FULL ISSUE

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# Editors' Note

Aimee Pozorski, Jessica G. Rabin, Maren Scheurer


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## *EDITORS' NOTE*

As the commemoration of what would have been Roth's ninetieth birthday in March of 2023 approaches, we have been mindful of Roth's legacy, not only in the sense of how Roth will be remembered—something the ongoing debates about the legitimacy of Roth's biographies have broached—but also in the sense of Roth Studies, both as an academic field and *Philip Roth Studies*, our very own journal. In consultation with Roth scholars from many fields and geographies, we have asked what a field called Roth Studies should look like. Timothy L. Parrish and Samuel J. Kessler, the editors of this special issue on "Roth and Judaism," are two of those scholars. While Tim began his career as a traditional academic, his work has evolved in the forms of essays and fiction; Sam is educated in a tradition of Religious Studies. They bring a slightly different approach to their editing work—one that involves inviting scholarship from outside our traditional circle.

The result is an issue that we may debate for months to come. And we hope that we do. Schooled in traditional Western thought that privileges such academic modes as scholarly debate and scholarly convention, we worried that the articles in this issue were a bit too essayistic, against the grain, and, at times, too distant from the concerns of literary scholarship that we were not sure we should publish them in the pages of this journal.

However, we also realize ours are not the only voices—just three in a globe filled with enthusiastic readers of Roth, readers from all different viewpoints and traditions. It is no accident that we are posing these questions now—not only because the question of Roth's legacy is in front of us but also because of the topic of this very special issue: Roth and Judaism. We have asked ourselves while overseeing this project: what does it mean to argue from a point of absence—that, while one would like to see more evidence of Roth's engagement with Judaism, sometimes it is not there in the form we would expect or even hope? What does it mean to read Roth's early work with the assumption that you can find a direct line to Roth the man while also assuming there is a normative position regarding Judaism? One of the things we pondered while preparing this issue is that many of the essays here end up proving, in spite of themselves, that Roth did not meaningfully engage with Judaism at all—but argue that he should have. We see a trend here that runs counter to what we know literature can do. The issue, with its endorsement of reading Roth from an explicitly religious perspective, also poses a challenge: how can we do justice to a religious point of view while at the same time also doing justice to our sense of Roth's literature and Roth's engagement with religion itself?

To be perfectly clear, we appreciate the desire of our guest editors to take on this incredibly important project. As they say, there needs to be more robust discussion of the place of religion in the work of Roth. And what better space to do that than in the pages of *Philip Roth Studies*, which has a readership from all different perspectives and all over the globe? However, we believe this is only the first phase of a long conversation that, we hope, will become more grounded in close readings of Roth's work and scholarly dialogue.

Rather than close down debate, then, we seek here to open the question. We would like to publish three letters to the editors in the Fall 2023 issue that capture exemplary and, at the same time, outstanding responses to our question: how far might we go, as a peer reviewed, academic journal, to invite new and different approaches in? What is the role of *Philip Roth Studies* in contributing to Roth's legacy—particularly regarding Judaism? Ultimately, how seriously should we take ourselves as serious scholars about Roth?

Please submit your letters to philiprothstudies@gmail.com. We look forward to continuing this conversation and to producing important and creative approaches to Roth.

*Aimee Pozorski, Jessica G. Rabin, and Maren Scheurer*

# Old Obfuscations and New Conversations

Samuel J. Kessler, Timothy L. Parrish


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*INTRODUCTION*

# Old Obfuscations and New Conversations

*Samuel J. Kessler and Timothy L. Parrish*

We are pleased to introduce *Philip Roth Studies* 18.1, "Roth and Judaism." As guest editors, we were kindly permitted broad latitude in our approach to this subject, and readers will see that we have indulged accordingly. We are delighted to publish six essays, each of which approaches the question of Roth's relationship to Judaism from a very different angle.

We have been thinking, writing, and teaching about Philip Roth most of our adult lives. Yet in the past few years we have become ever more intrigued by the question of Judaism in Roth, and specifically, by and in what ways we might understand Roth as having, all along, been engaged in a conversation about Judaism as a religious/theological enterprise, rather than simply about Jewishness as culture, heritage, or identity.

Such possible conversations were made especially poignant in recent years by the confluence of several factors, including the decidedly theological frame of some of Roth's late novels, Roth's own ritual-less funeral, the publication of Blake Bailey's salacious biography, and our general, almost childlike dismay at what seems to us to be the growing inability of contemporary literary scholarship to take religion and theology seriously.

Thus, our motivation for this Special Issue is bringing together religiously literate and religiously insightful scholars to think and write about one of our favorite subjects, Philip Roth.

But the more we conversed, and the more we took seriously the implications of the Bailey biography, the darker our meditations became, and the more we realized that Roth was, unmistakably and inescapably, fighting a moral-theological battle with Judaism. In other words, Judaism's very continuance posed the gravest threat to the absolute freedom of Roth's libido, far and away more constricting than anything postwar America could force upon him.

Philip Roth, like one of his heroes, Henry James, was that rare author whose own commentary about his work has largely determined what can be said of it. Along with being a brilliant, innovative novelist whose experiments in form transformed the tradition of the novel into the new possibilities or representation that culminated in modernism, James was also a talented critic. Arguably, he had to be—someone needed to explain to resisting readers what ground such aesthetic experimentation was clearing for himself as well as later writers. Roth, too, was a brilliant critic, although his criticism rarely illuminated the history of the form he ingeniously adapted to create his fictional personas. Roth's acuity as a practicing critic (to make an understatement) had one subject and concern: explaining the feelings of Philip Roth the author when confronted with readings of his book he did not like or did not intend. Roth's commitment to what one may call the field of Roth Studies has arguably made him its most influential contributor. One can even suggest that most published criticism of Roth's work derives from an objection (or grievance) he himself made at one point or another, either in his fiction or his criticism. His will to defend himself against unwanted interpretations was such that a primary plot device of Roth's many bildungsromane involve how the writer-hero is received and unjustly criticized by his readers, who, when they are not blood relatives, are cultural relatives, that is to say, Jews.

Indeed, it became so difficult for readers and perhaps Roth himself to distinguish between his alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, and Zuckerman's creator, Philip Roth, that Roth gave "voices" to both in his 1988 novelistic memoir, *The Facts*—and then, having done so, he had to create a new fictional alter-ego, which he named Philip Roth, to retain the illusory distance between his criticism and his fiction. And while in every incarnation, what it meant to be a Jew in the modern world was at the heart of Roth's work, Roth's writings repeatedly insist that "Jew in the modern world" was not to be taken as representative of any person other than the character Roth himself had imagined. "I did not want to, did not intend to, and was not able to speak," Roth insisted, "for American Jews" (*Reading* 224). In other words, Roth asked us to assume that the identity conflicts Ozzie Freedman, Eli Peck, or Nathan Zuckerman experience as Jews are peculiarly Roth's own original ideas and not endemic to contemporary Jewish experiences Roth observed or encountered. Yet, it is precisely because Roth portrayed a sense of dislocation as a Jew in the modern world that his work has received the strong critical reaction he wished to make disappear.

One may say with Roth that he effectively has a single concern as a critic and a novelist, himself, or his art, but one cannot make that claim without acknowledging that Roth's sense of himself was mediated through his sense of himself as a Jew. Furthermore, one cannot discuss Roth's sense of himself as a Jew without also talking about how Jews have responded to his fiction . . . and that point is precisely where

Roth's work as a critic began and his work as a novelist sought its most ingenious constructions. From the beginning of his career, Roth did not like what certain Jewish readers said about his fiction and he did everything possible to prevent their views from being part of his critical context as an author. One might even say a primary driver of Roth's career was the desire to eradicate, in advance, views of his work that challenged both his sense of who he was as a man and what his work meant to others.[1] That Roth criticism for the most part has resisted reading Roth's work as a meaningful engagement with Judaism proves how successful he has been. That this volume of *PRS* may be seen as anomalous is further evidence of Roth's extraordinary personal triumph in making it so that "the sufferings of the Jews throughout history," as he framed the matter in "Writing about Jews," was out of bounds for any serious consideration of his work (*Reading* 205).

Ostensibly, the preponderance of Roth's critical animus had to do with attacking how religious Jews received his work—though when Irving Howe washed his hands of Roth for having written *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) he was not speaking as an affronted rabbi but as a cultured reader who had decided that Roth's range of references and understandings was extremely narrow. In fact, Roth's range of references was not only wider than Howe gave him credit for, but it was also wider than Roth could acknowledge. Howe knew very well that Roth was a great reader of the modernists and the Russian and French nineteenth-century realists, but this sophistication did not prevent Roth from savaging Judaic tradition.

The premise of this Special Issue, however, is that Roth's work is so saturated in Judaic tradition that he could not escape it. In fact, it may be that Roth's engagement with Jewish tradition is why his work will endure. To be sure, Roth is a dissident Jew; his stance toward Judaism and God could never be confused with that of his contemporaries Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick, or even Bernard Malamud (who famously said all humans are Jews, a statement Roth would never have allowed himself). Roth's essay, "Writing About Jews," and his first Zuckerman trilogy portray religious Jews as being either hostile to, or insufficiently educated about, culture to understand such sophisticated Joyce-reading, Kafka-referencing artists as (the fictional) Zuckerman or (the real) Roth. Religious Jews who read Roth's works and wondered how his characters connected to Judaism or didn't, affirmed Judaism or didn't, were consistently framed by Roth as parochial. And given that when Roth made these arguments a greater part of his reading public was Jewish, he was, at best, being disingenuous, and, at worst, gaslighting.

So what was it about Jews and Judaism that so riled Roth? In the second essay in his book *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), George Steiner notes that Jews are unique—and therefore often despised—not actually for their ethnic self-isolation (the same observation could be made concerning many of the world's peoples) but because they

are the bearers of Judaism, a totally unique, world historical, world altering set of values, predicated on a form of ethical monotheism that invented and then universally imposed (through argument rather than arms—another deeply annoying quality) a set of moral responsibilities, laws, and obligations upon all the nations of the earth. "Jew" and "Judaism," Steiner writes, became confused in the mind of the general populace, such that hatred of the Jew is actually antipathy toward Judaism; hatred of a race is actually hatred of the idea invented by that race. Steiner notes (the final quote is Nietzsche's), "In polytheism [. . .] lay the freedom of the human spirit, its creative multiplicity. The doctrine of a single Deity, whom men cannot play off against other gods and thus win open spaces for their own aims, is 'the most monstrous of all human errors'" (38).

The more one examines Roth's relationship to Judaism, the clearer it becomes that it was the loss of this freedom (a freedom from the overweening morals of an archaic deity) that haunted Roth's libido, and that, over time, Roth came to blame the inventors of those morals for giving him a conscience he never asked to have. Those inventors, of course, were the Jews. Roth railed against the Jews—against those who continued, down the generations, to *happily*, *joyously*, *proudly* bear this moral, sexually-stunted conscience, to worship this conscience, to instill this conscience in *another* generation of helpless children through physical mutilation and endless Sunday school lessons—in books and essays and speeches and even through his funeral, shorn of all signs that he was ever *of such a people as those*.

Roth's struggle with Judaism's libido-constricting nature can be seen everywhere, but perhaps nowhere more so than in the fact that Roth named his most morally polluted character, Mickey Sabbath, the one he long claimed as being closest to himself, after the purest of Judaic inventions, the day of total and complete rest, when even slaves and foreigners must be freed from their material obligations. It's Steiner's argument in literary prose: The moral compass of civilization, laid down by the iron rod of an invisible deity, a fraudulent moral bigot perpetrated upon the world by Judaism, inhibits the pure carnal pleasure of Mickey Sabbath. God literally gets in the way of Mickey, who carries Judaism's central moral precept at the end of his name like a ball and chain. The whole thing like one big con that can never be escaped.

As the stories and novels explore, and as Bailey's biography elucidates in its gory detail, this is so much of what Roth was forever trying to do: to remove himself from these grounding, all-consuming, totalitarian moral assumptions, from the formative narrative of what the world is and should be that Judaism brought into the world. Roth's life-long argument, it turns out, wasn't with masculinity or sexuality or misogyny; it was with *Judaism*, with *Judaism qua Judaism*, for it was Judaism that formed the moral banks against which all his waves ultimately crashed. It was Judaism, the underlying moral fabric of the world, that suggested—merely suggested—that, in the

words of Tish Harrison Warren, "the human body is a holy thing to be protected," not something to be used merely for work (writing) and the pursuit of pleasure (sex).[2]

Roth, as it happens, was not wrong to insist that being a Jew and being Philip Roth were not necessarily the same thing. However, when he wrote about Jews while mocking the religion of Jews, and at a historical moment when Jews had just been murdered on a scale previously unimaginable in human history, it was reasonable for his Jewish readers (and some of his non-Jewish ones) to wonder why his characters and their author insisted on his aesthetic right to trivialize Judaic beliefs—especially since, if these beliefs, customs, and practices had been eradicated long ago, or during the Second World War as Hitler wished, then there would be, in point of fact, no Philip Roth as we know him or he knew himself. Nor can one simply say, as Roth seemed to believe was the case, that as a fiction writer Roth was made responsible for a subject he did not create, that is to say, the Shoah. Jews being killed for being Jews has a long history that Hitler neither started nor ended. Part of being a Jew is knowing that it is an identity separate from anatomy, and that one can be abused or killed simply for being a Jew.

Roth's anger and rejection of antisemitism was obvious and need not be debated. Perhaps his hostility toward readers who worried his fiction recycled antisemitic assumptions came, paradoxically, from his own contempt toward antisemitism. Roth was right to say that fiction need not advocate a particular political position or cultural understanding. Yet, Roth wrote as a Jew, about Jews, unlike, say, Norman Mailer. However, Roth's protagonists were primarily concerned with asserting the primacy of their male Jewish agency. In *The Ghost Writer* (1979), Zuckerman, riffing off Isaac Babel's description of the Jewish writer as one "with autumn in his heart and spectacles on his nose," adds, "and blood in his penis" (49). Thus, in that novel, Roth imagines Zuckerman sleeping with a miraculously still-living Anne Frank—the Holocaust in this context being transformed into a type of sexual fantasy.

Contrast this perspective with Bellow's fictional Artur Sammler, an actual (though fictional) Holocaust survivor, who kills German soldiers and goes to Israel in 1967 to be near the Jews fighting for their land. The sense in Bellow is not that Sammler is fighting so much for the nation-state of Israel founded in 1948 but for *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, the birthplace of the Jewish people. Sammler, therefore, is aligned with *b'nai Yisrael*, with the Jews who "struggle with [and for] God." Sammler's actions are consistent with how American Jews responded to the 2018 massacre at the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue. They called upon other Jews to attend services the next week as a sign of solidarity with the Jews who were murdered. This call was not a demand for Orthodox worship or even to acknowledge the existence of God, but a plea to come together as Jews in a place that acknowledges, preserves, and week by week enacts Jewish history, culture, and identity. Likewise, when congregants in a Colleyville,

Texas, synagogue were held hostage on a Sabbath in January 2022, Deborah Lipstadt urged Jews to fight antisemitism through the hashtag "SHOWUPINSHUL" ("shul" being the traditional Ashkenazi word for synagogue).

The closest Roth's fiction gets to any gesture like these is in "Eli, the Fanatic" (1959), where Roth characteristically portrays the protagonist's almost involuntary defense of a devout community of Jews (and Holocaust survivors) as leading to isolation and madness. In fact, the opposite is closer to Jewish reality. Were such a hashtag to appear in a Roth novel, it would likely be as a comic example of religious extremism, as something more than faintly ridiculous, like those rabbis whose discomfort with his early stories caused Roth to portray them as provincials. Roth's fiction, while never unaware of antisemitism, ignores such communal gestures as an imaginative possibility.

And yet, our view is that reading Roth *only* as rejecting Judaism is inadequate. The hashtag "SHOWUPINSHUL" needn't be seen as parochial nor as a point of view that excludes an engagement with Roth's fiction. Instead, it is more likely the ground upon which Roth's fiction has been written. Roth's writing remained connected to *Eretz Yisrael*, even if it mainly portrays the Jew who resists the solidarity of going to shul. These themes, to one degree or another, are featured in the writings of all our contributors. Whether it's the moral-legalism of the *Yiddishe Mama* in *Portnoy's Complaint*, as analyzed by Olga Karasik-Updike; the persistent questioning of the place of Jews and Judaism in modern life in the early stories, as empathically described by Phil Cohen; the questioning of Roth's underlying motives by religious critics, as discussed by Louis Gordon; or the peculiar elision of Jewish religious life in Newark in service of a narrative of Jewish communal decline, as Stuart Miller carefully reveals, Roth's persistent antagonism with Judaism is everywhere to be seen and felt.

Thus, we set out to make this special edition, to invite a set of scholars to explore Roth's connections to Judaism. Our six authors are not learning their Judaism *from* Roth. They are bringing a world of Jewish religious and cultural encounter into their engagement with Roth—which is exactly what Roth himself was doing: pulling from the matrix of his own experiences in order to tell stories. Our writers engage with something that many of Roth's most ardent readers, lovers or haters, clearly saw in his work from the very beginning: that Roth has been deeply a part of the culture of Judaism in America all along, not because he was born Jewish (lots of American writers were born Jewish) but because his readers sensed in him something that felt like a genuine confrontation with the very foundations of their culture. Not blood and soil. Not Roth as literature. But Roth and morality and God itself.

Each of the essays in this Special Issue offers insights that only readers who care about Judaism *as religion* can give. We also hope that readers take what we're doing with the intent with which it is offered, as a sort of intellectual *salon*, in which the

positing of ideas is the greatest merit. Each author offers a different view into how to read Roth *inside of* Judaism, and all of them together give a fascinating insight into the different ways that thoughtful scholars across contemporary intellectual life *want* to talk about Roth but too often haven't had a place in which to do it.

We wish to thank the editors, Aimee Pozorski and Maren Scheurer, for their immense generosity in giving us this Special Issue. We have known them both for a long time, consider them close friends, and admire their selfless dedication to the promotion of Roth scholarship. Ultimately, while the content and focus are ours, and the work is the writers' own, it was the two of them who gave us a chance to have this new conversation.

## NOTES

1. The friction of Roth's career, the force that gave it its spark and life, derives largely from Roth's adversarial relationship with his most critical readers. Along with religious Jewish readers, feminist readers too may justifiably argue that Roth's aesthetic impulses gathered force from his resistance to women who rejected his characterization of women in his fiction. It is a Rothian paradox that Roth, who had self-consciously put his work in conflict with Orthodox Judaism, was himself recognizably Orthodox whenever he wished to segregate his critical female readers from mainstream Roth readers.

2. What does this mean, to be incapable of escaping Judaism? Here's an example. As Phil Cohen discusses briefly in his essay, Barry Goldwater's father, Baron Goldwater, was Jewish. But if you produce a son like Barry Goldwater, you're pretty well assured to be dismissed and forgotten from contributing to the Jewish people. And ironically enough, Roth might have always wanted to produce a son like Barry Goldwater—if we take Parrish's essay seriously. A son, as in, a book, a persona, a vision of a resurrected, reborn life, an evangelical awakening. But Roth didn't produce such a son. He couldn't. His road to Damascus put him right back in Weequahic, again and again, which, as Stuart Miller notes, was far more religiously fecund and Jewishly diverse than Roth ever let on in his fiction, yet clearly drew on throughout his career. Baron Goldwater wasn't making a claim about Judaism when he raised his son in the church. He was simply making his way in America. Barry Goldwater, on the other hand, was making a claim about Christianity, and far and wide did it resound. Roth the man endlessly masqueraded as a simple, assimilated sop, a Baron Goldwater, who made no religious claims on anything and cared only for sex. Roth the writer, it turns out, bore a much closer resemblance to Barry, the outrageous, rowdy, almost messianic figure crusading for a mission within and against and about Judaism, a crusade that led him to become one of the most discussed figures in American Jewish circles. As Parrish concludes his essay, "Roth's lifelong revolt against Judaism was always and only an engagement with it."

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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Timothy Parrish is a writer and critic who teaches at the University of California, Davis. He's the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*. His Pushcart Prize nominated story, "Philip Roth's Final Hours," appeared in *Raritan*, and his novella, "The Critic," in *Ploughshares*. His most recent critical book concerns the democratic vision of Ralph Ellison. His work has appeared in *American Literary History*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Vestal Review*, *Sonic Boom*, *The Raw Art Review*, and *Equinox*.

# Philip Roth's View of Mid-Twentieth-Century American Jews as Seen in Three Stories from *Goodbye, Columbus*


Phil M. Cohen

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*ARTICLE*

# Philip Roth's View of Mid-Twentieth-Century American Jews as Seen in Three Stories from *Goodbye, Columbus*

*Phil M. Cohen*

***Abstract.*** This paper examines three stories in Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus.* The stories are united in their concern for the challenges posed to Jewish identity in mid-twentieth century America, a generation of Jews separated from their immigrant parents and grandparents. Roth, a keen observer of American Jewish life, shines a perceptive, occasionally critical, often humorous light on his characters; he teaches the reader some hard truths about American Jews, truths that remain relevant more than half a century later.

## INTRODUCTION

I have been attracted to *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) for a very long time. The book as a whole and the three stories I look at in this paper—"Defender of the Faith," "The Conversion of the Jews," and "Eli, the Fanatic"—reflect changing American Jewish identity by mid-twentieth century, as the immigrant generations yield center stage to their children and grandchildren. The stories Roth tells reflect conflicts that arise as American Jews born in America face the open American society into which they have been integrated, and in which they must compose their identity.

One feature of this collection is the fullness of Roth's characters: soldiers, Hebrew school students, rabbis, and newly transplanted suburban residents of a primarily

Gentile town. The mid-century American Jewish establishment may have chastened under the spotlight Roth shines on his characters, for they may have assumed that he was hanging out the Jews' dirty laundry, damaging the standing of the community by showing their many peccadillos. But one must ask: can there be unlikeable, disloyal, manipulative, mentally unhealthy Jews? The answer to the question should be obvious.

The Jews in the three stories under examination here embody a wide range of characteristics, some unpleasant, all complicated. One can imagine a Jewish community in 1959 feeling insecure and skittish and likely highly attuned to anything perceived as damaging to it, and that such writing is "no-good-for-the-Jews" (150). But the Red Scare is by now long over, Jews are quite well integrated into the fabric of American society (the rise in antisemitism notwithstanding), and the many worlds Roth's writing built remain very much alive. Meanwhile, anyone believing Jewish literature ought to present Jews only at their best should have a look at the Hebrew Bible, where unsavory Jewish characters abound.

One of Roth's accomplishments in these stories is an exploration of the challenge of American Jewish identity formation for the children of the immigrant generation in the face of life lived equally among the Gentiles. The Jews of the 1940s and 50s are thrust into an America that allowed, perhaps demanded, a kind of homogenization, the merging of a rush of identities into one undifferentiated whole. Where in Europe Jews generally lived in different places from Gentiles, dressed differently, spoke a different language, and ate differently, Jews in modern America had for the most part surrendered or deeply modified these historically accepted conditions and folkways. They have been thrust, voluntarily for sure, into a pluralistic society in which they were (and I would add remain) compelled to struggle to find their equilibrium; the results are occasionally tragic, and occasionally hilarious, but always challenging. Roth is one of the great chroniclers of this evolving condition. In these stories, we see Jews struggling with the question of loyalty to one's own, questioning the credibility of Jewish belief, and grappling with the ethics of rejecting the Jewish other, all in the service of attempting to find where to place the word "Jewish" in regard to one's identity.

In these stories, Roth shows how Jewish ethnicity or peoplehood (a relatively late term) has become fragile in the face of the challenges of modern America. Thus, the characters in these stories struggle to find a meaningful Jewish identity in the public sphere. And they attempt to understand Judaism and the meaning of the Jewish past all in light of life lived very differently from just a relatively short time before these stories take place.

As an American rabbi whose work and other life experiences have thrust me into the world upon which Roth comments, I have found Roth's observations resonant,

instructive, and filled with contemporary relevance. This paper, then, examines Roth's mid-twentieth-century Jewish America via three stories found in *Goodbye, Columbus*, published when Roth was twenty-six years old. This remarkable collection evinces a profound insight into the condition of the American Jewish community in the 1950s, with themes that continue to resonate. They form a unity; their respective themes contain snapshots that, taken together, make several instructive observations about the community of which Roth was a part and about which he commented throughout his career.

In "Defender of the Faith," I examine the challenge Jews confront when being asked to privilege one Jew in the public sphere, what that challenge might awaken, and what the limits of such privileging are. In "Conversion of the Jews," I unpack the intergenerational conflict over religious dogma, between a rabbi teaching in a religious school and his perspicacious young student for whom the rabbi's pat answers to difficult theological and sociological issues in mid-twentieth-century America are insufficient. In that sense, the story shows the newly evolving religious pattern of Jewish life. In "Eli, the Fanatic," I discuss the struggle over Jewish identity among newly transplanted suburban Jews when their societal comfort is disturbed by a group of Orthodox Jews, Holocaust survivors, who open a yeshiva on the edge of their Westchester County town.

## I. "DEFENDER OF THE FAITH"

One Friday night at synagogue when I was twelve years old and Barry Goldwater had won the Republican nomination for the presidency, over the cake and cookies, the rabbi asked the following: "Do we owe Barry Goldwater our vote because of his Jewish roots?" The answer among this group, many of whom were prominent in the local Democratic Party, was a resounding "no," but the question had to be asked: do we have a special obligation to so-and-so because he or she is Jewish? The rabbi was asking us a question about our unity as Jews, about the extent to which our Jewish identities required fealty. As good American Jews, nurtured on the New Deal and subsequent Jewish loyalty to the Democratic Party, the response was overwhelmingly in the negative.

Ought we favor our own people when we find them in the workplace, in politics, in the classroom, or in the military? What do we owe our fellow Jews in the public space of America where we find ourselves living as part of a larger whole? And if in some measure the answer is in the affirmative, what do we individually gain from this loyalty, and what do we lose? In this story, Roth gives us the portrait of two ways to understand the meaning of Jewish identity in the American public sphere. There

exists an undeniable kinship among Jews, which can, and perhaps ought, to be recognized and acted upon within certain limits. One need not vote for Barry Goldwater for president in 1964, but we may nonetheless ask the question and consider the limits. When Jews meet in the public sphere, what are their responsibilities to each other? When the universal dictates much of life in Jewish America, when does the particular emerge and when are its demands met? Under what moral circumstances might those responsibilities end?

These are the problems Sergeant Nathan Marx faces in spring of 1945, when he returns from the European theater where he has helped defeat the Germans, to be stationed in Fort Crowder, Missouri, to train new recruits likely headed to the Pacific theater to fight the Japanese, the end of World War II not yet in sight. Sergeant Marx portrays himself as coarsened by the war, stating, "I had changed enough in two years not to mind the trembling of the old people, the crying of the very young, the uncertainty and fear in the eyes of the once arrogant. I'd been fortunate enough to develop an infantryman's heart, which like his feet, at first aches and swells but finally grows horny enough for him to travel the weirdest paths without feeling a thing" (161). He had experienced enough of the brutality of war slogging eastward across Europe, it would seem, to have developed a thick enough hide to make him impervious to emotional tribulations during his remaining time in the Army. It is this coarseness that is challenged by the events in this story.

Maintaining his infantryman's heart is not to be; Sgt. Nathan Marx gets caught up in the tumult of shared ethnic identity. Throughout his first several months in Fort Crowder, he is to be challenged by three Jewish recruits, Sheldon Grossbart, Larry Fishbein, and Michael Halpern, of which the ringleader and antagonist is Grossbart. After Marx is introduced to the recruits, Grossbart approaches the sergeant, attempting to avoid a GI party (barracks cleaning detail), a regular event on Friday nights. Grossbart expresses the wish to go to chapel for Shabbat services, ostensibly out of genuine piety. Grossbart's opening comment to Marx sets the scene for the entire story. Marx is replacing one Sergeant Thurston. To the new sergeant with a likely Jewish name, Grossbart says,

> "[B]ut we thought that with you things might be a little different."
> "We?"
> "The Jewish personnel."
> "Why?" I asked harshly. "What's on your mind?" [. . .]
> "We thought you—Marx, you know, like Karl Marx. The Marx Brothers." (163-64)

Grossbart plainly means, you're a Jew, like us, like Karl, Harpo, and Zeppo, and now things are going to be different for us "Jewish personnel" (163). Grossbart lays down

the challenge that shared Jewish identity offers the potential of privilege from the new Jewish authority figure.

Marx sees to it that the request to go to chapel on Shabbat is permitted but has it couched as a general rule, which permits anyone wishing to engage in religious worship to do so. Here Marx sees no difficulty in fulfilling Grossbart's request, as long as the request is couched as part of the larger whole: the Army permits anyone wishing to worship according to his faith.

The three Jewish recruits attend the service, and Grossbart invites Marx to come along, wishing him a "Good *shabbus,* sir" (170). At first Marx is not so inclined, but something awakens in him, memories from his youth that constitute both nostalgia and Jewish self-rediscovery that impels him to join the service. He even experiences a spiritual moment, including the realization that he remembered the words to "Ain Kelohainu," the concluding hymn of the service. Attending chapel further allows Marx as narrator to share with his reader his observations of the soldiers' behavior during the service. Halpern is the only one of the three taking the worship seriously, the other two goofing off. The reader ought to have been suspicious of Grossbart's motives from the beginning, when Marx believes he hears Grossbart cackle, "Let the goyim clean the floors" (172). At the Shabbat service, it becomes clear that Grossbart is a first-class conniver, that he has manipulated his Jewish sergeant primarily to avoid work. Further in the story, Grossbart attempts to manipulate Marx to give him special privileges, "to change the food, to find out about [his] orders [whether Grossbart is to go to the Pacific], to give [him] weekend passes [not permitted during training]" (188).

The scene in which Grossbart achieves his greatest success in manipulating Marx comes when he persuades Marx to give him a weekend pass to go to St. Louis ostensibly to visit his aunt and celebrate Passover, albeit a month after the holiday had occurred: "My aunt's willing to go out of her way—to make a seder a month later . . ." (188). Marx acquiesces, but not before Grossbart accuses Marx of being an antisemite and a self-hating Jew, a tactic that has little effect on the sergeant, but which the reader recognizes as a tactic intended to draw Marx in. Not only does Marx relent and gives Grossbart a pass, but he issues passes for Fishbein and Halpern as well. The trio leaves with Grossbart promising to bring Marx a piece of gefilte fish. Marx has mixed feelings over issuing the passes, but in thinking the matter over, he hears echoes of his grandmother's voice: "'What are you making a *tsimmes*?' [. . .] But my grandmother knew—mercy overrides justice" (193).

While the trio is in St. Louis, Marx learns that the company is being shipped to the Pacific: "The news shocked me, as though I were the father of Halpern, Fishbein, and Grossbart" (193). At this moment in the story, Marx realizes that, surprisingly, he has developed a kinship with the three Jewish noncoms. He's allowed himself to

break regulations and give the three a pass in order to celebrate a sacred moment (if a month late) in the Jewish calendar. As he saw it at that moment, he'd performed an act of mercy that overrode justice. No harm was perpetrated against the others in the company, and, as he understood it through his immigrant grandmother's voice, the act of mercy benefitted the three young men. This kindness would ease their separation from family, from their familiar Jewish environment. This realization comes to Marx in the form of a childhood memory, an old, Yiddish inflected phrase his grandmother would utter in the face of similar situations. It's not a big deal, she'd say, and in that moment Marx understands his act in that spirit. Not a *tsimmes*. His heart overcomes the demands of his head. The pull of his childhood identity draws him further into their Jewish sphere, which is, after all, his Jewish sphere as well.

This realization recalls a moment earlier in the story, a reverie brought on by the three as they walk off to the chapel. In the midst of a recollection from childhood, Marx says the moment "had to reach past those days in the forests of Belgium, and past the dying I'd refused to weep over; [. . .] past endless stretches when I had shut off all softness I might feel for my fellows, and had managed even to deny myself the posture of a conqueror—the swagger that I, as a Jew, might well have worn as my boots whacked against the rubble of Wesel, Münster, and Braunschweig" (170). That voice of his grandmother from the past permits the reader to see something more: a realization for Marx. Ironically, Grossbart's abrasive aggressiveness finally pulls Marx out of the hard shell he'd developed while marching through war-torn Europe, a mindset that even prevented him, while at war, from any act of triumphalism as he marched through German cities, a clear reference to the Holocaust and its perpetrators. An act that favors the "Jewish personnel" in the company completes a process that had begun when he recalled the words to Ain Kelohainu at the Shabbat evening service, which he attended because of the three Jewish trainees. This act of issuing a pass that enables the three boys to attend a seder, the Jewish celebration of liberation par excellence, now returns the veteran of the European theater to a self that he'd submerged for the sake of his psychic survival while at war.

This self-knowledge is driven home by Marx's reaction to the news that the company is heading to the Pacific theater. In the shock of the realization that his men will likely soon be facing the Japanese, Marx feels a father's sadness, but only for the three Jews in the company. Having dropped his warrior's shell, he feels sympathy for the three men in his company with whom he shares ethnic kinship.

The Pesach journey to St. Louis turns out to have been a ruse. Upon their return, Grossbart claims his aunt was not home, that he mixed up the weeks, that it was to have been the next week. Instead of a Pesach seder, the trio eats dinner at a Chinese restaurant. Instead of a piece of gefilte fish, Sgt. Marx receives the gift of a soggy Chinese egg roll, Chinese food being a cuisine that Jewish immigrants to New York City had come

to draw into their newly developing American Jewish identity. Disgusted, Marx tosses it out the window to be discovered the next day by one of the trainees raking the yard, who exclaims, "Egg roll! [. . .] Holy Christ, Chinese goddam egg roll!" (197). This is surely the funniest moment in the story but also a moment that shatters Marx's reverie. He has allowed Grossbart to manipulate him by playing the Jewish card.

The story finds its conclusion with a final manipulation by Grossbart. Marx learns that Grossbart has escaped shipping out to the Pacific. He has been reassigned instead to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Marx deduces that Grossbart discovered the presence of a Jew in the PX named Shulman and, playing the Jew card with Shulman, persuades him to change his orders to somewhere Stateside. Engaging in a bit of chicanery of his own, Marx has the assignment reversed, and Grossbart is sent to the Pacific along with the other two Jews. The Jewish card can only be played so far and no farther.

Marx's action results in a tirade in which Grossbart confronts Marx yet again, utilizing a by-now familiar tactic: "There's no limit to your anti-Semitism, is there?" (199). When Marx says that Grossbart owes him an explanation concerning his behavior, Marx adds that he owes an explanation "mostly to Fishbein and Halpern" (199). For Grossbart has shattered the Jewish unity that had been the continuing trope throughout the story. Suddenly, it's every man for himself. Grossbart says of his fellow trainees that "Now I think I've got the right to watch out for myself" (199). This decision to look out for number one betrays every act Grossbart performed in support of the needs of the three throughout the story. Ultimately, in Grossbart's judgment, the unity of the "Jewish personnel" dissolves in the face of the unwelcome orders. At that moment, the other two Jews become a burden and Grossbart abandons them.

Regardless of Grossbart's betrayal, Marx's acts on behalf of Grossbart, Fishbein, and Halpern humanize him because they Judaize him. He is brought back to his humanity via the Jewishness qua individuality he submerged in order to survive the pain of warfare. On the other hand, Grossbart's desertion of his friends causes an opposite reaction. Grossbart's loyalty to his kin, it turns out, has its limits. The reader is not surprised by Grossbart's actions as they comport well with the other elements of his personality. Given the passion with which he argues on behalf of all three throughout the story, and how this behavior awakens something hidden in Marx, we are disappointed in him nonetheless, disappointed by his disloyalty to his friends.

Grossbart's chicanery and Marx's response show that for Marx there exist limits to loyalty through kinship. A possible alternate ending to the story might have Marx recalling once again his grandmother's recourse at difficult moments: Why make a *tsimmes*? It's no big deal. For the first time in the story, however, Grossbart's act is not one of relatively minor privilege. It is, rather, clearly immoral, and this act shatters

the ethnic loyalty that has constituted the problematic of the story. The watching out "for all of us" (200) is reestablished. The rules, even those, especially those, that determine who goes to war and who does not, are to be enforced fairly, just as everyone can worship as they choose. Marx's own chicanery sets things right; Grossbart is sent off to war side by side with his Jewish buddies. The story ends with a moment of regret, with Marx wishing to seek "pardon for my vindictiveness," but instead, he "accepted [his] own [fate]" (200).

## II. "CONVERSION OF THE JEWS"

"Defender of the Faith" portrays a conflict inherent in being both Jewish and American. Where once Jews lived in different places from Gentiles, dressed differently, spoke a different language, ate differently, Jews in modern America have for the most part surrendered or deeply modified these historically accepted folkways. There can be no doubt that Jewish culture thrives in America, but the intensity of difference between Jews and others that characterized much of premodern Jewish life barely exists except for the most isolated ultra-Orthodox communities.

Jewish education for children in mid-century America resided mainly in the synagogue in the form of Hebrew/religious/Sunday school. This institution, which met typically one or two afternoons per week plus Sunday mornings, represented (and continues to represent) the Jewish community's major effort to educate and socialize their children, to lead the boys to bar mitzvah, and as the twentieth century progressed, girls to bat mitzvah. Afternoon and Sunday school, administered progressively more professionally over the decades, remains a problematic means of educating children about a complex tradition. Children weary from a day of public school are asked to attend another couple of hours of instruction, or get up early on Sunday morning, to study with their Jewish peers in the synagogue. However ambitious these programs may be, it is rarely possible to equip students with the deep knowledge of the Jewish tradition to craft a strong Jewish identity of knowledge and beliefs that would resonate as powerfully as did Jewish identity in premodern times. With this education, children are then sent out into the American public square, ostensibly possessing a sufficiently solid Jewish identity through which, it is assumed, they are able comfortably to assert their Jewishness and simultaneously to withstand the challenges to that identity in the open American society. This situation constitutes the frame of "Conversion of the Jews."

The key moment in this story occurs near the beginning, when the protagonist, Ozzie Freedman, a boy around twelve years old, tells his friend Itzie Lieberman what happened the day before in Rabbi Binder's afternoon religious school class. Rabbi

Binder, Ozzie reports, began speaking about Jesus as an historical figure, not a supernatural one. That God was Jesus's real father, Rabbi Binder says, is impossible: "The only way that a woman can have a baby is to have intercourse with a man" (140), denying the Christian narrative of Mary's virgin birth. Rabbi Binder, a man likely attempting to capture his young charges' attention through the mention of sex, applies the normal biology of procreation to deny the possibility of God miraculously impregnating Mary. As Itzie puts it, "Mary hadda get laid" (140).

But Ozzie intuitively understands something important about the life of the Jews in America and the similarities of the Christian and Jewish stories: a shared notion of a God capable of entering history and producing miracles. Ozzie reports to Itzie that he raised his hand with a question: "I asked the question about God, how if He could create the heaven and the earth in six days, and make all the animals and the fish and the light in six days [. . .]. Anyway, I asked Binder if He could make all that in six days [. . .] why couldn't he let a woman have a baby without having intercourse" (140-41). Ozzie's question loudly captures an essential element of the religious conundrum of modern Jewish life lived among the Gentiles in America: why are our miracles true and theirs false? This question is clearly modern. Previously, Jews lived apart from Gentiles, and the "competition" between the two faiths was of a different nature. Jews could simply deny the existence of Jesus or at least his divinity without entering into much discussion of the matter. When the conversation did turn to Christ, it was frequently to ridicule Christianity. In premodern Europe, Jews did not usually share the same legal status, nor as a rule did they befriend Gentiles. Living parallel lives in Europe, young Jews would rarely if ever bother to challenge the Jewish refutation of the virgin birth.

By the 1950s, the time of "Conversion," Jewish life had long been open to one's Christian neighbor and vice versa. Children attended the same schools. They shared sports, film, and popular literature, and, perhaps, above all, they spoke the same language. The time frame of "Conversion of the Jews" places the story well before Vatican II (1965), a document promulgated by the Catholic church that, among other things, revolutionized Catholic-Jewish relations (and thereby Jewish-Christian dialogue). Nonetheless, the informal dialogue between practitioners of different religious faiths had begun on the ground. Jewish children, and their Christian counterparts, discovered their shared humanity, and in sharing humanity, their differences, including their religious differences, began to fade.

In that environment, as Ozzie succinctly puts it, God is credited by both faiths with the creation of miracles, deeds transcending the natural order that appeared to Ozzie to be lacking clear logic as to God's preference for one faith over another. If God can do one thing, e.g., create the world, an indisputably enormous act as Ozzie acknowledges, why is it impossible for God to impregnate a virgin? Why is one people's

founding story true while the other's is false, given that the God both faiths worship makes miracles? It's a fair question that demands a nuanced answer, an answer Rabbi Binder is ill-equipped to supply.

When Ozzie presses the question, Rabbi Binder again has recourse to the argument that Jesus lived but was just an ordinary human being. Ozzie relates to Itzie, "So I said I understood that. What I wanted to know was different" (141). To this, the narrator adds, "What Ozzie wanted to know was always different" (141). The first time Ozzie uses this trope occurs when Rabbi Binder asserts the Chosen People doctrine. How can the Jews claim chosenness, Ozzie asks, in the country where the Declaration of Independence claimed equality of all people? When Rabbi Binder attempts to distinguish between political equality and religious specialness, "[w]hat Ozzie wanted to know, he insisted vehemently, was different" (141). The narrator adds, "That was the first time his mother had to come" (141). Ozzie's mother has to come to have a meeting with the rabbi because Rabbi Binder sees Ozzie's query as disruptive, rather than a challenge worthy of a serious response.

The second time Ozzie's mother needs to meet with the rabbi is after a plane crash at La Guardia Airport in which eight of the victims are Jewish. During free discussion time at Hebrew School, Ozzie raises the question of the importance of separating Jewish names from among the other victims in a disaster. Rabbi Binder "had begun to explain cultural unity and some other things when Ozzie stood up at his seat and said that what he wanted to know was different. Rabbi Binder insisted that he sit down and it was then that Ozzie shouted in frustration that he wished all fifty-eight were Jews" (142).

Rabbi Binder appears to be a relatively young man, described as having a full head of dark hair and an intimidating voice, who wears a black yarmulke. Roth likely imagines him as born in the United States. Being of an earlier generation, he is not properly intellectually equipped to understand and address Ozzie's thoroughly modern questions, the challenges to Jewish chosenness, Jewish unity, and comparative miracles. He is well enough equipped to claim belief that Jesus was an historical figure, i.e., his belief system includes willingness to acknowledge Jesus's historicity. He believes this acknowledgement is sufficient to answer his students' unspoken question regarding a figure who looms so large among their Christian neighbors. But neither acknowledging Jesus's existence, nor differentiating between politics and religious claims, nor ethnic commonality satisfies Ozzie's curiosity because his life experience challenges those claims. The previous generation, symbolized by the impatient rabbi, could be satisfied with answers to the questions raised by life in the new context. For the next generation, maintaining Jewish difference requires better, at least more satisfying, answers than those that satisfied the rabbi's generation. As Ozzie says, it's different.

I can identify with Ozzie. My childhood rabbi, Rabbi Elefant, a man I remember fondly, was not up to the challenge of his students' theological skepticism. Asked for proof of God's existence, my childhood rabbi could only point to the beauty of the natural world, which could not lead a ten-year-old to believe in the Flood, or the Ten Plagues, or the Ten Commandments. Like Rabbi Binder, Rabbi Elefant, the product of an earlier generation, had no need for proofs of God's existence; he just believed. The Ozzies of the world require modern rationalism to explain theological claims.

Rabbi Binder is not without an intuition of his students' life situation. There is the aforementioned free discussion time, likely envisioned as the opportunity to raise questions in an open forum. At the same time, however, his openness has severe limitations. He finds Ozzie's questions, and perhaps the tone in which they are delivered, obnoxious, and three times the rabbi loses his temper. On one such occasion the rabbi says that if he could help it, Ozzie would never celebrate his bar mitzvah (142). It's not difficult for the reader to imagine the adolescent attitude with which the questions are delivered, or, perhaps, only the tone in which Rabbi Binder imagines he hears them. After all, his beliefs are under fire through the agency of the twelve-year-old boy. In any event, Ozzie's questions are cause for continual mother-rabbi conferences.

The new state of affairs in 1950s America puts Rabbi Binder into a difficult situation. Jesus lived but was human. All Americans are equal under the law, but the Jews are chosen. Jews are part of the American whole but maintain a cultural unity. So we mourn the Jewish victims of a plane crash, or, with another common situation, cringe when a Jew is arrested for a major crime. A shonda for the goyim. But in critical ways, Rabbi Binder (the name Binder, "to bind," is likely no accident) argues, unsatisfactorily, that Jews remain a people apart. For Ozzie Freedman ("freed man," also likely no accident), his rabbi's explanation is inadequate. Those old tropes require new explanations. Without new explanations, twentieth-century America has rendered these long-standing beliefs obsolete.

Imagine, then, that Ozzie Freedman grows up and, against all odds, finds himself drawn into Judaism and becomes a rabbi. It has happened. How might Rabbi Ozzie respond to his twelve-year-old avatar when asked to explain Judaism's viability in modern America? This, of course, is the burden of Jewish theology written in the twentieth century. Rabbi Ozzie's twelve-year-old interlocutor is not yet up to reading Mordecai Kaplan or Martin Buber, anyway, so a simple answer will have to suffice. The grownup Ozzie would know that modernity has hurled innumerable conundrums at the Jewish tradition, not the least of which is that the poor Torah has taken a terrible beating at the hands of its many literary critics who deny its Sinaitic origin. Rabbi Ozzie would have to explain that Judaism's central idea of a transcendent God survives the Torah's human origins, but looking for and finding that God requires significant heavy labor. That labor is ultimately worthwhile because a universe in

which God exists is infinitely more meaningful than one in which God is absent. Rabbi Ozzie would then spend the remainder of the academic year providing his young students with the tools to achieve that vision.

## III. "ELI, THE FANATIC"

One of the most significant developments in the history of American Jews, suburbanization, brought Jews from their apartments in such cities as Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, and Chicago where now (with the possible exception of New York City) the majority of Jews live outside of the cities spread out among a Babel of other ethnic groups. The reasons for this phenomenon are surely numerous, but certainly one reason is that this post-war generation of Jews celebrated the opportunity literally to leave behind the immigrant experience of their parents and grandparents; further, they felt a newly discovered comfort integrating into communities populated by Gentiles as a minority. One associated reason was a desire to escape the more binding elements of Jewish ethnicity, such as dress, language, and religious practice. To be modern meant to integrate, to fit in, to be homogenized among the larger American whole and become amnesiacs with regard to history. In "Eli, the Fanatic," Roth paints the portrait of such a modern Jew caught between the life of a newly relocated suburban American Jews in the 1950s and the Holocaust.

Eli Peck, a lawyer living in appropriately named Woodenton, a small town in Westchester County, New York, is a man of fragile mental health whose wife is about to give birth to their first child. Woodenton's Jewish community has no synagogue. Parents have to take their children to a synagogue in Scarsdale to receive a Jewish education. To the town's Jewish residents, living there represents the fulfillment of the American Dream, the chance to leave their parents' legacies behind. No longer must they live in the Bronx or Brooklyn or the Lower East Side; rather they live among Christians in prosperity. They dress and eat like Gentiles, and, since their very religious life, the vestige of their ethnicity, is lived elsewhere if at all, they have for all intents become Gentiles, both in the street and at home.

Into this town arrives a small yeshiva located on the outskirts of town composed of eighteen boys, the rosh yeshiva (the principal of the school), and a silent man dressed in ultra-Orthodox garb, all Holocaust survivors. The silent and nameless man appears in the streets of Woodenton with a note seeking supplies for the yeshiva, and because of his obvious ultra-Orthodox attire, symbolic of what they moved to Woodenton to escape, he sets the teeth of the Jewish residents on edge. Eli, who has no actual legal role either in the town's governance or in the Jewish community, is tasked by the scandalized Jews of the town to approach this yeshiva, and, armed with

appropriate local zoning ordinances prohibiting a school in a residential area, he is to inform the rosh yeshiva that the group must vacate the premises and move on. Note that there is no obvious discussion by a town council or suchlike. Indeed, throughout this story, no Gentile ever registers any discomfort with the yeshiva's presence in their town. Rather, a self-assigned group of Jewish men with no legal standing in the town decides that decisive action must be taken. This discomfort comports well with a generation of Jews who are both uncomfortable with the presence of ultra-Orthodox Jews and who fear someone who looks too Jewish will cause antisemitism.

What symbol in particular incites this strong reaction among Woodenton's Jews? What sets the informal council into action? A hat. The silent "greenie," as the man is frequently referred to, walks into town bearing notes for businesses asking them to supply shoes and food, wearing a black hat.

Eli leaves his first visit to the yeshiva after an unsatisfactory chat with Leo Tzuref, the rosh yeshiva. After being spotted by the children, who run away at the sight of him, "Eli saw him. At first it seemed only a deep hollow of blackness—then the figure emerged. Eli recognized him from the description. There he was, wearing the hat, that hat which was the very cause of Eli's mission, the source of Woodenton's upset. The town's lights flashed their message once again: 'Get the one with the hat. What a nerve, what a nerve . . .'" (253). This hat represents everything these suburban Jewish citizens left behind in the boroughs of New York City. The hat unpleasantly shouts "Jew!" aloud to these men. It awakens fears that what they've struggled to repress will be undone by the presence of one silent and, as the reader learns, traumatized survivor dressed in traditional ultra-Orthodox garb. The Jews at the yeshiva are foreigners. One of the Jews of Woodenton, Ted Heller, encapsulates the Woodenton Jews' xenophobic reaction, employing a familiar trope: "'And the guy with the hat, you saw the guy with the hat? [. . .] Goddam fanatics,' Ted said. 'This is the twentieth century, Eli. Now it's the guy with the hat. Pretty soon all the little Yeshivah boys'll be spilling down into the town.' 'Next thing they'll get after our daughters'" (258).

The reader is given no explanation as to how this small group arrives at the edges of Woodenton, and it may indeed be difficult to conceive. After all, wouldn't the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) have settled these refugees in a more congenial environment, e.g., Brooklyn? It may be, then, that the story suffers from a lack of verisimilitude, but the art of fiction allows some latitude in these matters. The presence of the man with the hat does not disclose his status as a survivor. Their origins become obvious to the reader and to Eli simultaneously but never become an element in the larger discourse among Eli's friends. That they lack the curiosity to inquire as to why (and how) this small group of boys and men came to occupy the old Puddington place forms the crux of Roth's problem. Observing an unpleasant reminder of their past, they instantly transform the man with the hat and the rest of

the yeshiva population into the other, utterly foreign, frightening, and unwanted. Instead of empathy, surely a possible response to the presence of kin obviously in need, they express fear and hatred, and Eli Peck, who does not share his friends' revulsion, is caught in the middle.

This story, first published in 1958 in *Commentary*, must be among the early instances of an American fiction writer's use of the Holocaust. Within ten years of the publication of "Eli, the Fanatic," the Holocaust will move from the periphery of American Jewish concerns to take center stage, where it remains to this day. But in 1958, knowledge about and understanding of the Nazi genocide was only emerging into the public square. Roth's use of the Holocaust is subtle. He introduces the group's origins by a simple reference to Leo Tzuref as a Displaced Person (251). In response to Eli's request for them to leave, Tzuref responds: "We stay. We're tired. The headmaster is tired. The students are tired" (252).

Unable to complete the mission to expel the boys and men, Eli attempts to find a compromise. On his own, he writes a letter to Tzuref in which he welcomes "Yeshivah personnel" to live in Woodenton, "provided they are attired in clothing usually associated with American life in the 20th century" (262), this mainly in reference to the man with the hat. In a note, Tzuref replies, "The suit the gentleman wears is all he's got. [. . .] But I tell you he has nothing. *Nothing.* You have that word in English? *Nicht? Gornisht?*" (263-64). He adds that "a medical experiment they performed on him yet" (264), and continues,

> "You have the word 'suffer' in English?"
> "We have the word suffer. We have the word law too."
> "Stop with the law. You have the word suffer. Then try it. It's a little thing."
> "They won't," Eli said.
> "But you, Mr. Peck, how about you?"
> "I am them, they are me, Mr. Tzuref."
> "Aach! You are us, we are you!" (265)

The heart of the matter lies in that exchange. The Jews of Woodenton, in divesting themselves of the past, have isolated themselves from the wider Jewish world, especially from the Holocaust, surrendering their Jewish identity, of which peoplehood is key. Their foray into the suburbs of Westchester County includes ignoring the Nazi genocide.

For Eli, and perhaps Eli alone, this cannot obtain.

Eli delivers two suits and all the necessities packed into a Bonwit's box to the yeshiva, intending the garments for the "greenie" with the hat. Later, Eli hears a noise at

the door to his home, opens it and finds the Bonwit's box on his doorstep. He opens it to find the greenie's garb. He dons the hat while otherwise naked. He puts on the rest of the man's clothing and proceeds to walk about his neighborhood and then to the yeshiva. On his way there, he stops to rest at a Gulf station. There the garage attendant says to Eli, "How are you, Pop?" To the attendant Eli says, "Sholom" (288). With the suit on, Eli has become the greenie, the man with the hat.

At the yeshiva, he spots his doppelganger. Eli says "Sholom" to him to catch the greenie's attention: "He looked at what Eli wore. And then Eli had the strange notion that he was two people. Or that he was one person wearing two suits. [. . .] They stared long at one another" (290). The matter of clothing fulfills Tzuref's earlier statement: you are us, we are you. Jews are Jews, regardless of the clothing they wear. Exchanging suits shows Eli the inextricable truth of this matter, awakening memory, shattering his suburban amnesia—an event that sets Eli radically apart from all the other Woodenton Jews. Indeed, Eli is no longer of Woodenton.

After this confrontation, still dressed in the greenie's clothes, Eli goes to the hospital to see his wife and newborn son. On his way, he encounters people who know him; seeing how he is dressed, they believe he is having a nervous breakdown, though Eli himself does not believe he is crazy. Inchoately, he realizes switching garments unites the fates of the two men. One man, the "greenie" arrived in Woodenton seeking relief from the nightmare of Europe. The other naïvely moved there seeking escape from his people's past. In the end, they are united in their fate. He has, nearly mystically, been drawn to the other, and brought back into the flow of Jewish history.

In the hospital Eli is approached by interns: "Their white suits smelled, but not like Eli's" (298). They inject him with a sedative: "Then a needle slid under his skin. The drug calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached" (298). Sedation may remove one from consciousness, but only temporarily; the soul of the Jew cannot be permanently sedated, right?

## CONCLUSION

Roth is famous for denying that he was a "Jewish" writer. Given that, one interesting feature of these three stories, besides that all the major characters are Jews, is that they all contain a Jewish religious component: in "Defender of the Faith," the soldiers attend Friday night services during a crucial scene and Passover plays a critical role in another episode. In "Conversion of the Jews," almost all of the story occurs in a synagogue religious school. "Eli, the Fanatic" centers on the arrival of a yeshiva in a Westchester County suburb.

The three stories combined concern the need for and fragility of Jewish ethnicity or peoplehood. Grossbart plays on Marx's Jewishness, awakening a submerged sympathy for his fellow Jews and as well his own Jewishness. Ozzie challenges Rabbi Binder for a meaningful explanation of Jewish peoplehood given the universality born of the American context. Tzuref and the "greenie" awaken in Eli the recognition of their shared and inescapable history.

Altogether, the themes of the three stories combine to illustrate the challenges to American Jews and American Judaism in mid-twentieth century America. Do we favor our own in the public sphere? How do we understand our religious narrative in the face of other narratives discovered while living in an open society? Can Jews escape their identity by fleeing the cities that nurtured the immigrant generations, and what is lost when they do?

I understand how these stories might have irritated the Jewish communal leadership in mid-twentieth-century America. Why would Roth write about the Holocaust the way that he did, with the genocide still so fresh? How could he create a character like Grossbart for all to see? How could he portray a rabbi as weak and dogmatic as Rabbi Binder? Why couldn't Roth be more like Leon Uris and create uber-Jews for all to admire?

In response, one could simply have recourse to something as obvious as that Roth is free to write the world as he sees fit and be done with the matter. But for me, my amazement at these stories, beyond the artistry of his writing, lies in my own experience to which these stories speak powerfully. He captures a piece of the reality of mid-century American Jewry that strikes me as true. Jews, like others, can be manipulative; they can find themselves helpless in the face of the modern challenge to traditional religion; they continue to prefer historical amnesia over the past. And in thinking and behaving this way, they cut off their ethnicity and thereby a piece of their humanity. Yet I do not find the characters who embody these themes, for the most part, unsympathetic, even the whiny Grossbart off to fight in the Pacific. (It might be worth noting in passing that neither the trio of soldiers nor their companions are likely see any action, as the war in the Pacific is about to wind down.) I doubt that in writing these stories Roth brought much antisemitism into the world, only a mirror that made some of his readers feel uncomfortable at what they saw when they looked into it.

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# Jewish Conversion Theory: Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews"


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*ARTICLE*

# Jewish Conversion Theory

## Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews"

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***Abstract.*** Previous research on Philip Roth's short story "The Conversion of the Jews" (1958) has focused on the protagonist Ozzie's personal struggle with Judaism as he prepares for his Bar Mitzvah. However, during these lessons, Ozzie asks provocative questions that challenge the foundation of Judaism. Roth confronts the reader with two interpretations of Judaism: a canonical one, personified by Rabbi Binder, and Ozzie's more radical approach. Operating outside of clearly defined theological parameters, Ozzie's naïve attitude opens Judaism to fresh, non-Jewish interpretations and asks such provocative questions as whether a conversion to Christianity can be an answer for modern Jewish Americans. Although Ozzie chooses Christianity as a myopic solution for his identity struggle, Roth knows that conversion is not really an option. In search of an American Judaism that fits Jewish Americans, this study, like Ozzie himself, will meet at the crossroads of theological doctrine and literary criticism.

Literary criticism constructs its arguments within a tight hermeneutic circle. Philip Roth's short story "The Conversion of the Jews" (1958) is thematically Jewish; the title, however, invites the reader to explore "subcultural perspectives" (Greenberg 487) beyond Judaism. Roth's personal and literary worlds did not exist in a Jewish vacuum; on the contrary, Gentiles crisscross both, and so does Roth's struggle with his Jewishness and Judaism.

Roth's allegorical story takes the reader on an inward journey. Oscar Freedman, aka Ozzie, is a modern Jewish pars pro toto who must confront his existence within a multilayered Judaism operating outside of a Christian framework. Roth allows the reader to participate in Ozzie's struggle to combine his individual views with those of his group. One way of finding his own identity in a labyrinth of social and theological options is by building his own temple of worship on the foundation of Torah, tradition, and history. The catalytic converter of his process is his Bar Mitzvah.

If we assume that Roth is an American rather than a Jewish author, then Jewish and non-Jewish readers respond to his writings and enlarge the circle. The term "conversion" sets this process in motion and allows excursions into both Christian and Jewish theology. Christianity is based on a linear interpretation of the Bible, which is rooted in the divine trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our inquisitive Ozzie, an American boy who happens to be Jewish, would not have done well in catechism class, asking the priest or minister why God is infallible and why the Bible has to be taken literally. Roth parallels the Christian trinity with three co-equal and co-eternal forms of Judaism: the character Yakov Blotnik, the synagogue's custodian, represents an archaic, traditional Eastern European shtetl Judaism; Ozzie's Hebrew teacher, Rabbi Binder, personifies a conservative, canonical one; and Ozzie, meanwhile, is in search of a new Judaism that fulfills the needs of young Jewish Americans.

In his story, Roth takes the reader into the basement of a synagogue somewhere in the Midwest. A group of American teenagers between the ages of 11 and 13 prepare for their Bar Mitzvahs, a spiritual rite of passage into the Jewish community. Unlike a bris, this transition requires the study and cantation of an assigned Torah portion in front of the congregation. The successful Bar Mitzvah will read, sing, and experience God's word in its original Hebrew. Because of the foreign alphabet, and the lack of vowels, this task requires diligence and motivation. While all of his non-Jewish classmates spend long Hebrew school afternoons at home watching their favorite television shows, Ozzie is stuck in a basement, internalizing and reproducing the pre-Gregorian, Hebrew chant of his specific Torah portion.

Ozzie is a serious student who "showed a great talent" (145) reading the Torah; however, he reads too slowly. Rabbi Binder, Ozzie's rabbi and Hebrew schoolteacher, admonishes him to "read more rapidly," but "Ozzie said he could read faster but that if he did he was sure not to understand what he was reading" (145). Why is Ozzie not able to understand God's word? In the beginning, so Ozzie learns, God gave the Torah to the chosen people, and for that, Jewish people are thankful. The Hebrew song "Dayenu," roughly translated as "it would have been enough," gives thanks to God for the gifts He has bestowed upon them, such as Shabbat, the Torah, and freedom from slavery. However, the gift of the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah, does not seem to have been enough for the following 5,782 years of Jewish presence. Humans added commentary upon commentary to modify what, we are told, is written by God, the Omnipotent.

In order to better understand the Torah, scholars have explained and applied this ancient text to real-life situations. For that reason, the practice of Judaism is not focused on the Biblical text alone but on its interpretations. At first, Jewish sanctity resembles an apparent concept of trinity that is not much different from Christianity, its younger sibling. At the bottom of the theological pillar is the Torah or Jewish

Law, consisting of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. God delivered His message indirectly through Moses. Later, He will send another delivery person, Jesus, to offer an updated version, called the New Testament. Unable to comprehend the meaning of God's first words, humans added a second main division of the Hebrew Bible, "The Prophets." The Haftarah, a portion of this second part, is essential to Ashkenazi Judaism, to which Ozzie belongs. The final pillar of the textual trinity is called "The Writings," or "Ketuvim." It includes Psalms, Proverbs, Job, The Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, and Ezra-Nehemiah, and it is staple reading of the Hebrew Bible. Torah, Prophets, and Ketuvim are the Tanakh, or the Hebrew Bible, which is a part of the Old Testament. In other words, God's words are a rear-projection on the big production screen of the synagogue's bimah. It is on the bimah that the scrolls from the ark are transubstantiated into Jewish beliefs and become a part of Jewish life. *Pathways Through the Bible*, a Jewish must-read, provides a *Cliff Notes*-like summary in English of these sanctified texts. Finally, rabbinical commentaries on the scrolls are canonized and applied to daily life. These commentaries are essential for bringing the ancient stories to life, even Ozzie's life. In addition, there is the Kabbalah. This form of Jewish mysticism is an esoteric method that focuses on the complex relationship between God and His creation. Thus, to the uninitiated Ozzie, Judaism presents an impenetrable maze of mysticism. Discussion and study of the sacred text, in Hebrew school for example, could have helped Ozzie on his spiritual journey into Jewish adulthood.

It is important to point out that even the Torah was delivered indirectly through Moses. If we assume that God communicated with Moses, why could He not speak to Jesus? After all, Jesus was born from a Jewish womb, a fact that makes him Jewish even in the most Orthodox eyes. Moreover, if the prophets are interpreting God's words, so are the disciples and apostles. Finally, if the Torah is supplemented, interpreted, discussed, applied, and explained by commentaries, why not accept the New Testament as an additional, newer, and more applicable interpretation of the same message?

Revisiting the Passover chant "Dayenu," "it would have been enough" for God to have delivered the Torah, but He did not provide stage directions. Therefore, *The Code of Jewish Law*, a must-memorize-and-apply guidebook, micromanages in painstaking detail every aspect of a pious life.[1] Mysteriously, God and man's word melt together in *The Code*, and it becomes difficult to decipher who said what. We can easily understand why Ozzie is unable to familiarize himself with the countless rules and regulations in one Wednesday afternoon per week. It is also easy to understand why Ozzie is left with countless questions.

Ozzie's questioning comes at a crucial point in his life. A pre-Bar Mitzvah boy is not yet a full member of a congregation, and as such, he is in a spiritual limbo. For Ozzie, the Bar Mitzvah is a rite of passage that allows him to make a public and

voluntary commitment to a congregation, its values and teachings. During this process of searching and self-finding, he has to ask difficult questions. After all, once bar mitzvahed, he personifies the communal values of the congregation.

However, Ozzie is not yet a part of that community, and his questions are of a philosophical nature. Philosophy operates within a paradigm of possibilities without any limitations. Theology, on the other hand, might ask the same questions; however, the canon of potential answers is restricted to a field that is marked by clear boundaries. Ozzie is not aware of those restrictions since he is quite unfamiliar with canonical Judaism. Raised in a family without a strong Jewish background, he encounters religious indoctrination for the time during his Bar Mitzvah classes. Steven Goldleaf argues that Ozzie "is a purifier of a religion he sees as corrupt and defiled. He yearns to have his eyes opened, but his religion insists he follows its forms blindly" (3). To follow "its forms blindly" is the definition per se of religion. Sandor Goodhart suggests that the conflicting Biblical stories are midrashic: "witnesses to a gap in scripture that point us [. . .] to a more inclusive interpretative reading" (8). By questioning the foundations of it, Ozzie is trying to fill the "gap in scripture." Unfortunately, Rabbi Binder does not have any answers for Ozzie. Trying to find a path through the maze of Judaism, Ozzie tempts the rabbi with various provocative questions and comments during the afternoon Bar Mitzvah classes: the virgin birth of Jesus, the question of equality, and the death of passengers in a plane crash.

Case in point is Ozzie's first question: "if He could make all that in six days, and He could pick the six days he wanted right out of nowhere, why couldn't He let a woman have a baby without having intercourse" (141)? Jewish doctrine acknowledges Mary and Jesus as historical figures without spiritual validity: "And [Rabbi Binder] kept explaining about Jesus being historical and so I kept asking him" (142). Roth is Jewish enough not to mention the unmentionable Mary and Jesus by name; however, Ozzie, the pre-Bar Mitzvah, who lives in a world with limited Jewish markers, is curious about his non-Jewish reality. Greenberg explains Ozzie's strategy as a transgression in order "to penetrate resistant domains" (488). If Mary and Jesus are irrelevant in Judaism, so is Mary's conception. Nevertheless, if Jesus is historical, then Ozzie ought to be permitted to ask critical questions. Rabbi Binder, who does not believe in the sanctity of Jesus Christ, misses the opportunity to answer questions about this Jewish taboo topic. Binder could have borrowed the answer from one of his Catholic colleagues for whom the Immaculate Conception does not relate to having "a baby without having intercourse" (141), but to Mary being without original sin from the moment she was conceived. Moreover, Binder could have chosen to answer Ozzie's question with biology, but that would have presented an additional problem for the rabbi. While Ozzie is supposed to question Mary's Immaculate Conception, he is to accept that Sarah, Abraham's wife, conceived Isaac at the age of 90. However, Mary's

method of conception lies outside Judaism and is therefore irrelevant. Per definition, any theology operates without historical and biological accuracy, leaving the door wide open for more justifications of a random doctrine. Greenberg reminds us that for Roth, "fiction about one's cultural group should not be the product of a detached and mature viewpoint but of perceptions in extremis" (490). The officials of any religious group must strike a fine balance between science and dogma. Free from indoctrination, Ozzie might have constructed his next argument as follows: since "[Rabbi Binder] kept explaining about Jesus being historical" (142), then Moses and Abraham could theoretically be a part of the same history. This argument is particularly valid since the Jewish Jesus never converted to any of the current forms of Christianity.

Ozzie's second obstacle in accepting Jewish teachings pits the religious and secular world against each other. He asks why "Rabbi Binder could call the Jews 'The Chosen People' if the Declaration of Independence claims all men to be created equal" (141). Only Jewish people consider themselves chosen within their own ideology, as long as their peers confirm that assumption. Other religions would not agree. The question remains, are theology and critical thinking mutually exclusive? In other words, how Jewish is the questioning of Judaism? In the beginning, God presented Himself as an angry deity. He demanded absolute obedience from the Israelites. He even tested their faith by asking Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Nevertheless, the same angry God engages in a discussion with Abraham. In Genesis 18:16-33, the section entitled, "Abraham Pleads for Sodom," God intends to punish the people of Sodom for their sins. Abraham, however, begins to plead with God to spare their souls, should He be able to find 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, even 10 righteous Sodomites. The fact that Abraham argues with an angry God has served as justification to open a theological dialogue within Judaism. For example, the Vidui prayer pleads with God to spare the soul of the believer. Four questions form the core of a Passover Haggadah. Like Judaism, Roth's "lens is never satisfied looking in a single direction," as Hannah Beckerman argues (Akbar et al.). These dialogues with God have contributed to the rich layers of Judaism and its spiritual trinity, the Tanakh. Michael Byers adds a physical trinity, anchored in "family (Mrs. Freedman), religion (Binder), and the forces of history (Blotnik)."

Roth introduces Yakov Blotnik as "the seventy-one-year-old custodian" (144) of the synagogue, for whom "life had fractionated itself simply: things were either good-for-the-Jews, or no-good-for-the-Jews" (150). In the story, Blotnik embodies "an object of wonder, a foreigner, a relic, towards whom they were alternately fearful and disrespectful" (144). Goodhart considers Blotnik to be a part of the "post-Holocaust Jewish community [. . .], who themselves for no good reason [. . .] escaped calamity and yet who know [. . .] that at any moment they may be subject to the same calamitous destiny as their European counterparts" (3). Similar to a

Greek chorus, Blotnik is Ozzie's moral subconscious that he is trying to eradicate. Blotnik is a barometer that gauges the pressure Ozzie puts on Rabbi Binder. C. Beth and Paul-William Burch brilliantly argue that Blotnik "evokes the ghost world of European Jewry, including the Holocaust" (88). Blotnik, with his stereotypical physiognomy and his Orthodox values represents a Judaism with which Ozzie cannot and will not identify. If Blotnik symbolizes the past, Ozzie, like Roth himself, represents the new generation of Jewish Americans or American Jews.

As a part of that generation, Roth never considered himself a Jewish author. In a 2005 interview, he stated that being Jewish "is not a question that interests me. I know exactly what it means to be Jewish, and it's really not interesting. I'm an American" (Krasnik). Europe for Roth, and for many other American Jews, is synonymous with pogroms, the Holocaust, or even the Inquisition. This feeling is encapsulated in Blotnik, who personifies what Greenberg calls "feelings of vulnerability and persecution" (487). Roth's paternal grandparents came from Kozlov in today's Ukraine, and his maternal ancestors were from Kyiv. On August 29 and 30, 1941, approximately 33,770 Jews were massacred in a ravine just outside the Ukrainian capital at Babi Yar. It is hard to imagine that Roth's ancestors would have survived these atrocities if they had not immigrated to the United States. However, Roth's desire to be identified as an American would not have saved him from Europe's mass extermination camps either. For the victimizer, Jewishness wipes out any national identity.

What does it mean to be Jewish? Is it a belief in established religious institutions, including the state of Israel? The story suggests that it is family and tradition:

> When his mother lit candles she would move her two arms slowly towards her, dragging them though the air, as though persuading people whose minds were half made up. And her eyes would get glassy with tears. Even when his father was alive Ozzie remembered that her eyes had gotten glassy, so it didn't have anything to do with his dying. It had something to do with lighting the candles. (143)

It is in this moment that people like Ozzie, "whose minds were half made up," experience the power of tradition. This is also the moment when Ozzie is closest to a spiritual identity. Goldleaf suggests that Ozzie is stuck "between individual freedom" to be bar mitzvahed, "and binding authority" (1), to abide by the rules and traditions laid out before him. In other words, his Bar Mitzvah forces him to come to terms with his public and personal identities, as well as his Ashkenazi Yiddishkeit.

Both Roth and Ozzie are unable to combine successfully their Jewish and American identities. Alienated from canonical Judaism and sidelined by American secularism, Roth understandably experienced "frustration with his subcultural position as a Jew in American society" (Greenberg 487). This ambivalence towards religion

is expressed in the name Binder, the rabbi who personifies Conservative Judaism. Rabbi Marvin Binder is the "binding authority" and, as such, bound to religious conventions: "A Jew, Binder counters, cannot admit to even the possibility of a miraculous birth of Jesus; to do so would mean denying you are a Jew" (Byers). Such a confession would also eliminate the need for rabbis altogether, and Binder would be without a job. Goodhart argues that Binder is stuck in "historical circumstances rather than remaining open to the wonders of divine possibility" (3). These possibilities exist only within a theological frame of reference. For Rabbi Binder, the "defender" of his faith, Judaism is "anti-idolatry," and "notions taught by Jesus can only be digested within a Jewish consciousness as a way of doing and continuing Judaism" (Goodhart 4). In other words, Judaism can only exist in its rejection of Christianity. In addition, the rabbi is a binder, holding loose, individual sheets of paper together. Similar to a bookbinder, the binder itself does not contain any content. For Ozzie, Judaism appears to be an empty binder, which must be filled with individual pages. One of those sheets of paper could have been filled with Ozzie's questions and added to the binder itself. However, such a new and individualized Judaism had become too voluminous for Binder to hold together. The folder becomes undone the moment Binder slaps Ozzie in the face. But Binder, who is associated with the Old Testament teaching of an angry God, has no choice but to punish Ozzie. Alienated and humiliated, Ozzie rejects Judaism.

Eventually, Roth seems to present a paradigm shift. At first, the reader might accuse Ozzie of disrupting the Wednesday afternoon peace. We are quick to condemn him for asking the wrong questions and for threatening to commit suicide. Shouldn't the reader blame Rabbi Binder, the teacher who fails to teach? James Duban explains that the rabbi does not provide meaningful answers, since his "Jewish identifications [are] grounded in little more than an emotionally fervid rejection of Christian theology" (5). Binder does not address the following conundrum: "how can being Jewish, an identity established in righteous worship of an omnipotent God, require a stiffnecked limitation of that omnipotence" (Theoharis 2)? If God is omnipotent, why is he not able to answer simple questions of a Bar Mitzvah?

Returning to the song "Dayenu," it would have been enough if Roth had turned Ozzie into a Jew for Jesus,[2] but he also gave him the mission to convert other Jews. Like Hinduism, Judaism does not have a mission to convert others. Generally, Orthodox Jews only reach out to other Jews to invite them to return to their roots. Ozzie reaches out to Jews, not to return to Judaism but to convert to Christianity. His desire to convert is evident in the final scenes of the story. With Ozzie on the roof ready to jump, his mother implores him, "Ozzie, come down! Ozzie. Don't be a martyr" (155). Itzie Lieberman, along with the other young voices, shouts, "'Be a Martin, be a Martin,' and all the voices joined in singing for Martindom, whatever *it*

was" (155). At this point, neither the rabbi nor Ozzie's mother considers converting to Christianity. Ozzie's young friends, however, encourage Ozzie to "be a Martin." (St. Martin was a Catholic saint who converted to Christianity at around Ozzie's age.) On the roof, Ozzie is close to a new life and "the only obstacle to freedom is his hesitation" (Greenberg 489). Tired of Rabbi Binder's inability to modernize Judaism, the Bar Mitzvahs are willing to abandon Judaism for "Martindom, whatever it was." Anything seems better than the lessons presented but not learned in Hebrew school. While his friends are first in line to embrace anything but Binder's Judaism, Ozzie is eventually able to convert even the most Orthodox and canonical Jews, such as Yakov Blotnik. This last survivor of the European tradition finds himself "for the first time in his life upon his knees in the Gentile posture of prayer" (157). Greenberg reminds the reader that Roth steps "across a boundary" (488) by rejecting all forms of Judaism. Blotnik's action makes it painfully clear that conversion of the Jews means "the Gentile posture of prayer" as practiced by Christians. Conservative Judaism, personified by Rabbi Binder ("'Make *him* tell me.' There was no doubt who *him* was" [158]) is forced to acknowledge that "God can make a child without intercourse" (158). Meanwhile, Ozzie makes all other remaining Jews "say they believed in Jesus Christ—first one at a time, then all together" (158), mimicking the communal prayers recited during Christian services.

Roth's title, "The Conversion of the Jews," raises questions about the precise meaning of "conversion." In *The Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, it is defined as follows: "the act or process of changing something from one form, use or system to another" and "the process or experience of changing somebody's or your own religion or beliefs" ("Conversion"). The first definition suggests a change within Judaism, such as Rabbi Binder embracing Ozzie's questions, but an excursion into etymology provides even more insight. According to Goodhart, who focuses on the Latin word *conversion* and the Hebrew *teshuvah*, both terms mean to turn back and "to abandon the way of sin and return to the way of God" (5). He proposes a conversion of the Jews not to Christianity but a returning to their Jewish origins. In this sense, Roth's story can be read as "the Conversion towards Judaism." Coincidentally, Ozzie's Hebrew schooling could pave his *Oleh*, his spiritual return to a Jewish ideology that embraces him. Theoharis Theoharis proposes that conversion is "the process by which opposition yields up identity" (1). Meanwhile Burch and Burch read the title of the story "ironically because there is no real conversion, no enduring change of faith or belief" (89). In this sense, according to Byers, Roth's story is an allegory in which Ozzie recaptures the paths of Jesus: "Ozzie's symbolic death, his symbolic ascent to heaven, and his symbolic return to earth as a deity." However, Roth does not allow an allegorical Ozzie to die or to ascend to heaven. Ozzie makes it as far as the roof before his Fall.

Paola Tartakoff offers an additional helpful definition of "conversion." She focuses on voluntary conversions to Christianity "by individual Jews for personal reasons" (731). Jewish history is the history of oppression, and Jews have been the target of many mass killings. In his article "Christian Persecution of Jews over the Centuries," Gerard Sloyan describes the reality for Jewish Europeans during the Middle Ages as filled with violence and social discrimination, and forced conversion is a recurring point of contention in Christian-Jewish relations. Tartakoff explains that by "converting to Christianity, [. . .] Jews sought to take advantage of the Christian majority's social, legal, and political dominance and its ingrained hostility toward Jews and Judaism" (732). If all Jews had converted to Christianity, nobody would have been gassed in Nazi extermination camps. A conversion of all Jews would imply not only the end of antisemitism, but also the end of Judaism. Do we have to understand Ozzie as the long-expected messiah, a savior who leads the Jews away from Judaism but into survival? Byers considers Ozzie to be "the story's Jesus," who "has converted the Jews and has brought peace to the world." Burch and Burch offer the clever solution of *pikuach nefesh*, "a law is to be ignored if life is at stake" (84). In other words, Jews could have performed a mock conversion, similar to the Spanish and Portuguese Marranos, in order to save their lives when facing the Inquisition.

If the story depicts Ozzie's rite of passage, what has he learned? None of his questions is met with meaningful explanations. On the contrary, Ozzie is beaten for asking the wrong questions: "Rabbi Binder's hand flicked out at Ozzie's cheek. Perhaps it had only been meant to clamp the boy's mouth shut, but Ozzie ducked and the palm caught him squarely on the nose. The blood came in a short, red spurt on to Ozzie's shirt front" (146). Goodhart states that Rabbi Binder slaps Ozzie "as if he is some kind of child Nazi who has turned against the God of the Jews, a slap that in this instance draws blood" (4). Like Jesus, Ozzie questions Jewish authorities, and for that reason, his blood is shed. Like Jesus, Ozzie assembles a group of disbelievers literally at his feet. The outcome is often read as positive, whether by Goldleaf, who claims, "The story ends with Ozzie still triumphant" (2), or Burch and Burch, who argue that the story ends happily since none of the Jews actually converted. But the ending of the story is not happy, neither for Ozzie nor for the Jews. First, for Christians God is associated with light. For Ozzie, that God has an "increasing darkness" (158). Next, Christian iconography interprets the halo as a union between the divine light, permeating the soul and the human body. For Ozzie, this symbol has no meaning and becomes the ordinary object of "the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo" (158). Whereas Jesus's message promised salvation, Ozzie offers only spiritual and cultural hollowness to his audience and himself. Ozzie's jump cannot be considered a triumph for the rabbi, his mother, his audience, or for Ozzie himself.

What must Ozzie think after his fall? His Jewish spectators will certainly not convert to Christianity, nor did Roth. Roth's choice of the name Oscar Freedman implies that Ozzie tried to free himself from strict conventions and traditions as personified by Binder. If Oscar freed himself from Judaism, he would be a "freed man." Moreover, Roth chose Oscar, a Gentile name with roots in the Irish language, as a first name. Through Ozzie, as Beckerman claims, "Roth portrays the effects of the grand narratives of history on the individual, and questions our notions of identity, family, ambition, nostalgia and love" (Akbar et al.). However, Ozzie finds himself between two worlds: one Christian by default, one Jewish by birth. Dan Isaac argues that many of Roth's characters "are forced to think their position through and come out with a new formulation" (91). There seems to be a lesson here for American Jewry. Ozzie's alternative, however, is not convincing or viable. At the end of the story, no one has learned anything. Ozzie, like Roth himself, is too American for observant Jews but remains the "Jew" for non-Jewish Americans.

This identity struggle manifests itself in a remarkable thematic consistency within Roth's oeuvre: "sexual vanity, lower-middle-class consciousness [. . .], the crushing weight of family and, of course, American Jewish identity" (Akbar et al.). The dilemma lies in the fact that Roth is alienated from his Christian surroundings, while being unable to identify with a Jewish community. Greenberg calls Roth a "Jewish outsider" (501), who remains "at the margins of the mainstream" (488). Positioned on the fringes of American society, Roth asks the quintessential question of how to succeed "in the American mainstream" (488) as an American Jew.

Gradually, Roth began to struggle more and more with the idea of integrating his Jewish-American identity into the concept of the American Dream. In Roth's idealized childhood experiences of the 1940s, often mirrored in the fictional protagonist Nathan Zuckerman,[3] Jews could be an integrated part of American idealism. Roth's middle works are laced with sexuality. However, his later works, particularly *The Plot Against America* (2004), document the prevalence of antisemitism and racism in the United States. Alex Hobbs suggests that Roth's later works "have a much darker tone" and that "the novels are not reconciled to the experience of ageing and old age; they depict angry men, who are not ready for what is happening to them" (65). David Baddiel assumes that Roth's later works add the theme of death to "his usual obsessions of sex and Jewishness" (Akbar et al.). Underlying all his work, however, is the question of Jewish identity as it is juxtaposed by the interaction with Christian characters. Not religious, yet considered Jewish, Jewish Americans must navigate their path between American secularism and Jewish ethnicity.

To bridge the gap between ideology and identity, Judaism offers several choices. The Reformed and Conservative movements, with their modifications and customer-friendly, kosher-optional liturgy, are now losing members. Like Ozzie's spectators,

Reformed and Conservative followers attend services to witness the performance of a rabbi on the bimah and more recently on zoom. Afterwards, all parties return to their daily activities. Similarly, Ozzie is not deeply moved by theology, even after a discussion with Rabbi Binder. On the other hand, Orthodoxy, with its strict medieval customs and laws, continues to gain support among Jewish Americans. Several studies have investigated its allure. According to Debra Renee Kaufman, orthodoxy adds spirituality and meaning to an otherwise "cultural ambivalence and confusion" (547). Orthodox Judaism provides real answers to the currents of secular life. An Orthodox Ozzie, possibly unaware of the existence of Mary, let alone a virgin birth, would have waited hungrily for his rabbi's commentary on the commentary without asking questions. Whereas questioning God and His gender would have been perfectly acceptable for a Reformed Ozzie, this pars pro toto Jewish and American Ozzie echoes the "American middle-class anxiety about assimilating into the predominantly gentile American culture" (Silvey 59), but he remains indecisive. "Unconfident about his cultural reception, yet unwilling to change" (Greenberg 501), Ozzie remains in a religious and social limbo, particularly since he does not complete his Bar Mitzvah. The story ends before Ozzie can become a man and a full adult member of a Jewish community.

Roth portrays a troublesome circle of violence within Ozzie's experience with Judaism; Rabbi Binder enforces his views on Ozzie by slapping him. In response, Ozzie "impose[s] his individual beliefs on his community" (Goldleaf 2). Patrick Silvey expresses the same idea when he writes, "the faith that Ozzie forces upon his onlookers is not unlike the faith that has been forced upon him" (66). Goodhart tries to explain Binder's reaction as follows: post-Holocaust Jews "repeat upon their own children the traumatizing behavior of which they have been the victim in their own lives" (4). Ozzie, however, did not experience the Holocaust. Therefore, he questions, undermines, threatens, and ultimately rejects the practice of a Judaism, colored by the Holocaust, in post-World War II America. He also criticizes the use of any form of violence: "Mamma, don't you see—you shouldn't hit me. He shouldn't hit me. You shouldn't hit me about God, Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God—" (158). Elisabeth Roudinesco recognizes this pattern of violence in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She argues that a large number of post-Holocaust Zionists, who had survived the extermination camps, began to invade a land that was occupied, "moving from the status of pariahs to that of conquerors" (59). The background of why the Israelites had to leave their land, their historic claims on that land, as well as the successful military defense of it, are usually omitted from a discussion on the topic. Although other nations routinely exert their territorial rights in this manner, Israel must abide by a different set of rules, and so must Ozzie. The allegory is complete: Jews are without a country, in the same way Ozzie is without a religion.

Moreover, he is chased out of the temple in the same way as the Israelites were forced out of their land. Finally, Ozzie struggles to find his Jewish identity in a sea of surrounding Christians, like Israel seeking its legitimacy in its neighboring Arab world.

The survival of Judaism is at stake, and Jews must ask some hard questions. Should Judaism continue by being practiced only in its most orthodox form, and thus exclude secular Israelis, Reformed Jews, and converts? Roth's answer is clear: Orthodoxy and Conservatism, as personified by Blotnik and Binder, do not appeal to the new generation of American Jews. Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews" is a cry for help to be saved from a cultural and spiritual limbo, but neither Ozzie nor Roth resolves the conflicts the story raises. True peace of "spirit" for Ozzie is not to convert to Christianity but to find a meaningful place within Judaism. If survival in terms of numbers is an aim of Judaism, then the new transparency will open Judaism to searching American Jews like Ozzie.

## NOTES

1. For example, chapter 23, sections 1-30, discusses the "Laws Regarding the Reading of the Scroll of the Law." Chapter 101 lists the "Laws Concerning the Preparation of Food on One Day of the Festival to Another, or for a Week-day," while chapter 102 describes the "Laws Concerning the Preparation of Food on a Festival for the Sabbath." Other laws regulate the menstruation of women (chapters 153, 154, and 155). Additionally, there are the laws concerning "The Crime of Causing the Effusion of Semen in Vain and Remedies for those Who Were Caught in this Trap" (chapter 151).

2. Neither Christian, nor Jewish, Jews for Jesus believe in Jesus as the son of God rather than as a historical figure. Because Jesus died for the sins of humankind, he can also offer salvation. Consequently, God manifests himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Old and New Testaments are both central parts of the teachings, as is traditional Jewish liturgy. This non-profit, messianic organization focuses its activities on the conversion of Jews ("About Jews").

3. William Boyd claims, "Zuckerman is Roth by any other name, despite the author's regular denials and prevarications" (Akbar et al.).

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# Roth and the Jews: Another Look

Louis Gordon


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*ARTICLE*

# Roth and the Jews

## Another Look

*Louis Gordon*

***Abstract.*** Philip Roth's career was largely shaped by early criticism from Jewish leaders and organizations who were rankled by the less than savory Jewish characters in his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). In particular, Roth's short story "Defender of the Faith," which depicted a Jewish soldier who uses his religion to shirk his military duties, prompted negative responses from a number of Jewish critics. While recent scholarship on Roth has often adopted Roth's claim that he was unfairly judged on what some perceived as his early unfavorable depictions of Jews and Jewish practice, the case is not as one-sided as Roth would have had his readers believe. This essay also takes a deeper look at some lesser-known material relating to Jewishness in Roth, including the *Commentary* letters responding to Roth's essay "Writing About Jews," and the Chofetz Chaim's thought on lashon hara (evil speech). During his career, Roth drew on Jewish sources such as the Chofetz Chaim and Vladimir Jabotinsky to provoke his critics while at the same time defending himself against charges of Jewish self-hatred.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Philip Roth's career was largely shaped by early criticism from Jewish leaders and organizations rankled by the less than savory Jewish characters in his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). In particular, Roth's short story "Defender of the Faith," which had earlier that same year appeared in the *New Yorker* and depicted a Jewish soldier who uses his religion to shirk his military duties, prompted negative responses from a number of Jewish critics, not the least of whom was the former US Army Lieutenant Colonel and military chaplain, Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman.

Recent scholarship on Roth has often adopted Roth's claim that he was unfairly judged on what some perceived as his early unfavorable depictions of Jews and Jewish practice. A prime example of this is Ira Nadel's characterization of Roth's response to Rackman as showing "a confident, and assertive Roth opposing the claims of those intolerant rabbis and dogmatic individuals who [. . .] instantly condemned his story and attitude," to which Roth "formulated a sustained response" (109). Blake Bailey similarly skews the debate in Roth's favor, allowing his readers to see Roth's response, but not Rackman's original letter (168-70). But the case is not as one-sided as Roth would have had his readers believe in his formal responses to the criticism. Defending "Defender of the Faith" against his critics in an interview with the *New York Post*, Roth argued that there were two Jews in the short story, one of whom, Sheldon Grossbart, "is a rat" and the other, the narrator, Sergeant Marx, "is a man of great decency and loyalty" (MacGregor 1). What Roth apparently did not realize was that his favorable narrator is also an unconvincing one: Marx attempts to show his connection to Judaism by his knowledge of the En Kelohenu prayer, which he recalls as having been chanted on Friday night in the base chapel. But a Jewish reader circa 1959 would easily have known that the prayer is not chanted on Friday evening, but rather on Saturday mornings, rendering Marx's account more suspect than Roth let on.

This shallow level of Judaic knowledge appears at other points in Roth's oeuvre, most notably in *Operation Shylock*'s (1993) references to the Chofetz Chaim, whose work is studied in every yeshiva today. When writing *Operation Shylock* in the 1980s while in Israel, Roth would have easily stumbled onto one of the English summaries of the Chofetz Chaim's work on slander, and used it as a kind of defense for his own work.[1] But Roth never told his readers (and he possibly did not know) that the Chofetz Chaim's writings in this area are so nuanced that they would probably also bar most of Roth's work as lashon hara,[2] or speaking ill of others.

This essay takes a deeper look at some lesser-known material relating to Jewishness in Roth, including the *Commentary* letters responding to Roth's essay "Writing About Jews," the Chofetz Chaim's thought on lashon hara, and a contemporaneous profile of the Chofetz Chaim, in an effort to elucidate Roth's work. It also points out that while Roth, to the end, continued to argue that he was right and the rabbis wrong, he drew on the use of Jewish sources to provoke his critics while at the same time defending himself against charges of Jewish self-hatred. Finally, this article also examines how Roth's use of Jewish sources supported his own expression of Jewish secularism, not only in his use of the traditional Jewish bar on speaking lashon hara but perhaps more subtly in his borrowing of Vladimir Jabotinsky's bitter commentary on the Jewish prayer, the Kaddish, in *Nemesis* (2010).

## II. EARLY CONFLICT: A TRAGEDY OF GOOD INTENTIONS

Roth apparently never recovered from the early criticism by Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman for publishing his story "Defender of the Faith" in the *New Yorker*. Roth defended himself against the charges that the story was anti-Semitic by pointing out that there were two Jews in the story, and that his critics only looked at the immoral gold-bricking Sheldon Grossbart, rather than Sergeant Nathan Marx, who thwarts Grossbart's efforts to pull strings to avoid service in the Far East. Roth further rejected the argument that he had confirmed anti-Semitic stereotypes through the character of Grossbart, arguing that "literary investigation may even be a way to redeem the facts, to give them the weight and value that they should have in the world, rather than the disproportionate significance they obviously have for some misguided or vicious people" (*Why Write?* 57). Since some of the sociological factors driving the criticism of the story have faded,[3] and Roth's admirers have largely parroted Roth's own defense (Pierpont 8),[4] many of the original critiques, which should be taken seriously, have been, when not purposefully ignored, simply forgotten.

Still, for any reader—and paradoxically the possibly more Jewishly educated reader of today—a rereading of "Defender of the Faith" reveals that the obvious problem with Marx is that, while possessing some admirable ethical qualities, he is not a committed Jew or even particularly proud of his heritage, and thus not a meaningful counterbalance to Grossbart. The fact that Marx, having not attended a religious service in years, would not be endearing to Jewish readers, seems to have gone over Roth's head. But there is a more serious problem with the Marx character: he is simply not a credible narrator. Though Marx's lack of credibility would only be picked up by readers with a knowledge of Jewish liturgy, it is important for understanding the hostility the story evoked in many quarters.

In Roth's narrative, Marx, a Jewishly estranged sergeant who has served admirably in Europe, follows Grossbart to the chapel where Friday night services are being held for the GIs (*Goodbye* 172). Though Marx's narration of events may seem realistic to the general reader, his mistakes in recounting the service raise doubts as to his reliability for anyone with a religious education or knowledge of Jewish liturgy. First, the sacrificial wine, which is not drunk until the very end of the service, is brought out too early. In addition, Marx notes of Rabbi Leo Ben Ezra, who bears a Sephardi name, "Though an American, the chaplain spoke deliberately—syllable by syllable, almost—as though to communicate, above all, with the lip readers in his audience" (171-72). What's striking here is that Marx treats Ben Ezra as if he were a Yiddish speaker. (Roth would use a similar description of Rabbi Warshaw's manner of speech in *Portnoy's Complaint* from 1969 [73, 202]). But the error that renders Marx most

clearly an unreliable narrator occurs after the chaplain advises the soldiers, who have had little choice but to eat non-kosher food, to "[e]at what you must to live and, throw away the rest" (*Goodbye* 172). Marx then recounts, "A round of chatter rose and subsided. Then everyone sang 'Ain Kelohainu'; after all those years, I discovered I still knew the words" (172). The lines are intended to show that Marx still has some attachment to Judaism, but on a closer reading reveal something quite different. "En Kelohenu," which is usually chanted in a melodious up-beat tune by boys below bar mitzvah age, is said at the end of the service on Saturday morning, not on Friday night. While it is not surprising that this liturgical confusion would have been overlooked by the editors at the *New Yorker*, to the more religiously learned reader, or to those who actually attend synagogue, Marx's narrative rings false: either he did not recall the event properly, or he is not telling the truth about the time of the event, or perhaps about the entire episode with Grossbart.

There is, of course, another way to read this string of religious infelicities: that Roth himself had not attended synagogue for many years and no longer remembered the order of the prayers or the rituals and thus erred in writing his fiction. This may actually be why Roth, in "Writing about Jews," said that "Marx does not strike me, nor any of the readers I heard from, as unreliable, incredible, 'made-up'; the verisimilitude of the character and the situation was not what was called into question" (*Why Write?* 58). However, this explanation is even more damning for Roth because it confirms that he himself was not credible regarding his subject. He hadn't done his research and projected his own ignorance onto his character at a time when substantial numbers of Jewishly oriented World War II veterans were creating a new wave of American synagogues. Thus, it would not have been difficult for more knowledgeable Jewish readers to have arrived at the conclusion that Marx was neither credible nor as honorable as Roth argued. As Sig Altman, author of *The Comic Image of the Jew* (1971), notes, "The shame of the Jewish reader is felt for his slandered Jewishness, and the bitter taste left in the mouth is due to Roth's intimation that his characters, as Jews who remain Jews, are unredeemable" (Our Readers).

Roth addressed the antagonism that followed the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, and specifically of "Defender of the Faith," in his December 1963 *Commentary* essay (*Why Write?* 50-64). Writing about the Jewish communal response, and citing Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman's letter to the ADL (which stated bluntly, "what is being done to silence this man? Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him"—the implication being cherem, excommunication), Roth notes here that Rabbi Rackman had, sometime after the ADL letter, written directly to Roth himself, and suggests that he had not written to the editorial board of the *New Yorker* because he did not want to "compound the sin of informing" (*Why Write?* 59). Rackman's criticism would go on to haunt Roth who as late as 2009 still wanted to retaliate for

what he believed was an unfair attack (Nadel 109). In *Commentary*, Roth defends himself against the charge of informing, noting, "I had told the Gentiles what apparently it would otherwise have been possible to keep secret from them: that the peril of human nature afflicts the members of our minority" (*Why Write?* 59). But the accusation of "informing" clearly affected Roth because in his carefully constructed essay he does not reveal which rabbi had made these charges, though a few paragraphs later he challenges Rackman by name for a statement he made at a subsequent rabbinical conference, that Roth was among certain Jewish writers who were "assuming the mantle of self-appointed spokesmen and leaders for Judaism" (64).

Roth's *Commentary* essay has been republished in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975) as well as in his collected non-fiction and cited by numerous apologists for Roth in the stream of books and now biographies that have seen recent publication.[5] Invariably, Rackman's letter to the ADL is what is generally cited to depict Roth as being unfairly attacked by the Jewish establishment. What has been overlooked, however, is the long section of letters in the April 1964 edition of *Commentary* entitled "The Faith Defended." This section includes an extensive response by none other than Rackman himself, but more than that, these letters are crucial for a more complete understanding of the passion evoked among certain sectors of Jews by the publication of Roth's first book.

The letters in "The Faith Defended" were mixed in their support and criticism of Roth, with writers such Michael Blankfort and George Sklar coming out in defense of the young author, and rabbis and editor Harry Golden criticizing various aspects of his work. Sklar notes, "To let fear of anti-Semitism dictate how one is to handle the Jew in fiction is to surrender to the anti-Semite" (Our Readers). That sentiment was echoed by others. Still, because the rabbis who challenged Roth came from all the branches of Judaism, it is clear why Roth later came to view himself as having engaged in a "war with the rabbis." Indeed, the Conservative Rabbi David Seligson, whose sermon criticizing the young author had been published in the *New York Times*, notes, "Mr. Roth has made no secret of the fact [. . .] that he is completely innocent of any basic Jewish knowledge, and burdened with a Jewish identity which is devoid of Jewish content" (Our Readers). Seligson wishes that Roth could have found in the Jewish experience what John Steinbeck had found in "the American saga." The Reform Rabbi Theodore N. Lewis of the Progressive Synagogue notes, "It is not 'timidity' which fills me and others with disgust and loathing for his writing. What I cannot tolerate are his caricatures of the Jew, his distortions, his traducing of the people I love . . . Obviously he is driven by a hatred for the Jewish people, and above all, for himself" (Our Readers). Dr. Gerhard Schwartz writes that, "in the eyes of the bystander," Roth's work made it seem that "Jews inform upon one another because they do not think much of themselves." He further argues that this was pointed out by

Sinclair Lewis, who "took special pains" to depict "a Jewish comedian who makes vicious fun of the Jews"—referring to the novel *Cass Timberlane* (1945) (Our Readers).

But the most important letter in the *Commentary* feature, as far as Roth's development as a writer goes, is unquestionably the one by Rabbi Rackman, who writes that he had tried to find a way to get Roth "to restrain his emotions and to address himself dispassionately to the one ethical question" he had been posing to the author. That question, as Rackman notes, was whether artists and authors should "be spared ethical judgments because art can tolerate no such restrictions?" (Our Readers). He notes,

> We were taught by sages of the Talmud, and their disciples, that not all that one thinks may one say; not all that one says may one commit to writing; not all that one writes may one publish; and not all that is published may one read. Is this wisdom passé? Or is it applicable to everyone but artists, film producers, authors? (Our Readers)

He then states that he had asked this question of himself as a writer:

> As a former Jewish chaplain I have dealt personally with more villains like the one described in "Defender of the Faith" than Mr. Roth ever dreamed of meeting. All of us were hard put to explain to commanding officers why they should continue giving three-day passes to Jewish soldiers for holiday observances when they had the experience, for example, of picking up Jewish soldiers excused for the holidays in brothels on the day of the holiday. (Our Readers)

Rackman continues, writing that were he to

> tell such stories in popular magazines which commanding officers were likely to read, would I be helping Jewish chaplains hereafter to acquire for their decent and loyal charges the passes that should be forthcoming for the holidays? [. . .] Perhaps I am exaggerating the consequences in my mind. But I cannot feel that I am impoverishing humanity with my restraint and I would rather not risk even the remotest evil. (Our Readers)

This letter reveals some important insights into Rackman's motives, though it has been virtually excised from any discussion of Roth's work, largely due to Roth's own recasting of the debate. Yet it remains crucially important, since Roth, as someone who did not attend services or practice Judaism religiously, had no credibility on this issue, either in his writing or his defenses of his writing.

In *Commentary*, Rackman states that he had still not received an answer to the question that he had first posed in his letter of May 8, 1959, and notes that if Roth "maintains [. . .] that the ethical considerations to which artists are subject differ from those of other men, and there are no 'subjects [which] must not be written about, or brought to public attention,' then I must reiterate my dissent" (Our Readers). Rackman then encloses the 1959 letter where he had asked "whether having written a good story about a decent Jew and an indecent one, one should have sought its publication irrespective of its consequences for harm in the particular milieu in which the publication would take place?" (Our Readers). Rackman notes that this was the same question that the Soviet writer of Jewish origin, Boris Pasternak, "might have asked himself." Rackman argues that Pasternak "courageously answered it by risking the ire of Soviet authorities," and that while "his Jewish self-hatred may have warranted the criticism of Jewish reviewers," to have published *Dr. Zhivago* in the Soviet Union "was a courageous act" (Our Readers).

Rackman adds another remark that would continue to haunt Roth: "[T]he courage you made manifest was to risk the displeasure of Jews like myself who have neither the economic, political, nor social power, to do anything other than scream, and for this you earned the gratitude of all who sustain their anti-Semitism on such conceptions of Jews as ultimately led to the murder of six million in our time" (Our Readers). Rackman continues, "Your story—in Hebrew—in an Israeli magazine or newspaper—would have been judged exclusively from a literary point of view. Publishing it as you did, where you did, created the ethical question which you ought reconsider even if it is suggested by one whom you have never met, do not now know, nor ever care to behold" (Our Readers). While Roth did respond to the other letter writers, his response to Rackman is merely, "having debated at great length with Rabbi Rackman, both in our private correspondence and in my article, I see no point in going around the same track again with him" ("Mr. Roth Writes"). The essence of Rackman's letters, however, would have a great influence on Roth's later work aiding writers in Eastern Europe, as well as in his novels, particularly *Operation Shylock*, where he addresses the issue of "informing" on other Jews.

While Roth was clearly troubled by the criticism from more informed Jewish sources, including at what has now come to be viewed as the famous Yeshiva University symposium of 1962 (Zipperstein 34-37), the roots of Roth's anger really come from what could be labeled a tragedy of good intentions. Roth honestly believed when he was writing the early stories that he was something of an expert on Jewish life—but as his alter ego Zuckerman would later note of himself in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), Roth's expertise only really extended to a part of the Weequahic section of Newark, where second generation American Jews resided (99). In other American Jewish neighborhoods of the same era, like "Jew Town" in Trenton or Newark's own

South Side, first generation Yiddish speakers still predominated. In *Brooklyn Boy* (1989), Roth's friend Alan Lelchuk depicts first-generation immigrants who haunted Brooklyn in the years after Roth had left Weequahic. The author Sidney Zion, a Roth contemporary who grew up in nearby Passaic where the top students and athletes, "even the football players," were Jewish recalled that in those years he did not know Roth's type of "self-conscious, self-deprecating" Jew (86).

But Roth's biggest misunderstanding may have been what could be called "the Potok Factor," or the experiences of his own contemporaries with more substantial Jewish backgrounds. While Roth was faithful to his own experience—indeed, he had his bar mitzvah in an Orthodox synagogue—he was not in the least familiar with the younger, more intensely Orthodox Jewish community, which began to crystallize in the neighborhoods of Manhattan's Lower East Side, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and even in Newark. While most American Jews in the early 1950s predicted the coming demise of Orthodox Jewry (Kaplan 141),[6] a few optimists anticipated the community's revival, not the least of whom was Rabbi Rackman, who had predicted this in a contribution to a symposium published by the quarterly *Judaism* ("American Orthodoxy").[7]

It appears that the conflict with Rackman and the other rabbis never quite abated from Roth's consciousness, or memory, of that period of his life. He notes in the introduction to the Library of America edition of his non-fiction writing, that

> fifty-five years after my story "Defender of the Faith" was published in the *The New Yorker* and promptly deemed an affront to Jews by any number of the magazine's Jewish readers, I received an honorary degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary that I trust signaled an end to the antagonism from the institutional and establishment Jewish groups that had commenced with my beginnings as a published writer in my mid-twenties. (*Why Write?* xi)

The remarks illustrate both Roth's confidence that he had won the war with his Jewish critics and his own denial of the true reasons behind the hostility to his work that came from these quarters.

## III. ROTH'S REACTIONS

Roth reveals his immediate reaction to the anger he perceived had emanated from more establishment Jews, however, in his fourth book, *Portnoy's Complaint*, which takes the form of a psychoanalytic encounter. The novel lays bare the psychological conflicts of Alexander Portnoy, like Roth a graduate of Weequahic High School,

who is simultaneously at war with and sentimental about his middle-class Jewish upbringing. While Roth's readers mistook the character for Roth himself, Roth claimed that he was not Portnoy, and there is some evidence that Roth was indeed not the model for the character. Leonard Strulowitz, a high school friend who had grown up considerably more religious than Roth, recalled an episode in which he and Roth, who shared a locker, mistakenly took each other's lunches and that Strulowitz vomited when he wound up eating Roth's shrimp sandwich (Wiener 1, 10). Now, if Roth was bringing shrimp to Weequahic High, it is clear he was not the religiously conflicted Portnoy, despite the numerous similarities between the author and the character.

While Roth clearly irked many within the Jewish community with Portnoy, the novel also benefited from its publication at the end of the 1960s when attitudes toward sexual behavior were changing in United States. Indeed, Roth's Jewish critics were tempered by the perspectives of some of the social scientists who encountered the novel. Two of them weighed in on *Portnoy's Complaint* in the June 1969 edition of *Psychology Today*, whose theme was "The Quest for Self Today," and features a discussion on the phenomena of "Cultural Nudity." Paul Hollander, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, writes here: "certainly it is a novel about being a Jew in America and about the process by which the lower-class Jew becomes middle- or upper-middle class; the uneducated, a holder of degrees, the religious, a nonbeliever; the simple one, complicated and conflict-ridden" (6-8). But Hollander, in contrast to Roth's own protestations that he was not a Jewish writer, also sees *Portnoy* as "a novel of Jewishness" that was not "specifically American" (6).

In that same issue of *Psychology Today*, John Shaffer, a psychotherapist, sought to explain how Portnoy's analyst, Dr. Spielvogel, ought to treat the patient. Shaffer understands Portnoy's dilemma as one that is basically moral. He cannot be both a "sexual libertine" and a responsible father and husband, and he cannot "shout undying, uncompromising contempt for everything his parents represent" while simultaneously holding dear some "tender moments" they had together. Shaffer observes that Portnoy's shattering his leg ice-skating while in pursuit of a beautiful gentile girl and his later ejaculation into his eye after being masturbated by the trampy Bubbles "involves a denial of an aesthetic and ethnic identity that is integral to him, and hence must betoken a kind of self-betrayal—perhaps this is the reason for his catastrophes" (8-9). Shaffer opines that Dr. Spielvogel might have to tell Portnoy to give up his "little-boy rules" to play a man's game, and "enjoy the consequences" as adeptly as he could. And like Hollander, Shaffer sees Portnoy's identity as specifically Jewish, regardless of how "fragmented and diluted the culture on which it is based" (10).

Other critics saw less value in *Portnoy*, and Roth, in the same way he went after Rackman, responded strongly to their condemnation of the book. In "Imagining

Jews," Roth famously takes to task critic Irving Howe and comparative literature professor Marie Syrkin for criticizing his work. Roth is particularly nasty in his response to Syrkin's observation that Portnoy's actions were reminiscent of the Nazi concept of *rassenschande* (racial defilement), taunting that she does not "even give any indication that oral intercourse may not necessarily constitute the last word in human degradation" (*Why Write?* 102).

Curiously, one of *Portnoy*'s critics Roth did not take on was Richard Crossman, the British statesman, who wrote in the *London Times* that the novel took him back to Berlin in the summer of 1930, which he recalled as a permissive society (Julius Streicher's anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer*, notwithstanding). Crossman writes that Streicher's success was based on the psychological trick of sugaring the pill of anti-Semitism "with a thick layer of sexual perversion." Crossman explains that "if some people find it exciting to imagine themselves in the arms of a beautiful blond, others find it more exciting to imagine her beauty being violated by a leering Jew" (qtd. in Slomovitz 2). Crossman concedes that there probably were "a few anti-Semitic Jews in Berlin who read Streicher for a good laugh," but that it never occurs to him that four decades later an American Jew would base a book on "precisely the same formula as Julius Streicher and receive the ecstatic acclaim of so many literary critics, including Jewish critics" (qtd. in Slomovitz 2).

Still, it is largely Roth's own view of *Portnoy* that has prevailed among later critics from Alan Cooper to Nadel. Roth would tell the *Paris Review* that it was the "small-mindedness and shame-ridden xenophobia" that he received from "official Jews who wanted me to shut up" that informed the moral atmosphere of the Portnoy household (*Why Write?* 156). Roth explains his later acceptance by Jewish critics as being due to his becoming

> less irritating than the Zuckerman I've depicted, largely because the Jewish generation that didn't go for me is now less influential and the rest are no longer ashamed, if they ever were, of how Jews behave in my fiction.
>
> Because it *was* shame — theirs — that had a lot to do with that conflict. [. . . ] American Jews are far less intimidated by Gentile disapproval than they were when I began publishing in the 1950s. (170-71)

Indeed, Roth was so successful in having his view become mainstream that his friend, Bernard Avishai, published his own book on Roth's influence, *Promiscuous* (2013), in the same color scheme as *Portnoy*, while even Marie Syrkin's biographer, Carole S. Kessner, pays him respect. Despite citing Syrkin's 1985 letter to Howe, which said that "Roth's obsession with the Jews had become an apologia for his whole life as well as a plea for rehabilitation," Kessner notes that "of course, when she wrote this,

Marie Syrkin had not read Roth's brilliant novel *American Pastoral*, which would be published twelve years later" (458). And while Roth may have even been correct in his assessment that changing social mores made some of the charges against him less relevant, the attack on his work by a "British" establishment figure like Crossman may still have had a part in his turn towards denouncing British anti-Semitism in *The Counterlife* (1986) and *Deception* (1990). Indeed, it is curious that Roth's post-*Portnoy* writing continued to provoke his readers, while simultaneously drawing on Jewish sources in his own defenses.

## IV. TURNING TO JEWISH SOURCES

In *Ziff: A Life?* (2003), by Alan Lelchuk, Roth's best friend in the 1960s and 1970s and professor in the Jewish Studies department at Dartmouth, a seminary professor says of Ziff, his fictional protagonist based on Roth, that, had he wanted to, he could have become a serious Judaic scholar. Roth attempts something resembling this in *Operation Shylock*, where he introduces a doctrine virtually unknown in the Jewish community of Roth's youth, but which has been a facet of Orthodox Jewish practice, the rabbinical injunction against speaking lashon hara, or badly about another Jew.

*Operation Shylock* presents the "real" Philip Roth on a visit to Israel where he encounters a look-alike imposter who advocates the doctrine of Diasporism or the return of the Jews in Israel to the diaspora. The book's epilogue, which speaks of a deleted chapter that details the "real" Roth's alleged mission for the Mossad on behalf of the Jewish people, has caused some discussion among scholars as to whether this actually happened, and as I have argued elsewhere it did not (Gordon 129). What is important for this discussion, however, is Chapter 10, "You Shall Not Hate Your Brother in Your Heart," which appears just before the epilogue. Here we find Smilesburger, the code name for the "real" Roth's alleged handler, telling the author over lunch that "You shall not go out about as a tale bearer among your people" (*Shylock* 333). This wisdom, Smilesburger advises, is from Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacohen Kagan (1838-1933), known as the Chofetz Chaim ("Desirer of Life," a reference to Psalms 34:19), the name of the book which codifies the laws of permitted speech. Chofetz Chaim (1873) utilizes references from the Torah, Talmud, and Rishonim (early commentators) in its discussion of lashon hara (evil speech) and rechilut (gossip) ("About This Text").[8]

In *Operation Shylock*, Smilesburger, after introducing the concept of lashon hara, launches into a long diatribe on the Chofetz Chaim's teachings, noting that the rabbi formulated the law of evil speech and that he forbade Jews from making derogatory or damaging "remarks about their fellow Jews even if they are true" (333). Smilesburger

notes that the forms of forbidden speech included in lashon hara are those said even without mentioning specific names,[9] speech made in jest,[10] and speech concerning well known facts,[11] relatives,[12] children,[13] in-laws,[14] the dead,[15] "ignoramuses,"[16] heretics,[17] "known transgressors,"[18] and merchandise[19] (*Shylock* 333-34).

Smilesburger continues that the Chofetz Chaim said that one could not speak lashon hara about another even if he had spoken lashon hara about him. Smilesburger says, "The poor Chofetz Chaim was an Anti-Defamation league unto himself—only to get the Jews to stop defaming one another" (333). The "real" Roth at the end of the monologue wonders where all this is leading, but it is quite clear where the author of *Operation Shylock* is going. It can be argued that Roth is, years later, still responding to Rabbi Rackman's letters to the ADL and *Commentary*, where Rackman references the laws against unrestrained speech—the same laws codified by the Chofetz Chaim. The author is, of course, trying to argue, via Smilesburger's diatribe, that lashon hara should not be spoken against him. It is not a bad argument from a halachic (Jewish Law) point of view, though Roth's understanding of the laws of lashon hara could be stronger.

Many of Smilesburger's remarks track the Chofetz Chaim's actual writing on lashon hara, such as the prohibition on speaking negatively about merchandise: "just as it is forbidden to slander one's friend, so is it forbidden to 'slander' his possessions [...]. [O]ne shopkeeper slanders the wares of another [...] out of envy."[20] But the prohibitions against speaking lashon hara regarding known transgressors and heretics are more nuanced.

The Chofetz Chaim, citing the thirteenth-century Catalonian moralist Rabbeinu Yonah, reasoned that if one privately lapsed on a single occasion by engaging in illicit relations or eating prohibited food, it was forbidden to disclose this transgression.[21] However, the Chofetz Chaim notes that these rules were applicable in case of someone who was likely to regret their sin. In contrast, under certain conditions, he finds that one is permitted to shame and demean a person who intentionally and continuously transgresses and who does not have the "fear of G–d" before him, both in his presence and absence.[22] The Chofetz Chaim also prohibits the acceptance of or belief of lashon hara, though if it was known from the past that such a person flagrantly violated known prohibitions such as fornication, "about such a man it is permitted to accept lashon hara."[23] Thus, it is not clear from a careful reading of Sefer Chofetz Chaim that the exemptions would apply to Roth.[24]

But Roth's use of the diatribe in *Operation Shylock* is meant to defend himself against the charges that he felt had been unfairly leveled. Smilesburger's statement that the lashon hara in Eretz Israel is a thousand times worse than it was in Poland during the Chofetz Chaim's lifetime, and that "when it comes to defaming the Jews, the Palestinians are *pisherkehs* next to *Ha'aretz*" (*Shylock* 337) is a direct response to Rabbi

Rackman's suggestion that Roth should have published "Defender of the Faith" in an Israeli newspaper. Smilesburger's retelling of a story about how the Chofetz Chaim concludes that one should not speak lashon hara about themselves further establishes Roth's position not to apologize for anything he had done.

Roth's critics have been largely perplexed by his insertion of the narrative on the Chofetz Chaim into *Operation Shylock*. Alan Cooper, whose 1996 book *Philip Roth and the Jews* is an early effort to rehabilitate Roth from a Jewish perspective, largely gets it wrong when he argues that "a reader may be impressed" by Roth's knowledge of some Hebrew expressions and his "not unimpressive display of Jewish history and doctrine." Labeling what are categories of halacha as "folkloric examples" of how one may "unintentionally sin in speaking ill," Cooper suggests that "this six-page passage might have been written for a collection of wisdom literature" (271). In a very different way, Debra Shostak engages in an analysis of literary form, writing that the "real" Roth and "by extension" the author "acknowledge the power of *loshon hora* to curb the possibility for narrative invention when he comes to write himself." Shostak argues that when Smilesburger urges the "real" Roth to "suppress the narrative," this is essentially a "command to silence the story of the self" (148-49).

However, the inability of Roth scholars to fully engage with the doctrine of lashon hara itself is understandable due to a lack of familiarity with the Chofetz Chaim's rabbinical oeuvre, as well as the fact that a fair amount of the published material on him is in the form of hagiography. With this in mind, Joseph Fox's 1931 lost profile of the Chofetz Chaim on his ninetieth birthday may offer some insights. Fox notes that "at a time when all hopes and faith in religion have more or less weakened; when the man of the 20th Century, who thought to conquer nature and discover its innermost secrets, was himself conquered and overthrown" there "rises from the masses" a man who has discovered the secret of life, a simple Jew who has translated into "ordinary speech the most complicated ideas in the Jewish religion" (4).

Fox writes, "he does not pretend to be a Tzadik [righteous person] whom the Chasidim worship as an intermediary. He is a plain Jew, not wishing to know of a philosophy. His religion is a full life in God as written in the Torah; and explained by the rabbis" (4). He notes that even the (anti-Semitic) Polish government honored the humble Chofetz Chaim, relating that once, when the government issued an order requiring pulpit rabbis to speak and read Polish and to possess a "thorough secular knowledge," the Chofetz Chaim held a conference with the prime minister where he explained that a rabbi only needed to have enough knowledge to rule on issues of kosher and trefah (permissible and impermissible meat), and that the romances of writers like Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916) and Wladislaw Reymont (1867-1925) were a "pitfall for the rabbis." Quoting the Chofetz Chaim as saying he "had mourned the death of many in 1863 (the years of the Polish rebellion against Russia) and was

therefore honored in seeing Poland set free. Do you want me to mourn again," Fox reports that the "Prime Minister saw the honesty of this 'simple Jew' and recalled the edict" (16).

While Roth did not, of course, see this profile of the Chofetz Chaim, his portrait is not so far from this much earlier account. However, Roth is not quite accurate when he has Smilesburger say that the Chofetz Chaim did not become as well-known as Freud, who pushed people to speak, given that the many editions of the Chofetz Chaim's *Mishneh Berurah*, or *Clear Elucidation of Jewish Law*, constitute a major text in every contemporary yeshiva. Still, Roth's purpose for bringing in the doctrine of lashon hara is ultimately to question why the community should pursue a skeptic such as himself, as well as an effort to use Jewish tradition to defend his own writing. It would not be his last attempt to use Jewish sources to support his personal vision of secularism.

## V. ROTH'S LAST JEWISH SCENE

To those who argue that Roth, after a lifetime of experience and study, had at least come to respect Judaism, the secular funeral with no Jewish ritual is off-putting. Even Abbie Hoffman, the sixties radical whom Roth had admired, had a Jewish funeral. Roth, in contrast, demanded that no Jewish rituals be performed at his funeral. Roth in death seemed again to thumb his nose at the Jewish community. But did he really?

One answer to this question comes in *Nemesis*, his last published novel. Though Roth's preceding books *Everyman* (2006) and *Indignation* (2008) also grapple with the reality of mortality and the rituals that surround it, both the story arc and the funeral that *Nemesis* depicts are different. *Nemesis* tells the story of Bucky Cantor, a proud gym teacher raised by his grandparents after his mother dies and his father goes to prison. Bucky's home turf is not Weequahic but rather the poorer Southside section, where his grandfather, whose nose was broken in fights with anti-Semites, encouraged his grandson to stand up for himself as a man and as a Jew (315). Through the persona of Bucky Cantor, Roth, at least at the outset of the novel, seems to have finally created a sympathetic Jewish protagonist who is not himself.

Though he excels in sports, Bucky is rejected from the army due to poor eyesight. He develops a romance with Marcia, another teacher, and later becomes a playground director where he works to develop the neighborhood boys. Bucky is devastated when both Alan Michaels, the most talented of the boys, and Herbie Steinmark, the least athletic among them, perish from polio. When Bucky himself becomes disabled from the disease, he breaks his engagement to Marcia, who is totally devoted to him, thinking she cannot love him as he is. The scene is probably the saddest romantic

moment in Roth's work since the ending of *Goodbye, Columbus*, and it might be noted that the Post Office, where an aging and bitter Bucky later works, is just a few blocks from the Newark Public Library, where Neil Klugman toils away his hours while romancing Brenda Patimkin, with both protagonists losing their Jewish girlfriends at age 23.

But most central to this discussion is Roth's focus on the Kaddish, the mourner's prayer that is recited at Alan Michaels's funeral, "parsing God's almightiness, praising extravagantly, unstintingly, the very God who allowed everything, including children, to be destroyed by death" (340). The narrator continues, "Between the death of Alan Michaels and the communal recitation of the God-glorifying Kaddish, Alan's family had an interlude of some twenty-four hours to hate and loathe God for what he had inflicted upon them—not, of course that it would have occurred to them to respond like that to Alan's death." But if such sentiments were lost on Alan's family, they were not lost on Bucky, who had not turned against God when his elderly grandfather died, but who now asks "how could there be forgiveness—let alone hallelujahs—in the face of such lunatic cruelty?" It would have been better to celebrate the sun "than to swallow the official lie that God is good and truckle before a cold-blooded murderer of children" (341). Roth then quotes, in both transliterated Ashkenazi Hebrew and English, the refrain of the Kaddish, "May His great Name be blessed forever and ever" (341).

Mark Eaton offers an excellent discussion of Bucky Cantor's anger at God, noting that Bucky is unable to join in the prayer not because he does not know the words but rather because he does not want to glorify a God who has taken the lives of the boys he has coached (142-43). Roth's take on the Kaddish is not a first in American literature; it could even be argued that Roth in *Nemesis* echoes the sentiments of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport," with its stanzas "Blessed be God! For he created death! The mourner said" and "Till life became a Legend of the Dead," as well as its ending, "And the dead nations never rise again" (44-45).

At that same time, however, it should be noted that Roth's depiction of the Kaddish is very reminiscent of the last chapter of Zionist leader and writer Vladimir Jabotinsky's novel *The Five* (1936), which depicts the implosion of the Milgroms, an Odessa Jewish family in turn-of-the-century Russia, which Hillel Halkin compared to the destruction of Tevye's family in Sholom Aleichem's tale.[25] Each one of the five Milgrom children through death, emigration, or conversion symbolizes a different tragic fate for the Russian Jews. But the death of Marusya, the beautiful redheaded Milgrom daughter who is immolated when her sleeve catches fire while heating milk for her baby, is perhaps the most tragic part of the novel, and the response to the Kaddish at her funeral, criticized by the narrator reminiscent of a young Jabotinsky,

is strikingly similar to Bucky's sentiments in *Nemesis*. In one of the last chapters of the *The Five*, "half of Odessa" attends the funeral where, the narrator notes, though "we have some fine prayers [. . .] one was strange, even senseless, in which there was no mention of loss, merely resigned praise of God-the-offender." Listening to how Marusya's family members utter the prayer, the narrator states, "I bit my lip in rage and thought to myself: I'd cast a stone at You, oh Lord, if You weren't hiding so far away" (Jabotinsky 189). Later the narrator goes to visit Marusya's parents, where her father, while sitting shiva, explains that Rabbi Akiba composed the Kaddish to trick the devil, who would try report to God that a Jew had cursed him for a tragedy that had befallen him by writing a prayer of praise to God. Her father explains, "You, Satan, don't interfere. Whatever accounts I have with God—that's our own business" (Jabotinsky 190-91).

The similarities in the two novels are not coincidental. Jabotinsky's novel, though published in the 1930s, did not appear in English until 2005, when Michael S. Katz's exquisite literary translation was likely read by Roth. While *The Five* is not on the list of books Roth donated to the Newark Public Library, among the books found in that collection is Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish* (1998), which contains an extensive discussion of Jabotinsky's passage on the Jewish memorial prayer (Roth Library 250, Wieseltier 163). The then *New Republic* literary editor wrote that the narrator of *The Five* "denounced the kaddish with a humanist's indignation," and Wieseltier's translation from a Hebrew version of the Russian original has a more brutal feel than the lines that appear in Katz's subsequent full translation from the Russian: "But there was an additional prayer that was recited, a strange prayer, a prayer that made no sense. It did not speak of the loss even once. Instead it was full of praises and exaltations of the murdering God" (Wieseltier 163). Wieseltier's discussion undoubtedly influenced Roth, who drew on Jabotinsky either in conjunction with or exclusively through the prism of Wieseltier to inspire his last fictional Jewish scene, simultaneously provoking his Jewish readers with his dismissal of the Kaddish, while also inserting himself into the larger Jewish canon. Paralleling his selective use of the Chofetz Chaim's work on lashon hara, Roth in *Nemesis* adapts Jabotinsky's writing on the Kaddish to his own uses, possibly disregarding the idea that the Kaddish was written to thwart the devil while essentially repeating the narrator of *The Five*'s critique of the prayer.

There is a deeper symbolism in Roth's drawing on *The Five* for his last novel. Indeed, the tragedy of the Milgrom family in that novel foreshadows the destruction of Jabotinsky's Odessa via the Russian revolution and the subsequent Holocaust. Similarly, the tragedy of Bucky Cantor and his students in *Nemesis* foreshadows the destruction not just of Roth's Weequahic but of the entire Jewish community of Newark during the 1967 riots—an upheaval that ended the long-standing Jewish presence in the city.

## VI. CONCLUSION

While the arguments and sources presented here are likely to have little impact on Roth's apologists, they may open new paths for those seeking to better understand the controversies that were the catalysts for his many novels. Intentionally or not, the dismissal of the early criticism of Roth obfuscates many of the important sources for his later works. Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman's criticism of the young Roth was not just a source for his essay "Writing about Jews" but had a tremendous influence on *Operation Shylock* where Roth inverted Rackman's use of Jewish law on lashon hara to defend himself and also was a source for his interest in oppressed Eastern European writers. Similarly, it is not hard to see how Richard Crossman's criticism of *Portnoy's Complaint* prompted reaction by Roth that would appear much later in *The Counterlife* and *Deception.* Roth may not have been well-informed about Jewish tradition, but in his literary works he often draws on Jewish sources to support his own vision, as when he extrapolates Jabotinsky's literary interpretation on the Kaddish for his own uses in *Nemesis*. Including a wider range of sources in the study of Roth—even if they were sources Roth hoped would be forgotten—provides a more nuanced understanding of his work and ultimately of the messages he sought to convey.

## NOTES

1. Two volumes on the Chofetz Chaim are in the list of books Roth donated to the Newark Public Library, *The Chofetz Chaim Looks at the Triumph of the Spirit: An Anthology of the Chofetz Chaim's Philosophical and Ethical Insights Collected from His Writings* (Publisher unidentified, 1988) and *The Chofetz Chaim Looks at Reward and Punishment: An Anthology of the Chofetz Chaim's Philosophical and Ethical Insights Collected from His Writings* (Likutei Chofetz Chaim, 1987), both compiled anonymously for the public benefit and translated by Raphael Blumberg.

2. This article uses Sephardi pronunciation when transliterating Hebrew, except when repeating Roth's transliteration, which is usually Ashkenazi.

3. The protests against the draft during the Vietnam war and the transformation of the US military to an all-volunteer force have eliminated the specter of conscripts either Jewish or Gentile from seeking to shirk their responsibilities.

4. For other studies sympathetic to Roth's view, see also Milbauer and Watson (15-16) and Gooblar (36-37).

5. Nadel, Bailey, and Pierpont are the rule rather than the exception on this point.

6. In full disclosure I note that I read the draft chapter on Orthodoxy and am acknowledged in the credits.

7. See also Rackman, "Orthodox Judaism," from which it is very clear that, in contrast to Nadel's claims, it was Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and not Rabbi Rackman who was the acknowledged leader of Modern Orthodox Judaism.

8. The text of Chofetz Chaim is composed of two sections: Mekor Hayyim ("Source of Life"), a legal text, and Be'er Mayim Chaim ("Well of Living Water"), which consists of footnotes comprised of "elaborations and legal arguments." It is often printed with an ethical work Shemirat HaLashon ("Guarding of the Tongue"). See "About This Text."

9. See Part One, The Prohibition Against Lashon Hara, Principle 3, Opening Comments in Kagan. The version of Kagan's Sefer Chafetz Chaim on sefaria.org places the English translation below the Hebrew text. All references to Sefer Chafetz Chaim in this article are to the Silverstein translation except for my comment in note 22.

10. See Part One, The Prohibition Against Lashon Hara, Principle 3, Seif 3 in Kagan.

11. Rechilut (gossip) is barred even when true. See Part Two, the Prohibition Against Rechilut, Principle 1, Seif 4 in Kagan.

12. See Part One, The Prohibition Against Lashon Hara, Principle 8, Seif 2 in Kagan.

13. Part One, Principle 8, Seif 3 states that the prohibition of speaking lashon hara applies even against a minor because in the case of an orphan, disparaging speech might lead to his being thrown out (Kagan).

14. See Part One, Principle 8, Seif 2 in Kagan.

15. See Part One, Principle 8, Seif 9 in Kagan.

16. Part One, Principle 8, Seif 4 states, "And know that the issue of speaking lashon hara applies even against an ignoramus [am ha'aretz]. For he, too, is in the category of 'the people of the L–rd and His hosts' that 'He took out of Egypt'" (Kagan).

17. See Part One, Principle 8, Seif 5 in Kagan.

18. Smilesburger's reference tracks Part One, The Prohibition Against Lashon Hara, Principle 8, Seif 7 (Kagan), but the Chofetz Chaim's bar on lashon hara in this instance is more qualified than would appear from Roth's text.

19. See Part One, The Prohibition Against Lashon Hara, Principle 5, Seif 7 in Kagan.

20. See Part One, The Prohibition Against Lashon Hara, Principle 5, Seif 7 in Kagan.

21. Rabbeinu Yonah (d. 1246), i.e., Rabbi Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi; cited in Part One, The Prohibition Against Lashon Hara, Principle 4, Seif 4 in Kagan.

22. Part One, Principle 4, Seif 7 in Kagan. It is also worthwhile to mention that the Chofetz Chaim uses the Hebrew words Pachad Elokim, fear of God, rather than the more commonly used Yirat Shamayaim, fear of heaven. The Chofetz Chaim further notes that while the prohibition on lashon hara is derived from the verse "You shall not go talebearing among your people" (Leviticus 19:16), the heretics are not in this category, for they do not "act as Your people" (Principle 8, Seif 5 in Kagan).

23. Part One, The Prohibition Against Lashon Hara, Principle 7, Seif 5 in Kagan.

24. Roth's limited understanding of the Chofetz Chaim's legacy is also present in Smiles-

burger's comparison of the Jewish sage to Sigmund Freud. The agent says, "they flocked, the Jews who couldn't stop talking, and to Freud they spoke such loshon hora as was never heard from the mouths of Jews since the destruction of the Second Temple. The result? [. . .] The Chofetz Chaim did not become popular among the Jewish people like Dr. Sigmund Freud" (335-36). But while psychologists have increasingly been turning away from the study of Freud, the number of students of the Chofetz Chaim continues to grow, with the recent English translation of his Mishnah Berurah bringing his work to an even larger audience.

25. Jabotinsky, as a connoisseur of nineteenth-century American literature, would also have been familiar with Longfellow's poem.

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# "Momma, Do We Believe in Winter?": Yiddishe Mama and Judaism in *Portnoy's Complaint*


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*ARTICLE*

# "Momma, Do We Believe in Winter?"

## Yiddishe Mama and Judaism in *Portnoy's Complaint*

*Olga Karasik-Updike*

***Abstract.*** In *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Philip Roth created a particularly vivid image of a Jewish mother. Now, more than fifty years after the novel was published, it is hard to define whether this novel produced the Jewish mother jokes or whether the jokes produced the novel. Sophie Portnoy is the embodiment of Jewishness as well as Judaism in the novel. "Hundreds of thousands of little rules" of the Portnoys' household go back to the laws of Judaism but are interpreted and presented by the mother in an odd and distorted way. Jewish philosophy is lowered to the everyday taboos that regulate Alex Portnoy's life even when he becomes an adult and lives separately from his parents. The belief in these taboos subsumes Judaism and its real laws, becoming the only Judaism Alex knows.

The Jewish mother is a stereotypical image that often appears in contemporary folklore and literature. The phrase "Yiddishe Mama" ("Jewish mother") has come into many languages from its origins in East European Yiddish and implies two different sides: one—a sacrificing mother who is ready to give her life to her children, proverbially cutting a piece of flesh from her own body if the children are hungry. The other—a mother hyper-protective of her children, caring about them too much even when they are already adults, controlling every sphere of their lives. This latter image has been ridiculously exaggerated in jokes and fiction. Martha A. Ravits, in her 2000 essay "The Jewish Mother: Comedy and Controversy in American Popular Culture," says, "The comic stereotype of the Jewish mother, from domineering to grotesque, is a cultural construct developed by male writers in the United States in the 1960s, the era of political turbulence that coincided with the

second wave of feminism in this country" (3). It should be noted that this stereotype is typical not only among American authors and that it appeared earlier than the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, Ravits mentions that it was not just male writers who created the typical images of Jewish mothers in their fiction, though she does not mention such writers as Grace Paley and Cynthia Ozick, whose short stories contain vivid images of the Yiddishe Mama. For example, the comic image of the Jewish mother appears in Paley's story "The Contest" (1959) earlier than *Portnoy* was written. The narrator's son is a typical momma's boy unable to live a normal life without his mother's guidance (41). In Ozick's story "Save My Child!" (1996), there are two mother figures: Zhenya, a Soviet Jew who wants to save her daughter from the already collapsing Soviet system by sending her to her New York cousin, and the cousin Ruth Puttermesser, an old lonely Jewish woman who is ready to save the young relative and do everything possible to make her comfortable in America. Both are concerned about saving the young woman and, in their all-consuming and naïve care, forgive her outright cynicism and do not notice that she uses them (134). At the same time, as Ravits puts it, "the most memorable and fully elaborated caricature of the Jewish mother was produced by Philip Roth in his 1969 novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, a best seller that made his reputation" (6). This novel has become iconic in many respects, one of which is the stereotypically comic image of the Jewish mother. As Alan Cooper notices in *Philip Roth and the Jews*, "While Roth has insisted he does not speak for American Jews or expound Judaism, he has given America a gallery of semitic stereotypes" (1), and, when Cooper begins the enumeration of the characters that exemplify this "gallery," Sophie Portnoy as Jewish mother is the first he mentions.

## YIDDISHE MAMA: THE ORIGINS OF THE IMAGE

The image of the Yiddishe Mama goes back to the everyday life in the shtetls of Eastern Europe. When the Jews were an oppressed minority with limited rights, with the vast majority living in the Pale of Settlement under the discriminative laws of the Russian Empire, they quite reasonably feared for their children's lives and future. The threat of pogroms and blood libel increased this fear, gradually leading—at least in the popular imagination—to a hyper-anxiety about children. This commonplace feature of Jewish parenting, and especially by mothers, prompted the numerous so-called Jewish jokes about Yiddishe Mamas. The comic image of the Yiddishe Mama became a cultural phenomenon and eventually an established part of twentieth-century Jewish folklore in Russia, Europe, and America. Jokes about Jewish mothers mainly

emphasized and hyperbolized smother-love, helicopter parenting, and total control over the family. Typical examples of such jokes include the following:

> What's the difference between a Jewish mother and a Rottweiler? Eventually, a Rottweiler will let go. (Hoffman and Spiegelman 9)

> Did you hear about the Jewish Mother ATM? When you take out some money, it says to you "Nu, what did you do with the last $50 I gave you?" (Minkoff 108)

> A mother gave her son two ties for his birthday, a striped one and a spotted one. The next day he wore the spotted one. "So what's the matter with the striped one? You don't like it?" (Eliezer 25)

> What is a Jewish sweater? It is what a Jewish child puts on when his momma is cold. ("Что такое еврейский свитер!," my trans.)

Adina Kay-Gross, Carla Naumburg, and Judith Rosenbaum, in their overview essay on this topic, "Battling Stereotypes of the Jewish Mother," write that "the Jewish mother wants her daughter to marry a Jewish doctor and her son to love her best of all. She is sacrificing yet demanding, manipulative and tyrannical, devoted and ever-present. She loves her children fiercely, but man, does she nag." The authors believe that two images — sacrificing yet hyper-protective — come together to create a highly explosive emotional combination, a "smothering" that does not stop even when children become adults and have their own lives.

While Kay-Gross, Naumburg, and Rosenbaum seek to push back against such stereotypes, in his own writings, Philip Roth brought the stereotypes to life. At the same time, Roth's creation of highly comic images may also exemplify a struggle with these stereotypes. Where hyperbole, irony, and satire often make his characters implausible, in fact, their main features are often taken directly from real-life, recognizable personalities. The distinctly Jewish features of such a mother go back mainly to the specific way of life and family structure of European Jews since the eighteenth and up to the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, in Sholem Aleichem's famous *Tevye the Dairyman* stories (1894-1914), Tevye's wife, Golda, presents a typical Jewish housewife and mother who may not have received any formal education but possesses life wisdom and often proves to be more intelligent and rational than a husband who knows how to read and regularly studies the Torah with other local men. As Golda demonstrates, a mother's primary concern was raising her children in an unstable, often hostile world. Total control of all aspects of a child's life could,

therefore, give the illusion of safety. Thus, we assume that the Jewishness of such mothers was found not only in opposition to Christian patterns and values but likewise in the combination of the ritual practices of Judaism as parts of everyday life and a special type of mentality developed as a result of historical factors, oppression, discriminative laws, and life in cultural and social isolation.

## A TYPICAL JEWISH MOTHER IN A TYPICAL JEWISH FAMILY

Whoever writes about the image of the Jewish mother in English within the last several decades inevitably refers to *Portnoy's Complaint*. Sophie Portnoy's iconic status as an embodiment of the Jewish family and the life of diaspora Jews in the twentieth century is best exemplified by a permanent exhibition in the new Museum of the Jewish People opened in Tel Aviv in 2021. In a section devoted to contemporary Jewish culture and identity, Roth's books, including the first edition of *Portnoy's Complaint*, are among the objects displayed as the best illustrations of the Jewish family.[1] And in this, Ravits's words about the origin of the stereotype in 1960s male American writing remain true, insofar as, despite examples such as Paley and Ozick, Roth's image of the Jewish mother proved to be formative for future iterations of the type. Now, more than fifty years after the novel was published, it is hard to say whether it produced the Jewish mother jokes or whether the jokes produced the novel. We may say now that a uniquely American literary tradition of Jewish Mother tropes has arisen from—or, because of—*Portnoy*. In other authors' works such as Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold* (1979) or Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) the mother figures resemble Sophie and are almost as comic as in *Portnoy's Complaint*. There is an obvious similarity between the image of the mother in the novel and the mother in Woody Allen's movie *New York Stories* (1989). Though personal relations of Roth and Allen were bad, we cannot rule out the mutual influence of their creative works. The image of a physically absent, but still omnipresent Jewish mother in one of the movie's novellas, "Oedipus Wrecks," can be considered as the development of the image of Sophie in an even more absurd and irrational way.

The stereotype of the Jewish mother is an essential part of the image of the Jewish family and all stereotypes associated with it. As Roth writes in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), "here was that legendary Jewish family dwelling on high, whose squabbles over French-fried potatoes, synagogue attendance, and shiksas were, admittedly, of an Olympian magnitude and splendor, but by whose terrifying kitchen lightning storms were illuminated the values, dreams, fears, and aspirations by which

we mortal Jews lived somewhat less vividly down below" (39). Sophie Portnoy not only meets all the stereotypes of the Yiddishe Mama but likewise makes her household this "legendary Jewish family" (*Reading* 39), organizing the life of her husband, son, and daughter in the way she thinks is correct and decent. The plot of the novel revolves around Alex Portnoy's attempts to become free from his mother's influence and control—and the impossibility of it, due primarily to his vacillations between hatred and adoration, Oedipus and inferiority complex, Jewishness and Americanness. Roth makes all this overt, titling the first chapter of the book "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met." Alex (while speaking to his therapist) introduces his mother as an omnipresent force: "for the first year at school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise. As soon as the last bell had sounded, I would rush off for home, wondering as I ran if I could possibly make it to our apartment before she had succeeded in transforming herself" (3). Alex has been under his mother's control and influence since childhood. It may and it did seem to readers that Sophie Portnoy as a character is based on Roth's own mother. Blake Bailey writes in his biography of Roth that "[a]mong the galling aspects of Roth's *Portnoy* fame was the general perception that the hero's archetypical Jewish mother, Sophie, was based on Bess Roth" (22). Here I follow a different route and examine one of the aspects of the image of Sophie as an archetypical Jewish mother—Sophie's relations with Judaism.

## SOPHIE PORTNOY AND JUDAISM

Together with being a stereotypical Yiddishe Mama character, Sophie Portnoy is the embodiment of Judaism in the family, the one who is responsible for sticking to the tradition and remaining part of the People. As head of the household, she establishes rules and demands obedience. As Alex says, "[h]undreds of thousands of little rules" (79-80) of the Portnoys' household go back to the laws of Judaism, each based on real laws and commandments in Judaism, but not always recognizable in the mother's interpretation. Sophie presents them to her children in the form of taboos and prohibitions, and they have been taught to her children since early childhood as tenets that may not be doubted or questioned. The roots of these regulations lie in the times when it was dangerous for Jews to leave the Jewish quarter, to come to an outer world hostile to them, to socialize with non-Jews. In the United States in the mid-twentieth century, the older generation of American Jews could still act as if warding against these threats and fears, trying to protect their children from the surrounding world—though (at least in Alex's eyes) this seems absurd and irrelevant. Sophie, to be sure, has never been in danger like the Jews of the Russian Empire, has

not experienced persecution or oppression, but the traces of collective traumatic memory live deep in her subconscious and reveal themselves in peculiar and often absurd ways. Thus, the taboos and prohibitions declared by Sophie Portnoy often cannot be explained rationally. She demands her family to accept them as the norms of life, and any departure from these rules is perceived as a deviation from the norm, a perversion, as well as a personal insult to her as a mother.

As a little boy, Alex blindly believes that everything is regulated and controlled by his mother who is the representative of God if not God Himself in the boy's eyes. Of his childhood, Alex remembers, "It's a family joke that when I was a tiny child I turned from the window out of which I was watching a snowstorm, and hopefully asked, 'Momma, do we believe in winter?'" (34). In his further confessions, Alex clarifies that, at least for him, this is not a joke; it was the worldview that had been formed in the mind of the little boy, the belief that the mother was in charge of everything in the world, and he always needed to have her permission to do, see, or feel something, believing everything done without such permission is bad, sinful, and will be punished. Fears produce other fears. As Alex elaborates, "The guilt, the fears—the terror bred into my bones! What in [my parents'] world was not charged with danger, dripping with germs, fraught with peril? Oh, where was the gusto, where was the boldness and courage? Who filled these parents of mine with such a fearful sense of life?" (35). These fears are the consequences of collective trauma, the centuries of oppression and discrimination, and in this case have taken exaggerated and perverse forms, and the mother's rules are their remote effects. Yet in the novel we see that Sophie's taboos and prohibitions have led to the opposite reaction she intended: Alex's sexualized rebellion, obsessive masturbation, and the nervous disorder discovered by his therapist Dr. Spielvogel and named "Portnoy's Complaint."

Sophie's regulations present a mixture of traditional laws of Judaism as interpreted by her. Fixed in the Bible and its commentaries and being followed for centuries, the rules and laws of everyday life in Judaism have taken on a curious and absurd form in the novel. What are rational and orderly laws in the *Shulchan Aruch* (the Code of Jewish Law), regulating all spheres of Jewish life from daily routine, prayers, Sabbath, holidays, kashrut, marriage and divorce, death and mourning, financial issues, and more, have, in Sophie's interpretation, been distorted almost beyond recognition, informed far more by the experiences of Jewish life in late nineteenth-century Europe under oppression than by historical legal theory. Sophie never refers to the *Shulchan Aruch* directly, of course (that would be out of character for a woman of her era in America), but if we look at what she teaches and preaches, we find the roots all there. As Alex says to his therapist, "Thus saith the kosher laws, at least to the child I was, growing up under the tutelage of Sophie and Jack P., and in a school district of Newark where in my entire class there are only two little Christian children, and they

live in houses I do not enter, on the far fringes of our neighborhood . . . thus saith the kosher laws, and who am I to argue that they're wrong?" (82). The regulations Alex mentions seem absurd and needless in America in the twentieth century, as it is not necessary (in Alex's view) for Jews to be isolated and to avoid non-Jews. It is hard to explain why Sophie sticks to them, and the only explanation is that those are the traces of collective memory that had been developing for centuries, helping Jews to keep their identity and religion. To stick to the rules meant to remain Jewish. "More than Jews have kept Sabbath, Sabbath has kept the Jews"—this phrase has long been a proverb (Ha'am 286-87). It is attributed to the poet and philosopher Ahad Ha'am but is so common that it is used as an axiom. It probably appeared in the late nineteenth century during a discussion about the place of tradition in Zionism. For Sophie, these famous words are true. In her perspective, her rules keep her family Jewish. That is why her rules are mainly based on the opposition of Jews and non-Jews. For her, the words "goy" and "goyish" always mean bad, inappropriate, and unhealthy.

## HOW SOPHIE SEES KASHRUT

It is important to distinguish between what rules Sophie and her household follow and what rules they do not. For Sophie, diet—keeping kosher—remains preeminent. The Portnoys do not belong to a strict religious community and do not follow all the ritual rules around sabbaths and holidays; they hardly adhere to any religious rules in everyday life, and they may even break some traditions due to circumstances. Indeed, it is obvious from Alex's childhood stories that faith and following all the commandments are not of vital importance for them. At the same time, Sophie establishes many restrictions for her children's diet. Alex recalls with bitter irony, "Even in the Chinese restaurant, where the Lord has lifted the ban on pork dishes for the obedient children of Israel, the eating of lobster Cantonese is considered by God (Whose mouthpiece on earth, in matters pertaining to food, is my Mom) to be totally out of the question" (90). Here the reader may remember a Jewish joke included in the section "Talmud According to your Grandmother" in David Minkoff's 2006 *Ultimate Book of Jewish Jokes*: "According to Jewish dietary law, pork and shellfish may be eaten only in Chinese restaurants" (72). Now it is difficult to say whether Roth knew this joke and uttered it in the novel, or whether the joke appeared thanks to the novel. Alex tells the story to mock his mother's hypocrisy: it is fine to eat pork in the Chinese restaurant, but it is never allowable to eat lobster. The joke thus becomes distorted as Sophie has her own reasons not to eat lobster. Of course, pork and lobster are equally not kosher, as it is said in Leviticus, "And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you.

[. . .] Anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales is to be regarded as unclean by you" (11:7,12). Sophie knows these rules but prefers to follow them, not only selectively, but in a way that actually reveals something quite significant about her underlying philosophy concerning the enforcement of rules: "It was at a convention held by the company in Atlantic City, at a noisy farewell banquet, that Doyle led my mother to believe that even though that wasn't what it smelled like, the plate the waiter had shoved in front of her corsage contained nothing but chicken à la king. [. . .] Subsequently, she was over the toilet all night throwing up" (91). The story has become a family legend. Sophie tells it again and again explaining why lobster is forbidden for her family. The laws themselves are less important to her than her own bad experiences — of being led astray, of in some way being wronged, by a gentile.

Lobster, of course, is not the only item forbidden less by Jewish religious decree than by Jewish (or perceived Jewish) personal experience. Many such stories become teachable moments for her children: "As other children hear the story of Scrooge every year, or are read to nightly from some favorite book, I am continually shtupped full of the suspense-filled chapters of her perilous life" (92-93). Sophie's stories end up substituting for Torah lessons for her children, or at least remain more influential and convincing. In Alex's monologue, the lobster ban is mentioned many times, as the symbol of absurd prohibitions created by his Jewish mother for her Jewish family. It goes even further than the joke about Chinese restaurants and becomes one of the most comic motifs in the novel.

As an adult, Alex realizes that those rules were his mother's way to control his life. Breaking them makes him feel guilty, whereas guilt gives his mother more control. Alex explains it as the eternal fear that had been formed within generations and could have disappeared in America — but did not. He tells Dr. Spielvogel that his obsessive masturbation might be the result of the taboos and prohibitions, a form of protest against the eternal guilt and endless fear: "Now, maybe the lobster is what did it. [. . .] What else, I ask you, were all those prohibitive dietary rules and regulations all about to begin with, what else but to give us little Jewish children practice in being repressed?" (79).

Sophie's dietary rules also concern typical American, "goyish," food that she considers bad, also according to her own experience. Bailey calls it "a ghetto-bred paranoia toward goyim that scarcely distinguished between Polish peasantry and Thomas Jefferson" (69). Along with the forbidden lobster, the stumbling block of Sophie's dietary rules is French fries, a motif that appears in the novel numerous times. From Sophie's perspective, French fries cause severe illnesses, especially for Jews. When Alex refuses to eat at home and when he locks the bathroom door (to masturbate), she thinks the reason for his strange behavior is French fries: "Alex, I want an answer from you. Did you eat French fries at school? Is that why you're sick like this? [. . .]

Alex, are you in pain? [. . .] I want to know exactly where it hurts. [. . .] Alex, I don't want you to flush the toilet" (22). Several pages of the novel are taken up by Sophie's hysterical questions, indignant shouting, and despair about her "nice Jewish boy" doing awful things after school—going to a hot-dog place and eating French fries. For Sophie this is a real sin, a crime that will be followed by inescapable punishment:

> "He eats French fries," she says, and sinks into a kitchen chair to Weep Her Heart Out once and for all. "He goes after school with Melvin Weiner and stuffs himself with French-fried potatoes. Jack, you tell him, I'm only his mother. Tell him what the end is going to be. Alex," she says passionately, looking to where I am edging out of the room, "*tateleh*, it begins with diarrhea, but do you know how it ends? With a sensitive stomach like yours, do you know how it finally ends? *Wearing a plastic bag to do your business in!*" (32)

This theatrical scene is typical for the image of the Yiddishe Mama, with her hyperbolized worries. Her statements do not have any basis in reality: Alex does not have any signs of a sensitive stomach, his diarrhea is her fantasy, as well as the fatal consequences of eating American food after school. She just wants to control every action of her son and does not like the idea that he may eat out, disguising it through care and concern about his health and by connecting it with being Jewish. This obsession with food is one of the typical features of the Yiddishe Mama image and comes from isolation in a closed community. Everything not Jewish was considered dangerous, especially food. Thus, Sophie places herself in opposition to non-Jewish mothers:

> "But you, thank God, have been brought up differently. You don't have a mother who gallavants all over town like some names I could name, from Bam's to Hahne's to Kresge's all day long. Alex, tell me, so it's not a mystery, or maybe I'm just stupid—only tell me, what are you trying to do, what are you trying to prove, that you should stuff yourself with such junk when you could come home to a poppyseed cookie and a nice glass of milk?" (24)

Each of these food episodes in the novel looks like a Jewish joke, where a mother's care and control become extremely exaggerated.

## SOPHIE'S HYPOCHONDRIA

Another of Sophie's obsessions as a stereotypical and hyperbolized Yiddishe Mama is her special type of hypochondria—suspecting hidden illnesses in her children.

As external circumstances increase her control of her son's health, consequently, her suspicions grow that something is wrong inside of him, where she cannot see. For example, Alex describes his mother's anxiety during polio season: "Open your mouth. Why is your throat red? Do you have a headache you're not telling me about? You're not going to any baseball game, Alex, until I see you move your neck. Is your neck stiff? Then why are you moving it that way? You ate like you were nauseous, are you nauseous?" (33).

According to Alex's reminiscences, Sophie notices each and every small detail in his behavior, forever suspecting health problems, which in her mind are certainly connected with his improper actions, like eating something goyish or going to the wrong place. But Alex's constant and excessive masturbation is not noticed. She just suspects him of having diarrhea. She also does not understand his psychological state of terror when he thinks he has cancer. This situation strengthens the comic effect of the archetype of the Jewish mother.

## NICE JEWISH MAMA'S BOY IS BREAKING THE RULES

While the reader is laughing at Alex's descriptions of his mother's total control, the protagonist is suffering and making unsuccessful attempts to escape. Being an adult and living apart from his parents, he does not have to follow the mother's dietary requirements and other rules, but he still has them in mind, and for him they are directly connected with being a Jew. Subconsciously, breaking the rules means betraying his culture and traditions. As Ravits says, "With the onset of male puberty, the mother's greatest power becomes her ability to influence her son through guilt" (16). The mother's lasting control is reflected in another Jewish joke: "There comes a time in every man's life when he must stand up and tell his mother he's an adult. This usually happens at around forty-five" (Minkoff 72). The rules imposed in childhood are so firmly seated in Alex's head that he cannot get rid of them, even when he wants to. In his adult life, just as in his childhood, the laws of Judaism concerning everyday life, presented by his mother in her own distorted way, remain in his mind as imposing as ever. The dietary rules and kosher food are to avoid stomach problems and diseases, dirt, and bacteria; the rules of social behavior and staying apart from goyim are to keep the family reputation and become an educated and cultured person; and many more. He breaks these rules deliberately but feels guilty doing so. The neurosis the therapist names after Alex is the obsession with breaking rules one knows are absurd and impossible and then feeling deep shame and guilt in doing so.

Alex is torn between the need to be "a nice Jewish boy" as his mother taught him, and leading the "normal" life of a young American man:

> I would never eat *milchiks* off a *flaishedigeh* dish, never, never, never. Nonetheless, there is a year or so in my life when not a month goes by that I don't do something so inexcusable that I am told to pack a bag and leave. But what could it possibly be? Mother, it's me, the little boy who spends whole nights before school begins beautifully lettering in Old English script the names of the subjects on his colored course dividers, who patiently fastens reinforcements to a term's worth of three-ringed paper, lined and unlined both. I carry a comb and a clean hankie, never do my knicker stockings drag at my shoes, I see to that; my homework is completed weeks in advance of the assignment. (14)

In this monologue, Alex seems to turn to his mother and explain that he is still her "nice Jewish boy." He mixes the commandment directing not to eat dairy products and meat (*milchiks* and *flaishedigeh*, respectively) in the same meal, and his mother's rules concerning everyday life—about a comb, handkerchief, stockings, etc. Thus, canonical Jewish laws are in the same line with everyday rules, the former descending to everyday life, the latter being erected to the level of commandments.

For Alex, to be normal and American means to do the opposite of what his mother wants him to do, to break her rules and taboos, to do things Sophie would call goyish. In his school years, those were going to the hot-dog place and eating French fries and hamburgers after school and going skating with a non-Jewish girl. But the real discovery of the non-Jewish world happens during his freshman year at college and becomes the symbolic event of breaking his mother's rules of life with ambivalent feelings of curiosity and guilt. First, he calls his parents and tells them he will not come home for Thanksgiving, adding that he has decided go to Iowa to stay with his friend's family. Being afraid of his mother's reaction, Alex deceives her, telling her he is going with "this boy named Bill Campbell" (227), though he is really going with his girlfriend Kay Campbell, whom he calls Pumpkin. This typical Midwestern girl is the complete antithesis of any Jewish girl he has ever known, the embodiment of everything he considers to be real, American, and normal, and his mother considers to be goyish and inappropriate.

Visiting Kay's parents, he breaks his mother's rule never to step in a goyish home and eat goyish food. In doing so, he feels grown up and independent, yet at the same time guilty, as if he is committing a sin. Everything Sophie has been teaching (indoctrinating) him his whole life comes to his mind when he enters the home of a "real American" family:

> There! Is *that* it, is that Christianity I smell, or just the dog? Everything I see, taste, touch, I think, *"Goyish!"* My first morning I squeeze half an inch of Pepsodent down the drain rather than put my brush where Kay's mother or father may have

> touched the bristles with which they cleanse their own *goyische* molars. True! The soap on the sink is bubbly with foam from somebody's hands. [. . .] Next I have to decide whether or not to line the seat. It isn't the matter of hygiene, I'm sure the place is clean, spotless in its own particular antiseptic *goy* way: the question is, what if it's warm yet from a Campbell behind—from her mother! *Mary!* Mother also of Jesus Christ! (*Portnoy* 225-26)

No commandments forbid Jews to visit non-Jews or be guests in their homes, though perhaps there were periods when it could be dangerous or was simply not done. Yet the Portnoys do not face any such dangers in America, and this rule was invented for Alex by his mother simply to keep control over him. All the while she presents it as purely and thoroughly Jewish, and Alex feels guilty for his betrayal just on entering the Campbells' house.

Relations with non-Jews is one of the central, strictest taboos cultivated by Sophie Portnoy. It is a part of her set of rules concerning non-Jews, including the prohibition to visit them and eat their food. This rule is not related to sexual life but is a part of the life routine created by Sophie. She is also against her son's friendship with non-Jewish children, as well as against his dating non-Jewish girls. In this she is also an archetypical Yiddishe Mama from folklore, the one whose first question when her son tells her that he "likes a girl" is, "Is she Jewish?" But this taboo actually has very little to do with religious restrictions. While the mother cannot imagine her son's sexual relationship with non-Jewish girls, he protests against her rules precisely through sex.

The religious attitude toward love and sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews has differed across time and cultural circumstances and remains quite contradictory. Michael L. Satlow devotes one of the chapters of *Tasting the Dish* (2020) to sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews, discussing different aspects of the problem. He writes: "Commenting on the Jewish 'hate and enmity' for all Gentiles, Tacitus writes that Jewish men 'abstain from intercourse with foreign women.' Although the verity of his claim might be questioned, Tacitus' comment does echo a strong rhetorical tradition found in Jewish writings of both the Second Temple and Talmudic periods" (Satlow 83). On the one hand, the Hebrew Bible tells numerous stories of relations and intercourses of Jewish men with non-Jewish women, though traditional authorities strongly oppose such behavior as the rabbinical texts forbid such relations. "Tannaitic and amoraic, Palestinian and Babylonian sources all employ a rhetoric of defilement in discussing sexual contact between Gentiles and Jews. Sexual contact with Gentiles, according to this rhetoric, conveys ritual pollution to Jews," Satlow explains, and concludes, "Obviously intended to keep a social distance between Jews and Gentiles, this rule is not explicitly connected in tannaitic sources to sexual contact. That is, it is likely that the intent of this rule was to keep social

distance" (96). Thus, the rule had a social background: as an oppressed minority, Jews were isolated and lived in closed communities that condemned interfaith and inter-ethnic marriages and relations, a preference that was often mutual.

Sophie Portnoy elevates this rule to the rank of the most important and unquestionable moral law, once again presenting it as purely Jewish and essential. This causes the same protest from Alex as do the other prohibitions, at the same time making this forbidden fruit extremely attractive. The violation of this rule gives Alex an especially guilty pleasure. His relationships with Monkey, and their orgies with a young girl picked up on the street (135-40), are opposed to both the moral values he was brought up with and everything he saw in the Campbells' home. He continues to rebel against Jewishness, albeit a distorted version of it.

## SOPHIE'S RULES = JEWISH LAWS

The belief in taboos and rules established by Sophie substitutes for Judaism and its real laws, becoming the only Judaism Alex knows. When he talks about being "a nice Jewish boy," he refers more to the household rules made by Sophie than to the real commandments of Judaism. His rebellion against Judaism is in fact his rebellion against his mother, as he does not know any other Judaism but hers. Yet there is another source of Jewish knowledge in the Portnoy household. The real traditions of Judaism are mentioned by Alex's father when he reproaches his son:

> "Tell me something, do you know Talmud, my educated son? Do you know history? One-two-three you were bar mitzvah, and that for you was the end of your religious education. Do you know men study their whole lives in the Jewish religion, and when they die they still haven't finished? Tell me, now that you are finished at fourteen being a Jew, do you know a single thing about the wonderful history and heritage of the saga of your people?" (62-63)

Unlike Sophie, Jack Portnoy speaks about the Jewish commandments and laws as they are. But the father has no authority in the family, and what the mother says turns out to be more effective. Thus, Jewishness for Alex is not connected with Torah and tradition but with his mother's rules, the ones that cause such a negative reaction—his wish to escape and, at the same time, his fear and guilt. Escaping mother means escaping Jewishness. Thus, in the therapist's office, Alex claims to be an atheist, an identification repeated throughout the novel: "I don't have a religion. [. . .] I don't believe in God" (60); "But I am something more, or so they tell me. A Jew. No! No! An *atheist,* I cry" (72); "And I find no argument for the existence of God,

or for the benevolence and virtue of the Jews" (73). These phrases appear short and banal compared to the vivid descriptions of the rules and regulations invented by the mother. Once Alex even pronounces the widely-known and often cited slogan attributed to Karl Marx: "*Religion is the opiate of the people!* And if believing that makes me a fourteen-year-old Communist, then that's what I am, *and I'm proud of it!* I would rather be a Communist in Russia than a Jew in a synagogue any day" (74). This looks very dramatic and excessive and echoes his mother's theatrical monologues.

Sophie's relation to the synagogue and the practice of Judaism is particular to herself. Roth describes her as a person not inclined to observe religious rituals, and who even from time to time violates laws to her own advantage (as she does with eating pork at the Chinese restaurant). Her family goes to the synagogue for holidays, and Alex remembers when the rabbi visited his mother in the hospital when she was waiting for a surgery: "She tells me how Rabbi Warshaw came and sat and talked with her for a whole half hour before—as she now graphically puts it—she went under the knife. Wasn't that nice? Wasn't that thoughtful?" (66). The mentioning of the knife reminds Alex of the kitchen knife he saw in his mother's hand, scaring him to death (43), and the whole conversation—the rabbi's visit, his kindness as praised by Sophie, the memory of seeing his mother on the hospital bed—makes him feel guilty and wrong, as if he were the reason for her illness. Alex as a boy recognizes the hidden meaning in his mother's mentioning of the kind rabbi: here is a good Jew, a real Jew, a model that you might become should you obey your mother. That message heightened Alex's feelings of guilt, made him so scared that he decided that he would become a good Jewish boy as his mother wished. The memory of that conversation stays in his mind and haunts him all those years later.

Alex's life is full of guilt that he is not good enough for his mother. At the same time, he understands that her total control is too much for an adult man. Writes Cooper, "Alex Portnoy wants to be bad and to be guilt-free. He manages neither. Sexually violate and curse as he may, his soul belongs to those who owned his first years; and Sophie and Jack stand for goodness" (100). Realizing that an escape from his mother, her control as well as her version of Jewishness, is almost impossible, Alex physically escapes and goes to Israel, to the Jewish state. He wants to become what he calls "normal" among the Jews. This action is, in a way, an attempt to drive out fire with fire, and it turns into a complete failure. The irony isn't subtle: in Israel, Alex is unable to perform sexually with the one partner his mother would have approved of: a Jewish girl, a Sabra (Israeli born). She reminds him too much of Sophie: "This mother-substitute! [. . .] Because she wore red hair and freckles, this makes her, according to my unconscious one-track mind, my mother? Just because she and the lady of my past are off-spring of the same pale Polish strain of Jews?" (266). Thus, the "most unforgettable character" of his childhood is chasing him, and in his mind her

threats become true: the punishment for not being good enough and Jewish enough comes in the form of sexual and moral failure with a "nice Jewish girl."

Alex's sexual life is directly related to his mother and therefore to Jewry. He thinks about his mother in all his relations, comparing all his lovers with Sophie, or wondering what her reaction would be if she found out about a particular woman in his life. As it is written in *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and Contemporary World* (2016),

> Sexuality is humor's favorite ploy. The sexual and gender politics of modern Jewish humor is best embodied through the persona of the "Jewish Mother," a mid-20th-century comic invention that functions in visual as well as verbal terms. [. . .] Dan Greenburg's *How to Be a Jewish Mother* (1964), Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), and Woody Allen's *Oedipus Wrecks* (1989) shaped the stereotype of this woman's overdressed vulgarity, smothering affection, and constant complaint. (Zemel 268)

Sexuality, humor, and Jewishness come together in the novel.

## SOPHPIE PORTNOY AS A JEWISH MYTH

All Sophie's dietary and food obsessions and her persistence in making sure her family is decent and eats only what is healthy and right are overturned when the reader comes to the chapter where the most shocking and scandalous scene of the novel takes place: the family is having for dinner the piece of meat Alex earlier used for masturbation (133-34), and Sophie, of course, does not know it. Here Roth's hyper-ironization and comedy surpass any possible joke, and this scene has become the signature episode of the novel. It gives the reader a sense of disgust. The mother looks like a character more ridiculous than sympathetic, even if before the reader has really imbued her with some kind of sympathy, following the so-called Jewish wisdom that "there is no such thing as a bad mother" (Swarner 40). Alex would never call his mother bad, but he feels that something is wrong and absurd in her desire to protect him when he does not need protection; he does not understand that she makes no attempt to understand him, failing to perceive him as an individual, but rather a part of herself, requiring control, not understanding. The harder she tries to control him, the more forcefully he rebels, and his rebellion always lies in the sphere of sex. His whole sexual life, starting with teenage masturbation, dating prostitutes, making orgies, and finally his fiasco with an Israeli girl, is the result of his absurd rebellion against his mother's absurd hyper-protection.

Roth creates the image of the Jewish mother following the already existing archetype from the folklore: a Yiddishe Mama, the image that combines Jewishness, hyper-protection, and care of children in a comic and absurd way. Sophie Portnoy is a Yiddishe Mama with her typical qualities—even in comparison to the folklore image—twice exaggerated by Roth. Though Sophie speaks of Jewishness a great deal in the novel, her version is far from real Judaism. All the rules established and cherished by her, claimed as Jewish laws and commandments, are distorted and deliberately misinterpreted to her own advantage.

Roth goes much further than the Jewish jokes. He hyperbolizes the already hyperbolized image. Sophie's behavior and speech are so much exaggerated and so absurd that she looks absolutely implausible, too far from reality. The ground of the folklore myth here is well-recognized, and it makes the main character feel like he lives "in the middle of a Jewish joke" (36). Thus, in his way, Roth creates his own Jewish joke, one that has now become Jewish-American mythology—its own sort of folklore through the image of the powerful and lawmaking Jewish mother who continues to impose herself in Roth's later works.

## NOTE

1. There are other pieces referring to Roth in the permanent exhibition of this museum. For example, in the section "My Hero," the visitors may watch short movies in which famous contemporary Jews from all over the world talk about their heroes and role models. In one of the movies, Nicole Krauss talks about Roth and reads from his books.

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## CONTRIBUTOR

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# Roth's Jewish Weequahic: Perception or Reality and Why It Matters

Stuart S. Miller


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*ARTICLE*

# Roth's Jewish Weequahic

## Perception or Reality and Why It Matters

*Stuart S. Miller*

***Abstract.*** Philip Roth gets a lot of things right about Jewish Weequahic, at least for the time in which he lived there. Nevertheless, there are some aspects of the Jewish landscape of Weequahic and Newark that escaped him. Some of what he misses explains a development he was surely unaware of, the rejuvenation of traditional Jewish life in Weequahic after his departure from Newark, which takes place in the very period in which Roth has "the Swede," Seymour Levov, cast off any connection to his Jewish roots. It is argued here that Roth misreads some of what he witnessed and was ill-informed about developments in Weequahic beyond 1950. Had it been otherwise, his take on the local and national Jewish condition might have been very different. Much of the story of the Jewish community of Newark has yet to receive the full scholarly treatment it deserves. When it is written, it will shed new light not only on Roth's writings but also on the struggles, realities, and meaning of being Jewish in mid-twentieth-century America.

> *"By the time the imagination is finished with a fact, believe me, it bears no resemblance to a fact."* —PHILIP ROTH, ON ACCEPTANCE OF THE NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS' AWARD FOR *THE COUNTERLIFE*, 1987

> *"[J]ust as Roth insists that his characters [. . .] are the labor of imagination, so too should we keep in mind that Roth's Newark is itself a fictional place."* —DEAN FRANCO, "THE PHILIP ROTH BUS TOUR"

## BACKGROUND

Like Philip Roth, I was born in Newark and raised in its much-vaunted Weequahic section.[1] Like Roth, I too have a fascination with Jewish life in urban centers, not only mid-twentieth-century Newark but also others that existed in much earlier times.

I begin with my interest in Jewish urban and communal life. I am a specialist in the history and literature of the Jews of Roman Palestine. A central focus of my scholarly writing has been the ancient Galilean city of Sepphoris (Hebrew "Tsippori"), which had a significant and, at times, predominant Jewish population from around 100 B.C.E. into Late Antiquity and was one of the centers of the nascent rabbinic movement that would ultimately define Judaism as we know it. The fact that the city's layout, architecture, and institutions mirrored that of other Graeco-Roman cities has led to a revisionist view that the Jews had fully assimilated to pagan culture following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. and their crushing of the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132–135 C.E. However, a more critical assessment attests to the persistence of Jewish life at Sepphoris and elsewhere in Roman Palestine despite these setbacks (Miller, *At the Intersection*).

Both my fascination with the tenacity and meaning of Jewish identity during this period and my approach to the study of Sepphoris are pertinent to this essay.[2] Many rabbis are associated with the town in Talmudic literature. The rabbis, whether connected with Sepphoris or not, had no intention of relating the history of this or any other city. Still, as denizens of the town or of neighboring villages, they convey important information, oftentimes in offhand comments embedded in digressive narratives (*aggadah*) or discussions of religious law (*halakhah*).

Thus, while Talmudic literature and the fiction of Philip Roth may not be the work of historians, both the rabbis and the novelist convey an *impression* of a place and its residents, one that is not necessarily historical even if it includes essential realia, events, and references that are identifiable. Where Sepphoris is concerned, the rabbis provide insights about the city and even relate incidents that reportedly happened there, all of which need to be critically evaluated.[3] Otherwise, rather fanciful reconstructions of Jewish society in Sepphoris can result, as was the case prior to recent advances in Talmudic studies. Most notably, Adolf Büchler portrayed the Jews of the city as a cantankerous bunch, who opposed the rabbis and included individuals who were prone to sexual licentiousness.[4] One wonders how any of the ancient rabbis, let alone the patriarch Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi ("the prince"), who lived ca. 200 C.E. at Sepphoris and is credited with the compilation of the Mishnah, would have felt comfortable living in such an environment—and how Jewish life could have survived, never mind thrived, there! (Miller, "Those Cantankerous Sepphoreans").

An even more fanciful portrayal of Jews from Sepphoris appears in a mid-nineteenth-century historical novel from Germany written by Ludwig Philippson, rabbi of the Reform congregation in Magdeburg.[5] Philippson unabashedly sought to represent an obscure, fourth- century rebel at Sepphoris named Patrick as the prototype of a modern Reform Jew who was increasingly comfortable in a Christian society in which Jews were seeking emancipation. Philippson's Patrick opposes the local Roman official Ursicinus and the mendacious machinations of the Jewish apostate Joseph. But as a Galilean connected to the Patriarchal house, he is also acquainted with Roman culture and has no problem with the enlightened Emperor Julian ("the Apostate") or the rule of *tolerant* Christians. After leading an unsuccessful revolt for religious freedom that ends with the fall of Sepphoris, Patrick and his lover Miriam depart and create a new *and better* life in Babylonia, that is, in the Diaspora (Ben-Ari 53-98).[6]

Philippson's idealization of the Diaspora brings to mind Roth's second-generation Jews of Eastern European descent. However, Patrick is not at all Roth's Seymour Levov. In contrast to the fully assimilated "Swede," Patrick's Jewishness is essential to his (and to Philippson's) identity. Judaism for Patrick is worth fighting for, even if he, like the Swede (and Roth), leaves his birthplace behind, seemingly for a brighter future.[7] Philippson's portrayal of Patrick and Miriam as willing to forsake the Land of Israel reflects his insistence that nineteenth-century European Jews could embrace emancipation and co-exist with Christians in *galut* (diaspora).

Philippson and Büchler remind us just how creative *both* the novelist and the historian can be when imagining real places in the Jewish past. Still, what Roth has to say about Newark and about its Jews might seem to be more plausible than what modern writers relate about Sepphoris. After all, Roth grew up in Newark and began incorporating aspects of its history and social life into his writings not long afterwards.

To be sure, no modern historian would rely solely on Roth's writings to reconstruct life in the city from 1933 to 1950, that is, the first seventeen years of his life, or in the subsequent period leading to the racial unrest of 1967 and beyond, about which he also writes.[8] Even so, Roth's readers are likely to be impressed by his detailed depictions of the city and undoubtedly come away with what they presume is an accurate assessment of life in Newark, Jewish Weequahic—and much more. As Robert Fulford muses, "as a reader of Roth I believe in some literary corner of my mind that I know the place intimately" (540). Roth famously—and often convincingly—portrays the final decades of Weequahic's Jewish community and turns his recollections into a literary medium for viewing history, as Michael Kimmage has shown in *In History's Grip* (2012). The reader is left with a vivid *impression* of Jewish life in the city and indeed in America, both during the time that Roth lived in Newark

and, subsequently, up to and including the dissolution of the Jewish community (due to migration to the suburbs) in the late 1960s.

What can we learn from this impression? Is it factual? Or is it one famous Jewish Newarker's nostalgic reminiscences, provided with verisimilitude here and there by his own considerable research into the city's history, and therefore not a genuine representation? Many of Roth's observations about Newark and its inhabitants pertain to matters that were unlikely to have been on his radar as a child and adolescent coming of age in Newark. The prodigious detail he supplies in, for example, *The Plot Against America* (2004) or *Nemesis* (2010), is obviously the result of extensive research.[9] Has Roth's general portrayal of the assimilationist inclinations and yearnings of the Jews of Weequahic been colored by his own experiences and perceptions of Jewish life in America, especially those he formulated *later in life* as an adult writer? After all, Roth has been called a "civic novelist," one who, Kimmage reminds us, included his perspectives as a citizen of both the city *and* the nation (23-25). And indeed, Roth regarded his upbringing in Jewish Weequahic as "indistinguishable" from "growing up American" (*Facts* 122; Nadel 18-19).[10]

Much that pertains to Jewish life in Weequahic may be true of American Jewry writ large, but we should not automatically assume that the two were entirely coterminous. Nor should we assume that Roth has provided a complete picture of Newark's—or America's—Jews. To be sure, Roth the "civic novelist" was a writer of fiction who cannot be faulted for not writing history. He certainly should not be held accountable for incorporating *his* impressions and certainly not for the takeaway of his readers. But while many Roth scholars have taken up the author's views on Jews and Judaism and how they reflect the history of the Jews in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, they perhaps need to ponder something more basic: whether Roth's characterization of Jews and Judaism in Newark is the product of his own unique lens and whether it is in and of itself complete. This should matter not only to historians but also to Roth scholars, precisely because what Roth relates about Jewish Weequahic and what he intentionally or unconsciously ignores or even knew nothing about is essential for assessing both the author's self-awareness as a Jew and his representations of Jewish life in mid-twentieth-century Newark and America.

My insistence that Roth's depiction of Newark's and, more specifically, Weequahic's Jews warrants more serious scholarly investigation[11] stems not only from my critical approach to narratives that relate information about Jewish life in Roman Galilee, but also from my having grown up in Newark. I spent roughly the same amount of time as Roth in Newark, but a generation later, from 1953 until 1971. *The crucial point is that it is the same period in each of our lives, which left a mark on our respective memories, albeit, for reasons I shall explain, differently.* But that is not all. I too am

a second-generation son of Jewish Newark. Roth and I both have roots in Galicia; I too had Yiddish-speaking paternal grandparents from the western Ukraine who emigrated and settled in Newark. My grandfather and father very much belonged to Newark's industrial history, having established a store fixture business in the North Ward that designed or did work for some of the department stores or other establishments alluded to in Roth's writings and was there well into the 1990s, that is, long after the city's industrial heyday.[12] My grandparents and parents, along with so many of their friends, were also very much part of the history of the Jewish community of Newark during Roth's day and beyond, helping to build its social and religious institutions, and especially contributing to the growth and *preservation* of traditional Jewish life in the city.[13]

Thus, when Roth, the secular "civic novelist," and I, the urban historian raised in a traditionally observant home, think about *and remember* our old neighborhood, we do so differently, not only because of our distinct professional vantage points but also because we lived a generation apart in Weequahic and had different childhood and adolescent experiences. To be sure, we have so much of the culture of Weequahic in common, even if I did not attend public school and instead went to Jewish day schools first in Newark and later, for high school, in Elizabeth.

Still, despite Roth's sentimentalization of Weequahic and his overall, oftentimes romantic, depiction of the Jewish family in Newark, his is a city and a community, that, as Kimmage has elaborated, must ultimately be left behind. Gentile America at large was beckoning. I share with Roth that sense of neighborliness, of *heimisch* Weequahic, but, for most of my youth there, with the exception of the post-1967 period (and then only regrettably), I would never have imagined it as a place that I wanted *to leave*.[14] Precisely because Roth lived in Weequahic during World War II and the post-Shoah years and depicts it as a Jewish oasis, I wonder, given his palpable nostalgia, if he really did feel, if I may borrow a lyric from Joni Mitchell, the "urge for going," *while he actually lived there and before he ever put pen to paper*. At the same time, his nostalgic reminiscences (and those of his Chancellor Avenue Elementary and especially Weequahic High School classmates or alumni)[15] are also not to be treated as history. As David Lowenthal reminds us, "Nostalgia tells it like it wasn't."[16]

For Roth, Newark's Jewish history pretty much ends *when he departs the city* in 1950. Not surprisingly, Roth has the Swede's dad leave for Florida sometime thereafter and Seymour, already settled in WASPy Old Rimrock, is left to oversee Newark Maid, both its main office and, beginning in 1958, its factory in Puerto Rico (*Pastoral* 13-14, 123, 134-35, 156). Yet, even in the years leading up to the 1967 disturbances, not all Jews were heading to or pining for the Oranges and Short Hills, regardless of Roth's claims otherwise. It was during this period (ca. 1962) that my family moved from one end of the South Ward a mile away to a quiet street, Van Velsor Place, one block above

Bergen Street and just off Chancellor Avenue, an area that Roth describes, in *The Plot Against America*, as where, in his day, "Jewish doctors and lawyers and the successful merchants who owned big stores downtown lived" (3). While the area was hardly a bastion of wealth, our move from Meeker Avenue to lower Chancellor Avenue was enough of a social *and* religious *aliyah* for my parents, one that allowed for their kids to *remain* Jews, *precisely because the neighborhood already had the requisite religious institutions and infrastructure*.

Evidently, Roth got a bit carried away in *The Plot Against America* when he has Sandy sent off to Kentucky where he gets to farm hogs and taste pork as part of Lindbergh's "Just Folks" program (98-100). Indeed, Sandy's determination to join Just Folks during the summer, primetime—in Roth's day and mine—for stickball, stoopball, touch football, and punchball on the streets of Weequahic, is quite a stretch. Truly, dispatching a kid from Weequahic, even to a *Jewish* overnight camp, aside from being beyond many of the local families' financial reach, would have been enough of an exile!

Our one-family home was located under a mile from the Roth family's two residences on Leslie Street; in fact, their last domicile was situated, like ours on Van Velsor Place, just a few hundred feet to the south of busy Chancellor Avenue. While Roth grew up in a multi-family house that was more characteristic of his end of Chancellor Avenue, such homes existed from our section of Weequahic all the way "up the hill" to his. True, there were more single-family homes the closer one got to Bergen Street and Elizabeth Avenue, both frequently alluded to by Roth, but while the parents of Weequahic may have been aware of class distinctions, most kids growing up on the streets bordering Chancellor Avenue thought of it as the artery that unified the largely (but certainly not uniformly) Jewish neighborhood. Roth may imagine that many of his Jewish neighbors yearned to live in the Oranges or Short Hills and beyond—many of them undoubtedly did—but for my family and friends a generation later, that was still very much foreign and uninviting, *goyish* territory.

## A TOPOGRAPHY WITH HOLES: THE MISSING JEWS AND JEWISH INSTITUTIONS OF ROTH'S WEEQUAHIC

This is not to deny that many, maybe even most, of the Jews of Newark during the 1930s and 1940s were assimilating to American life and were interested in leaving their humbler beginnings on High or Prince Street in the Third Ward for suburbia—rather than resettle in Weequahic. That certainly fits what we know of Jewish acculturation in the US during this period and of the diminishing population of Newark.[17] But while

the flight from the city was already in progress, it is not the whole picture. Many in fact stayed, and for these a renunciation of the past was hardly in the cards. Roth's main characters, certainly the writer as represented by Zuckerman, tend to distance themselves from their parents' old-world religious observances and look to new horizons. But does Roth overplay the chasm between the generations? Roth's dad can forget and forever abandon his *tefillin* at the YMHA, leaving father and son bereft of a ritual connection with their past (*Patrimony* 94-97), but the author is surely exaggerating when he states in *The Plot Against America*,

> *Nobody* in the neighborhood had a beard or dressed in the antiquated Old World style or wore a skullcap either outdoors or in the houses I routinely floated through with my boyhood friends. The adults were no longer observant in the outward, recognizable ways, if they were seriously observant at all, and aside from older shopkeepers like the tailor and the kosher butcher [. . .] hardly anyone in the vicinity spoke with an accent. (3-4, emphasis added)

As sure as there were such Jews in my day, that is, when according to *American Pastoral* (1997), Jewish life (and life in general) in Newark was ebbing, indeed hemorrhaging, so they existed in Roth's, even if they were few and far between. If we are to have a complete picture of Newark's Jewry in the time when Roth attended Chancellor Avenue School and Weequahic High and beyond, these missing Jews from Roth's works must be included. When they are, questions arise as to the meaning of those ethnographic details that Roth does provide, allowing for, in Geertzian terms, a "thick description" that results in alternate assessments of Jewish life in Newark. The post-Roth Newark period depicted in *American Pastoral* actually witnessed a *resurgence* of traditional life in Weequahic, largely infused by Jews who relocated from elsewhere in the city and perhaps by the arrival of some Holocaust survivors who preserved the old ways.[18] But, as we shall see, 1950s and 1960s Weequahic was hospitable to these developments *precisely because there was a lingering traditional ethos* in the community from Roth's day.

At least according to Roth, the younger generation, that is, his own, had no use for, indeed could not imagine, following in the ways of their forefathers, and saw whatever signs of it that continued to exist in the neighborhood as atavistic expressions that had been emptied of any meaning. Yet there is still much that he misses. Some important features of his/our neighborhood and the city eluded him, something the unassuming reader is likely unaware of. In *American Pastoral*, there is a remarkable passage in which the Swede's mother-in-law, Dorothy Dwyer, describes the city of Elizabeth in which she raised her Catholic family. The landmarks she refers to are all Catholic churches, nine in all, whose names and precise locations are provided along

with ethnic associations and other particulars (401). Roth provides no such detail for the synagogues of Newark, here or in any other of his works. Seymour the Swede, the fully assimilated Jew of the Levov family from Weequahic, certainly has no need for a religious landscape corresponding to that of the Dwyers' Elizabeth. That is evident when the Swede characterizes his dad's synagogue as "foreign" and "unhealthy" (315). Roth only references the Wainwright Street synagogue in *American Pastoral*, and then only obliquely (220), which is quite sufficient for a work that draws a sharp contrast between Dawn Dwyer's Catholic background and her husband Seymour's (and by extension Roth's) total disconnect with his *religious* roots. Kimmage captures Roth's drift: "America reverberates for the Swede; *Judaism* does not" (76, emphasis added).

Kimmage may be correct that Roth paints Elizabeth as the Dwyers' "Rome," but in no way was Newark, as he suggests, "Jerusalem" in the "Newark trilogy" or in Roth's later works (60). The contrast to be made is not between Vatican City and the Holy Land's, and therefore Judaism's, spiritual center, but rather between an identifying Christian life in Elizabeth and *Roth's* largely God-less Weequahic. Gerard O'Donoghue has drawn attention to Roth's emphasis on the "centrality of secularism to American culture," the "marginal presence of religious practice" in his writing, and the author's self-described, "inborn anti-clericalism" (153). Aside from his very (and not unusual) negative Hebrew school experience, Roth rarely takes his readers into a synagogue (except, as O'Donoghue notes, for funerals!) and has no serious interest in liturgy or ritual.

Roth misses not only the Jewish religious topography of Weequahic but also that of Newark. Of the thirty or so synagogues that existed in the city in his day, he knows of two, Wainwright Street and Schley Street, both Orthodox, that were very near to his family's residences.[19] In *The Plot Against America*, he cannot avoid mentioning the majestic, domed (with a star of David), neo-classical style, Temple Bnai Abraham on Clinton Avenue, which was Conservative in orientation and was led, beginning in 1939, by Rabbi Joachim Prinz, a refugee from Berlin, where, as a pulpit rabbi, he was an outspoken critic of the rise of Hitlerism and expelled in 1937. Prinz famously spoke immediately before Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his speech at the March on Washington in 1963. Not surprisingly, Prinz drew on his experience as a refugee and appealed to the collective responsibility of all Americans to live as "neighbors." In *The Plot Against America*, Prinz's political and social concerns obviously appealed to Roth, who has him boycott the wedding of the fictitious Rabbi Bengelsdorf because of the latter's sycophantic and short-sighted support of Lindbergh for President. Bengelsdorf may not have been a real historical figure, but Roth somewhat surprisingly makes him the rabbi of Congregation Bnai Moshe, a traditional synagogue in the Seth Boyden-Otto Kretchmer "Projects" below Elizabeth Avenue and Weequahic Park—a good distance from his home and from Prinz's Bnai Abraham, and also

socially quite distinct. Other than that, Roth makes passing reference to the prominent Reform synagogue B'nai Jeshurun, whose relocation from the Central Ward to South Orange in 1952 and from there to Short Hills in 1968, is conspicuously in sync with the Rothian trajectory of the quickly assimilating Jewish émigrés from Newark (*Plot* 32-33).

Roth's choice of synagogues is curious and obviously selective. Aside from the two synagogues around his corner, which he could not avoid, his interest turns to those institutions and synagogues whose leaders, real or otherwise, for better (Prinz) or for worse (Bengelsdorf), advocate for causes that they would argue were rooted in the essence of Jewishness. Social activism and survival (in Bengelsdorf's case, at any cost) are themes that would resonate with Jews in the FDR era. However, much closer to Roth's home than Rabbi Prinz's Bnai Abraham and the fictitious Bengelsdorf's Bnai Moshe, *all in walking distance*, were synagogues whose rabbis were neither the resented *cheder* teachers of Roth's youth nor the social activists he depicts. By the end of the 1940s there were at least nine synagogues in Weequahic, all of which subscribed to some form of Orthodoxy. The overall number in the South Ward, which included Weequahic and adjoining Clinton Hill, actually *increased* by the end of the fifties to upwards of eighteen and remained pretty much constant until 1967 (see table 1).[20] Among the most noteworthy in the vicinity of Chancellor Avenue was the Young Israel of Newark, straddling Weequahic, Maple, and Lyons Avenues, just across from Beth Israel Hospital, a location with which Roth was especially familiar. Established in 1942, this Orthodox synagogue would have been on Roth's bike ride route to his (and my) earliest neighborhood library on Osborne Terrace (Bailey 27). Rabbi Zev Segal, who was appointed the synagogue's spiritual leader in 1945, would become prominent throughout the Jewish community and remained with the congregation beyond the disturbances of 1967.[21] Not far away from the hospital and the library, and even closer to Roth's home on Leslie Street was the "Lubavitcher Yeshiva," which was actually an afternoon *cheder* located in a synagogue just across from Weequahic High School on the corner of Aldine and Chancellor Avenues. The students who attended were neither Hasidic nor for that matter necessarily observant. As early as 1942, Rabbi Shlomo B. Gordon was charged with the task of cultivating Jewish education in Newark by the then "Lubavitcher Rebbe," Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn.[22] Fledgling though it was, the school's presence and that of other afternoon schools and Orthodox synagogues in the area, including the Schley Street shul where Roth attended *cheder,* certainly meant there were some *yarmulke*-wearing boys and, among the teachers and rabbis, bearded Jewish males, in Roth's immediate neighborhood, even if they were not a regular sight on the streets!

Rabbi Gordon left Newark after three years but returned to head the school by 1948, when he also assumed the pulpit of Ahavath Zion, a synagogue that had seating

TABLE 1 Synagogues of Newark by Decades and Location, Courtesy of Philip Yourish, Jewish Museum of New Jersey

| YEAR | NUMBER OF SYNAGOGUES | SOUTH WARD | CENTRAL WARD | EAST WARD | WEST WARD | NORTH WARD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1940 | 30 | 12 | 14 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 1950 | 25 | 16 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| 1959 | 28 | 18 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 1 |
| 1967 | 23 | 17 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 1 |
| 1972 | 10 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 |

for more than a thousand worshipers in Clinton Hill, which continued to have Jewish life for decades.[23] By the late 1950s, the Lubavitch movement opened a small post-high school "Rabbinical College" in a house on Grumman Avenue, which increased the presence of the Lubavitchers in the neighborhood somewhat.[24] But even earlier, the Gordon family was not the only Hasidic family in Weequahic or Newark. Already around the time that Roth left Newark in 1950, Rabbi Abraham Leifer, the son of the "Pittsburgher Rebbe" who belonged to a line of Hasidim from Nadvorna, moved with his wife to Newark and established a synagogue barely two blocks down from Weequahic High on Chancellor Avenue ("A Brief History").

The "Orthodox" component of Weequahic was not, however, primarily Hasidic—far from it. Rather it was diverse, with some only tangentially identifying, perhaps for nostalgic reasons, with Orthodox synagogues, and others, ascribing to more modern expressions of Orthodoxy. While many of the so-called Orthodox might be described as what one sociologist has dubbed the "non-observant Orthodox," and the "residual Orthodox" (Liebman 30-36), elsewhere I have characterized these as the "practical Modern Orthodox," meaning they were traditionalists who, while not quite ideologically "Modern (or Neo-) Orthodox," were doing their best to navigate an observant Jewish life amidst the tugs of a modern world that was not always hospitable nor sensitive to such traditional ways ("Wake Up to Religion"). For these Jews, acculturation and assimilation were less of an attraction than a challenge, and whatever traditional observance they could preserve might be best seen as a form of resistance to accommodation.[25]

Newark had an Orthodox elementary day school by 1943, the "Yeshiva of Newark," which in 1948 was consolidated with the city's Talmud Torah afternoon schools into the successful Hebrew Academy of Essex County. Noteworthy too was the establishment of another Orthodox day school earlier in 1941 by Rabbi Pinchas Teitz in Elizabeth, that is, Roth's metaphoric "Rome" (see above) just south of Newark. Again, for Roth, Elizabeth had to be thoroughly Catholic while Weequahic's Jews were *at*

*most* just barely hanging on to their ethnicity.[26] As for the Hebrew Academy, it was originally located right down Clinton Avenue from Rabbi Prinz's Bnai Abraham, a synagogue that, as we have seen, was on Roth's radar. The school would merge in 1962 with the Hebrew Youth Institute, which was established in Weequahic in 1955 in the Young Israel synagogue building, forming the Hebrew Youth Academy of Essex County. The synagogue, which, under Rabbi Segal's leadership, was already prominent in Roth's day, now became an even more important religious and educational hub for Jews wishing to remain connected to their roots.[27]

By the sixties, Weequahic was clearly enjoying a revival of traditional Judaism, with many of the synagogues from Roth's day remaining, almost all casually referred to from the outset by the streets they were located on. The fact that Newark's synagogues were known by their street names is frequently commented upon, but its implications are not fully appreciated. It is not, as Blake Bailey says, that the shuls "were named after their streets" (42), but rather that that is how Weequahic's Jews defined and perceived space. This is significant, as it was just as true in Roth's day as in mine, when I would sometimes walk across town on Shabbat to visit my grandparents a couple of miles away in the "Avon Avenue shul" in Clinton Hill. The prominent early-twentieth-century chief rabbi of Newark, Jacob Mendelson, a noted author of books on Jewish law, held a pulpit into the 1940s when his synagogue, Beth haMedresh haGodol, relocated and became known as the "Bergen Street Shul" ("Yaakov ben Zion Mendelson"). My family and I celebrated my becoming a bar mitzvah at the "Custer Ave." synagogue in our old neighborhood.

*I never really knew the real names of these synagogues until I became an adult. It seemed like no one did.* Nor was my family unique. Traditionally observant families mapped out their community by its identifiably Jewish and especially religious and educational institutions; the synagogues especially defined and determined the topography of their neighborhoods. In this respect, ancient Sepphoris was not a whole lot different, as a good number of its synagogues are mentioned in Talmudic sources, often as local landmarks![28] The towns of Roman Palestine, the *shtetlach* of Eastern Europe, and the Jewish neighborhood of Weequahic underwent what Barbara E. Mann refers to as a "psychic shrinkage of Jewish space" when they were portrayed in literature (126). Israel Bartal, who refers to this shrinkage as "miniaturization," explains that it allowed writers to present a more "homogenous" Jewish "entity," one in which, for example, there were no Hasidim or Misnagdim (the "opponents" of the former), *just Jews* (189). For Roth too, Weequahic's Jews were largely all the same, even if his characters would have their problems identifying just where they belonged on the spectrum of Jewish identity.

Nor were the synagogues and schools the only religious institutions in the neighborhood. In 1955, just a few years after Roth left for Bucknell, the (Rabbi) Mendel-

sohn Hebrew Book Store moved from Prince Street, where it had been located since 1904, to just around the corner from his last home on Leslie Street. This enterprise had already become Rabbi L. Sky's Hebrew Book Store in the 1940s and was a frequent meeting place for Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews alike. Its relocation to Weequahic was significant as it was a source for all sorts of Judaica, from traditional *seforim* (religious books) to scholarly works and ritual items such as *tefillin*. "Sky's" supplied ritual items to Weequahic's residents as well as to synagogues and schools beyond Newark, pointing once again to the rejuvenation of Jewish life in Weequahic in the immediate post-Roth period, which was only possible because the ground had already been prepared in the writer's day (Michel 3). Indeed, the Sky family's decision to move their historic institution from the Central Ward to Weequahic suggests that Newark's more traditional Jewish elements were far more comfortable and secure remaining in the city than relocating to the Oranges or beyond, where Sky's undoubtedly would have had fewer walk-in customers and, consequently, the communal ethos that became the store's trademark would not have existed. Less traditional Jews may have been sidestepping Weequahic for the suburbs, but at least for the Orthodox (even the "non-observant" ones!) it was very much the place to be in the fifties.

That said, throughout the forties and until its last days as a Jewish community, Newark continued to have prominent rabbis, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox. As I have argued, Roth's attention to Rabbi Prinz stems from this rabbi's nationwide involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Roth pays passing acknowledgement to Rabbi Prinz's predecessor Rabbi Silberfeld or to Rabbi Foster of B'nai Jeshurun (although the latter may have been the model for Rabbi Bengelsdorf) (Bailey 692; Helmreich, *Enduring*, 249-52),[29] both eminent rabbis, and both non-Orthodox. We do not hear much if anything about their synagogues qua synagogues, although Roth notes their existence (*Plot* 33). It is remarkable that such noteworthy rabbis as Rabbi Louis Levitsky, who led the Conservative Oheb Shalom beginning in 1940, and Rabbi Eli Pilchik, who joined B'nai Jeshurun in 1947, did not warrant Roth's attention. Both were noted writers, with Levitsky completing a book in 1939, *A Jew Looks at America,* that one would think would have been of interest to Roth, considering its sanguine depiction, on the threshold of the Holocaust, of Jewish life in an America described as "a rainbow accompanying the promise of sunshine" (Levitsky 105).[30] Finally, Roth's Newark was home to Rabbi Meyer Blumenfeld, the "*Illui* (halakhic savant) of Kielce and *Gaon* (genius) of Newark," who wrote numerous scholarly works on rabbinic law in Hebrew during his long residence in Newark that received approbations from leading Talmudic authorities throughout the world (Weisberger).

This is all part of the story that Roth appears to know nothing about even in *The Plot Against America*, *American Pastoral*, and *Nemesis*, works that contain much detail about Newark. The missing Jews in Roth's depiction of Weequahic are those who

identified *religiously,* not merely ethnically, both in his day and beyond. For Roth, they are invisible. The historians of Newark whom Roth consulted to fill in his knowledge of the city both for the time that he lived there and especially for Weequahic in the ensuing period, represented by the Swede, were obviously not attuned to the presence of these Jews. Weequahic Park was known to Roth from his childhood for its horseback riding track and its boats (*Plot* 3), but I recall vividly how, at different periods of my childhood during what would have been the period of the Swede, the crowds gathered at either the south end or the north end of the park's mile-long lake on Rosh Hashanah to cast away their sins in the customary *tashlikh* ceremony. Add to this, eating in *sukkot* at the homes of family friends on Sukkot (the Feast of Booths) and young students from the Hebrew Youth Academy delivering *mishloach manot* (food presents) throughout the neighborhood on Purim and suddenly Weequahic takes on a very different look.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Jewish Newark's implosion was obviously still a long way off when Roth left the city in 1950 and later when he has the Swede settling into Old Rimrock. Even Roth's childhood Hebrew school at the Schley Street Synagogue remained in business, as did many others, well into the sixties. Indeed, at least one child from what was once the Roth residence at 385 Leslie Street was attending the school in 1961![31] It is hard to know how Roth could have missed some of the developments to which I have alluded, even given the fact that the influx of more traditionally observant Jews into Weequahic occurred after he left Newark. Perhaps, such signs and symbols of Jewish life that existed in his day were read differently by him, as the last gasp of an outmoded world, rather than as an indication that things were or might eventually be different, both in Newark and the nation.

A "thick description" providing alternate, more nuanced, interpretations of Weequahic's culture is obviously in order: The lyrics to the fight song sung by Roth and his Weequahic high school friends, *We are the boys who eat no ham . . . We keep matzohs in our locker . . .* may be understood as a smug allusion to the students' (or their parents') ethnicity—or as a prideful recognition that traditional observance endured. Many highly assimilated Jews at least avoided ham and celebrated Passover, but, even so, they would hardly account for the abundance of kosher butcher shops that existed in Roth's day in Weequahic and in Newark at large. Other evidence can similarly convey multiple meanings. Kosher diners and even caterers were present in the forties and sometimes advertised in the widely read *Jewish News* that the Jewish consumer could "keep their conscience clear," as they had no need to abrogate the traditional

dietary laws (see fig. 1) when celebrating their *simchas* (joyous occasions). A similar reminder was included in the ads for the "first sabbath observing" (and obviously kosher) Bergen Bake Shop (see fig. 2). Surely there were still enough kosher practicing Jews to support such eateries in the first place, aside from the less observant who might have also frequented non-kosher establishments. Even in the suburb of West Orange, there was a kosher resort that advertised—obviously to attract Jews from Newark who observed the dietary laws—that it was located not all that far from the city's Penn Station (see fig. 3). Again, one can read this appeal to kosher observant Jews as evidence of the falling away of the old ways—or as testimony that they were not quite ready to go away.

Obviously, there is a much larger story that has not been told, certainly not by Roth or, more importantly, by historians, about Jewish Newark.[32] As already stated, my work explains how and to what extent Jewish life persisted at Sepphoris and in the Galilee in the centuries following the destruction of the Temple. Others have rightly argued that the early rabbis were still a fledgling movement and that there seems to have been a falling off in ritual purity and other rites after the Bar Kochba revolt. Majority history, however, does not tell the whole story. The number of ritual baths that have been discovered belonging to the third and fourth centuries do not compare to the number belonging to the period before the revolts, but that they exist at all is what needs to be appreciated, especially since there is a clear resuscitation of

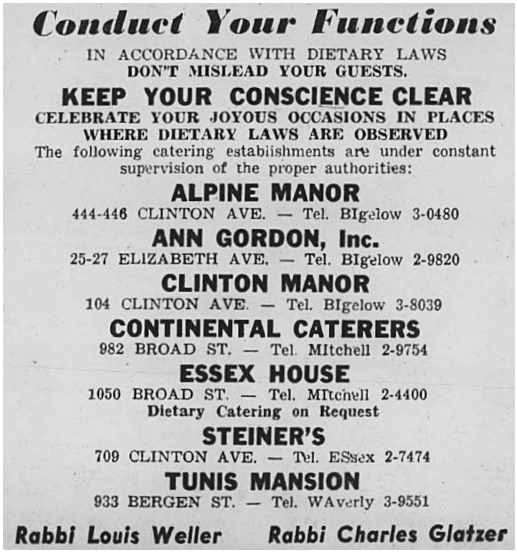
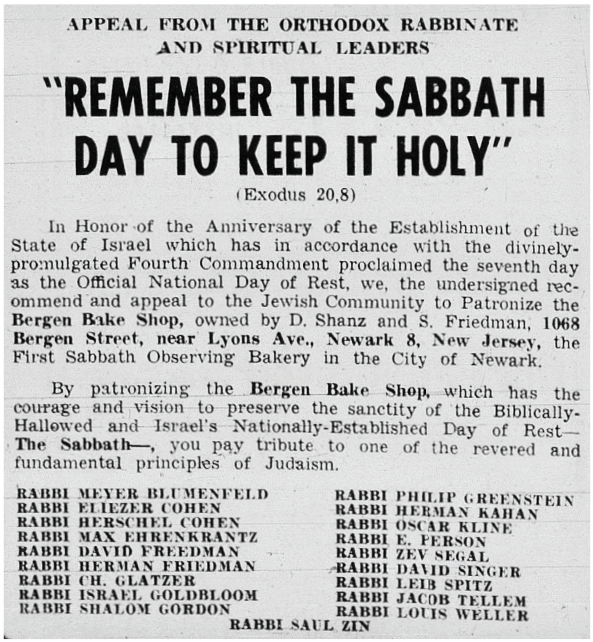



Fig. 1. *The Jewish News*, March 19, 1948. © Jewish Historical Society of Greater MetroWest



APPEAL FROM THE ORTHODOX RABBINATE AND SPIRITUAL LEADERS

"REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY TO KEEP IT HOLY"

(Exodus 20,8)

In Honor of the Anniversary of the Establishment of the State of Israel which has in accordance with the divinely-promulgated Fourth Commandment proclaimed the seventh day as the Official National Day of Rest, we, the undersigned recommend and appeal to the Jewish Community to Patronize the **Bergen Bake Shop,** owned by D. Shanz and S. Friedman, **1068 Bergen Street, near Lyons Ave., Newark 8, New Jersey,** the First Sabbath Observing Bakery in the City of Newark.

By patronizing the **Bergen Bake Shop,** which has the courage and vision to preserve the sanctity of the Biblically-Hallowed and Israel's Nationally-Established Day of Rest—**The Sabbath—,** you pay tribute to one of the revered and fundamental principles of Judaism.

RABBI MEYER BLUMENFELD
RABBI ELIEZER COHEN
RABBI HERSCHEL COHEN
RABBI MAX EHRENKRANTZ
RABBI DAVID FREEDMAN
RABBI HERMAN FRIEDMAN
RABBI CH. GLATZER
RABBI ISRAEL GOLDBLOOM
RABBI SHALOM GORDON
RABBI PHILIP GREENSTEIN
RABBI HERMAN KAHAN
RABBI OSCAR KLINE
RABBI E. PERSON
RABBI ZEV SEGAL
RABBI DAVID SINGER
RABBI LEIB SPITZ
RABBI JACOB TELLEM
RABBI LOUIS WELLER
RABBI SAUL ZIN

Fig. 2. *The Jewish News*, May 20, 1949. © Jewish Historical Society of Greater MetroWest

Jewish life in Galilee by Late Antiquity. The same applies to Roth's Weequahic. There were more than enough vital signs in his day that account, at least in retrospect, for the vitality that existed into the fifties and sixties.

How do we explain Roth's perceptions? Despite his acute sense of Jewishness and understanding of its family life, Roth was not sufficiently educated in Jewish traditions and therefore was not attuned to the finer details of the religion's observance. Rarely does he allude in any serious way to *Judaism*, which remains for him a biblical religion that somehow led to some idiosyncratic observances. The rabbinic tradition, the heart of Judaism, is mostly unknown to him. As Aharon Appelfeld long ago noted, "Philip Roth's works have no Talmud, no Jewish philosophy, no mysticism, *no religion*. His literary production does not reveal Jewish sources in the same way as Orthodox Christianity is found in Dostoyevsky's and Tolstoy's novels" (14, emphasis added). Roth's knowledge of *Judaism* (as opposed to "Jewishness") may include the *biblical* story of Jacob's struggle at Peniel (Genesis 32:24), the practice of donning phylacteries, and the recitation of Kaddish, but not much more.[33]

This is not to say that Roth is not capable of raising insightful and engaging theological struggles, say, for example, issues of theodicy in *Nemesis*. But a telling contrast can be found in the works of Chaim Potok, who writes about roughly the same period


Fig. 3. *The Jewish News*, September 10, 1948. © Jewish Historical Society of Greater MetroWest

as Roth. True, *The Chosen* (1967), *The Promise* (1969), and *Asher Lev* (1972) are set within largely traditional communities of New York. But what is apparent is that Potok's reflections are not based solely on the collective memories of family and community, as are Roth's, but on what Maurice Halbwachs refers to as a "religious collective memory," one that was rooted in Potok's traditional Jewish upbringing, personal observance, and knowledge base.[34] This frame of reference compels Potok to demonstrate the ways in which Jewish tradition can be, in the words of Kathryn McClymond, "integrated into mainstream American culture" rather than jettisoned. Potok's characters struggle with how to best remain committed to tradition and at the same time be "American" (9). Not surprisingly, Potok, unlike Roth, invokes classical *rabbinic* sources, as they were very much part of his upbringing and life.

As McClymond has also noted, Potok's writings display the lively ideological ferment within Judaism in mid-twentieth-century America that puts the lie to "broad-brush" portrayals. While Roth manages to convey the seemingly inexorable and complete acculturation of Weequahic's and America's Jews at the time, he is unaware of the *religious* struggles that existed, not only among the Orthodox but also within the Reform and Conservative movements, and that were further articulated by Mordecai Kaplan's call for a "reconstruction" of Jewish life. Roth's Newark and Potok's Brooklyn offer entirely different appraisals of what American Jews were dealing with and how they responded to it (McClymond 19-20). Again, this should not surprise. In my own studies of Jewish society in Roman Palestine, I have argued that it is treacherous to paint Jewish communities with a single brush, to understand them as either thoroughly assimilated to Roman paganism or, at the opposite extreme, as consisting mostly of rabbinic Jews. Instead, the expressions of popular piety that

we can reconstruct from literary and archaeological sources point to a spectrum of practices that reflect what I call a "complex common Judaism" that insists on nuanced, rather than pigeonholed characterizations (Miller, "Stepped Pools"). In second- and third-century Galilee, there was still a significant heartbeat that would allow for an eventual renaissance of Jewish life in Late Antiquity, when the landscape was marked by monumental synagogues, liturgical poets were busy composing remarkable *piyyutim* (liturgical poems), and the Talmud Yerushalmi and the bulk of our extant midrashic writings came into being. Potok is aware of and captures a similar heartbeat in mid-twentieth-century American *Judaism*; Roth is impervious to it.

In sum, Philip Roth succeeded in using his memories of growing up in Jewish Weequahic to make sense of the predicament of the Jews he knew *as an adult*, when, by his own admission, he first became aware, in Chicago and New York, of "[d]iscussions about Jewishness and being Jewish" among "intellectual Jews" (*Facts* 31). Readers are easily enchanted by his depictions of his old neighborhood, upon which he projects his later understanding of the contemporary Jewish condition. However, both the Roth critic interested in the author's Jewish mindset as well as the casual reader should bear in mind that he was not a historian and that the story of Jewish Weequahic, indeed of the Jews of Newark, is only beginning to be told in all its fullness.[35] Once that happens, we will be in a much better position to assess not only Roth's Jewish persona but also the complex dynamic of identity formation and preservation among America's Jews in the mid-twentieth century.

## NOTES

1. My thanks to Linda Forgosh and Jill Hershorin of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater MetroWest NJ; Philip Yourish of the Jewish Museum of New Jersey and of Congregation Ahavas Sholom, Newark; Beth Zak-Cohen and Greg Guderian of the Newark Public Library; Avinoam Patt, Director of the Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Jewish Life, University of Connecticut; Rabbi Moshe Herson, Dean of the Rabbinical College of America; my wife Laura Miller, an avid reader of fiction who compelled me to consider, "Why would anyone take what Roth says about Newark seriously?"; and to David Blumenfeld and my brother Leon Miller, two of the many ordained rabbis who came out of Jewish Weequahic and Newark.

2. See most recently, Miller, "The Study of 'Talmudic Israel'" and "New Directions."

3. This is not a straightforward task, as Talmudic literature is voluminous and includes not only the idiosyncratic Talmud of the Land of Israel (the "Palestinian Talmud" or "Yerushalmi") but also the better-known Babylonian Talmud, which also has much to say about Sepphoris. The corpus spans more than five centuries and poses complex textual and herme-

neutical challenges. Much of my work attempts to address these issues, beginning with *Studies in the History.*

4. See Büchler, *The Political and Social Leaders* (1909) and "Familienreinheit" (1934).

5. *Sepphoris und Rom: ein historischer Roman aus dem 4. Jh.* The work belongs to a genre of "historical novels" aimed at youth (Ben-Ari, *Romance*).

6. Philippson took great liberty with the historian Heinrich Graetz's speculative reconstruction of the poorly documented revolt at Sepphoris ca. 351 C.E. His two-part novel was translated into Hebrew by A. L. Jacobovits (Ben-Ari, *Romance* 130). For an overview in English, see Ben-Ari, "Historical Novel."

7. In contrast, Philippson has the apostate Joseph sell out Patrick and his fellow Jews (Ben-Ari 131-32).

8. Aside from Helmreich, *Enduring,* see the consideration that the anthropologist Susan Ortner gives to Roth's oeuvre in her *New Jersey Dreaming.* Of course, a sociologist (Helmreich) and an anthropologist are going to view the recollections of a novelist from a different perspective than a historian.

9. Roth consulted Charles Cummings who was widely regarded as the "official historian of Newark," and John T. Cunningham, who wrote ninety (!) books about the city (Nadel 49-50, 460-61).

10. Note too Roth's comment, "we were as carefree as any kids anywhere in postwar America, and certainly we felt ourselves no less American. Discussions about Jewishness and being Jewish, which I was to hear so often among intellectual Jews once I was an adult in Chicago and New York, were altogether unknown" (*Facts* 31).

11. Helmreich, *Enduring,* provides a wonderful overview and starting point.

12. Not all Jewish-owned businesses left Newark, even after the disturbances of 1967, when many Jewish establishments, especially those in the Central Ward, were destroyed. Roth has the Swede "hang on" until 1973, when he finally "gave up" and moved Newark Maid out of the city (*Pastoral* 24). On Roth's over-sentimentalizing of his time in Newark at the expense of later periods, see discussion herein and Schwartz. Also, see Lang.

13. Already before I was born, my dad, Irving Miller, was president of one of two remaining synagogues in the city, Ahavas Sholom, which now also functions as a Jewish Museum. My grandfather was president of Ahawas Achim Bnai Jacob for upwards of two decades during which time my grandmother was active in its "Ladies Auxiliary." Ahavas Sholom was/is located in the city's North Ward. Ahawas Achim was in Clinton Hill.

14. Cf. the reflection of Robert Weinstein in Ortner 57.

15. See the various reflections of former residents of Weequahic in Helmreich, *Enduring,* Forgosh, and in Ortner's chapter, "Weequahic," in her *New Jersey Dreaming.*

16. This was the title of an article Lowenthal published in 1989. See too his classic, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* 4-13. Cf. Schwartz 1-2.

17. On Jewish migration to suburbia nationally between 1945 and 1965, see Sarna 282-93.

18. On this influx of Jews in the 1950s, particularly from elsewhere in the South Ward, see Johnson 226-29. On Holocaust survivors in Newark, see Helmreich, "Impact" 23-24. Note too the locations of synagogues by period in table 1.

19. Schley was pronounced "Schlai," at least in my time in Newark.

20. In addition to table 1, see the 1949 listing of the "Synagogue Council of Essex County." The number of synagogues in Newark warrants further investigation as it depends on how one counts mergers and small synagogues.

21. He served as president of the national Rabbinical Council of America from 1968 until 1971.

22. The Lubavitcher movement is more commonly referred to as "Chabad" today.

23. See "Synagogue Services" and Gordon 15. The intention might have been to start a full-fledged day school, but that does not seem to have taken off. See Helmreich, *Enduring* 280.

24. On the Grumman Avenue yeshiva, which was not far from lower Chancellor Avenue, see Helmreich, *Enduring* 280-81.

25. Jeffrey S. Gurock has written extensively about "accommodation and resistance" among the leaders of institutionalized American Orthodoxy (*American Jewish Orthodoxy* 1-62). I use his terminology here with reference to those who affiliated with Orthodox synagogues in general. Gurock, after years of writing about the "non-observant Orthodox," has more recently come around to a more nuanced appreciation of these Jews, many of whom, he now realizes, were maintaining select traditional practices or modifying them so as to preserve them. I long ago characterized these Jews as the pragmatic or "practical Modern Orthodox" as opposed to the "ideological Modern Orthodox," in a presentation entitled "Implications of the Lieberman Candidacy for Knowledge of Jews and Judaism among Jews and Non-Jews," which was presented at a University of Connecticut forum devoted to "Recognition Politics for American Jews," Fall 2000. A popularized version of the piece appeared in the *Long Island Jewish World* under the title "Wake Up to Religion."

26. See Hezser, who points out that Roth's "father-complex" stemmed from the fact that "not only Jewish religious but also Jewish ethnic identity became less and less significant for the Americanized sons" (275).

27. Admittedly, "HYA," like the Talmud Torahs, enrolled a good number of students from non-observant homes, but it did have a core of students from traditional homes.

28. See Miller, "On the Number" 59-63. Samuel Kessler draws my attention to the fact that it was common in the old German and Austro-Hungarian lands for shuls to be referred to by their street names, a practice that continues in Germany today.

29. It is odd that Roth situates the highbrow Bengelsdorf at Bnai Moshe if indeed he is supposed to be Rabbi Foster. Bnai Moshe was an Orthodox synagogue (Roth calls it Conservative) and served a very different community and neighborhood than the Reform B'nai Jeshurun of Rabbi Foster.

30. On Pilchik, see Helmreich, *Enduring* 257.

31. Among papers that once belonged to my dad, Irving Miller, who served on the Board of

Education of the Hebrew Academy at the time, is a breakdown of all the addresses of students attending each of the four branches of Newark's "Talmud Torah," which had been subsumed by the larger day school entity. At least one child from 385 Leslie Street was attending the Schley Street school in 1961.There were a total of 82 at Roth's old school.

32. Helmreich's *The Enduring Community* devotes far too little space to Newark's many Orthodox synagogues, concentrating instead on the well-known histories of B'nai Abraham, Oheb Shalom, and Bnai Jeschurun. In general, the religious and educational institutions of the Jews of Newark require much more intensive investigation.

33. See O'Donoghue's insightful discussion of *Operation Shylock*.

34. For the distinction between familial and religious collective memory, see Halbwachs, chapters five and six. Cf. Cooper, who notes that Roth "knew far less about principles and practices—not to mention the scholarly tradition—of Judaism than about family-transmitted Jewishness" (7).

35. Noteworthy to this end is Johnson. It is ironic that Rabbi Nosson Scherman, an editor of the renowned ultra-Orthodox Artscroll Publications has written that when he was growing up in Newark in the 1940s, it was already in its final years Jewishly. However, his frame of reference is the departure of synagogues from the Central Ward. Sherman went to public school but attended the "Lubavitcher Yeshiva" on Chancellor Avenue started by Rabbi Sholom Gordon. He left Newark when he was *ten* years old to live at the New York yeshiva he attended. His grim picture of Newark misses the vibrancy of Jewish life in Weequahic after he left. He does acknowledge, however, that the "children, grandchildren and great grandchildren" of Newarkers became great learned Torah scholars and leaders of Jewish communities! (Scherman).

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# Philip Roth's Deathmatch with Judaism

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*ARTICLE*

# Philip Roth's Deathmatch with Judaism

*Timothy L. Parrish*

***Abstract.*** Philip Roth famously and frequently resisted being identified as a Jewish writer, although he never resisted being identified as a Jew and was a frequent critic of anti-Semitism. While Roth's work often depicts Jews arguing with each other, these conflicts have less to do with being Jewish, per se, than with how Judaism is conceived in the modern world. Criticized since his earliest stories for attacking Jews, Roth has rebelled against the practice of Judaism. This essay explores Roth's conflict with the existence of Judaism and the implicit communal demand that he abide by its historic practices.

At the end of his life when Philip Roth was asked what he was doing, the retired writer invariably answered, among other activities such as learning how to work his iPhone and watching television with Mia Farrow, that he was reading history—American history, nineteenth-century American history, specifically. "The questions that preoccupy me at the moment," Roth would intone with the impressive specificity usually performed by history PhD students preparing for their qualifying exams, "have to do with Bleeding Kansas, Judge Taney and Dred Scott, the Confederacy, the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, Presidents Johnson and Grant and Reconstruction . . ." He continues for a lengthy paragraph that ends with a list of names that includes, among others, Douglass, Lincoln, Stanton, Carnegie, Morgan, and Rockefeller. "My mind is full of *them*," he says (*Why Write?* 376). The present that consumed his days of writing is over, and he is preparing for death by literally putting himself in the past—a gesture that is the beginning of his death. He puts himself among dead Americans, specifically the actors of the Civil War since, as Roth knows, that's arguably where American history begins and ends, and Roth's proudest achievement likely was being included in The Library of America. But if you want to understand the writing of Philip Roth, you don't need to be expert in the American

Civil War or the period leading up to World War I either. You're better off reading the Talmud, the Mishnah, or the Gemara, works Roth pointedly was not reading. Because those books hold the past that defines Philip Roth. And he'll never escape it.

The fact that Philip Roth is a Jew and therefore a Jewish writer has never been doubted, though it is often questioned, most often by Roth himself. When asked whether he identified more as an American or Jewish writer, Roth would proudly declare himself an American writer. It may be that being included in The Library of America along with Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Willa Cather, a writer Roth disparaged but one whom no one has ever implied was anything other than an American, meant more to him than winning the Nobel Prize would have. In Blake Bailey's recent biography, we learn that Roth initially thought his first novel would concern an American Jew so unsettled by the Holocaust he would cross the Atlantic to murder a randomly chosen German. The story suggests an identification as a Jew that his career generally refuses. His career might have been very different had he completed that novel and it became, as it were, the gateway to his oeuvre. Perhaps he could not finish it because its plot would have required an identification with an implied community of Jews that his fiction ultimately does not depict.

Roth was simultaneously defined by Judaism and in furious revolt against its ubiquitous presence in his work. His early story "The Conversion of the Jews" dramatizes the conflict that was to define Roth's career as a Jewish writer. Hebrew School student Ozzie Freedman asks Rabbi Binder why the Jews are called "The Chosen People" when the Declaration of Independence says that all men are created equal (141). His question tacitly suggests that American history's commitment to equality has made the notion of "chosenness" obsolete, but that's not quite Ozzie's point. The child did not choose to be born an American just as he did not choose to be born a Jew. His American identity he takes for granted—it is literally his birthright. Being a Jew though . . . that requires learning and work, in his case, the study of Hebrew and Talmud required for his Bar Mitzvah. Ozzie wants to know why he must do it. He asks the rabbi other questions—like whether God, in His omniscience, might have allowed the virgin birth of Jesus. For this question, he is asked to leave class. Upon learning of her son's inquiry, his mother "for the first time in their life together hits Ozzie across the face" (156). Ozzie persists though his queries are met with silence from Rabbi Binder. When Ozzie says, "you don't know anything about God," the rabbi demands that the child apologize. Ozzie refuses and the rabbi strikes him so hard his nose's "blood came in a short, red spurt on to Ozzie's shirt" (159).

The rabbi's response is wrong. As any rabbi would know, being Jewish is not simply an identity but also a tradition—as works from the Torah to *Fiddler on the Roof* suggest. For questioning the community's beliefs, the child is physically abused. Ozzie's questions are to be taken seriously because a child asks them, but an adult

reader cannot take them seriously. They have no theological justification—unless you are a Christian. Jews need not offer an intellectual defense of the virgin birth. Were Ozzie to get his wish and convert the Jews to Jesus, that act would eradicate the Jews more effectively than the Shoah. The practice of Judaism would cease. Everyone would be equal and there would no longer be a Chosen People. By the end of the story, Ozzie has usurped the rabbi's role. He assumes leadership of the congregation and forces them to declare their faith in Jesus Christ in exchange for not killing himself.

Ozzie's mother and rabbi both strike him . . . strike him for what? I am uncertain. Do they strike him for being insolent or for questioning the Judaic conception of God? By portraying him as abused, Roth elicits the reader's sympathy for the child. Yet, Ozzie's questions are simple-minded, naïve, and perhaps hostile. It's hard to tell how hostile they are, that is, it's hard to tell if the narrator endorses Ozzie's challenge. Knowingly or not, Ozzie transgresses upon the community's notion of the sacred. It seems unlikely that the thrust of the story is to force the reader to confront the harmful consequences of child abuse, since Roth could write a story about a child's petulance that didn't require a plot where a Jew in effect holds the community hostage over their shared beliefs. Arguably, Roth mixes up Judaism with child abuse to convey the rage he felt about having Judaism thrust upon him as a child. This aesthetic sleight of hand allows Roth to deflect the reader's attention from the silliness of Ozzie's questions and to focus it on the fact the two most important authority figures in his life punished him for challenging the necessity of Jewish ritual. The rabbi's response is wrong, but the violence of their response, though unconsidered, conveys the threat Ozzie's ideas pose to the community and predicts the role Roth would play in the future as the writer of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), *Operation Shylock* (1993), and *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), not to mention the Zuckerman saga.

The most crucial fact about the story's plot is that Ozzie's questions precede his Bar Mitzvah. Roth strategically stops Ozzie's entry into manhood and the practice of Judaism. According to Hartmut Heep, Ozzie provokes a confrontation where "the survival of Judaism is at stake" (39). Heep's reading essentially updates and ratifies the attacks Orthodox or Orthodox-leaning readers made on Roth's early work as being a threat to the Jews—but only of course if one believes that the continued practice of Judaism is necessary for Jews to exist as Jews. One cannot say that his subsequent works retracted Ozzie's charge. Presumably, Ozzie, like his creator, is eventually Bar Mitzvahed. I would say we can only guess at the Jewish life he leads, but we know. The answer is the career of Philip Roth who suspended Ozzie's revolt when he did because he knew the child's victory over the Jews was provisional and deceptive. They remain Jews despite the child's terrorism. Neither Ozzie nor his creator can stop the practice of Judaism or its effects on them, however, which is perhaps why Judaism feels like abuse. For Roth, it was an abuse he expected to feel even in death,

hence his command that Jewish rites not be performed at his funeral, thereby putting a final period to Ozzie's argument. Nonetheless, that eloquent gesture cannot erase the history that prompts him to make it any more than Ozzie can truly convert the Jews to Jesus. The paradox of Roth's career is that his argument with Judaism and the crisis that Heep identifies beginning with "Conversion of the Jews" is what makes his oeuvre whole.

Consider *The Counterlife* (1986), where Zuckerman invokes his circumcision to acknowledge his place in the continuity of Jewish history. But even there—his circumcision was not his decision. A tradition made that choice for him. On the other hand, in that same novel Zuckerman ventures to the Wailing Wall, the last remnant of the Temple destroyed during the Roman War in 70 C.E., to mock those praying there as rock worshippers. If Abraham was the first Jew in that his example initiated circumcision as an essential, bedrock rite of Judaic worship, Zuckerman goes to Jerusalem to mock Abraham. In other words, determining which gesture is truer to Roth—embracing a secular Jewish history or mocking its origins in the sacred—is impossible. Although Roth, like Ozzie, likes to link his origins as a writer within American history and literature, Zuckerman's comic wailing before the Western Wall suggests how misleading that claim is. In *The Ghost Writer* (1979), Roth imagined Anne Frank transformed into an American girl arguably freed from her association with her Jewish family. He could not do the same for Nathan Zuckerman.

Philip Roth is the modern or postmodern epigone of the Jewish writer. The peculiar enigma of his career is that his aggressive indifference, verging on outright hostility, toward Judaism, is what is most distinctive about him. More than any other author since Hitler destroyed Yiddish as a living literary tongue, Roth raises the question of what precisely it means to be identified as a Jewish writer. In his fiction, Roth mocks those who suggest his work must be read in the context of the Holocaust. Yet, his status as a writer of Jewish lives cannot be separated from Hitler's achievement as an exterminator of Jewish lives. For embedded within the question of what makes Roth a Jewish writer is another question, usually silent, without which the question of Roth being a Jewish writer would lack the urgency it carries: what is the relation of the practice of Judaism to Jewish writing? Without the practice of Judaism there would have been no Jews for Hitler to kill since without Judaism the Jews as such likely could not have survived the diaspora as Jews. Arguably, the current situation is that separating one's Jewish identity from Judaism is easier, clearer than separating it from Hitler. And the truth is, as a writer, and as a Jew, Roth, despite his protestations, has done neither.

In a broad sense, Roth's fiction has been in the works since the Jewish emancipation after the French Revolution made it possible for European Jews to lead avowedly secular lives. Earlier American Jewish writers such as Abraham Cahan,

Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth wrote about immigrant Jews living among other immigrant Jews whose immediate Jewish world seemed intact and self-sustaining. In those writers' works, the Gentile world is necessary because a living can be earned from it or it offers enticing new cultural opportunities, but it does not precisely threaten the essence of the Jewish world, which remains intact and taken for granted. One almost wants to say the worlds of these writers, though written in American English, are not far removed from the worlds of Sholem Aleichem or I. L. Peretz, written in Yiddish, where Jews are also depicted as living among Gentiles—though the Jews in those stories are generally in more perilous circumstances. The 1903 pogrom at Kishinev hovers over the stories of Aleichem as it does the poetry of Bialstok, just as the Holocaust permeates Roth's fiction despite Roth having written a novel, *The Plot Against America* (2004), where the basic thrust is that "it couldn't happen here" because, according to Roth's exceptionalist logic, this is America.

For Roth, the question of his Jewish identity has been mixed up with his drive to connect his experience as a Jew with his birthright as an American in a way that self-consciously erases the practice of Judaism. Roth's writings effectively endorse Ozzie's view that American identity makes "chosenness" a choice, not a cultural necessity. Otherwise, one might simply say that Roth is a Diaspora Jewish writer who writes as Jews always have—except without theology. Contrasting medieval Jews with medieval Christians, Milton Steinberg notes that whereas the Jews during that time "had no theology in the sense of an official creed, body of dogma, or statement of doctrine" that they were "compelled to accept," Christians had the Nicene Creed. This meant that Christians were concerned with espousing or affirming the correct faith and "conduct and adherence [was] only secondary." Steinberg makes a distinction between theology and religion. Compared with Christians, Jews were religiously rather than theologically motivated. Jews' bond of loyalty inhered "in a social pattern, an ethical code and a historic loyalty" (95). This last phrase surely applies to Roth, whose fiction is unimaginable without Jews or the relations that pertain among Jews, yet one is hard-pressed to find among his protagonists "an ethical code" or even "historic loyalty" that is specifically Jewish.

In *The Plot Against America*, American history literally meets Jewish history when an American writer born to Jewish parents in Newark, New Jersey, in 1933 contemplates extending Hitler's attempted conquest to American shores. Using the extraordinary powers available to any gifted novelist, Roth rewrites history and toys with making the reader imagine that Hitler's triumph perhaps might have included American Jews. In Roth's version of Hitler's war, the anti-Semite, Charles Lindbergh, not Franklin Delano Roosevelt (who in truth did very little to protect European Jews from Hitler), is elected President. President Lindbergh sides with Hitler and detention camps for Jews are established in America. History, however, revolts at Roth's

usurpation of it, or so the author oddly insists, as it was unable to revolt when Hitler initiated the process of killing six million European Jews. In Roth's counterfactual history, history's facts win the day. America's Jews are not eradicated. American history rolls on in its exceptionalist way, insuring a safe haven for Jews like Philip Roth.

*Plot* was not written from the mindset of a Jew seeking revenge on Hitler for history. It's a celebration of history and it arguably brackets off the Holocaust from American history. At the time of its publication, many read it as a reflection on American history and a dark allegory concerning what many saw as the George Bush/Dick Cheney administration's anti-democratic tendencies. Surprisingly, Roth insisted reading it this way would be "a mistake." In fact, Roth wrote the book less to reimagine American history than to reimagine Jewish history within America. "What matters in my book," Roth claims, is less the plot device of making the anti-Semite Hitler apologist the President than "what American Jews suspect, rightly or wrongly, that he might be capable of doing given his public utterances, most specifically his vilification of the Jews" ("The Story"). These fears, ultimately, are needless since "in the 30's there were many of the seeds for its happening here, but it didn't" ("The Story").

Hitler may not have brought the Holocaust to America, but Roth, strangely, thought about making it happen, though not really. Roth's clarifications only underline that the moral of his fable is ambiguous and hard to parse. "I wanted America's Jews to feel the pressure of a genuine anti-Semitic threat," Roth explains ("The Story"). Why? Because they never have? And which American Jews does Roth want to feel the threat? The Jews of the past who faced history as it was or the Jews of the present who cannot see how "lucky" they are to be Americans? In this instance, when Roth speaks as a Jewish writer it is to tell American Jews that the Holocaust need not concern us. "History," he insists, "has the final say" ("The Story"). True enough, and the answer to why we must say Roth is a *Jewish* writer may well be the same.

Leaving off the peculiarity of a novelist insisting that facts are more important than the artist's right to invent facts and shape them however they wish, Roth's statement leaves unasked the question of *whose* history has the final say. For Roth, American history and Jewish history are continuous, virtually indivisible. Such a perspective seems either naïve or willfully selfish—or both. If you ask most people if Hitler lost World War II they would say he did—Germany surrendered. However, reading historian Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) suggests a different, utterly unsettling interpretation. One might view World War II—Hitler's invasion of Russia, even Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor—as a sort of false flag operation to disguise the fact that Hitler's primary objective was to kill European Jews, to eradicate them if possible. When Hitler died, he knew that he had committed an act of territorial domination that not even the Roman Empire had accomplished or even

imagined. He had transformed Europe into something it had not been since the third century B.C.E when the Jews moved into Greece: a territory virtually without Jews.

In his interviews and essays, Roth stresses that he writes about Jews rather than that he writes as a Jew. One of his heroes, Ralph Ellison, liked to say that "writin' is fightin'" and Roth's writing often seems so confrontational as to be pugilistic. But who Roth is fighting and what he is fighting for in his stories about Jews are hard to discern. His most obvious peers, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Cynthia Ozick, write stories about Jews that exemplify the Judaic virtues of justice, tolerance, and mercy. Roth, however, fights for his own reputation, and in his fiction his protagonists' most obvious antagonists, *Plot* notwithstanding, are often Jews. In Bellow's *The Victim* (1947), the Jewish protagonist, Asa Leventhal, must contend with the mystifying persecution from the Gentile Allbee. Though the Gentile arguably harasses the Jew beyond all reasonable patience, Leventhal, in the end, must search his own heart to see where he offended Allbee and make amends. His story enacts the Jewish fable that teaches that after God invented justice, the angels persuaded Him to invent mercy or else justice would have been unbearable.

In the immediate wake of the Holocaust, Bellow's 1947 novel about Jewish tolerance in the face of aggressive Gentile intransigence may also seem naïve. Roth's *Plot*, in fact, more plausibly presents the threat that twentieth-century history forced upon Jews. However, insofar as it assumes that the Holocaust cannot happen here since America possesses an innate sense of virtue that can be mobilized to confront and defeat evil, it arguably hides from the truth of Hitler's victory over the Jews as surely as accounts of Hitler's unambiguous defeat do. Indeed, perhaps the only clear moral the fable yields is that the Roth family won World War II. They won it because they fought on the winning side, and they won it because they continued their lives as Jews who had become Americans. Their fighting spirit and basic humanity is part of the historical zeitgeist that overthrows Lindbergh, stops the camps before they become too onerous, and sweeps Roosevelt back into power so that American history may resume its more or less benevolent course. Yet, though Roth practically demands that readers understand *Plot* as a triumphant account of the Roth's family history, the truth is that even Roth cannot escape the ancient knowledge that the Roths are at risk because they are Jews. If they live, they live as Americans—they fight as Americans. Had they died, however, they would have died as Jews. And in this sense Roth cannot erase his family's fate as Jews from his American morality play.

In "The Conversion of the Jews," the janitor Blotnik views the world through a simple but clarifying lens largely unavailable to Roth. Regarding any event that requires interpretation, he asks if it was or was not "good-for-the-Jews" (150). Though Roth can read Mikhail Sebastian's *Journal* and be outraged at the casual and

murderous anti-Semitism it depicts, his fiction never portrays the world through that lens. In portraying World War II as a battle wherein the Allied Forces fight and triumph over the Axis Powers, Roth's novel cannot ever acknowledge that Hitler's achievement was not to threaten American life in any meaningful way but to take the latent hatred for Jews that went into European civilization at nearly the same time Christianity did and weaponize it so utterly that millions of Jews could literally be killed without prejudice (or American aid). The blindness at the heart of *Plot* is that it's a Jewish story, not an American story. One might also say that blindness is at the heart of Roth's career, as well.

In *Plot*, Herman Roth takes the family on a vacation to Washington, DC, and argues with anyone who either questions his patriotism or the value of the American ideals to which he is loyal. When the prospect of the Holocaust appears, it is simply as something that Americans, or more specifically the Roths, can handle. "In our lore," Roth explains, "the Jewish family was inviolate against every form of menace, from personal isolation to gentile hostility" (*Counterlife* 14). If others lost that war, or lost their lives in that war, or survived the war only to lose their sense of what living is for, then the Roths did not suffer such hard fates. They're not survivors. They're winners. The author's failure to confront—to even register—the fact that the Holocaust is arguably the most devastating fact in Jewish history since the destruction of the second temple is of a piece with a story wherein a young man's questions about God, about Judaism, cannot be answered according to Judaism's own precepts. If God is dead, so is Judaism. It's at best an atavism, a curious mumbling like Blotnik's prayers in "The Conversion of the Jews." Because if God was dead before Hitler, what was lost when the Nazis destroyed Jews from Amsterdam to Moscow other than millions of lives, whose only "chosenness" consisted of them dying while others survived, and not all survivors were Jews, just like not all of the dead were either. If you take the "chosenness" out of the Jewish story, then what is left?

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Roth was indifferent to the Holocaust but that in his work, even when it concerns the Holocaust, Judaism's continuity is the most vibrant and intractable antagonist. Roth is the Jewish writer who writes as if being Jewish is a fate others are obligated to share, but not him. When Judaism appears, it is usually as a literary problem for Roth, or his alter-ego, Zuckerman, to argue away. The prospect of its loss is welcomed rather than treated as an existential threat to a people. Nathan Zuckerman cannot comprehend why his family members might be upset that he has written stories dramatizing not only their Jewish ethnicity but also their acts of cupidity, lasciviousness, and occasional thoughtlessness. These failings are common to human beings, not just Jews, as Zuckerman responds to his father's question why his son could not have written about his family's virtues rather than their failings—failings that Zuckerman is happy to note are common to all human

beings. Because these particular human beings are Jews who are also family members, and because the stories are based on real actions committed by the family members, they hurt the family deeply. They feel that Zuckerman exposes them to strangers. While their alarm is never portrayed as religious, as having to do with the Torah, the strong sense is that these are family quarrels and thus should be between and among Jews. Roth writes as if their chief concern is not to be embarrassed before outsiders, but he is the one apart. Nathan cannot see that his apparent alienation from other Jews upsets them as much as their embarrassment over whatever personal foibles he has depicted. Their unasked question is not "why are you embarrassing us before the goyim," but "why are you depicting us as betraying the Law, the Torah, without giving us the chance to make restitution?" Zuckerman's family are represented as Jews without Judaism—not by their choice but by Nathan's.

The principal plot for the pre-American trilogy Zuckerman involves him being a writer who is mostly concerned with his critics, that is, that part of his audience who is either hostile toward or critical of his work because of their depiction of Jews. And that criticism begins with his first readers asking him if, in the light of the Holocaust, his writing is good for Jews. During his lifetime, Roth's most famous antagonist was the critic Irving Howe, who was, to put the characterization mildly, a serious man. His scholarly books examining Jewish life and literature from the shtetl to modern America are essential. So are his edited anthologies of Yiddish and Jewish-American writers. Howe defended Roth's early stories and helped him win literary awards. However, after Roth published *Portnoy's Complaint*, Howe in effect washed his hands of the tribe's *enfant terrible*. Roth, Howe said, wrote from "a thin personal culture," by which he meant that Roth's knowledge of Judaism was so limited and his understanding so shallow that treating him as a representative of Jewish thought bordered on the inane. Meanwhile, *Portnoy* was a best seller that made Roth rich enough never to have to worry about book sales again. Within ten years, he had written a book that engages the Holocaust, *The Ghost Writer*, which to many made him seem a serious Jewish writer after the "Jewish mischief" of his early stories. From that point until the American Trilogy, Roth's career largely concerned the plight of being a successful Jewish American writer who had written a best seller that infuriated rabbis and gave him celebrity.

By the time of *The Ghost Writer*, Roth was no longer a controversial Jewish writer. He was simply Philip Roth, a significant American writer with an interesting, unknown future. Roth, however, remained stuck in the past—stuck we might say in the moment of his origin. *The Ghost Writer*'s plot could not confront the Holocaust without dramatizing Roth's own battles with his early readers—a battle he rehearsed again ten years later in *The Facts* (1988). Nathan Zuckerman's desire to marry the resurrected Anne Frank reflects his longing to be on good terms with his family and

likely betrays Roth's desire to end his battle with his Jewish critics. If so, this gesture was perhaps as close as Roth ever came to acknowledging that he was a Jew like other Jews, that he was not an "Eli, the Fanatic" storming off into the uncertain future alone, tribeless, a pariah of his own will.

By continually restaging his battles with those Jews who marked him as a danger to the community, Roth probably felt he was winning this battle again and again. Long after Roth had been accepted as an American writer in the broadest sense, Roth continued to restage this battle—arguably when no one noticed anymore. I do not know of any response Howe made to Roth having made him a pornographer in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983). When Roth published his nastiest novel, *Sabbath's Theater*, Frank Kermode spoke for the Anglo-American literary establishment in declaring it "hilariously serious about life and death." Presumably, Roth was happy to be compared with Thomas Mann, Daniel Defoe, John Milton, and the author of Genesis, but he probably wanted an angry rabbi to get equal time. That the novel concerned Judaism the distinguished critic did not notice. I have been comparing Roth to Ozzie Freedman (Roth is the freed man—he freed himself—that Ozzie longs to be), but he actually preferred Mickey Sabbath. He continually told interviewers that Zuckerman was not Roth, and then insisted that when he named his protagonist Philip Roth and gave his character his own experiences, as he had done with Zuckerman who wrote the Afterword to Roth's memoir, that his novels were not autobiography. He pleaded the venerable defense of fiction, well known by lawyers, novelists, gangsters, and child pornographers. Yet when he invented the most problematic, disturbing, and morally challenging character in all of his novels, the protagonist of *Sabbath's Theater*, he told his biographer that of all his fictional heroes, Sabbath was the one he most closely resembled.[1]

Identifying himself with Mickey Sabbath and using as his character's surname the word that marks perhaps the holiest of Jewish rites is an obviously provocative gesture, arguably a form of defilement. "The Sabbath," Heschel writes, "is a day on which we are called to share in what is eternal in time" (10). Thus, "the faith of the Jew is not a way out of this world, but a way of being within and above the world" (27). Sabbath's way of being in the world is based on a refusal of transcendence, a commitment to life as an experience of self-dealing transactions, and could not be more opposed to the Judaic conception of the Sabbath. He is trapped within the world's ways because he rejects the eternal and wishes to place himself above others by deceiving them. Such is Roth's notion of history—every man for himself. God has left us on our own—but Roth still clings to the word that marks the day Jews commune with God.

This version of "Sabbath" is consistent with Ozzie Freedman's fantasy that Judaic traditions might be eradicated—in effect, erasing history with a gesture—as well as with the adolescent grandiosity of Ozzie's revolt. Arguably, it's more eloquent

than his decision to forbid Jewish rituals from his funeral or his curious insistence on burying his father in a shroud though his father had not left him instructions to fulfill that ancient Jewish rite. Yet, none of these gestures is conceivable without the abiding presence of Judaism. Without Jews to provide his imagination its kicks and pricks, there would be no Philip Roth. I suspect he knew that better than anyone and thus his rage against Judaism enacts his ironic affirmation that he cannot escape the history of Jews since before the second Temple fell.

No one has better seen Roth's reliance on Judaism as his mode of expression—more important to him perhaps than Joyce, Beckett, and Proust combined—than Samuel Kessler in his forthcoming essay, "Judaism, God, and Ritual Practice in Philip Roth's *Everyman*, *Indignation*, and *Nemesis*." Kessler's key insight is that beginning with Roth's *Patrimony*, there is an explicit turn from writing about Jewish identity to using Jewish religious ritual and theology to portray his characters confront the "hardships of ending one's life in a world with or without the God of the Jews." Their "existential crises most often arise during or when meditating upon moments of Jewish ritual or Jewish theological expression." According to Kessler's persuasive argument, Roth, at the end of his life, found himself writing protagonists whose interactions "with Judaism are particularly Judaic."

In discussing *Patrimony*, Kessler correctly directs us to Roth's surprise and perhaps confusion that late in life his father returned to the synagogue and resumed observing Jewish rituals that his son had not seen him observe regularly during his own childhood. Presumably, these practices had been common in the house of Roth's father's father, an immigrant who gave up becoming a rabbi in order to support his family. Of particular interest to Roth is his father's decision to bequeath his tefillin to a gym locker rather than to him. While acknowledging that his father's choice aligns with Roth's attitudes toward Judaism for the past "forty years," he suggests that he "might well have cherished them" (*Patrimony* 96). Kessler reads this admission as "an early development of a religious pathos" that "Roth narrativized in his three late novels" in order to enact "a sort of kiruv, a joining together of Jewish families across the generations, and between Jewish communities of the past and present."

Kessler implies without ever quite stating that in these novels Roth, as a writer if not as a person, forms a tacit rapprochement with Judaism. I would like to accept his argument since it would render Roth whole as a Jewish writer, but I am more inclined to see Roth as the helpless and often angry conduit for a tradition he cannot escape. Regarding his father's tefillin, Roth pointedly notes that he "wouldn't have prayed with them" (*Patrimony* 96). His observation that "he might well have cherished" the tefillin is at best speculation, and certainly the antithesis of sentimental. What is certain is that Roth feels his father's rejection in the gesture—one that he experiences both as a son and a novelist since he acknowledges it's an act that even he could not

have imagined. He also admits his father would have been correct to "scoff" at the assumption Roth would have welcomed the gift. But his father's message is inescapable. Tefillin are not sentimental objects or pieces for a personal museum. Jews use them to pray and Roth by his own admission is beyond prayer.

In return, *Patrimony* is a clinical depiction of his father's decline. Roth is the dutiful son who literally cleans up his father's shit, using his own toothbrush to clean the floor after his father's fecal matter touched it. Whatever fights they had when both were younger Roth leaves out. He writes lovingly about his grandfather's shaving cup, which Herman kept and Roth took possession of after his father's death. In Polish Galicia, Sender Roth was to be a rabbi but as an American immigrant he settled for working in a hat factory. In 2014, twenty-three years after *Patrimony* and three years before his death, Roth connects his grandfather to American history, not to being a rabbi in Polish Galicia. "Even if I wrote in Hebrew or Yiddish," he says, "I would not be a Jewish writer." He notes that America is "238 years old" and his family has been present for "120 years or more than half of America's existence" (*Why Write?* 376). He notes that his grandfather was the American contemporary of Grover Cleveland, Civil War veterans, along with Mark Twain, Henry Adams, and Henry James. But when Sender Roth took his mug to the barber shop, he likely wasn't thinking of himself existing in the company of such men. If Henry James were to have run into Sender Roth, he would have seen him as one of those immigrants he writes of in *The American Scene* who were disfiguring the American faces he had known as a youth.

To Roth, the shaving cup is a holy relic of his grandfather's American identity. It had "the aura of an archaeological find" and "had on me the impact of a Greek vase depicting the mythic origins of the race" (*Patrimony* 28). A pretty comparison to be sure, but the mythic origins of a man who would have been a rabbi but for the exigencies of history is unlikely to find his origins in a shaving cup. A tefillin would be more appropriate. *L'dor va-dor*. The phrase comes from Psalms 146:10 and may be translated as "for all generations, forever." The phrase refers to the passing of Judaism from generation to generation to keep its practices and faith continuous. That Roth receives the shaving cup rather than his father's tefillin effectively breaks the chain of that tradition.

To be sure, the shaving cup is Roth's secular version of his father's tefillin. Roth's disinterest, however, his failure of imaginative empathy, for the life his grandfather sacrificed is equal to his indifference to the effect that the Holocaust might have had and has on non-European Jews. Neither can he see that his own father's return to Judaism likely meant to pay respect to his own father who sacrificed his ambition so that his family could thrive. It may have been his response to the Holocaust, as well. And while Roth celebrates himself as the descendant of his grandfather's sacrifice, it is without piety. He celebrates his family's lapses from Judaism and views himself,

the future author of *Sabbath's Theater*, as the culmination of a cultural and theological annihilation. So Roth refuses Judaic ritual for his funeral, a gesture in keeping with his choice not to continue the Roth line by refusing God's commandment to be fruitful and multiply. And he's also the one left to tell the story, or, more accurately, dramatize its abandonment.

Roth, however, finds rage rather than peace in a leave-taking he cannot leave. His tone describing his father's bequest to the gym locker is measured and contemplative, and works to conceal the anger he obviously feels from being excluded from his father's practice of Jewish ritual that Roth himself rejected. That rage is transferred and becomes Roth's extraordinary gesture of usurping his father's funeral rites through Roth's choice to bury his father in a shroud. According to Roth, the mortician asked him to choose a suit for his father to wear in his casket. "He's not going to the office," Roth bizarrely reasons to his brother, thus he "chooses the shroud of our ancestors to bury his corpse." Roth underlines that his father "wasn't Orthodox" and thus the act is either misplaced grief from the son or an attempt to humiliate his father in death (*Patrimony* 234). It's tempting and perhaps correct to interpret this act as Roth trying to get rid of the body of his inherited Judaism, but that reading does not go far enough to account for Roth's personal anger. Herman's body will rot and the shroud will disintegrate, but there's a grasping at the eternal in the act. Roth is putting his father into the forever at the same time he is displacing his rage regarding the tefillin on to his father's body in the form of the shroud. Whether his father is at peace is irrelevant to Roth. It's his own peace he seeks and cannot find—even he admits the act is possibly both "pretentiously literary" and "hysterically sanctimonious" (234). Roth usurps Jewish ritual to punish his father, but his act underscores his inability to escape its ubiquity in his imagination. And thus, as Kessler argues, Jewish ritual also becomes the means by which he dramatizes his late characters' confrontation with mortality. Perhaps his father would have been amused.

*Patrimony* closes with a line that echoes through Jewish writing, from Moses to the present day: "You must not forget anything" (238). Remembering, however, is not the same as understanding, and history is not just a random aggregation of facts without a story to give them continuity and meaning. In *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi argues that it was "ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history" (8). By their logic, God reveals Himself through history. Thus, Israel need only remember "God's acts of interventions in history" and adhere to them. With the canonization of the Hebrew Bible at Yabneh around the year 100 C.E., "for the first time the history of a people became part of its sacred scripture" (15). This is the need to remember so often invoked in the Hebrew Bible. It told the whole history of the world from creation to the fifth century B.C.E. Thus, "in Talmudic and midrashic literature there are many interpretations of the

meaning of history, but little desire to record current events" (21). This is the meaning of memory in the Hebrew Bible. Herodotus is called the father of history because he did not want to forget splendid things that happened. Facts for him were like curious pieces that could be saved from the rubble. Roth aspires to be like Herodotus, and his grandfather's cup is one of his splendid things.

On the other hand, ritualized memory of the past is an expression of piety and has always been crucial to Jewish experience. Roth's injunction to himself to never forget anything derives from the tradition Yerushalmi defines, just as his impious burial of his father is curiously Judaic. Until the Emancipation, the rabbis were the historians. They treated the Bible as a "revealed pattern of the whole of history" (Yerushalmi 21). As the family historian, Roth does not concern himself with God's interventions in history—though one might say every time an Orthodox reader criticized him God was intervening to give Roth his subject. And perhaps his writing might be richer were he to imagine his grandfather's passage to America an act of God. For, as Ozzie surely knows, if God could create the world and allow Jesus to be born of a virgin mother, then surely he could countenance Sender Roth working in a hat factory instead of a synagogue. In "Conversion of the Jews," Ozzie stands over the precipice of a building and enacts his own version of the Spanish Inquisition: he would make them renounce their faith for Jesus. And then from the building he jumps. Where does he land?

Coming from the mind of Philip Roth, he never had far to fall. He was always home, though in the story the loving arms of his community catch him. Bear in mind, though, the abuse Ozzie felt from his mother and rabbi likely remains. Why Roth may have felt abused by the ritual practices of Judaism is beyond the scope of this essay. There is no available evidence that his parents mistreated him. Of Roth's characters, Yerushalmi notes their "suburban Jewish past [i]s also a Jewish past" but it is "trivial." To complain about the persistence of Judaism after Hitler is . . . trivial is a kind word for it. Yerushalmi cites Maurice Halbwachs's notion that "individual memory" is "structured through social networks" and that "collective memory is not a metaphor but a social reality transmitted and maintained through the conscious institutions of the group" (xxiv). Roth fulfills that function—as a Jew.

Whether gathering his family's past from Sender the failed rabbi to Philip the successful novelist, or describing the travails of Zuckerman's battles with his Jewish readers, Roth the American Jewish writer took on a role as ancient and as familiar as the shroud in which he buried his father. Invoking Napoleonic wit, we might say that if you "scratch an American Jewish author," you'll see a rabbi—perhaps even Philip Roth dressed as Eli the Fanatic walking into eternity allegedly free from Jewish ritual. His final living gesture, however, cannot escape the afterlife of his fiction which, as Roth

likely knew better than anyone, will not escape the history of Judaism that arguably defined his writing as surely as it did that of Rashi, Maimonides, or Moses. Who can understand Ozzie's revolt better than Blotnik, Rabbi Binder, or his mother—the ones who want to bring him home safely? For despite his knowingly provocative *envoi* gesture, Roth's lifelong revolt against Judaism was always and only an engagement with it.

## NOTE

1. See Blake Bailey's interview with Eric Cortellessa. Sabbath imagines his own obituary wherein it is said he killed himself directly after paying a woman one hundred dollars to sodomize her. It concludes, mirthfully, "he did nothing for Israel," by which is presumably meant the people of Israel, not the country founded in 1948 (*Sabbath* 195).

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# A Biography and Roth's Most Experimental Work to Date

Eric Vanderwall


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*BOOK REVIEW*

# A Biography and Roth's Most Experimental Work to Date

Blake Bailey. *Philip Roth: The Biography*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2021. 898 pp. $40.00 hardback.

Ira Nadel. *Philip Roth: A Counterlife*. Oxford University Press, 2021. 546 pp. $29.95 hardback.

The first half of 2021 saw the publication of two biographies of Roth, each named for its subject. Oxford University Press published Ira Nadel's *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* in early March, and W. W. Norton released *Philip Roth: The Biography* by Blake Bailey about a month later. These two books' lives, if they can be called that, have been eventful in ways that broach issues of fact, fiction, authorship, perceived truth, and the host of other issues that animate much of Roth's own work. Nadel, a professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia, has been publishing on Roth for ten years, drawing the litigious attention of Roth himself and as a result losing access to much archived material and gaining the hostility of the estate (Bailey 754-55).[1] Bailey, however, worked at Roth's behest and under his direction, pleasing his subject enough to have earned the bequeathal of the prized Eames chair. Accusations of sexual misconduct, of degrees ranging from so-called grooming to forced sexual encounters, beset Bailey shortly after the book's publication and accompanying glowing reviews, profiles, and notices in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. Norton subsequently dropped the title from its catalog, although as of September 2021, new copies remain available from many retailers. As in many of Roth's works, stories obscure demarcations of author and subject, truth and falsehood, text and life, in ways that threaten to overtake the reader.

Even to confine attention to the texts themselves presents some difficulty in that the biographers proffer vastly different notions of the task of biography. Nadel describes his book as "an effort to explore the 'in-there' and penetrate the fortress of Roth's protective self, to peer over the rampart to see the multifaceted person, and to uncover some of the secrets" (xv). The epigraph, spoken by Philip Roth "to his

biographer," is the closest Bailey's work comes to stating its aims (and, probably inadvertently, its problems): "I don't want you to rehabilitate me. Just make me interesting." Where Nadel conceives of the biography as an attempt to understand its subject's true, rather than professed, thoughts, Bailey has, before the beginning of the main text, abdicated control to Roth and eschewed any concern other than making him appear interesting, a subjective and vague term. (That the command is to make him interesting, rather than present him as he was or, quoting Roth's own motto, to let the repellent in, seems significant.)

Nonetheless, the same evaluative criteria, based on a personal sense of what constitutes a good biography, will be applied to both books. A biography ought to portray the events of its subject's life with understanding without either defending him or condemning him, which necessitates the establishment of critical distance from the subject. The biographer ought to act the sideman, allowing the subject to occupy the attention of the reader; anything that calls attention to the biographer rather than the material under consideration is inappropriate. A rigorous epistemology must be in place, demanding proof at every turn and excluding from the text supposition, conjecture, assumption, false equivalency, and all other manner of faulty thinking. A literary biography should also include information of interest to literary artists and researchers alike: comparisons of drafts, remarks on the subject's working process, accounts of the subject's reading, details about literary influences, and so on.

Philip Roth poses a daunting challenge to biographers. Nearly all his published works were autobiographical to some extent, yet disparities between writer and written stymie any attempt to draw neat equivalences. He continually experimented with authorship, truth, deception, attribution, memory, representation, and identity, confounding most attempts to analyze. Roth was also keenly invested in fostering a certain perception of himself by the public, meaning that few, if any, of his remarks, even in private, can be taken as products of some genuine, unperformed Roth self. The man also seems to have possessed the kind of domineering charisma that tended to distort the views of those closest to him, and, further, deliberately to have cultivated relationships with people who might eventually write flattering things about him. Since Roth himself spent close to half his life directing biographical efforts, and not necessarily with scholarly critical distance a priority, much of the material assembled, even if factually accurate as far as it goes, serves Roth's aims more than those of researchers studying him and his work.

With a basic rubric for biography and awareness of difficulties in biographical study of this particular author, Nadel's and Bailey's respective works can be subjected to analysis. A consideration of Nadel's *A Counterlife* and then Bailey's *The Biography* reveals the latter to be the superior, albeit highly flawed, book. When read as Roth's first posthumous post-truth, metafictional novel, *The Biography* presents

Bailey as coauthor and unreliable narrator, while *A Counterlife* is best consulted as a supplement.

Basic problems that ought to have been rectified in copyediting hobble Nadel's biography. Nadel's frequent misunderstanding of irony stands as an error of interpretation that diminishes his authority and casts doubt on his understanding and reading of Roth in general (Nadel 30, 95, 131, 190, 192, 284, 318, 405, 422, 423, 434). This authority is further diminished by the many copyediting errors that bespeak a lack of attention to detail. Even citations of Roth's own works and the characters therein contain major errors. Gabe Wallach appears as Wallace and *My Life as a Man* (1974) as *My Life of a Man*, both of which demonstrate how an error of one letter distorts fundamental aspects of a work (185, 187). The chapter "Jewish Wheaties" contains in its opening paragraph an erroneous dating of the publication of *Our Gang* (1971). Such basic errors compromise the authority of *Philip Roth: A Counterlife*, and hence its reliability as a source for research.

Nadel's biography further suffers from a misuse and misreading of source documents. *The Facts* (1988) is cited often enough that it seems to have provided the bulk of the information about Roth's early life and marriage to Margaret Martinson. Use of a work of fiction (the category assigned it by the Philip Roth Society and suggested by its taking the form of a manuscript considered and rejected for publication by Nathan Zuckerman, a fictional character and Roth alter ego) as a source for a biography is irresponsible. Given Nadel's occasional demonstrations of the unreliability of *The Facts*, such as evidence in letters indicating that Martinson's level of involvement in Roth's writing was greater than he claimed in that book and elsewhere, it is incomprehensible why that ironically titled work (*The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*) would be construed as a valid source for anything other than some of Roth's metafictional, autobiographical guises. The notoriously biased *Notes for My Biographer* also appears as a source. This document provides insight into one perspective of which Roth wanted to convince others badly enough to have nearly published it, but it does not constitute a reliable source for fact. The same, or similar, goes for any documents Roth wrote: their value is in their revelation of the man's motives and not in their factual validity. Nadel even seems aware of his misreading of sources, concealing his use of *The Four Agreements* (1997), a popular self-help book by an author with no academic credentials, with a reference to what "one psychologist has noted" (291, 496). Without reliable sources and without a critical distance from essential but unreliable ones, the worth of the biography itself is doubtful.

*A Counterlife* frequently offers unfounded conjecture. Readers encounter many suppositions: Roth's "[fear] of failure might have been a factor" (xiii), Roth "may have taken his cue from Virginia Woolf" (104), Roth's and Martinson's battles for legal custody of her children "may have turned him away from the wish to have any

children of his own" (138), Roth "may have overplayed Maggie's [Martinson's] negative dimension" (193), that *Writers from the Other Europe* "might be understood as [Roth's] reaching back to the culture he supposedly lacked" (268), and numerous others. Such conjectures arise from a basic problem in Nadel's aim, to "focus on Roth's psychological experiences," which, being ephemeral mental states and not necessarily observable or documented, are easy to imagine but difficult to prove (x). It is not even clear how corroboration for psychologizing claims could exist; in the case of someone as evasive as Roth, this kind of inquiry seems destined to arrive at baseless and useless equivocating conclusions.

Bailey's work differs markedly from Nadel's but nonetheless suffers many shortcomings, chief of which is the failure to establish any critical distance from the subject. He reveals his sycophantic posture, apparently without irony, when in the acknowledgements he describes "listening to our greatest living novelist empty his bladder" as "about as good as it gets for an American literary biographer" (810). Bailey attends closely to reviews, as was Roth's wont, but seems to identify inappropriately with his subject such that any negative review cited is the work of "a stalwart hit man" or mere "boilerplate" (468, 726). The biographer's identification with his subject and defense of him also gives rise to some truly strange passages regarding some of Roth's paramours. Of Roth's girlfriend in the spring and summer of 2006, Bailey writes the following: "Brigit was the first woman Roth had ever wanted to marry, but, given his own nearness to death, he thought it only fair to offer her a child—a prospect, in this case, that thrilled him too" (713). Roth's sentiments are not at issue: people behave strangely when trying to keep a romance together. The issue is how Bailey utterly fails to establish a perspective other than Roth's, which is borne out in the syntax of the sentence that begins with Brigit and gradually redacts her, so that by the end Roth is alone with his enthusiasm for his supposedly generous offer. A good biographer would relate this episode with some critical distance yet without imposing judgement, allowing readers to see the subject in all his contradictory complexity.

An episode involving Barbara Sproul, Roth's girlfriend in the early 1970s, presents another notable example of Bailey's bizarrely Roth-dominated perspective: "When Roth got on [Sproul's] nerves enough to make her think *fuck you*, she'd notice him all but reeling from the unspoken blow, and hence took pains to keep mean thoughts to a minimum" (356). The endnotes cite no source for this assertion. Since the statement is largely conjecture about the unobservable (perceived irritation and thoughts not had) occurring nearly fifty years ago, there is not any conceivable way to corroborate it or other psychologizing passages of this kind. This Sproul sentence is comparable to the previous Brigit one in seeming to have as its basis Roth's beliefs, from which a decidedly lopsided characteristic scene is constructed. If one reads past the heavy and misleading hand of the biographer, these sentences also bear out interpretations

that Bailey seems at pains to avoid: in the former case, that Roth took a fling more seriously than his paramour, and in the latter case, that Roth made it clear, verbally and otherwise, that meekness was the acceptable attitude. While it may not be possible at this point to investigate or prove such alternate hypotheses, Bailey's total inability to distance himself from Roth and to parse Roth's dissembling severely mars this biography.

The distorted scope of interest exhibited in *Philip Roth: The Biography* presents grave problems. This book lists for $40 and runs nearly nine hundred pages, indicating that scholars and dedicated Roth readers comprise its audience. Despite this, the text barely engages with Roth's work as a writer; it never describes the author's working process, never quotes from successive drafts to compare them, and, after the early years, never refers to what Roth was reading at the time or what were likely influences on his many reinventions of his authorial persona. Only at a few points does *Philip Roth: The Biography* offer partial glimpses of the man's literary interests, sometimes references to his favorite authors and sometimes reading lists from his classes (Bailey 511-12, 528, 657). The book incessantly focuses on chronicling the minutest details of Roth's sexual escapades to the extent that the first mention of *Exit Ghost* (2007), as a finished work, comes as an aside only to frame how much "[finding] another young woman" helped Roth (Bailey 722). The scale and price of *Philip Roth: The Biography* indicate a scholarly audience, but the text reads like nothing so much as a very long celebrity gossip piece.

Bailey has the obtrusive (and rather Rothian) habit of inserting himself into the text. This begins with the epigraph, which is attributed thus: "Philip Roth to his biographer." Throughout the work, Bailey makes first-person cameos in the footnotes and third-person appearances in the main body of the text, with a Joycean shift into first-person in the epilogue (804). The biographer insistently uses *chez*, which is out of keeping with the diction of the subject and, worse, draws attention away from Roth and toward himself. The most intrusive and tone-deaf instance of Bailey butting in with *chez* occurs during Roth's second trip to Israel, in reference to the home of one Amos Elon, a "staunch advocate of Palestinian statehood and total withdrawal from occupied territories" (472). It is as if Bailey can't help continually interrupting the biography in an attempt to upstage Roth.

With the weaknesses of each biography identified, how should one apportion reading time? What purposes does each book serve and how ought it be read? Nadel's *Philip Roth: A Counterlife*, obstructed and delayed by the lawsuit in its early stages and plagued in published form by multitudes of mechanical errors running through its poorly organized sections, is, at about half the length of its competitor, a slog to read. The small number of valuable observations are buried among digressions and baseless psychologizing conjecture. The book's troubles are many, its pleasures few.

*Philip Roth: The Biography* by Bailey surpasses its counterpart in polish and organization (although not without its faults on the latter) while suffering from serious problems of perspective and (given the shared copyright and Bailey's cozy relations with his subject) conflicts of interest. Despite its many flaws, Bailey's is ultimately the superior work for the researcher because, whatever its problems of presentation and critical distance, it contains a lot of useful information; the caveat is that parsing the important parts requires reading past the unreliable narrator.

Bailey's biography is worthwhile because, from another view, all its shortcomings as a biography make it fascinating when read as Philip Roth's first posthumous ghostwritten/cowritten metafictional novel. *The Biography* derives enough of its information from sources originating with Roth that he seems to have used Bailey as little more than an amanuensis for an autobiography, a motive Bailey himself acknowledges observing in his subject (809). Roth's role can then be understood as an extension of the experiments with authorial attribution and identity that occupied him for most of his career; even its title, identical to its subject's but for the convention of italics and its genre designation, plays this game of identity. Which Roth is the real Roth—*Philip Roth* or Philip Roth? (And what is the definition of "real" when fiction is at issue?) That *The Biography*, with Bailey as its pliable narrator, discloses relevant information while deemphasizing or eliding the kinds of questions a good biography ought to ask, marks it as a work with an unreliable narrator, another literary device of great interest to Roth. Indeed, in the same paragraph that Bailey alludes to Roth's control over sources and interpretation, he makes the syntactically ambiguous claim that Roth "was all but incapable of dissembling his human essence," making apparent the biographer's poor understanding of his subject and diminishing his credibility without being aware of having done so (809). The book's skewed emphasis, which continually defies the conventions of the genre its subtitle announces, provides the story that Roth, judging by the epigraph, wanted to tell, but not necessarily the most scholastically useful or literarily edifying.

By now, accusations against Bailey, and their repercussions, have overshadowed the book itself. Bailey's alleged sexual misconduct, mainly involving young women who were former students, strongly resembles Roth's own habit of using his classes as recruiting grounds for sexual adventure (Bailey 341, 681). In a typically Rothian turn, it is as if the events of the biography spilled over into the biographer's alleged past, collapsing any delineations of biographer and subject, fact and fiction, biography and novel, truth and hearsay. Every way in which the reliability and impartiality of the biography could be challenged has been, and what has made it an execrable biography makes it a terrifically interesting work of fiction in a genre difficult to pin down—biographical fiction? fiction by proxy? multiplanar metafiction? nonfiction *roman à clef*? semifactual *bildungsroman*? nexus in an intertextual array (comprising its own

sources, the many stages of critical response, the accusations, etc.)? Its evasion of categorization is part of its charm when taken as other than authoritative biography.

Roth devoted a significant portion of his life to thinking about and directing efforts toward an official biography. In 1983, when he was fifty, Roth revised his will to designate as his official biographer Judith Thurman, whom he described as "a girl after [his] own heart" (Bailey 464). This is the earliest documented instance of Roth's working towards the eventual publication of a biography, something that occupied an increasing proportion of his thinking and his labors from then until his death three and a half decades later. The man succeeded so well in turning himself into an institution and his every move into a news event that the obvious question has never been broached: why did Roth want a so-called official biography as badly as he did and why did he expend so much effort in bringing it about? Consider that in 1983, at the first documented sign of his intentions, the award-dense two decades from *The Counterlife* to *Everyman* had not yet happened. The late-period entries in the Zuckerman cycle had yet to be published, let alone written. Why was Roth convinced of the necessity of a biography and the further necessity of his orchestration thereof?

Roth's dedication to an official biography of his own raises questions about authenticity and intention. Since Roth thought seriously about his eventual biography and posthumous legacy about halfway through his long life, it is unclear to what extent he conducted himself having in mind his biography and posthumous reputation. Bailey describes Roth's romance with Susan Rogers, which included purchases of new clothes at "chic Upper East Side consignment shops" and visits to "a posh stylist on East Fifty-ninth" (669). Roth nonchalantly claimed unconcern for the costs, which Bailey then follows with a correction, citing a higher figure. The professed indifference to expense is belied by the extravagant expenditures that seem to be more exhibitionist than generous, an interpretation supported by Roth's frequent flaunting of significantly younger and richly attired girlfriends at public events. When Ross Miller turned sixty in 2006, Roth "gave him a lavish [. . .] birthday party" to which, in addition to Roth's close friends, he had also brought his "official photographer, Nancy Crampton, the better to record for posterity this unwarranted act of generosity" (Bailey 707). Someone who hires a photographer to document a purportedly generous act seems to be using the recipient as a means for self-aggrandizement. (Also, why does a writer who claimed to care for little aside from writing have an official photographer at all?) One gets the sense in reading such scenes that Roth was performing for the biography. The same goes for his many letters and notes, a great many of which were preserved, presumably for use in a biography. If Roth was engaged in performing a version of himself for later documentation, how reliable are his personal papers? How can gestures in his personal life be interpreted if they seem to arise from a pre-biography performance?

For some critical episodes in Roth's life, he is the sole source of information. Neither biographer performs due diligence in assessing reliability of materials, instead generally following Roth's directions (quite explicit in the case of Bailey, who received many memos from Roth, as he admits in the acknowledgments). The details of Roth's first marriage, to Margaret Martinson, and the alleged urine fraud that was supposedly its basis all derive from materials that ultimately originate with Roth himself. Nadel relies exclusively on *The Facts* for these stories (100-01, 134). Bailey, in his capacity as officially approved biographer, had access to much more material, and yet still relies primarily on *The Facts* with some quotations drawn from Roth's letters dating to the time of the separation and subsequent legal proceedings (161-62). Such pronouncements, like any made during an acrimonious divorce, ought not to be taken at face value. Roth had in his possession an artifact he claimed was Martinson's journal, taken from her apartment in 1965 when she was hospitalized after a suicide attempt (Bailey 252-53). One passage quoted from this document refers to its alleged author's "one serious mistake" in "confessing to Philip [Roth]," which Bailey summarily asserts, closing the chapter, is "the only entry in Maggie's [Martinson's] journal that alludes to the urine fraud" (239). The passage does no such thing: whatever this confession's content cannot be surmised from an entry noting only regret for making it and nothing of its nature. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the biography offers no independent corroboration to establish the validity of this potentially spurious document. Roth's own story of its acquisition—which, occurring as it did during the protracted separation and legal disputes, was essentially trespassing and theft—casts doubt on his reliability as a source in general and certainly for this episode. Being that Roth's vocation for five decades was writing fictionalized (often thinly so) literary works, many of which (e.g., *The Facts*, *Portnoy's Complaint* [1969], *Operation Shylock: A Confession* [1993], *Patrimony* [1991], *The Prague Orgy* [1985]) take the form of a confession or include the word in the subtitle and experiment with authorial identity, his possession of a document of questionable provenance is not sufficient proof of its authenticity. Bailey draws numerous quotations from the purported diary without ever describing a process to determine its validity or reliability, which, insofar as the authorial attribution may be correct without said person being a dependable source. The absence of measures to determine the supposed diary's authenticity is surprising given the extent of Roth's efforts to determine whether Francine du Plessix Gray had written him an anonymous letter, one that rankled for years and presented what he believed to be evidence of a conspiracy against him on the part of Gray (Bailey 567-68). The diary attributed to Martinson ought to be vetted somehow if used in future studies of Roth's life. If it is found to be spurious, as there seems reason to suspect, that in turn raises myriad other questions about what actually happened, why Roth fabricated the document, etc. Until such investigations

yield such conclusions, the more pressing questions are how Roth has been able consistently to direct the course of biographical studies and why it is that a fiction writer, whose business it is to invent engrossing stories, should be believed without question.

Throughout his career, Roth professed himself to be something of a rebel, a gadfly, an underdog, a dark horse—an adversarial figure. In *The Facts* and elsewhere, Roth characterized his reception at the Yeshiva University symposium as a "trial" and "the most bruising public exchange" in his life, despite an extant audio recording contradicting his account of the proceedings (Nadel 116-19). Nadel describes Roth's receipt in 2014 of an honorary degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary as evidence of how "Judaism and the Jewish establishment made up to Roth" for perceived slights over the years (434). Bailey offers a comparable account of the same event, as "a kind of détente, at last, between Philip Roth and the Jewish cultural establishment" (Bailey 775). This assertion of Roth's late acceptance by what Nadel and Bailey identify as the Jewish establishment is belied by Roth's Jewish Book Awards, his close association with prominent literary Jewish figures, and his connections to Israel developed during his two trips there. Roth, despite his protestations to the contrary, was part of the Jewish establishment. Why, then, was it so important to him to portray himself as a lone outsider? Why do many find this narrative believable when significant evidence to the contrary exists?

Roth devoted time late in life to poring over academic works on him. Bailey briefly notes Roth's lawsuit against Nadel based on a line in *Critical Companion to Philip Roth* that its subject found objectionable, eventually forcing changes in the text and the withdrawal of permission for Nadel to quote from Roth's work or contact any of Roth's associates (754-55). The author, by then in a self-proclaimed retirement that received no shortage of news coverage, also hired a research assistant to "determine how widely the seepage from Bloom's book had spread throughout the academy" (Bailey 755). Roth's assessment of another of Nadel's pieces as "[p]ure rubbish, from the first to the last" is apparently important enough to have also merited inclusion in the biography (Bailey 782). Why was Roth concerned enough about his reputation in academia to sue academics? Why was he spending enough time reading what other people wrote about him to be well versed in the field devoted to studying him?

The academic literature on Roth is only a part of all such secondary and paratextual sources, categories that also include book reviews, jacket copy, plaques, biographies, award citations, etc. Roth attempted to exert control over much of this material. According to Bailey, Roth wrote the text for the plaque placed on his childhood home in Newark, which identified him as "one of America's greatest writers of the 20th and 21st centuries" (703). When he was dissatisfied with Ross Miller's efforts in the Library of America editions, he "wrote almost every word of his jacket copy" as well as the textual notes and biography in brief while still crediting all work to Miller in

order to "avoid the appearance of a self-serving motive" (Bailey 697). In 1983, the same year Roth named his first official biographer, he asked Hermione Lee to interview him for the *Paris Review*. After cooperating with his interlocutor on revisions of the transcript, Roth then spent six months "[sharpening it] almost beyond recognition," to the extent that he "almost certainly confected the whole exchange" as it ultimately appeared in print (Bailey 465-66). Thus did Roth control his portrayal by passing it off as work by another hand. All such efforts on Roth's part, of which there are many, can be understood as the second corpus: the body of work generated to control the perception of the first corpus and its author. When Roth's performance for the eventual biography is taken into account, his extensive private correspondence can be understood as part of the second corpus; his books, as autobiographical as they are, occupy a less definite position as both fiction and as endeavors responding to his life off the page, such as Roth's vow to avenge himself on Bloom in *I Married a Communist* (1998) and the use in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) of Milton Appel as retribution directed at Irving Howe for a "withering dismissal" published in *Commentary* more than a decade earlier (Bailey 607, Taylor 109-11). Although Bailey, in relating such information, is clearly aware of the extent and influential power of Roth's second corpus, he never poses the questions a responsible biographer should. Why did Roth feel as driven as he was to control what people thought about him? Why did he use Miller and others as mouthpieces for his own views on himself and his work? To what extent has this second corpus distorted attempts to understand the author and his work?

The biographies and reminiscences are probably the most crucial part of the second corpus, which surrounds and protects the primary one, akin to Felix Abravanel's metaphorical moat in *The Ghost Writer* (1979) (58). Roth seems to have dedicated himself to seeking out younger writers who could memorialize him and thereby foster the legacy he wanted. Claudia Roth Pierpont, a close friend but no relation, wrote *Roth Unbound* with Roth's involvement and approval, a work that begins with her declaration of admiration (Pierpont 3). Curiously, neither Nadel nor Bailey mention this book in their respective texts, although it does appear as a citation in the endnotes for each. Roth sought out Judith Thurman based on her biography of Isak Dinesen, naming her his first official biographer. James Atlas, whom Roth contacted in similar circumstances, seems also to have been tapped for hagiographical purposes, and, despite the acrimony between the two over the years, his audiobook *Remembering Roth* (2019) is admiring of its subject. Benjamin Taylor's *Here We Are* (2020), the literary equivalent of watching two guys pat each other on the back, even recounts Roth's explicit suggestion to Taylor that he write a book about their friendship (18). Most prominent of all is Bailey's book, which, judging by the copyright shared with the estate and the preponderance of sources penned by the subject, is very close to what

Roth wanted: "a ventriloquist's dummy" who was "someone first-rate that [Roth] could entirely bend to his own point of view" (Taylor 50).

An understanding of Roth's life necessitates understanding his career, including the financial components. According to Nadel, of all Roth's published books, only *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Plot Against America* (2004) sold well enough to cover his advances (4, 201, 248). Despite Bailey's close attention to advances, sales figures, and reviews, he never puts it so bluntly, although the information is there in the book, only without his having noted such an important pattern. (How Bailey could spend as much time as he did looking over sales figures, earnings, advances, and so on without noting such an important point is itself worthy of remark, casting doubt on his ability to interpret information in a manner other than that provided by Roth.) Literature is an art, but publishing is a business. Publishing houses need to make money somehow, usually through selling enough copies of a given title to cover the author's advance in addition to other production expenses (advertising, distribution, etc.). If Roth's publications proved to be such perennial commercial duds, how was he able to negotiate ever larger advances each of the numerous times he changed publishers? Why did publishers pay so much for an author who, whatever his literary merits, meant financial loss? Which better selling authors or benefactors (corporate or otherwise) were underwriting the publishers' losses, and did they know they were doing it? How did Roth have a publishing career at all after one or two sales duds? Financial considerations should not come into play in literary analysis, but they are pertinent when attempting to understand a life and a career. If Roth himself became wealthy as a published author while continually losing money for his publishers, there is much more to his working life than has been revealed in either of these biographies.

As both Nadel and Bailey acknowledge, without seeming to understand fully, one of Roth's primary interests was in questioning and playing with the distinction between true and false, what Nadel calls "the uncertainty of facts" (363). Roth wrote in *The Facts* that "[memories] of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imaginings of the facts" (8). In the last few years, notions about post-truth began emerging and receiving attention in academic and nonacademic settings. In thinking about new theoretical apparatus to apply to Roth to continue the study of his oeuvre, investigating his place in post-truth thinking could be fruitful. To what extent, if any, was his work an influence on the development of this idea? How might his corpus be read with post-truth theory as interpretive tool? How might the provisionally titled second corpus (including these biographies) be studied with such methods? Can Roth be understood as having been a post-truth writer before the term existed? What new insights might be gleaned by subjecting Roth's work to this still nascent theory?

These are but a few of the many possible questions that the field of Roth Studies could pursue in the coming years. What underlies the impulse behind all the foregoing proposed queries is a move beyond the hagiographical approach of *Here We Are* and *The Biography* while avoiding the pitfalls of unfalsifiable supposition in *A Counterlife*. It may also be the case that the biography as a form is of limited use in studying Roth, and that some other method is better suited to one as multifarious and evasive as he. At the time of this writing, Jacques Berlinerblau's *The Philip Roth We Don't Know* (2021) has been out for less than a month and Steven J. Zipperstein's forthcoming biography has as yet no publicly disclosed title or publication date. The post-Roth harvest is still being brought in and the disappointments of *A Counterlife* and *The Biography* may yet be fulfilled.

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## NOTE

1. Nadel and I corresponded through email after my acceptance of this dual review assignment. I do not think our communication has unduly biased my ability to critique his work.

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# "Portnoy's Complaint at 50": A Podcast About Roth's Most Infamous Book


Brett Ashley Kaplan, Samuel J. Kessler

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# "Portnoy's Complaint at 50"

## A Podcast About Roth's Most Infamous Book

*Brett Ashley Kaplan and Samuel J. Kessler*

Readers of this special issue might be interested in "portnoy's complaint at 50," an episode in the podcast series *Adventures in Jewish Studies*, produced by the Association of Jewish Studies.

In this episode, Jeremy Shere interviews literary scholars Warren Hoffman, Josh Lambert, and Brett Ashley Kaplan to discuss the hilarity and the controversy surrounding Philip Roth's most famous novel as it turns 50 years old.

When published in early 1969, *Portnoy's Complaint* was an immediate sensation, selling thousands of copies and rocketing to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, turning Roth into an overnight celebrity. Critics loved the book. Reviewing *Portnoy's Complaint* for the *Times*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt judged the novel "Roth's best work [. . .] and a brilliantly vivid reading experience."

But not everyone was so enthralled. Many Jewish readers, including rabbis and other leaders of the Jewish community, were scandalized by the novel's unsparing, satirical depictions of overbearing Jewish mothers and their sex-obsessed sons. And feminist critics, too, took Roth to task for what they saw as his misogynistic portrayal of female characters, not only in this novel but throughout his writings.

The guests discuss all these historical reactions and more. As Kaplan explores, we might alternately consider how Portnoy's central love interest, the sexually liberated and nearly illiterate Mary Jane Reed (whom Portnoy calls "the monkey"), embodies what feminist critics call "consent culture." Hoffman describes the book's portrayal of Jewish masculinity as queer, meaning that Portnoy's sexual neuroses and behavior are outside the norm. Hoffman reads Portnoy as reacting against the stereotype of the hysterical Jewish male to assert his identity as a red-blooded, sexually normative American man. And Josh Lambert notes that, going back to Yiddish literature of the nineteenth century, writers have thought about what it means to be Jewish through the lens of who a particular character is going to sleep with. In this way, diasporism becomes a kind of masturbation, and Israel induces impotence, so issues of continuity and Jewish identity come in through the sexuality of the book.

Finally, as the guests describe, 1969 was a cauldron of everything exciting happening at once. The world was undergoing a major transformation, and right at that moment appears a book that basically puts intimate details that are normally not seen on the printed page outside of pornography into the public realm. And people start talking about it. People start feeling that it represents some part of their own experience. *Portnoy's Complaint* taps into a vein of sexual repression and longing in mid-century America.

*Adventures in Jewish Studies* takes listeners on exciting journeys that explore a wide range of topics featuring the expertise and learning of scholars of Jewish Studies. The Association of Jewish Studies is the largest learned society and professional organization representing Jewish Studies across the globe, with over 1,800 members from more than 30 countries.

Find this episode wherever you get your podcasts.

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