“Phinehas, Abraham, and the Ethics of Imagination”

Michael Francus

“The Universality of Suffering”

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“How Jewish Was the Holocaust?”

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Symposium: “Sociology or Theology”

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“She Got What She Deserved”

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“How Great Art and the Unending Story of Joseph”

Gabriel Shapiro

January 2013

The University of Chicago’s Undergraduate Journal of Jewish Thought
Mission Statement

Makom aims to provide undergraduates from the University of Chicago and elsewhere with a forum for serious intellectual engagement with Jewish topics. Targeted specifically at undergraduates and drawing upon the Chicago Center for Jewish Studies, Makom seeks to create a space that is serious enough to stimulate genuine and fulfilling discourse while comfortable enough to encourage undergraduates to take risks in their thinking and writing about Jewish issues. Of particular relevance are Jewish students who want to engage with their Jewishness in a more intellectual way, and students of all backgrounds who are interested in Jewish studies but whose primary academic focus is in a different area. For the former, Makom offers a space in which the intellectual life that is characteristic of the University can be applied specifically to exploring Jewish identity, and for the latter, a space in which they can safely investigate their academic interests in Jewish studies. Ultimately, Makom strives to cultivate a rich undergraduate discourse on Jewish topics, to connect undergraduates with the Center for Jewish Studies, and to contribute to both the academic and Jewish communities of the University of Chicago.

Editorial Policy

Makom encourages submissions from undergraduate students interested in Jewish studies in the form of essays, articles, reviews, works of art, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor. Submissions will be accepted and published on the basis of their relevance to Makom’s mission statement, space available, and on their intellectual and creative merit. However, Makom reserves the right to decline to publish submissions based on the discretion of the editors, and to edit any material submitted for publication for spelling, grammar, length, and both legal and professional standards of journalistic integrity. No anonymous submissions will be published.

Commitment to Intellectual Diversity

Makom is dedicated to appropriately representing undergraduates’ diversity of views on Jewish issues. Our commitment is to serious intellectual engagement with Judaism and Jewishness, not to any specific stances that such engagement may take. As such, the opinions articulated herein are to be understood as solely those of the authors, and not necessarily reflective of the Makom editorial board.

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Letter from the Editor-in-Chief: Transitions of Power

Makom is taking a stand.

This year has been marked by the politics of power. The taste of electoral vitriol still ruins family dinners; proclamations and riots in Egypt, civil war in Syria, violence between Hamas and Israel are not half of the upheaval in the Middle East; and at home, in Chicago, a cantankerous teachers strike followed a shockingly bloody summer. These are all, in their way, the politics of power. Indeed, power and its practitioners are ineradicable from our very un-messianic world, but the fears and pressures that they engender don’t belong anywhere. They are not at home in earnest and thoughtful discussion—in Makom. We at Makom, and you at home, write, read and think about the things that we find most important. We fill a makom—place, space— with these activities and it becomes secure from power-relations and their corrupting influences. For one must be free from fear to think honestly and write earnestly; conversely, one must speak earnestly and think honestly for others to feel secure themselves. On the one hand, the honest, earnest, and insightful discussion that Makom seeks to contain presupposes the security of its discussants. On the other hand, the requisite security of these discussants exists anew with each new discussion conducted in common honesty and earnestness. Makom seeks to meet a need amongst undergraduates who wish to think honestly and speak earnestly about Jewish subjects but who do not pursue Jewish Thought as a course of study. With each issue a newly secure space must be fashioned. Indeed, Makom is not only a journal meant to afford thinkers of Jewish thoughts a critical and galvanizing intellectual environment but one that is brought into existence by the thought and writing and reading that makes it up. An issue of Makom is not a production of an existing institution but a world thriving or dying under its own coherent structure. An issue of Makom is a world that consists in the thoughts and words of its contributors, editors, and readers.

In the introduction to his Commentary on the Mishna, Maimonides discusses the roles of prophets and scholars. The scholar seeks to bring a text or tradition to understanding. His methods are clear, his tools well known. To succeed, the scholar must exercise great care and clarity of thought and argument. The prophet’s tools are obscure, unknown, and oracular. Thus the prophet can command but not interpret.¹ A prophet’s prophetic command to violate the Shabbat, in Maimonides’s mashal ² holds authority, but his definition of Shabbat does not. The prophet can command one to disregard the law, the text, the tradition but the prophet does not reveal the truth about Shabbat. For that one needs the scholar. The care and clarity with which the scholar approaches scholarship is fundamental to the transmission of tradition between generations.³ This tradition may not be touched by prophecy. The editors—who have worked with immense care and deep respect—seek to be scholarly rather than prophetic in their work on Makom. Dory, Doni, and Jon have each surprised me with their intelligence and facility. They have practiced clarity of thought, patience, and care in this issue. Together, we have taken Makom as it was laid before us by its worthy founders and have carefully and painstakingly sought to perfect it on its own term, always eschewing the politics of power.

Intergenerational transition places this issue in the context of Makom’s history. Makom has had fantastic founders. Perhaps the most relevant and just remark I can make in introducing this third issue is that the Makom community and its editors are deeply grateful to the founders of this journal, Ethan Schwartz and Danya Lagos, for their work and their success. We hope to make their creation into tradition and the space they marked out for Makom only more full of thought about Judaism and Jewishness.

Intergenerational transition with care, respect, and clarity is the means by which this issue has come to exist, and readings make up a large part of its content. If there were a subtitle to this issue, it would be “readings.” Michael Francus presents a theory of ethics through readings of the Biblical stories of Phineas and Abraham; Michal Goldschmidt reads Marc Chagall’s White Crucifixion for its universal theological meaning; Jon Catlin assesses tellings of the Holocaust; Leah Reis-Dennis reviews early twentieth-century Jewish Literature with an eye to transgressive sexualities; and I discuss great art, Joseph, and the possibility of distance from the Biblical narrative. Besides all this, we have five wonderful pieces in our symposium, “Sociology or Theology.”

Intergenerational transitions of leadership, transmissions of tradition, and interpretations of texts are vulnerable to the corrupting influences of the politics of power. On these three fronts and in its own Jewish way, Makom is taking a stand. By manifesting a transition governed by respect and care, by conscientiously upholding the character of our journal, and by reading as much as we can with compassion rather than force, another issue of Makom and another makom for Jewish thought has come to be.

Gabriel Shapiro
Editor-in-chief

Notes

² This is his word—probably the best translation for it in this context is “parable.”
³ Just after his mashal, Maimonides discusses the transmission of tradition.
**Phinehas, Abraham, and the Ethics of Imagination**

Michael Francis

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**Introduction**

The story of Phinehas is a thorny case for Jewish ethics, one that poses problems on multiple fronts and remains unsettling. In this paper, I offer a new approach to the story, one that sees Phinehas in terms of a structure of Jewish ethics that relies not only on biblical law, but also on the individual. More specifically, I employ the case of Phinehas to illustrate the caveat that one may in some cases act outside the biblical law despite that law’s claim to normative completeness—namely, that the dictates of the biblical law provide the correct course of action in any situation. Thus, while the Bible’s law offers prescriptions for every situation, the Bible also describes some situations—tests—in which the biblical law is insufficient. To show this, I will analyze Phinehas’s case and that of the Binding of Isaac through the new framework, and show how it provides a helpful understanding of the thornier ethical cases present in the Bible and in Jewish ethics in general.

**A Sketch**

The text (Numbers 25: 1-16) opens with Phinehas confronting a shameful scene in the desert: the Israelites have been led astray by Moabite women and Israelite worship of Ba’al is rampant. Consequently, God sends a plague upon the Israelites. Further, God orders Moses to tell the judges of Israel to kill the sinners, but before the judges carry out their sanguinary task, Zimri and Cozbi enter the public space by the Tent of Meeting to plead their case. The judges do not act, perhaps out of consideration for Zimri’s status within a leading family of the Simeonites. Suddenly, Phinehas raises his spear, heads for the pair, and skewers them, assuaging God’s wrath and ending the plague. As a reward, God bestows the “covenant of peace” and the “covenant of priesthood” upon Phinehas.

**Ethical Enigmas**

Phinehas’s case presents four interconnected enigmas. The first is that of zealotry, or ethical action beyond the law. Biblical law provides a normatively complete ethical code; consequently, it claims to give the correct ethical prescription for every situation. Given such completeness, acting outside of the law’s prescription should never lead to ethical action if the law’s claim is to be taken seriously. Yet in Phinehas’s case, it did. From the problem of zealotry arises the problem of law, that of prescribing ethical action. If zealotry can be acceptable and even ethical, then the question of thought; namely, that of determining ethical action, arises. If the law claims to be normatively complete and if zealotry is, at least on occasion, ethical, one must find a way of knowing when to follow law and when to be a zealot. The last enigma is Phinehas’s reward. While in many cases ethical action results in a reward (e.g. “honor thy father and mother so that you may live long” [Exodus 20:11]), unethical action does not. Further, not all ethical action, most notably killing, receives a particular reward. Samuel receives no special reward for killing Agag (I Samuel 15:33); nor do the Israelites for destroying Midian (Numbers 31:7), killing the wood gatherer (Numbers 15: 32-6), or stoning the man who curses God (Leviticus 24:10-23). Why, then, does Phinehas’s extralegal and unsanctioned killing merit a reward?

**Ethical Structure**

To understand the case of Phinehas, I will introduce a new scheme of Jewish ethics, one that relies on a distinction between God’s will and God’s communication with human beings. The former is by definition the Ethical, that which is introspected and desired by God; and the latter, its approximation. Given the limitations of human beings, we can never directly access the will of God—to do so would amount to sharing His mind. Consequently, God communicates with prophets and formulates the biblical law in order to provide human beings with a guide to the Ethical. This guide, however accurate and complete, is not itself the Ethical, but an approximation thereof that enables human beings to approach it. To understand this structure, consider a parallel case: our interaction with other minds. Suppose, for instance, that someone else is happy. He feels his own happiness, but I do not feel that happiness; instead, I see his smile and listen when he tells me that he is happy, and consequently I understand that he is happy. Likewise, I might also be made happy on my own or gladdened by his happiness, but my happiness is still distinct from his. In the same way, I do not introspect the Ethical in God’s mind, but understand it through various communications (prophecy, biblical law, etc.) and aspire to it.

Consequently, biblical law and prophecy serve as excellent approximations of the Ethical (just as most smiles come from happy people). Nevertheless, the two are not the Ethical itself, for they exist outside of God. This raises the possibility for misalignment—tests—in which the communication does not track the Ethical. The case of Phinehas is in this category. He was tested because the communication (via biblical law) demanded that he not kill Zimri (“You shall not murder” [Exodus 20:12]) while the Ethical demanded that he do so. Herein lies the justification of zealotry. Because every law derives from a communication, it may be the result of a misalignment: even if the general rules are perfect, God may send tests in which the situation demands action other than the dictated rules. As a result, zealotry—disregarding the communication—becomes acceptable. Further, the structure can explain law in light of its inevitable shortcomings. Despite the potential for misalignment, law is necessary because humans do not have direct access to the Ethical itself. With-
out law, a state in which all act as they see appropriate and there is no basis for ethical action, as is noted in Deuteronomy 12:8. With law, there is a heuristic that guides humans to the Ethical and prevents them from constantly erring.

Now the question of reward can be answered. Phinehas's reward derived from a specific type of ethical success. Not only did he achieve the Ethical; he did so by passing a test. Doing so, he achieved the Ethical not through its approximation, but rather by connecting directly to the will of God. By contrast, Samuel and the Israelites achieved the Ethical by its approximation—they followed divine communications, and consequently did not partake directly in the will of God. Phinehas's rewards reflect this. The covenant of peace—heret shalom—shares an etymological root with the Hebrew word for completeness and recognizes Phinehas for bringing himself into a complete relationship with God—not just God's communication, but the Ethical itself. Likewise, the priesthood represents a special connection with God as the Ethical and not just with the communication.

The question of thought, though, remains. How did Phinehas recognize that the ethical action required of him was not what was prescribed by biblical law? Zimri similarly disobeyed the biblical law, but his outcome was death, not an eternal covenant. Surely we should be able to distinguish between the two cases.

In most ethical situations, two tools serve as guides: faith and reason. Faith amounts to following divine communication and believing it to be the best approximation of the Ethical. Faith accepts the biblical law and treats it as the only standard for action—the law's normative completeness demands a certain response. Nevertheless, for Phinehas the communication itself was erroneous, and thus faith could not aid him. Further, no reasoning could indicate that God's communication was wrong—the law is ostensibly normatively complete, so reasoning could not demonstrate its inadequacy by exposing gaps in it. And Phinehas could not extrapolate from the law using reason either, as in his case the law was no longer the barometer of the Ethical. Reason requires a basis from which to work, and in this case that basis vanished, leaving Phinehas without tools. Again, we are drawn to the initial problem of ethical thought—what did Phinehas think when he embraced zealotry over law, and how did he know the Ethical outside of the legal?

Imagine

Herein lies the terror of existence. Phinehas did not know or reason through the ethics of his action. He imagined. One can never know or reason through the truly Ethical, using thought to fully understand God's will—it is beyond human capacity. Phinehas had no method to ensure certainty and correctness; he could only imagine. He saw the judges' inaction; he imagined the world as it was and as it would be; he envisioned Zimri and Cozbi not receiving their gruesome, public death; he envisioned the continuing plague and the death of Israelites. Parallel to this world, Phinehas imagined the biblical law chastising him, and he could see the communica-

tion looming. He gazed upon the communication and envisioned the world it would mandate in his case. Then he stopped, for he could not imagine such a world, and one thought flashed before him: "It must be otherwise!" And with that, he cast aside the law and lifted his spear.

On the other end of that spear was Zimri, justly skewered. Yet his act was eerily similar to Phinehas's. Zimri, too, flaunted law, but rather than reward, punishment was his lot. And in this confusion we meet terror: at which end of the spear will we find ourselves? Life outside of law inevitably poses this question. We can lambast Zimri for his failure of imagination—not being able to imagine a world where idol worship and sexual transgression are wrong bespeaks either a stunning lack of imagination or (more plausibly) lack of interest in ethics. Nevertheless, there is no defined line in the realm of imagination; nor could there be. Only after we act do we learn which end of the spear we face.

Abraham

A look at Abraham, who confronts a similar ethical dilemma in the Binding of Isaac, will enable me to flesh out the ethical structure that undergirds Phinehas, and shed light on another ethical problem. While there are countless interpretations of the Binding of Isaac, I focus on Soren Kierkegaard's, for its shortcomings show where my interpretation can resolve a number of difficulties. In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard constructs an understanding of the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19) that explains the role of faith and Abraham's greatness. He notes that Abraham faced the challenge of the Ethical contradicting the command of God. Abraham had full knowledge of both the command to kill Isaac and the ethical duty of a father to his son. Placed in this paradox of God against the ethical, Abraham chose God, reaffirming himself as a knight of faith through his acceptance of the absolute duty to God. On this view, Kierkegaard places faith above the ethical, and claims that faith is the very paradox of an individual transcending the ethical. One has an absolute duty to God and must resist the temptation of the ethical in order to become a knight of faith, which is the apogee of human existence. Thus, we live in fear and trembling as we work our way to salvation by embracing God above all else—including the ethical and the rational. For achieving this level of faith, Abraham was rewarded with Isaac and the blessing of prosperity. By resisting the ethical, Abraham proved himself and achieved the heroic status afforded him by Kierkegaard.

But upon reflection, Abraham's reward seems meager and his course of action partially erroneous. After the Binding, God no longer speaks with him. Sarah dies. Isaac no longer speaks with him. In describing Abraham and Isaac en route to Mount Moriah, the Bible uses the term yachdav, (Genesis 22:6) translated as 'together'. But yachdav denotes more than togetherness. Yachdav is etymologically derived from the term echad, meaning 'one,' which points to the complete unity of Abraham and Isaac and not just their juxtaposition (as would be the case with the word immo,
“with him”). Before the Binding they are tied to each other tightly. Afterwards, Abraham departs alone, and Abraham’s burial is the next time that they appear together: their former bond is lost. Such consequences of the Binding should not leave the reader overcome with the joys of fulfilled duty to God; rather, they should inspire ambivalence towards that duty, which brings the pinnacle of faith and catastrophe.

Abraham’s mixed results demand explanation, as absolute duty to God ought not disappoint, and its fulfillment should bring only good and happiness. In what way did Abraham go wrong? He ran up against the limits of faith. The Binding was a test (“After these things...God tested Abraham.” [Genesis 22:1]) but not one of faith: it tested that which goes beyond faith, as it presented a case of a communication misaligned with the Ethical. And Abraham failed. While most of the journey to God consisted of faith (in accepting His communications), the next step of the journey towards God required more, and here Abraham fell short. Abraham’s reward was that of faith, and only faith. God blessed his posterity, as faith is a critical part of maintaining any people who will journey toward God. But the focus was not on Abraham himself—unlike with Phinehas, whose covenant of peace established a personal relationship between him and God. Abraham did not achieve a complete relationship with the Ethical. After the Binding, Abraham lived estranged from God—never again did they speak, for he could go no further. Abraham was endlessly faithful, the ideal “father of faith” as Kierkegaard labels him. But this ideal is dissatisfying; there is a need for moving beyond faith, for finding something more, as Phinehas did.

The Nameless More

Kierkegaard presents the problem of faith as a paradox, which counterposes God and the Ethical. In doing so, he portrays Abraham as the greatest man, the faithful par excellence, but at the cost of placing duty to God in opposition to the Ethical, and thereby surrendering the very definition of God as omnibenevolent. Hence, Kierkegaard’s view is itself problematic despite its analysis of Abraham, which is incorrect in seeing Abraham as the faithful man par excellence. Where, then, does he err? He errs in taking faith as the highest aim of humanity. Beyond faith lies something more, something that has not been named and could not be named, something that partakes in the will of God itself.

Abraham neglected this nameless more for the sake of the divine communication. He heard God tell him to sacrifice Isaac and obliged, rather than following the Ethical, which would have told him to resist. In this case, the communication did not align with the truly ethical, and hence Abraham was tested. The Ethical demanded a refusal to sacrifice Isaac, but Abraham could not bring himself to disobey the communication from God. Thus, through his unconditional acquiescence to faith (obeying the divine communication), Abraham failed, and only attained the reward of faith. He came farther than all before him by achieving unconditional faith, which is the basis of ethical living, but he could go no further.

Notes

1 “Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes.”
3 *Ibid*, page 62
4 *Ibid*, page 66
5 *Ibid*, page 15
Scholars have consistently understood Chagall’s *White Crucifixion* as intended for either a Jewish or Christian audience. These readings, while astute and subtle in some senses, are incomplete as long as they do not recognize the painting’s universality. In this piece, I maintain that this painting’s subject is universal human suffering. Chagall elevates this suffering to an almost religious status by demythologizing traditional Jewish and Christian theological imagery and simultaneously mythologizing human suffering. To argue this more clearly, I have divided this essay into three parts. In the first, I shall briefly introduce the notion of crucifixion in religious art and introduce my approach to the painting. My approach will be focused on uncovering Chagall’s theological intention in portraying Jesus in a somewhat Jewish manner. In the second part, I shall look at the various approaches that critics have taken to the painting. In general, these seem to be focused either on an exclusively Jewish or exclusively Christian message. I shall try and show, however, that the painting’s message is neither one nor the other, but rather an appeal to universals, most specifically, universal human suffering. In my third section, I shall try and explore how the use of composite Christian and Jewish imagery undermines generic religious claims on ‘redemption’, insofar as redemption refers to freedom from suffering.

I. Artistic Crucifixions as a hermeneutical tool

Over the course of the twentieth century, theological movements and symbols were radically transformed. Against a backdrop of cultural globalization and on a scale never before seen, seminal historic events and monumental developments in technology accelerated the already extant movements of skepticism and secularism. Accordingly, the art of the twentieth century both reflected and struggled with these historical conditions. On a vast scale, people began to use the image of the crucifix outside of exclusively religious settings. Even within religious settings, this image was used innovatively. Furthermore, innovative religious use, particularly after the Holocaust, was not confined to Christians: the crucifix was innovatively portrayed by and for Jews as well. Chagall’s *White Crucifixion* is a particularly potent example of this phenomenon.

Post-Enlightenment, religious art is often seen to be a form of hermeneutics and a means of transferal of experience from a religious artistic interpreter to a religious audience. This is the approach of Stephen Breck Reid, a theologian at Baylor University, who has written extensively about the place of art in worship. He has argued that religious art should be viewed as a form of exegesis. In the textual sense, “exegesis was the recapitulation of experience,” a means of deepening the connection between the worshiper and the intention of the religious text. When the artist embodies the role of the exegete, the viewer is provided with a visual portrait of the exegete-artist’s own religious experience. Thus, in Reid’s view, when studying any painting that deals with explicitly religious themes, the objective or intention of such exegete-artists becomes an important subject of discussion.1 This approach is one that I find convincing, and I shall therefore be focusing on what Chagall’s intentions were when he portrayed Jesus in *White Crucifixion*. I mention this here in order to
distinguish my approach and this article from those that merely meditate upon the viewer’s religious reaction to Chagall’s crucifixion paintings. Although interesting, they do not provide a key to unlocking the intention of the artist, and therefore they belong to a different discussion.

II. Interpretations of the White Crucifixion’s iconography

The focal point of the White Crucifixion is a crucifixion image: bathed in shaft of white light, Jesus and the cross fill the center of painting. While scholars debate the meaning of Chagall’s rendition of this central image, they tend to read it either as exclusively Jewish or exclusively Christian. These approaches, while subtle and insightful, miss something if they fail to recognize the universality of Chagall’s message.

Most scholars address the same basic problem in their treatment of this image: the significance of this blatantly Jewish depiction of Jesus. This is a complex matter. Traditionally, crucifixion images depict Jesus as either drawing his last breath and pleading with God to save him or having just passed from the world—a moment which the Gospels describe as pivotal in world history. Indeed, in accord with this tradition Chagall’s Jesus has already drawn his last breath and is dead upon the cross. Also common in crucifixion images, blood drips from miniature holes in this Jesus’ hands and feet. Chagall’s depiction of Jesus does, however, differ importantly from the Jesus crucified in the Gospels and thus raises contentious theological problems. Jesus is not surrounded by the figures one would typically anticipate—his mother Mary, St. John the Baptist, or Mary Magdalene. Also, Chagall rather bluntly indicates that this Jesus is Jewish: rather than the crown of thorns he normally wears in such images, Jesus dons a cloth head covering similar to the Jewish kippah. Similarly, his loincloth is fringed and its two black stripes closely resemble a tallit, the Jewish prayer shawl often worn in worship.

To answer the interpretive question posed by Jesus’ blatant Jewishness, many have tried to argue that Chagall’s Jesus is nothing but one of the many other suffering Jews that surround him. For Matthew Baigell, the Jesus of the White Crucifixion is not “portrayed….as the Christian Son of God, but as a Jew who suffers and whose suffering does not redeem the world, because the suffering continues after His crucifixion.” Mark Godfrey concurs, but also adds to the impression of a helpless, suffering Jew. He believes that Chagall is asserting that Jesus is neither redemptive nor the ultimate atonement of sin for humanity. On these readings, Jesus’ Jewishness challenges Christian doctrine and, therefore, the painting’s meaning is mostly relevant to Christians.

Championing another approach, Ziva Amishai-Maisels has argued that Chagall’s portrayal of a Jewish Jesus surrounded by suffering Jews should be understood in a more accusatory vein. For her, Chagall’s message is that in killing Jews or other innocent victims, Christians were not only betraying Christ’s ideas, but killing Christ himself.” On this view, Chagall chooses Christian imagery in order to communicate specifically to Christians. He adopts Christian pictorial language, a language inherently alien to him, in order to enhance the potency of his criticism against the perpetrators of the crusades of the past and the pogroms of his present. This view offers an understanding of the painting only relevant to Christians and Jews.

Understandings of this painting as evincing an anti-Christian message—a denial of Christ’s divinity or as an accusation against Christians—suggest that this painting is directed towards Christians. There is, however, evidence to suggest that this is not the artist’s intention. In the early 20th Century, many academics were exploring the ramifications of Jesus’ Judaism on the message of the New Testament. With this intellectual context in mind, Chagall’s Jewish Jesus is less likely an explicit challenge to Christian doctrine than an extension of this investigation. Chagall, however, does not limit the image and possibilities of a Jewish Jesus to the realm of New Testament interpretation—as those primarily Christian scholars were apt to do. Rather, he seems to be emphasizing the ramifications Jesus’ Jewishness upon Jewish theology and identity instead. Thus, already, understandings of White Crucifixion as directed towards an exclusively Christian audience become questionable. There is also biographical evidence that suggests that Chagall did not mean for his painting’s audience to be Christian and Jewish. He himself said that

For me, Christ has always symbolized the true type of martyr. That is how I understood him in 1908 when I used this figure for the first time. I was under the influence of the pogroms. Then I painted and drew him in pictures about ghettos surrounded by Jewish troubles, by Jewish mothers, running terrified and holding little children in their arms.

It is, even, tempting to use this explicit equivalence between the suffering of the Jews in the organized pogroms and a crucified Jesus to argue for a solely Jewish exposition of Jesus and move to another extreme in interpreting this painting. One tempted in this way should note, however, that Chagall does not say that Jesus is the true Jewish martyr, but rather a true martyr in a more general sense.

In fact, there is much to suggest this more universal meaning of Chagall’s crucifixion image. Chaim Potok’s book, My Name is Asher Lev, was partly based upon and inspired by Chagall’s life. In it, a Jewish artist paints his familial pain in the form of a crucifixion because “there was no aesthetic mould in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anger and torment.” Upon introducing Asher Lev to crucifixion images, Asher’s first teacher, who is a Jew himself and aware of the religious sensitivities of his Hasidic student, tells him, “I am not telling you to paint crucifixions. I am telling you that you must understand what a crucifixion is in art if you want to be a great artist. The crucifixion must be available to you as a form.” Here, Potok correctly emphasizes the importance of the role that
the crucifixion as a form has played in the canon of Western Art. Additionally, the prominent image of Jesus on the Cross became the archetypal pictorial expression of suffering, martyrdom, and godliness. Indeed, in his autobiography, Chagall briefly touched on the artistic inspiration he sometimes found when studying traditional Christian iconography and religious images. He said that he “recognized the quality of some great creations of icon tradition — for example, the works of Andrei Rublev [a famous Russian Orthodox iconographer]” as ubiquitous tropes for expressing human situations. R. Rosen said it well when he said of the White Crucifixion, “Some symbols transcend particular traditions and strike a universal human chord.”

Perhaps the best argument for this more universal interpretation of the White Crucifixion’s central image comes from the painting itself. The tormenting figures that surround Jesus’ crucifixion appeal to the compassion of all viewers. These figures are evocative and unusual in a crucifixion image. Some, for instance, appear to be running out of the painting and towards its viewers; this brings their suffering closer and increases emotional impact. Crucially, and most idiosyncratically, none of the many figures on the periphery of the canvas look at Jesus and none are of Jesus’ historical era. They are frantically animated and dash from their crises as Jesus lies tranquilly dead on the cross in first-century Palestine. Thus, the painting is not showing any specific historical event, but simultaneously representing many events over many centuries. Furthermore, this composite nature seems to deliberately reference Eastern ikon painting, and thus the painting participates in narrative and formal methods from both Eastern and Western artistic traditions and histories. Through its historical, narrative, and formal diversity the painting is made cross communal.

On the left, reflecting the pogroms Chagall witnessed as a child in Vitebsk, the Russians, holding their red flags, plunder a shtetl. On the right, a large Western-looking synagogue is set aflame under a German flag, which probably mirrors the destruction of the synagogues in Munich and Nuremberg a few months before Chagall finished the painting. Originally, the flag next to the German displayed a swastika, as did the armband of the man destroying the synagogue. Representing the many signs and symbols that Jews were forced to don under Nazi rule, the sign on the man in the front left-hand corner who is amongst the other figures fleeing their synagogue also used to read “Ich bin Jude” (I am a Jew). However, Chagall painted over these details because, as he told Franz Meyer, he found that the distress and persecution in the painting made a statement that was more “literal” than he had intended. For this reason, Chagall shifted the painting’s focus from a historical depiction of Nazi and Soviet pursuit of the Jews to a more general rendering of Jewish hardship and persecution. Just as Chagall included some Christian icons in other artworks for their emotional power and impactful connotations, his erasure of the more exhaustive emblems of Nazi persecution are downplayed in the hope that the viewer may look beyond the specifics of Kristallnacht towards the greater motif: man’s inhumanity to his fellow man. The universality of Chagall’s subject and the diversity of his symbols transcend particular traditions and strike a universal human chord.

III. Chagall’s demythologizing of traditional Judeo-Christian imagery

Based on a close reading of the theological symbols contained in this painting, and against previous scholarship, I think that White Crucifixion bespeaks the role of suffering in shaping the man-God relationship. Chagall consistently undermines both Christian and Jewish religious imagery while elevating his own imagery of universal suffering to an almost religious status. If anything has definitively altered the man-God relationship—changing man’s understanding of and relationship to God—it was not Jesus’ light leaving the world as Christian doctrine holds, but rather the intense pursuit of man by man that characterized the twentieth century. Neither theology can account for the universal suffering of mankind. This suffering must be approached humbly, respectfully, almost religiously.

Just like the crucifix that they flank, the visions of Jewish maltreatment on either side of Jesus contain symbols that can be interpreted as both Christian and Jewish in meaning. On one side of Jesus, a living goat sits alone and watches the blazing shtetl. In the Hebrew Bible, the innocent scapegoat led off into the wilderness—to Azazel— is central to the ritual of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In the Christian tradition, Jesus is often seen as the final scapegoat. Juxtaposing these symbols with the oppression of Russian Jewry underlines the tragedy of the torture of innocents, both then and now. On Jesus’ other side, the parochet—the curtain that covers the ark containing Torah scrolls—burns in a synagogue. These curtains are often decorated and embellished; much care goes into the upkeep of the scrolls and the layers that protect them. For a Jewish viewer, the sight of this curtain aflame would be distressing in and of itself. Furthermore, in Midrashic literature, the parochet is thought of as analogous to the curtain in the Temple in Jerusalem at the entrance to the Holy of Holies. As I mentioned before, in the Christian tradition, “the curtain of the Temple was torn in two” (Luke. 23:45) after Jesus drew his last breath. Theologically, this has been taken to mean that a new relationship between man and God began when Jesus drew his last breath. Chagall’s inclusion of this symbol alongside Jesus on the cross articulates a belief that more than the advent of a messiah, indeed more than anything else, the endless cycles of suffering (for the events in the picture span millennia) have shaped the relationship between God and humanity.

This challenge to traditional heavenly paradigms is reinforced by the figures that float above Jesus. Unlike many Christian crucifixion images depicting an angelic presence above Christ, these figures do not triumphantly proclaim the occurrences beneath them as opening a new age. One scholar has identified these figures as the “biblical patriarchs and a matriarch” and indeed, this is consonant with many Jewish tales. For instance, in Jeremiah XXXI, Rachel weeps for the torment of her children, the people Israel, and through the merit of her tears the Lord promises to return them to their homeland. Additionally, in the fifth century Lamentations Rabbah,
Petihta XXIV, the patriarchs are described as exhibiting an unparalleled mourning for the destruction of the First Temple. Their weeping is the only true, authentic sorrow and it can hasten divine redemption. But in Chagall’s rendition, the patriarchs and matriarchs are mournful onlookers to both Jesus’ and twentieth-century Jewish problems; they too experience pain and have been reduced to something like beggars. In the painting, the patriarchs and matriarchs are not angelic powers who can intervene with God on behalf of their people, for they too they are subject to the Jewish people’s fate, they too suffer. This illustration is a far cry from the glory of their biblical days and their revered place in the balance of Jewish and Christian literature.

In White Crucifixion, Chagall strips still other figures and motifs from Jewish texts and liturgy of their established symbolic efficacy. On the lower right of the canvas, a figure in green takes great strides to escape the chaos and destruction of the surrounding scene. Chagall “ironically described the prophet Elijah as masquerading as a Wandering Jew, although Elijah’s arrival traditionally signals the coming of the Messiah and the end of the Jewish exile.” Not only is this wandering Elijah fleeing rather than redeeming, but also his flight cuts directly through the smoke radiating from the burning Torah scroll in the corner. He does not even stop to salvage the remains of the Holy Scripture. Elijah cannot save the lives of the Jews here; the Torah cannot save Elijah either.

The path of smoke through which Elijah flees ends in a mysterious white ladder and it too is a religious reference stripped of its traditional theological meaning. Crucially, this ladder does not reach the ground and it does not reach Jesus on the cross. Thus, on the one hand, it cannot be the ladder used to place Jesus on the crucifix. It cannot save him from this fate as it does not reach the sturdy ground below. On the other hand, it cannot be the ladder of Jacob’s dream because it doesn’t reach the heavens. For this reason, this ladder cannot serve as an angelic causeway and, therefore, can neither symbolize a hopeful connection between divine heaven and human earth nor the Biblical covenant. It seems that Chagall, in referencing established symbols but denying them their established meaning, is denying the hopeful and covenantal theology that is their context and grounding.

As if to involve the audience in the incidents of the painting, a Jewish mother and child run towards the viewer. They bear a strong resemblance to many images of the Virgin and Child but they are desolate and on the run. In place of a crown, the mother wears a dirty Jewish headdress and her robe is murky black instead of clear blue. Again, Chagall refers to images established by religion as symbols of hopeful doctrine and replaces their hopefulness with desolation and despair. This is the truth that is revealed with universal human suffering.

This demythologization of traditional Christian and Jewish figures is in keeping with the general disillusionment with ideas of redemption portrayed in White Crucifixion. The painting in its entirety seems to undermine the theological authority claimed by both Judaism and Christianity. Both offer sophisticated and complex imagery that attempt to account for the existence of global afflictions. Here, though, these symbols are, themselves, being persecuted. Elijah has returned, but he has been driven out again. Jesus has died for deliverance from sin, and yet even those who follow him are perpetrators of sin. Rachel cries for her people, but unlike in Jeremiah, God does not return her children to Israel. Rather, her descendants aimlessly scramble away from one tragedy to another.

This reading is further reinforced by the image of the Jews on the small boat on the left of the painting. They are lucky insofar as they have managed to escape the pogrom of their village with their lives, but they are losing their paddle and gesture aimlessly with their arms in frustration at their inability to avoid a new disaster so immediately after last. The only potentially hopeful element of the boat’s voyage is its foray into the shaft of heavenly light that illuminates the passion of Christ. However, the ray of light itself may not be so optimistic. As Aaron Rosen aptly pointed out, “Though some critics glimpse a sign of deliverance in the beam of light that bisects the canvas, what it ultimately illuminated is not so much the promise of a redemption as the reality of suffering.” Especially in the context of the unfulfilled salvation symbols of the White Crucifixion, this reading of the light in the painting seems accurate. Although the light brightens the bleak, drained grey that dominates the canvas, the white is glossy but has the solemn overtones associated with the white of a Jewish burial shroud.

Another image that might seem optimistic and the only major image yet to be discussed in this article is the candelabrum at Jesus’ feet. This candelabrum gives off its own heavenly light and holds the only fire in the painting that does not destroy. Indeed, it produces a halo of light that mirrors the one surrounding Jesus’ head. Considering the plethora of Jewish symbols in the painting, it is tempting to describe the candelabrum as a Jewish menorah—a candelabrum lit on Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, in order to commemorate the Jewish victory over the Romans who were trying to outlaw the Jewish religion. However, the six-branched candelabrum in the painting is not an authentic eight-winged menorah. Furthermore, to understand this image, one must note that yahrzeit candles are used in Judaism as a form of remembrance for the dead. Chagall’s candelabrum is not identical to a yahrzeit candle or to a menorah, but it alludes to both. By fusing the yahrzeit-menorah against a backdrop of suffering, the painting seems to assert that the perennial nature of Jewish victimization is inescapable. The menorah cannot be a true menorah because the story of Hannukah is still being repeated: the fight for freedom of religious identity has not been won—if it ever can be. Moreover, the Jews don’t seem to be in a position to fight their oppressors. There is no potential for battle here and there are no Hasmonaean fighting for the dead. Chagall’s candelabrum is not identical to a yahrzeit candle or to a menorah, but it alludes to both. By fusing the yahrzeit-menorah against a backdrop of suffering, the painting seems to assert that the perennial nature of Jewish victimization is inescapable. The menorah cannot be a true menorah because the story of Hannukah is still being repeated: the fight for freedom of religious identity has not been won—if it ever can be. Moreover, the Jews don’t seem to be in a position to fight their oppressors. There is no potential for battle here and there are no Hasmonaean forming an army. There is only fleeing and mourning.

The demythologizing of many Jewish and Christian religious archetypes is juxtaposed with the mythologizing of the relentlessness of human anguish. This torment acts as the sacred exemplar that binds the disparate characters and images
in the painting both to each other and to the viewer. Perhaps this is the reason for the ambiguous identity of Jesus, who is both Christian and Jewish at the same time. A fiddle, used to represent Jews in Yiddish plays like those of Sholom Aleichem, lies abandoned and unplaid. As long as humanity cannot recognize its interconnectedness and contemplate the tragedy of all persecution, there cannot be the hope of music nor can there be a unifying artistic culture for the West. The rise of the Nazi party in the West confused Chagall: “how could a civilization whose eyes had been schooled by the brushstrokes of Durer, Cranach, and Holbein fail to see the humanity of their victims? … For Chagall, the moral failures of the Holocaust were, at the same time, artistic failures.”

Whilst incessant maltreatment continues, all one can do is commemorate the valor of innocent victims. The White Crucifixion laments the hopeless and ubiquitous suffering of humanity that religion cannot solve. The painting itself is nothing more than a tormented onlooker.

Notes


2 For example, see Mark 15:38, which describes the Temple curtain, of its own accord, tearing into two pieces at the moment of crucifixion.


5 Amishai-Maisels in M. Raphael, Judaism, pages 141-2.

6 Michael Brown also views Chagall’s use of a crucifixion in this way, although he differs somewhat from Amishai-Maisels when he argues for a “heavily ironic” essence to the painting (Michael Brown in M. Raphael, Judaism, page 142). That is, he does not see Chagall as offering a religious message at all. The sense of the painting, according to Brown, is accusatory, but this is not where Chagall’s focus lies. Instead of accusing Christians of wrongdoing and shame them into moral repentance, Chagall is merely pointing out an irony. The Jews now embody true Christian values. Roles are reversed. They act like the innocent, persecuted Jesus of the gospels. Meanwhile, Christians have adopted the brutal and antagonist behavior of the ancestors of the Jews, the Pharisees.

7 This issue was largely ignored and/or denied until the 1800s, when scholars such as William Wrede and Herman Reimarus began to attempt to construct a picture of Jesus through historical, rather than purely theological, methodology. A socio-historical background of First Century Judaea, including the nature of Judaism and Jewish identity at the time, thus came to play a great role in this effort.


9 Kidd & Sparkes, God, p. 51.

10 Chiam Potok, My Name is Asher Lev (New York: Knopf, 1972) page 228.

11 Historically, an artist’s crucifixion image would be the marker by which his talent could be judged.

12 Marc Chagall in Aaron Rosen, Imagining Jewish Art: Encounters with the Masters in Chagall, Guston, and Kitaj (London: Legenda, 2009), page 19. The bracketed comments are mine.

13 R. Rosen in Kidd & Sparkes, God, page 51

14 Susan Compton has suggested that the painting eludes traditional Eastern and Western religious art categories by this inability of the composite parts to form a coherent narrative is intentional and means that “its form is related to that of an Eastern ikon, although the artist has dispensed with the separate compartments of an Orthodox ikon and used the grey background to unify the disparate scenes. All are dominated by the calm figure on the cross, an image from the Western tradition” [Susan Compton, Chagall (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1985) p. 214]. Unlike in the Western tradition, wherein large portraits or wall friezes interacted with one another, it was common for Eastern friezes or altarpieces to consist of many diverse and distinct images from across the Christian religion. As in the White Crucifixion, smaller scenes would often surround one larger image, such as Christ or the Virgin Mary. Unlike in the White Crucifixion, though, the different images were compartmentalized, clearly marking the different scenes as self-contained. Moreover, the figures of suffering on either side of Jesus that take the place of the two criminals next to whom Christ was crucified in the Gospels show scenes of suffering from both and Eastern and Western Jewry.

15 There is some debate about whether these figures are the protagonists or saviors of the village’s distress. Amishai-Maisels has argued for the Russians as liberators. Even if this were the case, they are ineffectual. The village has already been torched and the people have fled or been killed.

16 Chagall in Z. Amishai-Maisels, ‘Chagall’s White Crucifixion’, page 140. Amishai-Maisels points out that Chagall had plenty of opportunity to replace these details and did not. Thus, she concludes that the erasure was meant to be permanent (ibid., page142).

17 Leviticus 16:7-10 & 20-23

18 Also, unlike the angels that Chagall painted in other works, these figures lack wings.


20 Jeremiah 31: 14-16

21 Bohm-Duchen has suggested in reference to another Chagall painting, Over Vitebsk, that the portrayal of floating Jews “can also be explained by a popular Yiddish expression, whereby to ‘walk over the city’ alludes to the practice of door-to-door begging indicative of the poverty of so many Eastern European Jews at the time.” I would like to extend this to the figures here. M. Bohm-Duchen, Chagall, page 102.


23 Chagall did use Jacob’s ladder as a symbol in some of his other painting and this ladder does bear some resemblance to the ladder of his Jacob’s Ladder—both these ladders end in a shaft of light presumably originating from Heaven. Cf. Genesis 28:10-21.


25 During the traditional week of mourning following the death of a family member, yahrzeit
How Jewish was the Holocaust?

Jon Catlin

According to established usage in the Oxford English Dictionary the term “Holocaust” refers to “the mass murder of Jews under the German Nazi regime during the period 1941–45.”1 Only in the second sentence of this definition do we see mention of others persecuted: “More than 6 million European Jews, as well as members of other persecuted groups, such as gypsies and homosexuals, were murdered at concentration camps such as Auschwitz.” The term comes from the Greek holokaustos, meaning “burnt whole,” and has been used since the Middle Ages to refer to massacres.2 Today, the term “Holocaust” refers almost exclusively to the extermination of the Jewish people in Europe, and its relationship to the Hebrew term olah, meaning “burnt offering,” gives the Holocaust a particular biblical significance to Jews.

But what we now think of as the Holocaust was not always considered a specifically Jewish catastrophe. Cultural reception of catastrophic events changes over time. Only in the last thirty-five years has the Holocaust taken on the Jewish identity it has today in American culture—and even that is questioned. We have long known that many non-Jews perished in the Holocaust and related events, but prominent Jewish scholars such as Yad Vashem’s director, Yehuda Bauer maintain that the term “Holocaust” should apply only to Jews because of the uniquely genocidal component of the Holocaust for Jews.3 My task here is to bring into question both traditional Jewish accounts of the Holocaust and non-Jewish so-called “revisionist” accounts in hopes of addressing the question, “What is the value of the concept of a Jewish Holocaust?” Two premises will guide my argument: 1) Holocaust narratives should be judged on their historical accuracy and their moral usefulness and 2) narratives with more varied perspectives and greater moral complexity are more morally salutary.

According to Peter Novick in his exhaustive study The Holocaust in American Life, during the years following World War II even survivors of the death camps referred to their time in the camps as simply “the war” or “the Nazi atrocities”—collectivizations in the historical passive voice.4 For example, the words “Jew” and “Jewish” do not appear in Edward R. Murrow’s or General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s accounts of the Allied liberation of Buchenwald from April 1945.5 Tragically, this was because so many Jewish prisoners had perished that only about one fifth of prisoners liberated by the Americans at Buchenwald and Dachau were Jews.6 The May 7, 1945 issue of Life magazine that first brought Margaret Bourke-White’s widely reproduced photographic evidence of the Holocaust to the American public refers to the crimes not as specifically anti-Semitic, but simply as “[a]trocities… of the German concentration camps.” Most victims photographed at the liberation of Buchenwald were called “displaced persons” (or DPs), “prisoners of many nationalities,” “slave laborers,” or “political prisoners.” The word “holocaust” (uncapitalized) only

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22 MAKOM

Michal Goldschmidt

candles are lit. Afterwards, on the anniversary of the death, the candle is lit again for 24 hours as a form of remembrance.

26 Rosen, Imagining p. 40.
appeared in a caption referring to an image of a town that was literally burned. The next coverage of the Holocaust in *Time* came months later, in a September 11, 1945 article titled “Murder, Inc.” which stated that the Majdanek camp killed “Poles, Jews, political prisoners, and war prisoners.” Describing the identity documents of those who perished, the article notes the “papers of Frenchmen, Russians, Greeks, Czechs, Jews, Italians, Belo-Russians, Serbs, Poles.” News of the Nazi atrocities quickly spread across America, but was overshadowed by other wartime issues like FDR’s death and Hitler’s suicide.8

According to Novick, “Between the end of the war and the 1960s … the Holocaust made scarcely any appearance in American public discourse, and hardly more in Jewish public discourse.”9 Few books or movies dealt with the Holocaust and those that did had small audiences, with a few exceptions.8 Nathan Glazer’s 1957 book *American Judaism* reported that the Holocaust “had remarkably slight effects on the inner life of American Jewry.”10 Similarly, a 1947 study of American-Jewish sentiment about the Holocaust by a University of Chicago sociology student determined that “the murder of Europe’s Jews has not strongly affected the basic pattern of thought and feeling of Jews in the United States.”12 “This strange indifference was due largely to a feeling of shame among survivors wanting to move on with their lives, but it also reflected a clear downplaying of the Holocaust by Jewish leaders in America. Novick writes, “Whereas nowadays the status of victim has come to be prized, in the forties and fifties it evoked at best the sort of pity mixed with contempt.”13 Most Holocaust survivors wanted to abandon and, for lack of a better word, repress their traumatic experiences so that they could live normal lives in an extremely conformist postwar America. John Slawson, the chief executive of the American Jewish Committee said in 1944:

> We must normalize the image of the Jew… [What is implied] is neither segregation nor assimilation, but an adjustment to the American scene by means of a cultural integration… retention of positive and useful traits and the gradual sloughing off of useless and outworn characteristics in favor of desirable American characteristics.14

In the minds of prominent Jewish leaders, the best way to minimize anti-Semitism was to move on from vestiges of the experience of European Jews in the Holocaust. It is for this reason that organizations like the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress consistently voted in 1946, 1947, and 1948 against building a Holocaust memorial in New York City.15 In the immediate postwar years, Jews tended to downplay and even cover up their ties to the Holocaust.

In the late fifties, about twenty years before the Holocaust reached its peak attention, the first wave of survivor literature surfaced in the West. In the preface to the new translation of his now-iconic book *Night*, Elie Wiesel indicates that every major publisher refused his manuscript until it was published in French in 1958 and translated into English in 1960.16 Wiesel explains the difficulty with publishing his work: “Despite overwhelmingly favorable reviews, the book sold poorly. The subject was considered morbid and it interested no one.”17 Up until the mid-fifties, Wiesel explained, if a rabbi ever mentioned the Holocaust in a sermon, “there were always people ready to complain that it was senseless to ‘burden our children with the tragedies of the Jewish past.”

The distinctively Jewish character of the Holocaust was first popularized in America by *The Diary of a Young Girl*, the diary of Anne Frank, which was published in Dutch in 1947 after being rejected by dozens of publishers.19 When it was translated into English in 1952, it quickly became a bestseller. The play adaption of the book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1955 and became a popular film in 1959. Anne Frank, who one scholar called “Hitler’s most famous victim,” became a recognizable image of the Holocaust’s immense costs for Jews and a recognizable name in American culture.20

However, it wasn’t until the late seventies that the Holocaust as we understand it gained widespread awareness among the American public. Peter Novick writes,

> By the 1970s and 1980s the Holocaust had become a shocking, massive, and distinctive thing: clearly marked off, qualitatively and quantitatively, from other Nazi atrocities and from previous Jewish persecutions, singular in its scope, its symbolism, and its world-historical significance.21

With this transformation came Jimmy Carter’s formation of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust in 1978, the organization that ultimately founded the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. That same year, the NBC mini-series *Holocaust* reached an audience of 120 million Americans and has been credited with establishing the term “Holocaust” in American culture.22 According to the United States Holocaust Museum’s historian, “these highly public events of 1978 signaled that the Holocaust had moved not only from the periphery to the center of American Jewish consciousness, but to the center of national consciousness as well.”23 By this time, the stories of Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel were read with popular acclaim in America and became a staple of high school English classrooms. These narratives cemented the Holocaust’s unwavering identity as a Jewish catastrophe, from which the morally unambiguous distinction between Jewish victims and German perpetrators was established. So was born the “never forget” dictum that characterizes the worldwide imperative for Holocaust education today.

As the notion of the Jewish Holocaust grew more central to American Jewry and the general American perspective on World War II, two reactions to this history emerged. Certain authors came to the fore in elaborating and reinforcing this narrative of the Jewish Holocaust, while others sought to expand the term’s scope or even reject the relevance of the Jewishness of the Nazi atrocities—of a Jewish Holocaust.
The work of Elie Wiesel, clearly in the former camp, stands out as particularly worthy of discussion due to its wide readership, especially among young audiences. Cultural historian Oren Baruch Stier accuses Wiesel of giving the Holocaust a “sacred core” and turning it into a “sacred mystery held ‘over there’ behind a carefully circumscribed fence that, presumably, protects it from abuse at the hands of all who would violate its memory and its symbols.” Wiesel’s account of the Holocaust is perplexing; he denies scientific or historical explanations of the event as insufficient in light of what he experienced in Auschwitz as a metaphysical evil that will forever remain unspeakable. Throughout his literary corpus, Wiesel focuses almost exclusively on Jews in the Holocaust and takes a highly religious perspective. While he does not deny or trivialize the non-Jewish suffering at the hands of the Nazis, he gives voice only to a religious, Jewish perspective on the Holocaust. However important this perspective is for some, his focus does in effect narrow the potential audience and, one might argue, over-simplify the events’ moral message. A non-Jewish or non-religious reader is not likely to be able to enter fully into the logic of Wiesel’s perspective and obtain from his book the crucially important sense of ethical responsibility that must go along with a telling of the Holocaust. The narrowing of the audience—by appealing to rather particular beliefs and worldviews—narrows the moral message and thus the usefulness of the book. Thus the elaboration of the Holocaust in Jewish terms, if read to the exclusion of other sources, might miss nuance and perspective crucial for engendering the kind of ethical responsibility that the Holocaust requires of all.

Peter Novick explains this gradual simplification of historical events into black and white categories using Maurice Halbwachs concept of “collective memory,” in which cultural narratives tend to replace historical narratives. Novick writes,

Collective memory is in a crucial sense ahistorical, even anti-historical. To understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, of protagonists’ motives and behavior. Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.

This description of “collective memory” characterizes the morally predetermined first wave of Holocaust narratives which told the Holocaust story from an exclusively Jewish perspective. In response to this was a similarly strong second wave of what Jewish scholar D.G. Myers called “revisionist accounts”—narratives critiquing both the particularly Jewish Holocaust and the black-and-white distinction between Jewish victims and evil German perpetrators. For example, Philip Roth’s *Ghost Writer* gives a fictional account of Anne Frank surviving to become a creative writing student in America, dispelling the “aura of sanctity” around the Jewish victim. William Styron’s 1979 novel *Sophie’s Choice* best embodies this second wave of Holocaust literature and it is this text that I will evaluate here. *Sophie’s Choice* won the US National Book Award for Fiction in 1980 and was made into an Academy Award-winning film by the same name in 1982. It tells the story of Sophie Zawistowski, a Polish-Catholic woman who, by a chance turn of events, was taken to Auschwitz as a political prisoner with her two children. Being a non-Jewish Pole, she was awarded certain privileges in the camp, and was allowed to keep one of her children. Her heartbreaking “Sophie’s choice” is which child she will choose. Ultimately, Sophie’s father, husband, and both children perished in the Holocaust and Sophie emigrates to the United States, only to later succumb to suicide. Sophie is the classic Aryan: she has long blonde hair, and wears a cross around her neck. And yet she suffers in the novel, and is indeed a Holocaust victim. This novel emphasizes that, like Sophie, many non-Jews “suffered as much as any Jew.” Its critical success caused great controversy. On the one hand, Styron’s novel voiced a non-Jewish victim’s perspective on the Holocaust and helped enrich the moral imperative of the Holocaust. On the other hand, Sophie’s Choice popularized the dangerous and enduring Polish sentiment that the Nazis trampled all in their path, Pole and Jew alike.

Many historians have similarly attributed suffering formerly considered to have been primarily meted out to Jewish victims to many other groups that were oppressed during the Second World War. For example, the fact that 1.6 million civilians died in the Soviet Gulag work camps has received little awareness outside Russia. Revisionist histories thus seek to deny the uniform assumptions embedded in terms like “German” and “Jew,” since this dichotomy tends to deny the former victim status, which can be a serious mistake. A recent book by historian R. M. Douglas reveals that an estimated 500,000 Germans lost their lives to starvation and extreme conditions in forced expulsions of German-speaking people from all over Europe in the immediate postwar period. On the other hand, Peter Novick writes that such revisionist histories led to a “relativization” of the Holocaust, which, for Germans, “meant equating crimes against Germans to crimes by Germans.” Timothy Snyder has argued in *Bloodlands*, his recent history of “Europe between Hitler and Stalin,” that the war era has a tragic but complicated history that deserves to be reckoned with on a case-by-case basis—the Holocaust alongside other atrocities.

The spectrum of these accounts stretches from revisionist accounts like Styron’s, which aim at “tragic universalism,” to exclusivist accounts that accused Styron of “stealing the Holocaust from the Jews who were its victims.” Styron’s aim in *Sophie’s Choice* is not only to critique the notion that the Holocaust’s victims were solely Jewish, it is to exactly oppose it with tragic universalism—the idea that even though Jews were, as Styron put it, “victims of victims,” they were not the only victims. Myers explains Styron’s particular flavor of revisionism as a direct counter to the Jewish “uniqueness hypothesis.” He writes that Styron “advances a universalist, even meta-
physical interpretation, understanding the Holocaust as the embodiment of absolute evil, which threatened humanity as a whole.” For Styron, the lesson of the Holocaust is precisely that “uniqueness is victimization, whether practiced by Germans or Jews.” Moreover, to Styron the notion of a uniquely Jewish Holocaust wavered from the historical truth in its narrow story and became an insult to non-Jewish victims. Myers summarizes Styron’s conclusion: “[t]o remember the Holocaust as a uniquely Jewish catastrophe is to be Jews without memory”—a deliberate inversion of the “never forget” mantra touted by Jewish Holocaust remembrance organizations. For Styron, a non-Jew himself, was also a newspaper columnist known for wide-ranging, politically liberal commentaries. He wanted to unsettle the narrative of the Holocaust that took only a Jewish perspective insofar as it made little more than “fleeting references to the vast multitudes of non-Jews—the myriad Slavs and the Gypsies—who were swallowed up in the apparatus of the camps, perishing just as surely as the Jews, though sometimes only less methodically.”

As an exemplar of non-Jewish sufferers, Sophie lives a devastating life during and after the Holocaust. During her time at Auschwitz, Sophie is taken up by Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss as a personal assistant and typist. In an effort to save her son, Sophie is forced to seduce Höss, the man running the despicable operation that has already killed her father, husband, and daughter. Even after coming to America, Sophie is not safe from the horrors of her past. Like most Jewish victims, she is haunted by her history and is unable to shed her guilt from sentencing her daughter to the gas chambers and working as an accomplice to Höss. Her particular suffering as a woman is revealed when, even in prosperous postwar New York City, she is “digitally raped” by a stranger on the subway—an experience that “upset the fragile balance of her newly renovated psyche” and made her feel once again “the freezing cold of the spirit.” In response to the claim that the German program of exterminating the Jews was “the worst that had ever happened,” Styron charges advocates of such an idea with belittling and indeed forgetting the suffering of others, of all demographics, both in and outside the Holocaust.

Styron’s perspective, and revisionist accounts generally, though they admirably aim at moral complexity, are often simply and dangerously historically disingenuous: by modern estimates, at least 90 percent of the 1.1 million who perished in Auschwitz were Jews. Thus, his choice of a female Polish-Catholic Holocaust victim could not be called representative of the total toll of victims. Leaving aside his broader accusations, Styron’s case that there has been disproportional attention to Jewish victims gains some credibility when we zoom out to the broader death toll of Hitler’s war. By the traditional definition of the Holocaust, the scholarly consensus is that 5.9 million out of 11 million total Holocaust victims were Jews. One scholar arrives at 17 million total victims by including Polish and Soviet civilians in addition to the primarily targeted groups of Jews, Gypsies, the handicapped, political dissidents, religious dissenters, and homosexuals. Either way, the death rate for Jews was astronomically higher: about 78 percent of Europe’s Jews perished in the Holocaust, compared to 1.4 to 3 percent for non-Jews, and 25 percent for Roma (Gypsies), another targeted ethnic group. Though the total catastrophe of World War II claimed at least 60 million lives according to these sources, the sheer level of targeting that befell Jews is especially horrifying and indeed unique. As one Jewish commentator pointed out, “the inescapable truth that to be Jewish was to be marked for death.”

To get at this question away from the political divide, I think we must look at the reason behind the “never forget” educational and cultural model: to preserve and share historical truth so that such crimes are never repeated. To this end, revisionist accounts open the story to a multitude of perspectives that complicate the moral message in a constructive and true way. On the other hand, these accounts can stray dangerously far from the historical reality and the truth of the Jewish experience. As has been superbly illustrated by the permanent exhibition at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie, the Holocaust was a morally complex event, with both guilty and innocent Germans (the exhibit features Oskar Schindler, a member of the Nazi party who saved thousands of Jews) and the same for every demographic. The end of the exhibit makes explicit parallels between the Nazi Holocaust, the American internment of Japanese prisoners during WWII, and the present day genocide in Darfur, forcing “us” and “them” onto the same morally fallible plane. It is in this light that the Illinois Holocaust Museum’s youth exhibition asks children to “respect differences, address bullying, and take a stand on issues that matter to them” and places Holocaust heroes like Anne Frank in side-by-side comparison with others like Rosa Parks and a professional wrestler who stood up for gay rights. This is indeed a contextualizing and relativizing of the Jewish Holocaust, being deliberately conducted by a primarily Jewish institution.

Holocaust survivor Primo Levi likewise strongly criticized moves to separate sanctified Jewish victims from evil perpetrators. Like the Illinois Holocaust Museum, he supported a case for moral complexity with his concept of a moral “gray zone” into which all victims were degraded. On the black-and-white divide between “sanctified” victims and “evil” perpetrators, Levi wrote:
Levi’s personal experience with the Judenräten, Jewish prisoners who became accomplices to the Nazis in hopes of survival, led him to believe that all human beings are capable of the same evil, and that the real universal enemy was totalitarianism. Extending this principle of universalism, the same might be said for victims: any group could be the victim of vicious violence. Accounts of the Holocaust like these present a morally complex story, a story that can make all people pause and consider the evils of the Holocaust, and also one that does not distort the reality of the Holocaust as a predominantly Jewish catastrophe.

Universalist conclusions, though numerous, did not sit well with many Jews, particularly Holocaust survivors. Elie Wiesel has written that in Holocaust revisionist fiction, “Novelists made free use of [the Holocaust]… In doing so they cheapened [it], drained it of its substance. The Holocaust is now a hot topic, fashionable, guaranteed to gain attention and to achieve instant success.” To Wiesel, narratives like Sophie’s Choice, written by non-Jewish and non-victim authors, have cheapened the Holocaust and made it an acceptable topic for entertainment. This view contests the idea that Sophie’s Choice, a purely fictional account, could claim the same authority as thousands of real narratives.

Puzzled by the Holocaust’s unique notoriety in American life, Peter Novick asks a question that I think gets to the heart of our problem: “Why, since there was no real or metaphorical family connection, should non-Jewish Americans mourn Hitler’s Jewish victims more than Pol Pot’s Cambodian victims?” My answer is that they shouldn’t, but that they do so because, for various reasons, American culture focuses on the Holocaust more than many other atrocities. We have to acknowledge that whichever victims we empathize with are determined by our often distorted collective memory.

Elie Wiesel describes the Holocaust as “a unique Jewish tragedy with universal implications,” but this statement is self-defeating. When those implications are limited to certain groups, they become cheapened to culturally prescribed lessons that leave out important ideas. Wiesel’s narrative approaches the Holocaust only from a religious Jewish perspective and is thus incomplete. Peter Novick calls it “an intellectual sleight of hand,” which prevents the Holocaust’s moral imperative from being internalized. He continues, “The repeated assertion that whatever the United States has done to blacks, Native Americans, Vietnamese, or others pales in comparison to the Holocaust is true—and evasive.” A position such as the one that Novick criticizes demands that we make an impossible judgment: whether other atrocities from the Second World War and up to the present day are “truly holocaustal or merely genocidal.” Furthermore, a narrative of the Holocaust that allows for only a Jewish perspective will be less ethically potent. Such a narrative narrows the audience of what should be a story for all humanity. It distracts from what should be the lessons of the Holocaust—the reminder that such crimes are never acceptable and that every human has an ethical obligation to live by that maxim.

Ultimately, if a fictional, revisionist narrative like Sophie’s Choice is able to communicate the Holocaust’s complicated history in a meaningful way, it ought to occupy a place in the Holocaust canon—not to tell the whole story on its own, but to problematize monolithic accounts of a Jewish Holocaust just as they problematize it. To me, Styron’s novel makes the Holocaust’s universal guilt and moral responsibility crushingly close and haunting. For the sake of respecting all victims, maintaining a truthful amount of historical complexity, and, most importantly, preventing future atrocities, we must consider all of the Holocaust’s victims, and all its universal implications. However, opening the Holocaust equally to all alleged victims risks distorting the reality that the Holocaust was a predominantly Jewish catastrophe fueled by a unique prejudice.

After the Holocaust we are left, above all else, with an imperative to uncover the truth. That said, we should cling neither to a Jewish-only Holocaust nor to a revisionist account in which all groups were victimized equally, because both stray from the Holocaust’s complicated history. If revisionist accounts lead us to sympathize also with non-Jewish victims, just as Jewish accounts like Wiesel’s lead us to sympathize with Jews, we are left with both a truer and richer understanding of the Holocaust.

Notes

1 The Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “Holocaust.”


3 Yehuda Bauer, Rethinking the Holocaust (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xiii.


5 Ibid., 64

6 Ibid., 65

7 “Atrocities: Capture of the German Concentration Camps Piles up Evidence of Barbarism that Reaches the Low Point of Human Degradation,” Life Magazine, May 7, 1945.

8 Novick, 63, 66

9 Ibid., 103

10 Ibid., 103


13 Novick, 121
How Jewish was the Holocaust?

14 “Scientific Research on Anti-Semitism: Paper Delivered by John Slawson, Executive Vice-President of AJ Committee at NCRAC,” (September 11, 1944) (in Novick, 121).
15 Novick, 122
17 Ibid., xiv.
18 I will be referring to the following version: Anne Frank, The Diary of A Young Girl (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952).
21 Novick, 19
22 Myers, 499
25 Wiesel, x
26 Dutch Holocaust scholar Ernst Van Alphen is a good example of the second camp discussed above. He criticizes Wiesel’s work from the perspective as a non-Jewish boy growing up in the Netherlands in the 1960s. As was typical of European youth at the time, he writes that he “had the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust drummed into my mind… But they failed to have the required effect.” Later he writes, “Holocaust narratives were dull to me … because they were told in such a way that I was not allowed to have my own response to them. My response … was already culturally prescribed or narratively programmed…. The narration of the past had no ambiguities; moral positions were fixed.” Particularly disturbing to Van Alphen was the idea that the Holocaust was part of a war waged by Allied heroes against Nazi villains, and that one side could claim to “win” such a catastrophe. Told these tales, he did not feel treated as a “human being with moral responsibility,” Ernst Van Alphen, Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1-2.
27 Novick, 3-4
28 Myers, 499.
30 Jan T. Gross, Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001). Gross’s work, which suggests that grassroots Polish anti-Semitism was a major force behind the Holocaust, was met with violent opposition from Polish gentiles who denied Gross’s proof of Polish compliance to the Nazis.
33 Novick, 14
34 Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin (New York: Basic Books,
“MORE THAN THE JEWS HAVE KEPT THE SABBATH, THE SABBATH HAS KEPT THE JEWS.”
-Ahad Ha’am, 1898

Makom invited responses to the above quote and the following questions:

Are Jewish observance and identity more a matter of sociology or of theology? What is the relationship between observance and identity?

Jonathan Nathan

The Jewish Whalers

Imagine a whaleship, and bear with me.

The ship is at sea for a specific purpose: to hunt and kill whales for their oil.

If there were no market for whale oil, there would be no whaleship. If no one believed that sperm whales existed, there would be no whaleship.

But the ship is full of activity that has nothing to do with whaling. The cook has developed a unique menu. The sailors have invented an ingenious variation of contract bridge, which they hardly ever play on Sundays. And as a sign of their membership in the gallant crew, they cut off the tips of their right pinkies, even if they think it’s gross.

Moreover, the population of the ship is not uniformly committed to the project of whaling. Some crewmembers deny the very existence of whales, even though they’re willing to stay on board because they grew up on the ship. Others, seeking a direct experience of the Cetacean, declare organized whaling to be an impediment to their happiness and threaten to strike off on their own in small whaleboats.

I propose that Judaism works on a similar principle: Judaism is a nation whose raison d’être is a collective religious history. Starting with the generation that crossed the Jordan, the Jews have been sustained by a national memory of revelation, if not a direct experience of revelation itself.

But Judaism is also filled with activity that has intrinsically little to do with this religious experience—consider Israeli dancing, the Hebrew language, borscht, and latkes. Institutions like these are important to Judaism and common to most Jews, but unconnected to religion.

Moreover, many Jews renounce the religious aspect of Judaism. Though this decision separates them from the central Jewish project, it does not remove them in the slightest from the Jewish nation. An atheist Jew can still be important to her community, can still find prayer beautiful, and can still look forward to Shabbat dinner every week. In much the same way, the ship’s cook has no interest in whaling, but he is just as much on board the ship as anyone else. The only difference between the cook and the whalers is that a ship full of cooks would have no reason to exist.

All this granted, though, theology is at the root of Judaism, in three different senses of that phrase. In the first place, theology has historically provided the basis for the forms of Jewish practice. A completely secular Friday-night dinner is conceivable, but it is difficult to imagine its having been sustained over the millennia without its status as a commemoration of Creation. In the same vein, the only reason that Passover is today a dynamic and empowering cultural experience is that Jews over thousands of years believed that they should recount the story of the Exodus as real history.

Second, theology is the only thing that unites every Jewish community on
Earth. The Jews have very little national history beyond the Revelation and the few centuries that followed it: Iraqi and Ethiopian Jews had already left the scene, for instance, by the time the Romans occupied Jerusalem. There are also next to no cultural practices that are common to all Jews. (I find gefilte fish revolting and Ashkenazic music vapid. Less trivially, put a Jew from Latvia in a room with a Jew from Cape Town, and they’ll stare at each other without a language in common.) Even the Rabbinical Law came too late to reach some far-flung communities. But there is no Jewish community on Earth that does not recognize the Revelation as a national event.

Finally, and most importantly, the theological element of Judaism is the only thing that gives Jewish practice special meaning. There is no society on earth that is not filled with idiosyncrasies, and Jewish idiosyncrasies are perhaps more notable, and certainly more ancient, than those of other groups. So the cultural anthropologist might want to examine the sociological innards of Judaism in order to satisfy his curiosity. There is no reason, though, why that anthropologist should be more interested in Jewish culture than that of any other ethnic group: a bagel is no more intrinsically noteworthy than a slab of pork, and the hora is simply a Balkan dance. Seen from the outside, though, the Jews are marked by a central project more intrinsically noteworthy than any other: the Revelation and the few centuries that followed it: Iraqi and Ethiopian Jews had already left the scene, for instance, by the time the Romans occupied Jerusalem. There are also next to no cultural practices that are common to all Jews. (I find gefilte fish revolting and Ashkenazic music vapid. Less trivially, put a Jew from Latvia in a room with a Jew from Cape Town, and they’ll stare at each other without a language in common.) Even the Rabbinical Law came too late to reach some far-flung communities. But there is no Jewish community on Earth that does not recognize the Revelation as a national event.

“Who are the Jews?”
“A group of Hebrew-speaking Europeans and Africans that complains endearingly, tells sardonic jokes, eats bagels, doesn’t pick up the phone on Saturdays (though different Jewish cultures have variations on this custom), and is committed to the ethical principle of tikkun olam.”

“And what was the Pequod?”
“It was a ship of men who always used to sling their hammocks from the third hook up the post, some of whom hunted whales, and who ate each piece of toast with two squares of butter…”

Dory Fox The Theater of Religion

Religion is both a way of organizing life and a way of representing it. By “representing” I mean that religious rituals present the community’s values to itself and thereby re-enforce connectivity within the religious group.¹ If we think of religious ritual in this way, we can compare it to other collective experiences of reflexive representation and perhaps gain insight into what religion does for us and how it does this. By comparing the experiences of attending the synagogue and the theater it becomes clear that communities can reach a level of transcendence through means other than strictly religious rituals. By understanding the overlapping sociological functions of the synagogue and the theater, we can see that the Jewish religion functions first and foremost as a way to uphold common values and to experience connectivity to other humans.

Religious experience and Jewish theater have been associated for quite a while. S. Ansky’s 1914 Yiddish Modernist play The Dybbuk became a hit—it was translated, performed and adapted widely—because people found the experience of seeing it somehow transcendent. Many playwrights and critics used Jewish religious terminology to explain the experience. One journalist in Vilna wrote that his experience seeing the play made him “shudder with hadres koydesh,” the holy and awesome splendor of God.²

It is useful to understand this phenomenon of transcendence in the context of a particular shift in the early twentieth century, in which theater came to replace church or synagogue as a source of philosophical reflection and communal experience. This was an explicit tenet of the great Constantin Stanislavsky’s expressionist philosophy of theater, which dominated the Jewish theater scene in Europe when The Dybbuk first appeared.³ The ritual of going to the theater was surely a significant social event prior to the twentieth century. What is new here is that theater became a recognized source of transcendent experience.⁴

But synagogue and theater share more than transcendent experiences. They are both spaces in which people act with prescribed, ritualistic manners: they watch intently, laugh, and clap at the right moments. They bow, say amen, and kiss at the right moments. Families enter and take their seats to find a set, rehearsed program carried out by a (hopefully skilled) practitioner. There ought not be any talking during the program but it’s really inevitable, and someone in the family is always relieved at the unfurling of the curtain or the stowing of the tales at the end of the program. This is all part of the ritual and it is done not so much for the sake of the actors on stage, or the cantor, or even for God. In my mind, the players and the prayers are but a pretext for the illicit chats and the surreptitious looks amidst the action; though these chats and looks are not the “main event” they are quite ritualistic. Theater and synagogue are social spaces in which the most significant performances happen in the supposed audience or congregation, and not on the stage or the bima. The theater provides a chance to imagine a different world and the synagogue offers an opportunity to communicate with the divine, but people are inclined to sneak bits of their own mundane worlds into these experiences through stolen glances and hushed comments: the experience is just as much about seeing the others around you and having them see you.⁵

Durkheim writes that in certain collective rituals an individual experiences collective effervescence, in which “it is as if he was in reality transported into a special world entirely different from the one in which he ordinarily lives, a special world with intense forces that invade and transform him.”⁶ This sounds nice enough and
Kayla Kirshenbaum  
*The Sinner’s Waltz*

So you call me a sinner  
because I don’t believe I’m a chosen one.

Mourn me like dead  
because I fell in love with a city named Berlin.

Shake your head at me and scowl  
because I’ll never use a matchmaker,  
and  
the concept is insulting,  
and  
I don’t even own a white tablecloth.

Click your tongue at me  
because I’m moving to Chicago  
because New York is not a place for me  
or anyone who gives a shit about  
something  
other than the  
nothing  
of  
Brooklyn and boroughs  
and thriving on misery  
and  
the way the streets  
buzz with the hum of the homeless, the hopeless  
and  
the lack of trees  
and grace  
and oxygen

Glare at me  
because I wear long skirts with pride  
or  
because I wear tight pants—  
a temptress,  
a distraction.  
Even though you shouldn’t be looking at all.

Spread gossip about me  
because I chose to study in China,  
where my shidduch does not await me,  
where my faith will be challenged,  
where my choices bring a future that is mine.

Shriek  
and scream at me, even in the heart of my homeland,  
because my black tights aren’t enough for you  
or  
because you consider my clothing the uniform of men  
and  
we may never agree on the status of women  
because  
I will never apologize  
for being a woman,  
for being a feminist,  
who works a lifelong shift as a mother,  
who works in labs spare time as a chemist.

So you call me a sinner  
and I rear my head at you  
and I give you the evil eye  
because I don’t believe in superstitions,  
or the science that disproves a god.

We sinners, we spin, blurred, wildly out of focus,  
dragging ourselves in a drunken man’s waltz  
along the trail that drowns us in  
curdled milk and sour honey.

*Author’s Commentary:*

This poem, *The Sinner’s Waltz*, reflects on the disparity in the Modern Orthodox community between religiously rooted traditions, on the one hand, and practices invented by religious leadership and rooted in social pressure, on the other. These socially enforced practices become an imposing force and take on the name of theology. Indeed, when the Modern Orthodox community attempts to fuse the theological and sociological in its practices, the result can sometimes leave a young
Jewish person grappling with the expectations of his or her community rather than his or her faith. More specifically, the social pressure discussed in this poem is gendered. This biased social pressure becomes threaded through a set of successive practices in the young woman’s life. The social pressure for a young modern Orthodox woman to marry is felt as an urgent and external social force; no such pressure exists for a young modern Orthodox man. It is typical of a modern Orthodox woman to shift her line of work if it does not accommodate the potential opportunity to bare children—a social given in most modern Orthodox communities. A woman who wants to be a physician, for example, is often encouraged to pursue a different line of work that accommodates a lifestyle with children, while it is rare that a modern orthodox man will ever face such a dilemma. These are but a few examples.

Eric Singerman Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.”

In the beginning of October, I was asked to give a d’var torah on Parshat B’reishit. As a relatively secular Jew I was left at a bit of a loss. So I did what I always do when I’m confused or lost within the world: I Googled. I soon found that Parshat B’reishit is the beginning of the first book of the Bible. After a good deal more work, I think I ended up doing a decent job of sharing my thoughts. Allow me to take you through the process.

Since my beloved days of Hebrew School, I’ve wondered what it might have been like to be Adam in the Garden of Eden. He, perhaps more than any other man, went through major changes. These changes in Adam provide clues as to how I and perhaps all other Jews or even all other humans connect with God and other individuals. Adam’s experiences teach us that we are, as human beings in the world, in a constant state of solitude, and even that we may be naturally estranged from God. On the other hand, the changes that Adam experienced offer hope that we may be able to transcend solitude—rather than just ignore it. As I see it, this transcendence can be achieved only through connections to other people—not to God.

Octavio Paz, winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize in literature, sums up human solitude and loneliness better than I ever could: “Self-discovery is above all the realization that we are alone...we sense our aloneness almost as soon as we are born...astonished at the fact of [our] being.” Paz expounds upon this idea, writing that we feel alone not just from being self-aware but also because we acknowledge a wall between ourselves and the rest of the world. However, I doubt that Adam actually felt alone in this way. Though he was more alone than any of us are, he lacked the key awareness of his solitude.

Let me explain. One might think that Adam initially, as Earth’s only human, would have been lonely. Yet, Adam, before eating of the Tree of Knowledge, lacked self-awareness. In fact, before the creation of woman the text does not describe Adam’s interest in human company at all. The Torah tells us nothing of Adam’s sentiments: it only tells us that God saw that Adam needed a “fitting helper.”

The Torah writes that his “eyes...were opened” only after eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge. We know that this moment made him aware of his nudity. Before that, he lacked a sense of shame—the sense that someone might be watching and judging him. Thus we know that he lacked awareness of himself as a person in relation to other people. Therefore, before this eye-opening moment he could not be lonely. Adam’s new awareness was the origin of his solitude because only with it did he begin to see himself in relation to others; only with this awareness could he see the wall between himself and the world. At that moment, Adam began to experience the world as we do.

Some claim that we are not alone—that God truly knows us. Aside from being a weighty claim, which presupposes the existence of a God outside of the text-based God of the torah—and an omniscient God at that—this also does not solve the problem of human solitude in a satisfying way. Even if God knows us, we will never understand the ultimate metaphysical truths of divinity that would allow us to know God. This potential connection can never be reciprocal, and therefore only highlights our uniqueness and aloneness. We are always, to some extent, alone whether or not this fact floods our lives with solipsistic depression.

You may not be able to fully connect with God but, set adrift in the infinite sea of loneliness that is our existence, you will be able to connect with another human being. In the moment of that connection the sea disappears and we are firmly grounded on the land of mutual understanding. In spite of our mental solitude and the wall that divides our minds, our feeling of solitude is no more.

After all my Googling of B’reishit I think that I was able, if even for a brief moment, to connect with others, to escape solitude, not through God, not through the distractions of work or games, but through interpersonal connection. I shared my thoughts on the Torah, as Jews all around the world have done, week after week, year after year, for generations.

Avi Levin The Nature of the Commandments

In the Western world, Jews are often identified with a specific set of cultural practices, as if that cultural bond is enough to define Jews as a community. But that is clearly inadequate. Most of what is “Jewish” in a cultural sense is really just a slice of Eastern Europe transplanted to New York. Sephardim, Ethiopians, and Ashkenazim speak in different accents and languages, look different, and have different traditional foods, yet any one of these people is treated as a full-fledged Jew in nearly any synagogue in the world. Clearly, culture is not enough to define Jewishness.

The rejection of culture as a definition of Judaism has been around for much longer than bagels and lox. The Prophets did not count the Jews as one of

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Symposium

Sociology or Theology
the seventy nations, but rather as a “light unto” them. A thousand years ago, Rabbi Sa’adia Gaon wrote that “The Jewish people are a nation only by virtue of their Torah.” Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch went so far as to say that this is why God subjected the Jews to slavery, only to suddenly redeem them and bring them to Sinai: after stripping the Jews of a cultural and historical self-image, he provided the Torah in its stead.

Yet a document can only serve as the definition of a people if it contains a message to live by, and the message of the Torah is ambiguous. In some places, the Torah is a legal code; in others, it is a pedagogical narrative. Which of these facets of the Torah defines the Jewish people? Is it the legal code, uniting Jews the world over through common ritual? Or is it the narrative, instilling in all of us a common set of values?

Over the past two hundred years, both sides of this dichotomy have been used as bases for new Jewish communities. The leaders of the Jewish Enlightenment thought that ritual commandments were anachronisms, and that one could live as a Jew just by following the law’s moral precepts. Mordecai Kaplan and his Reconstructionists believed that Judaism was a civilization centered on rituals, which did not have any theological imperative behind them. Yet the movements that both camps founded have been suffering from attrition and ideological drift. It seems that neither ritual nor theology is sufficient on its own.

Of the two movements, the failure of the Reconstructionists is easier to understand. Immigrant ethnicities are mutable; as each generation becomes increasingly integrated into its host society, the habits of its parents and grandparents bear less and less weight, until they are firmly relics of the past. A hundred years of being a scattered minority is enough to destroy any civilization.

The error of the Jewish Enlightenment in rejecting the commandments, on the other hand, was to misunderstand their nature. The commandments are not injunctions that Jews fulfill in order to gain reward; they are the means by which Jews individually and collectively come closer to God. Different branches of Judaism posit different mechanics of this process: Kabbalists, acquiring the latent spiritual potential in creation; ethicists, the effects of a highly disciplined life on our personal character; Rabbi Hirsch, their power to directly impress symbolic messages on the mind. Yet all of these interpretations rest on the same fundamental principle: Judaism is not just a religion, but an inspired way of life—and attempting to strip it of its active nature strips away a piece of its soul.

Notes

Dory Fox The Theater of Religion

1 This perspective is largely derived from Emile Durkheim's theory of religion, as found in Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), originally published in 1912.


3 Ibid, page 236

4 In other terms, people began to be aware of a certain Durkheimian collective effervescence when they went to theater houses.

5 That is why dressing for the occasion is important: attendants would probably not wear the same clothing to work, school, or the grocery store.

6 Durkheim, page 220.

Eric Singerman Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.”

1 Genesis 2:18 JPS Translation


3 Genesis 2:18

4 Genesis 3:7

5 Depression is not the only outcome of an awareness of solitude. When God expelled Adam and Eve from Eden, he condemned them to work the land. Paz writes of work as a life raft, that we can escape the feeling of loneliness through “games and work.” But these are only escapist activities. Even Paz admits that they only allow us to “forget” our solitude. In our world after Eden, these things merely distract us from our loneliness. Paz, page 1.

Avi Levin The Nature of the Commandments


2 Sa’adia ben Joseph, The Book of Beliefs and Opinions, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale, 1976), 158 (3:7). My citation is a paraphrase of the original English rendering, “... our nation of the Children of Israel is a nation only by virtue of its laws.”


5 Charles Liebman, “Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life” American Jewish Year Book 71 (1970) 6-7

“She Got What She Deserved”:
Representations of Transgressive Womanhood in Jewish Literature, 1900-1924
Leah Reis-Dennis

Hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Eastern Europe flooded the shores of New York City between 1900 and 1924. A new literature accompanied this mass migration. It was composed in part of success stories of wealth amassed and lives rebuilt in America and in part of horror stories of women brought down by the thirst for the fineries that awaited them in a new land. In both Eastern European and American literature, Jewish authors positioned young women and their transgressions as the most hazardous threats to Jewish communities. This literature review focuses on four stories in particular: Peretz Hirschbein’s play, Miriam (1906); Shalom Asch’s play, God of Vengeance (1907); Joseph Opatoshu’s short story, “New World Idyll” (1912); and Anzia Yezierska’s Salome of the Tenements (1923).

Though more general claims about twentieth-century Jewry cannot be supported by four texts, these four do represent certain trends. First, these texts prescribe a pure Jewish womanhood defined primarily against material and sexual temptations and social climbing. In these tales, virtuous Jewish womanhood consists of resisting the desire to amass money and the dangers of premarital sex and adultery, but it lacks a positive form.

This absence of positive prescriptions for Jewish American ghetto femininity, as seen in these particular texts, allowed for new identity formations in America that, in their unconventionality, might have been labeled as delinquent and transgressive.

Although my primary geographic focus for this project is America, three of the four texts examined here were written in Yiddish and tell stories set in unspecified or explicitly Eastern-European locations. Yezierska’s Salome of the Tenements is the only text written in English and published in America. Opatoshu’s “New World Idyll,” though initially published in Yiddish, was translated into English for the literary journal Pagan, and both plays, Hirschbein’s Miriam and Asch’s God of Vengeance, were originally published and performed on the Yiddish stage in Eastern Europe. Eastern European texts remain relevant to my project because they were often circulated in America. Jews maintained disparate diasporic communities for thousands of years across national or continental divides; they were united by cultural forms that had the capacity to transmit Jewish thought, by words, beyond the face-to-face communities defined by geographic proximity. Thus, the Eastern European texts included here give a sense of the ways in which Ashkenazi Jews of the period were thinking about and representing transgressive femininities, regardless of residence. Although general conclusions cannot be made about early twentieth-century Jewish femininity based on four texts, these texts remain valuable examples of the treatment of young women who strayed from paths of expected gendered domesticity. I chose these texts based on their date of publication, their mass appeal, and their explicitness in treating female transgression.

One thread that unites these four stories is their fierce condemnation of illicit sexuality as the deepest possible form of transgression. Though a few of the texts critique other forms of deviation with an equally suspicious eye, these other improprieties are portrayed as threatening in large part due to the possibility that they might lead to illicit sex.

Hirschbein’s Miriam and Asch’s God of Vengeance serve as overt warnings of a young woman’s fall from purity and its consequences in the Yiddish world. In Hirschbein’s Miriam the eponymous anti-heroine begins as a naive stocking-mender new to city life. She fits the traditional mold of a woman in danger of falling into prostitution: her landlords are her only family, she makes a scant living mending stockings, and she imagines marrying a rich man as her pathway out of poverty. Her relationship with the wealthy Zilberman immediately creates a discord in the house between Miriam, flattered with the attention thrust upon her as the object of a moneyed man’s desire, and the rest of the home’s inhabitants, who fear that Miriam’s lingering country naïveté might make her susceptible to shame at Zilberman’s hands. Even Miriam senses the class disparity that stands between them. She tells her affluent beau, “I always think: I shouldn’t let myself get so close to you. Here in the basement they’re always giving me a hard time—and they’re right… I’m a poor girl, a small-town girl, and you—you couldn’t possibly love me. I’m—I’m an orphan…” Zilberman console Miriam, asking, “If I’m rich, so what? What difference does that make to us? Look; I wanted to get to know you, and I didn’t pay attention to anything; just the way you are, that’s how I like you. To hell with wealth!” And, with a kiss, Miriam finally determines to run away to Zilberman to achieve her independence. Zilberman has already promised to support her in an attic room—a promotion from her basement tenancy to that point—and made a vague commitment to a marriage that never comes to pass. Miriam gets pregnant, Zilberman abandons her, and she desperately seeks other avenues of support. Miriam’s former friends and landlords, however, express disapproval and even disgust toward her newly tainted womanhood. Toward the end of Act III, Miriam’s former landlords discuss her state:

DVOYRE. Miriam. May anyone who wishes me ill come to such a pass. SHIMEN. Ha, how’s she doing, that tramp? LEAH. There you go! Why does she deserve a name like that? What’s she up to? … How is she? Why doesn’t she come over? JONAH. He dumped her six months ago.
DVOYRE. Apparently she’s darning stockings again. If you could only see her. (Tearfully.) Her face is so pale and drawn. LEAH. She was so pretty, so young.
Miriam's landlords' largely unsympathetic response is remarkable for its violently accusatory tone regarding Miriam's illicit sexuality as well as for presupposing that her fate is irreversibly sealed. Shimen's description of Miriam as a "tramp" and his quip that "she got what she deserved" place the onus of the blame for the unintended pregnancy onto Miriam without discussing Zilberman's role in the conception. Furthermore, though Leah demonstrates the most compassion in the conversation, she describes Miriam's youth and beauty in the past tense and thereby implies that with her virginity gone Miriam's other positive attributes are also no longer.

The most incendiary send up of Miriam's out-of-wedlock pregnancy comes from Dvoshe, the long-lost wife of an incidental character who enters the scene of Miriam's labor with little explanation. In that scene, she verbally abuses Miriam:

Her mother must be spinning in her grave… The devil won't get his due today. Decent women kick the bucket in childbirth… But this one—worse than a bitch! … Nu, Mirele, is it good and painful? … They should die—their children together! They shouldn't get any mercy…. I've never heard of such a thing…. A girl with no parents, a pauper, should get herself into a mess like this! Woe to parents in this world with such children, and a curse on the ones in the world to come…. What was I dragged here for? … It would have gone fine without me too…You'd be better off sending someone to the shul to say Psalms and the prayer for a woman in labor…. You won't die, you won't die. Decent women will die in childbirth before their time because of you, but you … you won't die.4

Here, Dvoshe offers perhaps the most uncensored and illiberal Jewish response to Miriam's sexual transgression. She addresses Miriam's labor with superstition instead of sympathy. She implies that Miriam deserves a fate worse than death and that the only way to ward off the chaos brought on by Miriam's misbehavior is to revert to religion and prayer.

Miriam does not treat herself with any more sympathy than do her detractors. Her loss of virginity without marriage shames her to such a great extent that she is unwilling and unable to redeem herself socially. Though she insists, "I don't think I did anything wrong … " she also admits that

This idea worked its way into my head … that I was the worst. … I felt like there was this black stain on my face, and everyone was looking at me. I went to the storekeeper … and the way the girls looked at me … and whispered. … I was still in my fifth month … you couldn't tell anything … and they were whispering.5

Guilt ridden, Miriam is unable to interact socially or professionally. Ironically, her guilt thus forces her to seek economic redemption in the form of prostitution, which in turn only exacerbates her feelings of guilt and sexual wrongdoing.

Miriam reveals her deep shame and self-consciousness in an extensive monologue in the play's final act. There, she admits to several failed abortion attempts and haunting dreams of her late mother. Meanwhile, Grunye, another prostitute, drunkenly recounts her family's emotionally and physically abusive response to her pregnancy outside of marriage. Hirschbein conveys their deep hopelessness. After sharing their stories of pregnancy out of wedlock, Miriam declares, "I'm going to break free again … you'll see." But Grunye remains disengaged, commanding Miriam, "Drink; there's no way out for us… none!" Miriam's own emotional, physical, and mental downfall—accented by Grunye's alcoholic, depressive rage—serves as a warning to playgoers that the repercussions of illicit sexuality reverberate on both individual and social levels.

Sholem Asch presents a similar downward spiral in God of Vengeance—a play that opened to great acclaim in Eastern Europe but met with obscenity charges upon its arrival on Broadway. The play centers on Yekel, a brothel owner, and his wife Sarah, a former prostitute, who strive to give their daughter, Rivkele, a life untainted by the brothel just one floor beneath her bedroom. The action turns on Yekel's purchase of a Holy Scroll, which is designed to augment Rivkele's holiness by proximity and to elevate their status in the Jewish community. Yekel and Sarah, despite their participation in prostitution, maintain that their daughter's virginity is the ultimate embodiment of holiness and purity. Resigned to their own impurities, they go to great lengths to maintain Rivkele's wholesomeness—in large part to make her an attractive marriage candidate and to redeem themselves in God's eyes. They forbid her from interacting with the prostitutes of her age who work and live in the cellar beneath her, and they fearfully hope that her unholy surroundings will go unnoticed in the approaching matchmaking process. Even though Yekel and Sarah earn a living by selling sex, they firmly believe in the importance of young women's virginity—a belief that abounds in Jewish literature of the period. As the play progresses, Rivkele runs away from home for a tryst with a female prostitute and for a stint as a prostitute herself. When she returns home her parents obsess over her virginity—the hallmark of her former purity and her value as a marriageable young Jewish woman.

This incident represents yet another instance in Jewish literature of the period in which the illicit loss of virginity is the most shameful form of sex. Yekel, struggling to ask his daughter explicitly about her virginity, employs various euphemisms. He asks, "Are you still as pure as when you left the house? Are you still a virtuous Jewish daughter?" He continues, despite Sarah's protestsations and Rivkele's discomfort, "Are you still an innocent Jewish child?" Increasing his volume, he demands, "Are you still a chaste Jewish daughter? Tell me—tell me at once!" Rivkele responds with an accusation of her own, exclaiming, "It was all right for Mamma, wasn't it? It was all right for you, wasn't it? I know all about it!" Thus, the crucial
question of virginity rests at the center of the parent-child relationship in *God of Vengeance*. Yekel can’t reconcile his own impurities with the original, and later stained, purity of his Rivkele. Yekel’s interchangeable use of the terms “virtuous Jewish daughter,” “innocent Jewish child,” and “chaste Jewish daughter” demonstrates the centrality of virginity in a valuable Jewish womanhood and equates virtue with innocence and chastity. Rivkele’s loss of virginity derails her father’s hopes for social ascent through marriage and definitively sets her apart from the ideal of Jewish womanhood.

Sarah embodies the contradiction between a sinful past and hope for a better, more pure future. Time and again throughout *God of Vengeance*, Sarah, rather than espousing the superstitious potency of actions past, insists on human agency, the potential for change, and the power of the present as the defining factors in moral purity. Her husband, by contrast, attributes agency to devils and divine retribution—among other traditional Yiddish beliefs—when it comes to significant events and the purity (or impurity) of his household. For what he sees as the accumulation of his family’s *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination), he blames his lifelong work in an indecent profession. Against this accumulation of *yetzer hara* he feels powerless; he denies the potential for any human agency in changing the course of one’s life for the better. This juxtaposition of Sarah’s belief in human agency against Yekel’s staunch belief in divine destiny and superstitious forces comes across most forcefully in the moments following the immaculate Rivkele’s disappearance into prostitution and her father’s resulting breakdown. Sarah, speaking as the voice of reason, encourages her husband to be proactive in reclaiming his daughter from the conniving, aspiring brothel owner Shloyme. She pleads

Yekel, what’s possessed you? Have you gone crazy? Consider what you’re doing. A misfortune has befallen us. To whom don’t misfortunes happen! Come. Let us hunt out Shloyme. We’ll give him two or three hundred roubles and let him give us back our child. He’ll do it, alright… Well, what are you sitting there moping about? What’s the matter with you?9

Yekel—unwilling to entertain her hopeful, practical plan—responds dejectedly, “It’s all the same to me now. My soul is given over to the devil. Nothing will help.” As the play progresses, Yekel insists on his divinely ensured inability to rise up out of sin.10 Yekel’s failed attempt at climbing the Jewish social ladder by amassing wealth, purchasing a Holy Scroll, and marrying his daughter to a respected scholar results in misery. Despite Sarah’s best efforts, Yekel’s complete mental and emotional destruction by the end of the play impart the message that a formerly sinful person can never fully achieve holiness or purity. Rather, forces of divine retribution, its conclusion implies, will wreak havoc on a fallen person’s attempts at achieving a clean slate of morality.

Other texts also present anxieties surrounding the moral implications of social climbing, especially social climbing achieved through illicit sexual liaisons. In his “New World Idyll,” Opatoshu presents the overbearing, sexualized landlady, Rebecca Bloom, in an undoubtedly negative light. Bloom epitomizes the stereotypical Jewish, female antagonist: she is hungry for wealth and material goods, deviates from the norm of marital monogamy, and uses her sexual potency to support the extravagant life that she craves. While most of the other central female characters in these texts are presented with ethical ambiguity, Rebecca’s sexual transgressions are inextricably bound up with her moral misbehavior. She ruthlessly extorts money from both her alcoholic lover and her blind husband by charming them with her sexual appeal, and she shamelessly displays her transgressions in full view of the children in her house. This inter-generational display of sexuality is especially shocking in contrast to the close attention that the parental characters paid to the protection of their progeny’s purity in *God of Vengeance*.

In “New World Idyll,” Bloom offends by ignoring expectations both for womanhood and for parenthood. At the opening of this short story, Opatoshu presents his vision of ideal womanhood through Morris—an alcoholic father to a young son, Bloom’s tenant and lover, and the story’s main character—and his hopes for his son. Morris reassures his son, “I’ll make a man of you; you’ll have the sweetest ladies running after you. You won’t have to tag after the street-kind like me.” The importance that Morris places in finding a “swell” woman for his son echoes Yekel and Sarah in *God of Vengeance*, and their parallel drive to ensure respectability in their children’s future despite their own parental failings. Morris, rather than asserting positive female qualities, defines ideal womanhood in opposition to Bloom, the woman with whom he is involved but for whom he has no respect.

Bloom’s marital relationship follows a similar pattern in which sexual allure and respectable womanhood are mutually exclusive. Bloom’s husband, Simon, offers a biting critique of his unfaithful and avaricious wife. In an extended monologue he portrays Bloom as a money-grubbing, inconsiderate witch. He has no qualms about calling her a witch, a hussy, and a harlot in response to her adultery, disrespect, and money-spending habits.12 Bloom refuses to swallow his accusations, and instead lures him back into submissive complacency. She turns the tables by pushing the blame away from herself and onto Simon, accusing him of jealousy, insisting on her innocence, and once more cajoling money out of his pockets. Falling for her cover up, Simon insists that she will “live like a princess, like a real lady” provided she kick out her drunken lover and tenant. Thus, as the arbiter of his family’s wealth, Simon pronounces the disassociation between his wife’s ability to “live like a princess” and her illegitimate sexual liaisons. Both of Bloom’s relationships, with her lover and her cuckolded husband, reveal the impossibility of the coincidence of female sexual transgression and male respect.

Miriam, Sarah, Rivkele, and Bloom each embody the typical Jewish female transgression—prohibited sexual activity—and are thus doomed to live contemptible lives. They occupy Jewish communities in which they are judged for...
their misbehavior itself rather than for its perceived Jewishness or reflection on the
greater Jewish community. By contrast, Yezierska’s American setting in Salome of the
Tenements shifts the focus of Jewish women’s behavior onto the ways in which a
woman’s transgressions might affect the perception of Jews on a larger scale. Though
Yezierska also places stock in the common stereotype that Opatoshu’s Bloom em-
odies—that of lower-class Jewish women as extravagant, garish embarrassments in
the face of upper-class beauty and simplicity—she uses this focus not to condemn
women’s transgressions but to illuminate the class divisions between upper and
lower class Jews that abounded in early twentieth-century America.

Sonya, the protagonist of Salome of the Tenements, is an ebullient, second-
genration American girl who longs for beauty and a way out of the grimy ghetto. Once Sonya uses her impressive and easy charisma to climb the social ladder, how-
ever, she realizes the full force of the class disconnect between her East Side Jewish
roots and the blueblood world of New York’s old-money elite. Presented as an
irreconcilable contrast between the Jewish immigrant, heymish heart and the sterile,
Anglo-Saxon head, the Downtown-Uptown schism defines and ultimately destroys
Sonya’s fairytale marriage to the millionaire philanthropist John Manning.

Sonya treats Manning as her ticket to upward social mobility. In the first
chapter, titled “Salome Meets Her Saint,” Yezierska repeatedly employs religious im-
gery to depict Sonya’s zeal for the upper crust of Manhattan society. Upon her first
interaction with her future husband, the WASP-y John Manning, Sonya focuses
on “his low voice of cultured restraint,” and his “formal manner—his unconscious
air of superiority” that “roused in her the fire of worship.” Indeed, Manning and
Sonya play out the Protestant trope of salvation throughout their relationship.

Yezierska’s Sonya lives a narrative opposite to those of the fallen women in
the other stories reviewed. She rises up from poverty and frustration into a fantasy
world of Christian wealth, only to reject it and achieve a compromise that main-
tains ties with her Jewish roots while embracing a lucrative career of beauty and
high art as a fashion designer. Once Sonya has risen up out of poverty, she focuses
her attention on lifting up other, less fortunate East Side Jews. Thus Anzierska’s
story is especially valuable in displaying the two dominant types of Jewish women
in early twentieth-century American literature: the ambitious, dramatic “Ghetto
Girl” ready to go to great lengths to climb the social ladder through marriage, and
the established, wealthy, assimilated American Jew, already distant from her immi-
grant roots and eager to separate herself from the lower-class, recently immigrated
Jews who might taint her reputation. This latter category of established Jewish
American women often turned to Jewish philanthropy. This philanthropy, directed
at Jewish women in particular, helped establish the public personas of these phi-
lanthropists as generous and wealthy citizens concerned for the well-being of their
communities. Simultaneously it reformed those Jews with a record of, or potential
for, criminality: those who attracted negative attention to Jews generally.

In the often anti-Semitic world of early twentieth-century New York City,
any offense committed by a Jew in the public eye had the potential to affect main-
stream non-Jewish society’s perception of even the most Americanized, established
Jew. In her study of the “Ghetto Girl,” Riv-Ellen Prell explores the reasons why
“fallen women” or even non-deviant lower-class women (who had the potential,
as outsiders saw it, to stray from the path of respectable American womanhood)
struck fear into the hearts of both the American Jewish and gentile Establishment.
She notes that the material extravagance popular on the East Side among lower
class Jews posed the biggest threat to upper-class Jewish women. A taste for material
fineries, they feared, would likely lead to crime and indecency should girls become
unable to afford the extravagant fashions of the time on their low salaries alone.

By contrast [to the bourgeois model of assimilated Jewish American wom-
manhood], the Ghetto Girl’s taste was far too conspicuous; she was betrayed
by the cheapness of what she had and wore. She was loud and public and
immodest. Her wages financed her own excess, making her autonomous
and out of the control of the family. The Ghetto Girl stereotype integrated
Jews’ anxieties about their differences from Americans with Americans’ fears
of invasion by non Anglo-Saxons who violated America’s cultural purity.
Thus, Prell argues, bourgeois Yiddish communities encouraged East Side Jewish women to adopt a set of traditionally Protestant American values that might fend off a descent into delinquency. These supposedly American convictions were rooted in the Protestant tradition of simplicity and industrious modesty and lauded a new Jewish American womanhood predicated on “modesty, simplicity, and circumspect behavior.” Sonya’s adventures and misadventures in navigating this new American Jewish womanhood reside at the center of Salome of the Tenements. The compromise at which she ultimately arrives, a mixture of upper-class emphasis on simplicity and beauty with traditionally Jewish warmth and feeling, provides one prototype for Jewish American women striving to simultaneously assimilate, maintain their roots, and avoid the transgressive stereotype of delinquent Jewish women that pervaded the cultural production of the period.

Texts with settings in which Jews were a minority concerned themselves particularly with the perception that gentiles held toward Jews. In Asch, Hirschbein, and Opatoshu, the events take place in unspecified or explicitly Eastern European Jewish communities. Thus, these stories deal less with the possibility that transgressive womanhood might affect public perception of Jews and more with the personal repercussions, family consequences, and social exile resulting from female immorality. While these three texts offer important insights into common expectations for and deviations from Jewish womanhood, Anzierska’s novel provides the most pointed study of Jewish women’s identity formation and transgression in the early twentieth century.

The new, chaotic world that Jews entered in America offered both danger and possibility. It presented radical new freedoms to escape violence, discrimination, and old religious and social rules, and a simultaneous freedom to fail, starve, and misbehave in a foreign environment. Even success had liabilities, as it allowed assimilation that might threaten the survival of Jewish religion, culture, and community. While Old World literature focuses discussions of female transgressions internally, overlooking the judgment of the outside world, American literary texts consider actions in a wider context. Reputation always mattered, as seen in these stories, but the criteria for evaluating female propriety and impropriety altered along with changing conceptions of Jewish womanhood in a new land.

Notes

1 Illicit sex took many forms between 1900-1920. In this paper, “illicit sex” refers to prostitution, adultery, and sex before marriage.
3 Hirschbein, Miriam, 279.
4 Hirschbein, Miriam, 283.
5 Hirschbein, Miriam, 287.
6 Hirschbein, Miriam, 288.
8 This contradiction pervades the psyches of “fallen women” in the literature of this era.
9 Asch, God of Vengeance, 72.
10 Throughout, he repeats the phrases “Into the brothel with everything,” “No more holy scroll,” and “God won’t have it.”
13 It is also noteworthy that Yezierska presents her story from Sonya’s perspective.
14 Yezierska, Salome of the Tenements, 1.
15 Yezierska, Salome of the Tenements, 5.
16 Sonya combines the two types in her transition from an East Side greenhorn to a successful, assimilated American, her upward mobility facilitated by marriage. This trope is not unique to Jewish literature. This same narrative famously dominates Sister Carrie, a serialized novel by Theodore Dreiser and published to great acclaim in 1900, a quarter century before Salome of the Tenements. The eponymous heroine of Sister Carrie is not Jewish or European, but enters the city from the countryside as a wide-eyed novice, uses relationships to advance, but actually succeeds ultimately through her own talents and sheds her partners (who she doesn’t actually marry, leaving her a morally ambiguous figure). This narrative is strikingly similar to Sonya’s journey of upward mobility and identity formation in Salome of the Tenements.
18 Prell, Fighting to Become Americans, 43.
Great Art and the Unending Story of Joseph

Gabriel Shapiro

The skimmers amongst you will be disappointed that I cannot say which of the three sections of this piece is the more interesting or important. The advocates of the here-are-my-ideas-politely-and-coldly-presented-in-a-one-sentence-thesis sort of introduction are already annoyed. Those of you with generosity and patience—those of you who have read this far—will allow me the indulgence of a minor confession: writing and publishing this piece has been cathartic and invigorating. Some of the thoughts contained herein are, for me, old enough that their publication is a sort of purification and purification. Some are much, much newer. Thinking and writing these newer ideas has been exhilarating and anxious. Thank you for reading.

It is not from aesthetic preference or a desire to exasperate that I have left a neat thesis statement out of this piece; rather, it is because this piece is very much a series of three articles with three related but independent arguments. Though I think that each section helps support and explain the others, I do not think that all readers will find the three equally interesting or compelling. In the first section I put forth a description of great art. This kind of art is characterized by a unity of organization and, simultaneously, an infinity of meaning. In the second section, I will show that the Joseph story in particular and biblical narrative in general achieve this sort of greatness. This discussion will help me identify a characteristically Biblical manner of storytelling. A story told in this manner seems to have many endings but never truly ends. In the third section I will argue that the Bible demands that its Jewish audience conceive of itself as partaking in the Biblical narrative—that they live biblically.

I hope that the discussion of great art will provide a theoretical context for the Joseph narrative and that this narrative—as an example—will help to explain these theories. The discovery of a Biblical manner of storytelling, which also helps to make the Bible great art, will be crucial to the argument that the serious contemporary reader of the Bible cannot remain at a distance from the narrative.

I: Great Art

We commonly speak of some art as great; in this section, I try to give some thoughtful content to this tendency. Later, I will investigate the relationship between this understanding of art and the Bible. To argue that the Bible is great art, however, I must first put forth a description—for I shrink from a definition—of great art. The adjective “great” is appropriate here because I believe that, in some way, all art should aim to realize these characteristics. Nevertheless, to avoid writing an art-theoretical treatise I will forgo a detailed defense of my use of the term “great.” Rather, I will put forth an account of this artistic greatness in order that it enrich the following reading of the Joseph story and so that the Joseph story may become a useful, compelling, and specific example of this theory.

By “great” art I refer to art that has two related characteristics: 1) it always seems to have a simple and unified organization and 2) while finite it has an infinity of meaning. In other words, great art seems to contain a mysterious infinity while also always seeming to have a simple, unified, and defining principle of organization.

Perhaps an example is in order. The Mona Lisa seems to stand definitively for greatness in art, so it will serve well to make my meaning clear. The Mona Lisa is a painting of a woman with a half-smile sitting in front of a window that looks over mountains and lakes. This description roughly accounts for all of the details of the painting, but it completely fails to account for its greatness. Though it is just an imitation of the body of a woman, the painting conveys a rich subjective experience. A sitting human is not just a collection of nerves, muscles, and bones in a seated position: it is a being with an interior life. A sitting woman is a sitting, thinking, feeling, imagining, and reasoning being. But just as other humans convince us of their consciousness through their actions and wistful smiles, Mona Lisa—a masterly collection of brush-strokes on a canvas representing a woman with a half-smile—convinces us of her consciousness. This is indeed a mystery, and one that defies the finitude of the painting’s frame and the viewer’s description. For insofar as the painting evinces consciousness it cannot be circumscribed by description. Describing someone as having an interior life is like describing a spaceship as a piece of metal: it misses the point, the complexity, and the beauty. It is like referring to the Cinque-Terre Trail on Italy’s northwestern coast as “a hike.” The art seems at once an instrument whose purpose is to represent a sitting woman and an actual woman who is in no way instrumental. Thus, the greatness of this painting, I think, comes from its simultaneous adherence to and defiance of simple description. In fact, it is the simple description itself—in this case usually the smile—that seems to point us beyond this description.

There are many ways in which unity of organization and infinity of meaning can come to be in a piece of art, but these characteristics of great art always seem to stand in tension. I’ll try to draw out the necessity of this tension. If one can decisively refer to the meaning of a piece of art, if it can be expressed as a single thought or as a set of thoughts, then the art is no greater than this group of thoughts. Though these thoughts can certainly be important, even revolutionary, once they are studied, understood, and remembered the art has no more to give. Its meaning is exhausted. This is not great art. The trouble and mystery is that great art always seems to be simply organized. There seems to be a necessity to every element of great art—nothing is extra and nothing is missing. But this necessity suggests a unity of organization, a unifying principle or purpose. Thus the viewer interprets: “It must be organized in this way in order to . . .” The viewer must define the art, must give a meaning. How, then, can great art be characterized by infinite meaning as well as unity? How can it be both ungraspable and evoke a sense of organization?
It seems to me that if we are to agree that great art cannot be subject to
definition or synopsis and that great art must evince unity, then it must always seem
organized in a way that itself points the audience to a higher organization within the
art. This later unity will itself point to a new unity. Thus a first description of the
Mona Lisa draws attention to the smile—it is the smile that is mysterious. But Mona
Lisa’s smile points to her interiority and her interiority points to the real mystery of
the painting. Each attempt at picking the meaning out of great art bears new fruit—
new insight, inspiration, and understanding of the art—but also proclaims that what
looks like the fruit of a wild apple tree really hangs from a tree in a row of a beautiful
grove of apple trees. This new organization also suggests anew a purposefulness but
will in turn reveal itself to be merely a part of a larger unity. Thus each moment yields
a sense of self-sufficient unity, but calls us towards a larger unity.

If this account is worth anything as a theory of great art, its applications are
far-ranging and its uses many. As members of the Makom community—and by read-
ing this piece you most certainly are that—we are interested in this theory as it relates
to Jewish thought, and certainly the Bible.

**II: The Story of Joseph and His Brothers, and His Mother, and His Aunt, and
His Father…**

Though there are other examples of great art, and likely others that achieve
this greatness in a manner similar to that of the Bible, it is nevertheless striking that
the Joseph story fits the category so exactly. As is true of all stories, the framing of this
story—its beginning and its end—is essential in grasping the story’s organization and
assigning it meaning. In the Joseph story each framing, while intelligible, interesting,
and important, calls for its own reframing. Each time we try to begin and end the
Joseph story, we are pointed towards another beginning and another ending. In this
way, each of these reframings challenges the reader’s previous understanding of the
story. Thus we have an example of great art, and thus we discover an important feature
of the biblical manner of storytelling.

So let’s begin with the most obvious synopsis of the Joseph saga: Joseph is
born to Jacob and Rachel. While still in his youth, he finds himself without a mother
and the favorite of his father. His brothers are jealous and he is rash. Out of jealous-
ousy they nearly murder him but instead sell him into slavery. He finds himself a
slave in the house of an important Egyptian. He is blessed by God and beautiful; his
master’s wife tries to seduce him, and, failing, contrives his downfall. He is sent to
prison where he interprets the dreams of disgraced officials. This interpretive ability
leads to his ascent to the position of vizier to Pharaoh. A famine rages and Joseph
manages the country’s agriculture. Soon his brothers, living in Canaan and in need
of food, come to him for aid but fail to recognize their brother. He withholds his
identity while making their lives miserable—he has a silver goblet planted in their
luggage in order to throw Benjamin in jail and send the other brothers home to their
father Jacob, who has lost another son of Rachel. Finally, Judah confronts him.
Joseph, overwhelmed by emotion, reveals his identity. The brothers are reunited and
the whole family moves to Egypt under the protective power of Joseph, the vizier.

This is a story of brothers mistreating each other, but, with the help of God,
reuniting and reconstituting a family. It is a story of repentance and maturation: the
same brothers who were so angry with the young, arrogant Joseph confront the vizier
of Egypt to save Rachel’s younger son, Benjamin. Reading the story theologically,
one sees in Joseph a remarkable trust in God and in his troubles the dangers of ar-
rogance and jealousy. His brothers teach the reader that repentance and forgiveness
can re-knit even the most deeply rent of family fabrics. Here we have another, though
a more fully developed, Cain and Abel story. But in this reliving of the mythic
fraternal hatred, Jacob’s sons manage, with God’s aid, to overcome their murderous
impulses and emerge as a united family. However neat, this synopsis of the story is
misleadingly unified: this formulation of the story-unit seems much more solid than
it is.

To understand the story of Joseph and his brothers, one must at least recog-
nize the contentions between Rachel and Leah. Robert Alter suggests that Rachel’s
defining characteristics are her rivalry with her sister together with her deep desire to
bear children. He places particular emphasis on Rachel’s first speech, which reads as
follows:

> And Rachel saw that she had borne no children to Jacob, and Rachel was
> jealous of her sister, and she said to Jacob, “Give me sons, for if you don’t,
> I’m a dead woman!” And Jacob was incensed with Rachel and he said,
> “Am I instead of God, Who has denied you fruit of the womb?”

Jacob is perhaps correct to deny having the power to give Rachel sons, but his lack
of compassion for his wife here is striking. Instead of taking her pain seriously, he
admonishes her theological crudity. Jacob does not address Rachel’s problem and it
becomes his: soon Rachel’s desire for sons and her jealousy of Leah becomes a rift.
The naming of Naphtali, the second son born to Jacob and Bilhah, Rachel’s servant,
provides a concise and telling description of the sisters’ relationship: “And Rachel
said, ‘In awesome grapplings I have grappled with my sister and yes, I won out.’ And
she called his name Naphtali.” Foremost in Rachel’s mind, even at such a moment,
is her rivalry with Leah.

In the last chapter of Genesis, more than twenty chapters after Jacob’s re-
buve of Rachel, the language of this rebuke returns to the reader. The brothers’ rec-
conciliation after Judah’s daring speech was not as complete as it seemed at first. A few
chapters after their initial reunion and after Jacob’s death, the brothers fear Joseph’s
revenge. They decide to lie to him once more, telling him that Jacob had charged
Joseph to forgive his brothers their crime. Then we have
And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. And his brothers then came and flung themselves before him and said, “Here we are, your slaves.” And Joseph said, “Fear not, for am I instead of God?”

This pair of phrases is unique in the Hebrew Bible. Nowhere else do the words “am I instead of God?” appear. The second instance is a reversal of the first. Rather than responding with anger towards his brothers, Joseph promises to care for them. Jacob refuses to fulfill his wife’s deepest needs and imputes to her the crime of unreasoning, perhaps heretical, demands; Joseph provides for his brothers’ emotional need for forgiveness and absolves them of their actual crime. Furthermore, it is these brothers that caused Joseph’s slavery—and now they offer themselves as slaves to him. It is only at this moment that the family truly comes together. This, I think, is a clear indication that the fraternal rivalry was an extension of the rivalry between Rachel and Leah. These are not two stories, but one: the brothers’ rivalry is only a symptom of a larger pathology. Only here is their mothers’ rivalry overcome and only here is the crime of kidnapping openly addressed. The reader is thus forced to reframe the story to begin with the sister rivalry and end with the end of the book.

With the parallelism of these two verses the story suggests another narrative frame for itself and thereby another organization and meaning. The story is not simply of brothers but of a family in disorder. Only with the reordering and reuniting of the family can the story close. Yet it is a strange close. Under this framing, our story is an introduction to the story of slavery and redemption in Exodus. This paper is not the place for an extended treatment of the theme of slavery in the Joseph story, but such a treatment is possible and important. Certainly, the children of Israel offering themselves as slaves to the vizier of Egypt cannot fail to recall to the reader’s mind the story—and not only the story—in fact, they are reversed. While in the Laban story “he searched and did not find,” Joseph’s servant “searched … and found” in the Goblet story.35 This is, simply, the linguistic representation of the reversal in the narrative. Also, in the former story, we have “good or evil” and in the latter, “evil for good.” God’s words to Laban, I think, might even have made more sense as “evil or good”—for once speaking good is prohibited certainly speaking evil is as well—thus, the reversal in order can be taken as significant. In the two stories, the punishment promised is the same but phrased differently and uncommon phrasings:

- Both stories are dominated by semantically related word-roots: g.n.v., the root for theft, appears four times in the teraphim scene and the root k.s.f. for silver appears five times in the goblet scene.29
- Also, each scene plays off the other with a reference to the other’s word root. In the goblet scene, the brothers use the root g.n.v. in their denial and in the teraphim story Laban uses a play on k.s.f in his accusation.30
- In both scenes a reference to wrongdoing is made with a similar and uncommon phrase. Laban, in the midst of his accusations, strangely quotes God as telling him “watch yourself, lest you speak to Jacob either good or evil.” Joseph charges his servant to ask his brothers, “Why have you paid back evil for good?”31
- The verb for chasing—r.d.f.—appears in both.32
- The verb sequence “and he searched … he found” is in both.34
- The brothers echo their father’s response to Laban’s accusation of theft. Jacob says, “With whomever you find your gods, that person shall not live,” and years later the brothers tell Joseph’s servant that “he of your servants with whom it be found shall die.”34

All of these details are significantly and consistently changed in the second story—in fact, they are reversed. While in the Laban story “he searched and did not find,” Joseph’s servant “searched … and found” in the Goblet story.35 This is, simply, the linguistic representation of the reversal in the narrative. Also, in the former story, we have “good or evil” and in the latter, “evil for good.” God’s words to Laban, I think, might even have made more sense as “evil or good”—for once speaking good is prohibited certainly speaking evil is as well—thus, the reversal in order can be taken as significant. In the two stories, the punishment promised is the same but phrased once negatively and once positively: “shall not live,” in the first and “will die” in the second.36 Last, while it is the chaser who is deceived in the first story, the chaser is himself the deceiver in the second.

I think that the striking narrative and linguistic linkages between the scenes suggest that these two stories of family discord share a pathology—the shape and family leaving for Canaan; the stolen object is used for divination; the object is hidden in a saddlebag; a group pursues and catches the suspects; the “victim,” also a member of the family, confronts and accuses the suspects; the suspects categorically deny guilt and swear to their innocence on pain of death; a search is conducted ending with the finding of the stolen object; and, eventually, both stories end in peace making.

The language of these stories provides further evidence that at the heart of both episodes the same pathology afflicts the family. In the second episode, however, the beginnings of the family’s recovery are already apparent. These scenes share some uncommon phrasings:

- The verb sequence “and he searched … he found” is in both.
- In both scenes a reference to wrongdoing is made with a similar and uncommon phrase. Laban, in the midst of his accusations, strangely quotes God as telling him “watch yourself, lest you speak to Jacob either good or evil.” Joseph charges his servant to ask his brothers, “Why have you paid back evil for good?”31
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I think that the striking narrative and linguistic linkages between the scenes suggest that these two stories of family discord share a pathology—the shape and
behavior of the problem is the same. As the reversals show, these two scenes are at opposite ends of the problem. While they are both stories of family strife, the earlier scene with Laban suggests that Jacob's family has mismanaged the situation and created lasting problems for itself. The later scene, on the other hand, seems to manifest the moment at which the family's wounds begin to heal. This inverted parallelism will again reframe our reading, but this time it casts the shadow of the figure of Laban and of deceit upon the family's story.37

Upon inspection, the teraphim scene is really more about Laban and Jacob than about Rachel and Leah.38 Thus it is reasonable to read the connection between the scenes as a connection between the two pursuers and deceivers, Joseph and Laban. On this reading, the Joseph story is brought together with the deceit that surrounds Laban throughout. If this connection is viable, then it is likely that deceit is at the heart of the family's problem. The discord surrounding Joseph and his brothers is recast in terms of even broader family problems than those of rivalry. This theory becomes more plausible when one notes that though it is Laban who is the most unambiguous representative of the theme of deceit, he is not the only character to engage in it. Rachel steals the teraphim, Joseph plays his brothers with the goblet and his identity, and the brothers lie to Jacob about Joseph's death. Jacob misleads his father, cheats his brother, and sneaks out on Laban. The deception here is, indeed, pathological. Though at points Abraham's descendants had to choose between lying or dying, somewhere in the story the family developed a very troubling penchant for trickery. Thus Judah's courageous, open, and honest speech before the Egyptian vizier, Joseph, is comprehensible as a moment of healing. Joseph reveals his identity. The family has taken a great step forwards.

Here again the margins of the story waver. The goblet-teraphim parallelism suggests a broader view of the story and one that includes Jacob's youth in Isaac's house. The family must learn to deal with its problems openly, and with direct speech rather than through cleverness and trickery. Though deceit can serve a purpose, it has its own dangers.

Each recasting of the story and each internal linkage creates a new “whole” for the reader to grasp and assess, new material to know and understand. Each new whole itself has an organization and meaning. These linkages and their power to create meaning are not confined to recasting the beginnings and ends of stories, but link middles and weave a complex web of self-reference—intertextuality between stories and intratextuality within stories—that seems to extend infinitely.

Thus we find in Biblical literature a particular instance of great art. Here we have a literature that gestures beyond itself and reframes its own narrative. Each successive reframing provides an importantly different understanding of the art. Just as these linkages seem infinite, the meanings and reframings that correspond to them seem to be infinite. Yet within each framing, the story has a definite and graspable meaning, one that is not lost in synopsis. This greatness can be evident even within a small section by internal linkages. The relevant phenomenon for this paper is the reframing of the narrative arc of the story.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is a useful example of greatness of art. The Bible, like the Mona Lisa, demands thinking and rethinking, ever evincing an organizing principle but never fully grasped. Both leave one with an uncertain sense of a certain purposefulness and meaning. The manner in which the Bible attains this greatness is itself interesting: the endings and the beginnings of biblical story-units are not as solid as they appear. This observation will be crucial for the next section.

III: The Politics of an Unending Story

It should be evident at this point that a piece of art can achieve greatness in many ways. In this section, I hope to convince you that the biblical mode of artistic greatness described in the last section—manifest in the phenomenon of the wavering and expanding arc of Biblical narrative—conditions a sort of reading that draws even the twenty-first-century American reader into the Biblical narrative. I think that by reading in this way, the contemporary reader's distance from the text vanishes; this reader becomes, as it were, a character in the story.

First a word on contemporary distance from the text: I think that one can appreciate the moral, political, and theological meanings of the Bible and still remain at an important distance from the text. One can study the Bible and study it seriously, even piously, without living biblically. That is, a pious reader need not conceive himself has part of the story. While one may enjoy or admire the complexity of linkages in the narrative or glean politico-religious meaning from this manner of story telling, the reading is ultimately distant. I want to suggest that the ideal Jewish reader cannot maintain such a distance from the biblical narrative. This suggests a different relationship between the audience of these narratives and the text.

To say that the Bible demands the Jewish people's participation in the biblical story is not a new claim. Amidst the commandment to celebrate Passover—a commandment to be kept “when the Lord brings you to the land … ”—the Bible commands: “You shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘For the sake of what the Lord did to me when I went out of Egypt.’”39 It seems that in retelling the narrative of the Jewish Exodus, one is to place oneself into the past, into the story. The Mishnah picks up this reading in Tractate Pesahim. Citing this verse, the Talmud decrees that “In every generation a man is obligated to see himself as if he left Egypt.”40 In Deuteronomy, Moses addresses those about to enter the Land of Israel, many of whom were presumably born in the desert and who had never lain eyes on Egypt: “… You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your own eyes have seen, those great signs and portents.”41 This is, literally, not true. In both of these instances the historical reality bends under the pressure of religious imperative. For God's covenant is made with those present and those yet to be. Moses tells the people, “And not with
you alone do I seal this covenant and this oath but with him who is here standing with us this day before the Lord our God and with him who is not here with us this day.”

The special divine authority with which the Bible speaks lends a sense of imperative to its narrative. The Biblical narrator relates the creation of the cosmos and the prophecy of God. Moreover, this narrator commands; the Bible claims the authority of the divine lawgiver. The divine authority of the narrator lends a sense of necessity to the narrative. It must itself be fulfilled. Indeed, as we saw, the Bible demands explicitly that the Jewish reader see him- or herself as part of the story and particularly the story of the Exodus.

Beyond the Bible’s explicit command to enter the narrative, the Bible’s particular artistic greatness conditions a reading incompatible with a sense of historical distance from the story. The manner of storytelling in which the Bible creates an infinity of meanings leads one to read the document as a whole in the same way one reads each of its episodes: one doubts that the ending is truly final. As the ending of the Joseph saga wavers and takes on new meaning, the Bible conditions a form of reading that does not respect endings. Endings in the Bible are not solid; there is no dénouement but only the beginning of the next episode.

Locating the end of the Bible is itself a complicated endeavor. A case can be made that the end of II Kings is the concluding episode of the Bible’s continuous narrative. After II Kings there are isolated, though important, narratives, as well as a good deal of prophesy, poetry, parable, and psalm. So, it makes some sense to take this frame of mind. Belief in the Bible as a national founding myth is not sufficient: the ideal reader of the Bible must make himself a part of the story.

Notes

1 Actually, I think that great art has a third characteristic: 3) it justifies its own existence. I’ve left this out because I a real investigation of this characteristic would complicate this piece sufficiently to prevent including sections II and III. In short, I think, is an outcome of the second principle or characteristic. Great art can’t simply be valuable because it conforms to some external standard of valuation because in such a case its meaning would be definitive—as an example of that standard. Thus also, it also doesn’t depend on any standard of instrumentality for its existence as an object. While I was just beginning to write this section, Aaron Halper, AB 2012, referred me to the first part of Immanuel Kant’s Critique of judgment. I think that many of the ideas in this section can be found in some form there, but I decided that for the purposes of this article a lengthy discussion of Kant’s aesthetics was inappropriate.

2 The obvious difference is that we have much more evidence to think that the human bodies surrounding us have consciousness—they speak, for instance. But, the point stands that Leonardo Da Vinci really has created something convincingly conscious here.

3 Irad Kimhi, who is a visiting professor in The Committee on Social Thought, suggested a version of this understanding of “great art” in his class on Hamlet in Spring 2012.

4 In terms of the third characteristic of great art (see note 1): the physical work of art—for art must exist physically—would have merely instrumental value and would be justified only insofar as the work’s purpose fit with some externally justifying standard of value. Some twentieth-century movements, such as Conceptualism or the performance art movement, might contest the proposition that art must exist physically; nevertheless, the point that the art would be externally justified stands.

5 This metaphor is misleading if one forgets that the viewer sees the entire work of art at once—the grasping of another organization is not merely an expansion of the viewer’s field of vision.

6 The context of Joseph’s birth is fraught: as I will discuss later, Rachel and Leah are already in the midst of a heated rivalry (see Gen 30:1 and 30:14-16). Furthermore, Joseph’s birth coincides with a familial upheaval: “And it happened, when Rachel bore Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, ‘Send me off, that I may go to my place and to my land’” (Gen 30:25-6; unless otherwise specified, I will be using Robert Alter, trans., The Five Books of Moses, trans. Robert Alter [New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2004]). Here already, Joseph’s birth is a pivotal and contentious moment in the family’s politics. Rachel’s death is described at 35:16-20 and Joseph is described as his father’s favorite at 37:3.

7 Gen 37:4-5

8 Gen 37:19-29
9 Gen 39:1-20
10 Gen 40:1-13 & 16-22
11 Gen 41:1-45
12 Gen 41:8-9 & 54-7
13 Gen 42:1-8
14 Gen 42:9-23 & 44:1-17
15 Gen 44:18-45:20 & 47:1-4
16 Cf. Gen 4:1-16
17 I am not claiming at this point that one must consider the Rachel-Leah rivalry as an organic part of the Joseph-unit. That claim will be made and defended soon.
18 “It is a general principle of biblical narrative that a character’s first recorded speech has particular defining force as characterization” (Alter, page 158 note 1).
19 Gen 30:1-2 (my emphasis).
20 Gen 30:8. The name “Naftali” is etymologically related to the words rendered by Alter as “grappled” and “won out.”
21 Gen 50:15-17.
22 Gen 50:17-19 (my emphasis).
23 In truth, even these two are not exactly the same. Jacob uses the word anochi for his first person subject while Joseph uses ani. On the other hand word hatachat only appears three times in the whole of the Hebrew Bible, with the third instance in Samuel II 19:22, and only in these two places meaning “instead of” or “in the place of.”
24 This fulfills the dream that started all the drama!
26 Cf. Gen 44:5 and the Ibn Ezra’s or Alter’s commentary for a discussion of the “divining.”
28 Cf. Gen 31:19 and Alter’s note there.
29 Also, the root g.z.l. for robbery appears once.
30 Gen 44:8 and 31:30 respectively. The word in the teraphim scene is nikhsaf which looks and sounds of kesef.
31 Gen 31:30 and 44:4 (my emphasis). Alter renders the Hebrew ra as evil and tov as good
32 Gen 31:23 and 44:4
33 Gen 31:35 and 44:12
34 Gen 44:9 and 31:32
35 Gen 31:35 and 44:12.
36 It is important to note that in neither of these scenes is the punishment carried out.
37 Yair Zakovitch suggests that the story of Benjamin’s accusation and near imprisonment is a punishment for his mother’s theft of the teraphim and deceit of her father (Zakovitch, page 19). Thus, perhaps, Rachel’s wrongdoing is finally being undone, reversed. Though a certain level of criticism of Rachel here is undeniable, I think that this explanation is a bit farfetched. For one, Rachel has already died in childbirth. Indeed, if we need to impute a punishment for Rachel, it would be quite plausible that her deception, which centered on her fertility (see 31:35), would be punished with a fault of fertility.
38 Though Rachel precipitates the misunderstanding, she is not responsible for her father’s mistreatment of Jacob or her husband’s decision to flee.
39 Ex 13:4-8. (The emphasis is mine).
40 Chapter 10 mishna 5, and in the Talmud on 116b. This is my translation.
41 Deut 29:1
42 Deut 29:13-4
43 I think that historical narrative is closely analogous to Biblical narrative. As narratives, both depend on a beginning, middle, and end to tell a story but both refuse this simple framing. History is too complex to capture fully in such a form, the causal story is always more complex than its framing. Both challenge any attempted framing as incomplete. History by suggesting causal links and the Bible by manifest intertextuality. On the other hand, the facts causally relevant to a historical event in one way or another are infinite while those relevant to a narrative are (usually and ideally) contained in the work.
44 See II Kings 25:9, 25-26
About the Editors

Gabriel Shapiro – Editor-in-Chief (gshap@uchicago.edu)
Gabriel is a third year in the College. For two years before he began at the University of Chicago, he studied Talmud, Bible, and halakha at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel. At UChicago Gabriel is majoring in Fundamentals and minoring in Math. His question—Fundamentals is organized around a guiding question—is about religion, philosophy, and happiness. During winter quarter, Gabriel will be writing on Anna Karenina for his Fundamentals Junior Paper. Apart from his work on math, happiness, and Makom, Gabriel works as a research assistant for the Committee on Social Thought. Just in case you can help, Gabriel recently realized that he wants to know more about psychoanalysis, al-Ghazali, and philosophy of language.

Doni Bloomfield – Managing Editor (dbloomfield@uchicago.edu)
Doni is a third-year in the College at the University of Chicago, majoring in history. His interests include research into free banking in the American West, the economics and halakhot of kidney donation, and the literary approach to Tanach. In addition, he does research for Wall Street Journal reporter Greg Zuckerman and works on various projects with University Theater and Fire Escape Films.

Jonathan Nathan – Academic Editor (jnathan@uchicago.edu)
Jonathan Nathan is a sophomore at the University of Chicago majoring in History and Law, Letters, & Society. He is especially interested in theology, grammar, law, nineteenth-century America, and prose-embedded blank heroic verse. Jonathan grew up in New York City, where he attended the Fieldston School. He has spent the last two summers working at a boys’ camp and exploring Maine and New England.

Dory Fox – Layout Editor (dory@uchicago.edu)
Dory is a fourth-year in the College of the University of Chicago, double-majoring in Jewish studies and English. Her main academic interest is twentieth-century American Jewish literature. She is also interested in representations of Jews in Western literature and art, and in the intersections between Modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Dory spent the Summer of 2012 as a Steiner Summer Student at the Yiddish Book Center and as a literary intern at The New Republic. She is writing her Bachelors thesis on The Yiddish Policemen’s Union by Michael Chabon.

About the Contributors

Jon Catlin
Jon is a second-year in the College of the University of Chicago double majoring in Jewish studies and the College’s “Fundamentals: Issues and Texts” program, in which students use close readings of texts to answer a fundamental human question of their choosing. His Fundamentals question is, “What is the human response to catastrophe?” which he is investigating by studying literary and philosophical responses to the Holocaust in comparison to those of other catastrophes in history. He divides his time between writing and editing for The Chicago Maroon and The Midway Review and teaching philosophy to elementary school children on Chicago’s South Side through the program Winning Words. This summer he plans to study Polish language and Polish-Jewish literature in Kraków, Poland.

Zara Fishkin
Zara is a senior at Tufts University, majoring in English with a minor in Mass Communications & Media Studies. She is currently a copywriting intern at Hill Holliday, and is a former student of the Yiddish Book Center’s Steiner Program. Her interests include cause marketing, advertising, the history of fairy tales, and intercollegiate quidditch.

Michael Francus
Michael is a fourth-year at the University of Chicago, where he majors in philosophy and political science. He is currently writing a thesis on political obligation, though his interests span a number of fields. Outside of academia he has worked for the Congressional Research Service and for the Obama campaign, and is an avid Scrabble player.

Michal Goldschmidt
Michal is in her final year at the University of Cambridge. She is studying Theology and History of Art and is especially interested in the intersection of these two fields. In her free time she volunteers for the Fitzwilliam Museum’s education department by giving talks about the collection in schools that cannot afford to make the trip to the museum themselves. She also edits visual arts material for The Mays, an anthology of creative work by current students at both Oxford and Cambridge.

Kayla Kirshenbaum
Kayla is a senior at Queens College in New York where she studies English literature
and drama theater. Amongst other prizes, her writing has been awarded the Zolot Prize in poetry and the M. Hratch Zadoian Essay Prize in Holocaust/Genocide Studies. Kayla studied in Rome for half a year where she kept an online blog and food journal. Her primary interests include Victorian poetry and its literature, and she looks forward to pursuing a higher degree in creative writing.

Avi Levin
Avi, a native of Seattle, is a junior majoring in Applied Mathematics. Before coming to the University of Chicago, he spent three years in Beit Midrash at the Pacific Torah Institute in Vancouver, Canada. He currently serves as President of the RSO Student Alliance for Jewish Enrichment. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, programming, traditional Jewish study, and Halo.

Leah Reis-Dennis
Leah is a senior at Harvard University where she studies American History and Literature. She is currently working on a thesis entitled “Reforming the Incorrigible: Jewish Delinquent Girls and Social Reform in New York City, 1900-1925.” She spent this past summer as a Steiner Summer Student at the Yiddish Book Center. An emerging singer/songwriter, she also sings for The Nostalgics, a Soul and Motown band.

Eric Singerman
Eric is a second year in the College of the University of Chicago, majoring in philosophy. He was raised on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He came to UChicago to read the books he couldn’t understand by himself. So far, it’s going well. He loves to eat, cook, write, and read.
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