

American Jewish Fiction Turns Inward, 1960–1990

by SYLVIA BARACK FISHMAN

OVER THE PAST 25 YEARS a remarkable literary trend has occurred within the fiction of a significant group of contemporary American Jewish writers. These writers have produced a new, inward-turning genre of contemporary American Jewish fiction which explores the individual Jew's connection to the Jewish people, to Jewish religion, culture, and tradition, and to the chain of Jewish history. Although sometimes witty, this body of work wrestles with weighty spiritual matters: Jewish conceptions of faith and redemption in a post-Holocaust world; the conflict between free will and predestination in the light of Jewish belief and Jewish history; and the notion of the Jewish people as an *am segulah*, a chosen nation.

The new genre of American Jewish fiction has been unabashedly religious in its sensibility; in the words of Cynthia Ozick, one of its main practitioners, it is "liturgical in nature" and "centrally Jewish in its concerns."¹ It thus differs dramatically from the Jewish fiction of the previous quarter century, which had flourished largely by regarding Jews as a species of court jesters or existential heroes—as insightful outsiders who have special value to the Gentile world. Rather than depicting Jews primarily in terms of their universal interest or utility, the new body of fiction treats Jews, Jewish values, and idiosyncratic Jewish topics as intrinsically compelling. In addition, much in the new American Jewish fiction has moved beyond solipsistic preoccupations to an involvement in communal concerns, and has found new vitality in exploring the interaction between the two. For many contemporary American Jewish writers, the exploration of Judaism is more than a personal quest for spiritual identity—it provides an opportunity to investigate the confrontation between individual freedom and group continuity.

Fiction that focuses on Jewish spirituality has not developed in a vacuum, either in terms of the Jewish or the general literary environments. Rather, it draws upon the increased interest in religion among American intellectu-

¹Cynthia Ozick, "Toward a New Yiddish," in *Art and Ardor: Essays* (New York, 1983), pp. 174–75.

als in general. As Philip Zaleski suggests, "Not so long ago religion seemed to many intellectuals like a beached leviathan gasping for air, impaled by the glittering harpoon of science. Today, graying baby boomers pack the church pews and meditation halls, and fundamentalists prosper from Teheran to Texas."² Moreover, American Jewish fiction that focuses on Jewish spirituality is one aspect of a larger, extensive trend toward Judaic subject matter among American Jewish writers. There has been a dramatic increase in fiction, memoirs, essays, and poetry which explore themes in Jewish history, culture, and tradition. Much of this literature has been distinguished by a knowledgeable fascination with the internal details of intensely Jewish experience now and in the past.

Jewishly literate fiction can be found today at every brow level; it has attracted a broader reading audience than anyone might have predicted. The past two to three decades have seen the "birth of an authentically Jewish American writer, growing out of and appealing to American-born generations, and enjoying great popularity," testifies Bonny Fetterman, senior editor and director of Judaica at Schocken Books. Fetterman notes that the vigorous sales of books on Jewish topics encourage publishers to acquire and publish ever more numerous volumes of American Jewish literature, as well as to reissue Jewish and Hebrew classics long out of print or unavailable to American audiences.³ In fiction ranging from highly serious to middlebrow to frankly pulp, aspects of Jewish life which earlier in the century might have seemed to be inaccessible esoterica have been transformed into fascinating exotica instead.

The exploration of intensely Jewish subject matter is now evident both in the works of relatively new authors and in the return to internally Jewish concerns by some established authors. Thus, to touch on a few highlights of change, Elie Wiesel and Chaim Potok pioneered the extensive exploration of Jewish spirituality in American fiction; Arthur Cohen, Cynthia Ozick, and others developed and intensified the treatment of these issues; and Philip Roth responded to a transformed cultural landscape by producing *The Counterlife* (1987). After the notoriety that greeted Roth's early work, leaving him putatively traumatized by adverse reaction from a Jewish reading public uncomfortable with the intimate exploration of Jewish themes and environments, Roth virtually abandoned extensive treatment of overtly Jewish themes for three decades. *The Counterlife* brilliantly examines the paths that Jewish life can take today, from aggressive assimilation

²Philip Zaleski, "The Priest, the Rabbi, and the Best of Intentions," review of Andrew M. Greeley and Jacob Neusner, *The Bible and Us: A Priest and a Rabbi Read Scripture Together* (New York, 1990), in the *New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 2, 1990, p. 9.

³Bonny Fetterman, senior editor and director of Judaica at Schocken, personal communication, Aug. 1, 1990.

to Jewish renewal, from conspicuously complacent suburban America to militantly pious West Bank Israel, and ends by affirming positive Jewish connections. This extraordinary inside look at contemporary American Jewish challenges and options—the most thoughtfully Jewish book he has written since “Eli the Fanatic” and “The Defender of the Faith” appeared in the *Goodbye, Columbus* collection (1959)—is significant not only in terms of Roth’s own career but also as a response to the Jewish spiritualist phenomenon in contemporary American fiction.

The spiritualist genre of Jewish fiction is best seen as the dense innermost section of a forest, with diverse flora supported by common nurturing elements and by each other as well. This mutually supportive Jewish spiritual fiction is surrounded by larger but less intensive circles of fiction focusing on diverse Jewish themes, with outer circles which grow progressively less interactive and coherently Jewish. In the outermost areas are numerous pieces of American Jewish fiction written by authors such as Norman Mailer, Erica Jong, and many younger writers, which exhibit only marginal interest in Judaism and Jewish culture.

A marginally Jewish literature might well have been expected in contemporary America because it reflects certain strong trends away from distinctive Jewish attitudes and behaviors, trends often linked under the term “assimilation.” Particularistic Jewish themes in contemporary American Jewish literature, in contrast, might be considered to run counter to expectations. Indeed, American Jewish fiction of the past quarter century has often seemed polarized—as has much of American Jewish life—between literature which explores Jewish subject areas, characters, and environments and that which is essentially indifferent to them.

This essay examines recent fiction which draws on Jewish sources and/or deals with Jewish themes. Special attention is devoted to stories and novels that focus on Jewish religious or spiritual issues. Thus, the essay begins with a brief documentation of the broad scope of renewed interest in Jewish topics on the American Jewish literary scene, a phenomenon that is expressed through new works of American fiction, through translations of Jewish fiction originally written in Hebrew, Yiddish, and European languages, and through reissues of earlier Jewish classics.⁴ The essay then proceeds to its main focus, an analysis of spiritual American Jewish fiction, through a close look at several significant works by authors such as Chaim Potok, Elie Wiesel, Arthur Cohen, Cynthia Ozick, Hugh Nissenson, Allen Hoffman, Jay Neugeboren, and Rebecca Goldstein. The essay indicates the thematic interrelationships between these works and some earlier pieces of American Jewish fiction and notes the impact which these themes have had

⁴Complete citations are provided for books closely analyzed or quoted. Only publication dates are provided for other books mentioned.

on some established Jewish writers as well. Finally, the essay explores possible reasons for the receptivity of reading audiences to particularistic Jewish fiction and suggests potential directions of such literature in the near future.

THE VARIETIES OF JEWISH EXPRESSION

Particularistic Jewish fiction is now a commonplace on the literary scene. The new literature has, perhaps paradoxically, included a wide range of topics: an attraction to historical periods and religious environments which are more idiosyncratically Jewish than those of contemporary suburban America, especially Orthodox, biblical, Jewish-socialist, or other identifiable Jewish societies; an intense and continuing interest in the human and historical implications of the Holocaust; a proliferation of literature by and about Jewish women; an increased availability of, and readership for, Jewish literature which had previously been inaccessible or unappealing to American Jewish audiences, such as out-of-print books from the immigration period and Hebrew, Yiddish, and European Jewish literature in translation; and, not least, books which focus on or are set in contemporary or historical Israel.

One has only to look backward to the fiction of the celebrities of American Jewish fiction in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s to see the change. During the middle years of the 20th century, American Jewish literature was characterized by a universalistic orientation which defined the Jew through his/her relationship with Gentile Diaspora existence. As Ted Solotaroff perceptively notes, a quarter century ago, American Jewish writing won critical prominence because it brought to the American reading public the perspective of marginality, which "had the implication of standing apart, as the American-Jewish writer was perceived to do with respect to both sides of the hyphen." The American Jewish writer was acclaimed, Solotaroff posits, precisely because he was "an outsider in both the American and Jewish communities" and thus "was enabled to see what more accustomed eyes would miss."⁵

Thus, the Jewish character of the extremely popular Jewish-authored American fiction of the 1950s and 1960s had usually been other-directed: the Jew was presented as an obligatory outsider coping with American society, and/or Jewishness was presented as a theatrical species of ethnic comedy, full of streetwise Jewish humor and peppered with pungent Yiddishisms. This literary stance was probably influenced by the fact that

⁵Ted Solotaroff, "American-Jewish Writers, on the Edge Once More," *New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 18, 1988, pp. 1, 31, 33; p. 33.

until the late 1960s most American Jews assumed assimilation was the irresistible trend of the future, and much of the most celebrated (and notorious) American Jewish fiction focused on the process of assimilation. Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy articulated the assimilatory hunger of his generation: "O America! America! It may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me, a child whose earliest memories are of Ann Rutherford and Alice Faye, America is a shikse nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!" (*Portnoy's Complaint*, 1967).

Orthodoxy in New Jewish Fiction

In contrast, one of the most striking features of contemporary American Jewish fiction is how often it speaks from the inside of the Jewish experience. One aspect of this insider's vision is the depiction of a bewildering array of diverse Orthodox societies and characters. This is a trend that differs markedly from American Jewish literature of the past, where Orthodox characters tended to be cranky old men or force-feeding mothers and aunts. Orthodox Jewish characters and settings now enjoy an unprecedented and variegated focus in new American Jewish fiction.⁶ In addition to the authors and works which will be examined more closely later in this essay, Curt Leviant's most recent book, *The Man Who Thought He Was Messiah* (1990), reimagines and retells the life story of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav in a narrative suffused with both spirituality and sensuality. The prolific Isaac Bashevis Singer's novella *The Penitent* (1983) is a tour de force, rejecting what the protagonist characterizes as the nihilistic libertinism and empty materialism of current Western society and championing every legal and spiritual aspect of right-wing Orthodoxy. Daphne Merkin's novel *Enchantment* (1986) is set in the little-publicized world of upper-class Orthodox German Jews on New York's West Side. Nessa Rapoport's first novel, *Preparing for the Sabbath* (1981), portrays a young woman struggling with the conflicting demands of youthful passion and spirituality, Orthodoxy and secularism, in both American and Israeli settings. Both the title of Allegra Goodman's first collection of short stories, *Total Immersion* (1989), and the themes, imagery, and subject matter of many of the stories reflect her childhood in an Orthodox family in Hawaii. Steve Stern, in *Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven: Stories* (1986), creates a mythical Jewish neighbor-

⁶For discussions of Orthodoxy in contemporary publishing, see Thomas Friedman, "Back to Orthodoxy: The New Ethnic and Ethnics in American Jewish Literature," *Contemporary Jewry* 10, no. 1, Spring 1989, pp. 67-77; Joseph Lowin, "Herman Wouk and the Liturgical Novel," *Jewish Book Annual* 44, 1986-1987, pp. 43-54; and B. Barry Levy, "The Orthodox Publishing Explosion in Perspective," *Jewish Book Annual* 44, 1986-1987, pp. 6-17.

hood in the South, the land of Pinch, which is inhabited by a band of emaciated, cabbalistic yeshivah boys. Savagely humorous depictions of the idiosyncrasies and foibles of Orthodox environments are found in the pages of Tova Reich's *Mara: A Novel* (1978), which knowingly depicts wealthy contemporary Orthodox New Yorkers, and *The Master of the Return* (1988), which satirizes the spiritual searchings of a motley collection of *ba'alei teshuvah*, born-again Jews, who have gathered under the aegis of the Bratzlaver Hassidim in Israel.

The recent focus on Orthodox Judaism is a reflection of the intense interest which Orthodox societies have evoked among some contemporary American Jews. Examples of both this interest and the reasons why it has grown are found in Anne Roiphe's popular *Lovingkindness* (1987), a tale of an ultra-assimilated, intermarried, and widowed feminist whose daughter becomes a devoutly Orthodox Jew, much to her mother's initial astonishment and distress. The novel illustrates the turn toward Jewish topics both within fiction and within the author's life so directly that it can be viewed as a fable for our times. Born into a casually Jewish New York family on Christmas day in 1935, Roiphe has undergone a dramatic reversal in her professional relationship with Jewish topics. She established her reputation by writing witty books which articulated the conflicts implicit in the feminine mystique; one of the best known was *Up the Sandbox* (1972), a humorous exposé of the angst in a young mother's restricted life. She also wrote, and continues to write, articles promoting feminist causes, such as abortion rights and equal-responsibility parenting. However, an article that Roiphe authored on being an assimilated Jew at Christmastime aroused so much furor and reader response that Roiphe found herself reevaluating her own relationship with Judaism. Discovering that her knowledge base was woefully inadequate, Roiphe began to study Jewish texts in earnest. She soon began to write both about her own voyage of discovery and also about Jews, both knowledgeable and assimilated, in American Jewish environments; one product of her voyage of self-discovery is her nonfiction book *Generation Without Memory: A Jewish Journey in Christian America* (1981).

Lovingkindness, a fictional exploration of Roiphe's recent Jewish interests, accurately reflects a sociological reality: acculturated American Jewish parents sometimes say they might feel more comfortable having their child marry an Episcopalian than a Hassidic Jew; the characters in Roiphe's novel do both. Annie, the protagonist, holds vehement beliefs in individual freedom and secular Western humanism, which are tantamount to fanatical religious convictions. Those convictions are challenged when her daughter, Andrea, after passing through a series of drugs and experimental life-styles, becomes a docile and obedient daughter of Israel in an ultra-Orthodox community in Jerusalem. Andrea's defection to Orthodox Judaism is, in

Annie's eyes, virtually an apostasy into an alien culture. However, Annie subsequently searches her soul and recognizes that assimilation was her own agenda, not necessarily an objectively superior path. In addition, Annie is moved by the genuine warmth, stability, and generous sense of community which she finds among Orthodox Jews. When given the opportunity to tear her daughter away from Orthodoxy, she chooses to side with the administrators of the yeshivah and to support her daughter's new life.

This fascination with Orthodox settings extends to mystery novels and to popular fiction as well. For example, Faye Kellerman's homicide-detective hero meets the widow of a kollel yeshivah student in *The Ritual Bath* (1987); their relationship continues, with the detective serendipitously discovering in a sequel, *Sacred and Profane* (1987), that he has Jewish origins and is thus an appropriate romantic interest for the Orthodox widow. Even the jacket blurb for the latter novel says much about the mainstreaming of Orthodoxy in American Jewish fiction: "Juxtaposing orthodox Judaism against a brutal and brilliantly drawn homicide investigation. . . . The central character of Peter Decker, cop burnout and would-be-orthodox Jew, is unforgettable." Indeed, naming books aimed at a broad trade audience with titles such as "total immersion" and "the ritual bath," which refer to the laws of family purity and the mikveh, would have been almost unthinkable 25 years ago.

Naomi Ragen's *Jepthe's Daughter* (1989) brings a beautiful young Orthodox woman from the affluent American Jewish world to the extremism of a cloistered Jerusalem neighborhood in a disastrous marriage to a rigid and unpleasant Hassidic Jew; she escapes the nightmare by falling in love with a seemingly Gentile gentleman who turns out to have had a Jewish mother. The protagonist of Rhoda Lerman's *God's Ear* (1989) is first a Hassidic rabbi, then an affluent insurance salesman, and finally once again a rabbi and spiritualist in unlikely Kansas. Herman Wouk, whose prolific and popular fictional output had previously seldom made reference to his personal adherence to traditional Judaism, produced protagonist I. David Goodkind, an Orthodox Jewish presidential speechwriter and adviser, in *Inside, Outside: A Novel* (1985).

Historical Novels

Like Orthodox culture, settings that are placed in earlier, more unambiguously Jewish societies from the Bible onward also provide opportunities to explore issues of Jewish identity. In particular, a fascination with the more recent Jewish past and with definitively Jewish environments, such as the *shtetl* or Jewishly intense Eastern European urban areas—often in combination with or leading up to modern American Jewish life—is evident

in many different types of American Jewish literature, ranging from difficult and critically acclaimed fiction to easily accessible popular narratives. Many authors turn backward to explore the transformation of Jewish life in American Jewish immigrant societies and then trace the progress of that transformation forward through contemporary times. Some of Harold Brodkey's award-winning, experimental fiction follows this trajectory, as do several of Gloria Goldreich's best-selling popular historical sagas. Romances especially have mined the exotic settings offered by biblical, Eastern European, Sephardic, and Orthodox worlds, often in combination with American Jewish settings. In scores of popular romances by authors such as Cynthia Freeman, Belva Plain, Julie Ellis, and Iris Rainer Dart, landmarks of Jewish history previously relegated to textbooks have become plot devices in the pages of glossy-covered novels.

American Hybrids

A major focus of American Jewish fiction continues to be the interface between Jewish values and mores and contemporary American life-styles and demographics. One paradigm of such transitions is found when a gay man's lover and his former wife both show up at his son's bar mitzvah in Marian Thurm's short-story collection *These Things Happen* (1988). Another area of changing American Jewish demographics is explored in Linda Bayer's *The Blessing and the Curse* (1988) and in Julie Salamon's *White Lies* (1987), which depict the special pressures which infertility and adoption create for Jews. Indeed, Jewish peoplehood, in all its permutations, continues to attract much literary attention. Johanna Kaplan's fiction richly and often humorously captures the flavor of urban Jewish middle-class life; in Kaplan's work (*Other People's Lives*, 1975; *O My America*, 1980), conflict between Jewish-radical ideals, the more traditional historical Jewish heritage, and classical American dreams is played out alongside the conflict between several generations of American Jews. Roberta Silman also depicts the volatile relationships between Eastern European Jews and their assimilated offspring in books such as *Somebody Else's Child* (1976), *Blood Relations* (1977), and *Boundaries* (1979).

Fiction about Sephardic Jewish Americans is beginning to appear more frequently as well: Sally Benforado's stories tell of a Turkish Sephardic community descended from Spanish Jewry, some of whom find their way to the United States; stories by other new Sephardic-Jewish American authors such as Gloria Kirschheimer and Ruth Setton, each portraying a warmly human and humorous, idiosyncratic world, have been appearing in diverse journals and magazines.

Jewish socialism, another historically important element in shaping

American Jewish life, has appealed to some authors as an authentic voice of the Jewish psyche, and many authors have set their works in the urban, socialist environments of the American Jewish past. Among the best of these books, Grace Paley's short-story collections (*Enormous Changes*, 1974; *Later the Same Day*, 1985) depict a divorced daughter of two Jewish socialists as she develops her own calling to social activism and as she visits her parents in the Children of Judea retirement home. Vivian Gornick's memoir, *Fierce Attachments* (1987), vividly portrays the Jewish socialist Bronx and its colorful denizens. The historical role of socialism in American Jewish life is explored more prosaically in the novels of Meredith Tax.

Holocaust

Among the most striking of all the preoccupations of contemporary American Jewish fiction has been its obsession with the Holocaust and the lost communities of Eastern Europe. Sometimes the connection is indirect. Dozens of novels have been published over the past three decades which bring a 20th-century sensibility to persecutions, massacres, and expulsions in earlier Jewish history. Among the more notable authors dealing with subjects such as Jewish life during a variety of historical persecutions are Joanne Greenberg (*The King's Persons*, 1963, 1985) and Roberta Kalechofsky (*Bodmin, 1349: An Epic Novel of Christians and Jews in the Plague Years*, 1988). More often, Holocaust themes are explored directly in recent fiction. Elie Wiesel himself once trembled at the notion that one might transform the unutterable suffering of the victims of the Holocaust into art, and consoled himself only with the knowledge that it was his sacred duty to bear witness to the enormity of what had occurred. However, judging by the proliferation of both serious and popular fiction dealing with the Holocaust today, this anxiety no longer seems to deter many authors.

During the past 25 years, scores of Holocaust-related novels, both autobiographical and fictional, and memoirs have been published in the United States. The Holocaust motif in American Jewish literature runs the gamut from simply told personal tales to philosophical explorations of the meaning of evil to lightly fictionalized historical chronicles to cinematic soap operas in which scenes of agonized suffering are interspersed with graphically depicted sexual activity. The expansion of Holocaust-related American Jewish fiction has also given rise to an accompanying critical literature, much of which has been published by university presses, additional testimony to the critical status which Jewish literature continues to enjoy.⁷

⁷For example, a thorough and sensitive exploration of treatments of the Holocaust in American Jewish literature can be found in S. Lillian Kremer, *Witness Through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature* (Detroit, 1989); see also Dorothy Bilik, *Immigrant*

Holocaust themes, along with other motifs of Jewish history, tradition, culture, and ethnicity, have been thoroughly mainstreamed, even among the most cosmopolitan of American Jewish writers. Significantly, most major contemporary American Jewish writers have at least one work which focuses on the Holocaust. Among Saul Bellow's most powerful works, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), which won a National Book Award in 1971, depicts a fastidious elderly Polish Holocaust survivor living in Manhattan during the heyday of the youth culture, who finds himself shocked and sickened by the barbarism of life in New York. In Bellow's recent novella *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989), the story's most impressive character is obsessed with facilitating the meeting between her husband and Billy Rose, who saved her husband and other Jews from the Holocaust by secret ministrations. Bernard Malamud deals with Holocaust themes obliquely but powerfully in *The Fixer* (1966), a reworking of the Yakov Beilis blood-libel case in Russia. Malamud's last novel, *God's Grace* (1982), draws more overtly than his previous work on Jewish materials and is informed by a Holocaust-related motif. Significantly, in his earlier novel *The Assistant* (1957), Malamud's protagonist has little interest in Jewish literature, liturgy, or ritual, and states that to be a Jew means "to do what is right, to be honest, to be good" and to "suffer" for other people. In *God's Grace*, however, the protagonist is a descendant of a rabbinic genealogy and has himself studied for the rabbinate; in his postnuclear Holocaust argument with God, he utilizes Jewish sources in theology, liturgy, and rabbinic literature. Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* (1969) and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* (1974) are each stirring depictions of the Holocaust and its impact. Seymour Epstein's *A Special Destiny* (1986) sensitively portrays the friendship between a young German-Jewish refugee who becomes a successful playwright and the son of an unhappy Bronx Jewish family who is obsessed by the Holocaust.

Some American Holocaust literature has been controversial because of the ambiguous nature of its Jewish characters. For example, Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews: A Novel* (1979) stirred up feelings of betrayal among some Jews with its focus on Jewish collaboration; his more recent *Goldkorn Tales* (1984) tells stories about an atheistic Holocaust survivor who contrasts his love of civilization's delights with the decline of New York City life. Jerome Badanes's *The Final Opus of Leon Solomon* (1989) presents a complicated man—survivor of Auschwitz, thief of Judaica documents from the New

Survivors: Post-Holocaust Consciousness in Recent Jewish-American Fiction (Middleton, Conn., 1981); Sidra Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago, 1980); Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington, 1980); and David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, 1984).

York Public Library, and suitor of a black radio personality; both witness and obsessive personality, Solomon is far from the stereotypically heroic survivor. (Badanes earlier gained recognition as the author of the 1981 award-winning documentary *Image Before My Eyes*, an homage to the rich Jewish life of prewar Poland.) Popular American novels have also drawn on Holocaust-related subject matter. Indeed, it often seems that the use of the Holocaust as a plot device has become *de rigueur* in American Jewish fiction.

Israel

Israel, both as a separate subject and in combination with other aspects of Jewish history, including the Holocaust, continues to figure prominently in American Jewish fiction, albeit no longer through the romantic glow it had enjoyed earlier in Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958). Ted Solotaroff cogently notes that "the survival of Israel has been the paramount concern of organized Jewish life and probably the paramount source of Jewish identity" during the past quarter of a century.⁸ American Jewish fiction dealing with Israel, which has increased in recent years, can be divided into three basic types: serious explorations of Israeli life, society, and history; popular fiction, including romances and mysteries, which make use of Israel as an exotic and appealing locale; and works which, rather than portraying Israeli life as an entity unto itself, present the Jewish state in its relationship to American Jewish life, as an alternative or as a source of revitalization.

Many of the motifs in Mark Helprin's *Refiner's Fire*,⁹ for example, are emblematic of the wellsprings of Jewish renewal which American Jewish writers find in Israeli history and settings. Helprin gathers the most unlikely and seemingly deJudaized characters from a wide variety of settings and shows how their lives are given shape and meaning through their encounters with the land and people of Israel. In the novel, a Virginia gentleman goes first to New York in an attempt to give his life more Jewish content and consults a rabbi "whose advice consisted of coldly instructing him to purify his pots and pans by boiling water in them and dropping a hot brick." However, it is not until he bravely volunteers to serve as captain for a ship bearing illegal Holocaust survivor victims past hostile British marines into Palestine that "Paul Levy became a Jew." Helprin portrays Israel as being suffused with deep Jewish meaning, so that a gravely wounded soldier, an orphan who has been presumed doomed more than once in his life, looks out at trucks driving along the road and feels "that even the light and

⁸Solotaroff, "American-Jewish Writers."

⁹Mark Helprin, *Refiner's Fire: The Life and Adventures of Marshall Pearl, a Foundling* (New York, 1977).

motion of a truck blasting down the sea road were at every moment linked to an artful and all-powerful God." For Helprin and other American Jewish authors, ideas such as the ingathering of Jewish exiles and divine ordering of the life of the individual and the people seem to thrive on Israeli soil.

On a less edifying plane, note must be taken as well of the extraordinary proliferation of thrillers, mysteries, and political fantasies set in Israel. Paul Breines terms this "the Rambowitz syndrome," and comments that he knows of "roughly fifty" novels which "are linked by their idealized representation of Jewish warriors, tough guys, gangsters, Mossad agents, and Jews of all ages and sexes who fight back against their tormentors. . . . In their tough Jewish fantasies we meet muscular, manly Jews who have left behind their historic neuroses and nearsightedness in favor of fighting and fucking. We might . . . call them the first normal Jews in all of modern literature."¹⁰

Feminism

If Israel, the Holocaust, and intensely Jewish societies are some of the specifically Jewish themes and settings most utilized in contemporary American Jewish literature, feminist exploration is one of the most significant new generic movements.¹¹ In fact, feminism is often linked with Israel, the Holocaust, and Jewish societies in American Jewish fiction. Most commonly, however, feminist issues within Jewish and American culture have been explored in familiar American Jewish settings. The protagonists of American Jewish feminist literature, which includes a number of accomplished and promising writers, must struggle with a multiplicity of identities: they are Jewish, they are Americans, they are women, they are daughters and wives and lovers and mothers, they are moderns, they are heirs to an ancient tradition—not necessarily in order of importance. Among the most significant fiction dealing with Jewish feminist issues is that written by Cynthia Ozick, Grace Paley, Tillie Olsen, Alix Kates Shulman, Francine Prose, Vivian Gornick, Rebecca Goldstein, Anne Roiphe, Marian Thurm, Lynn Sharon Shwartz, and Marge Piercy. Jewish mythic exploration of feminist issues can be found in the fiction of E. M. Broner and Kim Chernin.

It is a mark of how pervasive all these trends are that even some writers who previously seemed remote from Jewish life subsequently wrote on more particularistic Jewish themes—notably Joseph Heller (*God Knows*, 1984),

¹⁰Paul Breines, "The Rambowitz Syndrome," *Tikkun*, Nov./Dec. 1990, pp. 17–18.

¹¹For a fuller exploration of Jewish feminist literature, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Every Life a Song: Changing Portrayals of Women in American Jewish Fiction* (Hanover, N. H., forthcoming, Fall 1991).

Stanley Elkin (*The Rabbi of Lud*, 1987), and E.L. Doctorow (*The Book of Daniel*, 1971; *World's Fair*, 1985). However, the Jewish consciousness of these skilled writers is expressed primarily in a depiction of attenuated Jewish ethnicity. Even Philip Roth, who probably knows and understands the hearts of a large segment of American Jewry better than any other living writer, and whose novel *The Counterlife* does explore aspects of Jewish spirituality, primarily composes variations on psychological or sociological realities. Fundamentally, therefore, the Jewish interests of these writers differ profoundly from the central and earnest Jewish spirituality of the authors who are the true subject of this essay.

THE SPIRITUAL QUEST

Within the works of the spiritual genre of recent American Jewish writers, characters are not merely or even necessarily religiously observant themselves, but they are embarked upon spiritual or religious quests, either as individuals or as part of a group. The environments in which they live range from those that are densely Jewish to those that are openly hostile to Judaism, but the characters search within these environments for sources of faith and redemption as articulated by richly diverse strands of Jewish tradition and as informed by a post-Holocaust awareness of the absolute existence of evil.

Within Jewish spiritualist fiction, several important motifs emerge repeatedly. First, and perhaps most surprisingly, supernatural agents of redemption, messiahs and/or golems, figure in the works of many, including Elie Wiesel, Chaim Potok, Arthur A. Cohen, Cynthia Ozick, Allen Hoffman, Curt Leviant, Hugh Nissenson, and Rebecca Goldstein. Second, orphans—symbolic of a people who have become, in Paul Cowan's poignant phrase, "orphans in history," due to persecution and assimilation—are protagonists in the works of Wiesel, Cohen, Ozick, Nissenson, Jay Neugeboren, Mark Helprin, and others. In addition, fiction by Potok, Neugeboren, Roth, and others focuses on the divergent spiritual paths taken by two brothers, with the subsequent death of one brother and the survival—and guilt feelings—of his sibling. The dead-brother motif illustrates the continuing relevance of the divine injunction to "choose life" in the midst of the bewildering and momentous choices open to Jews today. In Potok and Neugeboren the introduction of Levirate marriage also speaks to issues of Jewish continuity. In addition, the "accident"—the sometimes half-intentional, sometimes random, sometimes externally imposed occurrence which profoundly affects individual Jews and Jewish societies, emerges as a major and spiritually symbolic plot element in the fiction of authors as different as Wiesel,

Potok, and Neugeboren. Moreover, many books testify to the amazing survival of the spark of Jewish spirituality, *dos pintele yid*, in the hearts of Jews who might seem externally lost to Jewish life, as Jews scattered across the Diaspora or lodged in the heart of Israel continue to reimagine themselves, to reinvent themselves, and to ask, "What is a Jew?"

The authors who focus on Jewish spirituality often seem to share a symbolic language, a loosely connected system of themes and metaphors. In some cases, this linked symbolic language appears to be consciously allusive, with authors commenting on and developing issues broached by their colleagues. In other cases, shared symbolism seems to grow out of shared concerns rather than out of deliberate commentary. It is not the purpose of this essay to delineate the precise literary kinship between each of the works under discussion, but rather to define and document the overarching Jewish spiritualist concerns that distinguish them individually and as a group. However, the fact that such a kinship exists is significant and notable, because it indicates the richness of this most intensive incarnation of contemporary particularistic American Jewish fiction.

Chaim Potok

Spiritually focused American Jewish fiction emerged as a recognizable phenomenon in the 1960s with the memoirs and stories of Elie Wiesel, which gripped the moral imagination of American Jews, and the fiction of Chaim Potok, which rapidly gained a rather surprising widespread popularity. Potok's fiction flew in the face of conventional wisdom, which in the 1950s and 1960s assumed that traditional Jewish life-styles would be washed away in the rising tides of assimilation. Much of Potok's literary career has been devoted to a sympathetic depiction of traditional Judaism in its various shades and forms, from Hassidism to "modern" Orthodoxy to the careful liberalizations of Conservative Judaism. In each of half a dozen novels, Potok tackles a major aspect of contemporary American Jewish life; each protagonist struggles to reach a compromise solution which creatively blends the demands of Jewish survival, on the one hand, and intellectual integrity, on the other.

In two popular early novels, *The Chosen* (1967) and the subsequent *The Promise* (1969), Potok creates a duo of likable young heroes, one the scion of a Hassidic dynasty, one the son of an Orthodox liberal, a passionately Jewish intellectual. The plot line of *The Chosen*, which blends such appealing elements as baseball and parent-child relationships with the intricacies of American ultra-Orthodoxy, made the latter world accessible to readers largely ignorant of its existence. The two books also exposed the American Jewish reading audience to traditional Jewish life-styles which, far from

being monolithic, offer different types of spiritual answers to different kinds of people. Indeed, Potok's novels repeatedly demonstrate that moving away from the most stringent forms of Orthodoxy does not necessarily imply abandoning a commitment to Jewish ritual, culture, and peoplehood.

Perhaps one of Potok's most powerful and interesting works is *In the Beginning*,¹² a novel whose rich literary antecedents enhance its depth and literary nuance. The novel's young protagonist, David Lurie, is a sensitive child growing up and maturing among pious yet politically active Jews in an ethnically diverse, lower-middle-class Bronx neighborhood in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. David's personality and life situation both recall and contrast with those of Henry Roth's young protagonist, David Schearl, in a ground-breaking novel of the Jewish immigration experience, *Call It Sleep* (1935), which was republished and lionized in literary circles in the 1960s. Indeed, both the resemblances and the differences between the two novels are instructive. Like David Schearl, David Lurie is precocious and innately spiritual; like Schearl, Lurie's father displays violent (albeit not sociopathological) tendencies which had a more natural outlet in the farms and fields of Eastern Europe than in the teeming streets of New York City, and his mother has a romantic past which somehow impinges on his identity; like Schearl, Lurie often shrinks from confrontations with both Jewish and anti-Semitic non-Jewish bullies in the mean streets surrounding his apartment house; like Schearl, Lurie finds solace and relative safety in a sickbed and "sleep."

However, whereas Schearl's world could offer him little sustenance aside from maternal love, having sheered off from the supporting matrix of Jewish communal and religious life, in Lurie's world it is religion which gives life substance, structure, and strength. As such, Potok's novel is a telling exemplar of religiosity and spirituality in contemporary American Jewish fiction: in both books, immigration brings pain and dislocation; however, in Potok's novel the religious fervor and communal concerns of the parents repeatedly draw them out of their own pain, discipline and stabilize their personal lives, and allow them to rebuild family and community.

Through the eyes of the at first very young and later the growing David, *In the Beginning* explores answers to the biblical question "What does God require of man?" David's father, Max, once a young activist who fought in the Polish army against the enemies of the Jews, works all of his life in an attempt to live up to the responsibilities which he has assumed. When his brilliant younger brother is murdered, he marries his former sister-in-law and names their eldest son David after his dead brother, in fulfillment of the biblical Levirate law. When their European friends pool their funds to

¹²Chaim Potok, *In the Beginning* (New York, 1975).

send the Luries to the United States, Max works tirelessly in his new land until he has brought every contributor over to join him. When the stock market crashes, erasing the funds which he had invested for their communal self-aid group, the Am Kedoshim society, Max ruins his physical and emotional health in the attempt to pay each person back. He faces the Holocaust with an activism undertaken by few (and mostly immigrant) American Jews, with unfortunately little to show for his energies in the end. Seeing the helplessness and vulnerability of even those people who, like his parents and their friends, do active battle with fate, David dreams of a "Golem," a powerful creature who might come to save the Jews from their non-Jewish enemies.

Learning from both his father's example and teaching, David comes to think of duty as a form of spirituality and communication with God. He learns that it is the "job" of man to bring God into each of the places in which he resides; to sing praises to God no matter what befalls him, just as the grasshopper sings the most intensely just before he dies; to help other Jews around the world, especially those who are in danger or enslaved; to befriend widows, the vulnerable, and the lonely; perhaps to "pay back" the enemies of the Jews with vengeance; and to live up to promises which are made to other people, even when they are expensive or difficult.

David struggles until he emerges into his own unique life-affirming mission. He finds his calling in a typically Potokian activity: the rebuilding of Jewish life through an honest but loving scholarly exploration of biblical texts. He has been told since childhood that all beginnings are difficult and painstaking, and that he must be patient. However, he learns that beginnings, however difficult, are humanity's only weapon against death. Out of pain, struggle, and chaos, the Jew defeats the deathly accidents of history by imposing order, by rebuilding, and by naming the new world he creates.

Potok's protagonists continue their attempts, in differing settings, to synthesize the best of traditional Jewish values and behaviors with the best of secular Western humanism. In *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), for example, Potok highlights the conflict between the callings of art and Judaism, each of which essentially demands that "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." A conflict that had immense historical and sociological impact on American Jewish life in the first half of the 20th century is examined in *Davita's Harp* (1985), which deals with the tension between the universal ideals of socialism and the particularistic prescriptions of Judaism: how can one be simultaneously a member of a chosen people and a citizen of a classless and religion-free world?

Elie Wiesel

Potok's popular yet serious novels were a major initiating force in the exploration of Jewish spiritual themes. Immense strength was continually added to the critical appeal of such fiction by the moral weight of more than a score of memoirs, short stories, novels, and essays in over three decades of writing by Elie Wiesel. Although he writes in French, Wiesel is surely the dean of American Jewish Holocaust writing. A 1986 Nobel Prize winner, Wiesel achieved international prominence as the voice of the Holocaust survivor. He has devoted his life to bearing witness to the horrors of the Holocaust, "to wrench the victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death." While only one of his earlier books, *Night*,¹³ deals directly with his experiences at Auschwitz, all of his works are ineradicably informed by those years.

Wiesel can never forget—and he never lets the reader forget—that the Holocaust has profound spiritual implications for contemporary Jews. Indeed, one recurring motif in Wiesel's work is the agonizing conflict between the prophetic ideals of justice and mercy, on one hand, and the physical and emotional strength needed for Jewish survival in an evil world, on the other. Having witnessed the utter indifference of much of the world to the near destruction of the Jewish people, Wiesel comes down firmly on the side of Jewish survival. However, he is ever cognizant of the spiritual price that survival exacts. Ultimately, one may say that Wiesel's anguished argument is at least as much with God as with humankind, for having created a world in which even caring and kindly people are forced sometimes to kill innocent creatures.

In *Dawn* (1961), Elisha, the protagonist, is a young man who has survived the Holocaust and joined Jewish soldiers in then Palestine who are fighting to free the land from the hold of the British. Gad, a colleague who indoctrinates new soldiers, insists that only bloodshed will convince the English to leave. He reminds Elisha that the world—which will condemn such bloodshed—repeatedly stands silent when Jews are slaughtered. "The commandment Thou shalt not kill was given from the summit of one of the mountains here in Palestine, and we were the only ones to obey it. But that's over; we must be like everyone else. Murder will be not our profession but our duty." A masked stranger tells Elisha that they now have an "eleventh commandment: Hate your enemy." Thanks to this stranger, Elisha says, "I became part of a Messianic world. . . . Why has a man no right to commit murder? Because in so doing he takes upon himself the function of God. . . . Well, I said to myself, if in order to change the course of our history we have to

¹³Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy: Night, Dawn, The Accident* (New York, 1985); original English publication dates are: *Night*, 1960; *Dawn*, 1961; *The Accident*, 1961.

become God, we shall become Him." When Elisha is assigned the role of executing John Dawson, a British soldier who is innocent of any specific crime but whose death will teach the British a symbolic lesson, he declares that "the victim" and "the executioner" each "is playing a role which has been imposed upon him. . . . The tragic thing is the imposition."

From the vantage point of *Dawn*, Jews must redeem the world and deliver the Messiah by learning how to defend themselves with force. Wiesel's bottom line is that Judaism forbids turning the other cheek in life-threatening situations, because it is tantamount to suicide. Judaism requires that one kill in self-defense a pursuing agent of death; however, in the modern world, the distinction between a pursuing killer and the civilization supporting that killer is sometimes difficult to draw. In reacting to the necessity for Jewish violence, Wiesel's protagonist demands, "Don't judge me. Judge God," because God "created the universe and made justice to stem from injustice. He brought it about that a people should attain happiness through tears, that the freedom of a nation, like that of a man, should be built upon a pile, a foundation of dead bodies. . . ." Wiesel's protagonist comes to the startling conclusion that Jews must learn "the art of hate" in order to guarantee their physical survival. "Otherwise," he argues, "our future will only be an extension of the past, and the Messiah will wait indefinitely for his deliverance."

Wiesel's writing is powerful, however, not only because of the moral authority which it draws from his Holocaust experiences, but also because it is steeped in the vibrant, rich spectrum of Jewish history and tradition. The sights, sounds, and preoccupations of the streets and yeshivahs of his native Transylvania are woven through all of his fiction and nonfiction. In *A Jew Today*,¹⁴ for example, Wiesel provides a glowing depiction of a Sabbath day in Sighet, a day that was not only restorative in the modern sense, not only punctilious in terms of Jewish ritual, but which was a living testimony to the humanitarian morality of Jewish law:

. . . with the advent of Shabbat, the town changed into a kingdom whose madmen and beggars became the princes of Shabbat. I shall never forget Shabbat in my town. When I shall have forgotten everything else, my memory will still retain the atmosphere of holiday, of serenity pervading even the poorest houses: the white tablecloth, the candles, the meticulously combed little girls, the men on their way to synagogue. When my town shall fade into the abyss of time, I will continue to remember the light and the warmth it radiated on Shabbat. The exalting prayers, the wordless songs of the Hasidim, the fire and radiance of their Masters. On that day of days, past and future suffering and anguish faded into the distance. Appeased man called on the divine presence to express his gratitude. The jealousies and grudges, the petty rancors between neighbors could wait. As could the debts and worries, the dangers. Everything could wait. As it enveloped

¹⁴Elie Wiesel, "Words and Memories," *A Jew Today* (New York, 1979), pp. 8-9.

the universe, the Shabbat conferred on it a dimension of peace, an aura of love. Those who were hungry came and ate; and those who felt abandoned seized the outstretched hand; and those who were alone, and those who were sad, and strangers, the refugees, the wanderers, as they left the synagogue were invited to share the meal in any home; and the grieving were urged to contain their tears and come draw on the collective joy of Shabbat. The difference between us and the others? the others, how I pitied them. They did not even know what they were missing; they were unmoved by the beauty, the eternal splendor of Shabbat.

It is no wonder that Wiesel recalls, "Like God, I looked at the world and found it good, fertile, full of meaning." Readers find in his works, especially in his novels, such as *The Town Beyond the Wall* (1964), *The Gates of the Forest* (1966), and *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (1970), a mystical conviction of the profound spirituality of the universe and the unavoidable special destiny of the Jewish people. *Souls on Fire* (1972) retells and reinterprets the lives of the Hassidic masters; *The Testament* (1981) depicts the martyrdom of Russia's greatest Jewish poets at the hands of Stalin, as symbolized by the life and death of poet Paltiel Kossover. These works are suffused not only with the bereavement of the Holocaust but with a piercing, almost unbearable awareness of the spiritual riches of the world which the Nazis destroyed.

Hugh Nissenson

The moral dilemmas which Wiesel explores have particular resonance for post-Holocaust Jewish communities. A Jewishly conscious generation of American Jewish writers has looked to a wide variety of contemporary and ancient Jewish source materials in their literary confrontation with human and natural evils. One such writer is Hugh Nissenson, who has reported on the Eichmann trial in Israel (*Commentary*, July 1961), the progress and aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War in Israel (*Notes from the Frontier*, 1968), the impact of the Yom Kippur War (*Present Tense*, Autumn 1974), and the trial of Klaus Barbie in Lyons in 1987 (*The Elephant and My Jewish Problem*, 1988), among other events.

Like Wiesel, Nissenson writes about the bitter irony that the morality of survival often necessitates actions which may seem immoral. In "The Crazy Old Man,"¹⁵ a story which in some ways recalls Wiesel's *Dawn*, two Sabras (native Israelis), are trying to torture information out of a terrified young Arab boy. An older and thoroughly professional Arab lieutenant watches the brutal interrogation without flinching. Suddenly, a seemingly unbalanced elderly Orthodox man who lives across the hall interrupts the interrogation and demands in Yiddish that the Israelis release their prisoners, quoting to them from Isaiah, "No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous

¹⁵Hugh Nissenson, "The Crazy Old Man," in *In the Reign of Peace* (New York, 1968).

beast shall go up thereon, it will not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there." Ignoring the old man, the Sabras prepare to shoot the boy. The old man grabs the gun and, when the lieutenant tries to escape in the confusion, shocks everyone in the room by shooting the lieutenant: "The first round hit him in the chest, throwing him on his back. The old man walked over to him and emptied the rest of the magazine into his forehead, holding the gun a yard from his face." The boy screams out the necessary information so fast that they can scarcely write it down. Clearly, killing the lieutenant rather than the boy was a tactically superior move, but why was the religious old man willing to perform such a cold-blooded execution himself? Later, the protagonist realizes the motivation—seeing that the killing is unavoidable and longing for the coming of the Messiah, the old man acts as a kind of *shabbos goy* to preserve the purity of the land of Israel and its native-born inhabitants.

The twin upheavals of modern intellectual and social movements and the emigration to the United States, which worked in tandem to subvert the spiritually coherent world of Eastern European Orthodox Judaism, are explored in bleak and bitter detail in Nissenson's novel *My Own Ground*.¹⁶ Schlifka, a vicious, sadistic pimp on the Lower East Side of New York, reveals the concepts which he learned and loved when he was a youngster in an Old World Gemara *heder* and knew *Maseches Shabbes* by heart by the time he was 11. After rewarding his 15-year-old assistant with a prostitute for betraying Hannele, a rabbi's impoverished daughter, Schlifka shares his belief that "for guys like us there are better things. Higher things. . . . Spiritual things." All of the characters in Nissenson's tragic little book—criminals, idealistic socialists, pious old men, and young people caught in the wake of forces larger than themselves—end badly in the wreckage of Eastern European Jewish civilization. As Hannele's father discards lifelong convictions by performing a ritual cleansing of his daughter's suicidal corpse, he instructs onlookers in Yiddish, "Israel speaks to God: When will you redeem us? And he answers: When you have sunk to the lowest level, at that time I will redeem you." A socialist friend of Hannele's, also a lapsed Jew, explains, "He believes we can force the End and bring the Messiah." And the old man continues, "You might live to see the rest: all the sparks restored, the Exile ended, death swallowed up. The Temple, you know, will be rebuilt, and the divine lovers will embrace again in the Holy of Holies, face to face. The King and His bride, who is also called the Shekinah, the Matronit, and Earth." However, as is crucial in Nissenson's fiction, not only is each of these characters ravaged by history, each one of them, in some imperfect way, retains *dos pintelev yid*, some spiritual remnant, some tiny spark of the lost Jewish world.

¹⁶Hugh Nissenson, *My Own Ground* (New York, 1976).

Arthur Cohen

Such spiritual struggles are the novelistic flesh and blood of the late Arthur A. Cohen, a major figure on the Jewish literary scene, primarily through the searching intellectualism of his nonfiction books on Jewish philosophy and thinkers. Cohen's versatile works are often driven by the desire to make Jewish sense out of history. He argues that he is not alone in his enterprise, since his "quest" is much demanded by the times. In the introduction to his reader on Jewish thinking in the aftermath of the Holocaust,¹⁷ Cohen comments that "the return of the third generation of American Jews to the Synagogue is motivated by an uninstructed quest for life meaning and the conviction that the Synagogue possesses or should possess a body of insight and instruction." This "quest" is fueled, according to Cohen, by the fact that "the reasons for escape have disappeared," while "a renascent pride . . . founded upon ethnocentrism, or the admiration of a powerful and militant Israel redivivus, or the brandishing of the sword of guilt and anger over a culpable non-Jewish world" has emerged. That pride, in turn, grows out of the knowledge that during the Holocaust "human beings died because they were thought to represent an alien meaning, because they, in fact, did represent a believed meaning, and because they transmitted the value of that meaning." Cohen dedicates his anthology—as he often does his fiction—to the search for these particularistically Jewish meanings.

The protagonists of Cohen's novels are each chosen by providence for a special and specially Jewish role in the world. Some of them respond by fulfilling their Jewish destiny and redeeming the spark of Jewishness within their souls, and some try to escape it. In an early novel, *The Carpenter Years*,¹⁸ both the protagonist, a Jewish apostate, and the rabbi in his largely Gentile community, tire of the burden of chosenness. The rabbi's inner thoughts articulate what he experiences as the relentless responsibilities incumbent upon a serious participant in the nation of priests: "It was as if he had been appointed to come out from New York to be himself a Sabbath for the Jews. . . . He was tired of being something apart: a utensil of God."

The theme of Jewish chosenness is explored most fully in Cohen's complexly layered *In the Days of Simon Stern*,¹⁹ which weaves together messianic strands from diverse periods of Jewish history and varying religions, cultures, and literary forms into a fable with strong political implications. The novel presents Jews as chosen by a repeatedly hostile and genocidal world

¹⁷Arthur A. Cohen, *Arguments and Doctrines: A Reader of Jewish Thinking in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Philadelphia, 1970), pp. xvi-xvii.

¹⁸Arthur A. Cohen, *The Carpenter Years* (New York, 1967).

¹⁹Arthur A. Cohen, *In the Days of Simon Stern* (New York, 1972).

and chosen as well by their own special culture, life-style, and values. Simon Stern is a Messiah, within the context of the novel, because he labors to physically redeem a group of Holocaust survivors despite the graphically detailed apathy and obstruction of Allied leaders and official agencies. One narrator, Nathan Gaza, reflects on his "Messiah," Simon Stern, and on the nature of the messianic redeemers and their capacity to suffer. Cohen's terms recall both Wiesel's *Dawn* and Nissenson's *In the Reign of Peace*: "Why should one be able to bear suffering? Why should one be able to tolerate the suffering of others? There can be no reason other than the fact of having given suffering to another. Not willingly but involuntarily. The hardest guilt to bear is for the crime one could not have chosen to commit. . . . That I live and another perish."

Stern and his colleagues labor to build a utopian walled city of refuge, modeled on the historic rabbinic colony in B'nei B'rak, for the cherished remnant saved from the concentration camps. Their purpose is betrayed by a false survivor who attempts to turn their peaceable society into a heavily armed, nihilistic machine for vengeance. However, Stern and the aristocratic Dr. Klay warn the group that reasonableness and "tenacity of will" are the truly Jewish attributes, and that "beyond madness there is still judgement." Although Stern's walled city is destroyed through his own heedlessness, his society endures, for, in this novel's final analysis, endurance through commitment to justice and mercy is the most Jewish attribute of all.

Cohen depicts the persistence of *dos pintele yid*, the spark of Jewishness, in a variety of settings, even in the rocky soil of Communist Russia. Yuri, the Russian Jewish protagonist of *A Hero in His Time*,²⁰ is traumatized as a young boy watching both Ukrainian Whites and Ukrainian Reds serially executing innocent old Jews as "Jew hoarders." He understands that even Gentiles who hate each other share a mutual hatred of Jews. Yuri learns to survive the brutal Communist system by evading any taint of specialness, by behaving in such a nondescript fashion that he is perceived as being safe. He comments frequently that "anyone who tries to do something to moderate the magisterium of the official view was courageous but misguided, and therefore a fool." However, despite the fact that Yuri has been baptized and that he claims to be a "real atheist," he acknowledges to himself that his parents were "Jew believers," that "they locked up a secret name" inside him, and that he believes unwaveringly in his own personal deity, whom he calls "my Lord, my Adonay, my Elohim, my El Shaddai." To Yuri, these names "mean love and father and spirit and creator and good person," and he utters the names of his personal deity "twice or three times a day." He

²⁰Arthur A. Cohen, *A Hero in His Time* (New York, 1976).

finds himself secretly but irresistibly drawn to Jews who exhibit artistic and personal courage and discovers that he himself has a religious passion for justice. Finally, when Yuri can choose either to escape to freedom or to become a useful pawn in the Communist system, he rejects the relative safety of both options; instead, he bravely betrays the system and goes back to meet his fate, loyal to his destiny as a poet and a Jew.

Cynthia Ozick

Similar concerns are shared by the brilliant doyen of contemporary American Jewish fiction, Cynthia Ozick. One of the most influential Jewish authors writing today, Ozick's interests are emblematic of the new American Jewish literature at its highest level. She draws on classic Jewish source materials, ranging from biblical and rabbinic texts to Yiddish writers to contemporary fiction. Ozick openly and articulately espouses the creation of "liturgical" spiritual American Jewish literature; she feels that an English rich with Judaic materials must replace the role that Yiddish occupied in Ashkenazi Jewish cultures in expressing the inner heart as well as the external rhythms and concerns of Jewish life.²¹ She uses not only all aspects of her own contemporary Jewish reading, thinking, and experience in her writing, but also her broad knowledge of Jewish texts.

If Ozick has one signature preoccupation, it is the conflict between the Jewish intellectual, spiritual, and cultural tradition, on one hand, and the Hellenistic sweep of artistic creativity and secular Western humanism, on the other. The conflict between art and Torah is no mere intellectual game for Ozick; she expresses it in numerous stories and novels as a deep, ongoing, even a mortal struggle. In "The Pagan Rabbi,"²² for example, she takes to its logical extreme the talmudic prohibition against delight in nature because it may detract from Torah study or serve as a temptation to paganism. The pagan rabbi is a young Orthodox father of many children who eventually abandons his beautiful and pious wife—and loses his life—in an attempt to cohabit with a wood nymph. Too late he discovers that to separate from his Jewish soul is tantamount to death; at the very moment that he is erotically ravished by his mossy beloved, his soul appears as the archetypical wandering Jew, a ragged, bearded old man lugging a tractate of the Mishnah down a dusty road:

Incredible flowers! Of every color! And noble shrubs like mounds of green moss!
And the cricket crackling in the field. He passes indifferent through the beauty
of the field. His nostrils sniff his book as if flowers lay on the clotted page, but

²¹Cynthia Ozick "Toward a New Yiddish," pp. 174–75.

²²Cynthia Ozick, "The Pagan Rabbi," in *The Pagan Rabbi: And Other Stories* (New York, 1983).

the flowers lick his feet. His feet are bandaged, his notched toenails gore the path. His prayer shawl droops on his studious back. He reads the Law and breathes the dust and doesn't see the flowers and won't heed the cricket spitting in the field.

Disgusted with his weary and studious soul, the odorous wood nymph—a *belle dame sans merci*—abandons the pagan rabbi. His soul also tells him he will abandon him because he has been faithless:

"If you had not contrived to be rid of me, I would have stayed with you till the end. . . . In your grave beside you I would have sung you David's songs, I would have moaned Solomon's voice to your last grain of bone. But you expelled me, your ribs exile me from their fate, and I will walk here alone always, in my garden"—he scratched on his page—"with my precious birds"—he scratched at the letters—"and my darling trees"—he scratched at the tall side column of commentary. . . . "The sound of the Law," he said, "is more beautiful than the crickets. The smell of the Law is more radiant than the moss. The taste of the law exceeds clear water."

In the end, the pagan rabbi hangs himself, and the story's narrator symbolically flushes three green houseplants down the toilet.

Ozick's familiarity with intensive Jewish environments suffuses much of her fiction. She is a knowledgeable observer and sometime critic of contemporary Jewish life. As a result, her fiction has the kind of dense Jewish texture that is more typical of the Yiddish writers. The disappearing world of American Yiddish writers is itself evoked in the bittersweet story "Envy; or, Yiddish in America,"²³ in which literary fame seems to depend on the acquisition of a competent translator. While this and some other fictions are set in New York, Ozick's focus in her novels and short stories frequently departs from the typical Eastern European Jewish immigrant/urban milieu. She often deals with the uniqueness of Jewish life and history and the doomed attempts of individual Jews to flee their common destiny with the Jewish people. In the story "A Mercenary,"²⁴ for example, a Holocaust survivor who attempts to drown his Jewish identity in the black African nationalist struggle unwittingly circles back to the frequent historical fate of Jews; perceived as a middleman, a hybrid and therefore a quisling, he may meet his doom at the hands of the black official he helped the most.

Jewish suffering and the incapacity of most Gentiles to truly enter into Jewish history are explored in "Levitation."²⁵ The story is told from the viewpoint of Lucy, the converted daughter of a minister married to a Jew. Lucy is putatively a sympathetic fellow traveler, but she loses patience with what she sees as the Jews' obsession with the Holocaust and other "historical atrocities" committed against them; Lucy comes to the conclusion that

²³Cynthia Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," in *Levitation: Five Fictions* (New York, 1982); first published in *Commentary*, Nov. 1969.

²⁴Cynthia Ozick, "A Mercenary," in *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (New York, 1976).

²⁵Cynthia Ozick, "Levitation," in *Levitation: Five Fictions*.

Jews are "intense all the time . . . the grocers among them were as intense as any novelist." Such suffering is only interesting and real to her if she thinks of Jews dying, like Jesus, to redeem the world. Thus, Lucy decides that "every Jew was Jesus." As Lucy's husband and his friends continue to talk so incessantly that they float to the ceiling, she sees her Gentile friends as "compassionate knights," gallant and gracious and well-behaved.

Lucy's uncomprehending attitude toward, and eventual boredom with, Jewish suffering serves as a critique of universalist attitudes such as those found in Bernard Malamud's 1957 novel *The Assistant*. Malamud's protagonist, Morris Bober, is indeed a grocer who is as intense as the novelist who created him. Morris and his family suffer long and deeply. Frank Alpine, his Italian grocery assistant and disciple, puzzles over the Jewish capacity for suffering: "'What do you suffer for, Morris?' Frank asks. 'I suffer for you,' Morris said calmly." Morris informs Frank that Jews suffer in order to teach other human beings how to relate empathetically with each other. However, Ozick's Lucy illustrates the naiveté of such a hope. After picturing Jews suffering like Christ, after picturing the martyred Jews of history "as if hundreds and hundreds of crucifixions were all happening at once," after visualizing "a hillside with multitudes of crosses" —Lucy decides that "she is bored by the shootings and the gas and the camps . . . they are as tiresome as prayer." The world causes and tolerates Jewish suffering and is finally bored by it and resentful of hearing about it, Ozick shows us in "Levitation." In Ozick's eyes, it is wrong to try to explain Jewish suffering as a Christological activity; Jews do not suffer in order to redeem the world, they suffer because the world inflicts suffering upon them and then looks away.

Ozick examines the real impact of Jewish suffering on the lives of Jews in her recent works *The Scarf*²⁶ and *The Messiah of Stockholm*.²⁷ Her novella *The Scarf* illustrates the devastation of one individual life. The protagonist, Rosa Lublin, watches her beloved little daughter brutally murdered in a concentration camp—but refuses to accept her death. She constructs an entire existence for the girl, whom she imagines to be "a tigress" of strength and beauty. Ozick portrays survivors as idiosyncratic, flawed human beings, rather than as bland symbols, and at the same time makes their pain and confusion palpable.

Ozick explores the lasting destruction which the Holocaust inflicted upon the lives of survivors and indeed upon entire societies. She argues that the riches of Eastern European Jewish intellectualism have been lost despite the rescue of a few pieces of literature. Lars Andemening, the orphaned protag-

²⁶Cynthia Ozick, *The Scarf* (New York, 1989; a prior version of the story was originally published as "Rosa," in the *New Yorker*, Mar. 21, 1983).

²⁷Cynthia Ozick, *The Messiah of Stockholm* (New York, 1987).

onist of *The Messiah of Stockholm*, imagines that he is a kind of Messiah, that he is "Europe's savior," because "he wanted to salvage every scrap of paper all over Europe . . . in all those shadowy places where there had been all those shootings—in the streets, in the forests." But Lars eventually realizes that the shootings and the chimneys that consumed millions of individual Jews consumed their culture as well. Even if he could "save" Bruno Schultz's lost manuscript, "The Messiah," he cannot save Schultz, his colleagues, and his culture.

In *The Messiah of Stockholm* Ozick addresses the paradox that there is no higher, human life without imagination, and yet "there's more to the world than just imagination." Achieving the higher life is ostensibly the goal of Midwestern parochial-school principal Joseph Brill, protagonist of the novel *The Cannibal Galaxy*.²⁸ Like Lars Andemening, Brill aims for intellectual glory while neglecting human beings and eventually fails them both. "To the stars, ad astra," Brill proclaims, as he devises and implements goals and methods for an all-day school with a dual-curriculum, Jewish and secular, educational program. Ozick's sharp pen provides a scathing critique of Jewish suburban pretensions and mediocrity in this novel, skewering smug Jewish physicians who spend Sundays wearing shorts and beepers, self-serving pedagogues who cheat their students by not taking them seriously as cherished, individual, developing human beings, and school administrators who hope to ride into excellence vicariously on the reputations of their most talented students.

In addition to the obvious Jewish themes of the story—the Holocaust experiences of the principal and his family, the works of Jewish synthesizer Edmund Phlegg which obsess Brill, the dual educational curriculum which he devises—the novel is rich with Jewish allusions. The novel's heroine, Hester Lilt, whose philosophical specialty focuses on the secular field of linguistic logic, delivers a brilliant university lecture in which she interweaves stories about Rabbis Akiva, Gamliel, Elazar, and Joshua with the natural sciences. Using midrashic methods and materials, Ozick's celebrated secular philosopher passionately articulates Jewish distinctiveness and the Jewish triumph over those who would have destroyed them and the Torah down through the ages. Hester's name itself recalls the Hebrew word *hester*, "hidden," as God's face was "hidden" from the Jews during the Holocaust; the biblical heroine Esther, who saved the Persian Jews from annihilation; and also Hester, the isolated adulteress of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, who lives with her little daughter as a social pariah. Lilt is a melody but also Lilith, the demonic independent woman first given to Adam and then removed to make way for the more pliant Eve. Such wordplay, involv-

²⁸Cynthia Ozick, *The Cannibal Galaxy* (New York, 1984).

ing the full, 2500-year sweep of Jewish literature and tradition, is one of Ozick's trademarks.

Allen Hoffman

Among other fictions depicting intense, idiosyncratic Jewish themes and environments, one which stands out for its Jewish spirituality as well as its high literary quality is the title story—really a novella—of Allen Hoffman's *Kagan's Superfecta*.²⁹ "Kagan's Superfecta" takes place in an environment which many might perceive as antithetical to spirituality, a corrupt urban environment in which the protagonist, Moe Kagan, is both an Orthodox Jew, a *kohen*—descendant of the priestly tribe—and a compulsive gambler living on New York's upper West Side. The richly diverse, contradictory, Runyonesque urban world through which Kagan moves is almost exclusively a world of men, as thoroughly known to him as the inside of an old shoe. Fran, his well-meaning but uncomprehending Connecticut-born wife, is an alien in this milieu. In this unholy and imperfect universe, special sections of the synagogue service are auctioned off to the highest bidder, and unpleasant, power-hungry men chant the most sacred passages. However, there is more to Kagan's world than meets the average eye. Kagan sees visions and is accompanied by his own personal angel, Ozzie.

"Kagan's Superfecta" takes the protagonist on a bizarre, picaresque adventure played out on the streets and in familiar buildings within a few-block radius of Kagan's apartment. Early in the story, Kagan lolls in the steamy water of the mikveh (ritual bath) before Yom Kippur, surrounded by the white "submerging and resurfacing" bodies of other men, momentarily losing his anxiety to "the harmony of this purifying pool." Once seated in the men's section of his synagogue, however, he is tormented by visions of his superfecta, the numerical combination which he is sure will win a horse race held on the holiest day of the Jewish year: "The wiggly Hebrew print kept turning into horses before his eyes and the page numbers distracted him to the point of madness. How do they expect a person to pray with numbers on every page?" Struggling to resist the temptation to place a bet and trying to immerse himself in holiness, Kagan notices for the first time that in the Torah portion, "the High Priest drew lots" on two goats—which means that "gambling decides the most important event of Yom Kippur!" Kagan's head aches; shall he violate the sanctity of Yom Kippur to win a huge amount of money, a sure thing, which would change his and Fran's whole life for the better? Hoffman sums up the conflict between man's sacred and profane impulses in prose which manages to be simultaneously hilarious and visionary.

²⁹Allen Hoffman, *Kagan's Superfecta* (New York, 1981).

Confused by frenetic, vivid hallucinations, Moe Kagan struggles to understand the terms of the world he lives in and to redeem his own soul. He stands at the very threshold of heaven's closing gates during the *ne'illah* service, blessing the congregation with the other *kohanim* (priests), *tallit* over his head. Kagan prays for his wife, for the imperfect men around him, even for his own evil impulse in the person of the angel Ozzie—Azazel. Even one's evil impulses, Kagan comes to understand, can be disciplined to serve good purposes. He sees at last that each man gambles on his own soul, each Jew through his own actions and thoughts can choose God, life, and peace even at the last moment, at the very brink of disaster. Kagan realizes that "The Lord is the Mikveh of Israel. Through his unity, His oneness, we can be redeemed."

Hoffman is fascinated by the opportunities for holiness which lie directly beneath the surface of everyday life. His narrative voice is pungent with the inflections and reference points of observant, urban, contemporary Jews. Each of his stories might legitimately carry the aphorism which occurs early in "Beggar Moon":³⁰ "So this is a story about Jews. But it is much more than just a story about Jews; it is a Jewish story." The protagonist, a synagogue regular, gets involved with Bluma, an urban character, a talkative beggar-lady in red knee socks; he does not mean to get involved with her, but after he gives her a few rather generous handouts, she simply adopts him as her own. Moved by the soul-stirring sounds of the shofar during Elul and the High Holidays, he does not have the callousness to get rid of her. Bluma protects him from phony beggars, and she even insists on giving him used clothing for his family. Needless to say, his wife is appalled when she hears things moving in Bluma's hand-me-down bags and sees some rather impressive cockroaches emerging.

The relationship continues, with Bluma always refusing to accept any favor which she cannot in some way reciprocate or which will make her feel helpless or inadequate. Bluma becomes fused in the narrator's mind with both the moon, doomed always to be the lesser and subservient of the luminaries, and with the position of the Jews in what is fundamentally and irrevocably, until the coming of the Messiah, "a Goyishe world." Bluma grows crazier and crazier, until even her friend cannot help her. Grieving for her, not resigned to her fate, he has no choice but to wait hopefully, alert to any sign that the world—or Bluma—may be waking to some fundamental change.

³⁰Allen Hoffman, "Beggar Moon," in *Kagan's Superfecta*.

Jay Neugeboren

One of the great spiritual conundrums from the Bible onward, the conflict between predestination versus free will, is explored in Jay Neugeboren's *The Stolen Jew*,³¹ played out in the murky arena of family life. The story of the novel is seen through the eyes of Nathan Malkin, a 64-year-old author and wealthy businessman whose brother Nachman dies on the first page of the novel. Returning from Israel to New York to join his family for *shiva*, the period of mourning, Nathan reviews the life that he and Nachman shared, in painful detail. The family in which the Malkin brothers grew up epitomizes the wreckage of Jewish values on the rocky soil of American materialism.

One vignette which Nathan recalls is an especially effective symbol for the loss of an entire belief system. Nathan's father, a gentle, scholarly man but poor provider, who loved his large library of Jewish books, entrusted Nathan, the older child, who identifies strongly with his father's values, with the task of taking these *sefarim* outside before Passover each year to dust and air them. One year, however, the mother, an ambitious, domineering woman who derives joy from degrading her husband, sets her sweet, gentle, innocent younger son, Nachman, to do Nathan's task. Nathan pleads with her to let him take the books inside, because dark rain clouds threaten certain disaster to his father's library, but his mother sadistically prevents him from saving the books. As the rain pours down on the pages, turning them to pulp, the father returns home from work to witness his wife's triumphant glee at his irrevocable loss. Nathan is bitter, furious, tearfully empathetic, and little Nachman bewildered. The parents fling insults at each other and the two children huddle under the bed; Nathan retreats into the one task he can accomplish, to comfort his younger sibling, to be his brother's keeper.

Witnessing her repeated assaults on his father's dignity, Nathan hardens his heart against his mother; in response, she flaunts her favoritism, lavishing Nachman with affection and taunting Nathan with his putatively hard, cold nature. So malicious is her need to undermine her husband that she even subverts his attempt to provide Nachman, who is a musical prodigy, with violin lessons. Thus, Nachman's destiny is stolen from him; partially as a result, he matures into a sensitive but troubled adult who drifts in and out of mental institutions. He is his mother's favorite, but he emulates his father's tragically passive persona.

At the other end of the equation, Nathan writes no more books after his brilliant first novel, because he feels he must earn money to acquire for Nachman the professional help he needs. Nathan goes into business, suc-

³¹Jay Neugeboren, *The Stolen Jew* (New York, 1981).

ceeds brilliantly, helps his parents and his brother—and abandons his craft; his destiny also has been stolen from him. Determined that he will never be treated as his father has been treated, he emulates his mother's ambition and callousness. Nachman is "chosen" to be Abel/Jacob, the mother's favorite, the gentle dweller of the tents, and Nathan is left with the role of Esau, forced into a rough-and-tumble life of necessity.

However, Nathan's mother too is cheated of her dreams: like many Jewish women described in immigrant fiction, she takes on American values more rapidly and completely than her husband. Trapped in a lower-middle-class milieu with a husband who cannot or will not achieve the successful American life-style she longs for, Nathan's mother lashes out in frustration. She derides her husband's love for Jewish scholarship, Nathan recalls, and "even on Shabbos she would yell at him that he should go out and try to find an extra job, that she didn't have enough money to feed us, that Nachman and I would become sick and weak like him. It was terrible. . . . She would cry out to us. Oh you should have seen him! He was so handsome and strong! But in America, look at him." In this richly complex dance of betrayal, all are guilty and all are bereaved. All are stolen Jews.

In a novel within the novel—Nathan's one critical and popular success—Neugeboren examines the role of the Diaspora in exacerbating a different kind of theft, the theft of Jewish integrity, unity, and *ahavat yisrael*, love for other Jews, in the setting of 19th-century Russia. The story centers on the conscription of Jewish boys into the czar's army, specifically, the practice of rich parents buying substitutes for their sons—or even the kidnapping of poor boys by the Kehillah, an organization of Jewish communal leaders which served as a liaison between the czars and the Jewish masses. A father who has condemned these practices—citing Maimonides: "Not a single Jewish soul shall be delivered"—is later cruelly forced to choose between seeing his own son, a musical prodigy, drafted, or hypocritically allowing his son to be replaced by a poor, brilliant Talmud student. He chooses to save his own child, rather than to follow Maimonides' dictum of communal unity and self-sacrifice. The years of army service understandably strip the Talmud scholar of both his innately gentle nature and his scholarship; his spiritual birthright is stolen from him by an "accident," an external selection process. Thus, Malkin's fiction has a strong symbolic relationship with the "real" characters. And just as the characters in a novel are "free" to behave as they wish—although the novelist decides what they will in fact do—human beings are free to determine their own destiny—and yet freedom is a delusion. The frontispiece to Nathan Malkin's novel *The Stolen Jew* quotes from *Pirkay Avos*, "The Sayings of the Fathers": "Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted. . . ."

Rebecca Goldstein

Another interesting new author in the spiritualist mode is Rebecca Goldstein, whose short stories and novels are grounded in a thorough familiarity with traditional Jewish life. Her work explores topics as different as the difficulties experienced by children of Holocaust survivors and the difficulties experienced by urban New York Jews in preppy suburban Princeton. Goldstein's story "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish"³² depicts the daughter of Holocaust survivors whose childhood is subsumed by her father's sadness and the "quite blue fury" of her mother's total "goodness"—a goodness later revealed to be flawed indeed.

Goldstein's protagonist in *The Mind-Body Problem*³³ is a "beautiful, brainy" young woman, Renee Feuer, who grew up in a strictly Orthodox home. After leaving home for college and then graduate school, Renee moves incrementally away from her training. She does her undergraduate work at Barnard, where she discovers modern Orthodoxy, sexuality, and totally secularized Jews, and is working on a Ph.D. in philosophy at Princeton during the action of the novel. The scope of her religious antecedents allows her to experience particularly poignant varieties of knowledgeable spiritual ambivalence. Although Renee is no longer religiously observant, she is repeatedly drawn to the richness of Orthodox life, both as she remembers it from her parental home and as she observes it in the home of her brother and sister-in-law, a pious young couple living among others of their kind in Lakewood, New Jersey.

One of the pleasures of Goldstein's novel is that religious environments are depicted unself-consciously and with a balanced awareness of both their strengths and weaknesses. One aspect of Orthodoxy which troubles Renee has to do with the position of women within Orthodox societies, especially when life circumstances put women into marginal positions. Both Renee's sister-in-law, Tzippy, and her childhood girlfriend, Fruma, have experienced negative attitudes toward women because of their infertility problems; in societies which assume that divine providence has reasons for everything, even physical problems can acquire moral significance. And yet, despite living in a world in which their women friends, rather than their husbands, must coach them through labor, because their husbands will not be bothered with the *weibszachen* of natural childbirth after infertility problems are solved, Tzippy and Fruma enjoy religious depth, meaningfulness, and serenity which Renee envies. Goldstein captures Tzippy's spirituality, which extends into her daily actions, in a tender vignette:

³²Rebecca Goldstein, "The Legacy of Raizel Kaidish—A Story," *New Traditions*, Spring 1985.

³³Rebecca Goldstein, *The Mind-Body Problem* (New York, 1983).

All at once I was crying, and Tzippy silently joined in. She had only known my father in the last year of his life, but a strong and special closeness had developed almost immediately between them. It was she who had shown my numbed family the way when he lay dying in the final days. We had already distanced ourselves from the man lying there, smelling of death and wearing the face of martyrdom. That wasn't my father suffering; my father had already gone. But little Tzippy had shown us who that person was, had walked into the room and straight over to him, kissing him, holding him, talking to him as she always had. How he had smiled at her with that wasted face.

Renee ascribes much of her own attachment to the spiritual aspects of Judaism to her beloved father, a genuinely sweet-natured, "scandalously underpaid" cantor whom she describes as "passionately religious" and "supremely content" with his lot:

His pure, sweet song was like a picture of his soul. Snatches of chazzanes would escape from him all day long, pieces of the internal singing that must have been almost constant with him. He had loved his work in all its aspects: chanting the prayers on behalf of the community, comforting the sick and the sad, instructing the boys in preparation for their bar mitzvahs. His teaching powers were legendary. He was sent all the unteachable boys from around Westchester County—the retarded, the disturbed, the hyperactive. Each yielded to his softness and managed to be bar mitzvahed. . . . And he maintained his sweet outlook throughout his final terrible illness. One of the more illustrious members of his congregation said to me, as we watched my father limping in great pain up to his place on the bimah shortly before his death, "There's not a man I envy more."

When Renee abandons religious ritual for the study of philosophy, there is more than a little religious intensity and spiritual searching in her choice. She marries a mathematical genius, and once again her choice is related to a search for definitive spiritual answers. Much to her surprise, she finds that her scholarly, Jewishly ignorant husband is as sexist—perhaps more so—as her ultra-Orthodox brother. Her college best friend, Ava, has divested herself not only of feminine dress and feminine wiles but also of any gentleness, supportiveness, or sweetness, such as those retained and deepened by Tzippy and Fruma. Renee takes a lover, a thoroughly assimilated German Jew, who gives her a splendid time in bed but shocks her by his disinterest in taking her on as a soulmate for life.

Renee finds herself increasingly disoriented and spiritually hungry. Moved by a rereading of I. B. Singer's "Short Friday" to prepare an authentic Sabbath meal, Renee prepares traditional foods: challah, cholent, gefilte fish. Her classmate Ava sees her behavior as atavistic and mocks her unmercifully; her husband and her lover are so ignorant that they do not even have any conception of the significance of their luncheon cuisine. Chilled by the intolerance and apathy of her Jewish companions, Renee notes that she "had never felt quite so separate":

I stared out at the winter-stripped elms and remembered Shabbos at home. I could hear my father's singing, the sweet warm tenor rising up in his love. Beside it,

the secular chatter of the Jewish goyim I had surrounded myself with, circumscribed by doctors and not knowing what it is to yearn for the coming of the Messiah, sounded insignificant and despicable. But I had despised the religiosity of my past. How could I expect anyone to share my outlook, contradictory as it is?

CONCLUSION

The quandary experienced by Rebecca Goldstein's protagonist is paradigmatic of realities affecting the lives of American Jews. American Jewish life during the past two decades has undergone a simultaneous attenuation and intensification among different segments of the population. Anyone who currently teaches in a Judaic studies department on a college campus can testify that today's young adults—third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation American Jews who are increasingly the plurality in American Jewish communities—carry little in the way of Jewish cultural baggage. At the same time, they are far less hostile to traditional Judaism than many of their parents or grandparents may have been. They express feelings of empowerment and comfort in an open culture which they take for granted, and many of them also express a yearning for greater knowledge of their spiritual and cultural roots.

The current openness to Jewish exploration was preceded by two decades of intense ethnic awareness in the intellectual and emotional lives of select sectors of American Jewry. Unlike second-generation American Jews in prior periods of American Jewish life, third- and fourth-generation Jews in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s felt little need to "prove" their patriotism, their sophistication, or their modernity by jettisoning their Jewishness. During this period, groups of young American Jews interested in creative interaction with Jewish tradition formed *havurot* in which to worship and study together. Jewish studies departments proliferated on college campuses across the country. Books and films on earlier periods of American Jewish history were extensively reissued and enjoyed broad new audiences.

Both the authors and the reading audiences of American Jewish literature were profoundly affected by events in Israel, especially after the 1967 Six Day War, which marked a watershed in American Jewish involvement with Israel. That war awakened in American Jewry a terrified recollection of the Holocaust, while the reunification of Jerusalem and apparent strength of the Israeli state created widespread feelings of Jewish pride and confidence.

Moreover, Jews who once fled from the sights, sounds, and social pressures of the urban ghetto are now anxious to read literature which recaptures for them scenes and experiences from their childhood and youth. In addition, rising tides of international anti-Semitism, revisionist attempts to

deny the Holocaust, and the twin challenges of intermarriage and assimilation have led many self-proclaimed Jewish secularists to take a more sympathetic view of traditional Jewish life and thought.

The combination of a cultural acceptance of ethnic particularism, increased Jewish awareness and pride, and diminution of hostility to explicitly Jewish concerns has contributed to the growth of a wide reading audience for an American Jewish literature which differs in kind from the American Jewish literature of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. Contemporary American Jewish literature, reflecting the realities of American Jewish life itself, inhabits a world that is by its nature "contradictory." But unlike the situation in the past, today's American Jewish writers draw freely on Jewish tradition and culture, as they strive to regain the richness and warmth of Jewish tradition, while retaining the broad-ranging opportunities of American culture and society. They are unafraid to confront their own spirituality, and more and more they are finding that it is a specifically Jewish spirituality. They quest for meaningful Jewish concepts of faith and redemption. They long for a messianic age; they long for a sense of community; and yet they also long for the kind of personal fulfillment which seems to run counter to communal survival and spiritual goals. Few protagonists in American Jewish fiction succeed in achieving a total integration of the secular and Jewish worlds. More often, they simply struggle with their own counterlives. Their writing has attracted a broad audience among American Jews; the pieces of the worlds they juggle effectively evoke the yearning of American Jews toward often contradictory impulses of individual freedom and dynamic continuity with the Jewish past.

Ironically, there has been considerable critical speculation that American Jewish writing may have passed its peak. The late Lothar Kahn, for example, wrote, "If there was, indeed, an American-Jewish literary Renaissance it probably commenced in the mid-fifties and extended for some fifteen to twenty years into the late sixties and early seventies. Since then Jewish literature has enjoyed a diminished critical vogue and its popularity has also lessened considerably."³⁴ Similar opinions have been voiced by Louis Harap and others.³⁵ This essay has argued that a rebirth and revitalization of

³⁴Lothar Kahn, "American Jewish Literature After Bellow, Malamud and Roth," *Jewish Book Annual* 45, 1987-1988, pp. 5-18, p. 5.

³⁵For discussions of this issue in general and in relationship to particular authors, see Louis Harap, *In the Mainstream . . . 1950s-1980s* (New York, 1987), who calls the 1950s the "Jewish Decade" and labels Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and Norman Mailer as the quintessential American Jewish novelists; cited in Leslie Field, "The Jewish Presence in American Literature—Once Over Lightly," *Judaica Book News*, Fall/Winter 1988, pp. 21-24, p. 22. See also Ruth Wisse, "American Jewish Writing, Act II," *Commentary*, June 1976, pp. 40-45; Joseph Lowin, "Cynthia Ozick's Mimesis," *Jewish Book Annual* 42, 1983-1984, pp. 79-90; Thomas Friedman, "Back to Orthodoxy: The New Ethic and Ethnics in American

American Jewish literature has taken place and is still in the process of developing, at the very moment in time when others have predicted its demise. The new Jewish fiction is qualitatively different from works which preceded it and is, in fact, more intrinsically and particularistically Jewish than most American fiction of the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, this essay has demonstrated that spiritual or religious Jewish themes have flourished in a literary environment which is both more Jewish and more receptive to spirituality than at any previous time in American Jewish literary history.

It does seem likely that, as Cynthia Ozick has indicated, ethnic or sociological Jewish writing is past its prime, if for no other reason than that the ethnicity of American Jews is fast being blended into oblivion. When sociologists are pessimistic, they document the vastly diminished distinctiveness of American Jews; when they wish to be optimistic, they speak of the "transformation" of American Jewish life and culture. In either case, whether viewed through positive or negative lenses, the inescapable fact is that the particular ethnic distinctiveness which used to make American Jews feel and appear Jewish, even when they had abandoned their ties to Jewish ritual and organized Jewish life, is rapidly disappearing with each succeeding American generation.

With the passage of the *angst* of the assimilatory struggle, and lacking the bite of that dynamic so brilliantly articulated by the American Jewish literary coterie in the middle years of the 20th century, descriptions of acculturation become insipid and cease to be an engaging topic for fictional exploration. Religious and spiritual exploration, however, have emerged in American Jewish fiction as they have in American Jewish life, as gripping, often painful, and productive themes. There is every reason to believe that, at least in the near future, we will continue to witness in American Jewish fiction portrayals of the psyche of the American Jew fired to white heat, refined, redefined, and reforged on the anvils of the literary artists who articulate the spiritual struggles of their age.

Jewish Literature," *Contemporary Jewry* 10, no. 1, 1989, pp. 67-77; and Solotaroff, "American Jewish Writers."