurps the position of his loving wife. Far from being an indictment of patriarchal Judaism, Moishe reflects ignorance of the biblical *Avos* (Fathers) and of his namesake Moses. While Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are commanded by God to respect their wives and are reproached for infractions, Moishe had belittled his wife, cursed his daughters, and brazenly remarried shortly after his wife's death. As the daughters watch helplessly, he squanders the insurance money on his new wife. Where Shenah sacrificed her appearance and health for Moishe's *tzedakah* (charities) and Torah learning, Mrs. Feinstein demands a well-heated, attractively furnished apartment; new clothes; and jewelry. Once the money is gone, the battle lines are drawn with the avaricious Mrs. Feinstein threatening to sue for support, the older Smolinsky daughters distancing themselves from the crisis, and only Sara worrying about her father's fate.

Unfortunately, however, critics ignore Mrs. Feinstein's role, focusing instead on Moishe Smolinsky as the oppressive Orthodox patriarch, on Shenah Pesha as the long-suffering and submissive wife, and on the three daughters, Bessie, Mashah, and Fania, as simple, tragic victims of patriarchal Judaism. According to this formula, only one individual, the youngest, most Americanized, spirited daughter emerges as a heroine, and even Sara, in the eyes of Kessler-Harris, is trapped once she returns to her father to "attempt to seek absolution," a nonfeminist goal attributed to Yezierska's emotional need for her

father (xxxvi). Yet the novel concludes with a powerfully ironic role reversal, when Reb Smolinsky, a street peddler, is reduced to being dependent on his youngest daughter, a successful teacher engaged to a sensitive and devoted man. However, the critics prefer to ignore Sara's free will. Although Moishe, stubborn and demanding, hasn't changed, Sara has. Aware of the emotional and religious burdens her father will impose on her, she invites him to live with her: "Suddenly the pathos of this lonely old man pierced me. . . . All that he had left of life was his fanatical adherence to his traditions. It was within my power to keep lighted the flickering candle of his life for him. Could I deny him this poor service?" (*Bread Givers,* 296). Regardless of her ambivalence and the sacrifices demanded, for Sara the alternative of abandoning Moishe to a nursing home, or the claws of Mrs. Feinstein, is worse. Yezierska couldn't be clearer that Sara makes the right decision to protect her father instead of fleeing her past.

Those who deny this conclusion ignore Sara's growth and maturity, choosing only to focus on the explosive clashes between the tyrannical father and his family. Thus Ruth Knafo Setton emphasizes that the "emotionally autobiographical *Bread Givers*" pits desperate Sara against her "Talmudic Scholar father who greedily ignores his daughters as he arranges loveless marriages that assure his security but ignore their needs" (52). Doubtless Moishe is as self-centered as Setton describes him, arranging loveless marriages, and focusing on his needs. But without a deeper understanding of him, the other characters' behavior, and Sara's evolution, without acknowledging the roles of the daughters' boyfriends and Mrs. Feinstein, Setton will erroneously conclude that even Sara ends "bowed beneath the burden of misogynist Jewish tradition that divides women into blundering Eve[s] or demonic Lilith[s]" (53). Like others, Setton criticizes *Bread Givers* for "its attempt at a happy fairy tale ending . . . [in which] Sara swiftly meets and falls in love with . . . a gentle, tolerant, educated man" who invites Moishe to live with them when they marry" (53). But to reject Yezierska's conclusion is to deny the novel's logic and Sara's character, which has gradually matured through experience. Bright, ambitious, and idealistic, Sara flees the ghetto, pursuing a college education at an unnamed, "middle American" college, where she is persuaded that as an immigrant outsider she would never be accepted by those "calm faces and cool eyes" (211), by the real American students. Despite her academic success, Sara never makes close friends. Seeking comfort among her own kind, she chooses to return and teach in Hester Street, where she will meet Hugo Seelig, her principal and future husband, and be reunited with her destitute

father. Those who dismiss the conclusion must also ignore Sara's emotionally unsatisfying college experience and failure to assimilate.

In *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters: Tracing the Maternal in Stories by American Jewish Women,* a feminist study of American Jewish women writers, Janet Handler Burstein views Yezierska and Sara as beyond "being handicapped by poverty, by the unfamiliarity with the language and customs of America . . . [their] insecurities reflect[ed] the developmental dilemma of wom[e]n whose studious rabbinical father[s] never affirmed, or encouraged, or supported [their] desire to study"(30). Such an analysis holds Moishe Smolinsky responsible for crushing all the women in his family, but it is belied by Sara's success, her acknowledgment: "Who gave me the fire, the passion, to push myself up from the dirt? If I grow, if I rise, if I ever amount to something, is it not his spirit burning in me?" (286). It does not allow for the possibility of Sara *choosing* to pity, forgive, and understand her father in the end. Not surprisingly, Burstein concludes she "has always hated him"(30) and if poisoned with such anger, how is it possible to change? It follows, of course, that Sara will not be able to love either, which means that her relationship with Hugo is unbelievable and that Sara, like her mother and sisters, just needs validation by a male, an unwarranted assumption given her rejection of another suitor, Max Goldstein. Such feminist criticism rereads *Bread Givers,* ignoring Sara's development, her sisters' limitations, Mrs. Feinstein's venality, and Moishe's un-Torah-like behavior. Instead of recognizing the possibilities for growth and change, it interprets the novel fatalistically.

Quite a different portrait of Yezierska and her works emerges in her daughter's study of this passionate, troubled, immigrant writer. In: *A Writer's Life* Henriksen painfully examines the woman who couldn't really mother her since she was so self-involved. Written in 1988, 18 years after Yezierska's death, the book utilizes the author's autobiography, fiction, correspondence with family, friends, and Henriksen's experience with her famous, erratic mother whose mood swings caused havoc in the lives of even those who tried to help her.

Henriksen titles the preface, "Who was she?" and closes the last chapter with cries from her elderly mother's notebook, "Who am I? what am I?" For 300 pages in between, facts are detailed, exploits are recounted, emotions explode, and fame is won and lost, but the key to understanding Yezierska eludes both the reader and the immigrant writer herself. Raised in an impoverished environment by an autocratic father and submissive mother, Yezierska was an original: bright and talented, but also ambitious and demanding. Portrayed by her publicists as a Cinderella figure, the ghetto girl who makes it,

she more closely resembles an Horatio Alger hero, who finds success through luck and pluck. In *Red Ribbon,* Yezierska avoids any mention of her marriages and her daughter and rationalizes deserting her parents because they were "strangling [her] young life" (93). However, *A Writer's Life* provides a more complete picture of the author, who upon escaping poverty first seduces Arnold Levitas, then his more successful attorney friend, Jacob Gordon, whom she impulsively marries and then deserts, repulsed by his physical unattractiveness. Within nine months, Yezierska has again charmed Arnold, and soon conceives her only child, Louise (45). After the publication of her first story, "The Free Vacation House," "she . . . [rejects] house keeping and baking cookies" (62) and impulsively leaves her daughter with a frantic Arnold, only to return and escape with the child to her sister Fannie in California. Ultimately, Yezierska has no allies; Fannie's husband ejects her; she is accused of child neglect. When she tries to win back Arnold a third time, he closes the door to his house and his heart and she is left only with weekend visitation rights with Louise.

Not surprisingly Yezierska had similar relationships with her lovers, her publishers, Hollywood studio bosses, her siblings, John Dewey, and her daughter. Hungry for attention and approval, Yezierska passionately demanded total support, draining others but fearing or unable to reciprocate. In *Red Ribbon,* she describes the electrifying touch of John Morrow's (John Dewey's) hand, his appreciation of her sweatshop manuscript, his praise of her passionate personality and exotic loveliness, and finally her regrets when she pushes him away: "I had not dreamed that God could become flesh" (113). Once again Yezierska pursues love, but flees when it comes within reach. As Morrow/Dewey wisely observes, "You want love, but you do not want me. You do not love me. You only dramatize your want of love" (114). As if to confirm his insights, Yezierska refuses to return his love letters and poetry, which would destroy his family life. As Henriksen observes, "Dewey recognized the truth . . . that Anzia could not love him. But she had desperately needed him as a father, a lover, a brother, to care for her and make her whole" (121). In fact, in *All I Could Never Be,* Yezierska expresses amazement that Dewey, an American Gentile, reminded her of her father (35).

Nor was Dewey the only victim of Yezierska's intense psychological and material needs. She even turned on blood relatives when they could not satisfy her. Thus her sister Fannie outlived her usefulness when she put her husband first. Similarly, Annie, whose flat had provided the setting for her fiction and who helped with the early stories, was, according to Henriksen, forgotten once Yezierska achieved fame.

The biography actually parallels the rabbi and his daughter so visible in *Bread Givers:*

> In her self-centered dealings with others, compelled by the urgency of her need, Anzia somehow expected everyone to appreciate her dedication to a higher aesthetic than ordinary people knew. Just as her father, a rabbi, exacted such a deference, she always expected Annie, Fannie and their children to wait on her with food and lodging or she required, similarly, those who had editorial skills to contribute to the cause. (209)

Of all those ensnared in Yezierska's life, drawn by her vivaciousness, hypnotized by her passion, and ultimately wounded by her, the most haunted was her vulnerable daughter who admired, even adored, but also resented her. On Saturdays and occasional sleepover weekends, Louise might be treated to girl talk, gracious hotel meals, pleasant strolls, or be indoctrinated against her father and grandmother, while Yezierska, in a phase, even stinted on food. As a teen, Louise spent Saturdays reading manuscripts with her mother, unable to predict her moods.

Although few of these matters, with the exception of John Dewey, appear in *Red Ribbon,* Anzia Yezierska was quite aware of her failings, the pain she caused, and the responsibility she had to assume. Both *Red Ribbon* and even more clearly *Bread Givers* demonstrate Yezierska's pattern of desperation, flight from the ghetto and family, personal success, and longing for return and redemption. *Red Ribbon* begins with Yezierska pawning her mother's precious shawl for a dollar to phone Hollywood and accept an offer to work on a film version of *Hungry Hearts.* Symbolically, the sale of the shawl represented the loss of heritage and family connection. Despite financial support for her father, his words, "Daughter of Babylon," rang in her ears and though he "scorned [her] godlessness, she thought he would take a father's pride in [her] success" (33). Throughout *Red Ribbon,* her father's values, his voice, follow her. In Hollywood, surrounded by glamour and superficiality, she feels an outsider, but also guilty for her attraction to the wealthy: "I could almost feel my father turning in his grave at my apostasy" (59). Escaping to New Hampshire, she immerses herself in evergreens, pleasant but standoffish country folk, and lots of silence, but still feels unsatisfied, while her acquaintance with fellow author Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a very different personality, fails to blossom into a real friendship. The aging Jewish writer misses her home—the noise, crowds, vitality, the Jews of New York City, her roots.

At the end of *Red Ribbon,* on the way back to New York, the author thinks of her father. She describes proudly showing him the book,

but instead of praising her, the old man with his "tallis" and "tfillin" dismisses her as ignorant of life, unworthy of writing about him and all that he holds dear, the Torah and God. "How," he cries out, "can you write about someone you don't know?" Feminist scholars cite this passage often to indict Reb Yezierska, Moishe Smolinsky, all the patriarchal figures the author knew and wrote about, and by extension Judaism as a patriarchal religion. However, such critics omit significant portions of the scene and misunderstand Yezierska's intent in including it (216–218) Although equally passionate, self-righteous, and argumentative, chastising him for neglecting and enslaving the family, she realizes that her father, though saddened by her life style, was comforted by his Torah and God while she "envied his inward peace as a homeless one envies the sight of home. . . . She fled from him in anger and resentment. But it was no use. [She] could never escape him" (217). Given their strong, demanding personalities, only in fiction could Yezierska express her anguish and partially resolve their conflict. If in real life she could only send her father a check, in *Bread Givers,* she, as Sara Smolinsky, the youngest rebellious daughter, could return home, choose to make sacrifices, reconcile with the old man, and be rewarded by marriage to an enlightened, traditional Jewish man. But this immigrant novel written in 1925 is not the same work that today has become popularized, as Alice Kessler-Harris writes, by "the women's movement, [which] has [made] *Bread Givers* more meaningful than ever" (xxxvi).

Moishe Smolinsky is a Talmudic scholar who demands that his wife and four daughters support the family, provide a room for his holy books, the best of the food, allocation of scarce funds, and allow him to find matches for his daughters. While most critics justifiably condemn his domineering nature, they assume Yezierska's bullying caricature typifies patriarchal Judaism. According to halakah (Judaic law) a husband and wife must respect and support each other. Moishe, however, shows neither for the women in his life, actually defying the concept of the Torah family; his destructive matchmaking contradicts Jewish guidelines of *shadchanism* (matchmaking), according to the rabbinic authority Maurice Lamm. Arrogant, rigid, above all frustrated that America doesn't value his religious scholarship, Moishe tyrannizes his family, but he doesn't triumph. Contributing instead to his wife's death, his daughters' suffering, and his own humiliating beggary, he is by the conclusion, reliant on his youngest rebellious daughter.

Read from Sara's first-person point of view, *Bread Givers* becomes the demise of Moishe and the rise of Sara. In the format of an initiation novel, the latter flees home, the provincial ghetto; struggles in Middle America as she acquires a college education; and realizing

that she does not fit in, returns home to the Lower East Side where, stumbling upon her father peddling in the streets, her bitterness turns to pity. Long before the much-derided romantic ending when Sara meets Hugo Seelig, her future husband and admirer of Moishe, Sara will have matured enough to forgive and care for her father, despite his arrogance. Her visit to the cold, institutionalized nursing home; her encounter with the greedy, blackmailing Mrs. Feinstein; the indifference of her sisters, all have convinced Sara that she cannot abandon her father despite the past. There is also her promise to her dying mother, Shenah, to watch over him and guilt at having fled the family. However, if Sara were not independent and strong enough to make the choice and assume responsibility, the novel would end very differently and, contrary to the critics, very unnaturally.

The conclusion is the logical outcome of the novel's beginning where ten-year-old Sara aggressively hawks herring in the streets and turns the money over to her family. Bright, ambitious, much younger than her siblings, she learns from their experiences, their poor choices, and plots her escape. Yet it would be simplistic to believe that the other daughters, Bessie, Mashah, and Fania lacked free will and were just Moishe's pawns. True, they marry the fakers, louts, and unattractive men Moishe foolishly selects for them: Bessie will toil for the middle-aged fish peddler, Zalmon, and his six children; Mashah sacrifices herself and her babies for Moe Mirsky, the fake diamond salesman who barely supports them while Fania languishes apart from her family in California with her gambler husband, Abe Schmuckler.

However, before they and their mother are idealized as sacrificial lambs who, but for their father's chauvinist and authoritarian personality, would have had happy lives, it is essential to understand Yezierska's subtext that clearly reveals the difference between Sara and her three sisters. Where the former rejects the charming, affectionate, but self-centered Max Goldstein who dismisses her passion for education, the latter use poor judgment and fall in love with weak, shallow, self-serving men. Thus Bessie's true love, Berel Bernstein, is shown bargaining with Moishe for her as if she were garment ware in the factory she will help him run. In three long pages, they haggle over dowry issues, with Berel asserting that he could have had "prettier, smarter, and younger, girls," but he prefers Bessie the workhorse, all this within earshot of Bessie in the next room. So much for romance and her "sechiel" (sense). Mashah, lovely and decorative, becomes involved with Jacob Novak, a classical pianist dependent on his wealthy father for support. Their affair is undermined not only by both fathers but also by Jacob who is too weak to stand by her.

Finally, Fania's choice of Morris Lipkin, supposedly a sensitive poet, is a mistake, as he cannot confront Moishe, and makes fun of ten-year-old Sara who has a crush on him.

As for Shenah, the mother who allows her husband to bamboozle their daughters into unhappy marriages, she cannot be excused as merely a pawn of the patriarchy, for later when Moishe purchases a worthless New Jersey store, she becomes assertive, castigating him for his laziness and insisting on their working together in the grocery. Finally, Sara, though she is fortunate as the youngest to observe her sister's mistakes, also has the character to choose differently. Faced with the prospect of Max Goldstein, who briefly tempts her with a glib tongue and generous entertaining, she rejects him and is rewarded by meeting Hugo Seelig, of Polish Jewish background, who having succeeded in American education, wants to retrieve his Jewish heritage with her father's help.

Readers who discount the ending fail to understand that it represents Anzia Yezierska's most fervent wish, a relationship with her father and a connection to her heritage. Nor was she romantic, even in her fiction, about the difficulties involved. If, as in the novel, Moishe Smolinsky agreed to live with his daughter, the burdens would be great, the author realized, and the "shadow of the past" would always be following her. On the other hand, in real life Yezierska died lonely, regretful, without having reconciled with that which she needed the most.

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3

Edna Ferber, Jewish American Writer: Who Knew?

Eileen H. Watts

To write about Edna Ferber's treatment of Jewish American women in her fiction is to write about Edna Ferber herself. A nonpracticing Jew, Ferber was ferociously Jewish politically, socially, morally, and spiritually, yet virulently anti-Zionist. Her only Jewish novel, *Fanny Herself,* written in 1917, is highly autobiographical and provides the spiritual underpinning for Ferber's first autobiography, *A Peculiar Treasure* (1939), and to a lesser extent, for her second, *A Kind of Magic* (1963). While Ferber largely rejected Judaism in terms of religion, she felt keenly the history of the Jewish people, particularly their centuries of suffering and persecution, to which she attributed her own success as a writer.

Ferber was born in 1885 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, to Julia Neumann, a second-generation German immigrant, and Jacob Ferber, a Hungarian immigrant who ran a never-quite-successful general store, first in Ottumwa, Iowa, and then in Appleton, Wisconsin. While the Ferbers attended services on and closed the store during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they were not otherwise particularly religious, learned, or observant Jews. Thus, Ferber was raised in a home in which money was always an issue and in Midwestern towns in which Jews were a minuscule, and often persecuted, presence. The seven years spent in the anti-Semitic mining town of Ottumwa seemed to have scarred the young girl for life. Indeed, the abuse that she and her family endured there may actually, ironically, account for Ferber's literary love affair with

America—assimilation in the extreme. For Jews have but two options in response to the type of anti-Semitism seemingly indigenous to small, rural towns of the Midwest, far from the relative tolerance, if not acceptance, of Jews in the more cosmopolitan cities of the East. They can flee the towns or flee from Judaism—that is, assimilate. Thus, perceiving Ferber's immersion in Americana through the lens of her childhood fear of and contempt for "the Nazis of that little Iowa town" (Gilbert, 432), one suspects that Ferber's career was her way of proving that "the little Jew girl" was, indeed, an acceptable American. In later life, she recalled, "I don't think there was a day [in Ottumwa] when I wasn't called a sheeny. . . . I still feel an absurd and deep hatred of it. And yet not absurd. It must have left its mark on a sensitive child. . . . The hanging on Main street [*sic*] . . . It wasn't so much what they [the ignorant boys] said as their vacant evil obscene faces. I hope they were all very hungry, ill and in a good deal of quite unbearable pain before they died. My other cheek was all worn out long before I grew up" (Gilbert, 431–432).

Actually, the town's unbearable treatment of the Ferbers made the young Edna seek escape in books, at the rate of a book a day. Having exhausted the contents of her high school and community libraries, devouring all of Dickens by age ten, Ferber was largely a self-taught writer. Instead of costly college, the 17-year-old worked as a reporter for five years on an Appleton newspaper and on the *Milwaukee Journal*. These five years of frenetic work and neglected health led to a physical and emotional breakdown in her early 20s, after which, purely to forestall boredom, the restless Ferber wrote her first novel, *Dawn O'Hara*.

Undaunted by her initial inability to sell *Dawn O'Hara,* Ferber turned to writing short stories, achieving wild national popularity with her tales of Emma McChesney, a traveling saleswoman for the Featherloom Petticoat Company, at a time when the petticoat was about to be passe. McChesney is more successful than her male colleagues, is smarter than the company's president, raises her son, sends him to college, and saves the petticoat company from bankruptcy. In 1912, the editors of *American Magazine* informed Ferber that with Emma McChesney she "had created a new character in fiction. The American business woman had never been done" (*A Peculiar Treasure,* 177). A total of three volumes of these stories were serialized in various magazines and were published in three collections from 1913 through 1915.

Edna Ferber lived to be 83 years old (she died of cancer in April 1968) and in that time produced a prodigious amount of work.

Because she believed that humanitarian causes are congruent with Jewish causes, the moral, if not intellectual, superiority of oppressed people is a steady undercurrent in nearly all of her fiction, as are the commensurate ebb and flow of the oppressors' inhumanities. For example, the Emma McChesney stories collected in *Roast Beef, Medium* (1913), *Personality Plus* (1914), and *Emma McChesney and Co.* (1915) tackle the adventures of a divorced woman in a man's business. Similarly, the Pulitzer Prize–winning *So Big* (1924) dramatizes the physical and moral superiority of farm women, as the widowed Selina DeJong raises her son, Dirk, in High Prairie, outside Chicago. Amid the drama and romance of *Showboat* (1926), Ferber turned her attention to the cruelty of the South's miscegenation laws. *Cimarron* (1929) deals with the homesteaders of the 1889 Oklahoma land rush. Even here, her characters battle bigotry and racism against Jews and Native Americans, and she depicts women as the primary civilizing forces on the frontier, as physically and socially capable as men, but morally stronger. In this novel women stake land claims, but, unlike men, are immune to wealth's corrupting influences. *Giant* (1950) is perhaps Ferber's most sustained treatment of racism. As sprawling as Texas itself, the novel chronicles the life of the oil baron Benedict, who becomes a giant in his wife's eyes for championing Mexicans who are being evicted from a seedy diner. Ferber also exposes the cruel living conditions of and absence of medical care for Mexican ranch hands in early twentieth-century Texas. Here too, portraits of strong, capable, humanitarian women dominate. Finally, *Ice Palace* (1958), also an account of the ways in which building enormous wealth eviscerates people's ethics, presented Ferber with the opportunity to unmask racism and prejudice against Eskimos and Chinese immigrants in Alaska. In all, she wrote 11 volumes of short stories, 12 novels, and 6 plays, 5 of which were written with George S. Kaufman, including *The Royal Family* (1928), *Dinner at Eight* (1932), and *Stage Door* (1936).

In her novels, however, Ferber gave free reign to Judaism and the evils of anti-Semitism only in *Fanny Herself*. Her only other fictional treatment of anti-Semitism in novels appears in *Cimarron* and *Great Son* (1944). Set during the Oklahoma land rush of 1889, *Cimarron* features "the town Jew." The shopkeeper Sol Levy is forced to drink whisky, is shot at repeatedly for sport, and assumes the gaunt appearance and approximate position of the crucified Christ. Levy is quickly rescued by the novel's hero, Yancy Cravat, who risks his life to do so. Although a minor character, Sol Levy in Oklahoma is a fictionalized version of Edna Ferber in Ottumwa, allowing Ferber to expose in print the degradation and abuse she endured as a little girl. Even

the town madam, Dixie Lee, and her girls, tease Sol: "'Come on, Solly! . . . Why don't you smile? Don't you never have no fun? I bet you're rich. Jews is all rich.' . . . His deep-sunk eyes looked at them. Schicksas. 'Go on, get the hell out of here! You got your money, ain't you? Get, sheeny.' . . . He was the town Jew. He was a person apart. Sometimes the cowboys deviled him; or the saloon loungers and professional bad men. They looked upon him as fair game. He thought of them as savages" (*Cimarron,* 142, 143).

After rescuing Sol from the drunken cowboys, Yancy tells him, "This Oklahoma country's no place for you, Sol. It's too rough, too hard. You come of a race of dreamers," to which Sol later replies, "Those barbarians! My ancestors were studying the Talmud and writing the laws the civilized world now lives by when theirs were swinging from tree to tree" (145). Of course, Sol builds his business into the Levy Mercantile Company, whose building sports the only penthouse in Oklahoma.

While Sol Levy is a product of Ferber's imagination and childhood torment, *Great Son*'s Regina (Reggie) Dresden is, in 1944, all too real. The 18-year-old blonde daughter of a German Jewish father and an American Gentile mother, Reggie escapes Hitler's thugs and plays the initially minor role of companion to Exact, the 90-year-old matriarch of the venerable Melendy family, pioneering founders of Seattle. The novel's front story, which recounts the trials and triumphs of five generations of Melendys, is a valentine to the American pioneering spirit and to the country's natural and political beauty. However, much of the book occurs in the few years before Pearl Harbor, when the war was Europe's problem and American isolationism prevailed.

Throughout *Great Son* Ferber not only maintains the then current backdrop of Hitler's decimation of European Jewry and culture, but she also devotes an entire chapter to Reggie's story of Nazi brutality, the beating of her father in his own home, the wanton destruction of her family's possessions, and to Reggie's horrific voyage to New York "in a ship that was like a floating hell, only we were not lost souls, we were saved" (228). Not surprisingly, Reggie's description of the Nazis who invaded her home is eerily similar to Ferber's description of the anti-Semites who tormented her in Ottumwa. Reggie confides to Mike Melendy, Exact's great-grandson:

> There were six of them. They were stupid louts, very young, eighteen or twenty years old, not more. They were like the boys you read about here, sometimes, in gangs, roving the streets destroying things and hurting people and killing them sometimes only out of frustration or

> a longing for power. They are ignorant, and angry at the world, and they feel better when they can smash something. Things or people, it doesn't matter. Their faces are silly and mean and little. They took the silver from the cupboards . . . threw them on the floor and they jumped on them with their great heavy boots. Jumped and jumped, and their lips drawn back from their teeth. The pieces lay on the floor broken and twisted and smashed flat like tin. . . . This was just love of destruction. Then Father said '*schweine hunde!*' . . . Literally, pig dogs. Swine. One of them . . . hit Father on the face very hard with his fist and he fell. (226–227)

Reggie goes on to explain that her parents, realizing the imperative to leave Germany, sent their daughter to New York. Her non-Jewish mother could have escaped, but she would not leave her husband, and after Regina left, her parents vanished. When Mike asks incredulously, "What d'you mean—vanished?" Reggie answers, "My father and mother are gone. Swallowed up. No letters, no sign, no word—nothing. It's rather an old story now . . . people scarcely listen to it any more. I saw it all the time in Germany . . . and in France, so now it's an old story" (227).

After Mike's reassuring, "You're here now. You're safe here" (227), Reggie continues with accounts of New York's Jewish immigrants:

> There were many of us in New York. We walked like ghosts in those brilliant streets full of quick, rushing people. . . . I could detect a refugee the moment I saw one. Not only shabby, but the clothes were different. They hung like graveclothes on them. Their faces were gray and closed like a shuttered house in which someone has died. . . . They were the dead ones who walked. They were one kind of refugee. . . . They paced slowly . . . and the men usually bent forward a little and walked with their hands clasped behind them as hopeless people do in a small space. That's the walk of a concentration camp prisoner. You walk like that when your spirit is broken. (228–229)

With Regina Dresden, whose first name means "queen," and whose last name is, or was, a cultural capital of Germany, Ferber introduces not only European concerns into this novel of the Pacific Northwest, but also those of Jews—German, European, and American. Moreover, she also portrays American anti-Semitism, for many in the Melendy clan want nothing to do with the Jewish servant girl. Mike is one of the few exceptions. He falls in love with her, gets her in the family way, and marries her (in that order), before joining the air force immediately after Pearl Harbor is attacked.

Thus, the Jewish Regina will be mother to the sixth Melendy generation. At this point, Ferber gives Reggie the novel's penultimate and titular line. The pregnant girl tells the foreman at the Boeing plant where she works, "Thou know'st, great son, the end of war's uncertain," adding for clarity, "Shakespeare said that," to which the foreman responds, "He sure said a mouthful" (281). So ends the novel. (Reggie's remark is from Shakespeare's bloody play, *Coriolanus,* and is part of the warrior's mother's impassioned plea to her son that he refrain from attacking Rome.) The half-German Jewish girl (like Ferber herself), whose marriage into de facto Seattle aristocracy suggests that society's acceptance of her, will give birth during Hitler's reign to a child who literally embodies that acceptance. Unlike Ferber's 1929 treatment of the solitary and marginal Sol Levy, her 1944 approach to Jewish themes is radically foregrounded. The Holocaust raging, the war not yet won, Ferber achieves the European Regina's complete Americanization, signified nominally by the quite unregal-sounding "Reggie." More important to Ferber, Reggie's presumed son, an assimilation of races, religions, nationalities, cultures, classes, and bloodlines, will represent America at its greatest.

Of Ferber's scores of short stories, to my knowledge, the only one that deals with anti-Semitism is, like *Great Son,* written and set during the Holocaust; it is 1939's "No Room at the Inn," which was inspired by the following item in *the New York Times:*

> "NOBODY" IS BORN IN NO MAN'S LAND
> Prague, Oct. 25 (U.P.)—A baby born in the no man's land south of Brno, where 200 Jewish refugees have been living in a ditch between Germany and Czechoslovakia for two weeks, was named Niemand (Nobody) today.

As Ferber explains in a 1946 preface to the story: "The persecution, torture, and death of six million European Jews had actually brought little or no protest from a Christian world whose religion was based on the teachings of a Jew. I took the story and characters involved in the birth of the infant Jesus and modernized these to fit the German Nazi pattern" (*One Basket,* 515). "No Room at the Inn" begins with Joe and the pregnant Mary in their comfortable home, Mary sewing baby things for the expected child. Suddenly, the couple is terrorized by Nazis who wreck the house and stomp on the baby clothes; one soldier even blows his nose in a pink cap Mary was knitting. Mary and Joe are quickly herded onto a train and dumped, with hundreds of other Jews, into a ditch, where Mary gives birth to a boy she names

Niemand, nobody, as she informs the Nazi calling roll. Sadly, it is the midwives' fire that attracts the Nazi officials' attention: "'Yep, that's it. Born in a ditch to one of these damned Jews' . . . He stared and stared at the boy, the firelight shining on his tiny face, making a sort of halo of his hair. 'Niemand, eh? That the best you can do for him! . . . Jesus! . . . Well, cheer up, he's a fine looking boy. He might grow up to be quite a kid, at that'"(520–521). This story represents Ferber's only fictional treatment of the squalor, inhumanity, and barbarism suffered by the Jews in the Holocaust. In fact, the opening, "She had made every stitch herself," referring to the baby clothes Mary was sewing, and her heartbreak at their trampling, positions "No Room at the Inn" as a mild forerunner of Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl." Ferber, however, is more interested here in reminding the Christian world to be "Christian," for the story is directed not at Jews, in 1939, but at Gentile bystanders.

With the relatively minor exceptions then of *Cimarron, Great Son,* "No Room at the Inn" and, of course, *Fanny Herself,* Ferber's virtual divestiture of Judaism from her prolific output of fiction and drama, coupled incongruously with her vociferous defense of her Jewish identity, has its roots, no doubt, in Ottumwa. For example, when asked in 1912 by a *New York Sun* reporter to what she attributed her success, then founded on the exceedingly popular Emma McChesney tales, Ferber replied the (at the time) unprintable, "We - e - ell, I think if I've had any success it's because I was born a Jew" (*A Peculiar Treasure,* 189). Ferber believed that her gifts of "quick appraisal and decision" were Jewish traits, and saw Jewish artists such as Mendelssohn, Bernhardt, Heifetz, Rachmaninoff, Menuhin, Zimbalist, and Gershwin as Jews who turned 5,000 years of suffering and persecution into song (70). Arguably, Ferber has done the same by investing her fiction with what emerges as a Jewish sensibility, a sensitivity to the oppressed, a revulsion to bigotry. In fact, her description of the "Jew" applies equally to many of her characters, and, to an extent, to herself: "He has acquired great adaptability, nervous energy, ambition to succeed and a desire to be liked" (25).

In *Fanny Herself,* Ferber forces the title character (named for Ferber's older sister, Fannie) to recognize her Jewish soul and permit its expression in the form of decidedly feminist sociopolitical cartoons that expose the inhumanity of sweatshops, the human cost of industrial efficiency, and the environmental cost of progress. Fanny herself is divided between the American Dream of being a financially successful textile buyer, who lies about her Jewish identity, and the humanitarian thrust of her Jewish soul, which compels her to identify with the poor,

the oppressed, and the powerless. The novel chronicles this battle for Fanny's soul. Should she sell and assimilate it to the materialistic wealth of the American Dream? Or should she allow her soul to find its own voice in her art, and so define her? Ferber herself, armed with Fanny's soul, successfully divided her Jewishness from nearly all her fiction and drama, but remained fiercely proud of her race and its history. How she maintained the often-opposing roles of American, woman, writer, and Jew in the first half of the twentieth century is the subject of *Fanny Herself* and *A Peculiar Treasure*. In Fanny Brandeis, the 32-year-old Ferber created an alter ego that established the divisive issues she would tackle in future fiction and in her own life: the moral cost of chasing the American Dream, feminism, the relation of women to humanity, the artistic value of suffering, the spiritual and creative nature of a Jewish soul, and living as a Jew (or other minority) in America. Fanny ultimately overcomes the twin handicaps of being a Jew and a woman by redefining success in America in terms of serving the shared humanitarian imperatives of Jewish history and feminism.

* * *

As much as Fanny Brandeis, the career woman, hides her Jewishness and believes it to be an impediment to success, her obsession with wealth, that is, the American Dream, is, like Ferber's, rooted in her family's financially difficult life and her childhood clashes with anti-Semitism in the small Midwestern town of Winnebago, Wisconsin, a fictionalized version of Appleton. Ferber traces Fanny's development from a small-town daughter of the owners of Brandeis' Bazaar, a kind of variety store that catered to everyone from farmers' wives to "the patronizing East End set" (*Fanny Herself,* 2), to a veritable business titan in the infants' wear department of the enormous Chicago-based Haynes-Cooper mail-order house. Fanny's friendship with two men serves to counterbalance her unbridled passion for making money. Father Fitzpatrick, the town's Catholic priest, who is ironically able to perceive Fanny's Jewish soul and true nature, and Clarence Heyl, a sickly Jewish boy whom she had rescued from Jew-hating bullies, are the voices of instinct that pull Fanny away from buying and selling for a living. They attempt repeatedly to force her to acknowledge her own identity and the irrepressible nature of her Jewish soul. The Catholic priest and the adult Clarence, a Jewish naturalist who writes a column about New York City for the *Star,* a New York daily, ultimately convince Fanny to acknowledge her artistic gift. She sketches people

in a way that reveals "life, served up raw" (188), and at the novel's end, decides to accept a job with the *Star* as the only woman political cartoonist in the country.

Using the novel's cast of characters and thematic framework, Ferber threads the Jewish soul (which she discusses abundantly) through the interrelated social issues of feminism, suffrage, sweatshops, racism, sexism, environmentalism, moral decay, and others, perceiving it as a force of nature that creates beauty and exposes truth through the arts. For example, Fanny's brother, Theodore, is a violin virtuoso for whom Fanny and her widowed mother sacrifice much; Clarence's newspaper column reveals a fresh New York City perceived through clear Midwestern eyes; and of course, Fanny's drawings expose the gross inhumanity of the sweatshop, whether at a Winnebago paper mill, a Manhattan garment factory, or at her own Leviathan-like Haynes-Cooper plant. Molly Brandeis, Fanny's mother, is, like Fanny, a businesswoman, but in this novel, Jews who buy and sell, who turn their backs on their soul's creative imperative, are either unsuccessful or miserable.

For a writer of Ferber's prodigious and nonreligious output, in *Fanny Herself* she certainly pours out her heart on the subject of what differentiates Jews from Gentiles, and on what exactly characterizes a Jewish soul. Ironically, Fanny's childhood fervor for Judaism has little to do with religion. We are told that the activities that set Fanny apart from the other Winnebago children—staying out of school on Yom Kippur, going to synagogue Friday nights and Saturday mornings—were not really what differentiated Fanny. "The real difference was temperamental, or emotional, or dramatic, or historic, or all four (24). When the 12-year-old girl decided to fast during Yom Kippur, she saw it as "a test of endurance" (29). Moreover, Fanny responds not to the religious content of the Kol Nidre service, but to its spiritual power.

Ferber writes of the kaddish, "There is nothing in the written language that, for sheer drama and magnificence, can equal it as it is chanted in the Hebrew" (37). Fanny perceives "a glorious atmosphere of detachment" hanging over the congregation as "these Jews [are] thrown back thousands of years, to the time when the destruction of the temple was real" (38). The congregation, transported spiritually back in time, forgets its workaday troubles, and "Fanny Brandeis was shaken by it" (38). She is also given to times when her heart "ached seemingly, for no reason at all—as is sometimes the case when one is a little Jew girl, with whole centuries of suffering behind one" (42). Fanny remains spiritually rather than religiously moved by prayer and human misery. It is this spiritual little girl, unconsciously connected

to the past, whose Jewish soul is awakened by two defining events: discovering Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* (*Au Bonheur des Dames*), about a small shop's demise at the hands of a large wealthy company, and rescuing 15-year-old asthmatic Clarence Heyl from a pack of anti-Semitic bullies, who "called him the Name" (44), at which point Fanny "pounce[s] on them without warning, a little fury of blazing eyes and flying hair, and white teeth showing in a snarl" (44). Curiously, the Name, presumably kike or sheeny, never appears in the text, but the undercurrent of anti-Semitism in Winnebago is suggested by Molly Brandeis's response to her scratched and tattered daughter: "'Fanny dear, if you're going to fight every time you hear that name -----' Fanny thought of the torn sweater, the battered Zola, the scratched cheek. 'It is pretty expensive,' she said reflectively" (45). The twin experiences of being enthralled by Zola's tale of big business' inhumanity and defending the frail Jewish Clarence set the stage for Ferber's intertwining of social protest and defense of the weak with Judaism.

Shortly after these episodes, Fanny begins reading biographies of "Disraeli, Spinoza, Mendelssohn, Mozart—distinguished Jews who had found their religion a handicap" (74), for she is beginning to judge her religion similarly. This development emerges during a visit from Emma McChesney (whose three collections of tales had been best sellers by 1917), who wonders why Fanny, now a reporter for the *Courier,* seems to have no friends.

> "Oh, I read. I'm free to pick my book friends, at least."
>
> "Now, just what do you mean by that, child? It sounds a little bitter."
>
> "I was thinking of what Chesterfield [wrote] to his son. 'Choose always to be in the society of those above you.' I guess he never lived in Winnebago, Wisconsin. I'm a working woman, and a Jew, and we haven't any money or social position. And unless she's a Becky Sharp any small town girl with those handicaps might as well choose a certain constellation of stars in the sky to wear as a breastpin, as try to choose the friends she really wants." (85–86)

Having grown up in this atmosphere, the adult and now-motherless Fanny resolves to be independently wealthy, at any cost. She is determined to "admit no handicaps. Race, religion, training, natural impulses—she would discard them all if they stood in her way. . . . She would crush and destroy the little girl who had fasted on that Day of Atonement" (107).

Molly Brandeis's death is the catalyst for this change in Fanny. For the daughter saw her mother's endless hours of servitude to the store kill her; in the end, Molly's spontaneity and selflessness

brought her "nothing" (106), so Fanny resolves to be "cold, calculating and deliberate" (108). However, in pursuit of success, she employs the sensibilities of her Jewish soul: "Thousands of years of persecution behind her made her quick to appreciate suffering in others, and gave her an innate sense of fellowship with the downtrodden. She resolved to use that sense as a searchlight aiding her to see and overcome obstacles" (108). Here Ferber begins to identify why Fanny responds so viscerally to the victimized and the powerless, and she begins to define the Jewish soul. Thousands of years of persecution have made Fanny *how* she is; a hard life and Midwestern anti-Semitism have made her *what* she is. Consequently, when Fanny interviews for a job in Chicago as a buyer with the formidable Haynes-Cooper-mail-order company, she responds, "No," to her employer's curt question, "Jew?" (136).

In the face of Fanny's conversion to a hardnosed businesswoman, Father Fitzpatrick attempts to compel her to understand and value her Jewishness. When Fanny protests that she is "just like any other ambitious woman with brains," the priest counters, "No you're not. You're different. . . . You're a Jew." She acknowledges that she has "that handicap," but Father Fitzpatrick quickly explains that it is not a handicap, but "an asset." He continues:

> "Outwardly you're like any other girl of your age. Inwardly you've been molded by occupation, training, religion, history, temperament, race, into something—"
>
> "Ethnologists have proved that there is no such thing as a Jewish race."
>
> "H'm. Maybe. I don't know what you'd call it, then. You can't take a people and persecute them for thousands of years, hounding them from place to place, herding them in dark and filthy streets, without leaving some sort of brand on them—a mark that differentiates. Sometimes it doesn't show outwardly. But it's there, inside. . . . It's always been said that no artist can become a genius until he has suffered. You've suffered, you Jews, for centuries and centuries, until you're all artists—quick to see drama because you've lived in it, emotional, over-sensitive, cringing, or swaggering, high-strung, demonstrative, affectionate, generous." (121–122)

Ferber paints Fanny not as a self-hating Jew, but as a nonappreciative one. It takes a Roman Catholic priest to present Fanny's Judaism to her not as an impediment, but as a gift—a race that engenders in its members artistry, creativity, and compassion. Note that it is not the Torah or Judaism's theology that differentiates her, but history's anti-Semitism. That which has been molded by history, the priest insists, is "a

mark that differentiates." The cascading adjectives at the end of Father Fitzpatrick's speech catch the emotional stamp of the Jewish soul's imprint, its impact on the nervous system, so to speak. But what Fanny does not yet recognize is the contiguity between Jewish history and the Jewish soul's imperative to create art from it.

The tug-of-war between Fanny's Jewish soul and her ambition emerges most poignantly when Molly Brandeis's first *yahrzeit* (death anniversary) occurs. The dutiful daughter is torn between traditionally observing the anniversary of her mother's death, and ignoring mere custom. We are told that Fanny "had never formally taken the vows of her creed [she had not been confirmed, and] she told herself that she was glad this was so" (126). Consequently, she elects not to burn the traditional yahrzeit light for 24 hours and not to say kaddish. "But the thing was too strong for her, too anciently inbred" (200), and she switches on an electric lamp, informing her housekeeper, Princess, not to "turn it off until tomorrow evening at six." When Princess remarks, "Didn't know yo' had no relijin, Miss Fanny," Fanny answers, "I haven't" (201).

Divided from her soul, divorced from religious practice, Fanny compartmentalizes honoring her mother's memory and denies that observing it according to Jewish tradition is "having religion." Indeed, in seeking out Conservative and Orthodox services at which to say kaddish, she feels out of place. By the Conservative Rabbi Kirsch and his lecture to his millionaire congregation, Fanny was "fascinated and resentful by turns" and found his sermon to be, not religion, but "a tonic. She told herself that she would have come to the same conclusion if Kirsch had occupied a Methodist pulpit" (201–202).

As Kirsch's synagogue offered no kaddish that evening, Fanny joins services at an Orthodox Russian temple, where, when she rose to chant the prayer amid the women in the gallery, "she threw [it] into a wild panic" (202). Jewish Orthodoxy prohibits women from standing for kaddish. Thoroughly disenchanted with her attempts at "religion," her deliberate avoidance of it freshly validated, Fanny throws herself headlong into her work, tackling New York's unsuspecting garment district on behalf of Haynes-Cooper.

Fanny's second introduction to her Jewish soul is delivered by the naturalist-cum-newspaper columnist Clarence Heyl, who suggests that Fanny's drawings are in her blood. "It's the Jew in you," he insists. Fanny responds, "I won't do another sketch for a year, I'll prove to you that my ancestors' religion doesn't influence my work, or my play" (188). Clarence argues vigorously that she has actually proven the contrary in sketching an old Jewish fish vendor in the ghetto: "It took a thousand years of suffering and persecution and faith to

stamp that look on his face, and it took a thousand years to breed in you the genius to see it, and put it down on paper" (188–189). Clarence then quotes a book on the Jewish race: "It isn't the body that marks the Jew. It's his soul. . . . It isn't the complexion, the nose, the lips, the head. It's his soul which betrays his faith. Centuries of Ghetto confinement, ostracism, ceaseless suffering, have produced a psychic type" (188–189). Fanny objects that Clarence is "spoiling a wonderful day" with this talk. He counters, "And you're spoiling a wonderful life. I don't object to this driving ambition in you. . . . But don't expect me to stand by and let you trample over your own immortal soul to get there" (189). Clarence argues that, like Sarah Bernhardt, Felix Mendelssohn, Irving Berlin, Mischa Elman, and Charlie Chaplin, Fanny, too, is "set apart," and "instead of thanking G-d for that, you set out to be something you aren't [and] you're trying not to be what you are. . . . You're suppressing the thing that is you. You're cutting yourself off from your own people" (189–190).

Fanny's cries of "Stop" during Clarence's sermon bespeak her unwillingness to accept the truth, that to divide yourself from your race, is to divide yourself from your soul. Clarence puts this even more forcefully later, when he admonishes her, "I don't so much mind your being disloyal to your tribe, or race, or whatever you want to call it. But you've turned your back on yourself" (217). Ferber then universalizes Fanny's talent for rendering the human spirit on paper, when Clarence erupts, "You've got an obligation to humanity, and I'll nag you til you pay it. I don't care if I lose you, so long as you find yourself. The thing you've got isn't merely racial. . . . It's universal. And you owe it to the world. Pay up, Fanny! Pay up!" (217). Here, Ferber transforms a talent into a humanitarian obligation. Fanny's sketching for her own amusement is not sufficient. It is as if the Jew's artistry and compassion, conceived through centuries of suffering, must be delivered into a stubborn world, for its own ethical good. In other words, the Jews owe their talent and sensitivity to an anti-Semitic world, whose very humanity depends on Jews' repaying the debt in the form of art, music, literature, drama, film. Ferber's belief in this reciprocity between Jews and history appears to be her basis for dividing the religion of Judaism from the spirit of Judaism, in *Fanny Herself* and in her own life. Just as Fanny compartmentalizes religious observance and living true to her Jewish soul, so Ferber separated her religion from nearly all her prolific output, while exercising her Jewish soul in writing about the social injustices of sexism and racism.

Two passages in particular establish Ferber's spiritual intersection of feminism and Jewish history. The first describes Fanny's attraction to the grittier aspects of inner-city Chicago. The second illustrates her

reaction to seeing a poor, pale, Jewish girl carrying the banner identifying her contingent of a massive suffrage march: "Garment Workers. Infants' Wear Section." Fanny's compulsion to envision the human misery behind veneers of prosperity leads to the following narrative commentary:

> Successful mercantile women, seeing the furnace glare of the South Chicago steel mills flaring a sullen red against the lowering sky, do not draw a disquieting mental picture of men toiling there, naked to the waist, and glistening with sweat in the devouring heat of the fires. I don't know how she tricked herself. I suppose she said it was the city's appeal to the country dweller, but she lied, and she knew she was lying. She must have known it was the spirit of Molly Brandeis in her, and of Molly Brandeis' mother, and of her mother's mother's mother, down the centuries to Sarah; repressed women, suffering women, troubled, patient, nomadic women, struggling now in her for expression. (163–164)

Ferber traces women's compassion for humanity back to Sarah, the first Jewish woman, who gave birth to generations of stifled women culminating in Fanny, in whom they struggle collectively for a voice. Expression in this context refers to Fanny's art, her ability to serve up life, raw, as an outlet for and articulation of women's battles through the centuries. That Ferber finds women's struggles concomitant with Judaism is not surprising, given her views on women's rights. However, finding the two movements concurrent or congruent implies a spiritual connection between Jewish history, if not Judaism itself, and feminism.

The second passage that establishes this spiritual intersection concerns Fanny's reaction to the mammoth suffrage rights march in New York City:

> Women, women, women! Hundreds of them, thousands of them, a river of them flowing up Fifth Avenue to the park. More bands. More horses. Women! Women! They bore banners. This section, that section. Artists. School teachers. Lawyers. Doctors. Writers. Women in college caps and gowns. Girls. Gray-haired women. A woman in a wheel chair, smiling . . . And then a strange and pitiful and tragic and eloquent group. Their banner said, "Garment Workers. Infants' Wear Section." And at their head marched a girl, carrying a banner. (249–250)

Here, Fanny's eyes lock onto the young Jewish Russian girl on whose face "wasn't merely a look. It was a story. It was tragedy. It was the history of a people. You saw it in that which told of centuries of oppression in Russia. . . . There was in it the unspeakable misery of Siberia. It spoke eloquently of pogroms, of massacres, of Kiev and its

sister-horror, Kishineff. . . . Above this there shone the courage of a race serene in the knowledge that it cannot die" (250).

Fanny identifies with the centuries of Jewish persecution etched in the young sweatshop worker's face, marching with a banner impossibly large for her to hold. Consequently, after Fanny joins the march, she feels compelled to capture on paper this poor, worn girl. The drawing is titled "The Marcher," and the first woman cartoonist in the country is born.

The relationship between the feminist movement and Jewish immigrants at this time is, of course, historically true, but Ferber's focus is more precisely the spiritual nexus between the sensibilities of the Jewish soul and the status of women in the early 1900s. If being Jewish is a handicap, then so is being female. As Fanny's boss acknowledges to her, "A woman in business is handicapped enough by the very fact of her sex. . . . Too bad you're so pretty" (136). It is no wonder, then, that Fanny denies being Jewish. She has two strikes against her before the game begins. To appreciate Fanny's determined feminism, however, we must return to her mother, who, as a widow in 1902, scandalized the community with skirts that cleared the ground. We are admonished by the narrator, though, not to "get the impression that she (Molly Brandeis) stood for emancipation, or feminism, or any of those advanced things. They had been scarcely touched on in those days . . . But here was Molly Brandeis, a Jewess, setting out to earn her living in business, like a man" (3, 11). Yet to Fanny, her mother's traditionally feminine traits of sacrifice, generosity, and selflessness amounted to "nothing."

Thus, Fanny deliberately divides herself from what she considers "feminine" qualities, blind to the fact that those very qualities fire her Jewish soul. This is what makes Fanny so impervious to Father Fitzpatrick's and Clarence's pleas that she not reject her Jewish nature. For her, however, sex is the insurmountable obstacle; unlike her religion, she cannot hide her gender. In fact, when Father Fitzpatrick suggests that she draw for a living, she shoots back, "There's no money in it, even if I were to get on with it. What could I do with it? Who ever heard of a woman cartoonist?" (119). The ethnobiological barriers to her success are, at their roots, identical—prejudice and bigotry. Fanny must deal with a married employer, Fenger, who is attracted to her; train him to refer to her as a woman rather than "girl," even patronizingly; and eventually defend herself against a sexual assault. This last episode parallels Clarence's earlier battle with anti-Semitic bullies. Then, Fanny rescued the helpless Clarence; when Fenger attacks her, she wallops him with an uppercut that Clarence had taught her. This metaphoric reciprocity between anti-Semitism

and sexism is more evidence that, in Ferber's view, Jews and women are fighting essentially the same enemy.

Ironically, Fanny discovers that the only way to circumvent these handicaps is to redefine success. In what amounts to mountain climbing toward Clarence's cabin in the Colorado Rockies, Fanny experiences a philosophical epiphany: "To justify one's existence. That's all that life held or meant. But that included all the lives that touched on yours. It had nothing to do with success, as she had counted success heretofore. It was service really. It was living as well, as Molly Brandeis had lived, helpfully, self-effacingly, magnificently" (314).

Distanced from Haynes-Cooper, Chicago, New York City, and her blinkered race for financial success, Fanny's eyes open to a humanitarian definition of success, her soul's definition of it. This realization is prefigured 20 pages earlier when her brother, Theodore, recently returned from many years of studying violin in Germany, comments on the American audience's tepid response to his Kol Nidre–inspired concerto, his own composition written in response to virulent German anti-Semitism. He laments, "They accept it as a piece of music, Jewish in theme. It might as well be entitled Springtime" (294). Fanny explains that America is not "France or Russia . . . Antagonism here isn't religious. It's personal, almost. . . . They don't object to us as a sect, or a race, but as a type. That's the trouble, Clarence Heyl says. We're free to build as many synagogues as we like, and worship in them all day, if we want to. But we don't want to. The struggle isn't racial anymore, but individual. For some reason or other one flashy, loud-talking Hebrew in a restaurant can cause more ill feeling than ten thousand of them holding a religious mass meeting in Union Square" (294). Theodore responds, "Then here each one of us is responsible. Is that it?" Fanny answers, "I suppose so" (295).

The individual's responsibility to the group becomes Fanny's means to a humanitarian and therefore moral definition of success. Thus, her divided self is unified in the role of political cartoonist, which allows her to be both faithful to her heritage and socially responsible to others. Ferber played out this dual obligation publicly in the incongruous arenas of blistering anti-Zionism (fidelity to her heritage as diaspora Jew) and passionate yet judgmental feminism (social responsibility). In fact, the significance of Ferber's portraits of strong women has not been lost on feminists. In 1936, Margaret Lawrence's *The School of Femininity: A Book for and about Women as They Are Interpreted through Feminine Writers of Yesterday and Today* calls Ferber's early stories an "excellent stimulus for the progress of feminist enterprise, and excellent also for the increase of the primary

documentary sources of the feminist movement. Unquestionably, future historians will turn to Edna Ferber for the gathering of vivid first-hand reporting of the time in fiction. She is, therefore, to an almost final extent, the supreme feminist. . . . She belongs to the great procession—Austen, the Brontes, and Eliot—who presented the feminist picture" (Lawrence, 188, 191).

Lawrence also exalts Ferber's status as an American writer, attributing it, in part, to her feminist characters: "In her technique and in her material she was altogether American. She combined the new energy of women, which was a pioneering energy, and the trekking of the continent, . . .with more fidelity, deeper sincerity and more primitive simplicity, than any other American writer. . . . She writes as if none of the authors of Europe existed. From the classical standpoint she has no style whatever. But from the vital standpoint of how style is associated with the emotion of time and place, she has perfect style" (191).

Ironically, that Ferber's obvious love for the very times and places of America did not extend to the land of Israel is a consequence of her desire to be perceived as uncompromisingly American. Thus, for someone who dramatized and exulted in the ways in which land itself, America's topography, cultivated the vaunted American character, Ferber was adamantly anti-Zionist. She insisted "that the Jews' home was in their spirit" (Gilbert, 112), in the diaspora, not in Israel, and exploded famously in the editorial pages of the *New York Times* when David Ben-Gurion proclaimed, "Whoever dwells outside the land of Israel is considered to have no god" (113). Her response, in part:

> Not since Hitler has anyone delivered such a hideous blow to the Jews of the world as that recently dealt by David Ben-Gurion, the Premier of Israel. . . . As an American-born Jew, granddaughter of a German Jew who came to the United States one hundred and thirteen years ago . . . I consider this Ben-Gurion statement not insolence and arrogance merely. . . . It is as monstrous as though there should be issued from Rome, seat of the Catholic church, a statement that all Catholics who dwell outside Italy have not G-d; and that all Catholics should come to Italy. . . . Well then, as an American, a civilized human being, and a Jew, I find the Ben-Gurion statement not only infuriating but potentially hideously destructive, and I don't scare easily. . . . I suggest that Ben-Gurion retract his statement completely or be removed from office, his splendid early work done, before his later work proves the undoing of future plans for Israel. (Gilbert, 113–114)

Actually, her wrath had been piqued years earlier by *Exodus,* Leon Uris's novel dramatizing the creation of Israel. She wrote to a friend

who had sent her the book: "I am reading it but I can't honestly say that I, a Jew, am with it or against it. . . . It is incredible that we Jews have survived literally thousands of years of the most brutal persecution. Perhaps it is persecution that has caused our survival. One of the characters in *Exodus* somewhere says that it is, for him, so wonderful to be in a country where everyone is a Jew. How frightful to be as insecure as that" (115). Ferber's great-niece reports that upon her great-aunt's visit to Israel in 1960, "she was very much aware of and disturbed by the 'Israeli-firster' attitude, and of course scribbled about it as she went. Her jottings are time bombs . . . planted toward Ben-Gurion's eventual statement." Ferber wrote, "Israel is, in one way, a kind of Jewish Texas. It has the brashness and self confidence of Americans in the U.S. without the American citizen's charm and almost incredible innocence. They have accomplished the impossible, but they aren't content to let this speak for itself . . . Israel reminds me, more than anything, of Texas on my trips there for research on the novel, GIANT. Arrogant, uninformed, self-complacent, regarding the world outside itself as definitely second-best" (115).

The rant continues about Israelis' ignorance of the world, noting that "one rarely reads of people in Israel. They are spoken about and written about as though they were scenes carved in a frieze on a door or wall." Moreover, Israelis have "the worst manners of any people I've encountered in a lot of travel, including the people on a [New York] subway between 5 and 6 P.M." (115). By all accounts, Ferber's scathing description of arrogant Israelis, actually, fits herself. She was, no doubt, projecting her own rejection of formal Judaism onto Israel. Nonetheless, one cannot help but detect the ring of the self-hating Jew here, particularly in conjunction with her article blaming Jews for turning world opinion against them. She claims that the Jews' penchant for writing about themselves, "Narcissus-like," leads to their feeling sorry for themselves, to "breast-beating, . . . a trait . . . which the world does not find endearing" (Gilbert, 267).

And yet, this is from the same woman, who, in 1944 met with Arthur Sulzberger, the then owner of the *New York Times,* "to talk to him about the critical anti-Semitic condition growing here." She reports, however, that "he babbled on and on about himself for an hour and it all came to nothing" (Gilbert, 266). Actually, Ferber's rage at Hitler and the world's anti-Semitism exploded into effective War Bond speeches and newspaper articles. A sampling:

> As the so-called civilized world looked on—no, as it cast down its eyes and looked the other way—the Jews of Germany and of all Europe

went through a pageant of unspeakable horror and degradation and death which never has been equaled in the history of mankind, and which the imagination rejects as being too fantastic to be true. Six million men, women and children of the Jewish religion were carefully and deliberately murdered.

But it is true. . . . The world has seen the pictures. Many of us have seen the reality as we surveyed Buchenwald or Dachau or Oranienburg. We have seen human flesh heaped like humus. We have seen men and women and children piled any which way, lumped and mashed and disintegrating like heaps of garbage. These were men. . . . For the first time in the history of the world the dignity of man was flouted with complete contempt. Man, other than the Nazi German, was garbage. . . . Even in this country we hear from the rabble-rousers—the White Shirts, the America Firsters, the Father Coughlins, the Lindberghs, the Joe McWilliams, the Henry Fords—that if jobs are scarce and people are depressed and frightened after the war, and the weary world wants that old familiar scapegoat for bad temper and fear and frustration, why, blandly, of course they'll take it out on the Jew.

What insolence! What savagery! . . . Those who sit at the Peace Table should hear representatives of all minorities, including in the Jewish field Zionists and non-Zionists. That Jews should be admitted into the free lands of all countries including Palestine, and quickly, is or should be the opinion of every civilized human being of any or of no religion. . . . Any enduring peace must make clear that the Jew must be given the same rights accorded any other civilized human being of any religion. (Gilbert, 267–268)

Even further complicating her attitude toward Jews is Ferber's 1953 *Columbia Literary Series* recording. Sandwiched between her reading of the short story "The Gay Old Dog" and a scene from *Showboat* lies a stunning account of Ferber's experience at Buchenwald immediately after its liberation, *sans the word* "Jew." At Weimar on a writing assignment for the Air Force, Ferber bemoans the city of Goethe, now the city of Buchenwald. She recalls: "What I saw there was so unspeakable, so sub-human, so paralyzing in its revelation of the depths of degradation to which the human race can descend, that I lost all perspective. I shall not go into detail."

"Numbed, deeply depressed," and "no longer wanting to be a part of the human race," she encountered a young man who, upon recognizing her, began reciting a page from *Showboat* from memory. Noting the scene's incongruity, she claims that the speech "freed" her of depression and rage, and concludes that if men "could love and remember books and plays in the midst of war . . . , then . . . civilization could . . . never be destroyed by brutality." Perhaps for Ferber, Jewish

history here is congruent with human history. For even at a concentration camp, she universalizes but fails to name the anti-Semitism against which she had railed so forcefully in the *Times.* Buchenwald, she says, held "prisoners of all sorts" who were "guilty of no crime." Incredibly, this 750-word narrative never mentions the word "Jew"; more incredibly, the recording is not mentioned anywhere on the album cover or the album itself. Ferber's revelation at Buchenwald functions merely as a poignant introduction to her reading from *Showboat.*

Just as Ferber's attitudes toward ethnic Judaism, Israel, and Jews were contradictory, so too were her attitudes toward feminism and women double-edged. On the one hand, she was filled with hope and optimism and belief in women's capabilities; on the other, she excoriated women for not living up to their potential. She put her contradictory positions in rather brute terms, which led inexorably to analogy with Jews:

> Four-footed animals are either male or female. But two-legged humans are not only male or female. They are men or women. A woman can be a female and a woman at the same time. My objection to the behavior of my sex in general is that the great majority of them go on being merely female. This isn't good enough. More than half of the United States is largely a loss of talent and force. Women are usually smarter than men . . . for much the same reason that Jews are smarter than Christians. Jews have been held in subjection for centuries and they have learned to see through the backs of their heads. So have women. (Gilbert, 81–82)

In Ferber's fiction, women are superior to men physically, morally, intellectually, and spiritually. In reality, however, as her great-niece/biographer writes: "She thought most of them [women] were tiresome, prattling, and venal. The exceptional few, of course, were her friends for life. As for the others, off with their empty little heads" (Gilbert, 362). Ferber's disgust for women, and indeed, Jews in general notwithstanding, her perception of women and Jews as having endured similar, character-defining histories is telling. Yet her disdain of her own groups (women and Jews) smacks of the very sexism and anti-Semitism she and her novels attack.

Edna Ferber's work spans centuries, generations, ethnicities, and the United States. As all of her writing proclaims, Ferber was in love with America, its history, its geography, its regional tangs and its people. A survey of her work is a survey of Americana: from Creoles clinging to their aristocratic pasts, to European immigrants farming in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Connecticut, logging in Washington, striking oil in Texas and gold in Alaska, gambling in Saratoga, or falling

in love on a Mississippi riverboat. The woman who had "typed an empire" (Gilbert, 116) identified herself as "an American, a writer, a Jew" (*A Peculiar Treasure,* 383). Perhaps she felt divided among these roles, but she also believed that Ferber the American writer would not have had the same fire, the eloquence, or the impact had she not been a Jew. In this spirit, she prefaces and concludes *A Peculiar Treasure* with (ironically) Exodus 19:5: "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine; and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." For Edna Ferber, that holy nation was America.

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Transcription of Edna Ferber's 1953 Columbia Masterworks Recording of her experience at Buchenwald immediately after its liberation, Spring 1945 (Record edited by Goddard Lieberson)

In the early spring of 1945 when the horror we call the Second World War was still raging, I found myself in the beautiful and historic city of Weimar in central Germany. Weimar, famous as the dwelling place of Goethe, now was infamous for its Nazi concentration camp and death factory, Buchenwald, just outside the city. Buchenwald had been liberated by Allied troops just before my first sight of Weimar. The United States Air Force had in the last months of the war assigned me to a writing job that included in its territory parts of Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, England. Outside Weimar was an American Air Force Base. The first day of my arrival in Weimar was spent in seeing Buchenwald Camp. What I saw there was so unspeakable, so sub-human, so paralyzing in its revelation of the depths of degradation to which the human race can descend, that I lost all perspective. I shall not go into detail as to what I saw there. This had been a Nazi camp for war prisoners of all sorts. Guilty of no crime, they lived there under brutality and savagery, were tortured there, died there by the thousands and thousands. That most wonderful of mechanisms, man, that most precious and exalted of human possessions, the spirit of man, and the human dignity of man had been outraged beyond the comprehension of anyone who had not seen this place.

Numbed, deeply depressed, I returned to my billet in the town of Weimar. It seemed to me, that if this could by done by humans, to humans, then I no longer wanted to be a member of the human race. That same evening I was scheduled to have dinner at the air base with the general in command. After dinner, I asked to visit the enlisted men's club nearby. This was not on the program, but finally it was arranged. The impact of youth, of virility, struck you as you saw the big club room that served the enlisted men. Talking, reading, smoking, playing games, they seemed unbelievably young to be engaged in the grizzly business of war. A piano was being played somewhere; someone was singing. I met groups of the young men; we talked. A dark-haired young fellow, who had been standing apart, came up to me and spoke my name. He stood there a moment, a curious and wistful little smile on his face, then without a word of explanation or preliminary announcement, still with that winning half-smile on his face, he began to recite from memory an entire page

of the novel *Showboat*. He knew every word of it as he stood there in that crowded, smoky, noisy room in the town of Weimar, Germany, notorious now for horror instead of beauty, with the spirit of Goethe and the evil shadow of Buchenwald hovering over it, and war poisoning the air of every continent on the globe. It was incongruous. It was unbelievable to hear him. The excerpt described the moment before the curtain rises on the lamplighted auditorium on the old river Showboat back in 1875. The Showboat that brought magic and forgetfulness and romance and entertainment to the little scattered isolated towns along the rivers a half century or more before the day of the phonograph, the motion picture, the radio, television or even the theater as we know it today. Certainly there was nothing startling or even important in the lines he had somehow learned. This was perhaps the nostalgia of a homesick boy, who might have been slightly stage-struck, like myself. For I am and always have been stage-struck. In a strange land of bloodshed, brutality and war violence, in which he now found himself, perhaps these pages have somehow offered him peace and escape from the monstrous things that were beating upon his sensibilities. As I stood there, seeing him, and hearing him, and seeing the young manly wistful face, I began to feel free of the despair and bitterness and rage that had racked me after the horror of Buchenwald. It seemed to me that night, that if young men such as this one could love and remember books and plays in the midst of war and the fear of war, then our civilization could actually never be destroyed by brutality. Here is a brief excerpt from *Showboat*. And I speak it for those who know and love the theater, and who will understand the boy's mood and his charming, gaily defiant act.

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Part II

The Roads Diverge—Assimilation and Its Discontents: 1960s–1990s

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4

"My Own Design": Finding Identity in Anne Roiphe's Writings

Melanie Levinson

A popular author for nearly four decades, Anne Roiphe draws on her own personal and family history for her writings from her first novel *Digging Out* (1966), to her most recent memoir *1185 Park Avenue* (1999). Attempting to balance feminism, motherhood, and Jewishness, her protagonists struggle to discover their identities and resolve the conflicts of modern Jewish American women.

In *1185 Park Avenue,* a devastating account of a childhood of emotional storms and isolation, Anne and her younger sickly brother John compete for their immature, selfish parents' elusive affections by warring with one another. Although ignorant and disdainful toward Judaism, Johnny has a bar mitzvah, with all the trimmings, congratulations, party, and gifts and perhaps either from loneliness or rebellion, he actually immerses himself in Orthodoxy for a while, much to his parents' chagrin. Anne, interested in the mystery of Hebrew and equality, is angered when she is told that her realm is the home, not the shul, that studying Jewish law was for the men while the women took care of the house and the children.

In nearly all of Roiphe's novels, fictional characters express the author's conflicts revealed in *1185 Park Avenue,* a memoir of Roiphe's rejection and loss—her attachment and then hostility toward her father, her pity and disgust for her mother, her competition with her brother, her own difficult first marriage and divorce, and ambivalence about Judaism of which she knew little. In short, *1185 Park Avenue,* a

labyrinth of tortured family relationships, provides a map to Roiphe's other works, to her search for self. Brought up in a secular home with expectations of equality, but exposed to her brother's Orthodox experience, she is divided, longing for the comfort of ritual and religious custom, for the serenity of faith, but also intellectual acceptance and self-fulfillment. Such tensions also characterize her characters whose feminist desires for equality and religious need for law and ritual clash, producing outsiders, at home nowhere. "Is it possible," she asks, "for a twentieth century female, educated to have hopes of equality and justice, to accept the traditions of a past that have left her excluded from the law and prevented her from entering the sacred or the Halakah—how can a feminist feel about the Jewish religion?" (*Generation,* 18).

The question informs study of Roiphe's later work, particularly after the publication of her widely criticized *New York Times* article, "Taking Down the Christmas Tree." In her earlier writings characters often attempt to avoid Judaism as troublesome. While keenly aware of being ethnically Jewish, it is merely an accident of birth, a designation that unfairly marks them as exiles. The rejection, in other words, is theirs. Even in Roiphe's memoirs, her family is presented as utterly secular, complete with a Christmas tree and presents. Her father won't attend synagogue at all while her mother goes to keep up appearances.

The question, then, is whether one can be estranged from a religion to which one has never had any intimate connection. Ultimately it may be this absence of a bond with Judaism or other Jews, rather than authentic experience with Judaism, that so shapes Anne Roiphe and her protagonists.

In *Digging Out,* for example, Laura Smith relates the sordid story of her family, which begins with her Jewish grandfather betraying the location of his shtetl's hidden women and children to the Cossacks for the price of his passage to America. Among those sacrificed are his mother and his wife and eventually his American granddaughters' identity. Unsure of herself, a Jew by birth, celebrating Christmas, the narrator introduces herself as "Laura Smith, my name tells you nothing" (7).

Although this is Roiphe's first novel, her protagonist's struggle for identity is evident. Having attended graduate school and lived alone against the wishes of her mother and her aunts, whose exaggerated fears for Laura include spinsterhood, stalking, and physical violence, insecure Laura, with relief, postpones her studies to help care for her ill mother, which affords her time to think about herself as a woman and a Jew. Yet despite her soul searching she remains ambivalent.

While claiming to believe in the mystical visitations of the prophet Elijah at the Passover table, she also curses in the name of Jesus, purchasing both Christmas presents for her family and a tree for her mother's apartment. Unfortunately, Laura Smith, yearning for salvation through Elijah, is doomed to failure since her approach is egocentric: "He may come into the city . . . and help me restore the fragments of my history so that, as with a pot found under the earth, I may follow my own design" (29). Consider the protagonist's admission that to use her Jewish past is to allow her to "follow [her] own design." There is no explicit desire to draw nearer to her own history, her own people, even her family. Instead Judaism will be embraced as a therapeutic tool.

In fact, rather than exploring her family's history to better understand and resolve her own problems, Laura also believes that only her mother's death will afford her independence. Unfortunately, when her mother dies, she loses her tenuous connection to Judaism that she had wanted to develop. "A mother and a daughter are not entirely two separate entities. From the instant of conception they are like a page of paper. Different anecdotes may be written on each side but there is only one single page . . . The source of my life, the thorn in my side, my point of reference, biological and social, was fading. What would I be left when all the erasing was done? I would be cut loose from the mooring, floating out to sea" (67).

However upon further reflection, she concludes that only the severing of ties to her past will set her free, a freedom that requires erasure but does not guarantee her salvation. In Laura's case it appears that her Jewish past will always remain fragmented. "Sweet Jesus, has anyone the strength for such exploring?" (181) she cries at the novel's end. The impact of a mother's death on a vulnerable daughter's life is as much of an issue in Roiphe's fiction as in her life.

Although Roiphe's second novel, *Up the Sandbox* (1970), does not treat Judaism in any great detail, it does examine the subjects of feminism and motherhood largely through fantasies. Margaret Reynolds, college-educated mother of two, "too old for an identity crisis and not yet past the age of uncertainty," suffocated by the numbing routine of the middle-class housewife (14), adores her children but is envious of her academic husband and resents fulfilling his needs while her own go neglected. Thus in introducing one of her fantasies, Margaret declares in "the climate of opinion and my own opinion . . . a female must follow her own inclinations" (57).

However, the protagonist's frustration and nascent feminist ambitions manifest themselves only in a series of fantastic daydreams. In

one she is a revolutionary helping to blow up the George Washington Bridge in the name of racial equality, in another, a writer assigned to compose an article on Cuban women. She is a leader of a nonprofit organization observing the behavior of American servicemen in Vietnam and an anthropologist gliding down the Amazon to study an indigenous tribe. Each of these fantasies involves her leaving her husband and children behind, at first furtively, but then with their blessings. Each of these feminist adventures, however, ends in disaster with her fellow revolutionaries, who, never trusting her, ultimately betray her. She gains a rare interview with Fidel Castro only to have him reveal himself as a woman in male costume—a secret the female Castro knows that nobody will ever believe.

In Vietnam Margaret witnesses a nun's sacrifice at the behest of her abbess "for the glory of the Catholic religion" and learns of the government's overwhelming power to prevent reform, including the destruction of planes with political dissidents like herself (122). Finally, an Amazon tribe blames her for an infant's deformity and attempts to kill her. Having had enough of such nightmares, the narrator writes to her husband: "Paul, my darling, if I make it home to you, I will never leave you again. I will have adventure enough on the late, late show on television. I will play Jane to your Tarzan only in our own bed. I will learn to bake bread and make chocolate mousse" (147).

From Margaret Reynolds's fevered perspective there appears to be only one option, feminism or motherhood, without any alternatives or middle ground. Ironically, even the conclusion, with the protagonist choosing domesticity and becoming pregnant, has raised questions about fantasy and reality. Gayle Greene, in *Changing the Story,* for example, posits that "the ending of this novel takes place in reality since fantasy is no longer necessary once she embarks on the great adventure of motherhood" (73). On the other hand, Janet Burstein remarks in *Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters: Tracing the Maternal in Stories by American Jewish Women* that Margaret Reynolds's "last imaginary self simply conceives another child" (123). What is at least equally possible is that the two chapters at the end of the novel indicate a significant narrowing of the space between reality and longing and reveal Margaret Reynolds's true fantasy, which negates choice. Her concluding fantasy, a better relationship with her husband, involves replacing his anxious reaction to the pregnancy (real or imagined) "with pride in her beautiful, naked body" (155).

However, her dreams for an equal, loving marriage may be as distant as some of her bizarre fantasies, for the marriage is described as unequal. Since Paul appears to put his scholarship ahead of his family, blaming her

for disruptions, their noisy children, and his crayoned notes, it is unlikely that Margaret will realize her fantasy of a happy family. Although not autobiographical, *Up the Sandbox* resembles the author's own struggles with the compromises required of wife and mother. While working on the novel, she had recently remarried and was pregnant with her second child. "The book came out just when a lot of other feminist books were starting to appear," Roiphe stated in a 1995 interview that revealed her awareness of its political basis (Steinberg, 236).

It would take a couple of years, however, for Jewish issues to surface in her next novel, *Long Division* (1972). In some ways a continuation of *Up the Sandbox,* the work follows Emily Brimberg with her precocious, but alienated ten-year-old daughter, Sarah, to Mexico, where she will file for divorce. On her picaresque journey she realizes that she has been fleeing not only her selfish, artist husband, but also her Judaism, a burden she had been carrying since her Sunday school days when she heard the historical litany of atrocities recited against Jews: inquisitions, pogroms, the Holocaust. Recoiling from victimization, Emily planned her escape from Judaism: "Marry out—each little Jewish girl had an obligation to marry out. And only then the children might be safe and the terrible tale of Jewish history would be done. No large values, tradition, scholarship, holiness, would cover for me the basic craziness, stubbornness of a survival that imposed an unchosen suffering on the great-grandchildren to come" (57–58).

Unfortunately, as the author implies, such denial may be even more self-destructive. In her protagonist's case it leads her to marry a Gentile artist who rejects God, Jesus, and fidelity, all of which is intended to describe him as self-centered and lacking values. However, Emily has many lessons to learn on her trip. Reveling in her "unlooked for but eagerly grasped freedom," Emily picks up several young men hitchhiking outside the city (Halio and Seigel, 100) who turn out not to be the rebels she hopes for but are, instead, "Jesus freaks." When they ask whether the two women have "found Jesus," daughter Sarah replies, "I'm half-Jewish, and in New York City where I come from, we really don't talk about that sort of thing" (37). However the incident underscores the pathos and failure of Emily's attempt to assimilate for when her daughter begins to sing Christian songs with the hitchhikers and later responds to a preacher that she has "seen Jesus," Emily panics. And Sarah's reassurance, "Don't worry, Mother. I don't really believe in anything at all" (55–56) is the author's stark description of the parent's mistake. Emily Brimberg could rebel against her family's tradition, against Sunday school lessons, a painful, if only, partial view of her Jewish heritage. But her legacy to Sarah, her needy

child, had been, perhaps, worse than nothing, a tragedy she finally understands in the following conversation: "'Daddy doesn't believe in Jesus, does he, Mommy?' Sarah asked casually. 'No,' I said. 'I don't suppose. Painters, you know, are special, they don't need other people's words or images to get them to the heart of the mystery, the center of the universe.' 'Well, I'm not a painter,' said Sarah" (51).

In this early novel Roiphe pounds the point home through a series of episodic adventures. An immature parent, uncertain of her identity and values, devoid of family and community cohesiveness, has little to offer a child but guilt. Unlike Huckleberry Finn's journey west, Emily's flight is predictable. By the novel's end she will be divorced, free of an unfaithful spouse, but still uncertain about life and feeling cheated, her only dream that of marrying a "gentle man like [her] grandfather" (188). Along the way her confusion turns into the pathological belief that her kidnapped daughter would be better off with the band of gypsies than with her mother's problems. Gazing at a Daughters of the American Revolution pioneer statue, she envies the symbol of lives with purpose, unlike her own, "that of a wandering Jewess, covering the globe, belonging only peripherally to one culture or another" (71–72). While Emily may have been removed from Sunday school, she bears the imprint of its message that she is different as a Jew. As if to underline this, Emily recalls visiting Rome where a crowd waiting for the Pope filled her with "hate . . . [for the] murderers, crucifiers of a million Jewish children," an attitude that renders her incapable of transmitting a positive Jewish identity to her own daughter (18).

In an attempt to explore her conflicts autobiographically, Roiphe wrote her first memoir in 1981. A dialectic, *Generation without Memory: A Jewish Journey in Christian America* presents the advantages and disadvantages of Judaism. As a feminist, the author perceives Orthodox Jewish women as downtrodden, segregated in the "shul," judged sexually impure for half the month, shorn of hair and compelled to don "sheitlach" (wigs), descriptions to which she will return in *Lovingkindness* (1987). On the other hand, Roiphe acknowledges that Orthodox women, like her friends, Blu Greenberg (future founder of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Association, JOFA) and Rhoda Solomon, lead warm, satisfying lives, combining career, family, and even feminism. For these women Judaism is a source of strength and joy, enriching their marriages and sustaining their children.

While similar conflicts characterize Roiphe's protagonists in all her works, it is in *Lovingkindness* that the tensions of motherhood, feminism, and Judaism are most fully developed. Following the death

of by her Gentile husband while she was pregnant, Annie Johnson, a university professor, is a single mother who must cope with her wayward teen daughter's latest search for selfhood. Having wandered literally and figuratively for years before landing in Jerusalem, Andrea has joined an Ultra-Orthodox yeshivah, which so disgusts her feminist mother that eventually she will attempt to rescue her. Of course, the novel is about the author's long struggle to resolve the identity conflicts experienced by some Jewish women who feel excluded by Orthodox Judaism. Thus, Annie confronts not only her daughter's rebelliousness against feminism, but also her own ambivalent emotions about Judaism. Where does this leave Anne Roiphe? Somewhat divided. By the memoir's conclusion she still has reservations about religion, though like her heroine, Emily Brimberg, she recognizes the need for form and traditions, not the alien ones of Christianity, but the indigenous rituals of an egalitarian, proud Judaism. If Roiphe is not reconciled with her heritage, she has at least eschewed rebellion and begun the search for her "kind of Judaism."

Unfortunately, the author's search will be frustrated by the "ignorances that prey on her . . . the Torah, the Talmud, the words of Rabbi Hillel and the works of Maimonides" (81). Although interested in Judaism, Roiphe is ambivalent about her studies, reluctant to be "reghettoized," to sacrifice her universality and feminism, and ultimately skeptical about a God who allowed the slaughter of millions of innocents. Is it possible, she wonders, "be close within one nation without being narrow and exclusive, to be universal, without losing the pleasures of the particular?" (219). Rejecting the superficial Reform Judaism of her childhood, unable to embrace Orthodoxy and an Old Testament God, Roiphe is left, like so many American Jews, searching for an ideal Judaism that does not yet exist. Although *Generation without Memory* reflects the author's ignorance of her heritage, she is sensitive to the spiritual emptiness she seeks to fill.

And although the memoir documents the rivalry between brother and sister, Roiphe credits her brother, Eugene, almost enviously, with "liv[ing] in a foreign country . . . rich in memories and humor . . . 'Yiddishkeit' giving comfort from which he drew a sense of himself and gained strength" (210).

Any reader of Roiphe's first memoir will immediately recognize the religious issues and conflicts that dominate her best work, *Lovingkindness,* in which she attempts a reconciliation of mother and daughter and an appreciation of Orthodox Judaism but doesn't quite succeed. The novel is set, for the most part in Jerusalem, after a prelude where we meet Annie Johnson, a successful, academic,

but somewhat-unhappy woman, widowed, burdened by a daughter whom she has apparently failed as a mother. What's a mother to do? echoes throughout Annie's thoughts as she worries about her daughter, Andrea, who rebels against her wealthy, sterile environment by using drugs, alcohol, and sex to gain her mother's attention and to punish her. Ironically, the ultimate challenge to Annie Johnson is her daughter's surprising choice to relocate to an Ultra-Orthodox environment in Jerusalem. There the discipline, warmth, and simplicity of a women's seminary will save Andrea from further drug use and abortion and match her with Michael Rose, another lost soul, whose parents will try to kidnap him from his yeshiva.

Without a doubt, *Lovingkindness* is Roiphe's finest novel. Well-researched, it realistically depicts the details of Orthodoxy, the modesty, kashruth, Sabbath observance, prayers, separation of men and women. Roiphe is particularly effective in portraying the historic figure of Rabi Nachman of Bratzlav, an imposing figure who haunts Annie Johnson's dream, allowing her to mature, understand the Orthodox world, and release her daughter to it. It would seem, then, that Orthodoxy has much to offer in this novel. Certainly Andrea, reborn as Sarai, and Michael/Micah lead more purposeful, satisfying lives than before. However, the author's depiction of the claustrophobic yeshiva and shul; the domesticated women huddled behind the *mechitza,* the wall separating them from the men; the fire that erupts, threatening to engulf them on the narrow staircase; and finally the questionable conclusion rob the novel of a resolution. Not satisfied to witness her daughter's transformation from a half-dead street urchin to a loving, religious wife, Annie secretly plots the future of her unborn granddaughter, whom she will educate and encourage to become a doctor, precisely the type of future she had planned for her rebellious daughter.

To an extent, the ending weakens the novel and robs Annie Johnson's Jerusalem odyssey of some meaning. Although she will relinquish her daughter to Orthodoxy and allow her to marry a man she hardly knows, the protagonist cannot dispel her fears about the future, about a wave of history that will put women behind veils or under scarves where they will be treated like servants. But whatever has happened to her respect for the yeshiva rabbi, dignified wife, her feelings for the legendary Rabbi Nachman, her daughter's transformation? Though acclaimed, some Orthodox and some feminist readers will not be satisfied, since the work offers no resolution.

To better understand the ambiguities and paradoxes in Roiphe's fiction, readers should return to *1185 Park Avenue,* her second memoir,

briefly discussed earlier, a template for the disastrous families portrayed in all her work. Although Orthodox Judaism is peripheral to the book, her immigrant great-grandfather and grandfather's Jewish philanthropy, father's atheism, and her brother's infatuation with Orthodoxy have a lasting impact on the author. From the outset, it is clear that too much money, great wealth acquired through the toil of a Polish Jewish immigrant pushcart peddler, Moses Philips, and his son Isaac, founders of the Van Heusen Shirt Company and transferred to Eugene Frederick Roth married to Blanche Philips, would doom the family. Roiphe takes pains to contrast the grandfather who fled poverty and pogroms and contributed great sums to the community with the greedy American generations that followed. However, according to the author, there was a heavy price to pay: "America offered prosperity even if you had to sell your soul and work on the Sabbath and eat strange fruits with customers and your children didn't know or care about the Law and all that mattered at the end of the day was the shirts in the inventory" (16). Early in her life she saw that Judaism didn't matter to her family but wealth and materialism did. Unfortunately, there were no religious role models in her childhood, leading her to question why God would have allowed her brother to be born ill, later die of a terminal illness, and on a cosmic scale, permitted the Holocaust to have happened. Her only religious education consisted of attending an

> Ethical Cultural private school forged in the furnace of John Dewey and the progressive education movement . . . which intended to unite white and Negro, Jew and Gentile in a moral, rational humanistic religion (but which had only one white Christian child, two Negro children, and one child in a wheelchair. All on scholarships, bribed to attend with the liberal Jews). The school as well as the religion was liberal and sweet. It was the new age greed for that new age. In the end, however, the school and religion primarily served only Jewish families who had better things to do than be Jewish, more modern, more profitable, more prestigious things, more appropriately American, less swamped by the tragedies and claims of the old world." (87)

Critical of her Sunday school education, of her parents' indifference and even hostility to religion, of her brother's fanaticism, Anne Roiphe reflects the experience of many assimilated Jewish Americans. Except for memories of the grandfather, who will become a constructive paradigm in some of her works, there is little evidence of positive influence in her childhood.

By the tawdry end of *1185 Park Avenue,* with her brother and her parents dead, many emotional and metaphysical issues are still

unresolved, but Roiphe somehow understands what she has lost. Reflecting on the changing nature of *1185 Park Avenue,* at the close of the twentieth century, she writes, "The elevators now rise and descend on automatic power but the ever increasing distance between God and his furless creatures remains. We discarded with the trash or we placed in the storage bins the habits of the spirit that once helped us get by" (256). It is this realization that provides the basis for conflict in *Pursuit of Happiness* (1991) as it does in *Lovingkindness.* However, the typical mother-daughter conflict is replaced in *Pursuit* by a struggle between a father and daughter. As the only strong and secure woman, Sharon Herzog pays a terrible price for her courage expressed in her magnificent cantonal-like voice, a gift inherited from her father that could be traced back generations to the famous Chassid the Baal Shem. Unfortunately, none of her brothers have the gift, and as a girl, Sharon is not permitted to sing God's praises in the synagogue. Despite his desire to keep her at home with the family, her father, Joseph, cannot break Jewish law and allow his daughter's beautiful voice to ring out over the bimah (altar.) His refusal to part with tradition drives Sharon away to a successful singing career, but one in which she herself is gradually destroyed. By the time Joseph finally relents and has his wife invite their daughter home, she cannot face him. In the end it is she who regrets her decision: "She would think about playing on the hardwood floor of the bimah, quietly while her father sang to the congregation. She would remember opening and closing the ark and the silver Torah handles catching the ark, over the ark, above the brass trellis in which the Lion of Judah was embedded "his head back and his tail curved forever curved like the letter S. She wanted something . . . but what was it she wanted?" (271).

The question resounds throughout Roiphe's works and haunts all her women. Do they want to be accepted into an Orthodox religion that limits their participation and refuses their gifts? On the other hand, can they survive without their tradition and on their own? How many sacrifices are they prepared to make to find some sort of happiness as mothers, daughters, wives, and Jews? Perhaps there are no easy answers, as Jay Halio and Ben Seigel suggest. "Perhaps for Roiphe and some of her readers, the answers may lie in the searching" (110).

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5

Conversation with Johanna Kaplan

Nahma Sandrow

Johanna Kaplan is the author of the recently reissued novel *O My America!* the short story collection *Other People's Lives,* and many short stories published in *Commentary* magazine and elsewhere. Her stories have been widely anthologized. She has won the Jewish Book Award twice and twice been a finalist for the National Book Award. She won the Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award, Lewis Wallant Award, Kenneth Smilen/Present Tense Literary Award, and has received both an NEA and a CAPS grant. She has taught at Yeshiva University and read at the 92nd Street YMHA. Critics mention her respectfully alongside such distinguished Jewish American writers as Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, and Philip Roth.

Johanna Kaplan is my cousin, but so distant a relation that there was a great deal, personal and professional, I never knew about her until I interviewed her for this piece. What I did have, from encounters over the years, was a collection of distinct impressions. A vivid person, Johanna wears dramatic colors in subtle combinations. Her hair, which used to be lustrous black, is now gleaming white, and her eyes are amber. She's a terrific amateur actress and a devastatingly funny mimic. She belts out Israeli songs in a resonant voice, talks energetically and well, but she listens more than she talks. Her presence warms social occasions, so that other people tend to do their

best talking when she's at the dinner table. She is a shrewd observer and a generous judge.

Johanna's background is central to her fiction. She was born in New York, and grew up in the Bronx. Her mother was a psychiatric social worker and her father was a remedial reading teacher in the New York City public schools. She went to the High School of Music and Art as a cellist and then to the University of Wisconsin. She had to leave Wisconsin after two years and finish her degree at New York University because her mother died, and she was needed to help her father and young brother. She took a master's degree in special education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and spent her entire working life in the child psychiatry department of Mount Sinai Hospital, teaching severely disturbed children. All that time she wrote in the evenings and during vacations, but since retiring several years ago, she is able finally to write full time.

Jewishness is a stable core in Johanna's life, evolving as her life evolves while integrating a range of convictions, concerns, and passions. Recently she has gone beyond identification as an ethnic Jew or Zionist. After many years of being disconnected from her religious heritage, she has begun to discover (or rediscover) it. That is a profound change and, as her essay about her great-grandfathers attests, her "divided self" has found resolution through joyous participation in synagogue practice.

I have recorded my questions and Johanna's answers, only occasionally rearranging their order.

Since you are considered a Jewish writer, tell me about your Jewish identity, the identity that Mara asks about at the start of your essay, "Tales of My Great-Grandfathers."

Mara's is essentially a sixties story. And in the sixties, I think, I was almost the only one of my friends who didn't go through all kinds of complex, bizarre—not so much political—as *spiritual* searches. So many of my friends—*good* friends—would come and tell me excited stories, exhilarated, and for them, revelatory, proselytizing accounts of particular gurus or groups they'd discovered—always with highly exotic habits, clothes, topsy-turvy ideas, and discipline routines that sounded not only peculiar, but also always had a distinct, creepy whiff of the charlatan. Of the authoritarian as well. And I would think to myself: how can anyone intelligent, and in their right mind, go dancing around in an orange *shmatteh* (rag), or lie crouched on the floor muttering the same gobbledygook formula four thousand times—how could you believe *that* would make a difference for all of

life? Of course, I didn't say it. Each time, with each new round, all these friends would be so convinced they'd found the absolute path to happiness. Yes, I did tend to ask suggestive questions, but how could I burst their bubble? Why would I wish to? Still, I was genuinely fascinated: I wanted to be able to penetrate the capacity to think that way—for me, it was so mysterious, *so* alien.

In that bus-stop encounter with Mara in "Tales of My Great-Grandfathers," I felt, defensively, as I always had with her, and girls like her in high school, that I was the boring and provincial one. And for all I know, by their lights, I was.

At the same time, I thought her question about being Jewish (how I'd "gotten into it") was almost stupid. To my mind, the answer was so self-evident. I didn't understand then that it was *not* a stupid question, it was a very poignant one. Mara was precisely *not* the "child who doesn't even know to ask" [the Four Sons in the Passover Haggadah]; in fact, she *was* asking. In her own way. After all, if you weren't brought up with any Jewish tradition—and instead brought up, as so many kids from sophisticated, progressive families really were, to disdain anything to do with Jewishness—how would you know what it was, what it meant? How *could* you know? For them, "Jewish" was not just a blank, but a blank with shameful, jagged edges. Only much later, really, as a middle-aged adult, did I come to see, to *appreciate,* that it made an enormous difference to have clarity—to have true *possession* of identity. That is, I knew it, but took it for granted. I wasn't searching for some unknown, unknowable *mysterium* elsewhere. I certainly did have all the usual tormenting questions, doubts, and confusions about life, but at least I knew who I was.

You grew up speaking Yiddish.

Yiddish *was* actually my first language, but a baby's language only: for the first three years of my life. During World War II, when my father was drafted, my mother took me, her baby daughter, to live with her parents in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. (That's where my immigrant grandfather had been sent in the mid-twenties by the HIAS [the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] to be cantor of the small local Orthodox shul.) At the war's end, my parents and I returned to New York, and there I was in the Bronx: a little girl with a Yiddish accent. (Though like an old-fashioned New Englander, I said "bahth" instead of the Bronx's "baaaith.") But I regret tremendously that I didn't ever learn to speak a true, complex, adult Yiddish. I'd like to think, though, that through my summers at Camp Kindervelt, where I had a role in

Yiddish plays aimed at the adult camp (Unzer Camp), I did at least develop some *sense* of a higher-level Yiddish. And now, to my amusement and bemusement, both, I find that in the last few years, freed from the mental constraints of teaching verbally limited children, I do increasingly think in, and even use, Yiddish words and idioms, especially to express states of mind—and above all, varieties of misfortune.

Is this a return to an earlier self that had been left behind?

Yiddish was the real language of my mother's whole family. And it was a very large, close, contentious family—my mother was the eldest of ten brothers and sisters, and they tended to make up each other's whole social world. As a matter of course, my mother and all my aunts and uncles always spoke English to their husbands or wives and children, but among themselves, and especially when it involved serious, problematic, personal—that is, easily divisive—matters, Yiddish was the language that carried their excitable, agitated voices whether by phone or around a kitchen table. Long-running, emotion-loaded conversations of that kind could never have occurred in English; I would never have expected it. On Saturday or Sunday afternoons, once my grandparents had moved from Pittsfield to the Bronx, there would always be several aunts and uncles sitting around my grandmother's kitchen table, all their children, spouses—and occasionally a dog—relegated to some other part of the house. Really, that humid kitchen table was the domain of the sisters—my mother and my many aunts. My grandmother was there, too, but she was rarely an active participant in these electric, agonized marathons. She would throw up her hands in teary despair, and go off to check and see if any of her grandchildren's *davening* [ability to read the prayer book] skills had improved. (She did actually test us, and her standards were no different for girls than for boys.) She was, after all, the daughter of a much-respected rabbi [the first great-grandfather featured in the essay], and by her lights, it was both an annoyance and an embarrassment that so many women in synagogue would lose their place in the *sidur* [prayerbook]. So you could always please her by reading really *fast*.

Often I would wander into that explosive kitchen to get a glass of soda (black cherry, yes, delivered in those slatted wooden crates by the seltzer-man) and, if the conversation seemed interesting, I just hung around and listened, apparently invisible. Till—and the moment invariably came—when I blew it: by contradicting someone, and in English. "No, he didn't!" I would suddenly jump in. Or "*That's* not what she said!" Only then were they reminded that not only

was I *there,* but also that I could understand their Yiddish. And they would be forced to switch to Polish, a language in which they were not really comfortable. After a few minutes of some faltering and frustration—the Polish they spoke could not bear the weight of their passion and heat—I would be banished from the kitchen.

These kitchen forays of mine made me the "bad" child, the nuisance, "fresh" because I understood and interrupted; most of my other cousins had never absorbed enough Yiddish to pose a serious conversational threat.

Of course, Yiddish, for American Jews, by that time in the fifties, was already very much on its way out as a spoken, and even as a "heard" language. Even the adults, the parent-generation in my building in the Bronx—most were born in America—and though they could make simple, *necessary* responses in Yiddish (to elderly relatives), it was not a language they really knew, or at all valued.

In the essay you describe yourself as a toddler, sitting with your grandfather in synagogue, hearing the synagogue melodies.

Hearing and singing—both. So for me, that very early synagogue experience—seated on the bimah [pulpit]—was active, you could say participatory, and wonderful. But I could never claim to have faith in the classic, synagogue-prayer sense: *emunah* [faith]. I wasn't raised to have it. Mine was a *tradition*-observing family. We observed all Jewish holidays—which I loved. (I didn't ever feel "deprived" that we didn't *have* Christmas.) We were kosher, and in fact, I had never even been in a restaurant till I was in my late teens. We always observed a traditional Friday night *shabbes* [Sabbath]. My father made kiddush [blessing over wine]. My mother lit candles; she spread an embroidered tablecloth and used the "good" dishes, she made a traditional (roast chicken, potato kugel [pudding]) shabbes meal; she even baked challah. Though she was not much of a baker, she enjoyed braiding the dough—something she'd learned to do as a child in Poland. She did not ever cook on Saturdays, nor did we shop or buy on Saturdays. (Though I cheated sometimes. I went to the library most Saturday afternoons, and sometimes the smell of the jelly doughnuts at the bakery just next door to the library was too good to resist; but my mother did not approve. She knew I did it, but she made clear—by facial expression, through body language—that she wished I wouldn't. My father was more forgiving. Still, my guilt was considerable: not only was I buying on shabbes, but from a distinctly *goyish* [Gentile] bakery.)

We did travel on shabbes—take the bus—but really only to visit my grandmother. Still, my parents were not shul [synagogue]-goers; they would go on High Holidays, and to say *yizkor* [memorial prayer for the dead, recited several times a year], and sometimes *selichos* [penitential prayers at night, recited before Rosh Hashanah]. (And once he'd retired, my father always went to hear the *megillah* [scroll retelling the story of Esther read aloud on Purim] because *his* Hebrew name was Mordechai.) My mother really knew Hebrew; my father knew enough Hebrew to daven [pray]. And I went to junior congregation every week. Which was my choice: I went alone. Neither of my parents ever went to shul on shabbes.

But the great Jewish passion in my family was not religious observance, and not Yiddish; it was Zionism. My mother and her whole family were Zionists. In fact, my grandfather, in his youth, before he'd married and had a family, had had the intention, or at least had seriously played with the thought, of going on aliyah [immigrating to Israel]. (He'd been kicked out of yeshiva [school for studying sacred Jewish texts] for reading a novel by Avraham Mapu [an early Hebraist writer].) That would have been before World War I, *before* the Balfour Declaration, *before* the British Mandate. My grandmother's sister and several of her cousins did go, a bit later, in the early twenties.

By the time my mother was a young social worker in Brooklyn, working for Jewish Family Service, her Zionist activities often got her into trouble with both her colleagues and superiors because Zionism was dismissed, *disdained,* as "particularist," parochial. A highly contemptible charge in those times. (And perhaps still.) In the late thirties, she'd pressed very hard to make the bringing over of European Jews a specific focus of Jewish Family Service's agenda, and of course, that was ridiculed as particularist, too.

My father, born and raised on the Lower East Side, was not drawn into a Zionist milieu until he met my mother. But he'd always had, on his own—you might even say genetically—(It's his grandfather who was the captive child-soldier described in the essay) a tremendous sense of *ichud* [Jewish solidarity, connectedness]. That probably came from his own rough-and-tumble childhood experiences—his street sense. Which had thoroughly taught him the importance of being able, and willing, to stand up for yourself—when necessary, to fight. At the same time, he was a great reader of *Pirkey Avot* [Sayings of the Fathers]: "All Jews are responsible for one another." He took that *very* seriously, very personally. So it was only natural for him to see the establishment of a Jewish state as a fulfillment, an embodiment, of that concept.

For my formal Jewish education, I was extremely lucky in the local synagogue's after-school Hebrew School. (And I couldn't have realized that at the time.) All I knew was that my teachers were marvelous; I learned a lot, and I loved it. Only decades later, just a few years ago, did I find out that *that* Hebrew School, my plain old neighborhood Hebrew School, in the years when I attended, had attained a nearly mythic status among New York City Jewish educators: it had come to be considered the gold-standard Hebrew School, the model to aim for. "You went to [Rabbi] *Israel Miller's* Hebrew School?"

But the major influence in my Jewish attitudes, and even education, was the Labor Zionist youth movement, *Habonim.* In adolescence, when emotional confusion is at its height, Habonim gave me a clear, stable, and incredibly rich base. And you could *never* be bored: it was that kind of whirl. Discussion groups [*sichah*], informal Hebrew language classes, weekly plays or skits, singing, dancing, *Oneg Shabbat* [Friday night Sabbath programs], summer camp, and during Christmas vacation, winter camp, citywide Israeli dance festivals, music festivals, performances of various kinds—my entire high school social life revolved not around high school, but around Habonim. And to think now all that we were exposed to in Habonim, what we absorbed as a matter of course! Zionist history and thinkers, the struggles and varying ideologies of the *chalutzim* [pioneers], a sense of the dynamic Jewish life of interwar Poland, the tragic, heroic accounts of Jewish Partisans in World War II—and their poems, their songs. We happily absorbed all this as teenagers in an easy, casual way—material that even educated Jews tend to be unaware of unless they've gone out of their way to learn about it. Many Habonim kids were the children of survivors, some themselves hidden as babies, or born in DP camps, so *that* was an implicit education as well. Habonim was a whole world. And for me, it was absolutely formative. Though, in a certain sense, I was a Habonim failure: I did *not* go on aliyah.

Any other early Jewish associations? Food?

I didn't come from a family of good cooks. To this day, though, *matzah brei* [matzo fried with eggs] still seems to me the quintessential comfort food.

Early relationships with non-Jews?

There were really very few, except for teachers. The neighborhood I grew up in was largely Jewish, though it also had a significant Irish

component. But the kids from Irish families tended to go to Catholic school, so we didn't know each other. We rarely mixed—only as *very* little (preschool age) children in the playground. There were "Jewish" apartment buildings, and "Irish" apartment buildings, "Jewish" stores, and "Irish" stores. These you could tell apart by the slightest glance. We lived side by side, but with distance—a certain coolness, not friction. By the time I got to high school, the High School of Music and Art was, of course, diverse, but still (both in numbers and in culture) overwhelmingly a "Jewish" school, whether or not the kids came from consciously Jewish households.

So when you went to the University of Wisconsin, it was your first time out of this tight community

Before I left for college, my father said, don't worry about living among non-Jews. In the army, he said, he was among goyim [non-Jews] all the time and it never was a problem. He told me, "I got along with goyim, and so will you." But I *wasn't* worried. Not about that. I was curious. And very excited. I thought: This is Willa Cather country—and I'm going!

In fact, there was Jewish life in Wisconsin, too. And I did naturally gravitate to Hillel [Jewish students' organization]. In Wisconsin, for the first time in my life, there were classes, field trips, and even exams on major Jewish holidays. I hadn't expected that dilemma. (I did go to class if there was an exam, but I always felt torn about it.)

Nor had I at all expected—it was actually my first personal experience of specific, unvarnished anti-Semitism—that my freshman year room-mate, an echt small-town Scandinavian farm girl would say to me, "I knew that I would have to make sacrifices to get an education, but I never thought that I would have to live in the same room with a Jew." Looking back now, I marvel at how naïve I was. I think I started to giggle. Because I didn't feel threatened; I felt disdain, disgust, and condescension. In Habonim, we had picketed (segregated-counters) Woolworth's. So to me, the idea that a girl who was a *college senior* would not know that prejudice, bigotry of any kind was truly retrograde, shamingly backward—that was laughable. I thought, My God, isn't she embarrassed to *think* such a thing, let alone say it? I knew I wasn't in any kind of danger. Eventually I came to understand that she was jealous of the Jewish girls from New York and Chicago (always lumped together.) We had had big-city advantages and presumably seemed sophisticated, and she surely felt that she was just a hick. "How come all your friends have long hair and play the guitar?" was probably her puzzled, if unpleasant, way of

questioning, Is this somehow a part of being Jewish? Several years later, she puzzled *me* by sending me a postcard from some museum in Europe, signed "Love, Sue." By the time I figured out who the "Sue" was, I understood that she was letting me know: see, she had become worldly, too; she had become as '"sophisticated" as anyone with long hair and a guitar.

On the other hand, the following year I roomed with another girl from a more or less similar Scandinavian background, and we were genuinely friends; I was a bridesmaid at her wedding.

Sam B. Girgus, in his *The New Covenant*, commented that "the American idea is so basic to Jewish identity and to the modern Jewish mind that a novel by one of our most talented new Jewish writers [he meant your *O My America!*] focuses precisely on the relationship of the American idea to the Jewish experience and to the . . . Jewish intellectual." Peter Shaw noted that in your novel "the Jewish past . . . is inextricably intertwined with the American past and American traditions." Murray Baumgarten devotes the conclusion of his book *City Scriptures: Modern Jewish Writing* to the way you "investigate the urban situation of the contemporary Jew in America." Do you consider yourself a specifically American writer?

The country where you're born and raised is your given, and I do feel incredibly lucky to have been born here. (In the early 1940s, there were not too many safe places in the world for a Jewish child to be born.) But American Jewish writers and intellectuals have always engaged with the *idea* of America probably because it is, uniquely, a nation founded on an idea. And in my novel, *O My America!* I was writing about a generation of American Jewish intellectuals who were in conflicted love with that idea, but above all concerned with carving out a place for themselves within the idea itself. That was precisely the issue they kept wrestling with. And they were hardly at all concerned with their role as Jews, though they could not, did not, *totally* jettison that piece of their identities. It troubled them, made them uneasy.

I had a romantic notion of America, of the West—*Mid*-west, actually, going to Wisconsin. I loved the romance of the names of rivers, towns, place names—the music-geography of names. It was the game "Geography" come to life, made real. Still, I have always thought of myself as a New York City writer as much as an American or a Jewish writer. I feel a profound, intimate, lifelong bond with this city; I feel I am "of" it. I'm a city girl, and I'm a city writer.

Decades ago, I heard you participate in a panel discussion dedicated to chewing over that old question: What is a Jewish writer? You said then that to be a Jewish writer, you need to know things. You can't be ignorant. Well, what things do you need to know?

You have to know Jewish history. You have to feel a connection to our collective history, and know its substance—know what that connection really consists of.

You also have to have some basic Hebrew skills. Because that is the *essential* connection to the Jewish people, the *central* connection. Not just to our immediate Eastern European Jewish past. It takes us all the way back to the Bible and to every Jewish community in every place, in every period of time. There was always another lingua franca—Yiddish, Aramaic, Ladino—but Hebrew was the basis.

So, history and Hebrew. Obviously there are people who would say Jewish religious practice, but I don't consider that primary. I would *like* to be able to add as a requirement the concept of *Ahavat Yisrael,* a love for the Jewish people strong enough to withstand even its considerable faults—that very quality that Gershom Scholem told Hannah Arendt she was lacking—but I'm afraid that would be truly Utopian.

Are you describing what a Jewish writer needs to know, or what a Jew needs to know?

I'm not sure there's a difference. If every Jew ought to have those foundations, why should a Jewish writer have anything less?

When did you start writing?

I wrote all the time as a child. But after that, writing became only my *secret* ambition. I kept it secret not only from others, but above all, from myself. I started writing again the summer I was 25. By then, I had already been teaching for a few years, and I was once again going to spend that summer teaching summer school. But 25 seemed very old. Somehow it seemed to me the cutoff: now or never. So instead of working summer school, I spent the summer writing, and in fact did that every summer from then on.

And why did you start writing?

I've always thought that creativity may not be such a mystery. Clearly, you have to be born with a certain talent, but beyond that, I think, you have to have the need, from early on, to nurture yourself—even

entertain yourself—from your own imagination; that's where I think creative life is begun. If you have A-plus parental nurturing, you'd be unlikely to *need* to do that. In that case, you'd wind up using your talent in some other way. I started writing to tell myself stories—something I can remember doing even in the years before I could read and write.

We are stuck with a tremendously sentimentalizing myth of the warm, close, loving Jewish family. But in generations not too distant from us, such families hardly existed. In the shtetl [East European Jewish village], there were often stepmothers or stepfathers, and children from the earlier marriages would be grossly ill-treated—or even get cast aside. Poverty and oppression pushed people into harsh situations, and sometimes harsh habits of living. Think of the (commonly used) Yiddish idiom *a baizer Yid:* an angry Jew; a brusque, bitter, short-tempered, miserable guy. There must have been a lot of them around for that expression to have earned such widespread shorthand usage. And then, as well, there were huge numbers of orphans—and in the wake of World War I, *wandering* orphans. The great American Jewish psychodrama has been the wish—the fantasy—to recreate the kinds of families that in fact few of our shtetl forebears really knew. And if people didn't have it, *know* it, except in wish form, how could they offer it as everyday life?

Of course, I would never claim that *nobody* came from a warm, close, supportive, loving Jewish family. But probably few such lucky people became imaginative writers.

Though I would add that Jewishness itself does nurture. It points out the "larger" family that will always have a place for you, and the choice of that particular place is one you yourself can determine.

You have certain obvious equipment for fiction writings. The ear, which many critics mention—after all, you're a cantor's granddaughter, a cello player. Also the observant eye. Do you get your stories from listening and looking around you?

For me, the fun, the joy stage of the process is in *making up* stories, in inventing—to make up a very particular world, to be within the light markers of my own mind. I do look around, and I do listen, but I don't know who my characters "are", or where they might have come from, and I would never *want* to know. Because then, that would make it an "assignment," a report, not a door into another universe. I know I might somewhere glimpse a person—a face on a bus, or hear a snatch of conversation—in a store, in the street, but by the time anything like that becomes the glimmerings of a character or

the shadow of a story, that "information" or observation has already come to me entirely transformed. I'm writing fiction.

Do you come from a family of storytellers?

My mother certainly did not *think* of herself as a storyteller. She thought she was simply talking about life. But she was vibrant, dramatic, impassioned in temperament. An acerbic woman, rancorous, sharp, very astute about people. My father was a more conscious storyteller, and a wonderful one—an *entertaining* storyteller, wry, very, very funny, with a highly developed sense of the absurd—the ridiculous, and he was a brilliant, amazing mimic. He could do physical, gestural mimicry as well. But he, too, was not telling "stories": he was describing, dramatizing incidents from his own life.

My mother was a very good teacher. Despite her psychological training (her social work degree), she didn't fully understand—or maybe she just didn't accept—the conventional dicta about what a child was capable of understanding. And for me, this was both lucky and unlucky. She believed that she could explain to me everything that she herself understood. So she did not shield me from much; she didn't "protect" me. On the one hand, you could criticize that—it's certainly not ideal parenting—but there was an upside: she really did explain to me from an early age how to make sense of the world.

And yes, I can offer an early example. I can't have been more than five years old—I was not yet in "real" school. We were a bunch of little girls with doll carriages and jump ropes playing on the sidewalk in front of the building, while the mothers sat on folding chairs or upended cream cheese crates, gossiping, smoking, knitting (in my own mother's acid view, comparing nail polishes.) My mother did not—would not—participate in that absolutely fundamental neighborhood ritual, so if I wanted to play outside, I would have to be "watched" by the usual klatsch of neighbor-mothers. Somehow, once, we, the little girls, got to talking about our names: who we were named after. One girl, Rhoda, said that she'd been named after her grandmother. So I asked, "What was your grandmother's name?" And she turned to me with genuine annoyance (how could I have missed the obvious?), and said, "*Rhoda!*" But I said, "No. That *couldn't* be. Nobody's grandmother is named *Rhoda*. It has to be something like . . . Rokhl." And Rhoda's mother, one of the "watcher" mothers, overheard and looked up—in pure astonishment. She said yes, I was right, that Rhoda's grandmother's name *was* Rokhl. And she was totally mystified: she couldn't understand how I'd figured it out. But there was no mystery. I already knew enough about the way generational names worked that

I could say, without hesitation, that nobody's *grandmother* was named Rhoda. I knew because my mother had taught me.

Did your mother tell Jewish stories?

I don't think she talked consciously about being Jewish, but it was very much what she just naturally did talk about: her childhood, her family, the people she'd worked with, observations about the neighbors. And they were all Jews. Also, my mother was probably the only person in the building, and one of the few people in the neighborhood, who could speak to the refugees—survivors—who came to live in the Bronx after the war. She knew languages—Yiddish, Polish, Russian, German. (She also knew Hebrew and French—had actually majored in French—because at Hunter College, she'd been explicitly told, that as a girl with a foreign accent, the English department would not accept her.)

Literary influences?

The first serious writer I loved was Willa Cather. I was drawn in, captivated, by her stranger's sense for the feel of the land, and the variety of immigrant people who struggled with it. I "believed" her characters, was dazzled by her landscapes. And of course I loved the narrative: *life* happened, and it was a *kind* of life I didn't know. My favorite Willa Cather novel was *Song of the Lark,* though I know now that critics don't share my girlhood judgment. From a young age, I read the Brontë sisters, adored George Eliot, then, also Stefan Zweig, and Kafka (I would never say he was an "influence," but still I was fascinated). A little later, I began to read and devour Tolstoy, Chekhov, Flaubert, Conrad. Then, after that, Bellow, Roth (both Roths, Philip and Henry, I didn't get to Joseph Roth till later), and I'm a great fan of Naipaul's novels, and the short stories of Flannery O'Connor. I love the Joyce short works—*Portrait* included. For me, James Joyce's *The Dead* is the single greatest novella in English. I love and admire it in both old ways and new every time I reread it.

But Isaac Babel is the writer I admire most. As I came closer to being conscious of becoming a writer, I read Babel with a very, very careful eye. He was doing something with language that I thought was miraculous. I saw that he was able in spare, incisive, above all, *precise,* lyrical passages to set before you a character, a scene, a room, a field, even, in the most immediate, shocking, mind-awakening way. I've reread many of his stories many times.

In fact, I wrote a story "Family Obligations" [*Moment Magazine,* March 1983], intended as a "homage" to Babel. It was about my great-aunt, the same great-aunt mentioned in the essay. She was

briefly the doctor for a company of Bolshevik soldiers on a train, and my story uses the sparse facts I know about her real life. I was trying to write that story as if Babel (using his alter ego narrator Lyutov of *Red Cavalry*) had written it.

I'm a big fan of [Saul] Bellow's and Cynthia Ozick's, and Philip Roth's and [Bernard] Malamud's—his short stories. I learned from all of them. Also Henry Roth, and [Daniel] Fuchs, and of course, Isaac Bashevis Singer, but those last I read only later.

Many first-generation American Jewish writers (children of immigrants) associated Jewishness only with the past, and because they no longer deeply identified as Jews, at least not in the years of their striking-out young maturity—"Jewish" could only refer back to something to do with childhood or parents. That meant a vacuum had set in—and too often, a certain querulous sentimentality filled it.

Bellow is an exception. As a young man, he went to France, he plunged himself into a host of exotic, even esoteric, philosophical, spiritual universes. Yet at the same time, his Yiddish was so good, and his feel for things Jewish so keen that he could translate Bashevis Singer. He does have Ahavat Yisrael, I would say. Of the Jewish writers of his generation, he kept his hands closest on the reins of authentic Jewish identity.

Not all your stories are about Jews. The German Maria, rather than the Jewish characters, is the heroine of "Other People's Lives," though Peter Shaw suggests that in fact she "becomes a vehicle for giving significance to the Jewish experience." The heroine of your story "Dragon Lady," who is a young Vietnamese woman of Chinese descent—would you say the same about her?

In my own mind, that story, that character, has a conscious connection with Jewishness, but I wanted that to be disguised, hidden. It was a way of writing about a very alien culture. At the time, I thought, the only thing anyone ever talks about, thinks about, is Vietnam: all right, let me see if I can write about Vietnam. It was a challenge to myself. So I came to it from the perspective of a character from a *marginal* culture. This Vietnamese girl was in fact Chinese, from a marginal community in her own country.

The newspaper item that inspired the story, which itemizes the disguises she wore when shooting people, is reproduced at the head of the story.

It was that girl's collection of scarves and wigs detailed in the newspaper item that caught my eye. I could see her standing casually at the

Bloomingdale's counter trying on scarves. She was disguising herself. But she was doing it with purpose, as a secret agent. Many writers talk about artists or writers as "liars." Babel wrote, "A writer is a liar." Fellini too (in a documentary) likes to talk about himself as a liar. That has always bothered me—I've never felt that I'm remotely like a liar, or that I would *wish* to be a liar, but there's a way in which I can feel that I am a spy. I felt I could easily connect with the notion of someone going undercover. I could intuitively, instinctively, connect with the notion of changing identity or disguising yourself—because that's what you do, in effect, every time you create a new character.

You spent many years at Mount Sinai Hospital teaching children who were deeply disturbed emotionally, and were generally from unstable, underclass households as well. What drew you to that work?

To begin with, I was raised idealistically: to do "good" in the world. My mother was a social worker at first in Brownsville, and then, decades later, in the South Bronx. My father was a remedial reading teacher in Harlem. I was raised with a particular—I would now say, peculiar—kind of Litvak austerity. People who make money are automatically bad, shallow, empty: they demonstrate this by the very fact of their pursuits. It was a given that I'd do some kind of "good work"—as opposed to wasting time "writing *mayselekh*"—little stories—which is how one relative dismissed my efforts.

Doing "good" in the world was by no means a political act. I suppose I did consider myself a socialist when I was in Habonim, but that was a naïve, romantic kibbutz-based socialism—the sort of standard-issue socialism integral to the Israel of that time. By the time leftist politics, the New Left, became a serious issue for my generation, I knew that I was not, could not be part of that group. The famous early SDS Port Huron Statement was already clearly anti-Israel. Then I did go on several Vietnam protest marches, and on one of them I saw a group of students—I think from Columbia, about my age, I was just out of college—wearing kaffiyehs and making that wailing Arab-style ululation sound. The movie *Battle of Algiers* had just come out, and I'd seen it. I don't claim clairvoyance, but when I saw that movie, I had a horrible, shuddering sensation—it was the outdoor café scenes that did it—that such things could happen in Israel, that a nightmare of that kind would not be impossible. So as soon as I saw those kaffiyehs and heard all that ululation, I knew this was not my scene at all. I mean I understood right away that intrinsic to this movement was anti-Semitism. So I have no link with the "*link*" [Yiddish for "left"].

Did you just make that pun up? And if not the "*link*," how about feminism?

I came from a family of strong women, so it never occurred to me that women couldn't do what they wished to do in the world. To the degree that anyone could ever hope to do what they wished to do. Which, by the lights of my family, was very far from a given. But that was not gender linked; men did not have power or careers; they had jobs.

In addition, since I did not grow up in a restrictive Orthodox milieu, I didn't ever experience that excluded, demeaned, prevented, a-woman's-voice-must-not-be-heard sense of myself that many Orthodox women have talked and written about. (In fact I didn't know that such a scene was still so pervasive until I read about it as an adult.) I began my synagogue life singing on the bimah, and now that I've learned how to chant a haftarah [weekly Bible portion]—a recently acquired skill—you could say that I've picked up where I left off.

Still, that Jewish women were for centuries deprived of serious Jewish learning, a classic Jewish education—denied it, as their sometimes-reluctant brothers were not—I now, but only now, understand as an enormous, incalculable loss, both individual and collective.

So it was an idealistic decision to commit yourself to the job of teaching these poor children. How did that affect the writing?

I came to know a whole world that most middle-class people have no entrée to—the world of the underclass. And I got to learn it in the clearest possible way, through children. In the beginning years especially, I felt like an anthropologist: these children's whole universe was that different. The essay "Scenes from a Special Classroom" [*Commentary,* May 1971], and the stories "Christmas Party" [*City Journal,* Winter 1995] and "All-City Adolescent" [*Commentary,* May 1997] come out of my experience as a teacher.

And I learned, to my great surprise, that so many of the chestnuts about universality are not true. We're not all the same. What people want—and need—what makes them happy or comfortable, what they expect from, and about, life is very, very different. And those distinctions are highly culture-bound. If you don't see how cause and effect work, for example, then it doesn't make any difference what you do, what actions you take. In that worldview, just about everything is out of your hands. Too many experts, policy makers of every discipline and stripe, don't truly understand the depth of cultural disparities,

how much elemental passions may differ, or even how they might show themselves in radically different forms.

So there I was, working, and watching. Once, when I was teaching adolescents, during a break between classes, a lively discussion broke out among the girls about the best ways to get back at a boyfriend suspected of straying. One (14-year-old) girl advised, "Always have a piece of glass in your pocket." Another pointed to the place in her mouth which (in other circumstances) hid a razor blade. Despite all my years of experience, I was taken aback. So I interrupted. In my world, I said, people aren't violent. They argue a lot, I said, they use words, but they don't fight physically. You would not need to have a piece of jagged glass in your pocket, I told them, or a razor blade tucked in at the back of your tongue. And the class got very angry at me. They had thought of me as a teacher who could be counted on to speak to them truthfully, but this time they were absolutely sure I was simply handing them a line. They couldn't *conceive* of everyday lives without physical violence.

Most people I know have never stepped out of a comfortable Jewish intellectual or professional ambience. In a way, I envy that. But for a writer, maybe it's not such a bad thing to realize that there are whole other worlds out there.

I found I could write only by making as much mental separation as possible between writing—the world of my imagination—on the one hand, and my 8-to-3 teaching day. I wrote when I came home from work. But that kind of teaching was very tough, wearing, emotionally, and physically, too. When I taught younger children, it was very strenuous physically. They would throw chairs or whatever else was at hand when they got frustrated or angry; you had to have acute peripheral vision and you had to be very quick on your feet. Working with sullen, intentionally menacing, high school students was sometimes scary, but physically much less stressful. Still, it got harder and harder to sit down at night to write. I was very glad to be able to retire several years ago.

Retirement has been one huge change of the last few years. Synagogue observance is another. If you keep going to synagogue as you do nowadays, what's going to show up in your writing?

When my father died, about ten years ago, I went to synagogue only with the idea that I wanted to say kaddish [prayer for the dead]. While he was sick, before he died, I had thought to myself that I'd try to do it. And the very first time I went, I had a true flash of déjà vu, the closest thing to a mystical experience, the only one I've ever had. I was in the deepest grief of my life, a week after he died. But

suddenly, there in a strange synagogue, I felt an overwhelming wave—a surge—of happiness. For an instant, I had recovered that awed, protected three-year-old child who sat with her grandfather on the bimah—and recovered the whole scene with astonishing visual and even tactile specificity.

It had been decades since I'd been in a synagogue, except for bar mitzvahs, or an occasional Kol Nidre [prayer at the start of Yom Kippur]. And then I'd always felt very alien: this is not the way in which I am Jewish. And I was perfectly comfortable with that thought. All those Habonim years had taught me that we're not "that" kind of Jewish, and that's perfectly OK. Now I think that to have been a great mistake—in retrospect, a serious mistake of the Labor Zionist movement—and many people have realized it. In their zeal to remake a downtrodden people, they were throwing out great riches, enormous resources, resources that belong to every individual Jew: it was private property, and collective property, both.

So, since I think that now and did not think that when I wrote my two earlier books, I do expect that it will show up, though I can't say how. I don't feel a profound connection with Jews who choose to live lives entirely bound by ritual—Hasidim, the *Haredi* [Ultra-Orthodox]. But I would not now make the kind of dismissive gesture I used to. I do really think that the text treasures are *all* our treasures. And that is something I did not think, or even think about, in the past.

So that's your future. And what's going to be the future of Jewish literature?

I can't imagine a single bit of Jewish life that isn't now being—or wouldn't in future be—feverishly written about. As soon as whatever newly discovered tribes there may be out there arrive in Israel, into that massively literary and talking culture, they'll start their novels. I'm sure there'll soon be a great Ethiopian Jewish writer—if there isn't one already. We can laugh, and revel in that wonderful irony, but it *is* wonderful—in fact, it's remarkable. Jews are ferocious scribblers: we cannot know our future, but we can be sure it will be written about—described and inscribed.

I don't in the least feel hampered as a writer to be identified as Jewish. You know you have the riches of a great tradition and then, beneath the skin, the constantly pulsing presence of history. It gives you a very particular perch on the world.

6

Johanna Kaplan and the Freedom of Attachment

Carol Iannone

Johanna Kaplan is a native New Yorker who proudly and unequivocally accepts the designation of "Jewish writer." She has produced a small but choice body of fiction, almost all of it set in Jewish milieus in and around the city. And beyond its specifically Jewish characters and settings, her work is informed by an even deeper and more elusive Jewish quality. For one thing, there is what she has called "the primacy of people-hood" ("Tales," 53), a living sense that modern Jews, even if secular, unobservant, or atheistic, belong to something larger than themselves, and have a history and heritage that seeps into their ordinary lives, sometimes whether they like it or not.

The presence of the Jewish past figures importantly in a number of the entries in Kaplan's collection, *Other People's Lives* (1975), comprising stories written in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These stories evidence a distinctive Kaplan style—quirky, jumpy, funny, layered, compressed, elliptical, richly detailed, irregularly shaped, more musiclike than narrative, told in bits and nonchronologically, often reflecting the unfolding of the characters' inner worlds.

All of the stories in this collection deal with young people confronting a jumble of experiences and impressions. Some of them, especially "Sickness" and "Sour or Suntanned, It Makes No Difference," are centered in the all-Jewish childhood world Kaplan recalls in her interview—a world full of children named Gil Burstein, Mindy Simons, Marty Weintraub, Richard Lazaroff, and Stu and Arlene

Greenzweig, with only distant thoughts of the Catholic kids who go to Released Time for catechism study. A specificity of time, place, and culture marks these stories as well—postwar New York City, the Bronx, Alexander's, Loehmann's, *Howdy Doody, Marjorie Morningstar,* Jewish summer camp, Zionist youth groups, small apartment buildings with roof antennas and no air-conditioning, children laboriously practicing creaky classical music, and adults with "angry, worn out voice[s]" (114) who discuss socialism and remember Poland before the war. For a non-Jewish reader who grew up in New York City these stories can be a revelation, like the curtains opening on a house that one remembers seeing mainly from the outside.

In "Sickness," the main character, Miriam, is home from school with a case of measles and a high fever. Despite the seriousness of the illness, she is rather enjoying her days out of the usual routine. Clad in her clown-studded pajamas, she savors her room, her books, her mother, the neighbors, and all the attention she is getting. The story unfolds episodically and without plot but is tied together by Miriam's leisurely delectation of the varieties of Jewish experiences that enter her childish purview. As she feverishly dozes on and off, the tales she reads about the Jewish past begin to blend with real life in a rather-pleasant delirium, and her thoughts wander from one image to another—from the colors in her room to her classmates to the neighbors who live in her building to life on the block with the "cows"—the females who "get the best boys and end up with the best husbands" (114) and do a lot of shopping. On everything she pronounces with sage naiveté and a distinct lack of sentimentality. Of Eva, a frazzled refugee with a blue number on her arm, Miriam observes: "When she first moved in, it was this blue number that made all the other women in the building, the cows especially, keep away from her completely, but when they found out how talented she was in gossiping, all her worries were over" (120).

In her essay "Tales of my Great-Grandfathers" (2000), Kaplan explains her own happily assumed identity as a Jewish writer. While some of her contemporaries disdained their Jewish heritage and searched for other modes of fulfillment, especially during the tumultuous 1970s, Kaplan never abandoned her Jewish "trip" (49). She attributes this steadiness mainly to her family background. One of her great-grandfathers had been "an eccentric, lofty-minded rabbi who rescued abandoned children," and another, " a desolate, kidnapped child-conscript" in czarist Russia, like a little boy in one of Miriam's stories. "How could I not, then, as a writer," Kaplan asks, "be drawn to the paradoxes and disruptions that stumble through generations of

Jewish families' lives?" These family myths " have yet another link," Kaplan continues, "the primacy of people-hood," through which she feels herself a part of "a drama of catastrophe and renewal any imaginative writer would be hard put to equal" (53).

In her own childlike way, the young protagonist of "Sickness" also feels herself part of this sense of people-hood, even to the land of Israel itself. This element enters magically into the story when Miriam's mother relates how back in Poland, a large, sweet Jaffa orange was what her father, Miriam's grandfather, used finally to induce his younger daughters to take some needed medicine (128–129). The orange becomes a metaphor for Israel, and Israel a metaphor for the larger world of Jewish experience. As the "thick orange globe" of a sun (131) sets over the safety of her Bronx neighborhood, Miriam starts from sleep and from a haunted dream of Palestine to find her fever broken but herself still part of this larger world, with its long history, its procession of characters, its ups and downs, its catastrophes and renewals—like the refugee who lost her daughters to the Nazis and now finds herself in America with a son and a talent for gossip, and like Kaplan's great-grandfather, one of those Jewish children snatched by Cossacks to be made into Christians, who, she tells us, returned to his people and to life as a Jew after decades of forced service to the czar ("Tales," 52–53).

"Sour or Suntanned, It Makes No Difference" is a darkly humorous negative of the same idea. It is set in a Jewish summer camp that the young protagonist, also named Miriam (the same child, perhaps, only older), utterly hates. Her withering observations on the exuberant, arm-locking, hand-holding camaraderie of camp life and on other aspects of her experience are among the funniest things Kaplan has written. Miriam's glowing suntan cannot disguise her sour face. The world she sees and the world the adults see, or pretend to see, are very different. When a visitor to the camp remarks on its beauty, she insists the lake is polluted (150). To an uncle committed to socialism, she demands to know if the people in socialist countries are "faking it." ("All they have to tell you is if they're selfish or if they share around the things they've got" [151].) The show of settled complacency on the part of the adults conflicts with her own discontent and the unhappiness she sees in much of the overexcited, overemotional world around her, which in her caustic, unsympathetic, preadolescent fashion she ridicules, as, for example, when she thinks of life in her apartment building back in the Bronx, full of "screaming and crying: mothers screaming and children crying, fathers screaming and mothers crying, televisions screaming and vacuum cleaners crying" (116).

In camp, she is chosen for a part in a musical play about the Warsaw ghetto uprising largely because the Israeli director can detect her unhappiness. She is intrigued by being in the play, even though, as she sees it, with all the "fighting and singing there was no way for them to turn out not to be dead" (144). Though she resolves that in the future she will not let others read her face as the director did, she does play her part in the Warsaw tableau, an American kid far removed from that terrible event, who nevertheless, on behalf of "our new, free generation," sings to a weeping audience a Yiddish song about the courage of a young female resistance fighter who manages to shoot up a truckload of Nazis before lying down in the snow (153).

A second, more deeply Jewish aspect of Kaplan's work is her skepticism regarding "false idols," mental constructs that claim to define, explain, or control life. In a number of her works, she exposes the limited visions that delude or mislead her characters and projects a larger reality that breaks in on them, sometimes happily, sometimes painfully, with the force of truth.

An example in a minor key is "Babysitting," another story from the collection, in which a teenaged girl is given the opportunity to babysit for the children of a hotshot young writer who is the idol of her school. She soon discovers that his private life is a shambles, literally in the matter of his apartment, for example, which despite being located in upscale Central Park West is crawling with roaches and strewn with garbage.

In the title story of the collection, "Other People's Lives," the main character is a Gentile whose life has taken her from Nazi Germany to the Upper West Side, from being a factory worker in Communist East Germany to the center of an artistic coterie in New York City. "You think every time. This is my life," Maria observes philosophically at one point, reflecting on the amazing twists her path has taken. "But it's not. You don't know. You know only that it can change, be different" (105). This piques the interest of her boarder Louise, dazed with mental problems and her own tortured, fractured family background that included being born out of place in the Dominican Republic because her parents had to flee the Nazis. Her "chunky, full-cheeked" (8) Dutch girl's face seems to fit no place she's been.

Louise repeats Maria's words to herself when she is alone later, studying herself in the mirror. "This is my life," she thinks, and continues, reflecting her understanding of Maria's thought: "And it was, but just like a photograph, set and bounded in one time, it could not tell her anything more than what had already happened" (105–107). The sense of the ending is that Louise has been released from the

sadness of her past, released from her painful isolation into the flow of life.

Kaplan also looks critically at the theories and ideologies that have in modern times become religious substitutes for many, perhaps especially for secular Jews. Socialism, social work, psychiatry, psychoanalysis can impose a false sense of order on the chaos of life, and can often run up against the *real* order of the world which her characters have failed to understand, for example in the uncollected story, "Close Calls" (1986). Rona Auslander, PhD, clinical psychologist, is an efficient, controlling kind of person who has everything figured out. Years ago, she ditched her husband Joel, a wealthy, successful if somewhat unpredictable rock music promoter. Now that their son Seth's bar mitzvah is approaching, Rona has a dozen reasons for excluding Joel from the preparations; in fact, this important event becomes just another occasion for Rona to dominate.

Standing on his prerogatives as the father, Joel comes to her townhouse (mortgage-free, thanks to the divorce settlement) to talk things over, but Rona doesn't even want him to cross the threshold. She lectures him patronizingly on his supposedly unacknowledged and unresolved feelings about his own bar mitzvah, about his family's wartime experiences (not detailed in the story but probably related to the Holocaust), and about his sister, Eve, who died before he was born, all of which Rona is sure afflict him with "unbearable feelings of loss and deprivation" (56) despite his "narrow little repertoire of defenses" (54). But while she is recommending that he take Seth to see *The Sorrow and the Pity* and read books on child psychology, Joel informs her, when he can get a word in, that is, that he is doing very well, that he and his new wife are expecting a baby girl to be named after his sister, Eve, something they have already explained to Seth, much to Rona's sputtering surprise. The story is a sharp satire on psycho-babble and the imperious professionals who wield it over others.

In her career as a special education teacher, Kaplan learned to see through the expert theories and liberal good intentions that inform the helping professions and that fail to comprehend the sometimes intractable nature of circumstance. Her early essay on her experience as a special education teacher, "Scenes from a 'Special' Classroom" (1971), renders in unsparing detail the barely controlled chaos of teaching a small group of patients in a children's psychiatric unit in a city hospital. With precise, moment-to-moment observation, she gives a sense of how the special education teacher must deal not only with the obscure and terrified inner lives of each of the children in her

charge but also their frenzied and sometimes violent and profanity-filled interactions with others; and how brief, small, and hard won is any moment of order, peace, or accomplishment. A general reader might search a long time for such honesty about this corner of the education establishment.

The two fictional stories that grew out of Kaplan's professional experience, "Christmas Party" (1995) and "All-City Adolescent" (1997), also reflect caution about the efficacy of good intentions and skepticism about the wisdom of experts. Like most of Kaplan's work, these stories are set in New York City, but particularly the New York City of post-1960s America, the America of the well-intentioned "War on Poverty," marked by signs of urban collapse and the burgeoning presence of a needy underclass. "Christmas Party" is narrated by a teacher at the "Midhattan Child Guidance Center," a school for troubled youngsters virtually without family. Atypical of Kaplan's fiction, this story doesn't examine Jewish experience per se, but it too depicts a reality that is larger and more complex than at first understood. The narrator sets the scene with a brooding meditation on the city outside her classroom that can remind us of Melville, allowing for a little updating.

> There are days in mid-December when already, not long after lunch, the sky draws down so far that every reflected thing is shadowed, and from my steel-gated classroom windows, all the charcoal-etched glimmerings of the world outside—looming spectral rows of city project buildings, horizonless rubble of wrecked and plundered cars, dingily curving swath of railroad tracks, emerging from a sooten-crusted tunnel and in the far distance, the forbidding, archaic, black iron footbridge to Ward's Island—all of this is caught in a wind-driven, swirling grit that seems to endow the whole dismal scene with the coal-smeared dusk of an earlier time . . . as if, forever uncannily sequestered somewhere in the harsh, high scouring wind, are impressive, rebuking traces of all those from bygone generations whose lives in this city were foreshortened by bleakness. (110)

The teacher's classroom itself gives signs of deflation. The class Christmas party has just dispersed and the room is marked by a "sticky course of spilled soda and half-eaten candy canes" and, most tellingly, a bunch of "rejected donated Christmas gifts." The story concerns a visit to the narrator/teacher from a former student, Marisol Delgado, a lively 15-year-old whose jaunty surface and cleverly assembled street-fashion look hides a lifetime of "cheerless custodial transfers"—"all those hurried, unpredictable, just-shove-everything-in-a-big-green-plastic-bag shifts from one place to another" (110).

In the course of their conversation, the teacher realizes that she had benignly "conspired" with the girl when she had her in class, wanting to believe that her spirited and self-sufficient surface meant that she was someone who didn't need family and could manage on her own. In fact, Marisol is longing to be in touch with her mother and her new "littu twin sisters" at Christmastime, who she says are now in "prison." The "prison" is in reality some kind of supervised home, as Marisol tries to explain: "See, those littu girls, they born up there. It's like—kinda like a place. Like a Center. . . . Sorta like a program, maybe. Oney you can't go nowhere. See, that's the problem." This prompts the teacher to another realization. Without even realizing it, the girl had just named "every mercifully intended social arrangement she had ever been shuttled through" and had innocently likened them all to prison (113). All the hopeful, expert custodial arrangements had failed to deliver any abiding sense of simple human connectedness, to make the lives of the people they were meant to serve seem like much more than, well, prison. As illustrated by the rejected donated Christmas gifts—"year after year so many of them *wrong*" (110)—there is a severe disconnection between the physical needs that can be fairly easily supplied in a prosperous society and the needs of the soul that are much harder to touch.

Still, despite the gloom, there is a smidgen of hope, a shade of promise in how the story ends. Marisol decides not to go out for the "Christmas treat" that is all the teacher feels she can offer, a quick meal together. Somehow the girl knows that she does not need a "treat." While the teacher is briefly absent, Marisol organizes one of the classroom supply closet's shelves and leaves behind a note which, with all its misspellings and faulty grammar, poignantly conveys the sense that she is coping in her own fashion. Something in it suggests that the teacher's last musing—her hope that some young people from backgrounds such as Marisol's will find a way through life, however imperfectly—might be true.

In Nahma Sandrow's interview, Kaplan indicates that her social work taught her to mistrust the expert talk about the "universality" of human nature. "We're not all the same," she observes, "but are to a great extent shaped and defined by our culture." Some sort of a belief in universality, in some emotional feeling of a brotherhood shared and experienced by all, is among the ideals prompting the main character in "All-City Adolescent," the second of the two stories based on Kaplan's professional experience. Dan Gorelick is an adolescent psychiatrist for New York City (the title turns out to have a double meaning), on his way to a consultation in the Bronx with a female

assistant, a Russian émigré doctor called Svetlana. Their destination happens to be in the vicinity of the neighborhood where he grew up, safe and genteel in his day, full of ripped canopies, "boarded-up stores," and "cannibalized cars" today (38).

At the clinic where the adolescent patient is to be interviewed and placed, we witness full-blown what Kaplan calls "public institution . . . futility" (41)—the odors in the corridor, the slovenly habits of the staff, the indifference of the other professionals sitting in on the consultation as they devour Chinese takeout, the unembarrassed incompetence of the social worker who organized the session for the wrong patient, and a shatteringly noisy and ill-timed interruption from a late arrival in the midst of the proceedings.

Dan is nevertheless eager to display his renowned professional expertise to the Russian doctor, and he works in his showy, knowing, practiced manner to reach the patient, a sullen, belligerent, Puerto Rican youth named Hector who has made several suicide attempts in prison. The bulk of the story proceeds in the interchange between Hector and Dan, with some interjections from Svetlana, and Kaplan's talent for conveying characters through voices, cadences, accents, expressions, and vocabulary reveals itself. Since his own easy Bronx boyhood contrasts with the painful deprivations of Hector's young life and with Svetlana's experience in "prison house Russia" (48), Dan dwells in thought on the distant history of his family name, Gorelick—which derives from a town burned by the Cossacks decades ago—as if to find some common ground of suffering that he can claim to occupy with them. "Those embers on the skin adhered beneath the surface for generations," Dan thinks to himself (40), although from what we can glean, his problems are much more local, connected to his wealthy wife and his disrespectful adolescent daughter. And when Dan tries to reassure Hector by wisely quoting a Jewish saying, "Everybody has his own load to carry," the attempt to sound an expansive, empathetic note has the opposite effect. It disastrously sets the boy off. He shrivels back into his anger, spits out an insulting "Jew boy" to Dan, and not only spurns help, but even the idea that he needs help at all (48). As Kaplan says, "Elemental passions may differ." The kind of soothing brotherhood of suffering reflected in the Jewish saying is the opposite of the macho, in-charge image still cherished by this tough, troubled Puerto Rican youth.

The distances have only been sharpened. The pain of the Jewish past is not Hector's, the Russia of the Gorelicks is not the same as Svetlana's, and the invisible embers of that burned and ruined village are apparent only to Dan. Their meaning today is not quite clear to

him either, although somehow they are part of the load *he* continues to carry as he weeps in defeat on the way back to his hospital.

But the champion creator of mental visions in Kaplan's fiction is Ezra Slavin, the main subject of her gem of a novel *O My America!* (1980) an arch-controller who demands that America itself fulfill his grandest expectations. At the time of its publication, Pearl Bell called *O My America!* "a work of unmistakable originality and different from that of any other Jewish writer in America" (45), a judgment that still holds today. For once, a Jewish novel puts the egotistical, opinion-spouting, chaos-producing Jewish rebel under scrutiny instead of letting him run the show.

The techniques employed in the novel mark it as unmistakably Kaplan's: colorful monologues and dialogues in which people reveal themselves in distinctive voices and accents; episodic, nonchronological development that slowly fills in the story's blanks; and beautifully crafted whole essays, speeches, newspaper items, and television and radio interviews that exactly render a sense of the intellectual culture and pretensions of the characters and of the zeitgeist from which they spring. It is not a long book and yet it manages to take us through a century of Jewish experience, from shtetl to modern age, from peasant Europe to the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, as we learn about the background and career of Ezra Slavin through the eyes of his daughter Merry. Everything is presented with Kaplan's customary lack of sentimentality, shrewd powers of observation, and fresh, crackling humor. As with much of her work, no summary can do it justice because so much is packed into the interstices of the ostensible plot.

Ezra's sudden death of a heart attack in 1972 at age 64 frames the story, which ends at his memorial. Born in 1908 on the Lower East Side of immigrant Russian Jews, Ezra Slavin is a self-made intellectual, a self-described pacifist and anarchist, author of hortatory essays and books about Appalachia, the American West, and the alienation of modern American life. A populist who came of age in the idealistic 1930s, he finds himself idolized in the 1960s, when the counterculture begins echoing his disdain for technology, his resistance to materialism, his search for community, and his lifelong opposition to war (he even opposed America's entry into World War II).

Released from the restrictive mentality of their immigrant parents, many young Jews of Ezra's generation suffered from what Kaplan calls "first-generation disease," thinking to leave behind any trace of the old world and any claim from the Jewish past (if not every aspect of Jewishness), and to embrace America as an open-ended frontier of infinite possibility, a new Israel in a way, another land

of "the promise." Even better, for that matter, since in America, unlike in ancient Israel, there are no strings attached. Ezra has this "disease" in the extreme. The title of *O My America!* comes from an erotic, seventeenth-century poem by John Donne in which the then-unexplored new world becomes a metaphor for the woman the poet/speaker wants to possess. Ezra approaches the land of his birth like an insistent, voracious lover. Though critical of the consumerism and conformity that he sees in modern American life, he still celebrates America as a land of infinite possibility. "I have had a lifelong affair with the idea of America," the obituary quotes Ezra as having famously proclaimed (11).

In addition to his love affair with America, Ezra has married three times, the first to Pearl Milgram, a European-educated Jewish immigrant and Merry's mother; then to Isabel, a Midwesterner who writes fiction; and then to Jeannie, an uneducated girl from Appalachia, with whom he lives in a ramshackle house in rural Massachusetts. These marriages are supposed to mark a progression toward Ezra's dream of leaving the past behind and embracing a more and more authentic America.

Ezra has had an assortment of children with his wives, including, among others, a son born when he is over 60, and two daughters out of wedlock as well. As a result of his high-minded resistance to "bourgeois domesticity," however, he has been a terrible husband and father. His two older sons are estranged from him. One of his out-of-wedlock daughters, Ffrenchy (for Francesca) is a semihysterical child of the 1960s who searches out gurus and names her own newborn daughter Mountain Spring. Merry is closest to him and her feelings are a mixture of affection, attachment, and resentment. Despite her evident intelligence and steadiness, and despite her conscientious pursuit of her writing career, her life, too, seems suspended, absorbed in trying to keep up with her father and her scattered family and to learn something of her mother, Pearl, who died when she was born, and about whom Ezra is irritatingly vague and critical.

But domestic family life is just too small for Ezra, who needs much more than marriage, children, or anything in ordinary life could possibly fulfill. In one of his essays, he imparts his fevered conviction that America represents the absolute repudiation of the structures of authority that have ordered human life throughout history in favor of the authenticity of natural community (69). Although America is failing to deliver on this "promise" (69), as Ezra sees it, this failure only fuels his passion even more, as he exhorts his readers to refuse to be the limitations of the past and the rigidities of Europe, and

instead to aspire ceaselessly to "the best possibilities in ourselves." In truth there is something about America that gives rise to this kind of insistent, aggravated urgency. Ezra quotes one of his favorite authors, Theodore Parker, who wrote that with the Declaration of Independence America "went behind human history" to state "the new idea" of a nation founded directly on nature itself. This special quality of its foundations means for some that America is perennially an "idea," a "proposition," never a concrete reality, a country with an actual history, a developed culture, and a set of particular institutions that undergird its conception of freedom, a freedom that was not meant to be unlimited but contained within an established moral order that in turn was a product of the Judeo-Christian tradition. But for the believers in the "proposition country," America will always be an abstraction, somehow floating above or behind history, as much in embryo as when Keats's "stout Cortez" and his men "star'd at the Pacific" and "look'd at each other with a wild surmise," or as when the speaker in Donne's poem eternally approaches his beloved, his America, his "new-found-land." To the list of false idols that some Jews, and others too, have embraced in the twentieth century can be added this concept of America as an idea forever in potential, forever unfulfilled, forever yet to be delivered of her promise.

As with the women in Ezra's life, however, and with the counterculture that eventually disappoints him as well, America never quite meets his expectations. How could it? For one thing, there is a contradiction between his desire for limitless possibility *and* an inviolable sense of community. This is something Kaplan doesn't explore but just lets stand as typical of Ezra's type of intellectual promiscuity. Furthermore, as limitless as Ezra's construct of America is, it is still a construct, a formula that imposes itself upon reality and fails to respect the normal human ties, the social and biological boundaries and attachments that are part of what Kaplan calls (by way of an essay written by Merry's mother, Pearl, before her marriage to Ezra) "the grace of ordinary life" and "that moral sense which gives it meaning" (103–104). Ezra's disheveled appearance; his messy, shabby house; his furious rejection of life's sweeter amenities, cause Merry to assert in moments of bitterness that "[h]e has taught me nothing but austerity" (252) and the "worship of failure" (212).

Indeed, in a television interview late in his life, Ezra objects even to the phrase from the Declaration that dedicates America to "the pursuit of happiness," happiness somehow constituting too much of a commitment to reality, it seems. "If you were to say the pursuit of possibility, the pursuit of what might be, I'd go along with that one

hundred percent. . . . But when you say the pursuit of happiness . . . for *me* that implies the end of pursuit. And as far as I'm concerned, that's the whole aim of life. That's *it!*" (249). He cites Parker again, who remarked of his fellow Americans, "We have this characteristic of genius: We are dissatisfied with all that we have done."

Chronically and acutely dissatisfied is how Ezra winds up, although that was not his intention, which was to be quite self-satisfied, and satisfyingly dissatisfied with America. But Ezra's cosmic embrace, his permanent state of determined rootlessness, is almost by definition bound to come to grief. As he barely acknowledges his duties to his children, as he repudiates any claim from his Jewish heritage, so his "affair with the idea of America" implies that it's not quite his country, that it is something separate from himself. A few years before his death, he spends an afternoon with Merry on the Lower East Side, his old boyhood neighborhood, where he is now painfully out of place, making scenes and exploding in immature outbursts of anger. The man who wanted "easy belonging" (213) for everyone everywhere, belongs nowhere, is comfortable nowhere, not even where he was born. Having repudiated the past with its webs of connections and attachments, Ezra is left, so to speak, with no present.

Here the two aspects of Kaplan's vision come together. Rejecting "people-hood" and the other natural ordering principles of life for unattainable possibilities and artificial structures brings emptiness and loss, while true freedom comes from acknowledging them. The polar opposite of the ethos that Ezra preaches turns out to be a woman named Halina who knew Merry's mother, Pearl, when they were schoolmates back in Warsaw. Halina shows up one day at Merry's door and in the delightfully fractured English that must be her fourth or fifth language, fills the younger woman's longing heart with details about the young Pearl, and gives her a photograph in which Merry can see her own resemblance to the mother she never knew. Halina survived the Holocaust and has it as a sort of mission to visit the offspring and relatives of the people she knew to tell them what she can of their lost heritage. This beautifully constructed chapter acts like a melodious interlude in the novel, and contrasts with the more frenetic sections that render the actions of Ezra and those around him. And Halina's quiet composure about her varied memories contrasts with Ezra's growing feeling of "betrayal" (258) about his vision of American life. And then of course it is at about that point that Ezra's time on earth comes to its close. As Merry sums it up to herself at his memorial, "Believ[ing] himself to be self-generated," he "put all his

money on an idea of America he had just gone ahead and made up," and "nearly gambled away every penny" (286).

But that "nearly" in Merry's last comment turns out to be important. Ezra's memorial yields some surprises. People who genuinely loved him speak of the simpler human virtues that he possessed and that we have scarcely had a chance to glimpse. Moreover, to the consternation of the secular Jews present, one of Ezra's sons, Merry's estranged brother Jon, shows up to say kaddish for his father, reclaiming him at the last as a Jew.

"You think every time. This is my life," Maria remarks in "Other People's Lives," discussed earlier. "But it's not. You don't know. You know only that it can change, be different." (105). Life is too large, too varied to be boxed in by human concepts. Reality always transcends the limits we set for it and the definitions we devise for it, even when, as in Ezra's case, those definitions are meant to be limitless. Such is the clarity of vision that Johanna Kaplan, Jewish writer, conveys to us all.

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7

Norma Rosen's Jewish Journey

Ann Shapiro

Norma Rosen imagines that she was "immaculately conceived" because she was brought up in a secular household, where ties to the family's Jewish heritage had been nearly severed. Her grandfather, an Eastern European immigrant, "devoted himself to being an American" and abandoned all religious observance (*Accidents,* 134). Her grandmother lit *shabbos* (Sabbath) candles and went to shul on Yom Kippur, but Rosen's parents disdained those old ways. Her mother remained angry that women were exiled from the world of religious observance and forced to sit gossiping in the hot balcony of the synagogue while the men performed the service. Her father did not share her mother's anger, and one Yom Kippur he acceded to his daughter's request to take her to synagogue only to arrive late. Rosen remembers thinking that "all the Jews in the world were walking together in a single community . . . and that only my father and I were excluded from this belonging" (*Accidents,* 136).

Rosen embraced Judaism slowly; the defining event was her marriage to Robert Rosen, who had escaped Vienna on the Children's Transport but lost his parents in the Holocaust. Bob Rosen was an observant Jew for whom Judaism held spiritual and intellectual meaning. Although Norma created a Jewish home for her family, she felt the need to do more. Over the years she studied and learned so that unlike her mother, she could find her place in a synagogue. Nonetheless, she shared her mother's anger over women's second-class status within Jewish tradition. She once observed that a woman in Judaism was "the slave of slaves" and the "untouchable's untouchable" (*Accidents,* 130).

In her early works, the novel, *Joy to Levine* (1961) and the short stories published between 1959 and 1967, which were collected in *Green: Eight Stories and a Novella* (1967), Rosen explores issues growing out of her own experience as New Yorker, wife, and mother. Most of her protagonists are ethnically Jewish. As she put it, "When I began to write, I saw to my surprise that for me place, vision, imagination—all the elements that formed my peculiar window—concerned Jews" (*Accidents,* 137). While the speech, manners, and social mores of the characters in *Joy to Levine* and *Green* clearly identify them as Jews, most of these characters are not yet wrestling with the moral and religious issues that later preoccupy Rosen in her fiction and essays.

Joy to Levine, a slim novel that satirizes the American drive to get ahead, is also a romance between a bookish Jewish schlemiel and a plump stenographer, who he believes is Catholic, but who turns out to be Jewish. It is told with a light touch and a firm grasp of the fabric of the life of ordinary young people in New York. Arnold Levine has a dead-end job with a dead-end company that developed the now-outmoded Rutborough Shorthand System. He limps from his one-room apartment to his office each day hoping to woo his coworker, Theresa, whose physical bounty and innocence have won his heart. Theresa, however, aspires to a new life that will exclude Levine if she finally becomes thin and glamorous through her efforts at the beauty school, Thincess. Hovering over Levine as he fails at both love and work is his nagging father, a stereotypical overprotective Jewish parent, who declares in unmistakable Jewish rhetorical style, "You're keeping yourself back to spite me! You want to punish me? Here, take a knife and stab me" (8–9). The irony in the novel is that Levine ultimately wins Theresa, whose Jewish father is a virtual copy of his own father. The novel ends with Theresa's father asking, as Levine's father often did, "What's news with you?" (190).

The overprotective Jewish parent is also of central importance in the stories "Apples" and "The Open Window," both published in 1959 and later collected in *Green*. Larry, the protagonist of "Apples," is the child of immigrants, who believe that their son can be safe and secure only if he follows in their footsteps. Larry's father, Abe Goldstein, wants him to inherit his store, while his mother will be content if he marries a Jewish girl. Abe shouts at his son, "Did the parents struggle so the son could be a failure? . . . Who gives up a store for a nothing—a maybe?" Meanwhile, Larry prefers to work on his PhD in the hope of escaping the East Bronx, and he has "a fatal attraction" for girls who are not Jewish. Abe hints that the girl Larry finally marries is a "shiksa," but still Larry is unable to break with his past.

When his wife suggests that his aging father come to live with them, Larry reluctantly invites him.

Although the parents in "The Open Window" are not immigrants but second-generation Jews, they, like Abe Goldstein and the senior Levine, attempt to control their adult child to ensure safety in a world that they perceive as dangerous. At 18, Evelyn no longer wishes to join her parents on their annual one-week vacation in the country. Evelyn's father in the characteristic voice of a first- or second-generation American Jew, explains to his daughter: "We didn't even go to the beach. We'd sit in the kitchen and discuss it. The crowds, the germs, polio, kidnappers. She'd scare me and I'd scare her and in the end we wouldn't go. We'd sit here and sweat—except for the one week in the Country—and sometimes we'd go up on the roof to catch a breeze and I held you in my lap" (124).

When Evelyn's parents leave for their trip, Evelyn invites her boyfriend, but still imbued with her parents' values, she refuses to sleep with him. Unable to bear the separation, the parents return unexpectedly and after an improbable mishap, the mother confesses that her excessive concern for her daughter has been based on guilt and jealousy. The parents acknowledge the need to separate from their daughter, and though Evelyn, like Larry, has internalized her parents' values, she now sees how tenderness has sifted down onto their lives "like new snow" (145).

The only story in this early volume which explicitly deals with Rosen's own early conflicts over the observance of Jewish tradition is "What Must I Say to You" (1963). In this autobiographical story, there is an altercation between a husband and wife over a mezuzah. When the husband wants to honor their new baby's first Passover by putting a mezuzah outside the door, the wife objects even though she is moved by the words from Deuteronomy that are on the mezuzah scroll. In response to her husband's questions about Jewish observance in her own home, she remembers that her grandmother lit Friday-night candles alone in the breakfast room and gave her money when she found the matzo on Passover, but her parents never went to a synagogue because they "evolved" (200). The husband insists that the wife does not know enough about the symbols of Judaism to discard or judge them. Like Rosen's own husband, the husband in the story was born in Europe of an Orthodox family and he alone escaped the Holocaust. For the wife it is the Holocaust itself that leads to her rejection of Judaism. She ponders, "How is it my husband doesn't know that after this there can be no mezzuzahs?" (201).

After *Green* Rosen further explored the conflict between the Orthodox husband and irreligious wife in her 1971 story "Walking Distance,"

where the husband surprises his wife by his decision to attend Sabbath services at synagogues near their new home in Brookline. In attempting to explain his sudden renewed interest in synagogues, the husband says simply, "It brings back my childhood Saturdays" (63). This connection to past tradition is a crucial aspect of religion that Rosen herself was denied by her secular parents. In 1971 Rosen was still dealing with feelings of alienation, and the wife in the story tells her husband that she fears he will become "religious" as though that were some fatal disease. Still she marvels that somehow when they moved from New York's West Side to Boston they landed in Jewish Brookline rather in nearby Cambridge—the world of Peretz, not Santayana. For the wife Judaism remains a foreign country, with an unfamiliar language. And yet she perceives a void, which she does not yet know how to fill. In the final words of the story Rosen writes, "She doesn't at all see what it is she might become" (25); nonetheless, the wife recognizes that because of the Holocaust and Israel "[d]isaffiliation is no longer a positive thing" (23).

This indeed has been Rosen's position. She says that she "looked into Jewish history for the first time through the burnt opening of the Holocaust" (*Accidents,* 3). The result was her ambitious novel *Touching Evil* (1969), where she attempts to portray how images of the Holocaust pervade the existence of all people, even those who are not Jewish. In her foreword to the second edition she explains, "*Touching Evil* is about the Holocaust but there are no living Jews in it, only the shadows of dead ones." Her point was too subtle for some readers, who maintained the novel universalizes Holocaust imagery, when, in fact, she says she was "obsessed with the fate of Jews" (*Accidents,* 51). For Rosen the Holocaust was "the central event of the twentieth century" (*Accidents,* 49), but she is more interested in personal rather than political implications. She believes that we can understand suffering only through our own suffering, and, therefore, the appropriate response is empathy. Thus, those not directly involved become "witnesses-through-the-imagination" (*Accidents,* 51).

Touching Evil is certainly not Holocaust fiction in any conventional sense. It is the story told from the point of view of two Christian American women, Jean Lamb and her younger pregnant friend, Hattie Mews. Jean first experienced the terror of the Holocaust when her college instructor/lover showed her photographs, while Hattie became immersed in the tragedy when she and Jean watched the Eichmann trials on television. Meanwhile they suffer in their own lives, conjuring up images of the Holocaust as metaphors for personal suffering. Hattie is haunted by a vision of a woman giving birth on

a bare floor covered with spotted fever lice only to watch her baby killed by an SS officer. When Hattie finally delivers her own baby she says, "When I was in the Labor Room it was like being in a concentration camp," where the women were treated as "prisoners" and had to endure the "sadistic indifference to pain of the SS guards in the X-ray room" (*Touching Evil,* 246). In a 1974 essay "The Holocaust and the American Jewish Novelist," Rosen explains this disturbing simile: "It was not that I wished to say that hospitals—or labor rooms in particular—were like concentration camps. I was not talking about the banality of evil. But rather that this small experience of seeing how easily the helpless are despised brings home . . . this knowledge that brings with it a limit to hope. She becomes, in her hallucination, the women who gave birth in the camps. It is the "taking in" of the knowledge of the Holocaust (*Accidents,* 12–13).

Similarly, Hattie's husband, Ezra, "takes in" the Holocaust when he finally confronts the father he has long hated for his corrosive cynicism, which is ultimately expressed in blatant anti-Semitism. After telling his father that he will never see him again, Ezra screams, "You lousy fraud! You have no love. Your soul is Nazi!" (166) Thus, the Nazis provide the objective correlative for the intense anger Ezra feels. Damaged by his father's hatreds, Ezra distances himself from life by contemplating everything through the eye of his camera. His camera becomes his armor.

The characters in the novel attempt to form loving relationships that will protect them against the world's cruelties, but love does not endure. Ever since Jean had seen concentration camp pictures, the image of "the woman who claws her way up from the bottom of a pile of corpses" is imprinted in her mind. Afraid to love, marry, or bear children, Jean always seeks married men. When she finally falls in love, she is abandoned by her lover and throws herself into her work to lessen the pain. She attempts to find solace with an impoverished Puerto Rican teenage dropout, named Jesus, whom she regards as both son and lover. Jesus visits regularly to take a shower, have a meal, and go to bed with his benefactor. Rosen explains elsewhere that "for a mind engraved with the Holocaust . . . [s]hower means their shower" (*Accidents,* 52). Jesus is a victim—a lost boy who is beyond saving—and he cannot provide redemption for Jean.

Hattie communicates to Jean through a memoir that she is writing throughout the novel. She and Ezra have come to New York with her sister and her husband to live as a foursome, protecting each other from the dangerous world they inhabit, but each husband betrays his wife in his own way. The scene is the East Side of New York

following the demolition of the Third Avenue El, and the wrecking is still going on, suggesting both the wreckage of the Holocaust and the wreckage in the lives of the characters. The local storekeepers are being displaced as developers buy up the property for luxury buildings. Human beings are treated as expendable commodities. The broken pavement reminds Jean of the TV image of the "bloody woman, the digger through the rubble of last night's corpses" (50). Jean's very apartment is poisoned by the exterminator's spray as well as the bitter conversation of her neighbor. Her private world is thus infused with Holocaust images.

When Jean thinks back to her time in college, when she first saw the picture of the bodies in lime pits, she is troubled by the lack of interest around her, as her classmates live their lives untouched by the events on another continent. Later, Jean experiences a similar lack of empathy for suffering when she watches some ragged Negro children hungrily devouring franks. For Jean, as for Rosen herself, the connections are always there in the events of everyday life.

Frustrated with the critical response to *Touching Evil,* in 1974 Rosen attempted to explain her purpose as follows: "My theme was what might happen to people who truly took into consciousness the fact of the Holocaust. . . .The question the book was asking—What kind of daily lives can people live after they have touched an evil so absolute that it overpowers all the ideas of evil and good?—eluded some reviewers entirely" *(Accidents,* 12–13).

In 1990, when *Touching Evil* was reissued, Rosen again sought to explain her purpose: "In my novel, *Touching Evil,* American non-Jews respond to the first knowledge of the Holocaust by asking themselves, "How can we live now?" Non-Jews, says that book, suffer from Holocaust knowledge too . . . I wanted to call my novel *Heart's Witness* or *Witness through Imagination* . . . no one can escape the knowledge" *(Accidents,* 107).

It is not hard to understand why the premise of *Touching Evil* has been misconstrued. The fact is that most of the writing about the Holocaust has been done by Jews because, despite Rosen's eloquent comments on the larger impact of the Holocaust, Jews have felt its impact more than non-Jews. Alan Berger commented reasonably, "Since Rosen correctly argues that the Jewish historical experience carries a message for all of humanity, one wonders why Jews are excluded from *Touching Evil*" (175).

In Rosen's next novel *At the Center* (1982), which is set in an abortion clinic, the protagonist, Hannah Selig, may provide the character Berger wished had been included in *Touching Evil.* Hannah is

a Jew, whose life has been profoundly influenced by the Holocaust. Still this novel explores many issues other than Judaism. Nonetheless, Rosen maintained that the book "did not come together for me as novel until I could begin to see it from a Jewish aspect" (*Accidents,* 137). The idea for the book came to her after doing a series of interviews on abortion for the *New York Times.* She then researched rabbinic responses on abortion and discovered that for many the primary consideration was the physical and mental well-being of the mother. And finally she created the novel's protagonist, Hannah, the child of survivors who were murdered in America.

The abortion clinic, the Bianky Family Planning Center, is simply called the Center throughout the novel. The Center is a metaphorical location for questions about life and death that concern all the characters, who are embarked on their own journeys to find meaning and to choose good over evil. Although Rosen herself supports choice, all the characters in her novel struggle to assure themselves and those around them that they are working for the good of women and the betterment of the world even as they contemplate images of botched abortions or mangled fetuses.

When we meet Hannah, she is obsessed with the brutal murder of her parents, who escaped the Holocaust only to be gagged and mutilated in their own home. In the face of this horror, Hannah questions the nature of God and the authenticity of the Orthodox Jewish community headed by her parents' beloved Rabbi Pinchas. She has been taught that innocent parents are destroyed for the sin of the child, and she worries that her refusal to marry whom they chose makes her a sinner, responsible for her parents' death. But this explanation flies in the face of reason, and so she writes in letters to Rabbi Pinchas that since God gave free will, God ought not to punish those who use it (95). Hannah distances herself from Jewish ritual and the Jewish community because of her difficulty in accepting God after unspeakable destruction. She cannot share in the Orthodox Jew's belief in a messianic future, where goodness is still possible. Like Jean in *Touching Evil,* she does not wish to marry or bring children into an evil world; rather she will work at the Center because she was attracted by an advertisement that read "Individual sought with feelings of sympathy for other people's sorrow. Personal acquaintance with grief preferred" (98). In joining the Center, she tries to break her ties with Rabbi Pinchas and the Jewish community, but her decision is ambivalent. She lights the Sabbath candles, and then transgresses by writing in her notebook in the light of the candles. She means to break the law but cannot, so she eats dairy and thereby avoids dealing with the proscriptions that govern the laws for kosher food.

Her motive for initiating an affair seems to be a need to break the laws about sexual purity; still before her first sexual encounter, she squats in a tub and says a prayer. Hannah, it seems, cannot escape from the Judaism she means to renounce.

In fact, Hannah can only interpret the lives of those around her in the context of her Jewish experience. She understands that the head of the Center founded it because his sister died in a botched abortion. Thus Hannah considers that perhaps he is trying to redeem his sister's death by the "rescued lives of a million women" (105). In contrast, Hannah suffers in part because she can find no way to redeem the deaths of the six million. She wonders why the good and the gentle are punished and recognizes that Rabbi Pinchas has no more answers than she does.

A further problem for Hannah is the very fact that she is a woman and, therefore, silenced in Jewish tradition. Like her biblical namesake, she would like to talk to God, but she recalls that biblical Hannah was accused of drunkenness when she prayed. She thinks: "Let him hear for a change a woman's voice. . . . Arguments with men God sometimes seemed to enjoy—with Abraham, with Moses, with Lot, with Jonah. Up to a point. But with women? About this there was no news" (107).

Throughout the novel Hannah questions God's goodness. She speculates in her notebook that God could have sent rams in place of her parents as he sent a ram to Abraham in place of Issac. But then she reasons that they were never poisoned with bitterness and perhaps that was the ram. This understanding brings her happiness and the beginning of reconciliation with God, but not with man. In the final book of the novel, Hannah deserts her lover and embarks on a new life. She also is finished writing to Rabbi Pinchas. The last time we see her we are told: "She feels her heart expand like some warm, delicious fruit. She imagines that her spine, flexible and young is strengthened with sweet-smelling sheaves of willow. She sees now what the ancients had meant by that: her own being will be a stopping place for her in her dangerous and desirable journey . . . " (302).

Rosen explains this cryptic ending as follows: "She sees God, the world, Jews, herself in a new light by the end of the book. And making use of an image that comes from Jewish mysticism, she sees herself, her body as a kind of sacred Succah, in which the heart is the ertrog and the spine the lulov. Her own being will be a stopping place for her in her dangerous and desirable Jewish journey" (*Accidents,* 138).

It is tempting to assume that Rosen is speaking for herself, and in some ways she probably is. Rosen had come a long way since 1963

when she rejected a mezuzah because it was impossible to believe in God after the Holocaust. By 1982, like Hannah, she was on her own Jewish journey, where she would study the sacred texts and explore the meaning of the traditions her husband still valued and that she had once rejected.

Although *At the Center* focuses on Hannah, the novel tells intricate tales of other characters, and through these characters Rosen probes the moral implications of abortion for Jews and non-Jews alike. Edgar Bianky, the Center's founder, worries that because two of the doctors, Paul Sunshine and Charlie Brodaw, are Jewish people will say, "A Jewish doctors' plot to do away with babies" (19). Abortion is also problematic, especially for Jews, because of the Holocaust. Rosen explains, "A million abortions a year in America alone seems too much like another one of those sickening numbers of the twentieth century, whose specialty has been mass death" (*Accidents,* 173). At the end of the novel, the Center burns down, Charlie is a suicide, and Paul leaves in pursuit of Hannah. Edgar will rebuild the Center but the Jewish doctors are gone, and Amy, a young woman who has had two abortions, is married, pregnant, and planning to become a doctor specializing in fertility. Despite her pro-choice stance, Rosen seems to insist that Jews and non-Jews must choose life whenever possible. In discussing the imagery of childbearing and child killing in *Touching Evil,* Lillian Kremer writes, "In an age of aborted dreams, an age of Nazi perversion, evocation of life and death processes in terms of children denied and children delivered is apt" (217). This theme surely runs through both *Touching Evil* and *At the Center.*

The Holocaust still haunts Rosen when she writes "The Inner Light and the Fire" (1983), a story in which she once again uses a disagreement between husband and wife to illustrate two sides of a philosophical conflict. This time the issue is acceptance of sympathetic, enlightened Germans after the Holocaust. The friendship between the wife and the young German woman—both devoted, intelligent mothers—is described as "hesitant and delicate" because of the "dark undertow that catches at German and Jew wherever they meet" (3). The husband is even more distrusting of the relationship and advises the wife against introducing the German couple to Mr. Schneider, a Holocaust survivor. The wife, nonetheless, invites the Germans to meet the survivor and his wife. While the Germans, who were only children during the war, listen empathically to Mr. Schneider's horror stories of concentration camps, the wife understands later that their worlds cannot meet. In the end, she is unable to separate in her mind the beautiful box given to her by the

German couple from a box, described by Mr. Schneider, in which a Jew had been brutally tortured. Recognizing that her reaction is irrational, she can find no way to explain to her husband why she has removed the Germans' generous gift to the basement.

Jewish issues are less central in "The Miracle of Dora Wakin's Art" (1985), a short story that Rosen rewrote as a play and has recently rewritten in a yet-unpublished version, entitled "Some Questions about the Death of Dora Wakin Story." The story tells of a dying artist attended by her mother and husband and visited by her daughter and a rabbi. Dora seems less concerned about dying than about planning her new show, where the husband, knowing that Dora will not live to see the show, must oblige Dora by hanging her most recent art. In Rosen's new and preferred version, events are essentially the same, but issues are more clearly defined. The story examines the artist's passion to create even as she must face the conflicting demands of daughter, husband, mother, and large community. Her final compositions are ceramic pieces depicting women in the Bible. It is as if Dora, like the biblical matriarchs, was infused with a spiritual passion that had to be expressed even though the cost was immense. She sometimes had to lock her daughter out of her studio or reject her husband's demands on her time. She disappointed her mother, who wanted her to focus her energies on home and children. In short, Dora faced the conflict that Rosen and every professional woman has always faced. The miracle at the end of the story is that Dora managed to create art even though it sapped her physical strength. As she sinks into death, she is at last free, no longer hindered by the legitimate needs of her family, which she could not entirely satisfy in life.

With "Fences" (1986) Rosen returns to her ongoing quest to find meaning in the Holocaust. Frederick, an aging survivor, states, "No one can enter the Holocaust . . . The imaginers—what is it about them? They wish in subtle ways to extract meanings that the survivors themselves avoid" (80). But despite her recognition of the gulf that remains between survivor and witness, Rosen persists in exploration, this time through the story of a grandfather's tallith that Daniel, the child of a survivor, will wear at his bar mitzvah. Worried that the tallth might have disintegrated, father and son open the box to find it almost intact. It survived Hitler, and continuity with the past is preserved as first father and then son drape themselves. But the father kills the boy's momentary joy when he observes a few American moth holes, and the mother, in pain, runs from the room. She encounters Frederick, the elderly survivor, and sees a photograph that may be

Frederick himself when he was young or a son who was killed, and she understands that what has been lost cannot be regained.

Since "Fences," Rosen has been less immersed in the Holocaust, but she has always pursued issues related to being a Jewish American woman writer in a Christian society. Noting that she "moved directly into the feminine mystique time of the fifties," she observes, "It would have helped me if I could have known about a Jewish-American writer named Anzia Yezierska" (*Accidents,* 134). Rosen's fascination with Yezierska, who overcame the disadvantages of a poor immigrant to become a successful writer, culminated in the novel *John and Anzia: An American Romance* (1989), which is a fictionalized account of the well-documented love affair between Yezierska and the philosopher, John Dewey. Yezierska probably fascinated Rosen because of both parallels and disjunctions. The former solved the conflict between her art and her maternal responsibilities by leaving her daughter with the child's father so that she could pursue her own life. Her flight from domesticity was, for a time, also a flight from her Jewish roots because after abandoning her Jewish husband she briefly found happiness with John Dewey—an American, Protestant, and n intellectual. She wrote of her secret liaison endlessly in novels and short stories, where the names of the characters change, but the story is always the same: a poor immigrant girl finds happiness with a Protestant intellectual man, who embodies the American dream. Toward the end of the novel, the fictional Yezierska observes, "Only if she made believe it happened to someone else could she bear to tell it" (158).

It remained for Rosen to bring together the contradictions of being a woman and a Jew in her most recent full-length work, *Biblical Women Unbound* (1996). This book marks the fruition of Rosen's years at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where she studied Torah, Talmud, and midrash. A prodigious reader, she also immersed herself in the work of women theologians. With *Biblical Women Unbound* she finally embraces Judaism after a long journey that led from her parents' secular home through her own questioning of a God that allowed the Holocaust and finally to a return to the Bible itself. No longer questioning God's authenticity because of the Holocaust, Rosen writes, "Evil manifestly exists. And God, goodness, virtue, and mercy exist." She goes on to explain that we can be mindful of God's goodness even at times of deepest grief (27), which suggests that despite the Holocaust, it is still possible to affirm God.

Like many female biblical scholars in recent years, Rosen wished to find a way to reinterpret the Bible so that women could be more

central to the story. Judaism, with its long tradition of midrash, provides a means of entry. Rosen explained her purpose as follows:

> "What I want midrash to do is pick out the questions that have lain dormant and unnoticed in the story for 1,000 years like rich archaeological treasure, or the bone of some paleontological missing link fossilizing under layers of shale. I want midrash to give a voice to women in the Bible who have had nearly none. . . . To raise new questions and add them to those the midrashists have already asked, and to attempt new answers. . . . Above all, I want to suggest possibilities for new points of view, to create a narrative climate that will draw readers to participate creatively in the asking of new questions and the imagining of new answers, new midrashim." (6–8)

Rosen's method is to look carefully at the biblical text and then at commentary by midrashic rabbis, who she finds are occasionally sympathetic but more often obtuse in regard to women. She describes her own efforts at dialogue with the midrashic rabbis reflecting contemporary concerns and specifically the concerns of women that never occurred to the male rabbis. In our reading of Bible stories, Rosen suggests that we not make the traditional distinction between Aggadah and halacha because she believes that there is overlap, that tradition, as expressed in the stories, can have "legal force." Like the midrashim of the past, Rosen's midrashim sometimes stick very close to the original but at other times "pull the story in some other direction." In telling the story of 14 women in the Bible, Rosen states that she wanted "to bring biblical narratives in which women figure closer to our contemporary interest, ironies, and needs without . . . losing their original power" (*Biblical,* 8–9). In so doing she conflates time so that "we are present in their own time, and they are here in ours" (13).

As a novelist, Rosen seeks to fill in the gaps in the original by interpreting thoughts and feelings, and imagining biblical women as full-fleshed human beings with hopes, fears, and sorrows. While the Bible and the midrashists focus on what happened and often ascribe divine motives, Rosen is concerned with human responses, thus adding a new dimension to biblical narrative. The method here is not significantly different from the method Rosen used in *John and Anzia,* where she developed her story based on the known scraps of information culled from John Dewey's poetry, Yezierska's novels, and some biographical facts. What distinguishes Rosen's midrash from that of both biblical scholars and novelists, such as Anita Diamant, who wrote her own stories about biblical women in *The Red Tent,* is that Rosen brings to her task both the skill of the novelist and the

authority of years of study. Thus Rosen's biblical women manage to be feisty and amusing even while her treatment of the text remains respectful of the original biblical narrative.

As illustration, consider Rosen's treatment of Miriam. Because of Miriam's roles as the savior of Moses, prophetess, and leader of women, in addition to her well that provided life-giving water, feminists have eagerly attempted to make Miriam into a heroine. But if she is a heroic figure, the problem of her punishment remains. When Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses, God afflicts her with leprosy and exiles her, while Aaron is merely rebuked. The Bible gives us no explanation as to why Miriam, who was a pivotal figure in Moses'life, receives such terrible punishment and then dies. With typical scholarly reserve, Phyllis Trible hypothesizes: "The steadfast devotion of the people to Miriam indicates a story different from the regnant one" ("Bringing Miriam Out," 170). But what is this story? Scholars may speculate, but Norma Rosen exercises the prerogative of a novelist and midrashist and imagines a story in which Miriam in exile speaks to all the important people in her life. No longer silenced like Hannah in both the Bible and *At the Center,* Miriam even talks to God, and God answers that men distort his words—that scribes were really revisionists. God then discusses the alternative readings of the Bible—narrative, law, and midrash—suggesting that it is His intention that there be many readings. Rosen concludes with two endings for Miriam's story. After she is released at the end of seven days, Miriam either continued to lead the people or she died. "She both died and she persisted. She was ground down and she continued. She gave up and she endured. . . . Suffering and singing, she was like us" (110). Miriam, in the end, is not only a feminist, but she is everywoman and even everyman.

With Miriam and the 13 other biblical women whose stories Rosen writes, Rosen is no longer a voiceless outsider but finds an integral place in Judaism. She has mourned the loss of women in Judaism along with the loss of Jews in the Holocaust, writing, "We must, sadly add to that loss [the six million] the millenial prohibition against the voices of women in traditional Jewish culture and religious writing" (*Biblical Women,* 9). Fortunately, women, unlike Holocaust victims, can be recreated in the Bible and affirmed in new ways in both the Jewish and secular world, and Rosen has assumed her part in the task. *With Biblical Women Unbound,* Rosen partially answered a question she raised in 1986: "How to write as a Jew after the Holocaust" *(Accidents,* 42).

When she wrote about biblical women Rosen was returning to Judaism on her own terms, but her readers have not always understood

her enthusiasm for the subject. Worst was the Orthodox man who recently objected to her use of the word "redactor," asking whether she believed that Moses wrote the Bible. When she answered with a flat "No," he suggested that she stick to novels (Personal Interview). But even friends questioned her subject. One friend, apparently intending a compliment, asked, "Why would a writer like you want to write about the Bible?" Rosen's response is that the Bible must be read imaginatively and symbolically. She adds unequivocally, "It is the greatest challenge there is" ("The Greatest Challenge," 7).

Rosen says her Jewish journey has not been a straight path; even as she moved forward, she has returned to past issues and sometimes detoured. Since *Biblical Women Unbound,* she has been working on a new novel and writing short stories and occasional essays and reviews, which, for the most part do not specifically address Jewish issues. One exception is a short story, "Elixir" (1998–1999), where she once more explores the persistence of the Holocaust.

The protagonist, Manfred Racerman, is a German survivor, who had enjoyed his life as a student in a Berlin gymnasium, but because of the Holocaust was orphaned and fled to America. Taken in by his Uncle William, a refugee from Russian-Poland, he lives with his aunt and uncle in a narrow tenement above the uncle's appliance repair shop and is sent to work in the garment center. But Manfred goes to night school and ultimately earns a PhD in German literature, which enables him to get a tenure track position at Gotham University. When we meet Manfred, who "preferred his life (minus Nazis) abroad" (8), he is about to lose his job because of budget cuts at Gotham. Manfred desperately wants tenure, which becomes a metaphor for the continuity he has lost. Steeped in German literature, he is an aspiring German more than a Jew and not quite as American as his third-generation girlfriend. When his class is observed by a German Jewish professor, who insists that Jews must teach about the Holocaust, Manfred makes excuses about its relevance to his courses. In the end, he cuts himself on a vial containing a smelly elixir concocted by his uncle. The horrible smell of the elixir suggests both his uncle's grubby existence as well as the "shit and vomit" associated with the Holocaust. Manfred can never extricate himself from this past and becomes a wandering Jew, who finally gains tenure at an unnamed "western state campus," but he is haunted by dreams of William, now long dead, who exhorts him to drink the horrible liquid again and tells him, "Everything old-fashioned comes back" (29). Manfred, it seems, cannot evade his Jewish past no matter how far he travels or how much he immerses himself in German culture.

The orphan theme reappears in two other works, "The Orphan Lover" (2001), a short story, and "How Much Room Does a Man Need" (1992), a fragment of a novel in progress. Characters in both works bear Jewish names, and the young woman in each story is orphaned when her parents leave their colicky baby with an aunt and uncle for a few hours, during which time they are killed in an automobile crash. The orphan grows up with feelings of guilt about her parents' death. Like Manfred in "Elixir," these orphans are raised in somewhat reduced circumstances by their respective aunts and uncles. Why this obsession with orphans? Rosen sees the Jews of the diaspora as well as survivors as people cut off from the past. Jeremy Switzer, a lawyer whose father attempted to reconstitute the orphan's stolen legacy in "The Orphan Lover" looks like "something materialized from the land of Sholom Aleichem" (14). He tells her: "Your aunt read you that Sholom Aleichem story one day, and it connected you to a whole European past and tradition. People like to say it's lost, how foolish! That one story reconstituted it for you, just the way my father reconstructed a fortune from the little your parents left" (19).

In response, the orphan thinks, "I know what is gone can never be restored" (20). In a sense, then, all Jews are orphans. The orphan theme is introduced but not developed in "How Much Room Does a Man Need," and since this piece is a fragment of a yet-unpublished novel, it would be presumptuous to rush to interpretation. Suffice it to say that the novel appears to be a family saga told from the perspective of the orphan girl. Rosen says that she prefers not to talk about the novel at this point (Personal Interview).

Two short stories, "The Lovemaking of I. B. Singer" (1996) and "The Collaborator's Quarrel" (1998), as well as an essay, "Writers' Gift, Writers' Grudge" (2001), might be considered detours from Rosen's Jewish journey to explore ways in which writers write, create, borrow, and transform the work of other writers to make it their own. The stories also ask us to consider the sometimes-fuzzy line between fact and fiction. While "The Collaborator's Quarrel" harkens back to Rosen's earlier interest in Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey, the focus of the story is the creation of a literary biography rather than the romance of Lawrence Enderby and Mary Yarmolinska, who are obviously modeled on John and Anzia. "The Lovemaking of I. B. Singer" concerns a woman in the author's writing class who claims to have had an affair of sorts with I. B. Singer, but then again may have invented an intriguing story about her father's trunk full of manuscripts and her visit with I. B. Singer. In "Writers' Gift, Writers' Grudge," Rosen describes her own experience in a creative writing

seminar taught by Elizabeth Bishop as well as related incidents, where writers borrowed, stole, and gifted words and ideas.

Two other stories "Aunt and Bee: A Covenantal Variation" (1995) and "Egrets, Herons, Cranes" (unpublished) examine marriage. "Aunt and Bee" is the story of a husband and wife who have separated but are able to come together in a new way. At the beginning, the wife is so dependent that when she finds a mass of bees in her bedroom, she follows her aunt's advice and immediately calls her estranged husband, who is delighted to rescue her. Later she becomes a beekeeper, and when her husband visits, he puts on beekeeper's clothing and together they glean "marvelous yields of honey" (5). "Egrets, Herons, Cranes" is about a loving couple whose relationship is almost shattered when the husband becomes terminally ill. Rosen's own husband died recently after a very long illness.

Assessing where she is now on her Jewish journey, Rosen says she herself put up a mezuzah after the death of her husband, but her quarrel with Orthodox Judaism goes on as she recalls her anger about the *mechitza* (partition separating men and women) she observed on a recent visit to an Orthodox synagogue. She still feels cut off from the tradition her husband loved because he was raised in a home where that tradition was part of the fabric of his life. For her the meaning of Judaism resides instead in "the richness of Jewish text and study." She says, "As I go deeper into reading the Bible and deeper into the feeling of the Bible, I am fascinated by the great ambiguity in the relationship of the individual to God" (Personal Interview). At the end of *Biblical Women Unbound* Rosen writes about a group of women discussing the story of Ruth and Naomi: "I place this discussion last because the progression of their dialogues, moving as they do from adversarial questioning to the need (and the expressed longing) to draw close to some affirmation, summarizes for me the aspect of the contemporary woman's engagement with Bible . . . the effort to reenter Jewish texts without sacrifice of contemporary selfhood" (188).

Rosen's journey is ongoing, and she says that she is not certain where it will take her. She believes, however, that she is "more conscious than ever that to be a Jewish writer requires finding some way to connect with the Jewish past" (Personal Interview).

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Part III

The Convenent Confirmed?
1990s–2000

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8

Cynthia Ozick's Puttermesser Papers: From Whimsy to Wisdom

Sarah Blacher Cohen

"When I write, I am free. I am as a writer whatever I wish to become. I can think myself into a male or a female, or a stone or a raindrop or a bloc of wood, or a Tibetan, or a spine of a cactus. In life, I am not free. In life, female or male, no one is free. . . . My freedom is contingent on need. I am in short, claimed" ("Literature and the Politics of Dissent," 285).

This statement represents Cynthia Ozick's artistic credo, her declaration of independence as an asexual, secular writer. Throughout her career she has vehemently resisted the label "woman writer" as too restrictive, since she believes that a woman's body does not generate its own exclusive culture, its own set of unique values, its own special style and point of view. She also resents being considered a second-class literary citizen, consigned to the inferior women's section in the stadium of Literary Giants.

Thus in *Trust,* her first novel, Ozick tried to avoid writing a "woman's novel," which no one would take seriously. The first-person narrator Ozick thought she had created was a "bloodless device, fulcrum or pivot, a recording voice, a language-machine [which existed] for efficiency only, for flexibility, for craftiness, for subtlety, but never, never as a 'woman'" ("We Are the Crazy Lady and Other Feisty Feminist Fables," 289). Therefore, she attempted to neuter her narrator, to drain her of "emotive value of any kind," to strip her "of everything, even a name" (289).

But if we trust the tale and not the teller of the tale, the narrator we encounter in *Trust* reflects Ozick's conflicted authorial intentions. The figure she creates is not merely a well-wrought, fine-tuned thinking machine, but a very-much-alive human being, radiating sensitivity and intelligence. Adept at weaving together "metaphor and irony," which, Ozick believes, "are nearly art's everything" (Rainwater and Scheick, 263), her narrator is an astute registrar of impressions and assessor of facts. Fashioned in the Jamesian mold, she is that singular young woman upon whom nothing is lost.

In *Trust,* Ozick also tried to avoid the literary territory allotted to female authors: the circumscribed domestic sphere, with its protean intrigues of courtship and the labyrinthine entrapments of marriage. She took history as her subject, "not merely History as an aggregate of events, but History as a judgment on events" ("We Are the Crazy Lady," 289). By effacing the woman in her narrator, she hoped reviewers would regard *Trust* for what she primarily intended it to be: a Jamesian Jewish novel of ideas. Ozick's hope was not realized. The *New York Times* book review, titled "Daughter's Reprieve," was accompanied by "a picture of a naked woman whose bottom was covered by some sort of drapery" ("We Are the Crazy Lady," 289). It contained the following misreadings: "These events, interesting in themselves, exist to reveal the sensibility of the narrator." "She longs to play some easy feminine role." "She has been unable to define herself as a woman." "The main body of the novel, then, is a revelation of the narrator's inner, turbulent, psychic drama" (Stevenson, 29).

Despite Ozick's efforts in the early part of her career to prevent critics from wedding her literary talents to her gender, she was consigned to the *ezrat nashim,* the gallery of women writers, separated from the male preserve of sacred texts. No matter how complex and sophisticated Ozick made her early protagonists, she was still judged by "the ovarian theory of literature" ("Previsions of the Demise of the Dancing Dog," 266), which restricted the development of her literary creations.

Cynthia Ozick in subsequent fiction refused to be judged by such a reductive theory. She declared herself not an adherent of the "new feminism," which she described as "biologically based self-confinement." Rather she claimed to be an advocate and practitioner of "classical feminism"—i.e., feminism at its origin . . . [which] rejected anatomy not only as destiny, but as any sort of governing force . . . [which] rejected the notion of 'female sensibility' as a slander designed to shut women off from access to the delights, confusions, achievements, darknesses, and complexities of the great world" ("Literature and the Politics of Sex: A Dissent," 288). Of late, Cynthia Ozick has also balked

at being exclusively designated a Jewish writer. She has resisted being ghettoized by a Gentile readership that regards her subject matter as too arcane. She has been equally displeased with a chauvinistic Jewish reading public that regards her as their legalistic rebbe, proscribing the immutably fixed rules for ethical behavior. Indeed, in her essays and talks dealing with Jewish subject matter, she has given her Jewish readers grounds for viewing her in this light. She speaks of herself as a *misnagid,* a Jewish rationalist and skeptic, who in her daily life inveighs against mystery and magic. Yet in practice, she is in conflict with this position. As Ozick, the fiction writer, she heeds the call of the irrational and loses herself in the unpredictable imagination.

In her short story "Usurpation," she states that in Paradise "there will be a cage for story writers who will be taught as follows: All that is not Law is levity" (177). Thus, the observant part of her believes all that is not studying and obeying the precepts of halacha (law and consensus) is both a squandering and a desecration of precious time. Her involvement with Aggadah (tale and lore), serving no higher purpose than fabrication for its own sake, is, she also feels, a pagan indulgence. Yet she is seduced by the wiles and the whimsies of levity. She mocks her conflicted self and her conflicted characters for seesawing between levity and law.

As a "classical feminist," and an Aggadic-halachic writer, Ozick claims the freedom to explore any subject she pleases and to employ the interaction of the playful or comic with the serious or tragic in the treatment of her female characters. Her mixed comic mode is especially apparent in the best of her *Puttermesser Papers.* In Ozick's fictional depiction of her protagonist's shifting selves in three story-length chapters of the novel, she is conflicted between elevating the stature of these selves to make them superior beings and comically deflating her lofty portrayal of them as flawless heroines. Ozick takes delight in lampooning these figures, yet she does not want to be labeled a self-hating woman writer who transfers her animus against the unfriendly universe upon her own species. Nor does she want her wryly unflattering portraits of her women characters to be associated with male critics' mocking denigration of women authors and their female literary progeny.

The first chapter of *The Puttermesser Papers,* entitled, "Puttermesser: Her Work History, Her Ancestry, Her Afterlife," reflects Ozick's dual treatment of her protagonist. On the one hand, she makes her out to be a Bergsonian comic type whose upsets cause our "amnesia of the heart," and on the other, she portrays her as a vulnerable human being whose tangible pain we feel. Ozick thus causes us to laugh at

and empathize with her inconsistent women's liberationist: Ruth Puttermesser, a 34-year-old lawyer who claims to be "something of a feminist, not crazy, but she resented having 'Miss' put in front of her name; she thought it pointedly discriminatory; she wanted to be a lawyer among lawyers" (3). Ozick reveals the comic incongruity between Puttermesser's emancipated public self and her private self, an adolescent wearing furry slippers in the Bronx apartment of her youth and feeling remorseful she had not practiced her high school piano lessons. Ozick shows the equally funny gap between Puttermesser, the lawyer, with her highly advanced rational powers, and Puttermesser, still the teenager, with her irrational jealousy of the "Breck shampoo girl, so blond and bland and pale-mouthed," whom she hated with great passion (4). Puttermesser herself resembles a semicomic grotesque whose odd physical features Ozick describes as if she, like Bellow, were a wry anthropologist commenting on a rare tribal specimen: "Her nose had thick, well-haired, uneven nostrils, the right one noticeably wider than the other. Her eyes were small, the lashes short, invisible. She had the median Mongol lid—one of those Jewish faces with a vaguely oriental cast" (5).

This Jewish face amid the WASP law firm of Midland, Reid & Cockleberry triggers off Ozick's humor of cultural revenge that is ecumenical in scope. Sparing no one group, it is aimed at both Jews and Christians in the vocational sphere. It grazes external hypocrisies and lacerates deeply entrenched hostilities. Elsewhere Ozick has written about the ordeal of being Jewish in the Gentile world: "To remain Jewish," she states, "is a *process*—something which is an ongoing and muscular thing, a progress or, sometimes, a regression, a constant self-reminding, a caravan of watchfulness always on the move; above all an unsparing *consciousness*" ("On Living in a Gentile World," 168). Puttermesser, graduating at the head of her law school class, is this "self-reminding Jew" relegated to the back office of an elitist law firm to do menial legal research. She is acutely conscious of how very different she is from the others, but she will not change her ways to blend in with them.

Ozick holds Puttermesser's Christian employers up to ridicule. With ironic pique, she attacks them for their external gentility, their pretense at amiability, their hypocritical appreciation for things Jewish. Thus we learn the WASP partners treat Puttermesser as a "fellow aristocrat," only because she had her speech standardized long ago by Midwestern elocutionists and her grandfather hailed from Providence, Rhode Island. The partners take her out for a farewell "anthropologist's meal" where they feign interest in "the rites of her tribe" (8). They mask their discomfort in her presence with their "beautiful manners," which "were

the cautiousness you adopt when you visit the interior: Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" (8). They claim she is indispensable, but they have already hired a "clever black" to take her place.

Puttermesser goes from the private patrician workplace to the public plebeian one of mostly Italians and Jews to become Assistant Corporation Counsel of the city's Municipal Building. Here the dilapidated building itself, symbolic of the debilitated body politic and Puttermesser's discomfiture in it, is the source of Hobbesian humor Ozick creates to give us that "sudden glory" at the sight of someone more wretched than ourselves (Hobbes, 19). From our unscathed vantage point, we thus look down with amusement upon Puttermesser, ignominiously "belonging to that mean swarm of City employees rooted bleakly in cells inside the honeycomb of the Municipal Building, a monstrous place, gray everywhere, a kind of swollen doom through which the bickering of small-voiced officials whinnied" (9). We are also made to sympathize with Puttermesser for her fall from eminence as the editor of the *Yale Law Review* to being one of those "amphibious creatures hanging between base contempt and bare decency" (9) in a sullied bureaucracy with "litter on the floors, grit stuck all over antiquated books," and "scavengers after spoils" (9).

Ozick is tempted to rescue Puttermesser from this municipal doom and marry her off. She has even introduced a likely suitor for her, Commissioner Guggenheim, a blue-eyed German Jew who loves art history and detests economics. But Ozick refuses to transform her wry urban naturalism into romantic comedy. Because there are so many glaring imperfections in Puttermesser's world and in Puttermesser herself, Ozick can't superimpose upon the story an unprepared-for comic "happy ending, joyous celebration and reestablishment of order" (Barreca, 8). Instead of laying the groundwork for such conventional comedy, Ozick interrupts the narrative and risibly dispels the romantic illusions she's weaving. "Now if this were an optimistic portrait," she writes, "Puttermesser would end her work history abruptly and move on to a bower in a fine suburb" (12). But, she tells us, Puttermesser will not marry. Thus, in place of a comic ending, suggestive of fertility and regeneration, she endows Puttermesser with a fertility of imagination which fashions a "luxuriant dream" of *"gan eydn,"* the "Garden of Eden," "the World to Come," inspired by "her great Uncle Zindel, a former *shammes* in a *shul* that had been torn down" (12). Puttermesser is profoundly grateful to Great-Uncle Zindel for granting her the notion of an afterlife and, more important, a usable Jewish past in the present.

Puttermesser's vision of the World to Come is, however, a comically incongruous child's view of Eden where she would eat, not forbidden apples, but an unending supply of fudge, the kind sold in her grade school. Not only would she suffer no tooth decay, the bitter consequences for her indulgence in sweets, but her fudge, like Proust's *petit madeleine*, would allow her to recapture the sweet innocence of times past. In her Eden she would also lead a blissful prepubertal existence, freed of bothersome sexual distractions, with "every itch annihilated, fecundity dismissed" (13). In its place she would shamelessly eat off the tree of intellectual knowledge, voraciously reading all manner of secular fiction and nonfiction. Like Ozick's pagan rabbi, she would luxuriate in nature and read tantalizing unholy texts.

But in this world she tries to master Hebrew, which for Ozick is a higher form of learning than Puttermesser's study of great books in Paradise. For Hebrew is more than just a language for expression, it is a "code for the world's design, indissoluble, pre-determined, translucent" (5). Yet her Hebrew teacher is Great-Uncle Zindel, the Yiddish comic voice of antiheroism who underscores the worth of the butter knife over sharp knives that kill. He is also like Malamud's matchmaker, Pinya Salzman, the comic eccentric living in the slums, and wants to marry her off to ensure Jewish continuity. In his immigrant's fractured English, he instructs her to change her name so it wouldn't be a joke to turn away nice young men or he tells her to go to Israel to meet somebody. But when he likens Hebrew letters to the bodies of pregnant ladies, insinuating she pattern herself after them, Ozick temporarily curtails the fictional proceedings and has another narrator chastise her for introducing excessive invention into her biography. Ozick's wry self-deprecation augments the humor already existing in her histrionic self-reflexive fiction.

The narrator sheepishly tells us that Great-Uncle Zindel was never Puttermesser's Hebrew teacher, that he died four years before she was born. He was a fantasy she created to "claim an ancestor" since a "Jew must own a past" (17). At this point Ozick calls a temporary truce in her mockery of Puttermesser, for she sympathizes with her for her depleted Jewish heritage. Instead, her satire is aimed at Puttermesser's ancestors for their headlong rush to assimilate, to alienate themselves from what they construed as their backward tradition. Ozick tells us ironically that Puttermesser's paternal great-grandfather pretended he was a Yankee by wearing a Yankee captain's cap he sold as a peddler and then he later passed himself off as a Yankee captain of small-time industry. Puttermesser's own father was "an anti-Semite" who "would not eat kosher meat" because "he had no superstitions" (18).

Her mother had no memory of Great-Uncle Zindel. He was just "a name in the dead grandmother's mouth" (18).

At this point, Ozick suspends her Aggadic comic tale of Puttermesser's early life and introduces halachic moralizing about it. Sounding her familiar complaint against the loss of Jewish identity, Ozick finds Puttermesser's family to be an impoverished minority, since they have no gift of their own to offer the majority. Bankrupt, they borrow all their furnishings from their neighbor's house. They cannot invite their neighbor into their "own historic house" because "all the rooms are empty" ("The Holidays: Reply to Anne Roiphe," C6).

Consequently, to fill this emptiness Puttermesser invents and clings to Great-Uncle Zindel, the embodiment of the vibrant shtetl past of years ago and the more recent teeming Jewish East Side. Just as the heart of Bellow's intellectual hero Herzog "was attached with great power" to Napoleon Street, Montreal's "toylike, crazy," little ghetto (141), so Puttermesser, the legal giant, is connected with great feeling to Great-Uncle Zindel, the wry little man with "thorny English a wilderness between his gums" (17). However, Ozick does not permit us to have any permanent strong feelings for Puttermesser. She deconstructs her as a character and transforms her into an essence. Then, as her biographer, she breathes life into Puttermesser again and places her in another story.

"Puttermesser and Xanthippe," the second chapter in *The Puttermesser Papers,* is another of Ozick's Aggadic-halachic, fictions, which reflects her conflicted attitude toward the middle-aged Puttermesser. This time she offers a satiric and compassionate portrayal of her female lawyer that centers upon her bungling attempts to be an idealist and civic reformer. A caricature of a female Bartleby, Puttermesser, now 46 years old and unmarried, is still assigned to the city's Department of Receipts and Disbursements where, parodying Bartleby, she prefers not to work. But, unlike Bartleby, she yearns for some meaningful connection with her past. Since the tedium of her work has caused her Old World Great-Uncle Zindel to vanish from her fantasies, she longs to have a Jewish daughter to take his place. Since immaculate conception is unlikely, she spends her leisure time having joyless sex with Morris Rappoport, "a married fund-raiser from Toronto" (23), and reading Plato's *Theaetetus.* The passage she quotes to him before he jilts her is from the "Digression on the Contemplative Life" in which a maidservant scoffs at Thales, who looked up to study the stars and tumbled down a well, who was "so eager to know what was happening in the sky that he could not see what lay at his feet" (23). Clearly, Rappoport, seeking only instant money and instant sex, is meant to be a stolid

version of Plato's practical man. Conversely, Puttermesser, Ozick implies, is a female Thales, Plato's philosopher, who "is unaware of what his next-door neighbor is doing, hardly knows, indeed, whether the creature is a man at all," yet he "spends all his pains on the question, what man is" (23). Similarly, Puttermesser is so caught up in her lofty ideals that she is ill equipped to cope with the urban chaos in her midst.

Ozick then introduces her most inventive Aggadic episode. She mingles zany fantasy with satiric naturalism. She endows Puttermesser with the impulse to be another Rabbi Loew, the sixteenth-century Prague rationalist who created a male golem, a creature of brute force, to fight brute force. So she has Puttermesser, a female Platonic rationalist, fittingly create a female golem of impulsive will and boundless energy to fight her battles.

However, her golem-making is a travesty of the elaborate arcane rite of infusing life into the inanimate. Unwittingly formed out of the collective dirt of Puttermesser's houseplants, Ozick's golem is linked to its Hebrew etymology ("shapeless matter") and its use in Psalm 139:16, where the "speaker, perhaps Adam, praises the Creator . . . who secretly formed his body 'in the lowest parts of the earth,' from which came his 'imperfect substance,' that is *golem*. Talmudic commentators have therefore designated *golem* to mean "something unformed and imperfect." They have even used the word "to refer to a woman who has not conceived" (Goldsmith, 16). Thus Puttermesser, a woman who has not conceived, is a golem herself who, in turn, creates a golem. And so, from the outset, both the creator and the created are imperfect beings, each in her own way.

Because Puttermesser is imperfect, she wants to have a perfect Jewish daughter, to whom she gives the refined biblical name of Leah. But the golem, refusing to be named after the woman who was not the first choice of the patriarch Jacob, prefers to call herself Xanthippe after Socrates's shrewish wife, who grudgingly managed his practical affairs so he could pursue his high-minded activity, yet contradicted him when he became too authoritarian. Similarly, Xanthippe initially performs all of her mistress's domestic chores so she can lose herself in her grand abstractions. Sprung out of Puttermesser's mind, Xanthippe also gives expression to her mistress's latent ambitions, her utopian schemes. She goads Puttermesser to run for mayor against the incumbent Malachy Mavett, which is Ozick's pun for the *Moloch ha Moves,* the Angel of Death. Thanks to Xanthippe's charismatic campaigning, Puttermesser becomes the city's Angel of Life, with Xanthippe, the comic embodiment of the muckraker, executing her "Plan for the Resuscitation, Reformation, Reinvigoration and

Redemption" (74–75) of New York City. True to the principles of her self-created party, "Independents for Socratic and Prophetic Idealism" (72), Puttermesser, the caricature of the social meliorist, would like to have the poetic license to license such poets and writers as Walt Whitman to preside over the "Bureau of Summary Sessions, Shelley to take over Water Resource Development, William Blake in the Fire Department, George Eliot doing Social Service, Emily Bronte over at Police . . . Virginia Woolf and Edgar Allan Poe sharing Health" (74), but in the absence of such noble souls, Puttermesser has to rely on Xanthippe to reform the city.

Like Rabbi Loew, who became so dependent on the golem that he became his captive, so Puttermesser realizes that she is no longer the master but the "golem's golem" (79). Though she breathed life into the golem, the golem, through her cunning, made her mayor. Also this imperfect being caused her to be obsessed with creating a perfect city, so that, swelled with pride at her attainments, she becomes further imperfect herself. Thus not only is Puttermesser guilty of usurping God's role as a life giver, but she also unlawfully appropriates God's function of creating a paradise on earth.

As Puttermesser overreaches herself, so does the golem. Like Loew's golem, Xanthippe grows more formidable in size and sexual desire. What was whimsically comic becomes grimly Dionysian. Libidinal orgies with Rappoport unleash her *yetzer ha-rah,* her evil instinct. The city she previously redeemed, she now proceeds to destroy. "The city is diseased with the golem's urge . . . she ravishes and ravages, she ambushes management level after management level" (87). To hide Xanthippe's excesses, Puttermesser must compromise her principles, make political deals, adopt the spoils system she once condemned, become as corrupt as her predecessors. Thus not only has the golem made a fool out of Puttermesser, indeed has made her a golem, a "dummy," in the Yiddish sense of the word, but Xanthippe is clearly Puttermesser's id, her irrational, sensual half, the unruly secret sharer that she can no longer control. Therefore, Puttermesser, as Rabbi Loew before her, has no alternative but to return the golem to dust. Like the father in Goethe's *Erlkonig,* who must deliver his son to death, Puttermesser, the new mother, must deprive her new daughter of life and the procreation of her own daughters.

Some feminist critics have accused Ozick of being a self-hating woman writer. They've argued that Ozick has Puttermesser kill her daughter, Xanthippe, because she has stolen Rappoport, her mother's lover. E. M. Broner, for example, claims that Ozick has joined the "chorus of male voices" (95) who insist that women must be destroyed

when their stature increases, when they get "too big for their breeches." Still other interpreters of the story are convinced Ozick has written a Judaized version of Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* that shows the tragicomic pitfalls artists confront when they try to become social reformers. No matter how earnest they are in their intentions or how profound their utopian vision, the New England transcendentalists cannot make Brook Farm work, nor can the knowledgeable granddaughter of Jewish immigrants remove the tarnish from the Golden Land. Yet another reading of the story is that it is Ozick's portrait of the Jamesian artist who for a time awkwardly revels in the riot of his senses but inevitably represses his erotic rebellion. Just as Puttermesser was once content to be a "mind superfetate with Idea" (35), the Jamesian artist, like her, is filled with remorse over missed sensual opportunities.

But such interpretations of the story do not do justice to its profound midrashic intent. "Puttermesser and Xanthippe" is, above all, Ozick's retelling of *Paradise Lost*. No matter how steeped in learning an individual is, no matter how ingenious she is at crafting golems or idols, she cannot remake the world and create a permanent Eden. For, as Ozick states in the story, "too much Paradise is greed. Eden disintegrates from too much Eden" (99). Yet the utopian impulse still persists so that when Puttermesser at the end cries out, "O lost New York! . . . O lost Xanthippe!" (101), she mourns the impossibility of making the messianic ideal a reality in our time.

On a philosophical level, Ozick shows that the platonic rationalist cannot remain pure mind and divorce herself from the baseness of her lower faculties. Because her intellect is so luminous, she cannot avoid seeing her shadow self and assuming responsibility for the darkness it sheds. She must also show compassion toward this shadow self, this filthy mass, born without a soul, unable to speak, yearning for human love. She must try to integrate the two parts of her self or she will continue to lament the painful breach that exists.

Finally, the story itself is a monster that Ozick has sired. In a sense she is like Mary Shelley, who referred to her *Frankenstein* as a "hideous progeny," a deformed book she gave birth to in "her alienated attic workshop of filthy creation" (Gilbert and Gubar, 233). Similarly Ozick as a pious Jew regards fiction making as abominable idol making, for she is rivaling God in the act of creation. Furthermore, she believes she had joined the ranks of the infidels since she writes in English, which is "a Christian language" ("Preface" to *Bloodshed*, 10). But according to Ozick's definition of New Yiddish literature, which she describes as a liturgical literature written in English but infused

with "the Jewish sensibility . . . the Jewish vision" ("Toward a New Yiddish," 176), "Puttermesser and Xanthippe" is not a monster but a New Yiddish marvel.

Ozick ends "Puttermesser and Xanthippe" on a note of lamentation, with the 47-year-old Puttermesser mourning the loss of her golem daughter and the impossibility of a renovated New York. In "Puttermesser Paired," the third chapter of *The Puttermesser Papers,* Ozick transforms this lamentation into levity. She makes Puttermesser, the civic-minded idealist whose ingenious stratagems for social betterment have gone awry, into a 50-plus cartoon figure in a cartoon world of nagging Jewish parents anxious to marry off their progeny and of imperfect singles frenetically searching for the perfect mate. Earl Rovit describes this animated comic sphere as one in which "motives are reduced to single adrenal urgencies, personality is equated with un-nuanced obsession, and the fluidity of normal human intercourse is grotesquely rendered in a series of collisions when a caricatured dread or desire comes into thudding impact against its immutable or immovable limit" (37). For three decades Puttermesser's caricatured Jewish mother is consumed with the "un-nuanced obsession" of finding a husband for her, of reprimanding her for pursuit of civil rights, not martial rites, of engendering guilt in her for not producing grandchildren: "Ruth, Ruth (her mother wrote from Miami), there's nothing wrong with having a husband along with brains, it's not a contradiction . . . Papa agrees with me on this issue not only double but triple; we didn't come down here to live in the heat with Papa's bursitis only in order to break his heart from you and your brains" (105).

Puttermesser's super brains also cause her to be super particular in her demands for a suitor as she scoffs at the inflated male personals from the *New York Review of Books.* Feeling falsely superior, she arrogantly strips away their euphemistic descriptions of themselves and exposes them to be imposters, losers beneath their winning exteriors: "'Vibrant, appealing, attractive, likeable'—that meant divorced. Leftovers and mistakes. 'Unconventional, earthy, nurturing, fascinated by Zen, Sufism, music of the spheres'—a crackpot still in sandals. 'Successful achiever longing for strong woman'—watch out, probably a porn nut" (106). Clearly, the reason Puttermesser mercilessly skewers the ridiculous affectation of those male self-advertisers is that she feels she can't measure up to their exacting standards for the desirable woman. Berating herself for her lapses, she engages in the humor of wry self-deprecation. In response to a personal that seeks "a loyal, accomplished professional woman; well-analyzed (Jung only, no Freud or Reich, please), sense of humor and love of outdoors a

must" (106), she claims: "She was hostile to the outdoors: the country air—the peril of so many uneasy encounters with unidentifiable rodents, loud birds, monstrous insects . . . left her moody and squeamish . . . She was no good at getting the points of jokes . . . As for the examined life—enough!" (106). However, her deflation of self proves funnier than her ability to feign amusement at some witless male.

Perhaps another reason for Puttermesser's jests at her own expense is an outgrowth of her camouflaged resentment at being suddenly viewed as an old woman when deep within she feels like a young girl. Just as Bellow's Herzog mocks himself for his attempt to deny his age by wearing youthful attire and acting the young lover, Puttermesser mocks herself for assuming she is still the young piano student of 45 years ago, still trying to satisfy Miss Kuntz, her piano teacher. But the ravages of age shatter this illusion. With rueful hyperbole, she admits to "not practicing for so long that her hair was showing signs of whitening. If alive, Miss Kuntz would have to be a hundred and four and Puttermesser had still not perfected the Tempo di Minuetto section" (108).

Puttermesser directs a more angry form of humor at society's attempts to lump older people together, transform them into dehumanized collective entities, and pseudoscientifically study their mass reactions. Her satiric animus is particularly aimed at the Women Attorney's Association and their questionnaire, "Aging and the Female Counsellor," whose mechanized language treats women as if they were feminist robots or witless females forced to acknowledge all manner of hypothetical slights and injuries. Reinforcing the double standard of aging, it asks them such foolish questions as "Do you dye your hair? Use henna? Surrender to Mother Nature? If the latter, does this appear to augment or lessen your dignity among male colleagues? Female colleagues? The public?" (108–109). Like Rosa in Ozick's *The Shawl,* Puttermesser refuses such inane attempts to categorize or define her.

Much as Puttermesser tries to dissociate herself from the aging women attorneys, she can't dissociate herself from her aging apartment building. Indeed, Ozick treats it as the humorous objective correlative for the aging Puttermesser. Its state of disrepair corresponds to Puttermesser's physical disrepair: "Without warning the pipes dried up for the day; you could try to run the faucet and nothing would come out. Or the lights would fail; the refrigerator fluttered its grand lung and ceased" (109–110). Puttermesser, however, is not preoccupied with her damaged apartment building or her damaged body. She was concentrating instead "on the marriage of true minds," on the "wedding of like souls"

(112), patterned after the relationship of Victorian novelist George Eliot and her literary consort, George Lewes.

For many years Cynthia Ozick had her own love affair with George Eliot, scholar of Hebrew scriptures, translator of Spinoza's *Ethics,* devotee of Heinrich Heine and Yehuda Halevi, early advocate of Zionism, with Israeli streets named after her. Thus in "Toward a New Yiddish" Ozick lauded George Eliot for writing a "Judaized novel," for being "touched by the Jewish covenant," for writing of "conduct and of the consequences of conduct," for being "concerned with a society of will and commandment" (164). Clearly, George Eliot wrote the kind of fiction Ozick herself has sought to emulate: works of high moral seriousness with characters torn between the pursuit of selfish endeavors and the commitment to transcendent causes. Eliot's novels preached duty and purpose and dazzled with impassioned prose.

In "Puttermesser Paired," however, Ozick is interested not in George Eliot as the great Victorian writer, but as George Eliot, the woman at home in her connubial sphere with her common-law husband, George Lewes. In "Levitation," Ozick had briefly spoken of them as the ideal couple, "literary friends and lovers" (4) whom the Feinbergs, their direct opposite, a most unideal couple of would-be writers, claim to resemble. Similarly, Puttermesser, the lackluster, unemployed civil servant longs to be the distinguished, prolific George Eliot so she can share her life with the adoring, intellectually compatible man of letters, George Lewes. Ozick, however, treats Puttermesser's longing mock-heroically. She initially makes her out to be a caricatured Jamesian character, a female John Marcher of "The Beast in the Jungle" who "stopped in her tracks to listen, to detect; to learn something; to study. She was holding still, waiting for life to begin to happen" (120). Meanwhile, life passes her by while she waits for the ideal experience to give it meaning. But unlike Marcher, she has a specific someone she's looking for. She histrionically laments: "No one knows lonely sorrow who has not arrived fifty-plus without George Lewes" (120).

Ozick has Puttermesser find not George Lewes but a facsimile of him in the copy artist Rupert Rabeeno, who, in turn, makes reproductions of great paintings. Though Rupert is an imitation of George Lewes, he is another of Ozick's characters incisively modeled after an actual person and cleverly smuggled into her fiction. He joins the ranks of the other renowned literary figures Ozick has kidnapped and held captive in varying states of disguise for her artistic purposes: Isaac Bashevis Singer in "Envy; or, Yiddish in America"; Malamud, Agnon, and Tchernikhovsky in "Usurpation"; Jerzy Kosinski in "A Mercenary"; and Bruno Schulz in *The Messiah of Stockholm*. In these

works, she captures the dual identities of her reinvented borrowed characters and plays off the fictive against the factual dimensions of their personas, thereby heightening the complexity and comedy of their depiction.

In the case of Rupert Rabeeno and George Lewes, Ruth Puttermesser and George Eliot, Ozick points up the humor of their eager yet strained assumption of their roles, the matching and mismatching between copy and original. When Puttermesser first meets Rabeeno, he has some of the characteristics of the Lewes she's been reading about in the biographies of George Eliot. Resembling a "Victorian gentleman," he "was well into his thirties, unless that modest orderly mustache was meant to deceive" (124). Except for her intellectual tastes and love of George Lewes, Puttermesser did not at all resemble the 35-year-old free-spirited George Eliot who defied convention to live with the 37-year-old Lewes. Nonetheless, Puttermesser is so intent on re-creating the love affair between the two, her quixotic imagination transforms Rupert and herself into these two special beings.

"If there be any one subject on which I feel no levity," wrote George Eliot in one of her letters, "it is that of marriage and the relations of the sexes—if there is any one action or relation of my life which is and always has been profoundly serious, it is my relation to Mr. Lewes" (122). There is clearly levity in the pseudo-marriage of Puttermesser and Rupert, in which both of them think they have each seduced the other. As they slide in and out of their illustrious roles, Ozick employs the device known as comic "universe-changing"—the importing into one sphere of an entire "universe of discourse with all sorts of rich associations and all sorts of stock responses" which is "appropriate only to an utterly different sphere" (Monro, 45–46). On the one hand, Rupert and Puttermesser fancy themselves to be eminent Victorians, steeped in their worldview, who read to each other "in their nighttime coziness" the avowed masterpieces of their times. Or they pretend they are comfortably situated in George Eliot's elegant home, the Priory, hosting a salon for the best minds of their generation. They vicariously go on their journeys and reexperience their discoveries. Ozick, however, points up the comic disparity between their imagined selves and their actual selves. In her cramped, broken-down apartment, not a stately parlor with "high roseate ceilings" (117), Puttermesser is not the august Sybil, but "a worn-out city lawyer, stunted as to real experience, a woman lately scheduled, eaten up with loneliness, melancholia ground into the striations of her face" (139). And Rupert is not the multifaceted Victorian thinker, adept at science and literature, but a foppish imitator with a narcissistic philosophy of imitation.

Rupert's theory and practice of imitation, however, add anticomplication to the latter half of the story. Just as he insists he does not copy a work of art, but does it his own way, that is, "reenacts" it, so he insists upon reenacting the later years of George Eliot's life in his own way. He is content to be the George Lewes who is the boon companion enjoying a platonic relationship with George Eliot. But when Puttermesser reminds him they were lovers, he prefers to concentrate on the death of the 62-year-old Lewes and Eliot's marriage to Johnny Cross, a man some 20 years her junior who he claims was infatuated with George Lewes and wanted to imitate him. Rupert, all too aware of the 20-year age difference between himself and Puttermesser, feels a strong kinship with Johnny Cross and ultimately an antipathy to George Eliot so that in his version of the story he chooses to impersonate Johnny Cross "impersonating Lewes" (156). Though George Eliot finally gains the respectability of marriage, Johnny Cross is unable to consummate the marriage and, in a state of madness, jumps out the window on their wedding night. Similarly, Rupert grants respectability to Puttermesser by marrying her in a wedding ceremony, a makeshift civil travesty of George Eliot's church wedding. He, too, fails to consummate his union with Puttermesser. However, in full power of his sanity, he jilts her and walks off into the night. His mental seduction and abandonment of Puttermesser as George Eliot constitutes his artistic reenactment not of a painting but of a life story.

On one level the story is a reworking of the Plautine comic plot "in which *juvenis* outwits and conquers *senex*" (qtd. in Weiss 280). Puttermesser at 50-plus thinks she has conquered the heart of the young artist, ensnared him to be her ideal friend, her protector, her advocate, her lover. In point of fact, however, he has calculatedly invaded her space, used her funds, and exploited her as the subject matter for his artistic reenactment of her George Eliot–George Lewes fantasy. In Puttermesser's and Rupert's December-May courtship, Puttermesser's December has not become rejuvenated by his May. Heartbroken over his rejection, she has aged even more. "Puttermesser's shame stung. A hag. A crone. Estrogen dwindling in her cells" (132). Thus Puttermesser is not paired, that is, united with another human being. Rather, Ozick has her pared down, comically reduced in stature.

On an epistemological level, the story is about the impossibility of knowing anything accurately and creating anything totally original. The biographies of George Eliot's life are as fictional as the fiction she writes. Perhaps dabbling in reader-response theory, Ozick suggests there is no one George Eliot story but many versions of it by different

biographers through the years and infinitely more versions of these biographical versions by different readers through the years. Nor do artists, like spiders, weave new works out of their own entrails but, to draw from Harold Bloom's antithetical criticism, they imitate precursor artists or draw from preexisting webs. The degree of their originality is determined by the extent to which they swerve from their precursors or misread their precursors. Thus artists essentially re-create rather than create. Ozick has Puttermesser describe this process of artistic replication: "Whatever had happened once, she conspired, through a density of purposefulness, to redraw, redo, replay; to translate into the language of her own respiration. A resurrection of sorts" (52).

Finally, on a liturgical level, the story is a parable on the harmful effects of imitation. Rather than worshiping an inanimate object as idol, Puttermesser adores as idol a live human being, the writer George Eliot, and covets her literary fame and her total union with George Lewes. Puttermesser is like Ozick herself, who paid homage to a comparable literary idol, Henry James. But Cynthia Ozick was only 22 when she "believed, with all the rigor and force and stunned ardor of religious belief, in the old Henry James, in his scepter and his authority" ("The Lesson of the Master," 295). However, both she and Puttermesser at 50-plus suffer the consequences of Emerson's warning that "imitation is suicide" (46). Concentrating all their energies on trying to become these flawless literary masters, they kill their own chances for creative work and creative living. By making giants out of these writers, they dwarf themselves in the process and fail to grow, to develop their fullest potential. They are thus prevented from engaging in the highest form of imitation: the *imitatio Dei,* which, according to rabbinic interpretation of the biblical admonition "And you should walk in His ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9), was meant "as a commandment to imitate God's moral attributes" (Hartman, 38): "Even as God is called gracious, so be you gracious; even as God is merciful, so be you merciful; even as He is called holy, so be you holy" (Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:54, qtd. in Hartman, 38). But Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his work *Halakhic Man,* also speaks of God inviting human beings to imitate him as a creator. He not only enjoins them to change the world but to "complete the creation of one's individual capacities" (Hartman, 39).

Ozick realizes the error of her ways. In her essay "The Lesson of the Master," she vows never "to worship ripe Art or the ripened artist" but to accept the primitive, the ungainly, the crude in herself and to create out of her own "stupidity or ingenious" (296). Alas, Puttermesser, as comic character, does not gain such an anagnorisis.

She does not confront her ungainly self and try to transform it, but escapes to the realm of fantasy. At the story's end she accuses Rupert Rubeeno, her false *rebbenu* (teacher rabbi), of creating only dwindling reenactments, of being a mere copyist, when she herself is guilty of the same offense. Though Puttermesser has allowed herself to be swallowed up by George Eliot and has been diminished because of it, Ozick has been beneficially influenced by George Eliot. That is, she has not been one of those weaker talents who idealize and then imitate. Rather, she has become a writer of strong imagination who has appropriated from George Eliot what she needed to develop her own voice.

Fortunately, Cynthia Ozick did not, like George Eliot, have to adopt a male pen name to exercise her mirth-right; nor did she have to disguise her subtle use of parable and parody in *The Puttermesser Papers* to avoid its being dismissed as one of those "silly novels by lady novelists" (Barreca, Introduction, 13). Ozick's *Puttermesser Papers* are not predictable feminist follies, but original works of art in which delightful whimsy and profound wisdom are ingeniously linked to one another.

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9

Rebecca Goldstein: Tension and Ambivalence

Anna P. Ronell

Rebecca Goldstein, the author of such novels as *The Mind-Body Problem* (1983), *The Late-Summer Passion of a Woman of Mind* (1989), *The Dark Sister* (1991), *Mazel* (1995), and *The Properties of Light* (2000), is one of the most significant Jewish women novelists in the United States today. Each of Goldstein's novels is a knot of intertwined thematic and associative sequences rich in allusions to classical Western works as well as to traditional Judaic sources. Her novels deal extensively with the complexity of contemporary American Jewish identity, the changing status of Jewish women, feminism, intellectualism, and a myriad of other issues. Goldstein's background in philosophy informs her writing and gives it a particular philosophic quality. She also strives to place contemporary American Jewry within the time continuum of Jewish history. Although each novel is a complete and independent work, a variety of recurrent themes such as the mind-body problem and the development of female Jewish identity reappear throughout her fiction. These themes make Goldstein's novels into an artistic oeuvre with multiple elements echoing and complementing each other.

In her essays and interviews, Rebecca Goldstein, a self-reflective individual, examines her ambivalence toward the issues raised in her novels. Notwithstanding the fact that Jewish themes are central in her writing, Goldstein is conflicted about being called an American Jewish writer. She struggles with contemporary practices of creating

definitions, which are often critical value judgments. In an unpublished essay entitled "Judaic Dualism and Hebraic Memory," she admits: "I'm quite often asked whether I think of myself as a Jewish writer and I'm always at a loss to know how to go about answering the question, for I'm not at all certain what the question is supposed to mean. What is a Jewish writer? Are there any now in existence? Ought there to be? Most importantly to me: Is this at all a useful concept—are any of these ethnic identifications—or for that matter gender identifications—useful—really useful—in understanding literary outputs?" (1).

Rebecca Goldstein is not alone in her desire to avoid definition and consequent categorization. However, being a prolific writer herself, she admits the necessity of taking a stand and choosing a foundation for a literary edifice. She writes: "These questions have, for me, not surprisingly, a sharply personal dimension, stuck like a shunt through my cranium to probe deep into the dark regions where ideas for fiction struggle for life—and this invasive situation adds a definite edge to my epistemic dismay. There is a part of me that completely rejects the entire notion of a Jewish writer. And there is also a part of me that rejects the rejection. And, in addition to these two parts, is a part that accepts both the rejection and the rejection of the rejection and believes that it is precisely the uneasy presence of those other two parts that—perhaps, perhaps—makes me, whether I want it or not, a Jewish writer" (2).

While resisting definition, Goldstein recognizes the fact that her works are permeated with Jewish values as well as literary and linguistic influences. Along with the mind-body problem, the universalist-secularist versus the particularist-Judaic dichotomy constitutes the central thematic and stylistic tension of Goldstein's corpus and is the dominant theme of many of her works. Echoing Cynthia Ozick's theological tension between pagan nature worship and idolatry on the one hand and monotheistic Judaism on the other, Goldstein's heroines struggle to find a niche for themselves where they can attain a balance between Western civilization and their Jewish heritage. However, unlike Ozick, who often dramatizes the conflict between the Jewish world and its enemies, Goldstein mainly focuses on distinctions within the Jewish world. Goldstein's works are frequently tales of divided selves and stories of women who strive to achieve self-fulfillment. In the process, her female protagonists face a variety of obstacles and often have to turn inward for inspiration. In these cases, their Jewishness is both an asset and a liability that does not escape Goldstein's creative scrutiny.

Goldstein's fiction is representative of a new post–Holocaust genre that expresses a special interest in the current Jewish renewal in the United States. Goldstein's protagonists are intellectual Jewish women who struggle with their ethnic heritage and religious ambivalence, and seek spirituality and self-fulfillment. She belongs to a new generation of American Jewish writers who express the powerful resurgence of spirituality in American Jewish literature by depicting the return of Jewish individuals to religion and mysticism while wrestling with religious and cultural tradition. *Mazel,* for example, is not only a portrayal of intellectual women questioning their Jewish identity, but also a saga of three generations of Jewish women. This saga parallels an intriguing rise of interest in the Eastern European genealogy of individual families and entire shtetlach (communities) and a variety of topics connected to self-discovery and seeking out one's roots.

Like Rebecca Goldstein herself, her characters are ambivalent about their Jewishness. They also embody the dilemmas addressed in *The Mind-Body Problem:* Can a woman be both beautiful and intellectual, sexual and professional? Through these dilemmas, her sharp critique of the assimilated American Jewish milieu and an imaginative reconstruction of the Eastern European past, Goldstein leads her characters on an exploration of their heritage. To give voice to a variety of conflicting forces, Goldstein utilizes a number of narrative techniques and introduces the readers to a plethora of American Jewish characters who range from profoundly assimilated nominal Jews to spiritual seekers. The diversity of Jewish experiences animates Goldstein's literary imagination.

The Mind-Body Problem, Goldstein's first novel, is a complex work using as its foundation the classical European bildungsroman. However, unlike these types of novel where the protagonist is male, Goldstein's protagonist is a young Jewish woman named Renee Feuer. The reader follows her development from her childhood in a family of Ultra-Orthodox New York Jews to her academic career at Princeton University and then to her troubled marriage to a mathematical genius, Noam Himmel. In *The Mind-Body Problem,* the themes of Jewish identity, women's precarious position in the world of academia, intellectualism, and sexuality are integrated with the overall philosophical argument about the relation of body to mind. The mind-body problem often recurs within Goldstein's fiction. As Sylvia Barack Fishman notes: "[Goldstein] demonstrates that people who try to live entirely according to intellectual, rational dictates and to deny the seemingly irrational demands of their physical selves are fundamentally living a lie. Moreover, by rejecting part of themselves, they essentially create within

themselves a fifth column, an alienated and unacknowledged aspect of their own being. When Goldstein's characters imagine that they have totally cleansed themselves of whatever they consider undesirable needs and emotions, those very needs and emotions lay in wait, ready to ambush them when they are vulnerable. The more rigorously her characters reject and suppress their own bodily passions and physicality, the more savagely the body reasserts itself eventually" (81).

The tension between ideas and intellectualism and between sexuality and the positive body image can be traced in all of Goldstein's novels. However, women are not the only ones afflicted with the mind-body problem. Men's lives can be equally damaged by dissociating the world of ideas and pure thought from the world of human emotions, sexuality, and general physicality of existence.

The protagonist, Renee Feuer, a beautiful and brilliant Princeton graduate student in philosophy, is to a large degree modeled on Goldstein herself. While not equating the author with the protagonist, it is important to take notice of several autobiographical details found in the novel. Born in 1950 in New York, Goldstein grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family and, like Renee Feuer, she had to fight hard for her intellectual freedom. During our interview, Rebecca Goldstein talked about her childhood, offering me a valuable insight into her artistic imagination:

> I was brought up in a very Orthodox Jewish household. I would not say that my intellectual ambitions, which started very young, were encouraged. [Laughs] Quite the contrary, they were just seen as something negative, that it was going to make it very difficult for me in life, very difficult for me to get married. I had an older brother and we were three daughters. And all the education went to, I suppose, my brother. I was the middle girl. We were supposed to be sweet and pretty, and get married and have kids . . . to be good and not defiant, and modest . . . Modesty, there is such a thing, *tzniut*—not only outward, but inward. To please my family meant to be Orthodox. My way of getting the education was that I got married very early. And I had no longer to answer to my parents. They certainly didn't approve my putting off having children, although I was married. You know, I got married after my freshman year of college. Proceeded on to get a doctorate, I didn't have a child until I was already an assistant professor at Barnard. Very disapproving . . . But, you know, I was then my husband's problem [laughs]. (Personal interview, November 9, 2000)

In *The Mind-Body Problem,* Renee Feuer functions as Goldstein's alter ego, reflecting general concerns often faced by women of intellectual

pursuits. The primary issue is the problem of male bias toward women's presumably limited intellectual abilities and women's internalization of such biases. In spite of Goldstein's sense of humor, her writing betrays the hurt that she suffered over the years of her Orthodox childhood. In love with her puny, unathletic, and dim-witted Talmudic scholar of a son, Renee's mother "had always hidden my report cards so that poor Avram wouldn't have to see how much better than him his sister had done" (75).

Renee's family is not the only source of discouragement of female intellectual pursuits. Goldstein's descriptions of the Princeton faculty are a stinging social satire, which seeks to deflate the big egos of tenured philosophy professors and to expose their predilection for chauvinist attitudes. All through the novel, the faculty's condescending treatment (including her husband's) causes Renee much anguish and instills a constant sense of self-doubt: "Over the winter I wrote a few papers, so I wasn't kicked out of the department. 'But you are marginal, very marginal,' the director of graduate studies had warned. I had enjoyed those papers. The old love of philosophy had returned. . . . But the moment I stepped out of the isolation into which I always retreat when I'm really working, and began to talk with the other members of my department, all the doubts returned. Doubts not about the objects of thought, but about the thinking subject, me" (25).

Disillusionment with the world of academia parallels Renee's continuous alienation from her Orthodox family. Her mother is greatly skeptical of Renee's intellectual aspirations, perceiving her daughter's beauty as well as her intellectualism as religiously problematic and even disruptive for the scholarly world of male Jewish piety. Renee confesses that her mother "greeted each announcement of my educational plans with 'Nu, Renee, is this going to help you find a husband?' so that the consequence of all my academic honors, Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude, scholarships, fellowships, prizes, was only a deepening sense of guilty failure" (55). Renee's mother is utterly incapable of seeing her daughter as a woman in her own right, as an independent person, and a talented scholar. In the world of Jewish Orthodoxy, a woman's worth is assessed only in relation to the men she serves and nourishes. Thus when Renee waits for the first three stars indicating the end of the Sabbath to announce her engagement to a world-famous mathematical genius, she anticipates her mother's approval. And yet even this happy occasion becomes an instance of humiliation as her mother denies the unique worthiness of her daughter's personality and achievements, saying: "You should be very proud, Renee, that such a man should love you. Of course,

I know you're not just any girl. Who should know if not me? This is why God gave you such good brains, so that you could make such a man like this love you" (57).

Underscoring Goldstein's ambivalence toward traditional Judaism, the image of the mother is counterbalanced by the loving portrayal of Renee's father who is modeled on Goldstein's own father, the cantor of the Orthodox Hebrew Institute of White Plains. In her interview for *Hadassah Magazine,* Goldstein said that it was her need to cope with her father's death that prompted her to turn to fiction, in part because "there was no room for emotion in philosophy." She described her father, known as "the *Tzaddik* of White Plains," as a saintlike figure. "One of his duties was to teach bar mitzvah lessons and he would go out of his way to teach emotionally disturbed children. He had an aura of goodness about him, almost no ego, no pretentiousness." In *The Mind-Body Problem,* the memory of Goldstein's father was transformed into the character of Renee's father, which allowed Goldstein to contemplate the nature of human goodness.

> My father had been a cantor, a *chazzen,* a sweet singer of Israel, as it says in Hebrew on his tombstone. His pure, sweet song was like a picture of his soul. Snatches of *chazzens* would escape from him all day long, pieces of the internal singing that must have been almost constant with him. He had loved his work in all its aspects: chanting the prayers on behalf of the community, comforting the sick and the sad, instructing the boys in preparation to their bar mitzvahs. His teaching powers were legendary. He was sent all the unteachable boys from around Westchester County—the retarded, the disturbed, the hyperactive. Each yielded to his softness and managed to be bar mitzvahed.
>
> There were so many things I had always wanted to know about him. I wondered if he had struggled to arrive at his moral level or had been born there. I spent a lot of time puzzling over the question of which—the struggle or the lack of it—would make him the better man. Many ethicists, following Kant, opt for the struggle: those who are naturally good aren't really good. Yet the striving after moral perfection requires a concern for one's self: one has to want one's self to be good. And it seemed that even this sort of self-interest was incompatible with the nature of my father's pure goodness. (Lowin, "Portrait: Rebecca Goldstein")

Autobiographical elements, including the fact that all of Goldstein's heroines are either philosophers or writers, are revealing of her creative process. Often transcendent of representational reality, her personal experiences are intertwined with the larger metaphysical questions to

produce an intricate narrative texture. The nature of reality; identity as work-in-progress; construction of the self through stories people tell about themselves; and the fluidity of the self, often in response to the relationship between mind and body, religious and ethnic heritage and the larger world, are the recurrent motifs in Goldstein's fiction. The discussion of the chazzan's pure goodness and high level of morality is especially important in light of Renee's struggle with the restrictive sexual ethics of Orthodox Judaism. For Renee's mother, a girl's morality is embodied in sexual abstinence and the total suppression of all outward expression of sexuality. Thus Renee's ambivalence toward Judaism continues growing from her teenage years on, never quite reconciling the forces that pull her in opposite directions. On the one hand, she longs for the spirituality and goodness offered by her father. On the other hand, she is thoroughly alienated by her mother's blind acceptance of women's subservient positions in both the public and private spheres.

Goldstein's depictions of Jewish religious environments oscillate between a rather hostile portrayal of Renee's mother in *The Mind-Body Problem* and a warm description of a Jewish family in her short story, "Rabbinical Eyes." Her collection of short stories, *Strange Attractors,* contains a number of powerful treatments of twentieth-century Jewish experience. The affirmative attitude toward Orthodox Judaism in "Rabbinical Eyes" may be Goldstein's attempt to counterbalance the tradition's depressing aspects that she has expressed in *The Mind-Body Problem*. Beginning with a retrospective account of the narrator's childhood, the story unfolds through her family's history in Eastern Europe, the Holocaust, and wanderings throughout the United States. Eventually, the story culminates with the adult Rachel, the main character of "Rabbinical Eyes," torn between the strong pull of collective Jewish destiny and the pursuit of individual independence. Rachel describes her "rabbinical eyes" as a link to her father and to the multigenerational chain of rabbis uninterrupted until the Holocaust. "These eyes are huge. They make every expression that crosses our face a sad one. They are deep-socketed, heavy-lidded, and darkly shadowed, the area around them looking almost bruised. Their color is brown" (185). The eyes dominate her face, making her not only a female replica of her father, but also a carrier of Jewish heritage into the future.

Rachel resembles Renee in her profound intellectualism, fierce ambitions, and love for philosophy. Although both young women move from the world of traditional Jewish piety to the competitive atmosphere of American institutions of higher learning, Rachel

succeeds in preserving the warm memories of her Jewish upbringing. She emphasizes that both her mother and father pushed her to study the Talmud and other Jewish subjects as strongly as they pushed her brother: "I know that Orthodox Jews are rumored to be sexist. Hell, it's no rumor. One sage wrote that it was better for the sacred books to be burned before they were taught to Jewish daughters. . . . My family wasn't at all tainted by this kind of bigotry. . . . I've read some of the angry literature that's been put out recently by Jewish feminists. And truly there seems to be a lot to be angry about. All I can say is that the kind of mindless dismissal of girls that seems to typify certain parts of the Orthodox Jewish world simply wasn't my experience at all" (205–206).

The narrator's affectionate memories of her childhood are counterbalanced by the sad confession that Rachel's family sat shivah for her when she married a Gentile. The biggest blow to Rachel, a brilliant lawyer and original thinker, comes with the birth of her daughter. Although having inherited the family hallmark—the rabbinical eyes—the girl is mentally challenged and her eyes are vacant, thus breaking the chain of intellectual brilliance passed through the generations of rabbinical scholars. Preoccupied with the theme of Jewish continuity, Goldstein problematizes the ending of "Rabbinical Eyes." Does Rachel's daughter represent God's punishment for marrying out and an end of the illustrious line or a hope for the reconciliation between the protagonist and her family whom she sorely misses? The story concludes with Rachel's dream of a reunion in which her father accepts Rachel and her baby daughter and provides her with the spiritual guidance she so desperately needs.

Another short story that illustrates the tension between the universal and Jewish components and the issues of Jewish continuity is "Mindel Gittel." Further accentuating Goldstein's interest in the Holocaust and Jewish life in Eastern Europe, the story is told from the perspective of Sol, a Holocaust survivor who tries to start a new life in a small town in Connecticut. Attempting to put together a minyan for the High Holidays, Sol befriends Reuven Zweigel, also a Holocaust survivor and a learned scion of a long line of rabbis. The story, however, focuses on Reuven's daughter Mindel Gittel (her American name is Melody Grace), who is growing up completely alienated from her Jewish heritage and from memories of the Holocaust, lacking any identification with the collective Jewish destiny. Beautiful, smart, popular, and successful, Melody Grace embodies the immigrant dream of success and proves to be the ultimate victim of assimilation when she marries a Protestant son of

a blue-blooded U.S. Congressman. Unlike other female characters Goldstein endows with both beauty and brains, Melody Grace does not suffer from a divided self. So completely assimilated and devoid of any Jewish self-awareness is she that there is no hope for the continuity of even a diluted version of Jewish culture. As Andrew Furman observes, "'Mindel Gittel' is, above all, a lamentation on intergenerational rupture and cultural loss" (92). Goldstein not only mourns this loss, but also suggests that the lack of divided self may be a significant aspect of Mindel Gittel's impoverished personality since it is the tension between various aspects that underlies the quests for self-understanding characteristic of Goldstein's other characters. The powerful portrayal of the dissolution of Jewish identity makes "Mindel Gittel" an exceptional story.

Strange Attractors is also the collection in which we first encounter Phoebe Saunders who later becomes one of the protagonists in *Mazel*. In two stories devoted to Phoebe, Goldstein first attempts to show the growth and change of a quintessential Jewish academic and a female intellectual in search of romantic fulfillment. Although exposed to Yiddish and Eastern European Jewish culture from childhood, Phoebe maintains a distance between herself and this Jewish world, remaining ambivalent about her Jewish background. The intergenerational rupture is expressed in these stories as the third-person narrator points out the communication gaps between the family members: "Chloe and Phoebe don't speak Yiddish, Sasha and Phoebe don't speak ancient Greek, and Sasha and Chloe don't speak mathematics" (178). In these early stories, Phoebe, a 26-year-old Princeton professor, faces male biases directed specifically at intellectual women. On the plane on her way to the French Institut des Hautes Êtudes Scientifiques, Phoebe's contemplation of her platonic infatuation with a French scientist is rudely interrupted by a patronizing wealthy businessman who takes great offence at what he views as the degradation of Princeton University through the presence of a young female professor. Small and slight, Phoebe is accustomed to the perceived gap between her physical being and her intellectual capacity. The overarching presence of the mind-body problem highlights Goldstein's recurrent theme of negative body image that often accompanies soaring intellectualism.

In addition to the themes of intellectualism and ambivalence toward Jewishness, critics have noted a variety of other significant motifs. In her short article, "Destructive Intimacy: The Shoah between Mother and Daughter in Fictions by Cynthia Ozick, Norma Rosen, and Rebecca Goldstein," Susanne Klingenstein traces the theme of mother-daughter

relations in contemporary Holocaust fiction by women writers. Although she does not discuss the complex relationship between Renee Feuer and her mother, it is possible to establish a connection between the mother-daughter pairs in *The Mind-Body Problem* and in Goldstein's short story, "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish." Both relationships have one thing in common: the mother fails to understand the individuality and uniqueness of her daughter. According to Klingenstein, "'The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish' seeks to illuminate how the constant presence of the Holocaust memory destroys any possible intimacy between mother and daughter since 'Marta has no daughter independent of Raizel,' her Holocaust friend, whose life she gives back by taking life from Rose" (171).

"The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish" is one of Goldstein's creative attempts to establish an imaginative link between the Holocaust and contemporary American Jews. Rose, the first-person narrator of the story, is a child of Holocaust survivors named after the heroine of block eight of the Buchenwald death camp. The story opens with the stern introductory description of the following incident: There were two young Jewish girls, each the last survivor of her family, and they had become very devoted to one another during the few months of their imprisonment. One morning one of them woke up too weak to work. Her name was put on the death list. The other, Raizel Kaidish, argued with her friend that she, Raizel, should go instead. She would tell the Germans there had been a mistake, and when they saw how strong and fit for work she was, it would be all right. Someone informed on the girls and they were both gassed. The informer was rewarded with Raizel's kitchen job (227).

The short story is then structured along two parallel narrative lines: a psychological line and a philosophical line. Rose's mother has two objectives: to commemorate Raizel Kaidish and to recreate her in the body of Rose, on the one hand, and to teach Rose the moral framework learned by her mother in Buchenwald, on the other. In the process, Rose is traumatized by the dissociation of her individual personality from her physical body, which exists to compensate for Raizel Kaidish. She wonders "And I? How did I feel about my intensive moral upbringing? The object of so much attention, of all the pedagogical theorizing, the fights in the night: I felt ignored, unloved, of no significance" (234). Outraged by the continuously rejected need for unconditional love and acceptance for just being her mother's daughter and not a stand-in for Raizel, Rose fantasizes of having another family, "with parents who were frivolously pursuing happiness, and didn't have numbers burned into their arms."

Contemplating her own desire for a child, Rose reaches the conclusion that the child should be loved for its own sake and not regarded as a living memorial to high moral principles.

As Rose grows up, she learns more about her mother's passion for philosophy and her particular preference for Kantian ethics. Her mother's philosophical position is rigid and inflexible, insistent on the existence of absolute goodness and absolute badness. While in normal circumstances most people exhibit a mixture of the two, according to Rose's mother, under duress, one finds only "very great badness and very great goodness." Thus in her tales about the camps, there were "only saints and sinners, heroes and villains." Going off to college, Rose is adamant about becoming a philosophy major and seeing for herself the merits of the positivists whom her mother calls "Nazis." Rebelling against her mother's philosophy, Rose becomes a positivist, convinced of the absence of absolute values and the impossibility of finding criteria for determining the validity of ethical judgments. Not siding with either position, Goldstein traces the argument between the "absolutist" mother and the "relativist" daughter until it comes to a resolution at the very end of the story when on her deathbed Rose's mother confesses that it was she who informed on Raizel Kaidish. Only then does the reader realize the significance of the mother's insistence on absolute goodness and absolute badness. From the point of view of positivist philosophy, human behavior and ethical frameworks are often relative and dependent on varying circumstances. Conversely, Rose's mother believed that "the ethical view is the impersonal view" and that "one is morally obliged to look at the situation without regard for one's identity in it" (231). Thus she never allowed herself the luxury of excusing her behavior and the perceived failure of morality by the severe circumstances of the death camp. Instead, she lived all her life with a full realization that she was the embodiment of absolute badness.

"The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish" is a fictional account of the postwar life of Holocaust survivors. As in *The Mind-Body Problem,* the short story continues to discuss the question raised by Renee's recollections of her father. Who is really good? Does the struggle forge one's rectitude and high moral level? With eloquence and graceful descriptive power, Goldstein elevates the Holocaust to the level of the ultimate struggle and examines the moral and philosophical framework that results from the experience. In fact, "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish" is not the only work in which Goldstein explores these issues. In *The Mind-Body Problem,* while on their honeymoon, Renee and Noam go to Europe. In Hungary, abandoned by her husband, Renee wanders

through Budapest until she encounters a building decorated with Jewish stars. There she meets two survivors of the camps: a dwarf, subject of medical experiments, and an old woman with a disfigured face. Renee's experiences in Budapest are tied to the ever-present issue of the mind-body problem. As Susanne Klingenstein observes, "What the museum, the cemetery, the encounter with the two survivors signify is the irreplaceability of those murdered in the Shoah" (558).

In this instance, Goldstein approaches the Holocaust from a philosophical perspective. The mind-body problem plays itself out through the presence of a cultural and mental void that resulted from the physical annihilation of human bodies. Unlike Noam who believes in the independent existence of the soul and disregards the historical here and now, Renee is particularly attuned to the void left by the murdered Hungarian Jews, and her own self is changed as a result of the encounter with the void.

At the intersection of the present realities of American Jewish life and the millennia of Jewish sensibilities, Goldstein creates a new combination of a complex and multifaceted persona: the Intellectual Jewish Woman. As S. Lillian Kremer observes, "Intelligent, assertive women are the protagonists in short stories and novels celebrating the enormous changes achieved in recent decades in American women's lives. . . .Jewish feminists delineate women who are generally mute on shopping and cooking, but vocal about religious ambivalence and spiritual seeking; intelligent, Jewishly and secularly educated, at ease with Judaica and Western high culture" (75).

This type of an Intellectual Jewish Woman is the central protagonist of *The Mind-Body Problem, Strange Attractors,* and *Mazel.* Renee, Rachel, and Phoebe, as well as other female characters, are rarely, if ever, portrayed in a domestic setting. Instead, their lives revolve around their careers, intellectual achievements, and their relationship with their Jewish heritage. As the characters experiment with what aspects of Judaism they wish to follow or which ways of relating to their heritage suit them best in their search for spiritual fulfillment, Goldstein allows us to see the enormous range of possibilities available within the realm of Jewish culture.

We see this range of possibilities dramatized in Goldstein's critically acclaimed novel, *Mazel.* The novel has a scrambled chronology, as well as intertwining parallel plots involving Shluftchev (a Galician shtetl) and Lipton (an American shtetl). The novel's framing narrative, a Yiddish folktale about a contest of *seichel* (brains) and *mazel* (luck), echoes the characters' life stories amplifying the importance

of random luck, destiny, and uncanny coincidences in a person's life. Through the juxtaposition of Lipton (allusion to Teaneck, New Jersey) with the flashbacks of a tiny backwater sleepy shtetl of Shluftchev in Galicia (*shluf* in Yiddish means "to sleep"), Goldstein introduces us to *Mazel*'s protagonist, an energetic, clever, and feisty girl, Sasha, along with her hardworking wife-of-a-scholar mother, Leiba, and sensitive and imaginative sister, Fraydel. The story of Fraydel constitutes a link in the chain of Goldstein's portrayals of tragically misunderstood artistic women as Fraydel is destined to be rejected by society, her creativity and imagination enjoying no appreciation or acknowledgment.

Mazel is the first of Goldstein's novels where, in addition to the theme of intellectual Jewish women, she develops in great detail the theme of East European Jewish civilization. There is no critical consensus on the extent of Goldstein's achievement in engaging the East European theme. While some critics (including the present writer) consider Goldstein's treatment of the East European Jewish life to be a very significant development in contemporary American Jewish fiction, others believe that her portrayal of that world is overly nostalgic, superficial, and greatly dependent on Yiddish classics. The *New York Times* reviewer observes in regard to Goldstein's recreations of Eastern Europe: "Narrated in a tedious singsong cadence and dosed with saccharine nostalgia, this section introduces Sasha's saintly and pious parents, wallows in the mud of quaint rural poverty and subjects the reader to didactic lessons in ritual Judaism" (Dickstein, 54). It is worth pointing out that while Goldstein shares the nostalgia for the vanished East European shtetl with Sholem Aleichem and I. B. Singer, she succeeds, like them, in portraying its weaknesses as well as its strengths. Furthermore, the literary devices that Goldstein employs in order to recreate the atmosphere of a world she has only read about are indicative of the ambivalence she feels toward her Jewishness. On the one hand, Goldstein presents a vibrant feminist critique of the shtetl world, presenting a plethora of female characters who range in their attitudes from complete acceptance of male intellectual and religious supremacy to insistence on social change. On the other hand, Goldstein's choice of literary precursors shows her erudition as well as her love for Jewish literature.

Goldstein's literary shtetl, Shluftchev on the Puddle, is a synthetic creation, much like Sholem Aleichem's Kasrilovke. It has all the attributes of a literary shtetl: pious, closely knit Jewish community, wise and studious rabbi, his hardworking Aishet Chayil of a wife, and of course the familiar landscape. The shtetl has a number of

muddy streets, low wooden houses, forest and meadows that surround it, and the eponymous puddle. Yet in spite of all the warmth Goldstein reserves for the almost magical world of the shtetl, her protagonist, Sasha Saunders, breaks off and escapes her native shtetl "made unbreathable by piety and ritual," taking "no small pleasure in breaking the tiresome taboos with as much noise and commotion as she could muster" (19). Goldstein does not seem to make an effort to reconcile Sasha's rebellious feminism with her Jewishness. Instead, she includes them in her fiction as two equally important forces. The dynamics of the relationship between Judaism and feminism against the backdrop of a reimagined world of East European Jewish civilization give Goldstein's narrative its unique quality.

Goldstein uses a number of literary devices to convey the vitality of East European Jewish life. Yiddish and Hebrew phrases as well as kabbalistic terminology are used to simulate a Jewish linguistic milieu. A variety of Talmudic pronouncements are integrated into the narrative where they coexist with the notions of Jewish mysticism and with the East European Yiddish folklore. In this context, Goldstein's borrowings from and allusions to a variety of authors are revealing of her technique. Having been born in America in the second half of the twentieth century precluded Goldstein from gaining any firsthand experience of East European Jewish civilization. Thus she treats Jewish literature as a vast repository of collective memory for the later generations to draw upon. It is even possible to say that borrowing from the prewar Jewish literature is an existential condition of any contemporary Jewish author who wishes to write about the world of Eastern Europe. Of particular interest to us in this context are Goldstein's allusions to S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* (1926). There are at least three levels to Goldstein's text: the level of the narrative, that is, the third-person account of the Sonnenberg family life in Shluftchev; the level of the story, that is, the way this retrospective account fits into the larger framework of Sasha's life; and the level of intertextual allusions, that is, a parallel narrative borrowed from Ansky that introduces the supernatural and the elements of Yiddish folklore. These three levels interact and overlap, creating an intricate textual fabric in which the materials borrowed from collective memory intertwine with Goldstein's imaginative recapturing of the lost world of Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe.

Goldstein is highly aware of the loss suffered by the East European Jewish civilization during the Holocaust, which even seems to balance out some of her sharp and pointed criticism of traditional Jewish life centered on religion and male scholasticism. There exists an unresolved

tension perceptible throughout *Mazel*. On the one hand, the contemporary American part of the novel is all about intellectual Jewish women and their struggle with religious and cultural heritage. On the other hand, the prewar East European part of the novel subtly depicts the subservient position of women and the prejudice directed at them by the intellectual male piety. And yet Phoebe yearns to return to traditional Judaism hoping to find the spiritual fulfillment she seeks without losing her status or her independence. Goldstein's own view of her character presents only one out of many possible perspectives. In her answer to my question about the nature of Phoebe's character, Rebecca Goldstein underscored the importance of community.

> Phoebe is not a strong woman. Phoebe . . . to me she is very much a child-woman. I don't know if people would want to take her as a role model for someone, you know, who was able to reconcile all these different worlds. You know, she . . . she wasn't . . . she is a weak person and this [Lipton Modern Orthodox community] was a haven for her, a kind of refuge for her. She is not a worldly person, not a savvy person. There was a kind of nurturance from the community that she found here. But she is not any stupider for it and she continues to do her work.
>
> There is something, sort of beauty, you know, in this ruthless society we live in, a real community of people who care for each other. Jewish life is communal life Phoebe locates this and it answers something in her, as it does for many, many people. (Personal interview, November 9, 2000)

The emphasis is put on Phoebe's weakness and the need for a safety net rather than on her strength of character. Goldstein views Phoebe as someone who desires "to pad life with community" against the negative things that may happen. However, for Phoebe, Jewish community is more than a supportive, nurturing environment; it is also the source of shared culture and religious inspiration that gives her a new sense of belonging. While contemplating the nature of Phoebe's oversensitivity, her grandmother Sasha never considers Judaism a viable option: "A soul without a skin, without a skin. How can I keep the world from flaying her raw?" (17). Sasha further introduces ambivalence into the notion of communal comfort as she observes how happy Phoebe is with her new family in Lipton:

> Snuggled up together here, Phoebe and Jason can convince themselves, in these closing years of the twentieth century, that it's the outside world that's warped and unreal. Together, they've taken the

> stuff of chaos and tried to give it the texture of coziness. Did they really imagine that they had managed to insulate themselves, in those indistinguishable split-levels, from the slings and arrows of outrageous mazel? (40–41)

It is, in fact, mazel—the unpredictable force of connection and reconnection in the universe—that seems to account for Phoebe's "irrational" happiness, her newly blossoming sense of womanhood, and her insistence on removing the family's Jewish past from the level of mythology (336). There is much more that we can understand from Phoebe's return to Judaism than the desire to avoid facing the cruel reality of the real world. Being observant gives structure to Phoebe's life and her spiritual life transcends the dimensions of purely scientific thought. Phoebe's quest for "the meaning of life" resonates throughout the novel as we follow various characters on their quest to balance the Jewish and non-Jewish aspects of their lives.

Through the difficult years after World War I, in a Yiddish art theater in Warsaw, in Palestine, and finally in New York, Sasha remains the most powerful female character in the book. And yet, it is the present-day life of her academician daughter, Chloe, and granddaughter, Phoebe, in Lipton, New Jersey, that reawakens Sasha's memories of Eastern Europe and her need to reflect on the essence of her feminist Jewishness. Phoebe, a tenured Princeton professor of mathematics specializing in the geometry of soap bubbles, turns her life around by marrying Jason from a Modern Orthodox family and adopting the ways of traditional Judaism. Phoebe calls herself Orthodox, but Goldstein is quick to point out that Orthodox is "an unfortunate term" for "a rather large range of value systems lumped under the rubric of that one word" (332). In fact, it is definitely to Goldstein's credit that she faces the challenge of presenting a positive portrayal of a young Orthodox couple: they are truly in love, they share their values, interests, heritage, and spirituality, and they have managed to establish an egalitarian relationship. Together with Sasha, the reader must reflect upon the multiple sources of this renewed interest in Jewish tradition and religion on the part of Phoebe, a contemporary Jewish woman from Manhattan.

Sasha is intolerant of Lipton which she considers to be "Shluftchev with a designer label," a place that "manages to combine all the banality of suburbia with a few flourishes on the hideous all its own" (6). Sasha hates Lipton precisely because it reminds her of "Shluftchev on the Puddle, where she had been born Sorel Sonnenberg" and of the JAP (Jewish American Princess)-like consumerism; instead she loves the vibrant, pulsating culture of Manhattan where "she had hardly

felt herself to be an immigrant"—"This was exile? From what? From Poland? Sasha has decided, from the very start, that somehow or other she was born a New Yorker" (7). Sasha's daughter, Chloe, a professor of classics at Columbia University, also lives in Manhattan, but is more tolerant of the Lipton Jewish community. A character full of perplexities, Chloe embodies the dilemmas addressed in *The Mind-Body Problem*. Like Ava, one of the female characters in *The Mind-Body Problem* who intentionally makes herself androgynous and ugly ("because feminine is dumb" [194]) in order to be taken seriously in the male-centered world of academia, Chloe suppresses the outward expression of her femininity. Immersed in intellectual work, Chloe and Phoebe are "women without any detectable vanity" who take two different routes to achieve romantic fulfillment. As Phoebe begins to regard her desire for love in Jewish terms—such as *basheert* (fate) and mazel—her view of love acquires cosmic dimensions and enters the realm of destiny. Things Jewish begin to be associated with the truly romantic, while Chloe's involvement with Oliver Crittendon becomes the epitome of what is not basheert, not Jewish, not a true love. Goldstein portrays Phoebe and Jason as two people who come to consider themselves soul mates, people for whom a divine decree has promised an eternity of happiness together. In so doing, she introduces a new unknown into her equation of mazel: an element of romantic love and true happiness possible within the deep roots of Judaism.

Why does Phoebe, an intellectual Jewish woman, choose to return to the world of traditional Judaism? If Sasha took her Jewishness for granted as a result of being raised in the traditional Jewish home of a Talmudic scholar in the shtetl of Shluftchev, Chloe was brought up with very little Jewish knowledge. "Chloe was a pagan at heart. The secret of Chloe's inspired scholarship was that she loved those pre-Christian Greeks of hers so well that their passions were her passions, their gods and goddesses her own" (33). Thus, as a truly free-spirited American academician who came of age during the upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, Chloe did not give Phoebe any Jewish education. Instead, the hours of play were filled with reenactments of classical Greek drama. Chloe's enthused presentation of Bacchanalias and Apollonian cults stands out in sharp contrast to the absence of any Jewish content to the mother-daughter play. Chloe is never portrayed reenacting a *Purimspiel* (Purim play) or introducing her daughter to anything Jewish. Thus, Chloe's failure to create a positive Jewish atmosphere may be one of the factors contributing to Phoebe's interest in Judaism.

The dichotomy of universal humanism of the Greeks (championed by Chloe) vs particularistic Judaism is reflected in the relationship between

Sasha, Chloe, and Phoebe as well as in the family history in Warsaw. For Goldstein, the juxtaposition between the shtetl of Shluftchev and the capital city of Warsaw is symbolic of the contrast not only between the rural and urban landscape, but also of their different lifestyles and different philosophies of living. Goldstein indirectly portrays Warsaw from a variety of perspectives. The third-person narrator seamlessly merges into the characters, allowing us to see the city through their eyes. For example, in spite of his lifelong pursuit of sacred study, Sasha's father, Nachum Sonnenberg, "began to pay very close attention to the people around him, he saw, with great astonishment, how different a world it was, depending on who was looking at it, and when" (166). This is the crucial point in the narrative structure as we can follow several intertwining and overlapping perspectives on the issues of assimilation and retention of Jewish heritage.

Nachum's view of the pulsating, rushing, Jewish metropolis is especially significant since he is the male voice of tradition, a person whose shtetl mentality has not entirely adapted to the new life in a big city. Nonetheless, Nachum makes a conscious effort to understand the people around him in light of his Talmudic knowledge and his high ethical standards. Although initially critical of emancipated Jews who do not observe the daily rituals, attend theatric performances, and follow the Gentile lifestyle, Nachum grows progressively more accepting of his emancipated relatives who prove to be kind, caring, and loving people. Aunt Fruma (Frieda) and Uncle Chayim (Heinrich) are not only wealthy Jews enjoying the rapid pace of Warsaw's social life, but they are also very decent people supportive of the Sonnenbergs and utterly committed to their well-being. Nachum's perspective on life in Warsaw reveals a new philosophy of life he is forced to discover: Jews who are no longer pious can still be very good people. Underlying the gap between the shtetl stifled by conventions and traditionalism and the big city where people are free to follow their own hearts, Nachum's changing views of Warsaw Jews are symbolic of the characters' evolution from the insular and antiquated world of the shtetl to the modern world of European culture. It is with Nachum and his portrayals of Warsaw and its Jews that Goldstein starts developing one of the central themes of the novel: the pull of two opposing forces—the forces of assimilation and the forces of reaffirmation.

Gradually, Goldstein leads readers on the path of Sasha's life through her stardom at the Bilbul Art Theater and her involvement in the artistic life of Jewish Warsaw. That is when Sasha meets the Saunders brothers, Jasha and Maurice. While Maurice and his adventures receive much attention later in the novel, in the chapters devoted

to Warsaw, it is Jasha who is the focus of Goldstein's scrutiny. Counting on readers' knowledge of the Holocaust, Goldstein presents Jasha's ambitions at becoming a Polish or even European musician as an illusion of assimilation. Jasha's utter disregard for his Jewishness is expressed in his contempt for Zionism and Bundism as separatist ideologies based on fantasies of Jewish brotherhood, Jewish homeland, and a history of persecutions. On the eve of the Holocaust, Jasha believes that "the world at large, or at least enough of it, had freed itself from the steel-trap dogmas and pieties of the past, so that there was room at last to enter: without conversion, without hysteria and martyrdom and guilt; with nothing but one's faith in man's perfectibility and reason" (222). In her portrayal of Polish Jewish artists and intellectuals before the war, Goldstein's goal is twofold: first, she strives to create a panoramic view of Jewish life in Warsaw in historical context; second, she establishes a parallel with contemporary American illusions of assimilation and acceptance portrayed in the New Jersey chapters of the novel. The fate of European Jewry, its range of characters from nationalists to assimilationists, its hopes for integration and emancipation—all destroyed by the Holocaust—function as a foundation and a background for Phoebe's decision to renew her commitment to Judaism.

Phoebe's search for her roots instills a desire to discover whether her father, an Englishman she never met named Oliver Crittendon, was Jewish. Likewise, Phoebe's desire to marry an observant Jewish boy baffles Chloe: "Phoebe had found something here that she loved, and Chloe was trying her damnedest to see what it might be, if only for the sake of understanding her daughter" (332), and later, "Up until almost a year ago, when Phoebe had made her startling announcement that she had begun to keep kosher, being Jewish had seemed to Chloe to be nothing more than an incidental feature of both her own and her daughter's biography" (335). The reader searches for the answers together with Sasha and Chloe and, once considered, the multiplicity of possible answers is surprising. Maybe it is the general abandonment of the melting pot theory and the celebration of individual ethnic differences. Maybe it is a personal quest for the spiritual and the mystical in the cold world of high social expectations. Unlike Sasha who witnessed the decay and backwardness of Jewish orthodoxy in Eastern Europe, Phoebe finds the ceremonial and mystical aspects of Judaism as well as the tightly knit community to be fascinating. Even her mother, Chloe, falls under the spell of religious epiphany when during a synagogue service she feels "a spine-tingling awe, the sense that one was tapping into rituals that, despite any

modern accretions along the way . . . reached far back into something authentically ancient and therefore thrilling" (330).

An opportunity to tap into the ancient Jewish core proves to be a powerful incentive for a spiritual seeker such as Phoebe. When Sasha expresses her dissatisfaction with Phoebe's decision to keep kosher ("You're an educated woman! A professor! Why would you want to start up all over again with those old ways?" [338]), Phoebe answers her grandmother metaphorically. As in a story she heard many times during her childhood about a dead man, a Cohen who married a divorced woman and was consequently buried outside the Jewish cemetery, Phoebe longs to be back with her people, to gain access to the comfort of three millennia of Jewish continuity. This notion is underscored by Goldstein's introduction of East European Jewish culture as the framework for understanding the struggle between the forces of assimilation and the pull of heritage. An imaginative recreation of the East European Jewish past and the engagement of classical Yiddish fiction may be Goldstein's literary strategy to convey the renewed turn toward reaffirmation.

For Goldstein, Phoebe's desire to find a comfortable balance between universal and Judaic components is indicative of the change the American Jewish community had undergone in the 1980s and 1990s. While the older generation—Sasha and her husband Maurice—lost their families in the Holocaust and had themselves "lived through extraordinary events, largely because they had been born into a Europe in which being Jewish was no incidental feature in a person's biography" (335), Chloe and Phoebe had only a vague sense of being Jewish. Things changed within Phoebe and she started reconnecting with her heritage, seeking to acquire an organically integrated personality. The evolution of Phoebe's character is the focus of Goldstein's attention, and to document and to understand it is her goal.

Goldstein lends part of her defiant, fiery nature to her female characters making them echo each other across the entirety of her fiction. Her novels are about women's lives, and to the same extent they are also about a profound life of intellectual excitement and variegated types of Jewish identity. Renee, Ava, Hedda, Sasha, Chloe, and Phoebe are a group of vivid and memorable female characters. The introspective examination of the self, the search for spirituality, and the pursuit of intellectual fulfillment are aspects of a new type of female Jewish protagonist. The complexity of contemporary fiction written by American Jewish women writers shows conscious attempts to countervail a variety of preconceived notions and harmful stereotypes. In personal

reflections, Rebecca Goldstein discussed her focus on intricate characterization, tensions, and ambivalence:

> Mostly my characters grow with an organic life of their own, a lot is on an unconscious level. I do have a desire in a non-coercive way to show the complexity and the inner contradictions of the human mind. I feel positively towards Judaism, and I do want to project a positive image of Judaism and the Jewish people. To do justice to the complexity of women and to the subtlety of Judaism, rendering a nuanced portrait is very important. (Personal interview, November 3, 1999)

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10

Kei'tsad Mirakdim Lifnei HaKalah: How Do You Dance before the Bride?

Miriyam Glazer

How do you dance before the bride? The school of Shammai says, [you describe her]"just as she is." The school of Hillel says,[no matter what she looks like, you say] "What a lovely and charming bride!"

Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 16b–17a

I. Smolenskin Street: September

Like a willing hand into a soft kidskin glove the hue of the stones, of the Judaean wilderness itself. Maybe because I brought so few things with me from my life in Santa Monica. Is it real, or only a dream? From the moment I moved into this little studio on Smolenskin Street, on the edge of Rehavia, in the heart of Jerusalem, the last 20-odd years of my life seemed to dissolve. I eased back into the life of the city I once lived in, California—framed photos of my daughter, a single shelf of books—it was hard to hold onto the knowledge that I had been living that life at all. Or perhaps, despite my hesitation about returning to live here. Despite my years of bias against this city in favor of less history-haunted Tel Aviv, as soon as I moved back to Jerusalem I began to sense that my soul had never really left at all.

One of my students at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, where I've been teaching these last 14 years, has an explanation for holes in time like the one I'm feeling now. When she suddenly realizes she's driven way beyond her exit on the freeway oblivious of having passed it at all, it's because, she says, somewhere on the road she was kidnapped by aliens who then returned her to the planet miles away. I believe her now. Two decades ago, when I lived just a few blocks away from my Smolenskin Street studio, the same aliens kidnapped me.

Which is real, which the dream? The scents of rosemary and lavender that fill the air here, the way the rays of light shine fiercely across the sky from behind the afternoon clouds, the elusive breeze that seems omnipresent, and the stones, the endless stones! are more than beautiful to me. Early every morning and just as evening is about to fall, the ache comes upon me to walk up and down the hills of the city for hours, in and out of the half-hidden side streets, through parks of olive trees, old neighborhoods crowded with *shtiebls,* tiny old grocery shops, and thick bougainvillea. *You and me, Jerusalem, you and me.*

On the other hand: I have rejoiced in the lush white fog that masks the high palisade along the Santa Monica coast in early mornings; in the way only the light alters—and that, subtly so—to mark a change in the Southern Californian seasons; in the sudden flowering of the outlandishly purple jacaranda trees in May; the thick groves of sycamores in the canyons, the lavish exuberance of the red sunsets that paint the sky over the Pacific. But now I wonder—did I ever claim that landscape as mine? From the perspective of *here,* it feels as if I was only a tourist *there*. In fact, only when my friend Susan Suntree taught me that the canyons and hillsides—even the campus of the local high school—were Native American sacred sites; that under the malls and mansions of Hollywood, Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, Venice, Malibu, the endless suburban stretches of the San Fernando Valley, was a now hidden land that an ancient people had held holy, did I really find myself drawn in to the landscape of Los Angeles at all. Ah, it too was an earth filled with mana. It too had once been a holy land.

But not my *holy land*.

Living in Santa Monica, I began to believe that that did not really matter. Beauty is beauty. I felt lucky to live in the heart of it. Those jacarandas! Back there, I have an engaging job teaching and writing, a spacious home, and a rich life. It's a great climate. My daughter's happy, productive life is taking off in the film world of New York. I speak to her at least once or twice a week. My neighbors are warm and friendly. I entertain and am entertained. My colleagues are decent, my friends loving. The rabbis around are wonderful: several

are brilliant, inspiring; their words make my eyes tear and my spirit soar. I belong to a funky, friendly, synagogue in Venice—we daven together from the heart.

Before I came back to Jerusalem, I thought—more or less—that I finally had my life figured out. I thought, yes, I know who I am. Yes, I know what I want. And at this stage of my life, after years of searching, I know at last how I need and want to be Jewish. I know now how to celebrate my Jewishness. I finally found my own answer to the question the rabbis of the Talmud asked: *Kei'tsad mirakdim lifnei haKalah?—How do you dance before the bride?*

At least that is what I thought.

II. 141 Beach 136 Street

Why, anyway, does one *need* a holy land? Why do I?

I grew up on the Atlantic coast. Literally. Our old, brown-shingled, four-story house was right next to the beach when we moved there, and only two houses away after the lots next door to us were sold. Those eternal waves: no matter what was going on in our lives—whether my sisters and I were arguing with one another or playing blissfully together, whether it was winter or summer or fall—we could hear the ebb and flow of the ocean, the crashing of the waves. This was the postwar, GI Bill, one nation "under God" America of possibility; the sea that stretched to shining sea was right at our doorstep; the great promise of the country, which my parents, children of immigrants raised in poverty, were themselves living, began *here. Shed His Grace on Thee! Crown thy good with brotherhood!* Live lives with purpose, meaning, ideals as beyond the self as the ocean's relentless waves are beyond the ordinary, the everyday. Though there were take-cover drills at school, an Iron Curtain dividing Europe, *the house I live in, the plot of earth, the street,* that Frank Sinatra sang about in the black-and-white film they showed us at school every Brotherhood Week, *all races, all religions,* was *America to me. Give me some men who are stout-hearted men, who will fight for the rights they adore!* The presence of that grand ocean was counterpoint to everything, everything.

As a little girl, I was so filled with feeling, my cup ran over. Where could I express it? What form, what medium, could contain it? What could I find in the world that seemed at one with it, seemed to understand it? So every Shabbat morning I put on my hat, because in those days hats were de rigueur for little girls whenever they went Somewhere Special, and I strode alone and purposively along

Rockaway Beach Boulevard to the Temple on Beach 121st Street for Junior Congregation. We children all chanted the service together, and I exulted in the exuberance of our collective prayer, in the Hebrew that caressed my throat and my tongue into making sounds both earthier and beyond what English ever asked of me. Like the child Ursula Brangwen in her Sunday world, I was enthralled by the presence of the sacred. The unrolling of the Torah scroll, the chanting, the explanations of the *parshat hashavuah,* the Torah portion of the week, filled me with wonder and joy. I loved the learning. During the children's service in that bare basement room with worn-out leather and wood seats, I felt as if I could dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

It still puzzles me profoundly that I didn't catch on earlier. It certainly wasn't a secret. After all, there came a time in Hebrew school when the boys and girls were separated: boys went to bar mitzvah classes, girls to confirmation. I don't remember caring about or even questioning the division; this was years before the women's movement: who ever used the word "gender"? We girls carefully copied down all the rules they taught us about having a kosher kitchen. We devotedly practiced our confirmation cantata. The Jewish boys of Belle Harbor, New York, might be learning Torah, might be encouraged to go on to further studies in Judaism, might even be urged to become rabbis. But in our white confirmation robes, en route to our intended destiny as Women of Valor in Kosher Kitchens, we girls stood on the pulpit of the synagogue between the Israeli and United States flags, and sang of America's blessing of Jews: *"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."*

So how is it possible that I, the smartest or maybe the next-to-smartest kid in Hebrew school, was so shocked, so bewildered, at "Teenage Services" the following fall when our Hebrew school principal went around the chapel to see if we had a minyan and failed to count me? Whatever had made me assume that I *would* be counted? How had I managed to avoid hearing the school's most important message of all? I nearly ran all the way home that Shabbat, and cried that I was finished with Judaism—finished, really, with my home town community—and never wanted to step into a synagogue again.

III. "ALL I'M SAYING, MR. TSURIS, IS CHANGE YOUR CLOTHES."

There was no ocean in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

When I was 16, my father drove us the 600 miles from the coastal town of Belle Harbor, New York, through the twists and turns of the

old Route 66 and the coal town of Wheeling, West Virginia, to the green fields of southwestern Ohio and finally to rural Yellow Springs. I thought I was leaving the past entirely by going "out west." I was certainly going into unknown territory, into an entirely different America.

Back in New York, the world had seemed to be either Jewish or Catholic, from Eastern Europe or Puerto Rico, either Black, Italian, or Irish; when had I ever encountered WASPS? But Yellow Springs was redneck country, close to the Mason-Dixon Line and the Ku Klux Klan counties of Indiana. It was a Southern town whose one cinema had only recently been desegregated; when our Antioch College class of '66 arrived on campus, Mr. Gegner, who owned a barbershop on the main street, was still refusing to cut "Negro hair." Venturing into nearby Xenia or Dayton, I was acutely, uncomfortably, self-conscious about my black hair and dark olive skin.

Yet Yellow Springs had also been a station on the Underground Railroad, thanks to the Society of Friends whose descendants, and those of the runaway slaves, were still a strong presence. And, of course, the village was home to leftist, eccentrically innovative Antioch, where many students had grown up as "red diaper babies" and more than one politically persecuted professor had found refuge. But I had never *heard* of "red diaper babies" before I got there. I had never even heard of Woodie Guthrie or Pete Seeger. Belle Harbor girls sang "Earth Angel" and "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?"—*Run run. Rundy rundy papa do run dun, rundy rundy papa do*—on the bus to Far Rockaway High School. My father owned a hardware store on Howard Avenue in Brownsville, Brooklyn, with his older brother Sol. What did I know, at 16, of labor unions, the class struggle, or why Michael rowed his boat ashore?

Culture shock for me—a world I had never known before, a narrative of American history I had never heard before, an antibourgeois, workers-unite, defiant world that both attracted and scared me. "Stay away from the boys with the beards!" my father urged me when he dropped me off on campus. Before long, I wasn't sure of where or who I was in the American story or what the American story really was, where my family was, and very quickly I was not sure of what to believe in. I knew only that I wanted, terribly, to belong. I packed away my white A & S blouse with the Peter Pan collar, put on a black turtleneck, and bought a carton of Marlboros at the campus bookstore.

And I went out to meet those boys with the beards.

The civil rights issue was flaming on campus. We demonstrated against Mr. Gegner. We sang "We Shall Overcome" at the March

on Washington, wept and locked arms around the reflecting pool as Martin Luther King called out for all time that *Justice will flow as a mighty stream*. But instead of justice came the calamity of the John Kennedy assassination, the disintegration of the "Great Society," the Vietnam "teach-ins," and soon the moral-less compulsive fascination with High Camp and the no-music music of John Cage. We rejected meaning for the dictum that we were now "Against Interpretation," and published little magazines declaring that the written word was dead, content irrelevant, and only the "medium" the "message." We photocopied our asses on the startling, newfangled, Xerox machines and played with fonts on the new IBMs. The age of Artaud and the "Theatre of Cruelty" was upon us, of Peter Brook's anti-tragic, absurdist *King Lear,* Laing's *Politics of Experience. Turn on, tune in, drop out*. So many of my fellow students did just that, and landed up wandering the streets, their brains burned.

Only years after my graduation did I realize that though a heavy percentage of the students, and most of the activists on the Antioch College campus, were Jews, the "J" word had been a no-no. You could be a Quaker, Unitarian, an ally of the Catholic Workers; you could be an atheist "of Jewish origin," but subtly, nonverbally, you soon realized that in the antiestablishment culture of Antioch it was terribly gauche to be too jewery. The only holy land was social upheaval and political liberation. If its battlecry was from Isaiah—*Let the oppressed go free . . . share your bread with the hungry*—it was Isaiah the "Old Testament prophet," certainly not the *Jew.* Nobody at Antioch would have dreamt of getting a perky nose job or dying their hair WASP blond, but in Yellow Springs, Ohio, no less than in Philip Roth's upper middle-class suburb of "Woodenton" in "Eli the Fanatic," if you were too jewey a Jew, the clear message was "change your clothes."

Not that I *wanted* to be too Jewish. Oh no, not anymore. I was so relieved to be rid of Belle Harbor. I bought the new clothes of the culture, time, and place; learned the folksongs, grew my hair long, ate bacon and eggs, and tried, hard, to believe and to belong. It confused me that the literature professor whose classes I most adored because he relentlessly demanded that we ferret out a work's "basic assumptions," was a Jew. That the critics who wrote what I most wanted to read—Morris Abrams, Harold Bloom, Lionel Trilling—were, every one of them, Jews. Like many eager Jewish intellectuals before the age of identity politics, I swallowed my humiliation at the portrayal of Fagin, Shylock, Bleistein. I ignored Charlotte Bronte's slurs against Jews. Jewish was embarrassing: I would have choked to death rather than be caught saying "Lawn Guyland."

I might have lived most of my life as a Jew wary of ever being thought too Jewish—a "marrano" in the sense Elaine Marks has written of—but something happened to an older sister, and as a consequence to me, that changed both of our lives forever. On a lazy, Shabbat afternoon just a few weeks ago in Jerusalem, I heard my sister tell the story, and its details were different from the version that I had often told, which in turn was a version based on an earlier version I had been sure she told, and it was different, too, from the version that I had heard my mother recently tell. Interesting. Still, the versions differ only in the way the events actually unfolded—who said what to whom. And in all the versions, there was a moment of revelation, a moment that changed everything that came later.

The heart of the story is that the summer after my sister finished four troubled years at what was then an insidiously anti-Semitic Smith College, she went to Europe, and then to Israel, and one afternoon in Jerusalem she went to see Mount Herzl. The Israeli writer Yehudit Hendel has called Mount Herzl *the Mountain of Losses;* soldiers killed in the wars are buried there in graves that look more like lovingly tended, intimate, gardens, each about the size of a coffin. My sister read the names and ages on the small headstones and realized, of course, that many of the soldiers buried there had been just her age, even younger, when they were killed. *What am* I *doing with my life?* she told me she asked herself in the silence of the mountain of losses. And then out of that silence a voice called to her and told her she had to return here. A heavenly voice. A *bat kol.*

So she did. Israel was 16 years old, and my sister Alyne was about 22, when she left the States to learn Hebrew on Kibbutz Ein Hashofet, in the hills of Menashe, about 20 miles from Haifa. And that is where our stories intersected, for just as Alyne was beginning her new life in Israel, I was trying to delay my graduation from college. I signed up for what Antioch called "Travel Credit," sailed on the Greek ship Olympia *Olympia* headed for Europe, and discovered a fellow Antiochian aboard. Les was en route to Jerusalem to figure out whether he was a gay dancer or a straight Jewish painter. I didn't like traveling alone, so instead of disembarking at Naples, I went to the bursar's office, changed my ticket, and decided to join him.

If you never saw it for yourself, you must try to imagine the Jerusalem of those days. Though Jerusalem is still one of the poorest cities in Israel, perhaps, even, the poorest, how much stranger, and even poorer, it was then than it is today. The city felt truncated, suffocated, hemmed in. The Mandelbaum Gate seemed like a gag. "Danger! Frontier Ahead!" signs screamed their warnings if you

walked too far in any direction. The Jordanian army patrolled the walls of the Old City. On the edge of Jaffa Road, the Barclays Bank was pockmarked by gunshots. Hovering over the Valley of Gehenna, on the perilous border between Jordan and Israel, the neighborhood of Yemin Moshe, now a yuppified, elegant, area for affluent Anglos, was a Yemenite slum of stone hovels. A barbed wire fence surrounded outlying Talpiot. Most of the city seemed to me like a sleepy, dusty, Middle-Eastern version of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Les found a little stone hut in the poor area called the "Nachlaot," and while he hunkered down to search for his destiny, I hitchhiked north, determined to find my sister on Kibbutz Ein Hashofet.

I looked at the Ein Hashofet website the other day: the glamorous, countryclubby pool, the specialized far-flung industries, the sense of well-being, even affluence. How ancient I felt as I gazed at those photos—like a relic from another era, really, one of those people who either fascinate or bore others to tears when, oozing nostalgia, eyes gazing off to the far horizon, they murmur, "I remember when . . . " Well, I *do* remember when—especially because the idealism infused into every cranny of the then bare-bones life of Ein Hashofet had such a profound influence on me in the months that followed.

There was definitely no pool. There was one factory—producing nails. Most of the kibbutz was agricultural—citrus fruits, wheat. Poultry. For breakfast you chose between an egg or a piece of halvah—unless you had been up since five in the morning, washing the kitchen and dining hall floors, in which case you had the luxury of a *havitah,* a fried egg. I had never before eaten a dinner of chicken *pupiks,* or a main course of white meat balls—white, because they were mostly bread. We had only one communal shower for all the *ulpan* (method of students learning Hebrew) students and one telephone for the whole kibbutz. My sister and I were so *cold* that winter, with only one tiny little kerosene heater in our room and no hot water in our (shared) bathroom that we started sleeping in our heavy workclothes, so we could roll out of bed at five in the morning already dressed to go to work.

But oh, how my six months at Ein Hashofet filled me with joy and amazement. The students at the ulpan came from Argentina, Uruguay, India, Italy, Iran, Australia, Romania, South Africa—the four corners of the world: there, before my eyes, far away from the we-don't-count-women Judaism of Belle Harbor, New York, or the don't-call-attention-to-my-Jewness Jews of Antioch College, was the awesome diversity of *ahm Yisrael,* the Jewish *nation,* the Jewish *people.* My choices in the States had seemed to be between participating in the *religion,* which I refused to do, or diminishing my Jewish identity

entirely, which I had been doing since my early teenage years. But along with the thrilling diversity of the ulpan students, the kibbutz offered another vision entirely—a vision of hardworking idealists dedicated to a self-chosen destiny, a national identity, a just society.

When in my life had I ever met Jews like these before? Jews willing to give up their native countries, professions, and most of all their privacy and personal property in order to realize their dream as Jews? Jews passionately committed to their *national identity* as a people in their homeland again at last? The kibbutzniks of Ein Hashofet celebrated May Day, hung portraits of Marx in the dining hall, called one another "Comrade," and celebrated the festival of Shavuot not with white-robed young women singing confirmation cantatas on synagogue pulpits but with joyous wagon trains carrying newly harvested sheaves of wheat. Not even a mention of *matan Torah*, giving of the Torah. The religion, they said, had been necessary to sustain the Jews in the *galut,* the exile. But now that we were home, we were free to go back to the sources—the agricultural sources, the seasons and fruits of this *land*.

When I traveled around the country on our ulpan vacations and saw the ingathering of Jews from countries all over the world—Jews with *payot* (earlocks) east European or Yemenite style; Jews who rode the noisy, bumpy buses grasping cages of chickens, Jews in galabiyas, caftans, saris, suits, open-necked shirts, or *streimels* (Chassidic hats trimmed with fur); rural Jews, urban and urbane Jews—I rejoiced in my heart. *These are my people; these are my people*. Home at last. By comparison, the religion of Judaism paled.

Those six months in Israel at Ein Hashofet not only gave me my people back. They also gave me back to my people. When I returned to the Antioch campus, I no longer wanted to "change my clothes." Instead, I offered to teach a class in Hebrew.

IV. War(s)

Consider for a moment: who, by now, is the "postwar generation"? Is it still Malcolm Cowley's "lost generation," the writers and artists and wannabes who eked out a bohemian life in Paris after the "Great War"—that by-now nearly forgotten "Great War" that has receded into history as merely "World War I"? Is it still a way to describe the released GIs and their baby-boomer children—those of us born in the aftermath of World War II, the biggest generation in American history? Or by now do we mean those of us whose coming of age and adulthood were marked by the trauma of the Vietnam war; who,

along with Ginsburg, saw the "best minds of our generation" blown into crazed despair by fighting against or even worse, giving into, the war? Compared to my parents, I was a child of privilege—raised in the comfort of Belle Harbor in the expanding economy of "postwar" America—and yet, as it turns out, the most pivotal events in my own protected life were also wars.

The first was Vietnam. In my initial graduate school years, the sober "teach-ins" of Antioch gave way to angry "sit-ins" and violent political demonstrations, anti-draft counseling, hysterical flights into Canada, FBI lists, and bodybags. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, we danced frantically by strobe light to "Paint it Black," smoked dope, went en masse to demonstrate and be beaten up at the Pentagon, and saw our trust in the past, and our ties to the past, and the lives of so many of our own generation, unravel. I could not bear how aloof my graduate studies in literature were from the issues of our lives then. Nor could I feel at ease at yet another university, and in a department, so uneasy with "Jewish." After a year-and-a-half there, earning my MA, I took a leave of absence from graduate school, went to New York, and found a job as an editorial assistant at the New York Review of Books while I moonlighted at the left's answer to the Associated Press, the "underground" Liberation News Service (LNS).

Many years later, across the continent, at a party for my daughter's schoolmate's seventh birthday, the father of the birthday girl took one look at me and said, "I know you." He took a book off the shelf, and opened it: he had written a history of the LNS. He showed me a photo: and there I was at the ramshackle LNS commune in Vermont, my hair long and my jeans tight, posed among my fellow "revolutionaries." The scene came tumbling back to me. When the photo was taken, the LNS was tearing itself apart over whether the Revolution would come in the city or in the country. For that weekend, at least, my friends and I had chosen the country. But the truth is that, despite the photo-op, I didn't believe there would be a Revolution at all. Nor did I trust any one of us, city or country, to be capable of overcoming our own various estrangements and our personal psychodramas to create a better or even a more desireable world. What, after all, was our *own* moral vision? What, after all, was our morality? How *kind* were we being even *to one another*?

If I did not really belong at LNS, I was even less comfortable working at the New York Review of Books. For it seemed to me that *yichas* (reputation) counted there, and if you didn't have yichas—not, God forbid, that you would utter such a yiddishism there—the least

you could do was speak French. But I was just a jewey girl from the Belle Harbor that called Manhattan "the City," and my grandparents had sailed steerage class from Odessa and a shtetl near Grodno. Not only did I not speak French beyond *Sur la pont d'Avignon,* but I did not summer at the Cape, or live on the Upper East Side. I did not know what expression to wear on my face when I went to pick up a manuscript at Gore Vidal's house and he was wearing a bathrobe. I did not know who "Bunny" was. The New York Review was chic, as in "radical chic," and I was not chic at all. To make matters worse, after work every evening, as I walked wearily home to Second Avenue from my overheated subway station, the sight of my own generation nodding out from drugs on St. Marks Place made me feel helpless, bewildered, lost.

And then, one more time, my sister Alyne's life intersected mine.

Alyne came home in the summer of 1968 to recover from the trauma of the Six Day War. Maybe it was nothing more complex than her newly exotic clothes—her Bedouin dresses and her long Middle-Eastern earrings bought in the Old City of Jerusalem—that made me want to follow her back so I could wear dresses and earrings like those too. Maybe it was the camel saddlebag she gave me. Maybe it was that, by nature, I was more of a follower than a leader, a disciple, really, and intensified by the confusion of the times, I needed an older sister to show me how to live, what to live for, what to do. Or—another possibility—particularly in the face of my unease with the decadence and despair all around me—it was my sister's confident energy, bold Jewishness, fierce sense of peoplehood, and passionate love for Israel, which drew me like a magnet. My sister *cared*. My sister believed that what she had to contribute *mattered*. I wanted to *matter* too. I wanted to live more with *caring* than with rage. And more and more I realized that I wanted out of the chaos of America. I impulsively decided to follow her back to Israel.

I told my boss at the New York Review that I wanted to learn what it was about Jerusalem that made medieval cartographers draw it as the center of the world. I told my friends at LNS that I wanted to become an expatriate. Everyone to her own story: my friends at LNS told one another that I was going to Israel to help Palestinian refugees on the Gaza Strip.

On September 18, 1968, I left the States again and headed back to Jerusalem.

So that is how I came to live in my first little studio apartment, the one I am remembering so vividly tonight as I sit here at my desk on Smolenskin Street in the Hebrew month of Heshvan—sometime

in October—in 2002. Smolenskin Street is shaped like an arc around the back of Terra Sancta, in the pre-state days a Franciscan college for Arabs, now empty. My building, whose Jerusalem stones have blackened with age, whose garden is untended and forlorn except for the exuberantly flourishing flowers and sage I planted before Rosh Hashanah, is two doors down from the Rubin Academy of Music—I hear students practicing their flutes and clarinets, and see the young dancers leap and pirouette as I sneak a glance through the school's windows when I stroll past. Next door to the academy is the steel-gated walled-in fortress of the Prime Minister's House, complete with a sentry tower with an array of video screens, roadblocks, and soldiers guarding the streets. Black-curtained black Volvos—Knesset members' autos of choice—are often haphazardly parked on the street, but I have never seen the prime minister himself, though my upstairs neighbor suggested, in today's newspaper, that it wouldn't hurt if he acknowledged our presence by holding a block party. The young soldiers—another equally young neighbor calls them "cute"—search your car's engine and trunk before the barriers electronically descend into the road and you are allowed to drive into the street. Every once in a while the soldiers pace up and down Smolenskin, shining flashlights under all the parked cars. "Women in Black," bearing striking black-and-white signs calling with quiet desperation for an End to the Occupation, demonstrates across the street every Friday afternoon. A hunger strike for Jonathan Pollard takes place on the same spot Friday mornings. On Saturday nights, Peace Now demonstrates on the opposite corner, in front of billboards announcing song fests, the virtues of "Transfer" for the Arab population, lectures on Torah, and recent deaths. A lone old man, his sign scrawled on cardboard, always stands under the traffic light counterdemonstrating.

Last March, before I arrived here, a Palestinian blew up himself, 11 people, and the trendy Moment Cafe on Gaza Road, near the Prime Minister's House. Fifty-four other Israelis were injured. A small memorial plaque is affixed to the entrance there now listing the names of the dead, right next to the new locked gate and the security guard who searches your handbag before he lets you into the once again always-crowded and smoke-filled cafe.

That first studio of mine, though, was tucked into the quiet cul-de-sac of tiny, shady, Antebi Street, across from a little *makolet,* a grocery, and the Casa Argentina, a club for immigrants from South America. It was off a narrow downhill road named "HaGra," an acronym for "HaGaon Rabbenu Eliyahu," on the edge of the Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood Shaarei Hesed, "Gates of Lovingkindness,"

just blocks from where Les, who died of AIDS in New York more than a decade ago, had rented his flat in 1964. Like this one all these years later, the Antebi Street flat was just a "bedsitter," as the British call it. It had a modest couch that became the bed, a small wooden table, a hot plate, and a kerosene heater for the winter cold. I loved it. I kept it so neatly ordered that my landlord, who apparently dropped in when I was away, complimented my housekeeping skills.

To support myself, I quickly learned how to teach English as a Foreign Language, and for the next few months did, to adults at the Mitchell College for Workers, to soldiers completing their army service and hoping to enter the university, to upwardly mobile children at an after-school program. We native speakers might not ever say "If I had been studying English for three years, I would have mastered the language," but eager, hardworking Israelis learned how to fill in the blanks on their exam page with the grammatically correct "*would have*" even though they never would either.

Years ago, on a visit here, I ran into an artist I once knew. Ah, we said, you were the friend of the friend of . . . I visited you in your . . . remember that party on your roof! . . . *Those were the days, my friend,* she said, and we nodded to one another, and her eyes were sad, and my eyes were sad, because we both knew that the exhilaration, the sense of ecstatic invincibility, of horizons suddenly opened, that we felt as Jews in Jerusalem after the Six Day War, had all come crashing down, had all dissolved into blood and fire and the ashes of despair, in October 1973.

The Yom Kippur War had ended an era.

The era had lasted six years. If you were as we were during that time—young, Jewish, and in Jerusalem—the world seemed all before you. *Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven*. The Mandelbaum Gate had disappeared; the border signs had suddenly come down. Young and old tourists and new immigrants poured in from all over the world; this most ancient and troubled of cities became vividly alive, vital, boldly, magnificently beautiful. Mayor Teddy Kollek planted gardens. We bought Bedouin embroidery and Palestinian peasant dresses in the *shuk* (marketplace) of the Old City, blue Hebron glass and Armenian pottery on the Via Dolorosa, great copper and brass trays. We traveled to Jericho to buy the sweetest oranges, sipped Turkish coffee redolent with cardamon from tiny cups in the Old City, and dined for hours on *moussakhan* at Hassan Effendi's in Arab East Jerusalem, sitting on the very chairs, it was said, that King Hussein himself once sat in. In a hopeful gesture, an Arab and a Jew jointly opened a fish restaurant in east Jerusalem,[1] where we first tasted St. Peter's Fish baked with tehina.

The prewar claustrophobia of the country gave way to camping trips to the fjords of the Red Sea, south of Eilat; snorkeling at Ras Muhammed at the very tip of the Sinai peninsula in view of Saudi Arabia; hiking trips to the Golan Heights; wine tasting at the Cremisan Monastery in Beit Jala—the town in which, just this past year, an old acquaintance of ours, the late Avi Boaz, who never stopped going there even after the latest intifada, was captured by Palestinian terrorists and tortured to death. But then, then, *then (how long ago!),* sitting in our courtyards or little gardens, surrounded by the fragrance of jasmine, lavendar, and rosemary, wearing our long embroidered dresses and dangling earrings, our eyes lined with kohl, we young American women became the Shulamith, straight out of the *Song of Songs.* Then, *then,* we were the "Daughters of Jerusalem" in search of he whom our soul loveth.

Eager to find more permanent employment, I wrote a letter to the English department of the Hebrew University to inquire about a position. I received a reply from Professor Alice Shalvi, who asked if I might be interested instead in teaching in the new English department at the then fledgling University of the Negev, in Beersheba. Interested? By then, Alyne had left the city and was living in a sparse little room in the Negev, at Sde Boquer, the teachers' seminary and field study school just a few miles from Ben-Gurion's kibbutz. Now I, too, would be a pioneer. For the next two years, twice a week, I traveled down to the Negev from Jerusalem, passing Palestinian villages, terraced farms, young boys on donkeys, and women carrying huge baskets of foodstuffs on their heads, along windy, hilly, Hebron Road, to teach Shakespeare and Romantic Poetry in the dusty storefronts that served as the university's makeshift classrooms. *Teach these souls to fly!* wrote the poet William Blake, and I tried to, teaching just as my beloved Antioch literature professor had taught me. My students were eager older kibbutzniks, new immigrants, high school English teachers from poor Negev towns such as Yeroham and Ofakim, newly released soldiers, wives of soldiers stationed in Beersheba, and a handful of local high school graduates who had deferred their army service, the latter the only ones who were younger than me. When Alyne started teaching English as a Foreign Language there, too, we met between classes for thick espresso at a little kiosk, feeling less like university lecturers than like adventurers. Weren't we making the desert bloom?

Back in Jerusalem, I fell in love with a Scottish-Jewish actor who had made aliyah from Glasgow years before. We soon decided to marry. I went to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, proved through a copy of my parents' wedding certificate that I was Jewish, and was

guided in choosing a wedding date based on the "clean days" of my menstrual cycle. The *sheitled* (bewigged) woman at the ministry gave me a pamphlet explaining that, if we did not honor the laws of *niddah,* "family purity," I might give birth to retarded children. But I behaved myself; went, as demanded, to the prenuptial *mikveh* (ritual cleansing pool). My sole defiance was wearing a lacey white mini dress at our Orthodox ceremony—the only one permitted to Jews. The black-hatted, bearded rabbi sent by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to witness the *ketubah* (Jewish marriage contract)-signing worked hard to avert his eyes from my knees, and the rabbi who performed the ceremony forgot my name.

We slept that first night at the exotic-feeling American Colony Hotel in Arab East Jerusalem, where avowedly secular Israelis, foreign journalists, and Christian tourists hung out. The night after our wedding, my husband had a performance of the rock show *Karakhat,* "Baldy"—Israel's answer to "Hair"—in Safed, and it took us hours to drive out of the city the next morning because thousands of people from all over the world had gathered for the annual "Three Day March" across the Jerusalem hills.

Just three years later, in a little shop outside of Athens, as my husband held the Greek mask of comedy in one hand, and the mask of tragedy in the other, a radio blared in Greek what sounded like desperate news. We found out what the news was when we got to the port of Piraeus. The car ferry from Greece to Haifa, on which we were supposed to sail along with the little Renault 4 we had bought in Scotland and just driven across Europe, was nowhere to be seen.

We went to the Tourist Police.

Boom boom Israel. Why you want go Israel? the Tourist Policeman laughed from behind the counter.

My husband peered at the newspaper the man flashed at us, with the map of tanks crossing the Suez Canal, arrows pointing in all directions. E GIP TUS, he spelled out. And we realized what had happened. Israel was at war.

V. "Partly Cloudy"

> *I am the weather man. Everything, I see everything. At my house, it's partly cloudy . . .*
>
> ("The Weatherman," [Hebrew] from *Karachat*)

At war? How could that *be?* We had just been at graduate school in the States for two years. I had just finished my doctorate at Brandeis,

where I had gone with the blessing of Ben Gurion University and a generous fellowship; my husband had finished an MFA in theater. For the past two years we had lived on the university campus, driven an old red Mustang, brewed Constant Comment, watched in awe as the leaves of New England turned russet and gold in the autumn; we had bought fresh apple cider at roadside stands, celebrated Thanksgiving, dug out our car from under the snow. While my husband rehearsed *Guys and Dolls* at the university theater, my days had been spent writing in the quiet of my study or fervently conversing about William Blake, or about the growing American women's movement. Along the way, I had joined the academic tribe of "Blakeans," becoming a devotee of his radical passion for the human imagination and his fervent attacks on established authority, social injustice, organized religion—and war. Blake seemed to have put in words my own deepest and most inchoate convictions. *God only acts and is in existing beings or men. A dog starv'd at his master's gate, Predicts the ruin of the state. Energy is eternal delight, War is energy enslav'd . . . .*

Our degrees in hand, we had headed back to Israel filled with enthusiasm and travelling slowly, one continent at a time. We had spent the summer *by yon bonnie banks and by yon bonnie braes* in Scotland, seeing London theater, driving through the Simplon Pass as I quoted Wordsworth and Swiss Alps as I quoted Shelley. We had discovered Sienna in Italy, sipped cappucino in Rome. So how could it be that now, in Piraeus, our last station before home, we found ourselves stranded, frightened, torn?

Boom boom Israel. Why you want go Israel? At the Tourist Police in Piraeus port, my husband the actor turned into an Israeli army reservist, and I turned into a soldier's wife. We stored our Renault in a garage in Athens and flew back in a darkened plane to a darkened airport in the middle of the night to a nation at war. He was sent straight from the airport to join his army unit "somewhere in Israel." My dissertation clutched under my arm like a relic from another world, I took an intercity taxi back to Jerusalem at three o'clock in the morning. No one in the taxi said a word.

If I were back in Santa Monica now, I would go into the closet in my study where I store all my old journals and I would dig out the red one called "Living through the war, 1973, and after." I would go through the carbon copies I kept of the letters that I wrote about the siren that sent us all into the bomb shelters early the next day, the news of desperate battles, the scene on Ben Yehuda Street when a crazed soldier kept repeating *You want to be men, or not? You want to be men, or not?* I would reread my descriptions of Yisrael, who

was not taken into the army because of the obsessive buzzing in his ears, sitting in my kitchen and reading me the cryptic Hebrew poems he wrote on roll after roll of toilet paper, or of my phone calls to Hadassah Hospital to find out if they needed help rolling bandages. There were no cell phones in those days. I didn't know where in the country my husband was or what he was doing.

Or afterwards, when he came home on leave after having washed dishes in a prisoner of war hospital: paying our respects to his relative, both of whose twin sons had been killed in battle, one in the north, one in the south. Or fearing the fate of a friend's son, who had been taken prisoner by the Syrians. We worried that they would torture him until he was driven mad. *Death death death death.*

But here on Smolenskin Street, I don't have my journals. All I have are my memories—and the knowledge of the upheavals—in the country, in my own life—that came after.

The Yom Kippur War was a *debacle*. Later there was an official inquiry into why Prime Minister Golda Meir, along with her "kitchen cabinet," had ignored the warnings of the Egyptian build-up, and why the army was so unprepared, and why there were so many deaths. As a result of the inquiry, a particular general, who died young of a broken heart soon after, was blamed. But the truth is that the war marked the onset of the loss of faith in the government and the military—in the leadership of the country as a whole—that has been eroding into an ever-deeper despair ever since. Even in today's newspaper, there's a story about what *really* happened in the Sinai all those years ago, and the tankists who were burned to death: "No end to this bitter battle," says *Haaretz: "The battle for the Chinese Farm took place 29 years ago—but the survivors are still fighting over its heritage."*[2]

For me, the horror of the Yom Kippur War was the beginning of the end. Though I worked ardently for the fledgling feminist movement that emerged as a response to the war when women realized the sole war effort for which they had been trained was baking cakes to send to the front, and I labored publication-by-publication for my promotion and tenure at the university, during the years that followed, I began to lose faith in the possibility of any collective dreams. *How can you believe in prayer?* I used to angrily challenge my Orthodox friend Rachel. I might have said, *How can you believe in anything?*

For, increasingly, I did not. How could studying English literature help heal students who had suffered through the battles of the war? What was the point of it? It began to seem to me little more than cultural colonialism—as if we were trying to carpet the desert of Israel

with nonnative plants. Politically, too, the Israel I had loved seemed more and more to change beyond recognition. As the years passed, the country seemed to swell with a sense of its own power; to lose a sense of cohesiveness, a sense of a mission I could believe in. The "occupied territories" became "the Greater Israel," infused with a messianism that translated into permanent domination of another people, regardless of its human cost. New maps obfuscated the old "green line." It no longer seemed to be the country I had come to: the values that had drawn me now turned topsy-turvy; once famed for its egalitarianism, its gap between rich and poor widened; ideals from the past were discarded. I seemed to feel angry all the time.

Three years after the war, I was invited to join a group of artists at the Field Study School the Israelis had established at Mount Sinai. As we flew in a small Cessna farther and farther south from the lush coastal plain to the stark desert, the landscape seemed to strip itself naked till only its bare, rigid, backbone was revealed. From the moment we emerged from the plane, there was an all-encompassing stillness and silence, as if we had gone back in time, as if the giant granite boulders all around us had been stopped in mid-motion eons ago, after they were ripped off the mountains in a massive and ancient upheaval, while the furious, hidden, magma kept on burning deep under the surface of the earth. *So this is where it all happened,* I kept feeling, *this is the scene of the real story, this is the work of an angry god, a god of violence.* Moses smashing the tablets. Hitting the rock in search of water. The earth opening up to swallow the rebels. Jehovah imposing His law. I went to Sinai for "inspiration," and I came back feeling more estranged from God than ever.

At the foot of Mount Sinai, the *boustanai* that the monks of the Santa Caterina monastery had planted and walled-in amidst the stark wasteland reminded me of the "enclosed gardens" medieval poets had used as symbols of virgins. Another attempt to tame the feminine, another attempt at control. I had taken refuge from the heat of the day and the harshness of the landscape in small caves, moist with springs of water, their openings covered in maidenhair fern. Soon after my return, I discovered I was pregnant—and I always associated the beginning of my pregnancy with the feeling of those caves.

For motherhood changed me, too, drew me even farther from the world. For me fully to enter the intricately biological, emotional, and spiritual bond between me and my infant daughter was to experience a rhythm and a truth that had little to do with the getting and spending of ordinary life and even less with the dicta of religion. As I mothered my daughter, I felt myself awakening to a new sense of

womanhood, awakening to a new sense of patience, a new sense of time, of allowing change and growth to unfold at its own unforced pace, learning when not to interfere, admitting and yielding to the futility of insistence. She would roll over when she would roll over. Not when a book said she would, not when a doctor said she would, not when my mind or even my heart wished she would. Life proceeds at its own necessary pace, true to its inner nature. The God of babies and mothers is a very different God than Jehovah. How even madder the world seemed, how out of joint, from the perspective of motherhood. How *wrong* it all seemed, how filled with suffering, rage, violence, the frantic drive to assert control, to conquer or be conquered—much wronger than I had ever felt or experienced or named before. Beginning with the very conditions of childbirth, what a world to bring new life into.

Before my daughter turned two, my husband and I separated. I was in the throes of confusion and pain, and in my heart of hearts, I wanted to leave the country. But I probably never would have, I probably would still be living in Beersheba, looking forward to my trips abroad to Europe or the States every summer, serving on this university committee or that; perhaps, over the years, redoing the kitchen, building a second story onto the house, weeping as my daughter left home to do her own army service, remaining a confirmed and angry *apikorus* (hereticlike) still teaching the same courses in literature, had not the dean of the faculty knocked on my door early one morning and made me an offer I could not refuse: I had been chosen by the university to go to UCLA for a year to do anything I wanted to do and get paid for it.

VI. Galut in the City of the Angels

Los Angeles hadn't been even on my map of reality when I arrived there, with my little daughter but without faith. A strange and alien place: a landscape startlingly like that of Israel, but a society, a culture, that only for geographers was on the same planet. *Adults only, adults only:* I moved into a city that hated children, that didn't even want them living in the shabby little apartments I could afford. When I finally found one in a neighborhood of immigrants on Havenhurst Drive, the air was choking with smoke from a wildfire in Laurel Canyon; the hot, dry, Santa Ana winds were blowing, and the radio was blaring news of the worst smog alert in the city's history: I felt as if I were living in a Raymond Chandler novel. And then I drove out to

the UCLA campus to discover that, though there were few bookstores in Westwood, the university had *bowling alleys in the Student Union! Bowling alleys!* Beersheba could only have dreamt of a student union at all. And the wealth, the wealth! Sunset Boulevard shocked and overwhelmed me—the palm trees! The mansions!

But oh, how I yearned for a life without meaning, without purpose, above all, without caring. How tired of caring I was. How tired of living in a country where the suffering tore at my heart, where the politics ripped my soul, where Judaism was the harshness of Sinai, or the *haredim* (Ultra-Orthodox) shrieking *Shabbes! Shabbes!* (Sabbath) and throwing stones at drivers who dared enter religious neighborhoods on the Sabbath. Where every hour on the hour you frantically turned on the radio to listen to the latest disastrous news. When my year in Los Angeles was up, I asked Ben Gurion for another year's leave—and when that year was up, I asked for another. They turned me down. And so I resigned, gave up my job and tenure, and sold my house, driven by a bewildering desperation to surrender being a Shulamith manque, a Zionist patriot, and a desert bloom-maker, in exchange for the great relief of becoming a ditzy-as-possible California blonde.

I tried writing a screenplay. I tried out for a quiz show. I partnered with a Beverly Hills divorcee to start a PR company: within weeks we were wining and dining potential clients in Beverly Hills restaurants, signing up a Course-in-Miracles hairdresser who had visualized herself a TV producer; a psychologist planning to catapult to fame through a book on horse racing she had paid to have ghostwritten; an orthopedic surgeon who had Ten Magic Steps to Cure Your Aching Back. I dated a multimillionaire who hired professional clowns for my daughter's birthday party, took us all to Las Vegas. He bought a single's club in Charlie Chaplin's old mansion in Beverly Hills and taught me how to use limited partnerships for tax write-offs.

I tried writing a novel. I tried writing the "comprehensive study of all separation experiences," setting out to prove that if you were just "individuated" enough, no separation experience of any kind (divorce, death, exile from your homeland) need cause you any pain.

But I was in pain. And though I was fiercely dedicated to escaping it, I couldn't do ditzy very well, and jogging along the Venice shore soon tired of serving as my ideal of ultimate freedom. The truth is that living in California, in the galut, made me long to find a way to connect again with a font of significant Jewish life. But how to do it? For it was one thing to be a Jew who adamantly, stubbornly, defiantly, *purposefully,* refused to do *Judaism* in Israel, where

the rhythms of Jewish life, the echoes of the land itself, the quiet of Shabbat, the celebration of the festivals, shaped the structure of the week and the calendar the whole society lived by, no matter *what* you believed. But it was quite another thing to be an *American* Jew. If you didn't *do* Jewish in the diaspora, if you ignored the Sabbath, ate *treif* (unkosher), disregarded the festivals, you were defying no one, and all that was left of your Jewish identity was loyalty to the Democrats and a residual love for pastrami on rye. It was not as if there was a Religious Establishment in Southern California against whose repressiveness you had to declare your opposition to. Being "secular" was no pointed political statement; "secular" was nothing at all. And if I were really raising my daughter in the diaspora, what would it mean to *her* to be Jewish? What would I pass on? My whole life had been shaped by my own tumultuous passion to somehow engage this people and this faith. But if *we* didn't *do* Jewish in Los Angeles, what would *she* know? By the waters of Babylon, why *wouldn't* she want a Christmas tree?

There is more to the story, though. It wasn't just wanting to be a good Jewish mother who gave her daughter a good Jewish education. It wasn't just about lighting Shabbat candles, or celebrating Hanukkah, or trying to Honor what I could of Jewish Tradition. It was that living in Southern California, so far away from Israel, I missed God.

I missed, that is to say, the sense of a spiritual presence, or perhaps of The Spiritual Presence, hovering near me even in my rage, hovering in the very air, hovering somewhere or other even when, beginning with the Yom Kippur War, I could not sense that Presence at all. And that very absence, for me, had itself felt like the presence of a too-terrible chasm, a slough of despond, a black hole in space, emptiness, despair. No distraction, no luxurious triviality, no material indulgence, could compensate for its absence. What was my life about without God in it? How many Interesting Films could I see, how many Fascinating Places could I visit, how many Fabulous Dinners could I eat, that came close to the depth, intensity, and joy that the very possibility of dancing with the bride awoke?

And such dancing could not come easily. It was not like the anything-goes dancing that had started with the Twist. It had rules. They were difficult. They were demanding. I had put an awful lot of effort into rebelling against *any* rules. Rules separated you from a lot of people and a lot of potential experiences and a great deal of the culture that surrounded you. Most of the time, despite your best efforts, you stepped on your partner's feet.

Yet I could not quench the longing. Slowly, over the years, I began to find a way back, a way in. I became involved with a newly evolving feminist Judaism—a rewrite the liturgy-to-get-rid-of-the-sexism-and-include-women Judaism. A friend and I established a Jewish women's spiritual retreat. It was there, in a moonlit ceremony of singing, dancing, and a mikveh in a flowing stream—so unlike the one in Jerusalem all those years before—I took on what felt like my true name, my Hebrew name, *Miriyam,* which no one had called me since my childhood at Hebrew school. For the next Rosh Hashanah, I wrote a ceremony for *Tashlich,* for casting off our sins and our shortcomings of the past, which a group of us carried out on the shores of the Pacific. I joined a Reform synagogue, and bought myself a tallith. I concentrated so hard on preparing my daughter for her bat mitzvah, that I forgot to order centerpieces for the reception.

Perhaps the lives of each of us has a hidden narrative line. Perhaps we ourselves write in, create, the narrative line of our lives; we who impose order, as C. S. Lewis said, on the chaos of the given. Or maybe it is just that God, after all, has a sense of humor. Because it does not seem to me mere serendipity, mere happenstance, that, having fled Conservative Judaism on the east coast when I was a young girl, having turned my back on it and traveled all the way to Israel to find a way to live as a Jew, as a grown woman I landed up not only on the west coast, where I had never even ever imagined myself to be, but also suddenly surrounded by Conservative rabbis at the very center of the Conservative Judaism I had originally fled. For 14 years ago I was hired by the University of Judaism to create a new literature department at a college designed to do what I had been struggling my whole life to figure out how to do: integrate "Western" and "Jewish" civilization.

Yet, as I soon had to admit, it wasn't really the *same* Conservative Judaism that I had grown up with anymore: during the many years I had been away, Conservative Judaism had undergone a change. Now women *were* counted in a minyan; now they did play an equal role. The time had come for me to let go of my old grudge, bury the chip I had carried on my shoulder, release that long-ago pain and let it fade into the shadows of history. Women could even be ordained as rabbis. Women could dance before the Divine Presence. They could dance before the bride.

I joined an egalitarian Conservative synagogue, and 40 years after that confirmation cantata on the pulpit in Belle Harbor, New York, I celebrated my own long-long-overdue bat mitzvah.

Along with the changes in Judaism, had come changes in Jewish American literature. Nobody was writing *Marjorie Morningstar* anymore. The hurtful voices of the previous generation of American Jewish writers, with their mockery of Jewish women, their disdain for Jewish culture, and their displacement of their own inadequacies onto hapless Jewish mothers, had given way, at last, to strong writers, women and men, struggling with spiritual questions. I began to write about "gender and spirituality." Though in a sort of nostalgic way I still appreciated my old friend William Blake, I knew, now, his spirituality was no longer *mine,* could not be mine. My real passion became helping students wrestle with and value their own Jewish identity, and to be able to name *their* story, to place themselves, their religion, and their culture, in the otherwise encompassing Western story. No, it was not the *Old Testament.* It was the "Hebrew Bible." No, there's no *real* referent for "Judeo-Christian culture": there's *Jewish* and there's *Christian* and the two religions perceive and portray the very fundamentals of human spirituality in profoundly different ways.

Yet the more I taught and thought and wrote about Jewish identity and Jewish literature and gender and spirituality, the more I longed to study those very texts I had never really had a chance to study earlier in my life. I wanted to befriend those "sages" of the Talmud and the Midrash even if, long ago, debating the nuances of every statement, every law, creating their own wild, off-the-wall stories, seeking, every way they knew how, to discern the footprints of the elusive Presence, to carry out the Divine Will, they never imagined someday having a friend in their study hall or at their Shabbat table quite like me. "How do you dance before the bride?" they once asked each other. Though they had envisioned only men dancing, I wanted, at last, to dance with them too.

"So, when are *you* going to enroll in rabbinic school?" It was the president of the university, and he had begun asking me that question at least once a year, from the moment that the university had established a west coast Conservative rabbinic school. I could not admit that his question was the one echoing in my heart ever since I found myself at the university, surrounded by rabbis and rabbinical students. That it seemed so . . . *bashert.* That it evoked, for me, the little girl who had brought every fiber of her being to those children's services all those years ago, who had been spurned, who had run away, who had gone in search of her soul to Yellow Springs, New York, Jerusalem, Beersheba, and now—of all places to search for a soul!—to the "City of the Angels," *Los Angeles.* Social change. Political liberation. The Shulamith of the Song of Songs. William Blake. Making the Desert Bloom.

Is this what God wanted of me? Is this what the story was about?

The president telephoned me the next day. At the Ordination Ceremony for that year's rabbinic class, he said, "You looked like a little girl with her head against the glass, asking 'When can I be let in?'" Instead of an invisible—and impenetrable—shield immediately appearing to protect my heart, I found myself saying "Yes." I want to be a rabbi.

My "yes" had been a long, long time in coming.

VII. Smolenskin Street: November

The days have grown shorter, the nights longer, and the weather in Jerusalem has turned cold, not as cold as it will get when we really hit winter, but cold enough to need warm sweaters to wear and heating in my flat. My porch opens onto the garden in the back of the building, where the leaves of the pomegranate tree, whose fruit, tart and sweet at once, we picked in time for Rosh Hashanah, are turning yellow now. Right after the festival of Sukkot, when we added the phrase "Who causes the winds to blow and the rains to fall" to our daily prayers, the winds in Jerusalem began to blow hardily and the first rains of the season fell.

Early every morning, I put on my backpack, heavy with books, say *Boker Tov!* Good Morning! to the guard outside the Rubin Academy of Music, Shalom! to the soldiers outside the prime minister's, and meet my study partner on the corner, to shlep up and down the hills together, through the winding paths of the Valley of the Cross, to rabbinic school. We're in our third year.

This coming Shabbat, I will join my old friend Rachel—the one I challenged about the purpose of prayer all those years ago in Beersheba—for afternoon services in the little Greek shtiebl she loves. The women, there, sit upstairs in a gallery, behind a lattice and a curtain, and I am curious about what that way, worlds upon worlds away from mine, is like. I sense that it will be like visiting a long-ago but not-to-be-forgotten past.

Last night I was in the town of Modi'in—from whose environs Judah Maccabee, hero of Hanukkah, which arrives next week, came two thousand years ago. I went there to teach a page of Talmud in which the ancient rabbis try to understand why a certain pious man had his spiritual vision clouded even though he seemed to be doing just what Jewish law required of him. The rabbis figured out that he had constructed a guard-house for his community that shut out the cries of the poor—not unlike our gated communities today, not

unlike the impassable walls the government is building in the West Bank, and the economic walls more and more separating the newly rich and the expanding ranks of the poor in Israel today. I'm giving the talk for a group I passionately support, Rabbis for Human Rights, which I've joined.

Soon I will write my *Dvar Torah* (brief commentary on the Torah), which I have to deliver in front of my fellow students, about what disturbed Joseph's brothers about his dreams so deeply that they threw him into a pit when he approached them as they were grazing their flocks in the desert. I will say that Joseph's dream envisioned his family binding sheaves in a field of wheat—but, in fact, they were shepherds, had always been shepherds, and descended from a line of shepherds. Joseph's dream terrified them because he saw them all as farmers, and they could not bear the possibility of so radical a change—did not have the courage to reconceive their lives, to imagine their lives anew.

I understand them. I once cast my own dreams into a pit.

But tomorrow, I am off to the Ministry of the Interior to get a new Israeli identity card. I lost my old one many years ago. Actually—I didn't lose it. It was buried in my drawer in Santa Monica for years, and one day I noticed my photo had fallen out of it—the glue had just dried up—so I threw it out.

But I want an identity card now. I need one. After all, I'm an Israeli citizen as well as an American one, and I am determined to vote in the next elections.

You and me, Jerusalem, you and me.

Notes

1. My sister and I were recently told by the Jewish owner, who long since moved his restaurant to a site in west Jerusalem, that his Arab partner was murdered "as a collaborator" on a visit to his family in Syria.
2. Avihai Becker, "No End to this Bitter Battle," *Haaretz Magazine,* November 15, 2002, pp. 18–20.

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Anxieties in the "Modern Context": Fantasies of Change in Allegra Goodman's Fiction

Victoria Aarons

Allegra Goodman's fiction—two collections of short stories, *Total Immersion* (1989) and *The Family Markowitz* (1996), as well as her novels, *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998), and, somewhat less prominently, *Paradise Park* (2001)—reflects a distinct Jewish presence, one that shapes the central tension in the lives of her characters. Much of her fiction revolves around the preoccupations of middle-class, postwar American Jews and the attendant anxieties about constructing an ethos that balances what for Goodman are the two often-competing identities of "American" and "Jewish." In this split between the two defining conditions of their lives, Goodman's characters would seem to be deeply divided. They are divided in generational and familial terms among themselves. But they are, too, "divided selves." All grapple to one extent or another with the place of and possibilities for Judaism in their lives. Often critical of one another, Goodman's characters focus on Judaism as the site of their divide. Goodman's characters are preoccupied with their place in Jewish history and collectivity, a Judaism they either embrace fervently, intellectualize into ersatz forms of cultural exchange, or deny, a denial that takes the form of flight, running from the very legacy that shapes them still. With characteristic ironic distance and understated pathos, Goodman draws from the collective memory of a distinctly Jewish narrative,

"a memory, real or imagined," to contextualize the paradoxes of contemporary Jewish life ("One Down," 251).

As an American Jewish writer whose fiction is patterned on a long tradition of both scriptural and secular storytelling, Goodman's fiction turns on the fluid and complex tensions surrounding the place of ancient Jewish law and learning in contemporary American life and thought. In the competing voices of her characters, controlled by the consistently ironic authorial "voice-over," Goodman draws together and exposes the tensions that both link and pull apart her characters: Orthodoxy and reform, piety and secularism, ancient narratives and modernity, and tradition and change. And here, the weight of the past, the "thundering of history," as Ed Markowitz fears, creates an uneasy legacy that presents itself as the central dialogue in her fiction ("Four Questions," 207). This dialogue is, for many of Goodman's characters, a dialectic of uncertainty, one that opens itself up to anxieties about place, identity, relationships, and self-invention. And such uncertainties and ambiguities for Goodman center on the ways in which her characters define themselves as Jews. In doing so, the past, that is Jewish history and communal identity, would seem to pose itself as the present's uneasy double; contemporary life here is seen through the kaleidoscopic lens of the past, so much so that, as Rose Markowitz puts it, "they can't tell the present from the past" ("Oral History," 49). For Goodman's characters are deeply divided, torn between an open, unhampered, but ambiguous secular future and the persistent, desired, but equally ambiguous Jewish past, one seemingly resistant to the very mechanisms of change that would seem to have insured its survival in the present age. And it is *The Family Markowitz,* Goodman's collection of interlocking stories that spans three generations of Jews, that most markedly captures and exposes these ambivalences of American Jewish identity and that reveals, unmistakably, Goodman's preoccupation with how these uncertainties complicate contemporary American Jewish cultural experience, how, in other words, such anxious preoccupations exist in response to the historical, religious, ideological, and emotional demands of being Jewish in America at the close of the twentieth century.

The Family Markowitz begins with the "past," with the memories, "real or imagined," nostalgically reconstructed, of an immigrant woman, Rose Markowitz, and concludes with the "future," with her granddaughter, Miriam Markowitz, the second generation of American Jews, a young woman whose imminent future is assured in ways her grandmother's never could have been. For Rose Markowitz, determined matriarch, Jewish self-consciousness would seem to be a

matter of looking back, of assessing her past, her prewar and war-torn life in Europe. For Miriam, however, the future is immediate, unhampered, her autonomy and independence from the restrictions and intolerance of her grandmother's past assumed; the choices she decides upon are of her own making. Miriam Markowitz, 23 years old, a medical student at Harvard, a woman seemingly unrestricted by gender, ethnic, or religious prejudices of the past, that from which her grandmother's generation literally fled, chooses instead an Orthodox life, Jewish law, "austerity and obscure ritualism," according to her father, Ed Markowitz, first-generation American-born. In doing so, Miriam chooses to frame her life, to create an identity, linked to the strictures of Hebraic law, the kinds of structures from which her grandmother fled and which her parents had denied her, long since disassociated from that which would seem to hamper their freedom. But for Miriam, ritualized, religious Judaism, strict observance of the law, provides her with a context, a communal heritage in which she can fill an ill-defined sense of loss, of sterility, of being unanchored, untethered. In the face of the possibilities for self-determination, Miriam returns, uncompromisingly, unrelentingly "puritanical . . . fierce and punctilious," as her peevishly secular father sees it, to the rigidity of the law, to, as she insists, "the original context . . . the Jewish people . . . God" ("Four Questions," 187–188, 198). And in Miriam's self-imposed hold on religious dictate, we do not find a return to her grandmother's generation, nor a compliance to her father's; rather we are meant to see her embracing that which one generation fled and another dismissed, only to be renewed, reinvigorated by another.

For Goodman, the tensions among the disparate and in some respects desperate responses to Judaism are contextualized in generational terms exactly because of the kind of unconscious self-positioning and identity formation that takes place in relation to others, a kind of competition for place. Thus it is in the family that the anxieties and fears about autonomy and the insistence of one's ego are all contested. And in *The Family Markowitz,* pronouncedly so, such conflicts are made all the more emphatic because here the generations merge in a continuing dialectic in which competing ideological and ethical contestations are played out. And while Goodman surely and comically creates characters such as Ed and his brother, Henry Markowitz, who transparently display their own willful defiance of both an errant American dilettantism and a Judaism they can only see as stifling and regressive, Goodman satirizes such postures as suffering from myopic self-interest. Miriam Markowitz, an equally complicated character, is shown to be still in a nascent position of anxious adherence to a "text"

that she fears has been lost, or at least under siege by an abridgment of the text of Jewish history and thus threatens Jewish survival in the modern age. Her response to her father's abbreviated seder, his determination to contemporize and extemporize Judaism out of the past and into the present, is itself both a declaration of independence and an eagerness to participate in the ongoing family drama. With a peevish contentiousness that only competes with that of her father, Miriam regresses, at least momentarily, to a childlike unwillingness to "play along." "Chanting to herself out of her Orthodox Birnbaum Haggadah," reprimanded by her mother to "be pleasant," Miriam, affronted, calls attention to her defection, and ignoring the warnings of her mother, "looks down at her book and continues reading to herself in Hebrew . . . reading all the stuff Daddy skipped" ("Four Questions," 193, 197). What she doesn't see is that her father's attempts are farcical and thus expose him as anxiously figuring himself into the tolerant and open-minded secular intellectual that he so fears himself not to be. Unlike his wife, Sarah, Ed Markowitz's anxieties and attempts at self-invention are located in his response to Judaism, and his self-constructed inventions of a Jewish history and identity are finally reconstructed if only in defiance of and resistance to Judaism.

Caught in between these two generations is Sarah Markowitz, Ed's wife, Miriam's mother, and Rose's daughter-in-law, a woman for whom choices are much more complicated than they are for either her daughter or her mother-in-law. For Rose, matriarch of the family, the past can be nostalgically reconstructed in self-defining ways: "upper-class, cultured . . . our home in Vienna . . . a beautiful work of art" ("Oral History," 49). She refuses to remember the past as it was: "The war . . . dirty and dangerous . . . filth" ("Oral History," 47). And in many ways, for Rose, the necessary decision to reinvent and self-fashion her life in America was very simple: "We were Jewish. That's why we came here" ("Oral History," 48). And, her granddaughter, too, believes that she can choose the kind of life that she desires, but in her case to graft the past upon the present, to have both: a modern, liberated, independent life that, despite the contemporary pressures that militate against it (including her own family's secularism), coexists with Orthodox Judaism. She clings to a sense of Jewish history that is not necessarily her own, raised, as her father puts it, in a culture of "pleasant suburban Judaism" ("One Down," 241). Instead, Miriam is drawn back, back to the "history" of scriptural narrative, to the exodus, the moment of deliverance, not to be forgotten.

Miriam's identification with ancient, storied Judaism would seem to provide her with a communal inclusivity that shelters her from

the fluctuations and instability of her present life; it allows her to see herself as part of an ongoing narrative. Miriam, not unlike her biblical predecessor, celebrates her arrival "on the other side," her determination to live her life, unhampered, as a Jew, here for her, perhaps, the miraculous parting of the sea. And for Goodman, Miriam's song of triumph is viewed as an extreme act of willful independence, uncompromising, and as both a running away from as well as a running to. Her adherence must not equivocate; there can be no middle ground for her. Were there so, her communal consanguinity to Judaism would be tenuous, open to rupture. Perhaps both the biblical Miriam and her namesake are motivated by fear and an impending sense of loss, loss of identity, of communal identity as Jews.

For Miriam's mother, Sarah Markowitz, a generation sandwiched in between that of her mother-in-law and her daughter, the past—the immediate past that has already much too soon presaged the way for her into middle-age—becomes no less than an account of her own failures. Her desire to write has always been thwarted by the age in which she matured, the prejudices and assumptions about the place for women of her generation. One novel written long ago and kept in a box in her closet, Sarah, instead of the "fame . . . dazzling poems" she desired to write, has found herself, instead, writing occasional book reviews and teaching classes at the Jewish Community Center ("Sarah," 231). Her life is taken up with the family, managing daily life, negotiating relationships, distracted by the conflicts and needs of others. It is she who functions as the bridge to the divide between her husband and daughter. It is she who will accept her daughter's Orthodoxy and appease her husband's quarrelsome sense of fracture and displacement. She is, after all, "a writer of fiction and believes in change, secrets, and revelations" ("The Wedding of Henry Markowitz," 88). In this, Sarah may represent the voice of Goodman, whose evolving stories may be seen as an attempt to reconcile competing narratives of desire and autonomy, of wishes fulfilled.

Placing herself in the context of the legendary Sarah, the biblical narrative that she feels drawn to, a narrative that might at least provide a frame in which to locate herself, she recognizes instead that her story is not a narrative of hope and reprieve; "she is not much like the Biblical Sarah. . . . She did not have a child in her old age. . . . She has pined, but not for children. She has pined to have a literary career, to have her work discovered by the world. This has been her dream" ("Sarah" 230). Like the biblical Sarah, Goodman's protagonist is unable to conceive, but hers is not a failure to continue the generations, to pass along the legacy of Jewish history and identity to

subsequent generations. The Sarah of Goodman's invention, though drawn implicitly from her biblical predecessor, is unable to write, to give birth to the kinds of stories that, perhaps not unlike the "original" Sarah's own, will have lasting duration, will have some kind of staying power beyond her own particular time and place, will span the generations. And Goodman's protagonist, not uncharacteristically, is comically aware that her "failure," her story of despair lacks the drama, the tragic status of a biblical narrative, an extended, exemplary narrative. Recognizing her fantasized and impossible desire, Sarah satirically imagines a reenactment of the biblical story: "If the Lord came to her in a dream and said, 'You will achieve what you desired,' she would laugh, certainly. If an angel or an agent came down from New York and said, 'You, Sarah, will write a great novel, a best-seller. Not a pulp romance, but a good book, wise and luminous, with a future movie bursting from its pages,' then she would laugh for all to hear—although she would take down the phone number of the agent just in case" ("Sarah," 231). Parodically aware of her own desire for divine intervention, though all too aware of her own tendency for "creative midrash," Goodman's protagonist may be more like the biblical Sarah than even she imagines. For hers, too, is an astonished laugh that recognizes the conditions that limit and define her. But there is, for her, no angel to intervene. She remains isolated, disappointed, but resigned to her fate. This is a story she cannot make her own.

In fact, all the central characters in *The Family Markowitz,* to one extent or another, try to take control of their lives, to revise the stories from which they emerge, all the while recognizing their limited ability to do so. Such knowledge may temporarily dissuade them, but it is not enough to foil their attempts to remake their lives. Rose Markowitz, for example, attempts to reinvent herself in a reconstructed history, but it is a reinvention that fools no one. She is caught between the reality of her childhood and the way in which she wants it to have been. As a result, she is also torn between her resistance to talk about her past life before coming to America and her fear of the consequences of her reluctance to talk about herself, so much so that "she cannot bear the thought that she will not be remembered" ("Fannie Mae," 27). For her daughter-in-law Sarah, past desires and intentions, the "lives" she fantasized about, are eclipsed by the responsibilities and exigencies of the life she has assumed. And Miriam, too, is caught between her fierce determination to remake herself from the way in which she was raised into something else, something as-yet nascent, but all defining. Her "remaking" is, of course, complicated because it necessitates negotiating her parents' expectations and their suspicion

that her desire to remake herself and her life is in willed opposition to and thus a defection from the family.

For Henry Markowitz, Rose's son, the kind of suffocation he so acutely feels from his boyhood—to "practice for his bar mitzvah . . . to memorize the Hebrew and pretend he understood it . . . smothered in the long, stifling service at the temple"—causes him to flee, literally to leave America, the place of his childhood, its artifacts and icons, and begin life anew in England, an exchange of selves ("Wedding," 88). Henry's flight is also a response to the dissipated life he led in the "art biz" and his own participation in a life he longs to erase. But his flight in both cases takes the form of shedding past selves and donning another. And Henry's brother, Edward Markowitz, Sarah's husband and Miriam's father, finds his escape from what he fears is the debilitating intrusion of a Jewish self-consciousness upon his life in the academic enterprise. Ed Markowitz would, irresistibly, like to "believe," but can't enter into such an impossible "bargain." And so, he attempts to escape the "old world" vestiges of Judaism by reforming himself as an intellectual and so inured from what he views as superstition and fear. He is divided between a Jewish legacy that won't go away and his attempts to intellectualize himself out of it. And he, like his brother, remains an outsider still. Continually in the process of self-redefinition, desperate and often self-deluding reinventions, he, like his brother, Henry, and, too, like Sarah, is a writer of fiction, the creator of his own stories with himself as his favorite character, "believ[ing] in change, secrets, and revelations" ("Wedding," 78).

Miriam Markowitz may be seen as a foil to Goodman's characters who can never quite articulate an identity based on stories from the "past," which would hope to provide them with a uniquely communal, connective Jewish ethic from which they can draw to make sense of and, in some ways, legitimize and justify their lives. Any attempts to contemporize, to graft the past onto the present, inevitably fail for them, because the past, a uniquely Jewish heritage and legacy, does not align itself easily with their desire for an assimilated, secular passage into contemporary American life. And this is particularly true for Ed Markowitz, who only feels safe, feels "like himself again," when he maintains an academic, scholarly posture in direct opposition to the emotional vestiges of past history, "ancestral totems," as he describes it ("Mosquitoes," 133, 123). But neither can Goodman's characters comfortably abandon their inheritance; any such attempts become, as Rose announces, a matter of "pretending they are what they are not" ("Wedding," 81). And so, many of Goodman's characters sense

a decided rift, a deep divide and tear in what they feel to be the precarious texture of their lives.

In particular, we see this conflict satirically played out in the anxiously figured character of Ed Markowitz, professional intellectual, academic historian, scholar of Middle East politics, expert on terrorism, and patriarchal head of his three-generational family. It is, in fact, in the character of Ed Markowitz that Goodman establishes explicitly, and not uncritically, the paradox presented to and created by her characters. America for a character such as Ed Markowitz becomes the emblem of both unrestrained freedom and a return to captivity. Furthermore, the very measure of unimpeded privilege and the sense of familiarity and mobility—economic, psychological, social—that such autonomy engenders, ironically, heightens the claustrophobic sense of captivity that he so acutely experiences. For Ed Markowitz, the academic life, the scholarly enterprise, is both his salvation and the source of his deepest conflict, since his very identity as both a Jew and an American is embedded in it. Ed views the academy as a safe haven from emotional investments, from personal histories, or from personalizing history. Instead, the academic world provides Ed with the means to "focus on something outside myself . . . distance . . . objectivity" ("Mosquitoes," 133). He is an expert on politics in the Middle East, on terrorism, careful to be evenhanded, nonsectarian, unaffiliated, not to be accused of favoring Israel, whose birth, after all, "was facilitated by terrorist acts," a fervent believer in "resolution and moderation on all sides" ("The Persians," 163, 174). Invited to participate in a Christian-Jewish dialogue at a conference held at the Ecumenical Institute, a retreat in the Midwest, Ed, pleased to be invited, pleased with his honorarium, pleased, above all, with himself, is appalled by the ready and eager willingness of his fellow participants, led by the institute director, to depart from an academic mode and discuss instead their "relationships on a spiritual level—with God, with Scripture" ("Mosquitoes," 109).

Robbed of his scholarly guise, his prepared conference paper "snatched away, ripped from his flailing hands," Ed feels exposed, vulnerable, unstable. Canterbury pilgrims misplaced in the Midwest, Ed's fellow "colleagues" tell their own stories, their personal histories. In his complacent sense of difference and intellectual separation from these people, Ed, smugly believing that "he'd never developed that kind of mythology about himself," can't see his own self-mythology, and he can't, in large part, because of the very language of his own particular myth ("Mosquitoes," 123). For Ed Markowitz, the language of scholarly skepticism and academic objectivity must,

necessarily, wrap around his Judaism. He cannot separate his professional life from his personal life, because his self-identity is wrapped up in the safety net of his professional guise. His sense of himself as an academic, freed from the restrictions, the limitations, from what he believes to be the myopic worldview of his unenlightened ancestors, is linked not to a denial of Judaism, but to a denial of faith. In what can only be seen as a wearied and exhausted moment, Ed confesses to his brother, Henry, his disingenuous desire to believe in God: "It would be very comforting . . . some sense of permanence . . . stability. I think I would like to believe in God." But Henry, the "expatriate Brooklyn Jew in Oxford," quickly sees through Ed's fiction—"You? Never!"—undercutting his brother's comically transparent self-analysis that he could be convinced "under the right conditions . . . a miracle, for example" ("Fantasy Rose," 154–55). The intellectual and the believer make for unhappy bedfellows here, but Ed, conflicted by his sense of obligation, stricken by the divided self, cannot quite abandon his Jewish past.

Ironically, but not uncommonly in the fiction of contemporary American Jewish writers (I'm thinking here of Steve Stern, Ethan Canin, and Thane Rosenbaum, for example), the locus for such transparent unease and the point of departure for escape is America, satirized here, in the short story "Mosquitoes," as the American heartland, where Ed Markowitz, lost in the Midwest, finds himself in exile, a stranger amidst the "cornfields, gleaming silos, cows . . . no sign of human habitation ("Mosquitoes," 101–102). At the Christian-Jewish dialogue, Ed is, comically, an alien, stranded among strangers, like Abraham before him, wandering into lands not his own, the only outpost in sight St. Peter's College, "a huge cruciform building on the crest of the hill" ("Mosquitoes," 102). Ed feels himself displaced, out of place, threatened by the very landscape that ensnares him, the mosquitoes that he hasn't yet seen, but of which he's been "warned." There are no touchstones for him here, none of the totemic protection of "the peckishness of the academics in California, the sullen diffidence of his students in Georgetown" ("Mosquitoes," 104). Ed, at home on either coast, on the "remote . . . green turf" of the Midwest, where "a beaming . . . large man" resembles "a cross between a bear and a Buick," and where the institute director "hums . . . like a lawn mower in the distance," believes himself to be preyed upon, under siege, the very pleasantries to which he is subjected are viewed from his warily suspicious and threatened perspective as insidiously planned attacks, as he tells his wife during a furtive phone call: "I'm in some godforsaken hole in the ground. Literally! It's a hundred

degrees when it isn't pouring rain, with a bunch of clergymen. . . . And my roommate . . . wished me pleasant dreams!" ("Mosquitoes," 120). Despite Ed Markowitz's comically hyperbolized account of his surroundings, there is, indeed, something ominous about the landscape of his diaspora, "chimneys and vents poking through the lush [hillside]" ("Mosquitoes," 102). And, although such instruments of death from another time, the machinery of annihilation, are depicted in passing, as little more than a benign backdrop for the institute's edenic surroundings, their representation accentuates what is, for Ed Markowitz, hostile terrain and his exaggerated difference from others.

And Ed is, indeed, singled out, and is so all in the name of ecumenical goodwill and tolerance for religious observances he neither maintains nor requires. During mealtime at the institute, Ed is driven past the "brownies and red Jell-O cubes and the vats of mashed potatoes . . . [and] meat loaf . . . potatoes and Irish stew" that are provided for the non-Jewish participants at the conference and which Ed would clearly prefer over the kosher meal, a bagel dog, that is not unceremoniously presented to him ("Mosquitoes," 106–107). Ed's sense of difference is both externally imposed—he is, after all, one of the institute's invited Jews and thus meant to be a representative figure at the conference, for which Ed has contempt. For Ed, the "good," the totems of the successful life and the well-formed character are articulated in the scrupulous god-terms of his own middle-class, professional, generational culture: intelligence, rationality, discernment, and self-analysis, the ability to recognize one's own self-myths even in the midst of their making. And Ed Markowitz, estranged among the pilgrims, takes no little comfort in his conceit and difference from his unbidden peers: the Presbyterian preacher who listens to recordings from the Bible on his Walkman; the Catholic convert who remembers his "roots" as a Jew; the monk who resembles an auto mechanic; the nun-turned-assistant professor, who specializes "in prophets from a form-critical approach" ("Mosquitoes," 112). And if he has to be singled out as a Jew to ensure his advantage and self-conceit, then so be it. But furtively, behind the scenes, in an ego-affirming moment of pardon, "stealthily, after checking to make sure that none of the conference people are around, he takes a tray and loads up with fried chicken, mashed potatoes, peas, and apple pie. He goes back for seconds. He eats like a man rescued from captivity," rescued, that is, from being the Jew, from his own worst fears about himself ("Mosquitoes," 124–125). His phobic response to being out of control, out of place—"he feels he is falling . . . falling as in a dream"—suggests his fear of impotence, of powerlessness, of being ill-equipped and

fundamentally unsuited for that which he has so diligently worked, and his pressing fear that that which he has so arduously constructed will be taken away ("Mosquitoes," 108).

American culture here is necessarily seen as popular culture for most of these characters, alien, fragmentary, temporary, without historical context, unanchored to a communal, ethical past, "cultural memory bound . . . in coffee-table books," as Ed Markowitz puts it ("Mosquitoes," 116). And, of course, this presents the deep divide for Miriam Markowitz, the kind of fragmentation that motivates her to hold on to tradition, ritual, and story. And here, of course, is the schism, the place where Jewish history severs from America as the place "where all trains stop," where, in what becomes a very limiting and provincial view, a position of superiority, history is made. And, not surprisingly, there is a kind of vying for that authority in this literature, a rival for the history most legitimate, a legitimacy measured in large part by its staying power. In *Kaaterskill Falls,* Allegra Goodman's novel of a deliberately isolated orthodox Jewish community, Nina Melish can, with no uncertainty, contend that "the [Jewish] children don't know their history. . . . They know nothing about the war. . . . They learn *American* history; they learn about Pearl Harbor. To them that's what the war is. They don't learn about their heritage. They don't learn about Israel. It's a shanda [a shame]" (*Kaaterskill Falls,* 44–45). And, here, American history, *recent* history, is viewed as the direct antithesis of a Jewish past, but also as its antagonist, as arresting and redefining all other histories. Typically, Goodman offsets one character in opposition to another. For here, too, a turning away from the things of this world is viewed at least by Goodman's character Andras, in *Kaaterskill Falls*—"an immigrant from Budapest . . . from an expansive, assimilated Jewish community that, like [his] belief in God, has scarcely existed since the war" (5)—as "disingenuous." As he contends, an infatuation with history, with a singular and representative moment in Jewish history, "that tragic history," is misleading, since "you can't imagine what you don't know . . . no way to conceive, to picture, someone else's life . . . no way to transfer memories" (*Kaaterskill Falls,* 45). And, as Goodman constantly contends, "the Kehilla [Jewish community]" is not "a fortress" (*Kaaterskill Falls,* 225). But it is a place of memory, untransferable, perhaps, but shared.

The perhaps overreactive and precipitous consequence of this fractured and conflicted condition can be seen in what becomes a halfhearted but nonetheless headlong attempt of many of Goodman's characters to procure a renewed stronghold on Jewish history and

culture. Goodman's Ed Markowitz, in something of a crisis, a casualty of loss, finds himself, uncharacteristically, scarcely to his liking, in the synagogue "sort of expecting something . . . some words of wisdom from the rabbi," something that will take him out of himself and put him back where he belongs ("Fantasy Rose," 154). Yet he finds himself belonging nowhere, lost in America. The very discourse of American culture for such a character seems to undermine and dilute the very narrative of Jewish history and identity, survival and continuity, the kind of sustained "memory" that such divided characters want to own. American culture becomes, for such characters, an essential thinness, a reminder of what is missing, of what they have, all too willingly, surrendered, an unforgivable denial of Jewish history, legendary and immediate. To Henry Markowitz's stricken ears, the rabbi reminds the congregation of their tradition, "one of communal, rather than personal, guilt, and one of communal redemption" ("The Art Biz," 41). Rebuilding the temple, as it were, in godless, capricious America, requires a revision of the narrative, but one that does not capitulate, or at least not easily, to historical amnesia. The rabbi's chiastic warning on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement)—"Your sins are my sins, and my sins are yours"—may, in fact, cohere both rhetorically and ideologically, but we are, at the same time, reminded by Goodman's satiric and parodic voice that one may not necessarily or even desirably cross histories of suffering. Rather, individual histories are asymmetrical; they cannot be witnessed from the outside. And so the rabbi pulls the congregation together in communal guilt and redemption and, in doing so, makes suffering and histories specific, a testimony that cultures are alone in their suffering and that they must be for suffering to be definable. As the rabbi puts it, with regard to what it means to be a Jew, "We are all interconnected at the most intimate level." For Allegra Goodman, then, Jewish history is seemingly irreconcilably split in a very real sense. On the one hand, Jewish history might be seen as myth, as textual memory. On the other hand, there is a much more immediate Jewish history, the history of Jews in America. And perhaps more so than with other American Jews of her generation, Goodman most directly grapples with issues of Jewish heritage in the "modern context" ("Four Questions," 198). Goodman's fiction poses competing perspectives on the place of both cultural and religious Judaism in contemporary America. Interlacing contemporary issues such as gender, feminism, education, generational tensions, and socioeconomic mobility within the context of Judaism, Goodman shows the ways in which such pressures from the "outside" complicate conditions for her characters and

make the construction of identity that preoccupies them endlessly all the more difficult. Goodman's characters are continually engaged in conflicting postures among what they perceive to be the obligatory tentacles of traditional Jewish values and the intrusions and presumptions of American cultural influences. There seems to be little middle ground for Goodman's characters. There are those who uncompromisingly embrace Judaism and those who run from it, or from what they imagine it to be.

In all these ways, Goodman's fiction speaks most lucidly to the divided self, a self whose pulls to Judaism often make for an uneasy reconciliation with the ever-growing anxieties of the "modern age," especially for the first-generation American-born. But perhaps Goodman is able, finally, to suggest the means for reconciliation. For, in the final story in *The Family Markowitz,* a generation of secular, cultural American Jews, as seen in the postures of Ed and Sarah Markowitz, uneasily and somewhat suspiciously, give up their daughter—a child raised "in a liberal, rational, joyous way . . . to enjoy the Jewish tradition" ("Four Questions," 187)—to all that they at least initially dismissed, "traditionalism . . . an Orthodox wedding with *glatt* kosher food, a *very* young and baleful Orthodox rabbi, and separate dancing circles for men and women" ("One Down," 240). And, too, their daughter Miriam's reaction to Judaism is finally, here, seen as yet one more evolving generational response to her "legacy," to one's place in a long tradition of Jewish history and myth, part of an ongoing dialogue that can, without sentimentalizing the past, reinterpret and make it one's own.

Indeed, the collection concludes with the joyful celebration of Miriam's marriage, a very traditional Orthodox wedding at which her father's earlier distaste once shed becomes now the place for the kind of tolerance and acceptance that he has always claimed to maintain. In what might be seen as Ed Markowitz's last comically portrayed attempt to hold on to his "domain," as he puts it, he does step out of his predispositions, if only momentarily at the height of the celebration. He recognizes in his daughter's life the possibilities of this generation's ability to bring together what he has always seen to be two contradictory impulses: "Jon and Miriam are deeply committed to the sciences, to Judaism. . . . It is a new beginning for Miriam and Jon, and for the Jewish people as a whole" ("One Down," 259). To be sure, Goodman shapes the ceremony with characteristic comic balance, since the videographer filming the wedding—making a sales pitch for "the deluxe . . . six hour" version—competes with the rituals of traditionalism. But, finally, it's a ceremony of seeming reconciliations, a synthesis

and intertwining of the secular and religious life. It is for Miriam's generation, if not that of her parents and grandparents, a comfortable fit. But "getting there" is not without its recognition of the fracture or the potential fractures in the family, in the very foundations of generational continuity, and in the generational exigencies and oft-perceived constraints for middle class, educated Jews in America in the second half of the twentieth century.

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Part IV

Into the Twenty-First Century: The Pendulum Swings

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Failed Conquests: Jews and Germans in Fictions and Memoirs by American Jewish Women

Susanne Klingenstein

For 30 years I have remembered the name of one Jane E. Gilbert. In the mid-1970s, when I was an adolescent living in southern Germany, the country's liberal weekly newspaper, *Die Zeit*, ran a story about a young Jewish woman who had come from America to live in Germany. She had come, she said, in order to rid herself of the hatred of Germans that her parents had instilled in her.

I admired Gilbert's spunk to go live in Hamburg but I thought then, as I do now, that Gilbert's project was crazy. Psychologically, she was probably right. Years of physical proximity to the Germans would most likely induce her to replace many of the notions she had acquired from her parents with her own perceptions and judgments. Considering her decision from a communal Jewish perspective, however, I thought Gilbert's undertaking made little sense. Why bother with the country and culture of death and the perpetrators instead of devoting her intellect and energy to Jewish life? In the mid-1970s, Germany was a Jewish wasteland with very few Jewish teachers, Jewish books, and Jews of Gilbert's age. Jewish sources and resources were most bountiful in America or Israel. Gilbert, if so inclined, would probably marry a German. Her children would be *halakhically* (in Jewish law) Jewish but sociologically German; and chances were that in the next generation they would disappear into Germany.

I thought then, as I do now, that Gilbert's Jewish life had come to an end the day she arrived in Germany. My own wish was to get out of Germany in order to live Jewishly among Jews. When I was about Gilbert's age, I left for America. A life for a life.

Gilbert's project of reducing the distance to a historical enemy, of overcoming enmity through proximity and perhaps love, is of course, a familiar subject in Western literature (think of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*) with long roots in the Christian idea of love as a potent eraser of enmity created by material differences in the here and now. Geoffrey Chaucer had famously, and possibly ironically, pinned the idea to his prioress's cloak: *amor vincit omnia* ("love conquers all," Prologue, line 163). He had swiped the Latin adage from Virgil's tenth eclogue (line 69), a poem consoling the elegiac poet Gallus for a life of unhappy love. But inscribed on the prioress's brooch the sentence refers to the redemptive, self-denying love of Christ. It succeeds in overcoming all by emptying the self of everything that constitutes self(ish)ness, including anger generated by memories of injustice, hence one aspect of Christian love is forgiveness (Ozick, "Notes"). The Christian idea of love, which has dominated Western literature and shaped our expectations as readers of what we find psychologically satisfying, is based on the seeming paradox that in order to gain a self one has to give up a self; in order to gain an eternal (new) self you have to give up your temporal and material (old) self. Tolstoy famously employs it to redeem Ivan Ilych in the short moments before his death; and Boccaccio plays with the idea in the frame story of *The Decameron* when the fine young ladies of Florence, who escaped from the plague into a church, resist the idea of sacrificing themselves in the care of the sick and insist instead on their right to their own lives (Boccaccio, 59).

For Jews, the Christian concept of love has always been problematic. The self-denial it requires, the idea of giving up one's temporal and material self, meaning one's specific historical identity, is the exact opposite of the Jewish idea of identity. In contrast to the Christian redemptive emptying of the self, the Jewish construction of self, consists precisely in the nursing of historic grudges, if you will. Exact remembering and an awareness of differences created by deliberate behavior (based on God's 613 commandments) constitute officially, that is, rabbinically, Jewish identity since Moses brought down the word of God from Mount Sinai.

Not the overcoming of differences (*amor vincit omnia*), but the inscription of difference through remembrance of specific historic experiences make one a member of the *goy kadosh,* the holy (i.e., "separate") people. In short, history and experience demarcate

one's identity and separate people from each other. For that reason, Gilbert's project of moving to Germany to overcome her inherited hatred of Germans seemed to me psychologically sane, but Jewishly self-destructive.

Jane Gilbert is a real person; and real life is infinitely complicated. And so is the literature it generates. It can't be reduced to simple identity structures as the ones outlined above. Jane Gilbert has many siblings, both in real life as well as in American Jewish fiction. Germany has become unavoidable for Jews, not only because our international awareness and interdependence has drastically increased since the end of the Cold War, but also because of the intensity with which contemporary American Jewish identity is tied up with the Holocaust, the German murder of the European Jews (Rosenblum; Israel).[1] This American postwar construction of Jewish identity appears to tie Jews eternally to the Germans in a kind of bondage, one that Gilbert attempted to break at the paradoxical price of getting even more deeply entangled in it.

For American Jews, Germany is a subject of immense complexity, and for some time now it has figured here and there in American Jewish fiction. Probing the relationship of Jews and Germans in a work of realistic fiction may create some rather interesting problems, since Christian and Jewish constructions of identity are so profoundly at odds with each other that a writer will be forced at the end to take sides, either for or against the Jewish model. In this chapter I will examine how several American Jewish women writers used encounters between Germans and Jews to bring questions of Jewish identity into sharp focus. I will look at fictions written by Cynthia Ozick, Rebecca Goldstein, Jane Rahlens, and Binnie Kirshenbaum; and at two memoirs written by Jane Gilbert and Susan Neiman. The works of nonfiction will offer a wholesome reality check; knowing them makes it easier to perceive the labored constructedness and theoretical nature of the fictional works. Because of the tremendous psychological and historical complexity of the subject matter, the reader has to be prepared for a certain untidiness of argument in this essay. Each writer has pursued the subject differently and used it to pursue her own agenda. Among the few constants in the texts discussed below is the pitting of love against history. In the fictions, history usually trumps love; in the memoirs, things are not so easy. Germany is proving that she still knows how to seduce the Jews.

One of the earliest literary texts by an American-born Jewish writer that depicted a Jewish woman and a German man in an intimate relationship was Cynthia Ozick's short story "The Suitcase," written in

the 1960s and published in her first story collection, *The Pagan Rabbi* (1971). The story, told by an omniscient narrator, privileges the perspective of Gottfried Hencke, a retired German architect who had been an air force pilot for the Kaiser in World War I. At the time of the story he lives "in a big yellow-brick house in Virginia, and no longer [thinks] of himself as German. He did not have German thoughts [. . .]" (103). Hencke comes to New York ostensibly to attend the gallery opening of his son who is married to a vapid but wealthy WASP. His real purpose, however, is to embark on a voyage back to Europe. He is forced to take this trip in his mind before he even sets foot on ship when at the gallery he meets Genevieve, his son's Jewish mistress. It remains unclear, in Ozick's telling, why Genevieve has taken up with the younger Hencke, who is clearly marked as her intellectual inferior. Genevieve seems dismissive of the younger Hencke but she spars with gusto and deep relish with the older Hencke. In an escalating showdown, Genevieve forces him ever deeper into German thoughts he had long buried in the past. The story, which presents itself in the garb of a social satire about New York's cultural life, is at its center a Jewish conjecture about the nature of Germans.

Ozick's story, however, is not an empathic rapprochement to post-war Germans. On the contrary, it is an aggressive indictment of the Germans that exposes their famous "Bildung" (intellectual cultivation) as a thin veneer over an instinct-driven egocentrism devoid of empathy and moral imagination. Ozick's story was not based on personal encounters with Germans; it was an ideological fiction positing Jews and Germans on opposite sides of an unbridgeable chasm. It came down clearly on the side of Jewish self-definition through the exact and unapologetic remembrance of historic events (Kauvar, 62–66).

The resistance of memory to being softened by love and the desire of love to overcome memory is the theme of Rebecca Goldstein's extraordinary second novel, *The Late-Summer Passion of a Woman of Mind* (1989). One of its three emotional cores is the encounter of a German woman with a Jewish man. The other two cores are the German protagonist's relation to her German father and her love for an American student. Like Ozick's story, Goldstein's novel is told by an omniscient narrator and the perspective of its German protagonist is strongly privileged. At the start of the novel, Eva Mueller is a 47-year-old, highly respected professor of philosophy at a university resembling Cornell. The novel's subject (or, more precisely, the vehicle for the unfolding of its philosophic gedankenexperiement about freedom and bondage) is the gradual lifting into consciousness of Eva's suppressed memories of the painful elements of her German

identity. As in case of Ozick's Hencke, the suppression is undone as Eva slowly comes to acknowledge her emotional longings and sexual desires. Goldstein, like Ozick, thus acknowledges that our identity is not exclusively constituted by rationally grasped events committed to memory, but also by deep emotional longings that cannot be controlled by reason.

Eva Mueller's story is that of a descent from an illusion of philosophic detachment or freedom into enslavement to history and emotion. The descent is depicted in the plot as the recovery of suppressed memories while the heroine allows herself to fall in love with a boy less than half her age. What she gives up in freedom she gains in the fullness of her experience of the human condition. When the reader first meets her, she thinks she has "achieved freedom. She was, as far as it is possible, without a history. The facts, of course remained; they would always remain. What she had shed was the awful sense of them. [. . .] She had struggled free; and she was happy" (12). She paid for her freedom by renouncing all human contact and sensual pleasure. She eats little, sleeps little, and sees no one. That is how she wants it to be because she agrees with Spinoza's definition in his *Ethics:* "Human infirmity in moderating and checking the emotions I name bondage; for when a man is a prey to his emotions, he is not his own master, but lies at the mercy of fortune: so much so that he is often compelled, while seeing that which is better for him, to follow that which is worse" (50).

In the course of the novel, Eva descends into Spinoza's "bondage," falling in love and retrieving the suppressed memories of her beloved father whose own passions led him to "follow that which is worse." Eva's working through of the history of her father's entanglement in the ideology of the Third Reich in this 1989 novel coincided in real time with an intense phase of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (working through of the Nazi past) among Germans born in the last years of the war or just after it (Reichel; von Arnim).

One of the intriguing features of Goldstein's brilliant novel is its generous, sympathetic portrayal of the German struggle to come to grips not only with a criminal past, but also with the painful fact that an adored parent is not good but morally flawed. The "German condition," if I may call it that, serves Goldstein primarily as a clear-cut example of bondage (moral failure due to misguided passion) in a novel of ideas that pits reason against passion, perfection against fallibility, freedom against love, and innocence against the full, terrible range of human experience and entanglement in the world. She nevertheless succeeds in presenting with astounding empathy and

realism the German postwar generation's struggle with the atrocious failure of its parent generation (Schorsch, 149).

In other words, despite the many uncannily realistic elements in Goldstein's portrait of Eva, she is nevertheless the vehicle for a Jewish idea, dream, or wish fulfillment. Goldstein envisions for her German protagonist the kind of sorrow about the murders that would ease the strain between Jews and Germans and make it possible to bridge the chasm. In Ozick's text, by contrast, the chasm separating Jews and Germans is presented unequivocally as unbridgeable (Ozick, 1988; 1989). Goldstein equips her descendant of perpetrators with a humanizing full range of emotion but withholds children from her, as if the author wasn't ready to trust fully the goodness of her creation. The question of offspring is in fact central to the novel's second emotional core.

When Eva Mueller was still a graduate student at Columbia, she became involved with a Jewish law student, Martin Weltbaum. He was the son of two Holocaust survivors, who had settled in New York's Washington Heights neighborhood where Martin, in his words, grew up among the "necrophiliac perverts, living in a filth of decomposing memories" (64). Martin hates his parents because they exude the memory of death. He hates them because of the terror they caused him to feel when he realized as a small child that "these parents of his, on whom he was so utterly dependent, were born to be victims" (65). Although he thinks he has dissociated himself from them, he is tied to them by his hatred. He hates them because they had been weak; and he hates the Germans because they had caused his parents' victimhood and thus his own suffering.

When Martin first sees Eva on the steps of the Low Library, he is attracted to her because she is blonde, blue-eyed, and beautiful. When he finds out that she is "*echt* German," he is hooked. And so is Eva. His hatred ties him to her; her shame and guilt ties her to him. Eva senses Martin's rage, his "half-crazed anger" (60), and she submits to his violence. She allows herself to fall into a state of apathetic heaviness and fatalism: "She knew that all that was happening had to happen, and thus was absolutely right" (75). She interprets Martin's violence as a historically just punishment for the crimes committed by her parents against his parents and imprisons herself in his tiny, filthy apartment, which she barely ever leaves for 11 months. In her state of complete bondage she does not think rationally. She even enjoys what she perceives to be the justice of the abusive situation: "She felt herself strangely elevated in meeting his demands" (70).

When she gets pregnant, Martin loses all self-control and makes clear to her that presenting her to his parents as his bride is utterly

inconceivable. "What, exactly, do you expect?" he asks when she tells him that "this baby was meant to be" (79). He sketches an imaginary introduction: "Here's my bride. I'm afraid she's slightly soiled. And, one of your darkest fears: she isn't Jewish. But you haven't heard anything yet. Wait till you hear about the in-laws. Wait till you ask her about Papa's high-minded theories. I, your only surviving child, am presenting you with a nightmare that not even you two tormented souls could have dreamed during this endless night your lives have been [. . .]" (79). Whether Martin's torment of Eva is motivated by hatred of Eva as a German, as she ends up thinking, or really by hatred of his parents, by his need to do violence to them and their wishes in the only way he can, namely indirectly and secretly, is left unclear.

What is important for us here is the subject Goldstein introduces with Martin (and then drops again because she wants to focus on Eva), the subject of inherited resentment. It is precisely such secondhand hatred that Jane Gilbert sought to conquer and overcome by moving to Germany. In 1989, the year Goldstein published *Late-Summer Passion,* Jane Gilbert published her memoir of living in Germany, entitled *Ich mußte mich vom Haß befreien: Eine Jüdin emigriert nach Deutschland Ein Lebrensbreicht* (I Had to Liberate Myself from Hatred: A Jewess Emigrates to Germany). It was never translated into English. The German title was a direct rejection of Gilbert's parents and rather gratifying to Germans, since it not only appeared to confirm their notion that Jews looked down on them,[2] but also promised that here, finally, was someone who exposed the Jewish hatred of the Germans *and* embraced the new Germany by settling there.

The book is subtler than its title denotes. Its first half is a powerful portrayal of the psychological burden incurred by many American Jews who grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust in the late 1940s and 1950s. Gilbert was born in 1947; her grandparents were immigrants from Russia and Poland; her parents were raised speaking Yiddish, but after World War II insisted on completely assimilating to America. The children were urged to learn all they could, to excel in school, to fit in, never to call attention to themselves, to save all money for emergencies, to be aware that anti-Semitism lives, and to be prepared to flee at a moment's notice. Gilbert's parents did not discuss the Holocaust with her. She discovered it on her own as an adolescent. Although her Orthodox grandparents were part of her childhood, which she spent in an almost exclusively Jewish environment, she received no Jewish education and was not forced to be observant herself. Very gradually Gilbert slipped into the profound

hatred of the Germans that Goldstein described for Weltbaum. It did not serve her as a substitute for Jewish identity, but was an empathic reaction to the shame of the denigration and violence suffered by her parent generation. Perversely, Gilbert developed a morbid fascination for the mysterious Germans. Her first boyfriend in college was a young German, whose father had been killed on the Eastern front and whose mother had married an abusive, alcoholic American GI after the war. Like Weltbaum's relationship to Eva, Gilbert's relationship to Peter is an addictive love-hate relationship.

Gradually she realized that she needed to do something about what she considered to be an illness of her soul. She decided to visit Germany after college to get a good look at the enemy. In graduate school in North Carolina she developed the plan to study German in Berlin and in the spring of 1972 she moved to West Berlin to enroll at the Freie Universität. The second part of Gilbert's book deals with her stay in Germany and her gradual healing. As she worked on overcoming her anger and hatred, she moved deeper into German society, but kept her critical distance. Her description of Germany is a nuanced and disquieting picture of the profound psychopathologies of German society in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet Gilbert stayed. In 1986 she gave up American citizenship to become a German citizen.

Gilbert's memoir is not so much a reconsideration of Jewish identity (her identity was never in doubt) as an attempt to escape from what she felt to be an emotional impairment that caused her to be unjust and to live less fully as a human being. It is part of the literature of second- and third-generation trauma, which was just beginning to emerge in the late 1980s (Bar-On, Hass, Karpf, and Rosenbaum).[3] It is somewhat puzzling that Gilbert's vivid, unsentimental book with its compelling description of German society was never published in America. Were American publishers uncomfortable with Gilbert's desertion of America for Germany? Did they fear that critics would consider Gilbert's therapeutic solution as crazy as the psychopathology it was attempting to heal?

The book that was published in America about an American Jewish woman moving to Germany was Susan Neiman's memoir *Slow Fire: Jewish Notes from Berlin* (1992). Neiman did not come to Germany with an axe to grind; she didn't come as a troubled soul; she came in 1982 on a Sheldon Traveling Fellowship from Harvard University to study philosophy in West Berlin. There Neiman's problem was both her Americanness and her Jewishness, since Germany's young were in the related throes of Vergangenheitsbewältigung and anti-imperialism, which turned the largely leftist student body from the official German

pro-Israel line toward pro-Palestinian agitation. Although not religious, Neiman's Jewish identity was firm and comfortable. Her mother had provided her with two basic tenets of Judaism: "a belief in the value of a good education, and a liberal solidarity with the struggles of other oppressed peoples" (4). Those tenets in combination with Neiman's secure and loving upbringing in an educated, nonchalantly religious, middle-class family for whom being Jewish in America was uncomplicated, connected Neiman with a particular brand of liberal European Jewishness: "If any book about Jewish identity seemed written for me, it was Isaac Deutscher's *The Non-Jewish Jew*" (5).

When Neiman arrived in Berlin, she came as an American of liberal Jewish persuasion. Her book is a description of the Germans' struggle with their Nazi past. Its ubiquity in conversation heightened her awareness of herself as a Jew. Yet Neiman's vantage point and style (compared to Gilbert's) is distanced, ironic, emotionally untroubled; Neiman's descriptions are sharp-edged and witty; her interlocutors are often socially perceptive, offbeat, charming, some are tormented, some are not. Neiman herself falls in love with an offbeat type, Michael, the son of a Jewish mother and a German father who served in the Wehrmacht (202). After four years, having finished her dissertation on Kant, she returned to America taking Michael with her. When asked by one of her friends in Berlin why she is moving back, she replies, "There are all kinds of reasons. But a Jew can't live here without going crazy. Sooner or later" (286). Jane Gilbert went crazy in New Jersey, Neiman anticipated going crazy in Berlin. When *Slow Fire* appeared in 1992, Neiman was teaching philosophy at Yale University, and lived in Connecticut with her husband Michael and their three children.

Three years after *Slow Fire,* yet another book by and about an American Jewish woman living in Berlin appeared. It was Holly-Jane Rahlens's first novel, *Becky Bernstein Goes Berlin* (1997). Set in 1992, its protagonist, Becky Bernstein, a successful radio talk show host on a Berlin station, has just been dumped by yet another German lover. Deep in the doldrums, she decides to put herself and her apartment on a diet. As she sheds pounds and rids her apartment of accumulated junk, various objects jolt her memory and thus the reader learns what made Becky Bernstein move from Forest Hills, New York, to Berlin, Germany, and induced her to stay there for 20 years and the foreseeable future.

Gilbert's memoir was painfully serious and soul-searching, and Neiman's book was self-assured and written with that slight touch of intellectual condescension and moral superiority one detects in the

reports of rich relatives who can't help but feel awfully blessed after a visit to their impoverished cousins. Rahlens's novel, in contrast, is quite simply funny. Here is an American Jewish woman trying to connect to German types as manly men, whose attractiveness is heightened by a whiff of brooding and high art, and she is going about it without examining them or herself for deep wounds hewn by the German past. Becky Bernstein ends up in Berlin in 1972 because on her first visit on a student membership card to the MOMA, mother of all high culture, she falls for a guy who looks like Dustin Hoffman. Only he is Jürgen Markowski from a working-class section of Berlin, where he lives in a rented apartment, commune-style, to save money. Pushed to choose between a Jewish "premed hippie high on tie-dye" and "a young Berliner with no money, sloppy shirttails, and the nicest, warmest grin . . . a killer grin", she chooses the latter (4). Like many first novels, the book was strongly autobiographical. When I asked Rahlens what had drawn her to Berlin, she replied, "I had met a Berliner. What else is new? I was young and adventurous, needed to get away from home, and Berlin was a unique place to be" (Rahlens, 2006). No Jewish issue. No qualms. No guilt.

Rahlens grew up in Brooklyn as the daughter of American-born Jews whose own parents had arrived as immigrants from Lithuania and Russia. "I had, I would say, a cultural identity, I went to a Jewish day camp, a Jewish sleep away camp. I was in girls groups at the neighborhood synagogue, dated Jewish boys, went to bar and bat mitzvahs, read *The Diary of Anne Frank,* wondered if I would have survived the death camps despite the fact that I was near-sighted, you get the picture. I didn't have much of a religious identity. And a political identity? Not that either. My parents were pro-Israel but we didn't talk much about it" (Rahlens, 2006). While still in college, Rahlens went to Germany in February 1971 to spend a few months there. After graduating from Queens College, she returned to Berlin in 1972. She began working as a journalist and then became a live radio announcer and subsequently built a successful career as a radio journalist, writer, and performance artist.

Although Rahlens's novel gingerly skirts Jewish issues with history, the protagonist is very clearly identified as a Jew and the novel continuously takes note of the cultural differences between Germans and American Jews. In fact, failing to connect to Germans is the novel's main theme. Becky's disappointing German lovers parade through the book; they are singularly unfriendly, petty, niggardly, and self-obsessed. They have an external charm, a "killer grin," but it wears off quickly. The novel is light and upbeat on its surface. "I wasn't

trying to write great lit when I wrote that book, but I was trying to be truthful in a funny way" (Rahlens, 2006). The truthfulness can be sensed as a tinge of bitterness at the book's core, which registers the emotional inapproachability of the Germans, their narcissistic self-involvement, their inner sluggishness, and lack of empathy. But then, again, there are Germans who are sweet and generous. Ultimately, though, the German men in the fiction of Rahlens and of the American writer Binnie Kirshenbaum are kissing cousins. Rahlens's novel, though it sold well in Germany, flopped in America "mostly because no one cared and the reviewers could not see past Germany" (Rahlens, 2006). Kirshenbaum's books, however, appearing just a few years later, were noticed. Not because they were "better" works of literature, but because they foregrounded the German-Jewish conflict (which Rahlens's novel did not) and thus targeted a specific (Jewish) audience and gave (the largely Jewish) reviewers something to sink their teeth in.

In an autobiographical essay, entitled "Princess," Binnie Kirshenbaum disarmingly identifies all out with Brenda Patimkin, the Jewish American princess in Philip Roth's story, "Goodbye, Columbus." She puts her finger precisely on the class consciousness and gender role distribution of the 1950s that were most faithfully adhered to by those upwardly mobile Jews who had made their money in kitchen sinks or ladies garments without having had either the time or the urge to acquire an education as they moved from the Bronx to Queens to Westchester County. Kirshenbaum depicts herself as a walking stereotype saved by none other than the great seducer and nest-befouler Philip Roth.

She claims, although one doesn't quite know how serious that claim is, that she was utterly transformed by reading "Goodbye, Columbus," because she realized "that to be breathtakingly shallow was not the pinnacle of human achievement I'd cracked it up to be" (219). So she packed up and left. "I yearned to wrest free of this golden yoke, the way my ancestors yearned to escape pogroms." In humorous self-deprecation she adds, "And as my ancestors did, I too journeyed to the promised land: New York City. Unlike that of my forebears, however, my journey to New York took all of half an hour by train and on the commuter line, at that. Grand Central Station was my Ellis Island, the big clock my Statue of Liberty" (222).

She came to New York to be "something other than Brenda" (222). Since poor is pure, she became a writer; secular Jews showed up in her fiction and "Jewishness crept into my writing, just as Jewishness bit by bit revealed itself in my being. I got to abdicate the crown of

Princess, and begin to discover what it means to me to be Jewish, which necessitates looking back" (224). In other words, history constitutes Jewish identity, a bit of a problem certainly for Kirshenbaum's fictional characters, because they never acquire very much historical knowledge to look back on, therefore they never quite cease to be Brendas who prefer looking down on things to looking back on them.

Kirshenbaum published her first collection of stories, *Married Life and Other True Adventures,* with a small press in Santa Cruz, California, when she was 30 years old. Her next three books—two novels and a short story collection—were brought out by a small publisher in New York in rapid succession between 1993 and 1995. By 1996 Kirshenbaum had received a Critic's Choice Award and been named one of the 52 best young American novelists by London's *Granta* magazine. She published her next novel, *Pure Poetry* (2000), with Simon and Schuster and then switched to W. W. Norton. Within ten years Kirshenbaum had moved from the margins to the center of the literary marketplace. Her writing became more accomplished; her characters lost some of their cartoonish flatness. Her 2002 novel, *Hester among the Ruins,* a love story between a German man and an American Jewish woman, was her first full-blown realistic fiction with fairly well-rounded characters.

Germans figured in Kirshenbaum's fiction from the start mainly as the butt of ethnic jokes. But within a decade they morphed from aggressively portrayed stereotypical Krauts into an attractive, sexy professor of medieval history at the University of Munich. In her novel, *A Disturbance in One Place* (1994), which still thrived on rough-cut stereotypes, Germans had only a cameo appearance but it was a telling one. The first-person narrator, a young Jewish woman married to a WASP, is involved both in a passionate affair with a sensuous American Italian professor of eighteenth-century history and in a fling with an irritating tightwad, a famous, hip multimedia artist who happens to be a Jew from Minnesota. When the narrator sees the artist wearing a sweatshirt with "Universität Heidelberg" in gothic lettering and comments on the oddity of seeing a Jew wear such a shirt, he tells her "it's a new generation" and points out that all his German friends are artists and intellectuals. "He makes it sound as if only butchers and saloon keepers were responsible" (53). The narrator is put off. "His affection for Germans confirms some suspicions I have about the multimedia artist: 1) he has a short and convenient view of history, and 2) he is cheap, tight with a dollar. Only cheap people can put up with the Germans, tolerate their stingy ways. The only things Germans do with largesse is plop potatoes

on a plate and gas people" (54). Kirshenbaum's slapstick sarcasm is funny but also cheap itself, and it appears content to avoid any closer contact with the issue it addresses.

The narrator then remembers her encounter at age 15 with a 29-year-old German biochemist who, after exchanging addresses in an Amsterdam youth hostel, actually calls her from Kennedy Airport expecting to be hosted by his American acquaintance. When this courtesy is extended to him, he is exquisitely polite to the mother during dinner, but afterward makes his way into the girl's bedroom with an erection. She kicks him out and he shouts back, "Jew bitch" (58).

The flashback occurs when the narrator observes the Jewish multimedia artist in his Heidelberg sweatshirt. Looked at closely, the flashback actually equates a stingy American Jewish artist with a stingy German scientist. The core of the narrator's encounter with the multimedia artist is told in an astoundingly aggressive anti-German chapter entitled, "Jews Have No Business Being Enamored of Germans," which has been reprinted in an anthology of Jewish fiction on sex, although it's neither about Jews nor about sex (Bukiet, 115–119). The story's pornographic rather than erotic tension derives from the repulsiveness of seeing Jews in love with Germans and Germans aroused by Jews. The chapter ends by juxtaposing two naked men: the rapacious, freeloading German with his erection in the girl's bedroom and the multimedia artist neatly folding his Universität Heidelberg sweatshirt. "I step back to study him, his nakedness, his obliviousness to the situation: a naked Jewish man enamored of Germans" (*Disturbance,* 58). The opposition between Germans and Jews, created by the Nazis, has been reduced to its starkest outlines. There is no nuance, no irony, and no empathy for either side. German and Jew appear equally despicable.

It is remarkable that around the mid-1990s Kirshenbaum was becoming a success in Germany. She was first published in Germany in 1994. Her German hardcover editions appeared under the imprint of Hoffmann & Campe, a publisher of both literary and mass market fiction; the more widely disseminated paperback editions were issued by Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag (DTV), one of the largest and most respected publishing houses in Germany. According to Kirshenbaum's editor at DTV, her books "do very well indeed. Altogether we've sold something like 200,000 copies and we're expecting a lot more" (Wolff, 2003). Although Kirshenbaum had been noticed by German literary reviewers as a young, hip writer as soon as her first story collection appeared in translation in 1994, it was not until the translation of her novel *A Disturbance in One Place* appeared in Germany

under the sexier title *Kurzer Abriss meiner Karriere als Ehebrecherin* (Brief Outline of My Career as an Adulteress) that she attracted significant attention in the German press. Far from being put off by her sarcastic portrayal of the Germans as both niggardly and rapacious, reviewers praised Kirshenbaum's sexually uninhibited heroine who moves with ease between husband and lovers. In sophisticated German fashion, the reviewers were tempted to read the lovers as metaphors: the strappy Italian Catholic "hit man" representing the body, the artistic Jew standing in for the mind. German readers were clearly charmed.

One wonders to what extent the ease with which German readers took to Kirshenbaum was facilitated by an encounter with an American mindset so unencumbered by Jewish substance and seriousness that even the historic blame routinely lobbed at the Germans loses its sting. The protagonist of *Disturbance,* for instance, who takes the Jewish artist to task for not being Jewish enough when it comes to dealing with Germans, is herself married to a Unitarian. She spends Yom Kippur in complete disregard of its religious significance in the arms of her Catholic lover. As the daughter of a Jewish mother and a Methodist father, she identifies as a Jew in accordance with Jewish law, but her Jewishness is entirely defined by her encounter with the Holocaust.

Here too, though, the author lacks the seriousness German audiences are used to in the treatment of this subject, reading Kirshenbaum on the German murders must feel to Germans like taking a holiday from the perpetual reminders of their inextinguishable guilt. Like many American girls, Kirshenbaum's protagonist reads, at age 16, *The Diary of Anne Frank,* which her mother, now divorced from her non-Jewish husband, has hidden in a closet. "When I finished the book, I was a changed person in two ways: 1) I became aware, having identified with the main character after all, of what could've happened to me. 2) I developed a taste for Nazi atrocity stories" (87). She then begins to read books, at night in bed under the cover, about the annihilation of the Jews, and while falling asleep begins to fantasize how she would have managed to survive. She imagines herself as a partisan, living in the forest, carrying out raids, but dismisses that as unlikely. "Rather, I'd have tried to fuck my way out of such a predicament. Aimed to have caught the commandant's fancy, his roving eye. I would have been a Nazi's whore, sucked his dick, saved my ass like that" (88). The combination of crudeness, ignorance, and puerile self-importance is breathtaking and makes for a spectacular belittlement of the Jewish tragedy that German audiences might rather enjoy, because, for once, an American Jew does not appear to take the murderers very seriously at all. One cannot ascribe the

fantasy of engaging in sex with a Nazi entirely to the naiveté of an overripe teenager, since by 1993 the theme was already well established in Kirshenbaum's work. It would also become, though less crudely, the central conceit in her next two novels.

In 2000, Kirshenbaum published her third novel, *Pure Poetry.* It appeared in Germany the same year under the more lyrical title *Als hielt ich den Atem an* (As If I Was Holding My Breath). The German title refers to the Jewish protagonist's suspension of life during her three-year marriage to the German Max Schirmer, a name that ironically means "protector."[4] Lila Moscowitz, the daughter of a narcissistic mother, is the sort of American Jew who "underwent baptism in the blue chlorinated waters of the swimming pool at Fox Hill Country Club" (*Poetry,* 53). She is a version of Brenda Patimkin and Binnie Kirshenbaum. She meets Max in the streets of Manhattan, having gotten lost on her way to a courthouse. Max turns out to be a cartographer for the Rand McNally Company. "I am a German," he says (75), half mocking the meticulousness and precision needed for his job as a German characteristic. (In Ozick's "Suitcase," Gottfried Hencke's German art had been characterized by "precision" [109].)

Max is not a bad guy. He is aware of German history and thus tempers his unflagging professional self-confidence with ironic, slightly self-deprecatory remarks that indicate a thinking mind. But he keeps a lot to himself. It is the Lila who turns him into the man of her dreams and nightmares. The precision that charmed her in the first encounter is turned against Max once the relationship has become pathological and the narrator can no longer bear that Max wraps his sandwiches in waxed paper, folding the ends "with sharp creases and precision" (41).

That Lila will use Max for her own purposes—purposes that will soon enslave her, as Eva's purposes enslaved her to Martin Weltbaum—is evident in her first reaction to his confession of being German. "One way to assert your Jewishness is to have it in for the Germans. It is a birthright. Ours for the taking. One of the few things to which Jews are entitled" (75). Lila is immediately attracted to Max's physicality and she considers whether she was "the teeniest bit turned on at the thought of doing it with a German" (76). Max and Lila launch into a passionate affair. The fact that they are Jew and German is never far from their minds. In fact, they use the illicitness of their relationship during the Nazi period to enhance their pleasure. "It is likely that our evocation of *rassenschande* was nothing more than a gimmick Max and I cooked up. To enhance the excitement. The extra kick afforded by that which is illicit. As if neither of us were

able to trust our love for what it was" (159). Throughout the text, the professions of love ring false, not least because Lila considers the high point of her relationship with Max his willing subjugation to her body. "Max used to go at me like between my legs was his private Wailing Wall. His personal shrine to the six million, and he offered up nibbles and kisses of atonement. If I had to pick one thing I missed most about being married to Max, there you have it" (94). It's hard to beat this passage in its utter tastelessness.

The narrator asks the pertinent question early on: "[W]hat did it say about me that I, a Jew, found this image of Max as a townsman of Wiesbaden, if not attractive, then decidedly exciting" (44). What it says is that she likes cheap thrills and that her Jewishness consists in very little outside identifying the Germans as the enemies of the Jews. This turns her marriage to Max into a social pathology, because, married to Max, she needs to continue to think of him as an enemy in order to keep up the excitement and to affirm herself. As the excitement dulls, she needs to turn the screw. Gradually she transforms herself into a starved, shaved, dirty, naked concentration camp inmate, supposedly imprisoned by her Nazi captor. From this craziness she is saved by her thrice-married Paraguayan friend Carmen, who is descended from a long line of matriarchs. She finds a new WASP lover and Max marries a woman called Dawn. But for Lila, the loss of Max leaves a vacuum that cannot be filled, not because, as she sentimentally supposes, "there is no replacing your first love" (166), but because only he could give her identity as a Jew definite contours. Ignorant of all Jewish substance spanning three thousand years of intellectual effort, she allows herself to be reduced to the Nazis' definition of a Jew: a body of a particular kind. Hence, what she calls love is a self-centered pornographic obsession in which Max is not so much a victimizer as a convenient tool of her own narcissistic self-torture.

In her next novel, *Hester among the Ruins,* Kirshenbaum moved from satire to psychological realism and, concomitantly, from pornography to love. Published in Germany under the title, "Decisions in a Case of Love" in March 2003, it was an instant critical and commercial success there. The plot is vintage Kirshenbaum. A charming, hip, unencumbered 38-year-old American Jew, a historian by the name of Hester Rosenfeld, falls madly in love with a married German professor of medieval history 20 years her senior. This time the geographic parameters of the encounter are changed. Hester moves to Germany and lives in Munich where she can observe her beloved in his natural environment and gradually transmutes her stereotypes

of Germans into likes and dislikes based on actual observation. Once again the question of Germany raises the issue of the protagonist's Jewish identity; and once again the proximity of Germans reinforces the American's sense of her Jewishness in irrational ways. Yet this time, observation and proximity gradually trump stereotype. Hester and her lover Heinrich Falk are fully fleshed out, three-dimensional characters who engage each other as human beings with all their faults and virtues. Kirshenbaum, who spent a lot of time in Germany herself promoting her books, and made many friends in Munich, finally allows the love between a Jew and a German to unfold as a love between man and woman.

Hester Rosenfeld is the American-born daughter of Jewish immigrants to America. "We celebrated no religious holidays, but we pulled out all the stops for the Fourth of July." She has a doctorate in American history, acquired with a dissertation on a "Puritan woman, who—because there was no statute of limitations on sin—was tried thirty years after the fact for having had a little hanky-panky with a man who was not her husband" (18). We realize that we are dealing with foreshadowing here, since for some Jews, say of Cynthia Ozick's kind who "twenty years after Hitler's war, would not buy a Volkswagen" ("The Suitcase," 109), even 60years after the Holocaust a "little hanky-panky" between Jews and Germans is objectionable, and for religious Jews, the adultery committed by Hester is on a par with the sins of idolatry and murder. Needless to say, Hester's Puritan heroine makes us think of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, who was ostracized for a little hanky-panky with a clergyman while her husband was away. So we realize that Hester Rosenfeld, really wasn't named for Hester Street by her immigrant parents but for a "happy memory," which her parents connect to Hester Street (38–39) and which Hester Prynne experienced in the forest with Reverend Dimmesdale. Very cleverly Kirshenbaum inscribes into Hester's name the enjoyment of a moment of (illicit) sex.

When we meet Hester, she is 38 years old, unmarried, and has been an independent historian for some ten. She lives in New York City on a small inheritance left her by her hardworking parents. The metaphor is clear; her parents' legacy carries Hester back into history. After mining the beginnings of the United States, she is now turning to the Jewish past, for her current project is to write "*The Life and Times of Heinrich Falk*" (20).

Born in a Berlin air-raid shelter in 1943, "he was a war baby raised in the quagmire of defeat by a generation of murderers at worst or cowards at best" (21). Falk is exceedingly pleased that he

is the subject of Hester's new book, an investigation of the post-war German mentality of which he serves as the premier example. The reader realizes, of course, that Hester's future book is the book he or she is holding in hand. When Hester meets Falk while attending a conference on medieval medicine in Munich, she is immediately smitten with his looks in a way we've come to expect in Kirshenbaum's fiction: "You know those movies, those Hollywood movies about World War II, and the scenes in the ghetto or in the camps, and how the tension clamps around the insides tight like a fist when the Kommandant arrives on the scene? He, that Kommandant, appears to be carved from ice, and despite everything, you have to agree that he is handsome. Well, that's exactly what Heinrich Falk looks like when he's not smiling" (32–33). Later Hester adds, "Only destiny could think up an attraction this intense and this perverse" (33), or a novelist trying to make point.

It turns out, though, that Falk is not at all a manly man, but, at age 57, a boyishly charming, exceedingly vain, and self-indulgently sentimental man without any self-control whatsoever, a perpetual adolescent, and, a feminist might say, a perfect exploiter of those women who will succumb to him. What turns him on about Hester apart from her youth is her Jewishness, her exotic darkness (think Zenobia in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*), and he blubbers on about wanting to have a child with her, "a dark baby girl" (60) because he thinks pregnant women are sexy and he loves having daughters (19). Unmentioned is the fact (of which Goldstein's Eva Muller is so keenly aware) that making Jewish babies would be a sort of restitution for the murder of the Jews.

What Hester finds after actually moving to Munich is that her "being Jewish in Munich feels different from being Jewish in New York. In New York, being Jewish by way of cultural definition was just there, like my thyroid or appendix. A section of myself to which I rarely gave thought unless it was going to give me trouble, which, since childhood, it has not. . . . But here I am finding that I experience the occasional pang of heritage. Germany acts as a daily reminder. Tweaks *Jew* and twinges *Jew,* a pinch here and there *Jew, Jew, Jew*" (55). Unlike Jane Gilbert, Hester thinks that she comes to Germany without an agenda. "I am not the child of Holocaust survivors. By the time the ovens were fired up, my parents were long and safely ensconced in New York. . . . I have no personal relationship to any of Europe except by degrees of separation" (50, 52). This doesn't quite add up; if she were so separated from Europe, why would Germany act on her as a daily "reminder"? Reminder of what? Obviously of the German murders. Hester admits that she holds "a modicum of prejudice toward the German people.

I know it is wrong-headed to reduce the city of Munich to oompah bands, breweries, and Nazis. Still, I do it" (56). This is not so much wrong-headed as an indication that, like most Americans, Hester knows nothing else about the city or its complex history (including its Jewish history).

Hester, having settled into a small bed and breakfast hotel, begins her investigation of the Germans. She finds that Falk's father was a bit of a wimp and his mother a powerhouse. Falk's first father-in-law was a member of the Einsatzgruppen whose task was killing Jews behind the forward-moving eastern front. That discovery "bestows me with moral superiority," and its narrative reduces Falk to tears; but "he cries easily, at the drop of a hat" (57–58). The Einsatzgruppen man's daughter, Konstanze, has turned into a philosemite, and her thumbnail portrait is the most exquisite social satire in the book (57, 147–156).

That Falk's mother, who, incidentally, is the most interesting character in the book, was part of the self-confident and class-conscious upper middle class, Hester finds out several weeks into her stay in Munich. Now connect that to something Falk said right at the beginning of his affair with Hester: "[M]y parents considered the Nazis to be riffraff. . . . Nazism rose from the shopkeepers, taxi drivers, pimps, ex-soldiers, policemen, out-of-work workers, and *Hausmeisters.* Janitors, custodial crews . . . My parents would never have aligned themselves with those sorts" (46–47). And, bingo, you have the good German who comes from an alternative (non-Nazi) German tradition that kept its distance from the Nazis and did not sully itself by committing atrocities. Hester in love does not bother to investigate this self-serving postwar German myth, since looking more closely under the German rocks after rain might turn out to be less pretty. The lover has won out over the historian.

And so the novel progresses. Hester's notebook fills up with research and observations about the xenophobia and philosemitism of the Germans. As Hester moves deeper into German history, her parents become a greater presence. Her parents denied history. After arriving in America in 1940, Germany ceased to exist for them. They spoke with accents, but they were determined to be Americans in every fiber of their being. "My mother was always one to go with what was new. *Look alvays to ze moment, mine Hester. Zen look to ze future.* No dusty antiques in their house . . . My bedroom was done up in all the latest styles: beanbag chairs, studio bed, modular desk and shelving. *Ze latest fashions.* Although in my parents' eyes my PhD beatified me, my decision to study

history was, no doubt, an act of rebellion. The past was the stuff of nightmares. *Do not be looking for ze regrets. Leaf ze past to ze dead.* But by delving into American history, I did manage to leave their dead undisturbed" (200). As for Gilbert's parents, the experience of the Rosenfelds' expulsion from Europe was so traumatic that they attempted to make a clean break in America's newness. But children want and need roots and stories about their origins, and so Hester was propelled into history, American history at first, German history now; but her research does not enlighten her, because it is focused on the wrong issue.

Gradually Hester becomes depressed, in part because she is isolated, dependent solely on the married Falk for intimacy and companionship, and in part because she really hasn't progressed intellectually beyond the accumulation of facts about the Falk family. She knows more but it doesn't help her. She is still stuck in the simply binary mode of the beginning, the binary mode that informs much of Kirshenbaum's work: "Go ahead, out loud say *German* and see if the associative word that springs to minds isn't *Jew.* We need each other, not to survive, but to help define ourselves" (255). Now, for a German this is clearly not true; Germans don't need Jews to define themselves; Falk doesn't need Hester to know who he is. He is a medievalist; he knows the history of his people like the back of his hand. Hester is an indulgence for him, an entertainment. And for an educated or religious Jew, Hester's statement is not true; religious (or Jewishly literate) Jews don't need Germans to know who they are, because they are steeped in the body of texts that constitute Jewish identity. But for Hester, a secular, uneducated, Jewishly illiterate Jew, who knows nothing except the *Diary of Anne Frank,* this may tragically be true, because she is stuck, like Lila Moscowitz in her relation to Max Schirmer, with the Nazis' definition of the Jew as body (which is all Falk sees in Hester, a body for sex and babies). By investigating the Germans' history, Hester is not investigating her own (indeed her mother may have hailed from Munich and her father from Berlin; but the degree to which those cities may have defined their identities as German Jews is exactly not what Hester researches). By focusing exclusively on the Germans and their Nazi past, Hester fails to arrive at a valid definition of Jewish identity, even of the German-Jewish identity worked by so many German-Jewish intellectuals during the Weimar Republic (Brenner, Kahn) that would free her from her obsession with the Germans.

Hester realizes that she is stuck and throws in the towel; that is, she throws her notebook to Heinrich because he had asked her to

be allowed to read what she has written. "'You can read it whenever you want to,' I tell him. 'There are no secrets here. Although I haven't actually written anything yet. It's nothing but notes. But feel free.' I toss the notebook at him and he catches it with both hands" (271). It is the beginning of the end. In the middle of the night Heinrich wakes Hester and starts correcting her factual errors but his real gripe is with the overall feel of the notes: "You are looking for Nazis under every cabbage. It seems as if you want every member of my family to have been one. And not only is that not true, but you know perfectly well it is bad scholarship to twist the facts to fit the theory" (274).

Heinrich is moving fast toward the unforgivable: "You have to be careful how you present things. You don't want anyone thinking that you are one of those greedy Jews." Hester stops dead in her tracks and asks him to clarify. "What I meant was that you don't want to be like that Goldhagen," says Heinrich, referring to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, a Harvard PhD and son of a refugee. In his book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), a widely discussed bestseller in Germany, Goldhagen had argued that anti-Semitism was deeply engrained in the German people, which caused the vast majority of Germans to acquiesce to Hitler's plan to root out and destroy the Jews. He blew the myth that there was an alternative way of being German, by way of upper-class snobbery, a way that implied distance to Hitler and nonacquiescence to his policy of extermination. Heinrich then adds, "I'm talking about how Goldhagen wanted everyone to be guilty. He needed everyone to be guilty. And whether they were or not, he made them guilty for his own purposes" (275).

With these words Heinrich destroys the relationship. "[O]nce a thing has been said, it cannot be unsaid. And what's been said is there in the air between us like a permanent frost." The next day, Hester searches for the box Heinrich received from his father's second wife a few months after his father died in 1991, a box he never opened. She opens it and sifts through the photos, letters, and newspaper clippings, "I want his father or his mother, or better yet, both of them to have done evil. I want them to be guilty of something beyond minding their own business. I need for them to be guilty of something unspeakable. I want the proof of it. . . . Somewhere in this box there is dirt or blood. It has to be" (278).

By giving Hester these thoughts, the author abandons her Jewish heroine and confirms Heinrich's point of view. What had been a powerful critique of postwar Germans, an exposure of their resentment of the Jews, just a page earlier is now turned against

the Jews. Kirshenbaum now creates the impression that the Jews coming to Germany are using the Germans for their own purposes. Why, though, does Hester want Heinrich's parents to have been active perpetrators? Why is Goldhagen's argument of passive acquiescence not damning enough? Because Hester is angry at Heinrich? Because it would increase her thrill to have been the lover of a descendent of murderers? Because it's easier to think of the Germans as murderers than as banal, emotionally sluggish, unempathic, self-centered people? It's not clear.

What is made clear in the final pages is how deeply her parents' victimhood had gotten under Hester's skin (as it had gotten under Martin Weltbaum's and Jane Gilbert's), how deeply she was pained by their weakness. She envies Heinrich for always having been able to admire his strong, energetic mother. She, in contrast, had been ashamed of her weird, weak, foreign parents. "'They were victims.' I spit the word. 'And victims are pathetic. We feel bad for them. But we don't admire them'" (280–281). Suddenly she moves back into an intense memory of her parents' hardships even in America (281–282).

Heinrich the sentimentalist begins to weep and offers Hester his pity. And right afterwards, "[a]s if it were an answer to anything, I tell him, 'I love you. I really, really do love you.'" Forgotten are the brutal murders of the Jews, the starving of infants, the torture of children, the fun and games with frightened old men. We seem to have arrived at the irrational *omnia vincit amor et nos cedamus amor*—love overcomes everything, and we cede to love.

But Hester returns to America, which had offered newness and oblivion to her parents, because she realizes that she would keep looking for Nazis and evil deeds. "It wouldn't matter if I never found anything. I would always be looking. I don't want it to be this way. But it is. It's what we were left with." Jane Gilbert had come to Germany precisely to undo what she had been left with, to undo the craziness of resentment and the urge to look for evil. In a last-ditch effort, Heinrich asks Hester to forgive him, a variant of Christian love. The author could now assert her heroine's Jewish identity by having her insist on the demarcations drawn by history, on the separation of Jews and Germans. But she doesn't. Instead her heroine simply abdicates all responsibility for the events in Europe: "[T]here is no point to asking my forgiveness," she replies, "I am in no position to forgive any of it, because I was not among the suffering."

Thus the book ends with Hester back in the New York Public Library researching the arrival of the first Jews in New Amsterdam

in 1654, and thus with a first step toward establishing a more secure Jewish identity.

What conclusions, if any, dare we draw from these texts? American Jews do not think about Germany in a unified way. The country and its past continue to challenge the Jewish imagination and will continue to serve as touchstones of Jewish identity, in works of Jewish American fiction as much as in real life. Jews are once again thriving in Germany. Of the six American writers discussed in this essay, three live in America, three have opted for Germany (although I was not able to locate Jane E. Gilbert).

Susan Neiman returned to Germany. She left Yale University in 1996 to teach philosophy at Tel Aviv University, and in 2000 accepted a professorship at the University of Potsdam where she became director of the Einstein Forum. Two years later she published *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy.* Neiman became one of the most prominent and outspoken Jewish intellectuals in Germany. Liberal and secular, but deeply Jewish identified, and entirely at ease with German culture from the eighteenth century to modernity, Neiman begins where the Jewish intellectuals of the Weimar Republic were forced to leave off in the late 1930s and the Germans are thankful for her presence.

Holly-Jane Rahlens is a successful one-woman performer and a writer living in Berlin with her German husband and ten-year-old son Noah. Her book for teens *Prince William, Maximilian Minsky and Me* (2005), which appeared first in Germany in 2003, is the story of a 13-year-old girl's crush on Prince William of England. The girl's mother is an American Jew, her father a philandering German artist. The mother desperately wants her daughter to prepare for her bat mitzvah but the girl undertakes a Jewish education of her own devising. The book garnered the most important young adult literature prize in Germany and was being made into a feature film in the summer of 2006.

I asked Rahlens about the real-life identity of her son Noah. She replied: "Noah knows he is Jewish. He takes Jewish religion at his school, the Kennedy School (the German American school in Berlin). His best friend is Jewish. The friend's father is a Canadian Jew and head of the library at Berlin's Jewish Museum. Noah may or may not have a bar mitzvah. If he doesn't, it's more because he may not want to hit the books."

That has always been the issue—hitting the books—in America and Germany. What is evident, though, is that a Jewish life of sorts has sprouted from German ashes.

NOTES

1. Rosenblum writes that "between 75% and 85% rate the Holocaust as an important factor in their Jewish identity, as opposed to 7% who view the study of Torah texts as an important aspect of Jewish life." These numbers have been consistent for the past decade. A 1995 survey found that 74% of the polled American Jews identified awareness of the Holocaust as essential to their Jewish identity. The existence of Israel was important to 53%; social justice to 41%. A spring 1999 survey reported by Eric Fingerhut in the *Washington Jewish Week* found that 24% of the polled American Jews considered remembrance of the Holocaust "extremely important"; 54% thought it "very important." Other identity markers were: being part of the Jewish people (49%); commitment to social justice (20%); religious observance (15%); support for Israel (3%). www.jewishworldview.com/0699/identity1.asp.
2. A German career diplomat (born in 1941) once told me in the fall of 1999: "Für Euch sind wir doch immer im Verachtungsgraben" (for you [Jews] we [Germans] are always in the pit of contempt).
3. In the late 1980s, second-generation trauma work was being done on both the Jewish and the German side. The subject was popularized by Art Spiegelman's *Maus I* (1986) and *Maus II* (1991).
4. The German noun "Schirm" means "umbrella"; the verb "beschirmen" means "to protect"; the suffix "er" converts a noun into an agent carrying out an action.

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"Writing between Worlds"

Tova Mirvis

I do some of my best writing in shul. Not with pen and paper, not with my computer, all of which are forbidden on the Sabbath, but in my head. What moves me to write is the gap created in shul, the contrast between worlds: the public and the personal, the holy and the prosaic. People sit in rows, their siddurs open to the same page, and recite the prescribed prayers. They stand when the ark is opened, kiss the Torah scroll's velvet cover as it is carried past, bow at the knee as they begin the silent *Shemoneh Erei*. These prayers ask for cohesion, everyone saying the same thing at the same time. The words are scripted, claiming to articulate what is in the heart.

Spliced seamlessly into these sacred words is another more human, more interesting world. Here, alternate, private prayers are formed. Here, minds wander. People glance at their watches. They daydream and whisper. Silent, inner words coexist with the outer, public ones. Underneath the beauty of the prayers, inside the appearance of shared ideology and practice, I wonder who believes and who doesn't, and who is here because they want to be and who because they have been forced to come. In shul, the gap between the words we say and who we are becomes more pronounced. Lofty moments of yearning commingle with mundane moments. Both exist simultaneously, so richly, so exquisitely.

It isn't just in others that I wonder about this gap. I feel it in myself all too well. I know that I'm not really praying, at least not usually, at least not very well. I practically grew up in shul. Every *Shabbos* (Sabbath), in Memphis, Tennessee, in a purple-and-silver Orthodox shul resembling a

disco, I sat in the women's section, next to my mother, one row behind my grandmother, my view obfuscated by the domes and decorations of grand hats and the *mechitza* that separates the men from the women. Now, I still daven in an Orthodox shul. The words of the prayers still come naturally. But it's harder to feel moved by them. I am still part of this Orthodox world but at the edge, looking outward. I have one foot inside and one foot stepping out. This dangling act, this living between worlds, is unresolved and probably unsustainable. It's not a comfortable place to live. But it's a very fertile place from which to write.

Orthodox Judaism has so many rules: what to eat, when to eat, what to wear, when to pray. The great works of traditional Judaism are not narrative; they are codes of law—the Mishnah, the Shulchan Aruch, the Mishnah Brurah. Here, every moment of life is categorized and examined. Creating categories is crucial to Jewish law. Underlying much of halacha is the need to make distinctions, to separate between holy and secular, between night and day, between Israel and the other nations. There are divisions in space, in time. The Sabbath is holiness in time; the land of Israel, the holy temple, are holiness in space. There are divisions between men and women, between the priestly caste and the rest of the people. There are commandments not to mix species, for men not to wear women's clothing. The laws draw clear lines; they create and enforce strict borders.

But in day-to-day life, the borders aren't demarcated with the grand strokes of theology. They are constructed from thousands of tiny details. Orthodoxy is about minutiae; the law resides in the smallest particulars of domestic life. Clothing, food, and furnishings are never incidental. They have become the stuff of God. Seemingly unimportant details, with no clear theological origin, bespeak major statements and have taken on the force of law. "There, nothing goes and everything matters—here everything goes and nothing matters," Philip Roth wrote, comparing the old Eastern Europe and America. The Orthodox world bears great resemblance to that Eastern Europe. Everything matters. Everything means something. Ideology can be determined from the tilt of a hat. Marriage prospects are decided, and a whole world is transmitted, in the absence or presence of a seam down the back of a stocking.

All these details, these rules, do more than just restrict behavior. They hold people tightly together, creating a hotbed of community. Every individual action has an echo in a communal forest. With eyes and ears lurking everywhere, nothing goes unseen or unheard. For me, as a writer, community is always primary. Both my novels have been set within the Orthodox world. My first novel was about an

outsider longing for community and trying to become part of an insular Orthodox community in Memphis. But it is narrated by the insiders, and ultimately it is about them. My second novel is about the confrontation between tradition and modernity, about doubt and tolerance, about wanting to be inside this world and wanting to be outside it.

Happily for the fiction writer, communities bestow more than just rules. They offer the possibility for rebellion. Flannery O'Connor said, "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one." In a well-ordered, tightly constructed community there are always insiders. And only when there are insiders can there be outsiders, strangers and freaks, this rich cast of characters that a fiction writer longs for.

I learned about community as much from my Southern background as from my Jewish one. In the South, where you're from and who you're related to are the first questions asked of someone. I am a sixth-generation Memphian and am related, one way or another, to practically everyone. More than anything, growing up in Memphis taught me how to listen to the voices of a community, to hear its unsaid but certain opinions. I learned, though, that this communal voice speaks not in its highest moments, not through its most learned, important members. Rather, a community speaks most honestly through its gossip, this supposedly trivial activity taking place off to the side—in the women's section of the shul, in the aisles of a grocery store, under the hair dryers of a beauty parlor. But in a community where the details are domestic and all-important, the largest issues are played out in these seemingly small, often female spaces. Gossip is the animating voice of these spaces, and through what is talked about and what is not, it reveals most clearly what a community values and fears.

Though O'Connor's Mississippi was just a short drive from my house, it was supposedly worlds away from my Orthodox Memphis. But I recognized the voices of her characters. This was true of Eudora Welty and William Faulkner as well. In their rich, complex evocations of community, I saw my own world clearer. I cannot imagine Eudora Welty's characters without community surrounding them, without these whispering, gossiping, all-seeing, and all-knowing voices. The communities in which she places her characters, plots, and themes are not merely the side story of "setting." They are equal to her characters and plots and themes. In *The Golden Apples,* a member of the community comments that "in Morgana, most destinies were

known to everybody and seemed to go without saying." Communities serve as measuring sticks; there is always a norm from which to deviate. For Faulkner, community is equally pervasive and inescapable. In "A Rose for Emily," an old woman presumably murders a lover and then keeps his body in her house. Faulkner tells this story from the communal perspective, in the first person plural, a voice that inspired the narrative choice in my first novel. In his short story, murdered lovers are interesting, but not as interesting as the community's take on this. The presence of a community observing and wondering magnifies every individual action. Without the question of *What will they think?* the fictional world becomes so much thinner.

The writer wrestles with her own question of *What will they think?* In order to write about a community, you have to hear their voices, this ubiquitous "they" of public opinion. You have to know what they are proud of and afraid of, what they wish you would say, what they fear you will say. You have to know your subject matter so well that you can narrate a story from their perspective, until you could almost, almost quiet your objections, quell your restlessness, and become one of them again.

But for a writer, this is impossible. The official communal point of view always, eventually, must be pushed aside in favor of the individual voices that bubble up underneath. Fiction reveals what people might think but don't say or what they won't let themselves think or don't notice or simply don't believe. The goal can't be to protect or affirm, which it inevitably becomes when you live fully, deeply, wholeheartedly inside the borders. To see a community clearly, you have to be willing to expose, to look not only from up close, but from a distance. You can live within but need to make forays, imaginative and otherwise. The writer is a spy, slinking back and forth over well- delineated borders. The spy is essentially an outsider everywhere. But he or she is also an insider. By moving back and forth, the spy has the clearest sense of exactly where the border lies.

In the Torah, the spies Moses sends out to survey the land are guilty of the sin of *lashon harah:* they speak evil of the land. They are not accused of lying. Rather, they are guilty of telling the truth, for seeing the land as it actually is as opposed to how it ideally can be. Indeed, little has changed. Often, in tight-knit communities—and for me, most notably, in the Orthodox community where I've set my two novels—the worst crime a writer can commit is airing the dirty laundry in public. The dispute is rarely with the veracity of the portrayal. It is with the very act of telling. The writing is judged by whether it's "positive," whether it's "nice." Inside the protest of "negative" is,

I think, the wish to believe that there is no story. The only acceptable discovery is that—what a relief—nothing lies underneath, except for more sameness, more Orthodoxy.

But there is always a story. In the inner life, there are no orthodoxies. It is the writer's job to chip away at any insistence otherwise. Peer under a yarmulke, and what's there? Flip back a wig, lift one long skirt, and what do you find? This is not to say, of course, that the narrative of Orthodoxy must always be one of rebellion, that this is the only story that can emerge from such a world. But it is a useful and telling narrative because it explores not just what is outside but what is inside as well. By putting pressure on a world, by crossing lines, you can see both sides—what is rejected and what is valued—more clearly.

Here's a true story that gets me thinking in the middle of the night and writing early in the morning: Two girls from Borough Park, Frumchy and Elky, ran away from their Ultra-Orthodox homes. Swearing they'd never come back, looking for the farthest place from Brooklyn they could find, they took a bus to Arizona, lived in a run-down neighborhood, lied about their ages, and tried to get jobs. Here it is, the potboiler novel of outsized rebellion, the coming-of-age story, the *frum* (religious) girls' novel of high adventure. The writer's mind begins to thrum. Which temptations of the outside world beckon first? Where do they begin? How do they end?

But in order to qualify as heroines, Frumchy and Elky don't have to cast off their long skirts and step happily into an unshackled modern life. Even fictional narratives about rebellion need not follow the path of entropy, from order to disorder, from belief to disbelief. I don't need large rebellions. Small acts of transgression will suffice. Give me the stirring of a forbidden thought, a quiet chafing against a rule. In religious literature, lots of stories tell of the way in. In secular literature, lots of stories tell of the way out. But the streets don't have to run only in one direction. They can double back and wind around in complicated, paradoxical patterns. Stories come from the tensions, the oscillations, the struggles, and the compromises. Without ambivalence in either direction, the intersections are gone, the conflicts are blanched, and in its place everything is pareve.

In this case of Frumchy and Elky, life supplies the most resonant plot line, and also the quietest. In Arizona, the two girls spent most of their time shopping for blue jeans. They eventually were persuaded by their families to come home, but they returned clutching their shopping bags. Now the story seemingly shrinks and becomes less sensational: from grand adventure and high rebellion to sheepish

return. Suddenly the story is about something so mundane as clothing. But Frumchy and Elky know, and the knowledgeable observer knows too, that their story is still large and subversive, maybe more so. In their shopping bags the girls carry more than jeans. They bring home pop culture and America and adolescence and sex. With one seemingly small action, they challenge their whole world.

But Frumchy and Elky's jeans are the perfect ending to their story only when the desire for jeans is recognized as forbidden, only when this seemingly ordinary attire is imbued with religious and cultural overtones. When all this must be explained, the implicit power is diminished. In writing about traditional Judaism, there is a continual problem of language, of invoking words, concepts, or rituals beyond Shabbos and challah, beyond shul. How can these be incorporated into a novel without italics, without a glossary? To use the actual language is crucial for any true rendering of this world. In deleting potentially incomprehensible words, the rhythms and authentic voice of a novel are put at risk. To write with this dilemma is to write in your native language yet be writing in translation.

But perhaps that is the most fitting way to write about the traditional world when it is transplanted to America. Because that world is lived in translation too. A Jew steeped in ritual or texts is always something of an immigrant, in time, not just in space. No matter how many generations one's family has lived in America, to live according to Jewish law is to live knowingly out of step with the outside world. It is to live in the suburbs, in Teaneck, New Rochelle, or Memphis, but to cast a glance back over the shoulder at Babylonia and Yavneh, Vilna and Lublin. Sixteenth-century texts are not history, not legend, not myth. They are alive and binding, a means of deciding what may be eaten, what may be thought, what may be worn, during every minute, every day.

And yet, while heart and mind may be in the holy temple of Jerusalem and the great yeshivas of Babylonia and the shreds of Eastern Europe, the rest of the body is still very much in twenty-first-century America. Despite its protests to the contrary, Orthodoxy has become thoroughly American. Yarmulkes are emblazoned with Yankee slogans and Nike insignias. Sushi is certified kosher and served, as if halachically required, at the smorgasbord of every Orthodox wedding. The outside world has seeped in even to those communities that profess to shun it. But this has always been the case. Jewish culture comes not from the whole, not from the unadulterated. Rather, it is an amalgam of intersecting worlds. Straddling several worlds, living between them, is essential to the Jewish experience.

Perhaps this is why the oft-asked question *Are you a Jewish writer?* is so fraught. Ask it and watch the stampede for the door. This is true even for my generation of young writers, who are supposedly comfortable writing about tradition, who are at home with Jewish texts and rituals.

This is of course the most Jewish of protests, and underlying it is, I think, a fear of being viewed as limited, as if being intimately knowledgeable about one world precludes the ability to see and know other ones. It is also a refusal to settle down firmly inside any set of borders, to live too deeply in any one place. For me, this is a familiar spot, a familiar straddle. I am happy to call myself a Jewish writer, a Southern writer, a woman writer. I am fully all of these; they are my sources of material, they are my language and my sensibility. But at the same time, I never think about such labels when I write. There isn't time, or room, for such a consideration. When I write, I don't consider myself anything. I don't live anywhere. I don't belong to anyone. I can stand in one place, in one particular shul or another, and be somewhere else at the same time. In life, there are so many restrictions, some I will hold on to, others I have and will discard. But in writing, I don't have to do either. I can move back and forth across borders. Legal categories draw lines. Writing blurs them.

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On Being Modern and Orthodox: A Conversation with Tova Mirvis

Evelyn Avery

At 34, Tova Mirvis is a success story, the author of two best-selling novels, *The Ladies Auxiliary* (1999) and *The Outside World* (2004). She is popular on the lecture circuit, a wife and mother of two little boys, and secure in the affections of an extended family, parents, grandparents, and siblings. A Modern Orthodox Jew, she seemingly balances her religious and secular lives confidently, in stark contrast to such a literary ancestor as immigrant writer Anzia Yezierska. What do these two, separated by almost a century, have in common besides being Jewish women writers, and why do I feel drawn to both? Having researched Yezierska's life and works for an earlier chapter in this book, I decided to interview Tova Mirvis, representative of a group of young women authors who write openly and warmly about Judaism.

The invitation was accepted graciously and for convenience, we agreed to correspond online, beginning with an introduction of myself, since we had never met. I am probably in-between Anzia Yezierska and Tova Mirvis, both in age and background. Though I was born in the United States, my parents were both poor immigrants from Poland, my father arriving in the States via Panama in 1937, my mother with her family in 1921. Although raised Orthodox in Borough Park, Brooklyn, in the 1940s and 1950s, I married Don (an abbreviation of Sheldon) Avery, a secular Jew whom I met at Brooklyn College Hillel. Influenced by the Kennedy era, we escaped our "ghetto" background by teaching in an Ismaili school in Kampala, Uganda, for two

years. However, while my life took detours from Orthodoxy (several years of academic life at the University of Oregon) and others of my generation, such as some of the authors in my book, struggled with their heritage, Mirvis's experience has been quite different. While it would take having children and losing my father to return me to the Orthodox community, Tova has never left it.

There was never a question about her identity from the moment she was born. Her parents named her Tova, after her great-grandmother's Yiddish name *Gittel* (Gertrude in English), which like the Hebrew name Tova, also means good. Significantly, the author mentioned that her parents, who are of my generation, didn't give her "an English name because [they] didn't like the idea of two separate names, as if one lives one's Jewish and secular lives separately."

Though admitting she didn't "love" her name, Mirvis has not changed it, as many Jews in earlier generations had done. Furthermore, the author's comfort with her past, her interest in her namesake, her great-grandmother who had died a year before her birth, has proven fertile to her, both personally and literally. From a "handful of almost mythical stories," Gittel has emerged, as a "very proud, determined woman from Grudnow, Poland, able to overcome hardships such as having her shoes stolen while digging for potatoes," a tale Mirvis used in a short story and may incorporate in a novel someday.

Gittel, I learned, was not the first of Mirvis's relatives to immigrate since "she married into a family who had been in Memphis for several generations." Atypically for that period, these Polish Jews were not Orthodox, but Mirvis relates a story about her grandmother "that [she] loves." She describes her leaving the "Reform Temple where the family belonged and on her own (according to the family story), taking the street car to the smaller, then poorer Orthodox shul On her first Shabbat there, she introduced herself to [Tova's] Orthodox, Memphis-born grandfather by saying, "'I thought I knew everyone in Memphis.'" A bold, independent woman, she presents quite a contrast from the author's great-grandmother who had been separated from her husband for ten years before joining him in America, and conveyed a tragic figure of a woman "with a small prayer book, who instead of saying the words in it, would put it over her face and cry into it." Even in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jewish life, it seems, the difference between one generation and immigrant status could shape a woman's position in America. According to the author, such stories and images from her mother and other family members "have raised many questions and opened up the possibility for her writing."

While Mirvis can draw on an Eastern European immigrant past for her fiction from family tales, it is obviously different from mine and Anzia Yezierskia's, the latter's life haunted by Jewish Lower East Side poverty and the struggle to be accepted as American. Mirvis, however, had a mother she could respect, who grew up in Memphis with an ideal Jewish American experience, combining religious and secular activities. Raised in Memphis, "she attended the Memphis Hebrew Academy but also danced on a float in the Memphis Cotton Carnival Parade." She left the South to pursue her bachelor's degree but attended "Stern, a women's Hebrew College, where she met her husband from nearby Yeshiva University, who, although not from Memphis, was a fellow Southerner from Hampton, Virginia. She was the first in her extended family to marry a non-Memphian, which was acceptable as long as they moved back to Memphis." A remarkable pattern, perhaps reflective of the general South.

The emerging landscape of Mirvis's background, old Jewish Memphis, her college-educated, professional parents, the extended Orthodox family, in a tight middle-class community, yet in touch with the surrounding American culture, all contrasted with my life and reading experience. How wonderful to be rooted in a society and to transmit a sense of security to one's children! And yet, despite the close Jewish family and community ties, the author admitted feeling like an "outsider, feeling there is something about the South that separated the Jews, [herself], from the mainstream culture. In New York, [she] hadn't felt that way or perhaps [she] was able to more easily forget it." Perhaps this partially explains her decision to remain in the North, first in New York City after attending Columbia University and marrying, and then moving to Newton, Massachusetts, where she now lives.

However, even if Mirvis has geographically relocated, she is still attached to Memphis both emotionally and creatively. It is her other home. One idea for a future novel, she indicated, "traces several generations of a family in Memphis and how it changes with each teller, perhaps beginning with [her] great-grandmother's story about digging for potatoes, and exploring the process of shedding one identity and gaining another, trying to become part of another place and the stories that reflect that evolution."

Mirvis describes her preoccupation with the theme(s) of belonging, wanting to fit in, which is so characteristic of the "Jewish American experience" especially for a previous generation when the question of belonging was more pronounced, the barriers, more fixed, more tangible. Now supposedly," she continues, "these barriers are not there as much." But she is interested in how we still feel them and

experience our difference. Furthermore, she adds, that "even if life for many assimilated Jews has changed, been made easier, for the observant Jewish community, religious practice, in terms of clothing, food, other rituals, make one stand out."

Whereas earlier Jewish immigrants to America such as Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska were rendered outsiders by language, economics, social prejudice, and rejected their heritage, one hundred years later Tova Mirvis and other contemporary Jewish writers can choose to perpetuate their religion and culture freely. In so doing, however, they elect to be outsiders, which offers them certain freedoms as individuals and as authors.

In her private life, Mirvis can lead an Orthodox life with her husband and children but it is not the one of her grandmothers or even her mother. Times have changed. Thus, in New York City she was able to join a "liberal synagogue, KOE, open to women's participation, to adopting practices not part of mainstream Orthodox Judaism, but deemed *Halachically* (legally) acceptable." On a personal level, Mirvis commented, that she is "religiously observant, keeping kosher, observing the Sabbath and all the holy days, sending her kids to day school. She loves ritual, the Sabbath that provides an oasis in everyday life, and preserving the heritage for future generations. The Orthodox world is very much part of her life, yet there are many areas that she considers problematic and there she diverges."

There are still challenges for women in Modern Orthodox Judaism, as the author indicates, but the women's movement, the Holocaust, and American society have made it possible to be "observant" and "diverge[nt]." Like Yezierska and other Jewish American women writers, Mirvis is interested in "exploring women's lives, in domesticity, in which larger yearnings, issues, and ideas develop through the so called unimportant, mundane domestic details of life." However, in contrast to many earlier Jewish writers, she also pursues a "religious context [exploring] how women live with the rules, how the rules shape their lives and how their own desires, in turn, shape the rules. [Though she] considers herself a feminist," she wonders about her books. "Can a book be feminist," she asks, "if characters belong to and accept rules and rituals which are decidedly unfeminist?" In Tova Mirvis's words, "I don't know."

And just those three words separate Tova Mirvis from the Jewish feminist authors of the 1960s through the 1980s, many of whose works were gender and agenda driven, unlike this author whose fiction focuses on the individual within a group and "the possibility of private desire within communal norms."

If Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, and others were conflicted about their heritage, recent authors such as Mirvis are secure enough in their Judaism so they can critique but still embrace it. Acknowledging affinity with other Jewish women writers such as Dara Horn, Naama Goldstein, and Joan Leegant, Mirvis mentions that they all share a "comfort with and knowledge of Jewish tradition. Instead of using traditional Judaism to evoke a long lost past," from which characters emerge to "become part of the modern world," for these writers "tradition is alive in their fiction, exerting a pull on the characters' lives . . . to be wrestled with today."

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Select Annotated Bibliography of Contemporary Jewish American Women Writers

Eileen H. Watts

Abraham, Pearl. *Giving Up America*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998. This novel is a follow-up to Abraham's *The Romance Reader* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) whose Hasidic heroine finds herself wed to a Hasidic man she does not love and leaves him. In *Giving Up America*, the fault lines in Deena and Daniel's seven-year-old disintegrating marriage proceed from the fact that Deena was raised Hasidic; Daniel, Orthodox. He is scrupulous about ritual, but she is no longer observant. Living in New York, Deena is far from her family in Jerusalem, and without them, religion has lost its joy for her. Ultimately, this mismatch of spiritual Hasidism with blind obedience to laws destroys whatever religious or moral integrity Deena and Daniel had before they married. While Abraham defines Hasidism as "a way of life" in which "custom and ritual are sometimes more important than law [and in which] legend and myth have as much influence as fact," we see little of this demonstrated in the novel's 300-plus pages. Similarly, Daniel's attitude toward Orthodox Judaism is played out in his attitude toward marriage: "Some things you just do," he says. "What's wrong with following a tradition simply because it exists?" This seems to be his problem. As Deena's father had warned her, "Orthodoxy without the delight of Hasidism is a very dry thing." So is Daniel. If he is Orthodoxy sans the love of Hasidism, then Deena is the love of Hasidism sans the rules of Orthodoxy. She does not keep Sabbath, kosher, or belong to a synagogue. He joins a synagogue, but cultivates a relationship with another woman. While working on their newly purchased house together symbolizes the couple's

working on their marriage, and Deena's addiction to running indicates her needs to leave the marriage, much of the novel chronicles each spouse's infidelities, to each other and to Judaism.

———. *The Seventh Beggar*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005. This novel of frame stories (a la *The Canterbury Tales*) is itself framed by two instructive quotations. The first is by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772–1811), great-grandson of Hasidism's founder the Ba'al Shem Tov: "I tell you my dreams also because a dream is but the story of a dream, yet the story of a dream is more than a dream." The second, closing quote is by Walter Benjamin: "The Storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. . . . The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself" (*Illuminations*). *The Seventh Beggar* traverses the religious and literary distance between the two scholars, and into the twenty-first century. With Nachman's unfinished multilayered allegory "The Tale of the Seven Beggars" at its core, Abraham's novel generates concentric circles of creation stories ranging from Genesis to artificial intelligence and robotics. In the process, Abraham completes Nachman's tale. Set primarily in Monsey, New York, the novel tells the story of 17-year-old Joel Jakob, a brilliant Yeshiva student who becomes obsessed with R. Nachman of Bratslav, particularly after visiting his grave in Uman, Ukraine. Joel, given to fainting spells or seizures, slowly recedes into his own world of alphabet permutations (written on his bedroom ceiling) and unfortunately repairs to his neighborhood's underground drainage pipes to think. Many years later, his sister Ada's son, JakobJoel, Joel's namesake, is an MIT robotics student, who is regularly haunted by his brilliant uncle, who counsels his nephew about reaching God, Hasidism's goal. JakobJoel's female robot, Cog (presumably for cogito or cognition), is part Frankenstein's monster, part Golem, but made of words, at least in her creator's story of her. In Cog's version of Genesis, however, the universe is binomial and consists of permuted numbers. Abraham's narrative is suffused with quotidian Hasidic culture, its opportunities (rather than limitations) for women, and its spiritual life. For example, Ada is a successful dress pattern designer for Hasidic women, but her greatest disappointment in life is recognizing the limitations of knowing another person. On a more spiritual plane, Joel believes Nachman's claim that it is possible to fulfill the 613 commandments spiritually rather than physically. He also attempts to perfect himself with repeated fasts, and believes that the scribe's intimate knowledge of Hebrew letters "was the closest man could come to knowing God," for God made the world with words. Indeed, Joel believes that telling stories is a way to repair the world (to perform *tikkun olam*). The elasticity of Nachman's tales is evident in their relevance to all of Abraham's narrative ingenuity; her stories are packed with stories about stories. In the process, dream and reality, imagination and spirituality, are blurred. Abraham integrates most notably, excerpts from Arthur Green's *The Tormented Master* and Arnold Band's translation of Nachman's "The Tale of the Seven

Beggars." This Hasidic novel of Yeshiva students and science fiction, of animal allegories and talking robots, is a testament to the power of story and the creativity of the storyteller. (See also Abraham's "Trust the Tale: The Modernity of Nachman of Bratslav" at PearlAbraham.com.)

Eve, Nomi. *The Family Orchard*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000. Written as a fictionalized genealogy of writer/narrator Nomi Eve's paternal ancestors, *The Family Orchard* chronicles the cultural, political, and military history of Palestine from 1837 to the end of the twentieth century. For example, Eve braids together the lives of her ancestors, who tended citrus orchards in Sachar, Israel, with their participation in the Haganah in a dual narrative that juxtaposes "I Write:" passages with the much shorter and bold-faced "My Father Writes:" passages. The double-generational perspective offers the narrator's personal, sexual, emotional rendering of her family's stories, in tandem with her father's concise, sanitized version of events. Thus, the novel presents private and public biographies of the Sepher family members through five generations. Eve poignantly dramatizes life as a story, as befits a family named *sepher* (book). She writes that family stories are a "verbal vertebra that spine our minds," and that she writes "to build a word museum." But the novel's pervasive and salient metaphor derives from the orchards that her grandfather's grandfather owned and worked—grafting. To keep old trees productive, new life must be grafted onto them in the form of eye, support, and head grafts, all of which are explained in detail. Gradually, the grafting of new roots, branches, or trunks onto orange, lemon, and olive trees becomes emblematic of the family's life through the generations. Marriage, children, and the grafting of one generation's stories onto the next produce a novel as much about the individual's identity as about Israel's.

Goldberg, Myla. *Bee Season*. New York: Doubleday, 2000. This novel recounts one year in the empty spiritual lives of the Naumann family, whose perfunctory participation in synagogue and Jewish rituals leaves them craving something to fill the void. The father, Saul, who gives bar mitzvah lessons, finds his spiritual fulfillment in training his spelling-bee champ daughter, 11-year-old Eliza, in the kabbalistic path to transcendence through permuting the Hebrew letters in God's name. In teaching Eliza from the works of Abulafia—"The key to transcendence is language itself. Creation takes place through words. . . . Language is God's divine power made manifest in the world. The foundation of language is letters"—Saul not only bonds with his heretofore unremarkable daughter and marvels at her mystical powers, but utterly abandons his formerly close relationship with his 16-year-old son, Aaron. Consequently, bored with Judaism, rejected by his father, and yearning to repeat his communing with God that he experienced at his bar mitzvah, Aaron turns to Eastern religions, embracing an alternative mysticism. The mother, Miriam, a brilliant lawyer, is a kleptomaniac who believes that in stealing things she is reclaiming parts of her fragmented, dispersed self. Last, Eliza's obsession with pronunciation and letters recalls Shaw's Eliza Doolittle. Both seek

respectability and social acceptance through mastering words, whether in terms of spelling or pronunciation. Even Saul Naumann's Professor Higgins parallels *Pygmalion,* as teacher begins to idolize student. Goldberg's Jewish variation of Shaw's play also suggests an existential or ontological reading of her title, "Be" season, for its characters are seeking ways to live spiritual lives.

Goldstein, Naama. *The Place Will Comfort You*. New York: Scribner, 2004. This short story collection comprises five tales under the heading *Olim* (ascending), which deal with transplanted Americans living in Israel, and three tales under the heading *veYordan* (descending), which focus largely on American Israelis living again in America. The *Olim* stories function as backdrops for Israel's territorial, cultural, and violent history, but all of the stories tackle cultural dislocations among Israeli Americans and American Israelis. The collection's central thrust, however, is found in the last *Olim* text, entitled "The Roberto Touch," about high school girls on a field trip retracing Bar Kokhva's escape route from the Romans. Goldstein writes poignantly of a Jew's integral belonging in and to the physical land and history of Israel, as if it were the text of one's life. She writes, "The point is you're exactly where you belong. Physically you feel very small, so why is that? Perspective. Sure, you're small, but you're a comma, you're a period, you're a necessary part. The hills are chapters, all around you, past and present, future and the end days, so you see. You see exactly where you are, and what you are, what you've come from and what you're bringing about." This feeling is the corrective to the cross-cultural confusion that interests the little girl in the first *Olim* story, "The Conduct for Consoling." She tells her friend, "I know . . . that you can be of one place and another, not at all the same." Not surprisingly, Goldstein's characters living in Israel are much happier than those living in America, and American relatives who visit their Israeli families are depicted as overbearing, obtuse people who are ignorant of Israeli culture.

Goodman, Allegra. *Kaaterskill Falls*. New York: Dial Press, 1998. Goodman uses the Catskill summer retreat of the Washington Heights Orthodox community to explore a range of observance and freedom adhered to, bristled under, or rejected by a variety of Jewish characters, orthodox and secular. Beginning before *Shabbos* (Sabbath) and ending at *Havdalah* (ritual that closes the Sabbath) two years later, the novel balances the give and take required for membership in the kehilla (Jewish religious community), particularly by its women. Moreover, various characters seem to hold and turn Orthodox Judaism in their hands, look at it from their personal perspectives, and offer quite valid assessments of it. For example, Jeremy, secular son of the Rav, believes his father values "not deep thought about the sacred, but obedience . . . a life encumbered and weighed down by tradition and endless layers of legalism and strict observance." His mother had educated him to take his father's place, "and set him free." Similarly, Elizabeth, mother of six daughters, opens a grocery

store of her own, with the Rav's permission, to the benefit of herself and the community, but the late Rav's second son, Isaiah, forces her to close it because she catered a party without his consent. Having crossed the new Rav, Elizabeth is all but shunned by the kehilla, yet she remains part of the community because "there is something beautiful in . . . ornamenting each day with prayer, dedicating each month, and season, and every act, to God." Thus, Goodman's response to orthodoxy attempts to separate its cultural fetters, primarily those controlling women, from its religious freedom and beauty.

———. *Paradise Park*. New York: Dial Press, 2001. In this dovetailing of allegories, Goodman marries Solomon's *Song of Songs* to Milton's *Paradise Lost,* uniting in the character of Sharon Spiegelman the search for a husband (involving sequential exiles), the search for the self (the paradise within, happier far), and the search for spiritual contentment, in the form of traditional Judaism. While Paradise Park is a "bird zoo," in which birds, who by definition must fly, are caged, Goodman further analogizes the park to Sharon's image of the trade-off between freedom and happiness. She will learn that happiness means being bound to someone—a husband, or something—a religion. Sharon shifts, chameleon-like, from boyfriend to boyfriend and from spiritual guide to spiritual guide, for example, the Greater Love Salvation Church, the Consciousness Meditation Center, Jerusalem's Torah-Or Institute, and Professor Friedell's course on world religions at the University of Hawaii, the novel's initial, paradise-like setting. Sharon eventually marries classical pianist Mikhail, settles in Newton, Massachusetts, and has a son. By the novel's end, she realizes that she need not search for God any longer, "because he was searching for her." She decides "to be a receptor . . . a listener . . . a sounding board . . . open to God in all the ways he might come." Her recent knowledge of the meaning of the lyrics to "*Hinach Yaffe*" (Behold, you are beautiful), signals her own paradise within; she used to sing the words without knowing what they meant. For Goodman implies that the *Song of Songs* holds the key to the Jewish soul, which, like Sharon's fingers that play the guitar "from their own finger memory," remembers what it is supposed to do. It is no accident that her name also points to riches of the self: Sharon is a fertile region of Israel, and "spiegel" means "mirror" in German.

Horn, Dara. *In the Image*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002. This debut novel is the story of the Dutch Landsmann family across five generations and the Atlantic Ocean. Magazine editor Leora, who will marry a Landsmann, is the central character around whom various satellite characters revolve and unfold their pasts. Horn has imagined a world in the image of Jewish and biblical history, art history, the secular history of two world wars, Spinoza, and New York City's present cultural and Orthodox scenes. This intricately crafted tale is a nesting-doll series of images of the following. Photography: Bill Landsman's "eyes are like camera lenses that separate the world into frames on the film of his retina," his massive collection of slides

capture his global travels and his late granddaughter's life; Art: two visits to Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, one by Bill when he was a boy in the 1930s, and one by Leora in the 1990s, where she meets her future husband, Bill's distant relative, Jake; Dollhouses: Leora's fascination with dollhouses and miniatures, especially the verisimilitude of their contents; Genetics: Landsmann generations are images of one another in their familial resemblances and mannerisms that are repeated in each generation; Biblical Archetypes: Chapter 10, "The Book of Hurricane Job," is written in the image of *The Book of Job,* and evokes the flood; Epic Archetypes: Chapter 11 is an image of New York City's underworld, reminiscent of Odysseus's and Aeneas's epic visits to their respective underworlds, but here, on the eve of her wedding, Leora dreams of an underwater city beneath Manhattan, where its history, unchosen possibilities, and people live. Interestingly, "The road to the lost city underneath New York is paved with tefillin," which brings us to the largest nesting doll of all—God's Image. The idea that the all-but-exterminated "Jewish world lived and breathed in the image of God," and that the circumcised Willem (Bill) Landsmann is made in the image of God, contains all of the novel's smaller image motifs and more. For example, the mystery of the ancient tefillin rescued from the bottom of New York Harbor turns out to be only one of thousands of tefillin jettisoned by immigrants approaching Ellis Island, and in the Job chapter, God chastises William Landsmann's now-lost library of slides, which had "preserved a world that could be lost," saying, "I dare you to collect/A gallery of images like mine . . . These are my images, my universe, my eternity . . . I created you in my image/I am not created in yours." Thus, Horn's novel reads like a collection of double, triple, and quadruple exposures on the frames of each page. *In the Image* won the 2002 Edward Lewis Wallant Award, the 2003 National Jewish Book Award, and the 2003 Reform Judaism Prize for Jewish Fiction.

King, Ruchama. *Seven Blessings.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003. Tsippi Krauthammer, Holocaust survivor and matchmaker in Israel, tries to heal the world and avenge Hitler by making *shidduchim,* marriages. Against this backdrop of single men and women looking for their *bashertes,* King analogizes Torah study to finding one's soul mate. Comparisons between Ashkenazi and Sephardic rituals in an Israeli Orthodox neighborhood juxtapose multiple manners of Orthodox observance, complete with one group's disdain for the other's practices. The book's main character, 39-year-old American transplant Beth, is a *ba'al teshuvah* (a Jew who becomes Orthodox) who feels relief in living the Orthodox life in Israel without apologies. In this respect, Beth embodies King's freedom to "tell it like it is" in the form of the American Jewish novel. Beth's participation in a women's Torah study group parallels her search for a husband. Yet Torah study is distinguished from a relationship with God developed by prayer. For Beth, "keeping the mitzvahs outside of Israel—[in Pittsburgh, for example]—felt like doing laps in a bathtub. It lacked context." King neatly marries text to context by

discussing Torah and Orthodox practice in Israel, and by treating marriage as the *shidduch* (marriage match) that creates a universe.

Leegant, Joan. *An Hour in Paradise*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003. This collection of ten stories explores various paths to experiencing the divine, finding a sense of belonging, and developing family relationships. Leegant also experiments with the importance of and relation to strangers in our lives. Set in Jerusalem, New York, Los Angeles, and Florida, these stories deal with the spiritual or familial fallout when Jews have the rug of expectation pulled out from under them. For example, in "The Tenth Man," a rabbi's complacency about minyanim is thrown out of kilter when male Siamese twins enter the synagogue. Do they count as two or one? Because the rabbi never sees them again, were they actually there or did he imagine them? "Lucky in Love" similarly throws its main character off balance, when she learns at age 40 that her biological father is actually her mother's lover and current second husband. "Seekers in the Holy Land" finds Neal Fox, American tourist, in Israel, searching for his soul in the old synagogue in Safed, where he ends up acting as *shames* (caretaker) and janitor, collecting tips from other American tourists. He is stripped of his spiritual certainty when he realizes that the Israeli tourist business is a scam. There is no holiness, no union with God. On a more positive note, "The Diviners of Desire: A Modern Fable" is the story of a butcher who intuits that a young American woman, a transplant to Israel, is looking for a husband, and that another young American man is right for her. The butcher cleverly uses the aroma of stew to locate the woman's apartment and introduce the *bashert* (intended for each other) couple to each other. Other searchers for God and holiness populate "How to Comfort the Sick and Dying," in which Reuven, a reformed drug dealer who had sold a lethal dose to a now-dead 18-year-old girl, is taken in by a Lubavich rabbi. The rabbi charges him with visiting the sick in hospitals every day, where he ultimately despairs of finding holiness. "The Lament of the Rabbi's Daughters" is also populated with characters searching for holiness, but not in Orthodox Judaism, despite their father's prominence in the Orthodox community. Ilana changes her name and converts to Buddhism; Rena changes her name and is an aspiring actress doomed to doing toothpaste commercials; Shaindey is 26 and still lives at home; and Mira, the oldest, has disappeared and been presumed dead for years, until she shows up at Shaindey's, but then, like the Siamese twins of "The Tenth Man," disappears. *An Hour in Paradise* has won the 2003 Edward Lewis Wallant Award for Jewish Fiction, and the 2004 L. L. Winship/PEN Award.

Mandell, Sherri. *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*. New Milford: The Toby Press, 2003. This memoir recounts the professional writer Mandell's grieving and healing in the year after her 13-year-old son, along with his friend Yosef, was stoned to death by Palestinians in a cave near his home in Tekoa, Israel. While Koby's death in 2001 shattered his mother's heart, it also opened her eyes to the presence of God and Judaism, alive in her

midst. For example, she realizes that Elijah was present at Koby's bris and before his death; she intertwines biblical history, particularly of the cave, with her son's life and death and her own life thereafter, and she believes that "nature is God's speech," so that the birds are messengers of Koby's soul. In attempting to feel his presence, Mandell sees the words of the *Zohar* and *kabbalah* reflected in her experience, and sees her story told in the psalms and prayer books. She virtually folds Judaism into her life. A year after her son's murder, she feels reborn, with a new soul and mission: to achieve holiness. This has taken the form of the Koby Mandell Foundation Women's Healing Retreats for Bereaved Mothers and Widows, and Camp Koby, a camp for children who have lost parents and siblings to terrorism in Israel. Mandell's long day's journey into light is a testament to the hidden world of Jewish souls, to the Bible's currency, and to God's active presence in our lives.

Miller, Risa. *Welcome to Heavenly Heights*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003. Set in a West Bank settlement named, ironically, Heavenly Heights, this debut novel chronicles the ad hoc culture and lifestyle necessitated by living in such a place. The book welcomes us with an explanation of the main character's name. "Tova Zissie [was] named for her grandma, a third generation Jerusalemite raised and married in two cavernous rooms carved out of a stone buttress fifteen steps from the Western Wall." We are also told that Tova means good; Zissie, sweet. Tova Zissie must now trade the material sweet of a cushy life in Baltimore for the spiritual good of Heavenly Heights and try to carve out a life from the stone buttress of her and her husband's own religious belief. Tova's husband abruptly quits his high-paying managerial job at Bio Optics and moves the family to the West Bank to "reverse the exile. To go home." His departure from Bio Optics suggests a change of vision, or an alternative way of seeing life, but the first chapter's title poses the book's unanswered question: "Good, Sweet, Maybe." Is the move for the best? While this novel returns American Jews to Israel, it sets them on the politically and militarily explosive West Bank, where Miller plants several other families through whose lives we experience the settlement's culture. Through religious practice, life cycle events, and the daily difficulties of living in poorly constructed housing, amid a bureaucracy strangling in its own red tape, and the gaping vulnerabilities to violence, Miller paints a picture of life on the front, of war, of belief, and of zealous Judaism. Risa Miller won a PEN Discovery Award for this book.

Mirvis, Tova. *The Ladies Auxiliary*. New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999. Mirvis's first novel, set in her native Memphis, Tennessee, depicts the city's "close-knit," insular Orthodox community. When a free-spirited widowed convert moves to town, with her very blonde five-year-old daughter, the community begins to unravel. The novel's narrator is the communal "we" of *The Ladies Auxiliary,* who describe Batsheva's effects on them and their daughters. Batsheva the convert reminds the women of some part of

their own lives: loneliness, not having been raised Orthodox or observant at all, and doubting their own desire or ability to live an Orthodox life. Imperfect in her observance, Batsheva, however, has the faith and spirituality the community's ritually meticulous women lack. Here, Mirvis states the need for both physical observance and its spiritual meaning, but implicitly values the spiritual over "rote observance." For example, Batsheva, an artist and the girls' art teacher, brings a creativity to sukkah decorating and menorah building that invigorates the community's spirit and transcends its physical rituals. In addition, prior to converting, Batsheva "felt like a soul born into the wrong body," and now sees "beauty in restraint." She feels so purified by the *mikvah* (pool of purification waters) that she continues to use it when it is no longer necessary. The novel is essentially a three-pronged study: of a community's attempt to live up to a religious ideal, of the individual's benefits and costs of living in such a community, and of the price of belonging—to any community.

———. *The Outside World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004. In this novel Mirvis dramatizes the dialectics of escape and belonging, individuality and community, identity and family, and spirituality and ritual practice in the context of Modern Orthodox Judaism, itself a dialectic. The Goldmans and the Millers of Boro Park, whose children marry (Tsippy Goldman and Bryan/Baruch Miller), play out the doubts and certainties that plague Jews who belong to both worlds: those in the insular community that wish to escape from the outside secular world, and those who live in the secular world, but wish to belong to the insular community. Riddled with doubt about where they belong, the characters experiment with alternate identities. Tsippy studies a college course catalogue, whose pages and classes "seemed to say you could be this, or . . . that." Naomi Miller, "whose longing for G-d, for spirituality, felt too private," studies books on spirituality and meditation, and attends "The Women's Pre-Passover Healing Circle," which "was intended to heal the bonds of slavery—physical, emotional and spiritual." The physical work of cleaning, cooking, even praying, has become exhausting and empty for Naomi, and she seeks a fulfillment of the soul. Moreover, her husband, Joel, professes to be an Observant Agnostic, which thoroughly confuses their teenaged daughter, Ilana, who does not know who she or her parents are supposed to be. It also drives their son, Bryan/Baruch, to embrace yeshiva learning in Israel instead of Columbia University. However, Bryan's marriage to Tsippy and their move to Memphis release them from their respective families' expectations and allows them to find their own balance between escape and belonging, individuality and community, secular and religious life. Ironically, the novel ends with a passover seder at the Millers', with both families celebrating the exodus from slavery.

Pogrebin, Letty Cottin. *Three Daughters*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. A Jewish version of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters,* Pogrebin's three daughters have change thrust upon them, finding common ground

and stability in gradations of Jewish religious observance and spirituality. From a left wing feminist seder to admission to the Jewish Theological Rabbinical Seminary, the Wasserman sisters, Leah, Rachel, and Shoshana, half sisters over 50, play out their plethora of issues that plague Pogrebin's contemporaries: aging parents, disappointing grown children, failed husbands, menopause, family secrets, and loss. All of this is soaked in the histories of the women's movement, Jewish immigrant life in New York City, *Yiddishkeit* (Yiddish life), and the Bible. Each sister is consumed by her own obsession: Leah, language; Rachel, codification; Shoshanna, order. Clearly, these three values, independent of one another, create skewed lives. Combined, however, each would balance the others, which is what Pogrebin aims at with the sisters' reconciliations with each other and with their father. This novel is also a version of the Rachel/Leah story. Here, however, Sam, rather than Jacob, chose Rachel over Leah, allowing the latter to remain with her psychotic mother, resulting in the sisters' problematic relationship and in Leah's 35-year estrangement from Sam, who has long since made aliyah and is returning to his old congregation on New Year's Eve 1999 to accept an honor on the shul's centennial. The novel's feminist strain is most poignant when it applies to Judaism. The abandonment motif in Leah's life is reflected in the family's seder, in which Rachel, whose philandering husband has been evicted, leads the seder wearing her father's *kittel* (robe), and conducts the seder as a reenactment of memory offering a moving interpretation of the Passover story. Near the end of the book, Rachel delivers a midrash on the eternal light and lighting candles, and Rabbi Emeritus Sam Wasserman gives a sermon at midnight on New Year's eve, Friday, 1999, on biblical Judaism. He lovingly uses the Zohar's ritual of tikkun olam to publicly acknowledge and reach out to Leah. He speaks in terms of Tikkun Rachel and Tikkun Leah, at last explaining to her how he was forced to abandon her for much of her childhood.

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