



D O R O T :
The McGill
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Introduction

This year has been my second at McGill University and my second with *Dorot*. Last year, I served as an assistant editor to Adam Blander. I recall wanting to be a part of the Jewish Studies Journal because I felt that scholarship on Jewish matters was very important for promoting both continuous change and reflection within Judaism. It is coincidentally on the themes of reflection and identity that many of the essays in this volume turn.

The essays of this volume have been arranged with respect to the chronology of their subject matter. We begin with my “Perfection in Maimonides as Theoretical and Practical Rationality” (submitted under a pseudonym), in which I argue that perfection for Maimonides requires, among other components, the act of reflecting on one’s knowledge. The philosophy and historical context of Maimonides recall a traditional Judaism, which helpfully contrasts with the modern affirmation, alienation, renewal, or struggle of Jewish identity that the other essays illuminate.

In that vein, we move to Jessica Abell’s “Rising Up: the Radical Jewish Women of Eastern Europe,” which explores the assertion and

development of Jewish identity on the part of a subjugated population. The author navigates through tensions among modernity, class struggle, and equality to showcase the important role of radical Jewish women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The next two essays touch on a similar note, both examining the literary portrayal of Jewish identity at the time of the Russian Revolution. David Shannon, in his "Lessons from Yiddish Literature: a Study of the Modern Life Devoid of Meaning," compares Dovid Bergelson's *Descent* and Esther Kreitman's *Deborah* to exemplify the fragmentation and metaphysical displacement of identity during that period. Similarly, Jordan Paul investigates the formation of Jewish masculinity in the years surrounding the Bolshevik Revolution in her "'The Iron and the Flower': Conceptions of Masculinity in Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*." She argues that *Red Cavalry* displays the Jewish male's self-conscious struggle between passivity and tradition on the one hand and action and revolution on the other.

The theme of Jewish identity and self-reflection culminates in this volume with Ronen Shnidman's "The Problem of Secular Judaism." Shnidman contends that the current, secular Jew is troubled by an unclearly defined identity, and he looks back at the founding Zionist thinkers for the roots of this problem. This volume, then, takes the reader from a self-assured Jewish identity to its tumultuous reformulation in modernity, and ultimately to what may be a currently confused state.

I am proud of the authors whose contributions are showcased here. Thank you for your original insights and hard work throughout the editing process. I extend many thanks to the Jewish Studies Students' Association and to our cover artist, Rebecca Mary Hartz, as well. Inspired first by milkweeds, Rebecca's work definitively captures the content of this volume. Most importantly, I am grateful to this year's copy editor, Anna Kurennaya, and assistant editors, Daniel Friedlander and Sarah Bedard, whose dedicated efforts were essential to the production of this volume. Therefore we present to you the eleventh volume of *Dorot: the McGill Undergraduate Journal of Jewish Studies*. Please enjoy.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Fine

Editor in Chief

Perfection in Maimonides as Theoretical and Practical Rationality

Jonathan Fine

Maimonides claims that human perfection consists of the perfection of the rational faculty. As is usually the case with the confounding thinker, it is not clear what Maimonides means by this. Scholars often maintain that he means the perfection of either theoretical or practical rationality. I argue that Maimonides considers human perfection to be the perfections of both theoretical rationality and practical rationality, which together constitute the highest form of *imitatio dei*. After some preliminary notions in theoretical and practical rationality and Maimonidean thought, I present the *prima facie* case for human perfection as perfect theoretical rationality. Next, I raise and refute Shlomo Pines' objection that perfection consists solely of the practical life. I then develop the synthesis that Maimonides takes "worship" as human perfection,¹ which requires perfection of both theoretical and practical rationality. I conclude by attending to some concerns that this interpretation raises.

Let us begin by clarifying what is meant by theoretical and practical rationality. Theoretical rationality (TR) is reasoning about beliefs whereas

practical rationality (PR) is reasoning about actions. Arab Aristotelians, such as Maimonides, follow this model by distinguishing two elements of the rational faculty.² The practical element (*al-'aql al-'amali*) has as its objects those things that depend on human volition, an intention to act or an act itself, where *act* denotes a bodily action. The theoretical element (*al-'aql al-nasari*) has as its object the intelligibles, the forms of sensible objects. Knowledge concerns the apprehension of these forms. TR is sometimes conceived exclusively as a relation between one's beliefs (e.g. if I believe if *P* then *Q*, then TR requires that I believe *Q*). This conception of TR as a relation between beliefs will not do for Maimonides. The reliance on true beliefs about the forms of objects necessitates that TR relate beliefs to the world in some way. An example will do well to show the correlative and separate aspects of TR and PR. Suppose I am thirsty. I therefore go to the kitchen and take a drink of water. However, there is surely more to the story. My action is consequent upon my desire to quench my thirst and my beliefs that I am thirsty, that there is water in the kitchen, that water will quench my thirst, among others. We could easily provide a fuller story that would account specifically for my intentions, motor skills, perceptions and the like. The important thing to note is the reliance of PR on beliefs. Consider the case where I drink vegetable oil instead of water because I believe that it will best quench my thirst. Given my ends and relevant beliefs, I perform an action or intend to perform one that satisfies the end. In the case where I drink vegetable oil, I may have PR but certainly

not perfect PR, for there is a better action, namely drinking water. I am taking *perfect* PR to rely on TR, knowledge (i.e. not just beliefs but true beliefs) concerning the relevant facts. So PR needs TR. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to suppose that I can gain knowledge or know which facts are relevant only if I know how to acquire beliefs by various means. In our example, I form the belief that water quenches thirst by having interacted with the world somehow, say, by previously drinking water. So likewise, TR needs PR. Their relationship is bi-conditional.

This may appear question-begging, for if perfection requires either TR or PR because perfection concerns the rational faculty, then the other must come along with it – and hence perfection must consist of both. However, bi-conditionality, which is logical equivalence, does not entail conceptual equivalence. It does not entail that the perfection of one is the perfection of the other, but only that at some point, the other was needed. If this were not the case, then my drinking vegetable oil is perfectly rational. No doubt it is rational, but I am disinclined to judge it perfectly rational because we may ask further why I believe that vegetable oil is thirst-quenching, or more so than water. I doubt that that belief-forming mechanism is warranted. We may say then that PR is a process that operates on beliefs to produce an act or intention while perfect PR is a process that operates on true beliefs to produce a perfect action or intention in those circumstances. That this conceptual correlation does not entail conceptual equivalence is clear. When I drink the water, we may call

this perfect PR, and it does not require perfect TR. Even if we do not call it perfect PR, it seems feasible to label an agent's behaviour, usually moral conduct, "perfect" without predicating full apprehension of intelligibles of that agent. Our definitions of TR and PR are fine.

Because we are interested in the perfect man and thus the perfect rational faculty, some preliminary words on Maimonides' conception of man and the intellect are in order. Like Aristotle and Arab Aristotelians, Maimonides thinks that man uniquely has a soul with a rational faculty which "enables him to understand, reflect, acquire knowledge of the sciences, and to discriminate between proper and improper actions" (*Eight Chapters*, 1 in Twersky 365). Man's function is the exercise of his rational faculty, and his end requires the actualization of his function. Man's rational faculty, which is connected to matter, is the potential or hylic intellect, which is a predisposition to know (*Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:70, 72³). Accordingly, separate intellects are posited to explain how an intellect entrenched in matter can ascertain the intelligibles. The Active Intellect is introduced to explain actual human thought.⁴ Al-Farabi's model views the Active Intellect as an emanating light which lets objects of knowledge be known. Man can then abstract the forms of sensible objects and apprehend those forms, which is the activity of knowing. However, the Avicennian model to which Maimonides more closely hues⁵ takes the Active Intellect to not only illuminate sensible objects but also give the object's form to the potential intellect. The thought here is that man cannot

abstract intelligibles from matter but can only apprehend them once the form is given. The Active Intellect is what brings the human intellect into actuality: "Intellect *in actu* existing in us... derives from an overflow of the Active Intellect and through which we apprehend the Active Intellect" (2:4). Conjoined to the Active Intellect, the intellect *in actu* is the acquired intellect. It is not a bodily faculty but one that overflows towards the body (1:72). At this point, man is actualized intellect or *nous*. Corresponding to TR and PR, theoretical *nous* is concerned with first definitions and universal principles, whereas practical *nous* is concerned with particular actions or intentions to act (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1143a35-b5). This accords with what we have said thus far.

What is theoretical *nous*, or perfect TR, according to Maimonides? The answer lies in GP 1:54. When Moses apprehends the ways of God, he apprehends His actions. As the creator of the world *ex nihilo* and *de novo* (2:13), God is the efficient, formal, and final cause of all that exists. Because each attribute that exists in the cause must also exist in its effects (2:22), the attributes of God exist in the world. From the act of creation (*act* is used equivocally; God cannot, properly speaking, act) every created entity contains God's Essence in varying amounts via the process of emanation or "overflow:" "it has been said that the world derives from the overflow of God" (2:12). Knowledge of God's actions, then, consists of knowledge of everything that exists – full metaphysical knowledge. Consequently, Maimonides construes prophecy in natural terms as "an

overflow overflowing from God... through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty" (2:36). This formulation should appear strikingly similar to Maimonides account of intellect *in actu*. Prophecy is an intellectual apprehension of the natural order and the transformation of these metaphysical truths into imaginative form. The apprehension or acceptance of God's emanation is like an excellent receptor picking up signals broadcasted from a station.⁶ Moses, the epitome of perfection for Maimonides, receives the totality of metaphysical knowledge by intellection alone, from which the divine law "followed necessarily" without the aid of the imaginative faculty (2:38). Although we took a conception of TR as a relation between beliefs to be insufficient, Maimonides' conception, then, does include a necessary relation between beliefs: for every p such that p is true, an agent with perfect TR knows p . The set of beliefs of perfect TR is both consistent and exhaustive. Perfect TR consists of full metaphysical knowledge.⁷

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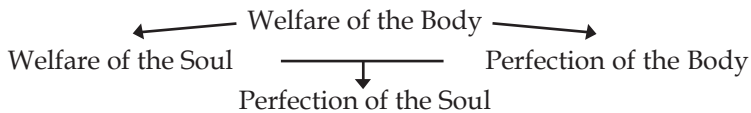
We now have the relevant background to deal meaningfully with the question before us: does Maimonides think perfection consists of perfect TR or perfect PR? A *prima facie* reading of Maimonides gives us the impression that he thinks perfection is the perfection of TR. Perfection is dealt with substantively in the *Guide of the Perplexed* primarily at 3:27-28 and 3:51, 54. GP 3:27 lays out a schema for perfection by first separating

it from what Maimonides calls *welfare*. Mosaic Law, the divine law, aims at “welfare of the body” and “welfare of the soul.” Welfare of the body consists of proper societal order. It is achieved through the elimination of dangerous conduction by forming good laws and through each society member’s acquisition of moral traits. Welfare of the soul, which can be achieved only if welfare of the body has been secured, “consists in the multitude’s acquiring correct opinions” (3:27, 510). Welfare is tantamount to a basic level of well-being; in one case it is secure living conditions and in the other it is elementary knowledge. Correspondingly, man has two perfections. “Perfection of the body” requires bodily health and “the best bodily state,” which includes food, shelter, etc., and this cannot be achieved by oneself. Political order must also first be in place. “Perfection of the soul” is man’s “ultimate perfection [that] is to become rational in actu, I mean to have an intellect in actu” (ibid. 511). As we have seen, intellect *in actu* is the acquired intellect – and thus perfect TR is in play. This by itself does not preclude the role of PR or perfect PR. However, Maimonides continues:

This [ultimate perfection] would consist in his knowing everything concerning all the beings that is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection. It is clear that to this ultimate perfection there do not belong either actions or moral qualities and that it consists only of opinions toward which speculation has

led and that investigation has rendered compulsory. (Ibid)

This quotation confirms that perfect TR is a necessary condition of perfection. The exclusion of actions and moral traits seems to preclude the possibility that perfect PR plays a role. Moreover, Maimonides' emphasis that *only* correct opinions comprise perfection makes perfect TR a sufficient condition. After describing perfection of the soul, Maimonides explains how perfection of the body is a prerequisite for it. Following Lawrence Kaplan (almost entirely), we may diagram the relationship between the welfares and the perfections as follows⁸:



Welfare of the body leads to welfare of the soul and to perfection of the body, both of which jointly lead to perfection of the soul. Interestingly, we may also consider that both welfares are provided by the divine law. Recall that the divine law is consequent upon a prophetic event, which includes the apprehension of the natural order (2:36, 1:54). Such apprehension is perfect TR, which is perfection of the soul. There is a cyclical and bi-conditional structure that is similar to that of the relationship between TR and PR explored earlier. Like before, we have here a separation at the level of perfection. (To avoid confusion, *perfection* here refers to “ultimate perfection” or perfection of the soul, i.e., the perfection with which we are concerned.) Yet we should note that the TR at the level of perfection is less

tied to PR than before. Imperfect TR requires PR to acquire true beliefs by some interaction with the world, such as observation. Moses' perfect TR occurs via intellection – his complete metaphysical knowledge does not require him to uncover every rock to see what is under it. Because he needs perfection of the body beforehand, perfect TR is still connected to PR although more weakly by a material conditional. Again, the prerequisites of perfection of the body and both welfares for perfection of the soul do not necessarily make PR an element of perfection.

We again see perfection as only perfect TR at the close of the *Guide*. In a parable where “the ruler” refers to God, Maimonides says that those who “come to be with the ruler” are those who have “achieved demonstration... of everything that may be demonstrated; and who [have] ascertained in divine matters... everything that may be ascertained; and who [have] come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it” (3:51, 619). Perfection is measured in terms of closeness to God, which is equally a matter of knowledge. Later, Maimonides differentiates four levels of perfection. The fourth, which is true perfection, consists of “the conception of intelligibles” (3:54, 635). The third, and hence not the ultimate, perfection is moral perfection. In addition, the fourth perfection, which *is perfection*, belongs to the perfect man alone (Ibid). As such, it is inward, not outward or shared with others as actions might be. As in GP 3:27, Maimonides' description of perfection places it exclusively in the perfection of TR.⁹

II

Shlomo Pines famously argues that Maimonides locates perfection entirely in the practical life of politics. On his view, our current model errs in three ways: it takes perfect TR as sufficient for perfection; it takes perfect TR as necessary; and it takes perfect PR as neither necessary nor sufficient. I will present Pines' argument and show that his conclusion follows only if he assumes perfect TR as a necessary condition for perfection.

Pines argues that Maimonides imposes limits on human knowledge that make perfect TR impossible. Maimonides' stipulates *via negativa*, or negative theology (1:56-59), that we cannot have positive knowledge of what God is (His Essence), only that He is and what He is *not*. Positive predication implies multiplicity in God, which is theologically and philosophically unsound. Since nothing can be supplemented to His Essence, His Essence is identical to His Knowledge, which is identical to His Will, and so forth. Moreover, we cannot know His Essence. Pines interprets *via negativa* to mean that "God, like the separate intellects cannot be grasped by a human intellect, whose activity is dependent on sense data and images."¹⁰ God's connection to intellect is essential: He is the Self-Intellectualizing Intellect (*nous nous-ing nous*) (1:68). Pines' interpretation relies on the claim that matter hinders our attempts to cognize immaterial objects, and thus a "great veil" stands between us and the separate intellects and God (3:9). However, I do not think that from the difficulty to apprehend we can validly infer that apprehension is

impossible. Consequently, I resist Pines' assessment that in Maimonides' view "man can only know material objects".¹¹ Pines also draws from GP 3:22 and 3:24 to conclude that Maimonides holds it impossible to attain certainty in matters pertaining outside the sublunary sphere.¹² With these epistemic limitations in mind, Pines examines the use of *apprehension* (*idrāk*) in descriptions of man's intellect, which we have taken as central to perfect TR: "the intellect *in actu* existing in us, which derives from an overflow of the Active Intellect and through which we apprehend the Active Intellect, is similar to that of the intellect of every sphere that exists in the latter" (2:4 in Pines 100). Elsewhere Maimonides states that the "true reality of the intellect is apprehension" (1:68), which is tautological for an intellectual act.¹³ Against this, Pines does not think that *apprehend* means here that the intellect *in actu* cognizes and conjoins to the Active Intellect. He does not take the intellect *in actu* to refer to the acquired intellect, which is separate from matter, but instead, the potential intellect that is bound by matter. He bases this interpretation of apprehension on a qualification that appears in GP 3:54:

'It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, *in a measure corresponding to his capacity*, apprehension of Him...' Given this wording and Maimonides' views on the limits of man's cognition of the Deity, it is evident that *idrāk* of God does not mean an intellectual act.¹⁴

Maimonides' view on the limits of man's cognition refers to his being "veiled" by matter. If this is the case, then man's intellect never gets passed its hylic stage, and the apprehending subject is not the acquired intellect. Yet, even if this is the case and Pines' reading is correct, it still does not follow that apprehension must not be intellectual. "A measure corresponding to his capacity" could be the acquisition of knowledge of everything that man can, in fact, know. Regardless, let us grant Pines this as well. For Pines, the continuation of the above passage tells us what apprehension is:

Apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance... the way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view loving kindness, righteousness and judgment, through assimilation to His actions (3:54, 638).

Apprehension is "equated with the knowledge of God's governance."¹⁵ He points out, as we have, that God's actions mean the natural order, or the way in which the world is governed (1:54). The exhortation to loving kindness (*chesed*), righteousness (*tzedaka*), and judgment (*mishpat*) seem to require moral conduct toward the goal of *imitatio dei*; that is, the imitation of God. GP 1:54 suggests this: "For the utmost virtue of man is to become like unto Him... which means we should make our actions like unto

His".¹⁶ We should imitate God's political governance. Consequently for Pines, Maimonides conceives of perfection as perfect PR alone.

Nonetheless, because Pines relies on GP 1:54 for his conclusion, he invalidates it. We saw that Moses' knowledge of God's actions constitutes full metaphysical knowledge, which we called perfect TR. On Pines' reading as well, Moses obtains full metaphysical knowledge and consequently provides the divine law and governs politically. Yet Pines says that perfect TR does not enter into perfection. However, it is impossible for Moses to have imitated the actions of God without first knowing them (unless he did so by luck, which is easily refuted). Moreover, prophecy in general proceeds first from intellectual apprehension of the natural order, though not necessarily all of it, and then to the imaginative faculty, which does the ruling (2:36). Mosaic prophecy, by which Moses learns God's actions, is achieved by intellection alone (2:38). As the epitomic man and prophet, Moses' case is sufficient for our inquiry into perfection in Maimonides. We cannot hold that (a) his governance is necessary for his perfection, (b) his knowledge is necessary for his governance, and (c) his knowledge is perfect TR, but not that (d) perfect TR is necessary for perfection. One may object that I have committed the fallacy I raised earlier, that of supposing that if x is necessary for y , and y is an element of perfection, then x is an element of perfection. However, necessity in Moses' case is not the weak sense of material conditionality, but a stronger sense that requires persistence: y can occur just in case x has occurred

and *continues to occur*. Moses cannot imitate God and govern in virtue of God's actions unless he *is* (not was) *nous*, that is to say, in the possession of full metaphysical knowledge (perfect TR) at every moment of ruling. An instance of perfect PR would have to be one of perfect TR. To this response, one may further object that the fact that both perfect TR and perfect PR exist in the perfect man does not necessitate that perfection consists of both perfections. There are, after all, grades of perfection (3:51). This is correct; yet, in this view, perfection concerns only the actions of an individual and neither his intentions nor state of being. Maimonides seems to reject such a characterization. That the perfect individual's "way of life" is one of loving kindness, righteousness, and judgement suggests that perfection is a state that is prior to those virtuous actions. Therefore, we should not conclude that "political activity... is the highest perfection of man. The practical way of life, the *bios praktikos*, is superior to the theoretical."¹⁷ Still, Pines' interpretation raises some elements of perfection that discord with the *prima facie* reading. For example, there is mention of *imitatio dei*, virtuous actions and political governance. There is also the fact that, for Maimonides, the prophet is greater than the philosopher and the philosopher could have full metaphysical knowledge (2:37). I must therefore amend our original conception of perfection.

To do this I will rely on GP 3:51. I focus on this chapter in light of the work of David Shatz, who compares Maimonides' treatment of perfection in 3:51 and 3:54 to show that 3:54 is "simplistic and misleading" for giving

the impression that the ultimate end of man is intellectual apprehension.¹⁸ 3:54 holds that intellectual apprehension is “the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent perdurance; through it man is man” (635). 3:51 offers a stage beyond what 3:54 calls “the ultimate end”. After intellectual apprehension, man should

turn wholly toward God, renounce what is other than He, and direct all the acts of their intellect toward an examination of the beings with a view to drawing from them proof with regard to Him, so as to know the governance in whatever way it is possible. These people are those who are present in the ruler’s [God’s] council. (620)

3:54 describes a stage that precedes the attention to God described in 3:51, one that is conceptually prior to the stage in 3:51.¹⁹ 3:51 even acknowledges the political requirements of perfection that 3:54 mentions, by referring to the efforts of Moses and the Patriarchs “to bring into being a religious community that would know and worship God” (3:51, 624 in Shatz 81). 3:51 subsumes 3:54 and advances a stage beyond it. This stage is worship. Worship is human perfection.

III

What is worship? Worship has three components: perfect TR; reflection on the knowledge of perfect TR and on God; and intention to govern politically, which is to perform God’s actions. This third component

is perfect PR. Worship renders man perfect, at which point he is not a material being, and he performs perfect actions via overflow. Worship constitutes *imitatio dei* in four respects, the greatest possible imitation of God. I will now elucidate this.

Worship consists first of perfect TR. In his ‘parable of the palace,’ Maimonides describes men with perfect TR as walking about the inner court and coming into the ruler’s habitation (3:51, 618), which is proximity to God. This location in the palace is unique, for those who are there must first have “achieved perfection in the natural things and have understood divine science” (3:51, 619). This is the penultimate stage described in 3:27 and 3:54: knowledge of the totality of knowable things. The men in the ruler’s inner court “should make another effort; then they will be in the presence of the ruler, see him from afar or from nearby, or hear the ruler’s speech or speak to him” (618). Proximity to God does not entail spiritual closeness to, interaction with, or benefit from God. The man who is proximate but not connected to God has attained perfect TR and is identified in Maimonidean terms a “man of science” (619), which is to say, a philosopher (2:37). The next effort is “the worship peculiar to those who apprehended the true realities; the more they think of Him and of being with Him, the more their worship increases” (3:51, 620). Perfect TR is explicitly made a prerequisite: “worship ought only to be engaged in after intellectual conception has been achieved” (Ibid). Unsurprisingly, the perfect man is in part *nous*.

Worship has secondly a reflective character. It is also this reflection that necessitates the continued presence of perfect TR in the perfect man. The way to move beyond perfect TR to the ultimate end of worship is to engage in totally devoting yourself to Him, endeavour to come closer to Him, and strengthen the bond between you and Him – that is, the intellect... In my opinion it consists in setting to work on the first intelligible and in devoting oneself exclusively to this as far as this is within one's capacity. (620-621)

The striking thing to note is that the spiritual closeness involved in worship is purely intellectual. The perfect man is engaging intellectually, that is, he is '*nous-ing*'. In the intellectual conjunction of worship, we do not conjoin more closely to God by gaining more knowledge of the intelligibles. If this were the case, then the worshipper would not already have the requisite perfect TR. Instead, we are told to "set to work on" and "devote to" the first intelligible. We are exhorted to "think of Him [God]" (620) and to "the employment of intellectual thought in constantly loving Him..." (621). Love is intellectual, which is confirmed twice by Maimonides in the space of a few lines, as he states that "love is proportionate to apprehension" and that the "exhortation always refers to intellectual apprehension" (621). However, the worshipper does not know or learn anything new – having perfect TR, he has exhausted that domain. Instead, he reflects. He directs his thoughts on something. Maimonides describes

worship as an activity in which we “turn wholly toward God... direct all acts of the intellect toward the examination of the beings” (620) and “do not empty [our] thought of Him... attention is not distracted even for an instant” (622). The word “reflection” itself is even used (Ibid). Still, on what does the perfect man reflect? At first glance, it seems that the reflection is on two different things: on intelligibles and on God, to whatever degree possible. This is problematic; one cannot turn his attention “wholly” toward two items. However, I propose that these are in fact the same item. If the worshipper has perfect TR, he knows God’s actions. According to the *via negativa*, knowledge of God’s actions is the total and highest possible positive knowledge that we can have. The *via negativa*, however, does not preclude forming non-instructive, negative knowledge about God. Recall that Maimonides describes God as the Self-Intellectualizing Intellect, or *nous nous-ing nous*. Consequently, the worshipper reflects, in one fell swoop, entirely on the knowledge that he has, which is of God’s actions, and entirely on God *to the best of his capacity*. We can argue for this solution top-down as well. If the worshipper concentrates on God, *a fortiori* he concentrates on all of His creations (which emanate from Him and contain His Essence), and thereby on all metaphysical facts. GP 2:36 hints at this identity when it says that the perfect man is aware only of God and only of the set of true opinions. This thought is taken up again in 3:54, when worship is depicted as intellectual occupation with “His commandments... with Him, may He be exalted, and not with that which

is other than He" (622). In a manner reminiscent of Peter John Olivi,²⁰ worship's reflection is on all of one's knowledge. As such, perfect TR remains a constituent of perfection. With his reflection on full TR and God, the perfect man (*nous*) is reflecting (*nous-ing*) on *nous*.

We noted that Maimonides associates perfection with political activity. This association seems at odds with his prohibition against focusing on "any of the things pertaining to this world" (3:51, 623). The worshipper severs his bond with God by thinking of worldly matters – the worship "is actually broken off at that time" (*ibid.*, 621) and ceases to exist. Attention to anything other than God renders the bond less than perfect. Yet Moses and the Patriarchs are worshippers *par excellence* and they rule nations. Moreover, it seems that they are worshippers in virtue of their political aims: "these four were in a permanent state of extreme perfection in the eyes of God... For the end of their efforts during their life was to bring into being a religious community that would know and worship God" (*ibid.*, 624). Moses and the Patriarchs have religious political governance as their goal. It is their *intention* to create a religious community directed at knowledge of God, an intention that was realized. The commandments of the Torah not only cultivate man towards worship, but cause the occupation with God that worship requires (*ibid.* 622; Shatz 86). Insofar as Moses and the Patriarchs intend to create laws by which man will know God, they intend to imitate God's political governance.²¹ This is the perfect intention. I take this perfect intention to imitate God's

governance to be the element of perfect PR in worship.

Why is Moses' intention more important than his actions, especially when the actions are successfully completed? Moses in fact brings about the community that he intends to create. If the intention to act is perfect and the intended act is realized, it seems that the act should constitute perfection. In other words, Moses' acts should be what count. However, the worshipper is not concerned with matter at all. He is also fully an intellect *in actu* (3:51, 625), which is the acquired intellect that is not a bodily faculty. Accordingly, Moses is described as transcending corporeality, as "he did neither eat bread nor drink water" (Exod. 34:28 in 3:51, 620). He needs no physical sustenance because he is no longer enmattered. Instead, "his intellect attained such strength that all the gross faculties in the body ceased to function" (620). Furthermore, Maimonides holds that the perfect man enjoys a form of providence which confers "enduring permanence," perhaps immortality (628). Consequently, worship does not mandate perfect actions because at this stage, man is not involved in the material world. Nor could he be, lest he sever the intellectual bond necessary for worship. Yet Maimonides praises Moses and the Patriarchs for performing actions of political governance. Two worries arise if the perfect man acts in but cannot focus on the material world. First, how are his bodily actions possible? Second, if they are possible, then why do they not sever the bond of worship with God? Both worries can be answered by observing that the perfect man acts via

overflow of his perfection. The worshipper's perfect TR, reflection, and perfect intention (perfect PR) causes

a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned toward Him... while outwardly he is with people... Withal they were occupied with governing people, increasing their fortune, and endeavouring to acquire property. Now it is to my mind a proof that they performed these actions with their limbs only, while their intellects were constantly in His presence. (623 – 624)

The worshipper can act without relating himself to matter because he acts only with his limbs while "his intellect" reflects on God. The intellect is man's true self, whereas the body is not an essential part of a person.²² The perfect man's bodily acts do not result from deliberation. Rather they emanate from his state as the acquired intellect, as the acquired intellect is not a bodily faculty but overflows toward the body (1:72). Because the consequences of the overflow do not belong to the intellect itself (2:11), the worshipper's actions should not be considered "part of the *essence* of human perfection but rather part of the *overflow*."²³ Maimonides conveys the conceptual consequence of overflow by describing Moses' transmission of divine law and political leadership as "necessarily brought" (3:51, 624) and following "necessarily" (2:38). Shatz similarly describes the worshipper's overflow as "mechanical causality."²⁴ In this

way, the worshipper can perform perfect acts in the world without ever relating himself to matter. In sum, the three elements of perfection and the consequent overflow serve as the greatest possible *imitatio dei*. God is *nous nous-ing nous*, whose actions overflow from His Essence and govern all of the cosmos. Comparatively, the perfect man is *nous* and engages in intellectual contemplation (*nous-ing*) of an object that is *nous*. Intellection unifies the object, activity, and subject. The perfect man *qua* acquired intellect is not enmattered, his actions overflow from him, and his actions are those of governance.²⁵ A combination of perfect TR and perfect PR, worship is *imitatio dei* in the greatest possible respect.

IV

I want to address three concerns that my interpretation raises. Firstly, it is natural and common to feel uneasy about regarding the worshipper's intention to perform perfect acts as perfect PR. This is to be expected. We normally rank intention beneath an action that fulfills that intention. However, recall that an intention is equally an upshot of PR. It should be clear that the actions that emanate from the perfected essence cannot be regarded as constituents of perfection. Thinking otherwise is "a pure absurdity," according to Maimonides (2:11 in Shatz 101). Even though the actions are necessarily consequent upon the intention, there is a significant separation between these concepts. For example, Abraham's binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1-24) illustrates that virtue can lie in an intention to act and not the act itself.²⁶ The intention to govern a community in

virtue of God's actions is perfect PR because it focuses solely on God and does not corrupt man by entrenching him in matter. Hence, the perfect man transcends corporeality, and his intention is so perfect as to cause actions not by deliberation but by the necessity of overflow. So we are in unnatural territory: intention is sufficient for perfect PR and, while actions do occur, they occur by emanation. It is due to this unnaturalness, I feel, that scholars have tended to ignore intention and hold that the aspect of perfection corresponding to perfect PR lies in conduct. For instance, Kaplan conflates intention and action and asks how actions can constitute "pure worship."²⁷ Similarly, instead of viewing political governance as consequent upon worship, Kogan considers conduct an element of perfection.²⁸ Yet worship precludes the possibility for conduct to comprise perfection itself. Howard Kreisel acknowledges this preclusion and consequently argues that PR cannot be necessary for perfection.²⁹ He correctly claims that the perfect man has perfect TR, and so is no longer bodily and cannot deliberatively act. However, Kreisel wrongly infers from these premises that perfection excludes perfect PR because he conflates intention and action. Worship requires concentration on God, partly in the form of an intention to perfectly govern. This is the same concentration that we raised in connection to perfect TR. Therefore, the perfect PR requirement of perfection is one manifestation of concentration on God, and the perfect TR requirement is another. Kaplan provides a helpful metaphor to understand this duality: at the level of perfection, TR

and PR are not distinct but are inseparably “two sides of the same coin.”³⁰

The nature of the perfect man is also a concern. He is no longer enmattered and cannot act in a way like any other man. We may wonder if man *qua* man is even human. However, Maimonides claims that it is erroneous to compare a being's perfected state to the nature of that being before perfection (2:17). We must remember that Maimonides conceives of man as endowed with a function, and that perfection consists of at least fulfilling his function. Because man's function is intellectual, his perfection requires him to abandon matter. There need not be a continuum whereby man becomes less and less material; otherwise we could argue by way of a sorites paradox that man could never achieve worship. At some point, the function is achieved, and the perfect man may be radically different than before. But our concern is double-edged. Perhaps we have made man into a god. The worshipper, like God, is *nous nous-ing nous* that emanates perfect actions. Is he imitating God or being God? Aristotle in fact faces the same problem, which is to be expected since Maimonides is working with the Aristotelian tradition. But some of the ways in which Aristotle's perfect man (*eudaimōn*) is not a god will not work for Maimonides' worshipper. Following Aristotle, we might say that God is always active *nous* whereas man is sometimes passive *nous*, that is, his *nous* is not always in an active state, either because the objects it intellectualizes are material, or because it is unexercised.³¹ However, unlike the *eudaimōn*, the worshipper is always in the active state of reflection on *nous* and thus achieves permanently

active *nous* (3:51). Nor can we follow Aristotle in his second move to say that God does not have or need a body, whereas the perfect man does.³² The worshipper, too, is not a body and need not tend to one; Moses did not require sustenance and the worshipper is told never to avert his attention from God in order to eat “the necessary” (3:51, 621). Still, the worshipper is not God for two reasons. God is eternal, and is eternally *nous nous-ing nous*. The worshipper, although possibly immortal, is not eternally *nous* because he became perfect at some point in time.³³ God is also causally prior, a necessary and sufficient condition for all of existence.³⁴ The perfect man cannot exist without God and his *nous* cannot exist without God’s *nous*. Therefore, Maimonides’ worshipper is not God but only godly. Both are *nous nous-ing nous*, but *nous* is used equivocally.

Lastly, there is a tension in Maimonides that is problematic for *imitatio dei*. His negative theology prohibits positive predication of God and disallows us knowledge of His Essence. Yet God is labelled *nous nous-ing nous* (1:68). Maimonides thus appears to define God, to specify His Essence, which would violate his negative theology. Closer examination reveals, however, that there is no contradiction here because Maimonides is not making a positive epistemic claim. God is still entirely the Other. I see GP 1:68 only as a re-description. If we take GP 1:68 to contradict his negative theology instead of viewing it as a non-positive re-description, then we must similarly say that Maimonides contradicts himself when he claims that God’s Essence must be identical to His Knowledge because

He has no parts. This option is not the way to go. Hermeneutically, we would have undermined Maimonides' central conception of a unitary God whose Essence is His Knowledge (which is His will and so forth). More importantly, it seems that there is no to claim that Maimonides' God violates his negative theology; on pain of inconsistency, then, we must not charge him with a contradiction at GP 1:68. Still, while there is no contradiction, there is, however, a tension: 1:68 offers an idea of what God's Essence might be, albeit something entirely other. As a result, and given negative theology, *imitatio dei* should be impossible or far from godlike. But in detailing the conditions of worship, we provide a procedure by which we imitate God and approximate as best we can His Essence and actions. In fact, we provided a procedure good enough to raise a concern as to whether the perfect man was divine. The epistemological tension surfaces in perfection also because the worshipper turns his intellect "toward Him" (3:51, 623) and "is with God" (ibid. 625), which should be impossible if we cannot know God. I submit that this may cohere with the rest of Maimonides' thought. Worship is often qualified by a statement of degree such as "as far as this is within one's capacity" (ibid. 621). At this degree—the highest degree—man does not, properly speaking, know God's Essence. Maimonides claims that the fact that God is *nous nous-ing nous* is beyond "the human mind to apprehend clearly" (*Mishneh Torah*, Book of Knowledge, Basic Principles of the Torah, 2.2 in Twersky 45). Similarly, like looking into the sun, "human reason cannot fully conceive

God... cannot grasp it all" (EC, 8 in Twersky 385). However, just as we can glimpse the sun, the perfect man can glimpse God's Essence. The idea of glimpsing, and qualifiers like *clearly* and *fully*, enable the perfect man to form a conception of God that is not knowledge but that is sufficient for *imitatio dei*. This tension between Maimonides' negative theology and GP 1:68 should be explored further. Such exploration may indicate to what degree Maimonides thinks perfection is possible. Regardless of its possibility, we will know at least that he thinks that human perfection is worship, and that it consists of the perfections of both theoretical and practical rationality.

End Notes

1 I will usually omit the qualification "human." "Perfection" by itself will refer to human beings.

2 Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 63 – 64.

3 GP denotes *Guide of the Perplexed*. Unless otherwise stated, all references are to the *Guide*.

4 Barry S. Kogan, "What Can We Know and When Can We Know it?: Maimonides on the Active Intelligence and Human Cognition" in Ed. Eric L. Ormsby, *Maimonides and His Time*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 122.

5 Ibid., 126

6 This simile was suggested by Lawrence Kaplan.

7 We might wonder if perfect TR cares only about knowledge of *p* and not the activity of knowing *p*. These are closely tied: if I engage in knowing *p*, *p* is known. *Know* is an individual level predicate in which the activity guarantees the end (versus step-level predicates like *build*: if

I am building a house, the house need not be built). It is probably for this reason that “I am knowing *p*” seems awkward: grammar probably rejects semantically uninformative constructions such as the progressive aspect for individual level predicates. Nonetheless, *p*-knowledge and knowing *p* can be conceptually separated. Suppose for example that we create, in the spirit of Robert Nozick, a Knowledge Machine that transmits the totality of facts into our brains. That activity is necessary, for perfect TR is clear from the descriptions of perfection as an active process, e.g. “speculation” (3:27), “demonstration” (3:54), and from the fact that men who speculate on the principles of religion are closer to God than those who accept beliefs on authority (3:51).

8 Lawrence Kaplan, “‘I Sleep But My Heart Waketh’: Maimonides’ Conception of Human Perfection” in Eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer, *The Thought of Moses Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies*, (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 122.

Kaplan characterizes the relationships nicely. I have differed from his model superficially by using arrows to better convey the idea of *leading to*. Conceptually, I feel that Kaplan’s model omits the fact that welfare of the soul and perfection of the body can lead to perfection of the soul only in conjunction with one another, and gives the misleading impression that welfare of the soul and perfection of the body can both lead to perfection of the soul independently.

9 Some concerns arise when we wonder how the perfect man will fare in the world. One is that because he must discern the best means to the best end in every circumstance, he could never act because this would take infinitely long. If it does not take infinitely long, it may take long enough for the circumstances to have changed, and so he would have to recalculate, and then recalculate *ad infinitum*. Maimonides evades this since the perfect man has the intellectual virtue of sagacity, which enables him to perceive and grasp ideas without delay or extremely quickly (EC, 2 in Twersky 365). Also, if there are equally favourable means or ends, we have the paralysis of Buridan-type choices because Maimonides construes choice in general to require a reason (EC, 8 in Twersky 379 – 386, GP 2:18, 26). In Buridan-cases Maimonides may adopt al-Ghazali’s model of choice as the power of the agent to choose; after all, God did not create out of necessity but arbitrariness (2:17). Lastly, there is the problem of rational determinism. If the perfect man must do what is rational, then he is not free. See Calvin Normore,

“Rational Determinism” (22 Nov 2002). The problem is exacerbated when we consider that in Maimonides man’s function is his rationality, so he is functionally determined “by final causes” (2). Normore is correct to conclude that there cannot be a finite agent which as a matter of causal law will always do the rational thing (19). So is Maimonides’ perfect man impossible? No, because as will be shown, he is not finite – and determinism would be incorrectly applied at that point. The problem of rational determinism dissolves either because the agent cannot be perfectly rational or because rational determinism cannot apply to an agent who is.

10 Shlomo Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides” in Ed. Joseph A. Buijs, *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 102.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid. 103.

13 Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, “Is the Philosopher the Perfect Man?: Man’s Natural Capacity for Perfection” in Eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer, 36.

14 Pines, 101. His emphasis.

15 Ibid., 110.

16 Ibid., 111.

17 Ibid.

18 David Shatz, “Worship, Corporeality, and Human Perfection: A Reading of *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:51-54” in Eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer, 78.

19 Ibid., 88.

20 See Peter John Olivi, *Quaestiones in secundum librum Sententiarum*, (Bibliotheca Franciscana Scholastica 4 -6), ed. B. Jansen (Quarrachi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1922 – 1926), Q72.

21 Kaplan in Eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer, 145.

22 Shatz in Eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer, 101.

23 Ibid., 100. His emphasis

24 Ibid., 99.

25 Kaplan in Eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer, 139.

26 I would like to thank Andrew Reisner for this suggestion.

27 Kaplan in Eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer, 133.

28 Kogan, 135.

29 Kreisel, 91 – 92.

30 Kaplan in Eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer, 145.
See also Dobbs-Weinstein, 38 and Kogan 135-136 for this reading.

31 C.D.C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*,
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 146.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 147.

34 Ibid., 148.

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Rising Up: The Radical Jewish Women of Eastern Europe

Jessica Abells

If it is true that “the Jewish worker suffer[ed] in Russia not merely as a worker but as a Jew,”¹ the claim can be furthered that the Jewish working woman suffered in Russia not merely as a worker, and not merely as a Jew, but also as a woman. The development of the Jewish socialist movement in Eastern Europe was of the utmost importance to Jewish women struggling for their own emancipation as women, in addition to their struggle for emancipation as Jews. Women were considered intellectually inferior under the hierarchical structure of traditional Jewish society throughout pre-Enlightenment Europe, and the lives of Jewish women were fundamentally different from the lives of Jewish men. Oppressed by rabbinic law and orthodoxy, women were alienated from their own history. Relegated to household management, they were segregated from men in the synagogue, exempt from many celebratory ceremonies, and denied a religious education. Because Jewish women had to overcome social boundaries not only as Jews but also as women, it follows that the experiences and motivations of Jewish women who entered and participated in the radical politics developing in Russia²

during the late 19th and early 20th centuries were in some sense unique from those of Jewish men.

This paper will explore the history of Jewish women radicals in Russia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and examine the different motivations and influences that characterized their involvement within the revolutionary movement and which made their experience unique. I will begin with an examination of the tensions that developed between modernity and tradition in Jewish society, focusing primarily on the nature of gendered education and its influence on the secularization of women. Secondly, this paper will consider the involvement of women of the Bund and Poale Zion, comparing the treatment of women in these organizations to that of men, providing brief biographical sketches of their most prominent female members.

Education and the Appeal of Radical Politics

It is essential to examine the factors that led to their secularization in order to understand the development of Jewish women and their involvement in radical politics. Of particular interest is the education received by women in traditional Ashkenazi households. In the Jewish community, where Talmudic scholarship was highly valued and the highest ranking members of society were the rabbinic elite, women were marginalized and excluded from all traditional Jewish learning. In denying women access to the *kheder*, the religious elementary school, the rabbinic elite meant to keep the control of sacred learning in the hands of men,

expecting women to remain ignorant and dutiful. However, as historian Iris Parush suggests, marginalization of women in the traditional Jewish community may have ultimately been beneficial to women's educational development. According to her:

It was in fact the women, those same people who were prohibited from studying Torah and who were expected to remain ignorant of almost any issue of spiritual consequence, who eluded the supervisory system entirely and who were able to act, wittingly or unwittingly, to subvert it.³

Because of the emphasis on religious study in the Jewish community, gender roles were not always divided between public and private spheres, but also between the sacred and the mundane, "effectively [localizing] each gender in a distinct religious-cultural sphere."⁴ It was considered prestigious for a man to study Torah for much of his adult life. Conversely, women matched with rabbinic scholars or rabbis were expected to manage the household, responsible for generating part, if not all of their family's income. It was therefore necessary for Jewish women to have a certain level of secular education, in order that their families could survive. A great percentage of Jewish women in the Pale of Settlement are estimated to have been economically active by 1897.⁵ Their activities in the marketplace meant learning not only Yiddish, but many of the local languages as well. Their involvement in trade also exposed

Jewish women to life outside of the Jewish community and introduced them to local people and customs.

Though societal roles were defined by the gendered nature of education, the exclusion of women from sacred learning ultimately allowed them more freedom to learn what they wanted; that is, it gave them the space “to be free and to set free.”⁶ Because men learned in public under the tutelage of the rabbinic elite, the education received by men was highly controlled. On the other hand, women were disregarded by the rabbinate, providing them with an uncontrolled educational space. Parush suggests that, consequently, women held different attitudes towards reading and education than men.⁷ Firstly, men were relegated to the public cultural sphere where they were forced to learn the curriculum provided. Women, on the other hand, were granted the opportunity to read for pleasure and were exposed to a variety of language and modern literature, often of their choosing. Secondly, even the religious scriptures read by women were translated into Yiddish, including many fables and prayers, whereas men were taught religious texts only in their original Hebrew. This was partly due to the fact that many rabbinical scholars considered it dangerous to make the Bible readily understood and comprehensible, having the desire to control the interpretation and dissemination of religious knowledge.⁸

Over time, the distinctions perpetuated by gendered education created tensions within the Jewish community. Many women, banned from the Jewish schools of a set curriculum, were instead provided a

largely secular education through private tutoring or public Russian schools. Many tutors were themselves Maskilim, the product of the Jewish Enlightenment, and had comprehensive knowledge of foreign culture and language. Many Maskilim were opposed to rabbinic leaders and believed that women should be treated equally and, therefore, have the right to education. As noted in the memoirs of Ita Kalish, born into a Hasidic family in Warsaw around 1900, often “the sons went to a *stibl* [a small synagogue] and learned *gemora* [Talmud] and the girls studied in foreign schools and were educated in the purity of Polish culture.”⁹ In this way, women were some of the first members of a community to gain access to the secular education promulgated by early Enlightenment thinkers. Of course, the Haskala had its own opinion about the status of women in Jewish society.

Having been exposed to foreign languages, literature, and thought through their education and their experience in the workforce, many Jewish women had an increasing desire for learning and for modernity. This desire often led to a tension between a woman’s traditional Jewish identity and her desire for modernity and education. The Haskalah movement was of little help to women who desired intellectual equality with men. There is evidence that although Maskilim called for equality in marriage, most were uneasy granting women full emancipation or intellectual equality.¹⁰ By the late 19th century, there was a growing fear amongst both Orthodox Jews and the Maskilim that women who had access

to a secular education were discarding their Judaism and assimilating. This trend was cataclysmic for both groups because of their shared belief that Jewish tradition was passed down maternally. As mothers, Jewish women were expected to instill in their children a love of Torah and the Hebrew language.

Coming from a hierarchical society in which women were marginalized, it is no surprise that education not only satiated their hunger for learning, but also gave Jewish women the tools for their own liberation. One of the first signs of this desire for emancipation was the growing disillusionment that women began to experience with marital tradition. Up until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women were still being married at a young age, almost directly after puberty. The end of a woman's education often came with the announcement of her *Shiddikh*, an arranged marriage. Many women tried to forestall their marriages in order to continue their education. Women who were supported by their families successfully transcended social norms and were sent to study abroad or in public Russian gymnasia. Others, however, married men with whom they had little in common and who often lacked secular education.¹¹ For this reason, women who chose to embrace secularism had to break away from their family and their traditional Jewish heritage. Secular education, as well as the struggle and desire for liberation, led many women towards radical politics even in its earliest manifestations. Many Jewish women worked within the topmost ranks of the earliest

Russian populist movement. Most famously, one can point to Hesia Helfman, who was implicated in the assassination of Czar Alexander II.

Women of the Bund

Jewish women who desired independence and equality turned to radical politics, the only political sphere in which they would be accepted. With the development of the radical Jewish socialist and Zionist movements, Jewish women were granted the opportunity to incorporate their desires for emancipation and equal treatment with their desire to maintain their Jewish identity. Rejecting the religious and social aspects of Judaism no longer meant a complete dissociation with their Jewish roots. As historian Paula E. Hyman explains, “Political choices implied choices about Jewish identity.”¹² Depending on a woman’s political beliefs, she could choose to associate with a number of Jewish political associations. The two most significant Jewish political ideologies of the time, Zionism and Socialism, offered different solutions to both the ‘Jewish Question’ and the ‘Women’s Question.’ Many Jewish women, according to their political beliefs, became active participants in both movements.

The Bund, the General Jewish Labour Organization of Russia and Poland, was especially appealing to Jewish women, with more women joining the Bund than any other radical political organization at the time. This was in part due to the Bund’s ideological position. The Bund followed a strictly socialist program and, therefore, their focus was oriented on class, not gender. However, despite the fact that issues of gender were

not at the fore of the Bundist program, Bundist ideology nonetheless incorporated and provided a solution to those women seeking liberation and equality. Bundists believed that women, in participating equally in the proletarian revolution, would not only bring about the emancipation of the worker, but of the woman and Jew as well. The importance of the 'Women's Question' can be seen in the writings of Vladimir Lenin, one of the leading socialist and communist thinkers of the time:

Up to the present the position of woman has been such that is has been called a position of slavery. Women are crushed by their domestic drudgery, and only socialism can relieve them of this drudgery.¹³

Thus, the Bund did not discriminate based on gender and recognized the working woman as equal. For this reason, the Bund readily accepted and encouraged female membership. It is suggested that by the time the Bund reached its height of success, women made up about one third of its total membership.¹⁴ Nor were Jewish women limited to mere inclusion: the Bund readily accepted women amongst its leadership and foremost agitators.

The Bund appealed to Jewish women from both upper and lower classes, recruiting both the intelligentsia who wished to organize and educate, and an incredible number of impoverished working class women who wanted to fight for their liberation. By the 1880s, the plight of women factory workers became dire. The conditions in the factories were

horrible and hundreds of unmarried women and children were forced to work long hours with little pay, whether in the hosiery factories working sixteen to eighteen hour days, or in the cigarette and match factories where they were likely to contract severe lung disease.¹⁵ During the early developments of the proto-Bund, when propaganda was the primary method for the dissemination of radical socialist ideas, many educated women from the upper echelons of Jewish society became involved in the organization. They educated other women workers by establishing the *Kruzhok*, thus intellectualizing elite groups of workers.

When the Bund shifted its policy from propaganda to agitation, many of the working class women who had been educated through the *Kruzhok* became leading agitators, orators, and organizers. Of the seven delegates who attended the first official meeting of the Bund, two were women: Maria Zhaladskaia and Rosa Greenblat.¹⁶ During the famous May Day rally of 1892, two of four speakers were working women: Jewish seamstresses, Fanya Reznik and Yelena Gelfand, who emphasized the growing importance of working women within the socialist and Bundist program. In her speech, Gelfand directly addressed the issue of gender equality, reminding the crowd that the issue of women's liberation was inseparable from the greater struggle for the liberation of the proletariat and that the working woman was "not inferior to men in her working ability or intellect."¹⁷

Esther Frumkin was perhaps the most famous woman in the

Bund and the only woman to directly influence Bund policy. Frumkin was born into a wealthy family in Minsk and, like many revolutionaries of her time, she became self-conscious and guilty of her privilege. It is estimated that approximately one fifth of the Jewish population in Minsk lived in poverty.¹⁸ This sickened Frumkin and prompted her to abandon her life of luxury in favour of the revolution. She was arrested multiple times by the Russian government for her revolutionary activities and her contribution to various Yiddish socialist publications, which called for the overthrow of the Czarist regime.¹⁹ Her grandfather was a rabbi and, in addition to her secular upbringing, Frumkin was taught both Hebrew and Yiddish. Later, when the Bund adopted Yiddish as the official language of the Jewish proletariat, Frumkin became one of its greatest proponents. For her, Yiddish represented both the Jewishness of the Bund and the hope for Jewish autonomy and nationhood.²⁰ At the 1908 language conference in Czernowitz, Frumkin became famous for subverting the conference for political ends, arguing for the supremacy of Yiddish as the only national language of the Jewish people, and challenging the likes of I.L. Peretz, who argued for the importance of Hebrew as well as Yiddish.²¹

One interesting aspect of Frumkin's socialist ideology was her desire for the reappropriation of traditional elements of Judaism into Jewish proletarian society.²² As its new ideal, Frumkin favoured replacing the rabbinic hierarchy with the Jewish working-class family. She envisioned a selective Judaism that would preserve domestic celebrations, historical

festivals, and the universal message of the Talmud, while omitting more dogmatic religious elements.²³ Despite her efforts in the Bund to establish an autonomous Jewish nation in Russia, Frumkin led a ferocious attack against traditional and rabbinic Judaism. This tension between Jewish socialism and the traditional rabbinic Judaism coloured her later career as a commissar of the communist regime.

Pioneer Women

Many women were also attracted to the Poale Zionist movement. For them, the land of Palestine promised not only the emancipation of the Jews and the founding of a socialist utopia, but also provided the opportunity to establish a community in which men and women would be equal. Manya Vilbushevitz-Shochat was one of a select group of tenacious and exceptional women who fought her way into the male-dominated political hierarchy that had developed in Israel. For these women, socialist Zionism was the opportunity for the freedom and equality for which they yearned. They, however, were among the minority, as most socialist female immigrants were not as included in their supposedly utopian communities.

Originally, the Zionist movement was not as welcoming to women as other ideological movements at the time. Unlike the Bund, which incorporated women into its leadership from its very inception, there were no women delegates at the first Zionist congress in 1897. Even socialist Zionism was slow in incorporating women into its ranks; in its

formative years in Palestine, only one woman, Rachel Yanait Ben Zvi, was active in the movement. For most women who immigrated during the Second Aliyah, what was imagined to be a burgeoning society built on egalitarian values and socialist ideology was in reality a society in which women were marginalized and dismissed by men. Relegated to the kitchens and laundry, women were not trained in farming or other, more liberating, occupations. Furthermore, women were not included in their communities' political debates or policy meetings.²⁴

As second-class citizen, some women gave up trying to live equally with men and instead decided that only through segregation could they become liberated. Hanna Meizel, an agronomist trained in Germany, was one of the first women to branch off from the conventional settlement, starting a secret market garden outside the gates of the main settlement in 1909. A year later, she opened the first training farm for women in the Kinnereth. By that time, the movement had prompted the formation of an independent women's socialist movement in Israel, which in 1921 established the General Council of Women Workers, a separate body within the Histadrut (the Federation of Labour). Unfortunately, the council ultimately failed to procure for its members the respect and equality that they desired from the Histadrut, which remained paternalistic throughout the pre-state period, continuing to treat women as second class citizens.²⁵ There was some improvement over time, especially within the development *kibbutzim*, where women were eventually able to transcend

prescribed gender roles. However, these women made up an incredibly small portion of the population.²⁶

Manya Vilbushevitz-Shochat was perhaps the most famous and controversial of these figures. Not only renowned for her contributions to the establishment of the state of Israel, Shochat was one of the most active Jewish socialist women of her time. Born in 1880 to a wealthy and educated Jewish family in Grodno, Shochat had a privileged childhood. This privilege led, as it did for Frumkin, to a crisis of conscience that resulted in revolutionary activities. Controversially, Shochat was one of the Bundist radicals arrested by Russian secret police under the control of the infamous Sergei Zubatov and consequently persuaded, along with other leading Bundist radicals, to set up a new Jewish trade unionist party supported by the Czarist regime. When this collapsed, however, Shochat threw herself into political radicalism, smuggling arms and completing various missions for the Bund and other radical factions.²⁷

As the story goes, Shochat was eventually tricked into immigrating to Palestine by her brother Naham Vilbushevitz, who, scared for her safety, sent her a false letter claiming that a great misfortune had befallen him and that he was in need of her assistance.²⁸ Heavily involved in socialist terrorism back home, Shochat originally believed that her part of the revolution would be fought in Russia. Once in Israel, however, Shochat fell in love with the country: “[it] is a love,” she later writes in a memoir, “that has lasted through all my life, and its strength seems to be bound up

with the renewal of something many centuries old.”²⁹ Throwing herself into socialist Zionism with the same fervor with which she had fought for socialism back in Russia, Shochat spearheaded the kibbutz movement, helping to establish Sejera, one of the first working class collectives in Eretz Israel. She also took part in Ha’Shomer, a mobile farming and military defense organization, in which women insisted on standing guard over the collectives and even went on reconnaissance missions with men.³⁰ Ultimately, Shochat’s contributions to socialism and Zionism are too numerous for this paper. It is fair to say, however, that through her determination, intelligence, and cunning, Shochat became one of Israel’s most foundational personalities.

Radical Jewish women played an integral role in the socialist and labor movements of Eastern Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although these women fought alongside radical Jewish men for the emancipation of the Jewish people and the liberation of oppressed workers, their struggle had elements unique to them as women. They faced marginalization not only as Jews and workers, but also as women. Often second class citizens within the Jewish community itself, women had to struggle for equality from within their own communities and movements, as well as from the outside. It is important to study the history of these women, taking into account the distinctiveness of their position and experience. This paper has explored only a few of the motivating factors that led Eastern European women into radical politics. Still, I believe it

has made obvious the strength and courage that these formidable women possessed, as well as the importance of women like Esther Frumkin and Manya Vilbushevitch-Shochat, and their struggle within the radical social movements in Russia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Endnotes

- 1 Joseph Mill, as quoted in Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 190.
- 2 Russia is assumed to include the Pale of Settlement unless otherwise specified.
- 3 Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Woman; Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*. (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press (University Press of New England), 2004), 7.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 5 Paula E. Hyman, *East European Jewish Women in an Age of Transition, 1880-1930*. In Ed. Judith R. Baskin, *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 273.
- 6 Parush, 6.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 67.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 9 Ita Kalish as quoted in Paula E. Hyman, *East European Jewish Women in an Age of Transition, 1880-1930*, in Ed. Baskin, 275.
- 10 Hyman, 274-75.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 277.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 278.
- 13 Vladimir Lenin, from *Woman and Society*, in *The Woman Question; Selections from the Writings of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, V.I. Lenin, Joseph Stalin*. (New York: International Publishers, 1951 (this printing, 1972)), 43.
- 14 Paula E. Hyman, *East European Jewish Women I an Age of Transition, 1880-1930*. In *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, 279.
- 15 Naomi Shepherd, *A Price Below Rubies; Jewish Woman as Rebels and Radicals*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 142.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 17 Yelena Gelfand as quoted in Naomi Shepherd, 147.

- 18 Shepherd, 152.
- 19 Ibid., 156.
- 20 Ibid., 159.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 161.
- 23 Ibid., 162.
- 24 Ibid, paragraph informed by pages 178-180.
- 25 Ibid., 176.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid., 184.
- 28 Manya Vilbushevitz-Shochat in Ed. Mark A. Raider and Miriam B Raider-Roth, *The Plough Woman; Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*. (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press (University Press of New England), 2002), 4.
- 29 Shochat, 5.
- 30 Shepherd, 195.

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Lessons from Yiddish Literature: A Study of the Modern Life Devoid of Meaning

David Shannon

Yiddish literature of the early 20th century is marked by the theme of a cultural decline coinciding with the destabilizing effects of the onset of modernity. The overwhelming motif is one of degeneration, although there is a glimmer of hope for the renewal of Jewish life in the modern setting of the city. Prominent Yiddish authors Dovid Bergelson and Esther Kreitman both examine the issue of the disconnection of Eastern European Jews from their cultural values and traditional ways of life. Bergelson's *Descent* dissects this issue by means of a slow unravelling of the mystery surrounding the suicide of a promising young pharmacist in a small provincial town, whereas Kreitman's *Deborah* follows a young woman's lonely struggle to find constancy and meaning amidst a hopeless world of ever changing misfortune. Meylekh, the esoteric pharmacist, and Deborah, the neglected child, are poignant personifications of the anomie that pervaded the Yiddish world; both characters embody the depressing consequences of the fragmentation of Yiddish life, which manifests itself as a personal metaphysical displacement.

The origin of this fragmentation is the profound loss of centre

within the Yiddish world. The characters of Deborah, Meylekh, and Khaym-Moyshe emblemize the extent of the ramifications of this loss of orientation on Jewish society and the Jewish individual. Although Bergelson and Kreitman both expatiate on the same basic discourse, their characters come to disparate conclusions regarding the possible outcomes of a similarly despondent circumstance. Deborah is fated to a life of loneliness and a permanent detachment from reality. Meylekh, also disillusioned by his reality, chooses not to accept what he perceives to be a pitiful existence devoid of purpose, and thus ends his own life in a final effort of defiance. By following the footsteps of his closest friend, Khaym-Moyshe comes very close to ending his own life of loneliness, but his life is redeemed at the last moment. The redemption is the hope for renewal, an affirmation that one can still derive meaning from the fragmented remains of a declining Yiddish world rendered obsolete by modernity.

Both *Descent* and *Deborah* portray a Yiddish world that was once home to a thriving, vibrant Jewish culture centered on the constancy of longstanding traditions. These traditions constituted the foundation on which this world was built and shaped the infrastructure that allowed it to function and survive despite external influences such as violent anti-Semitism. Thus, every facet of the Yiddish world was modeled after tradition; tradition dictated all societal norms and patterns of life. A Jew could judge the strength of a community by the strength of its traditional institutional pillars, namely the rabbinical authorities, or *tsadikim*, who

governed the town. And this system was indeed tenaciously enduring, as evidenced by its history of survival in the hostile Eastern Europe.¹ Despite the unrelieved poverty, despite the violent pogroms, despite all the “harsh anti-Semitic realities of tsarist rule,” the Yiddish world continued to prosper for centuries.² However, like all dated societal structures, the Yiddish world could not forever remain impermeable to the forces of change. Modernity demanded a stark distinction between the old and the new; the traditions of the past came into direct conflict with ‘modern’ ideals. Unparalleled world events signified that the era in which Bergelson and Kreitman authored their works was without historical precedent. In this new age, the old rules and traditions that had guided the Jews for centuries seemed invalidated.

The First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the Russian Civil War would ravage the Yiddish world well before the catastrophic destruction of the Second World War. As Bergelson’s *Descent* chronicles, the Yiddish world was “decaying from within” before these upheavals penetrated the shtetls of Eastern Europe.³ The draw of assimilation was increasingly strong. Integration into non-Jewish society offered a chance to escape the limits of the shtetl and explore the cities, rich with opportunity and the lustre of modern ingenuities and avant-garde culture. Furthermore, in the case of *Deborah*, the unctuous *tsadikim* themselves became little more than opportunistic egoists, corrupt with power and wealth.⁴ Portrayed as relics of the past, these *tsadikim* serve as

living testaments to the bankruptcy of the moralistic traditions that held the Yiddish world together and the incompatibility of ancient tradition and modernity. The unravelling of the social fabric affected all spheres of society during this period of rapid modernization. In *Deborah*, the family becomes disjointed, whereas in *Descent*, it is the structure of the entire shtetl community that becomes disconnected. As shtetl life disintegrated, the allure of the modern city seemed ever more enticing.

Meylekh and Khaym-Moyshe, as well as Deborah, uncover the effects of modernity. It is important to specify what is meant by the term 'modern,' as there are a number of conflicting definitions and connotations. In his examination of the philosophical discourse on modernity, Peter Osborne cites Marshall Berman's account of modernity as "the dynamic and inherently contradictory process of constant change, a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal that opens up and closes down avenues of human possibility."⁵ The modern world is ever-changing and unpredictable; the facts of yesterday may no longer be considered as truth tomorrow. Modernity thus yields a measure of uncertainty, for only the ephemeral 'present' can be grasped. On this view of modernity, there is no way to prepare for what the future may bring; hence the theme of fear of the future in both *Descent* and *Deborah*.

Another aspect of modernity is its hyper-rationality; as Benjamin Singer writes, "as a cognitive concept, modernity points to the emergence of instrumental rationality as the intellectual framework through

which the world is perceived and constructed.”⁶ Heavily influenced by Enlightenment thought, modernity demands the primacy of reason as the source of legitimacy and authority. The modern, Osborne explains, is “opposed . . . to ‘tradition’ in general,” and thus comes into direct conflict with the Yiddish system of belief.⁷ As *Deborah* and *Descent* seem to suggest, tradition and modernity cannot peacefully coexist, for they are fundamentally opposed to each other. As Eastern Europe enters the ‘modern’ age, Yiddish tradition is slowly overcome by the forces of modern thought that prevailed in the cities. It was only a matter of time before the decline of Yiddish world left its inhabitants displaced in a new modern reality without the tools to cope with its destabilizing effects on their traditional mode of life.

Walter Benjamin, a prominent German-Jewish philosopher living at the time *Descent* and *Deborah* were written, describes modernity as an apocalyptic “time of truth” that provides “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed.”⁸ For Benjamin, modernity represents the period that precedes the Jewish Messianic age, when all will be revealed and the Jews will finally experience the redemption they have so patiently awaited. However, Benjamin continues by insisting on the “‘nothingness of revelation’ and the definition of history as infinite deferment (deferment of redemption).”⁹ In the context of *Descent*, the ‘nothingness of revelation’ is evidenced by the philosophical stagnation of Khaym-Moyshe and Meylekh that will be explored later in this essay. Thus, it is

“the *impossibility*, not the imminence, of willed redemption” that leads to the hopelessness that pervades both *Descent* and *Deborah*.¹⁰

Drawing on the works of Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin, Benjamin Singer describes modernity in terms of a fundamentally new type of urban subjective experience that is characterized as “markedly quicker, more chaotic, fragmented, and disorienting than in previous phases of human culture.”¹¹ The metropolis that is the modern city is representative of the experience of modernization.¹² In both *Descent* and *Deborah*, the city is used as a symbol of modernity in a broad sense. The chaotic environment of the city causes its inhabitants to be grouped together simply as ‘the masses’, a nameless crowd with no fixed identity or purpose. Each individual is entirely consumed with his own needs and pays no heed to his neighbour lest he be delayed in his rush to the next destination. Within this context, urban “everyday life is the measure of all things: of the... nonfulfilment of human relations.”¹³

Inevitably, modernity could not deliver on its promises of prosperity and knowledge for all. Upon leaving the microcosm of the shtetl and entering large metropolises like Warsaw, small town Eastern European Jews were often discriminated against by non-Jews. When Deborah ventures out to the “magnificent Saxton Gardens,” a sign notifies her that “Jews wearing gabardines and dogs [are] not admitted.”¹⁴ If they hoped to fraternize with “all the nicest people... with titles and money and everything,” the Jews had to abandon their traditional garb before

being admitted into an establishment that catered to higher society. As Jews, Meylekh and Khaym-Moyshe are allowed to attend the university in the “great city” only as external students, and thus cannot graduate with any sort of degree.¹⁵ The privileges of the city are open only to those who fit the modern mould. The modern man, then, is ‘free’ in the sense that he is not held down by any customs of the past and is limited only by his own rational capacity. He is eager to seize the urban setting’s new opportunities, yet to do so requires abandoning of a longstanding system of values.

In the city, the Jews from the shtetl also encountered the startling duplicity of the vast opportunity presented by a greater economy coexisting with a profound lack of community. In these novels, the city seems to have an intangibly sinister nature. Kreitman notes that “the street was full of animation, full of the breath of life,” but one must not breathe in too deeply or else be punished by the “evil city smells.”¹⁶ The city has an overwhelming affect on Deborah and her family. Even her father, ever the optimist, points out “the sort of thing that can only happen in the big city . . . when so many people are herded together, they lose sight of their own individual value as human beings with a sacred soul.”¹⁷ The perpetual hurry of city life does not afford anyone the time to care about the next man, or to pay homage to human decency in general. Bergelson illustrates the calloused attitude brought on by city life with an anecdote about a horse that had collapsed and lay dying in the middle

of a busy bridge. Khyaym-Moyshe understands that “these people are metropolitan and fully occupied; they have no time to wait for the horse to expire on its own and they shoot it.”¹⁸ These city people are forced to make decisions in haste; they have no time for impractical niceties that were commonplace in the slow-paced lifestyle of the shtetl. Furthermore, these city people “shoot [the horse] with the certainty that they’re doing right,” but after all, even if they were to be wrong, the prevailing attitude is that “it’s of no significance.”¹⁹ This little episode exemplifies how the modern city trivializes life by degrading the value of common human interaction, for “they don’t even turn to glance at Khaym-Moyshe, they don’t ask him whether or not he gives his consent.”²⁰ It is no wonder that Meylekh and Khaym-Moyshe observe that the “enormously great city seemed enveloped in a haze . . . composed of . . . lumbering shadows that roared and terrified and rendered the world formless and void.”²¹

Khaym-Moyshe, Meylekh, Deborah and her family are all drawn to the big city by its modern lustre and allure of opportunity. Again, each character experiences both the advantages and the deprivations of city life. The experience of the city alters the course of both *Descent* and *Deborah* in that it leaves a distinct impression on the characters’ worldview. The way each character reacts to the city experience, however, differs greatly based on his individual circumstances, as are the reasons the characters initially move to the city from their hometowns.

For Deborah, the effects of the modern city compound the

destabilizing forces already present in her life. Her family is fragmented and insensitive to her needs. Her parents' worldviews are fundamentally opposed, and thus they can only offer contradictory advice to their daughter. The disorientation of city life accentuates Deborah's identity crisis, but the origins of this problem become clear when examining her family life.

Deborah's father, Reb Avram Ber, always seeks a better life for his family. This motivates him to move time after time to accept ever more enticing offers from communities in need of a holy man like himself. At the outset of the novel, Reb Avram Ber and his family enjoy a comfortable existence in the quietude of Jelhitz. He is soon presented with the opportunity to be head of the yeshiva in R—, however, and the family jumps at the opportunity to “at last be rid of the sleepy little town of Jelhitz” and move on to R—, where “a new and glorious life would begin.”²² Even Reb Avram Ber, a man steeped in Jewish tradition, is drawn to the opportunities presented by the modern city. This initial episode reveals a pattern of behaviour within the family dynamic that repeats itself as the family moves again and again. This repetition is notable because each move is expected to bring about a change, but instead, every migration simply reinforces familial dysfunction.

There is a distinct lack of communication within the family, and the deepest feelings are never shared amongst them. As a result, no one is attuned to the true needs of his relative. The family's entrance into the big

city only accentuates this disconnect and intensifies Deborah's confusion in her search for identity. But the absence of communication is evident from the very beginning of the narration, when the family gathers in the living room to "absentmindedly" drink their tea, and "though they all seemed to be unaware of each other's presence, every one breathed a breath of gentle disapproval on his neighbour."²³ While it is clear that there are important unresolved issues, it is equally clear that these issues will never be addressed. Each member of the family suffers from the dysfunction according to his personality and by his own measure, but no one suffers as acutely as Deborah. Indeed, she "felt slighted by them all."²⁴ She is a victim of circumstance, one might even say a victim of modernity, and this condition develops as the narrative advances.

Deborah is much like her mother, Raizela, who is described as "highly educated, a real lady" of great sophistication and also practical – "as wise as any man."²⁵ In a way, Raizela fills the traditional role of the father more than Reb Avram Ber himself; she is a sort of pre-feminist modern woman. Although "in his heart of hearts, Reb Avram Ber disapproved of his wife's erudition," he nevertheless placed the utmost trust in her judgment, for "she was his adviser in all secular matters."²⁶ But for all the love, trust, and respect Reb Avram Ber afforded her, Raizela could not forgive her husband for aborting the original plan by failing to pass the examinations required to become the rabbi of the town of Plotck.²⁷ This grudge meant that she would never see her husband as an equal,

as worthy, and she would forever hold herself coolly detached from him and the world at large for having mistreated her so. In this way, Raizela embodies a drastic disconnect from those closest to her. This failure to communicate and consequent loneliness and self-seclusion is a pattern that is closely followed by her daughter, Deborah.

Raizela is a woman of quiet power; she inspires “fear mingled with respect” even in men.²⁸ Notably, she is “not a believer in *Tsadikim*,” and sceptical and distrustful of people in general.²⁹ Raizela is not a warm, caring mother by any measure. She is highly rational and practical in business terms, a truly ‘modern’ woman who places her trust in logic, not in God. She spends most of her time absorbed in her reading, “reclining on her couch, ailing and feeble.”³⁰ Raizela’s apathetic detachment renders her unapproachable, almost inaccessible, especially to her daughter.

As for Reb Avram Ber, he is “just a simpleton” who lacks the courage and confidence to make decisions for himself, in contrast to his wife, who is never afraid to share her opinion.³¹ Whereas Raizela trusts only in the science of logic, the Rabbi places his faith in his religion wholeheartedly, and he relies on tradition as a crutch for the reinforcement that he is incapable of deriving on his own. Due to his pusillanimous nature, Rev Abram Ber is incapable of independent action; in times of crisis, “he could only pray to God for mercy.”³² So when Deborah seeks advice from her father, the Rabbi can do nothing but refer her to God. The Rabbi’s source of guidance, his traditional theological rabbinic education,

leaves him thoroughly underprepared for the trials of the modern world. Reb Avram Ber's character stands in stark contrast to that of his wife. The juxtaposition of this opposing parental guidance further confuses Deborah, who feebly attempts to walk the middle line.

Meanwhile, Michael "kept aloof from all the turmoil."³³ As Michael grows up, however, he eventually reaches "the age of understanding," and, henceforth, he can "no longer pretend that life [is] a game."³⁴ It is as though Michael fully realizes the harsh realities of the modern world. After this point, Michael's quips become increasingly biting as his insight allows him to touch on the real issue at hand but escape any real confrontation through the pretence of the comedy. Michael understands certain characteristics about his sister that even his parents could not discern. When people laugh at his jokes, they laugh because there is truth, indeed, a sort of wisdom in his wisecracks. At one point, Michael notes that "the average person leaves off suspecting when he knows for certain, but you just begin!"³⁵ Deborah knows this is true, and tacitly admits it in her response. Due to his insightfulness, Michael is in a unique position to help his sister. Unfortunately, he and his sister were "never on very friendly terms," and thus any support Michael can offer Deborah is permanently out of reach.³⁶

Deborah is a confused child, a child of modernity. She is born into a period of great transition, and she struggles to cope with the whirlwind of change that surrounds her. Deborah is torn between two

colliding worlds. Because of her parents' apparent disagreement on the trustworthiness of the Jewish rabbinic tradition in general, Deborah has no clear parental direction to follow. She must judge for herself from a very young age, without much experience or knowledge to guide her decisions. Deborah's ambiguity is a destabilizing force; she constantly re-evaluates her decisions and second-guesses herself. This trait is mainly attributable to her lack of self-confidence and self-worth that developed out of her upbringing. To illustrate, when she asks her father what she will be one day, he replies, "Nothing, of course!"³⁷ Deborah's ambiguity and uncertainty are compounded by her parents' opposing worldviews. While her father is forever the God-fearing optimist, her mother is the sceptic. Accordingly, Deborah "did not know whether it was best to look solemn, like her mother, or happy, like her father."³⁸ To compound the issue further, the people most able to help her, her own family, are unable to offer her any support.

Deborah's family moves from Jelhitz, to R—, to Warsaw, and with each successive migration, a new hope is born. Based on this hope, the stakes are raised, the rewards are doubled, and the possibilities seem ever more realizable. Within the first chapter of the novel, the family is "in a bad way, deeply in debt."³⁹ But Reb Avram Ber returns from a visit with the *Tsadik* full of confidence, exclaiming, "All's well, the Lord be praised! All's well!"⁴⁰ He is ecstatic about the offer he has just received to fill the post of principal lecturer at the new yeshiva the *Tsadik* is building

in R—, and the compensation of fifteen roubles a week along with free accommodation. The family rejoices at the news. Even Raizela, ever the sceptic, eventually decides that she had little to lose in the move and thus she would “entrust herself to the mercy of the lord, and maybe everything would turn out for the best.”⁴¹

In reality, the living situation in R— is not all that the family had hoped for. Despite the guarantees from the *Tsadik* that his finances would be taken care of, it soon becomes clear that the glorified *Tsadik* in fact an effete, miserly autocrat who cares only about himself. When the *Tsadik*’s court goes up in flames, the community is filled with anguish and in need of words of comfort from their leader. Yet all the *Tsadik* can do is sit upon his pile of valuables that he managed to recover from the burning compound, and, “like a creature forlorn,” he keeps guard over his only true love, his “treasures,” including priceless diamonds.⁴²

Modernity does not recognize the value of community. Only economic status holds and retains its value in times of trouble. Reb Avram Ber has to beg for the wages he was promised, and furthermore, has to pay for his own rent in direct violation of his prior working agreement. At least in Jelhitz, the family had enjoyed “a little nest of [their] own, a little peace and security.”⁴³ It is evident to all that the move to R— has not brought about a better life for Deborah’s family; on the contrary, they were in fact better off where they had started.

After all the bitterness of the family’s disappointing experience in

R—, the reader, like the characters themselves, might wonder, “What did the future hold in store now?”⁴⁴ Again, the possibility of renewal afforded by another migration kindles a new hope for the future of the family. Reb Zalman raves about the great city of Warsaw, “the city of golden opportunity,” the most modern city in all of Poland. This time, Reb Avram Ber is a bit more cautious in his approach, asking, “Shall we take the chance?” Raizela repeats the rationale for moving to R— and responds, “No harm in trying.”⁴⁵ Again, the outlook is as bright as ever. Reb Avram Ber is enthusiastic about this opportunity to move his rabbinical practice to the city. He declares, “This time everything is going to turn out for the best.”⁴⁶ Thus, the despairing pattern repeats itself in the family’s subsequent move to Warsaw. While Reb Avram Ber does succeed in eking out a respectable existence in Warsaw, the big city exposes Deborah to modernity complete with its malaises. This exposure will accelerate Deborah’s gradual descent into desolation.

Deborah is trapped in an endless and exhaustive cycle of raised expectations and dashed dreams. As the high hopes fail to materialize time and time again, the reader, along with the characters, gradually develops a deeply entrenched scepticism, not unlike that which Raizela harbours. It seems that the experiences of every character, whether central or peripheral, slowly teach that character to carefully guard against any optimism in relation to the future, the unknown. What results is a “sort of yearning for the past and a hazy vision of the future.”⁴⁷

Deborah's family undergoes drastic changes in their environment that challenge each family member's personal strength, yet at no point do they reach out to each other to share the burden. Deborah, Michael, Raizela, and Reb Avram Ber all harbour grave doubts about the future; "no one, however, revealed his feelings to the other, nor gave the slightest hint of them."⁴⁸ The lack of communication within Deborah's family leaves her utterly alone in her struggles.

Deborah's troubles develop progressively as the plot advances. At the very start, she is obsessed with Naimonovitch's *Russian Grammar*; Deborah longs for the education that would enable her to be "a person of real consequence" who could "make her own life."⁴⁹ Deborah knows that she must rebel against her family's wishes and seize her future for herself. Although "almost every night, in bed, she firmly resolved to give up her duties of keeping house" to pursue her educational dreams, "she was lacking in courage," and lacking in the self-determination necessary to follow through.⁵⁰ Deborah cannot bring herself to take action for her own cause, and thus, in effect, she resigns herself to the fate that she dreads most. So, "without being told . . . she went back into the harness again, fretting and suffering all the more for her vain hopes of freedom – freedom that seemed within her grasp."⁵¹ Modernity seems to offer freedom, but that freedom is always just out of reach. Instead of enjoying freedom, the modern child is trapped in a 'harness,' unable to find another way to work towards the freedom she yearns for.

The freedom that Deborah yearns for is emblemized by Deborah's one and only love, Simon, the freethinking revolutionary. She is consumed with adoration for the man her mother recognizes as "a man of exceptional spirit" and her father extols as "the most brilliant student we have."⁵² Simon comes to represent the passion that is glaringly absent from Deborah's life. This passion prevents her from coming to terms with the world around her. This passion makes her feel that "there was something missing in her life," something that "gave her no peace" and made her feel that "she alone could find no place for herself."⁵³ Simon, together with his cause of socialism, fills a void in Deborah's life and gives her meaning.

In Warsaw, Deborah is introduced to socialist ideology. Deborah finds it "unthinkable for her to carry on with her present useless life" that is characterized by "her own sceptical outlook on life" that "led to stagnation, to nothingness."⁵⁴ She immediately embraces its tenets and eagerly adopts the cause. In contrast to her life before she discovered the socialist cause, her newfound purpose "afforded her a certain feeling of comfort, even of pride."⁵⁵ For the first time in her life, Deborah is able to see value in her purpose and value in herself. Simon, or Draiskin as he is known in the party, is irresistible to Deborah. She cannot help but to fall helplessly in love with the man who "not only sent the blood racing in her veins... not only made her flesh tingle, but... stirred the depths of her soul."⁵⁶ He makes her feel alive again, and, furthermore, he represents the values and aspirations that Deborah has sought her whole life: he was a

person of consequence, the leader of a party that would one day lead a revolution. Simon embodies all that Deborah admires, and she “learnt to love him more and more with each passing day.”⁵⁷ It is Deborah’s love that evokes her heartfelt dedication to the socialist cause. It is her love that gives her this newfound zeal for life.

Through Simon, and his zeal for a socialist revolution, Deborah experiences what it is like to live and work for a purpose. Deborah experiences love, and it brings new colour and meaning to her life. When Deborah is ousted from the party, it has devastating and permanent effect on her. She cannot bear the rejection, and very quickly “her love and affection gave way to hatred, not only for Simon, but for the whole clique around him. And her Socialism perished,” along with any hopes she ever had for personal happiness and fulfillment.⁵⁸ For “now she saw the hard truth: she was all alone in the world.”⁵⁹ From this point on, Deborah descends slowly but irrevocably into a madness born of helplessness.

Deborah’s descent into madness is a process that begins at the very beginning of her story. At the opening of the novel, it is evident that Deborah is unable to cultivate a healthy relationship with her own family; they are oblivious to her needs and neglect to show any semblance of gratitude to Deborah for her tireless housekeeping efforts. Deborah receives no positive reinforcement from those who profess to love her most. The author makes this clear, stating at the opening of the first chapter that “as long as [Deborah] could remember, never had a word

of praise fallen to her lot.”⁶⁰ This premise further inhibits Deborah from establishing any meaningful connection with anyone beyond her family, for if she is unable to do so in the realm of her own home, the hope of establishing a close relationship with someone beyond that sphere is even more remote. To Deborah, it is as if she is of no consequence to anyone. At one point she muses, “Everybody dislikes me, everybody!”⁶¹ Thus, she is alone in her struggles; but worse still, her lack of faith in her self-worth means that even when she confines herself to her mind she still cannot find comfort or acceptance. For Deborah, there are no options, there is no one to turn to, there can be no hope; there is simply no way out. Her family has failed her and her brief experiment with socialism has yielded only frustration; her every effort to define her place in modernity is stymied by forces beyond her control.

Despite her best efforts, Deborah occasionally remembers that life was not always so dull and depressing, and she suffers from “pains at the heart” that seem to represent a yearning for the true love that she experienced in the presence of Simon.⁶² Her longing is evident when she is discussing Simon with Bailka after she is already engaged to Berish. As Bailka mentions that Simon has spent a few hours with her recently, she scans Deborah’s face for any trace of jealousy. Deborah then reveals the permanent damage that her broken heart has wrought on her psyche as she thinks to herself, “I believe I’m going mad... I’m moving in a crazy world full of mad fancies and with a mad longing to do myself

great injury.”⁶³ Deborah knows her fate, for she seals it when she agrees to the marriage with Berish, and she moves steadily towards her end, a maddening descent into non-existence.

From the time of her engagement to the end of the novel, Deborah cannot find the strength or the will to resist her descent into madness, for she feels “too sick at heart to care what might become of her.”⁶⁴ Deborah can no longer engage life and attempt to play a role in her own destiny. Every previous attempt she has made was met with utter defeat, each failure progressively more ruinous than the last. It is almost as if she has no power over this fate of hers, for she seems to try every means of self-expression available to her, and ultimately, all her efforts are for naught. By the end of the novel, Deborah simply lacks the means to resist her misery any longer; she succumbs to hopelessness with the realization that “she [is] helpless.”⁶⁵ She is thus unable to exercise her prerogative, for “she no longer [consults] her own wishes and . . . lost all her willpower.”⁶⁶ Deborah finds no respite from the disintegration of the Yiddish world, and can find no relief from modernity.

Deborah glides through the remainder of her life with “complete indifference,” for she is freed from any need to feel pain by “remembering nothing of the past and caring nothing for her future.”⁶⁷ This total apathy towards life seems to be hardly better than death, for she submits to this “slow, relentless torture of the brain which could have only one unhappy ending – in the madhouse.”⁶⁸ And yet, when she agrees to marry Berish

and sentences herself to a life devoid of meaning, Deborah unsettlingly ruminates that “a marriage of convenience [is] surely no worse than the cowardice of dying by her own hand!”⁶⁹

Bergelson’s *Descent* furthers the discourse on that particular response to hopelessness. In contrast to Deborah’s interpretation of suicide as an act of cowardice, *Descent* portrays the act of taking one’s own life in a very different, more impartial light. The novel examines the same fragmented Yiddish world that drives Deborah to insanity and Meylekh to take his own life. However, Khaym-Moyshe and Meylekh, the central characters of *Descent*, follow a very different path than Deborah. *Deborah* focuses on the tribulations of the Yiddish family, whereas *Descent* is about the degeneration of the entire Yiddish community. Accordingly, the narrative seems to suggest the possibility of outcomes that differ greatly from the fate of Deborah.

Bergelson’s narrative voice argues that some people are able to derive meaning and project a sense of real purpose, even when the world is fragmented by the social order and in a state of disarray due to the loss of center. The center of the Yiddish world consisted of a rich heritage of longstanding Jewish traditions that all served as reminders of God’s omnipotence. This center once served as the metaphorical sun around which all spheres of life followed their respective orbits. All orientation was determined by relation to this central source; this sun gave meaning to every sphere, including the personal, the familial, the communal, and the

metaphysical. While this meaning may have been interpreted differently by each character, nevertheless, the source remained constant. Indeed, the constancy of the source brought about a sense of peace by means of providing stability through times of great difficulty. Thus, the structure of the community at large is entirely dependent on its center. It is precisely for this reason that the loss of this center brings about such devastation. And it is this devastation that Bergelson chronicles in *Descent*. Modernity offered a host of new possibilities to a Jew who was willing to sacrifice his tradition for the price of admission into the secular world. But as Joseph Sherman notes, "Once Jews abandoned a cultural heritage predicated on the Jewish religion, they effectively pulled themselves up by the roots."⁷⁰ *Descent* tells the story of two likeminded young intellectuals who confront the existential crisis of modernity. For Meylekh, the journey is a descent into the utter loneliness that stems directly from the loss of meaning – the loss of center. Khaym-Moyshe follows in his footsteps, but ultimately finds an alternate path.

Bergelson depicts Meylekh as the key to understanding the meaning of the story. The reader only sees Meylekh through the eyes of others and thus his portrayal is coloured by their own beliefs, values, discontents, and personal interactions with him. Evidently, he leaves an indelible mark on his friends and acquaintances. Indeed, the entire microcosm of that small town bears Meylekh's influence. Yet instead of relating to the reader just what it was that made Meylekh so influential

in terms of his impression, the reader must decipher Meylekh through his actions as described by those who knew him. But since no one truly understood him, any attempt by the reader to do so is stymied by a lack of a transparent source of information. It could be said that the reader is forced to derive his or her understanding by piecing together the fragments that Meylekh left behind. In effect, this separation places Meylekh beyond the narrative.

Meylekh's character is a direct contrast to Deborah's. Although both characters face identity crises as they struggle to cope with the loss of center, Meylekh seems to have the wisdom that Deborah always lacked. Whereas she searches for answers, he seems to have already found them. He also yearns to be understood, but, unlike Deborah, he has a response to his crises, a prepared statement in the form of an irreversible action. Meylekh is faced with the same issues that Deborah struggles to understand: loss of center and a consequent loss of identity. As opposed to Deborah, who can find no course of action that satisfies her needs, Meylekh develops a response that may puzzle his community, but still communicates a powerful message of protest and thereby serves his purpose.

The story of Meylekh's demise is obscure. The reader struggles alongside Khaym-Moyshe in attempting to uncover his reasoning. Although the plot revolves around Meylekh, his motive is never spelled out. Conversely, the reader is privy to Deborah's innermost thoughts and emotions; there is no mystery in her impulses and thus no mystery in her

fateful misery. While her family may be puzzled by her actions (just as the community of Rakitne is puzzled by Meylekh's suicide), to the reader, Deborah's motives are perfectly clear. *Deborah* illustrates the sources of discontent in modernity; *Descent* challenges the reader to derive his/her own understanding, providing many clues, but no definite answers.

Exceptionally, only Khaym-Moyshe comes to understand Meylekh. So well does he know Meylekh that Khaym-Moyshe is able to conduct conversations with him in his mind. The narrative voice elucidates this point by declaring that "essentially Khaym-Moyshe and Meylekh were one person."⁷¹ Thus, when Khaym-Moyshe ponders the reasons behind Meylekh's actions and addresses questions to Meylekh, he actually undergoes introspection, seeking to understand why Meylekh, in a sense a part of him, died. Indeed, upon arrival in Ratikne, Khaym-Moyshe inquires of the first person he sees as to the details of Meylekh's death.⁷²

The separation from meaning is the central theme of this novel. Meylekh and Khaym-Moyshe are separated from their community; their actions are separated from their motives as they are misunderstood by their community: even the reader is never given a clear picture of the main characters. The entire narration consists of seemingly disparate portions of seemingly frivolous conversations and social interactions. Most of these episodes consist of little more than superfluous town gossip and convey nonessential facts that obfuscate the mystery with extraneous information.

For example, the infatuations of Preger, the principal of Talmud Torah, with Khave Poyzner and then with Chayke, do not have any direct relation to the motivation behind Meylekh's suicide. These episodes serve to relate the vapid existence that characterizes a modernity that trivializes human interaction to the point that it becomes meaningless. Vexed by this meaninglessness, Meylekh and Khaym-Moyshe attempt to rationalize their existence, and this causes them to question their tradition and their God. For if God had, in fact, created the world and all that was in it, then "as far as they were both concerned... [He] hadn't behaved at all well."⁷³ Of all the fantastic possibilities within His great power and the "many beautiful worlds to choose from at the time, as though out of spite[,] He'd deliberately set them down on this worthless one."⁷⁴ This worthless world, devoid of all meaning, could only frustrate those who sought a greater purpose; for "there was no point in complaining... [and] equally none in interfering. There was nothing."⁷⁵ Meylekh and Khaym-Moyshe had no desire to participate in this existence; they were "strangers" to the world.⁷⁶ As children, they had experienced Yiddish life and found it unfulfilling, so they endeavoured to escape the bounds of shtetl life. Yet as external students in the big city, they find that despite all its promises of wealth and industry, the chaotic existence of city life "rendered the world formless and void."⁷⁷ There is nowhere else to go, no other source that can offer meaning in such a world, and thus Meylekh and Khaym-Moyshe devise "their own special response... the eternally mute protest."⁷⁸ Perhaps

because of their close relationship, Meylekh and Khaym-Moyshe are able to come up with this response, for Deborah could devise no such method of meaningful self-expression.

Meylekh, Khaym-Moyshe, and Deborah all confront the shared problem of a loss of center resulting in profound disorientation and metaphysical displacement. Although the narrative journey each character completes has a definite influence on that character's destiny, a fundamental distinguishing characteristic can help elucidate the three possible outcomes of such an uprooted existence. The ability of the character to communicate and to be understood by the conversant is what distinguishes the characters and ultimately influences their respective fates. Deborah finds that no one is able to understand or appreciate her troubles, and eventually she does not even attempt to share her true feelings at all. While Meylekh is more successful in gauging the inability of his peers to understand the spiritual depth of his dilemma and speak appropriately to his audience, in the end he also abandons the aspiration of being fully understood. Instead, he leaves behind a mystery that confounds his community in the hopes that someone may come to understand his nadir posthumously. And that person is Khaym-Moyshe, his closest friend, who proves to be the only person able to disentangle Meylekh's ambiguities and uncover the true cause of death. In doing so, Khaym-Moyshe comes to the same conclusion as his former classmate.

Accordingly, Khaym-Moyshe is prepared to swallow the same

bitter pill as his best friend did before him. After he has concluded his investigation into Meylekh's death and tied up all the loose ends in Rakitne, he must confront the inevitable question: "What was left to do now?"⁷⁹ At this point, he is ready to leave his apathetic world behind and end a trivial existence; for perhaps in death some significance, some purpose, may be exacted from life. But before he is able to execute his final act of protest, Hanke arrives to offer an alternate answer this question. Yet she does not say anything; "with a pale and frightened countenance," she only stares at him, "unable to speak."⁸⁰ Until this point, Khaym-Moyshe was trapped "in a spiritual, emotional, and intellectual twilight," ultimately "doomed to a life without growth" just as Joseph Sherman suggests in the novel's introduction.⁸¹ However, Hanke represents the opportunity to derive new meaning from the midst of this existential crisis. Bergelson felt that in *Descent*, he had shown "the death of the intelligentsia, who no longer had anyone to talk to... After all, Khaym-Moyshe now spoke exclusively to a dead person, to Myelekh."⁸² However, the final page suggests a powerful alternative to death: a person who empathizes with Khaym-Moyshe.

In stark contrast to the hopeful possibility presented in *Descent*, Deborah remains a hapless, lonely, and dejected child. She is ignored by those for whom she holds the utmost respect. She is let down by those whom she most trusts. She is neglected by her own family, who shows her no love and can give her nothing save a sense of worthlessness. Wherever Deborah turns, whomever she confides in, the result is inevitably a

pronounced disappointment that only reaffirms that sense of utter worthlessness that her family has instilled in her. Without any semblance of hope, Deborah is eventually enveloped by self-doubt and doomed to a profound isolation.

Each successive hope is greater the last, and each inevitable downfall solidifies the ever-present sense of helplessness. As the plot progresses, the reader becomes increasingly doubtful of even the possibility of any good existing in future; it seems as if each change can only yield more misery, each move can only but worsen the situation. For Deborah, the overwhelming pessimism that results from each change of situation only serves to exacerbate her self-doubt. Not only is she unable to place trust in the future, she becomes unable to trust in her own ability to influence that future. Deborah is “forever lacking something, herself hardly knowing what.”⁸³ But Simon knows what Deborah was missing in her life, what she longed for but could never find: it was love.

Bergelson appends a biblical epigraph to *Descent* taken from Ezekiel 8:7-8. It reads: “...and when I looked, behold there was a hole in the wall...and when I had digged...behold, there was a door.” taken from Ezekiel 8:7-8. Joseph Sherman, the translator, suggests that in the context of the novel, this passage is referring to “the dead-end process of seeking meaning in observed behaviour.”⁸⁴ However, the novel does not finish with a dead end; Khaym-Moyshe does not end his life. Rather, the narration leaves the ending open, for the reader to interpret. Hanke stares

directly into Khaym-Moyshe's eyes, and it can only be love.

Deborah and *Descent* explore the personal, familial, and societal ramifications of the profound loss of center that plagued the Yiddish world as its inhabitants struggled to adapt to modernity. Deborah, Meylekh, and Khyam-Moyshe attempt to forge a path between the traditions of their Yiddish heritage and the realities of a rapidly modernizing and unforgiving Eastern Europe. Deborah has no social resources and finds no outlet for self-expression. She eventually descends into madness, utterly incapable of coping with her reality. Meylekh and Khaym-Moyshe share a strong bond, and together they come to an understanding of the malaises of modernity and the stagnation of tradition. Meylekh sees that he cannot fight the changes wrought by modernity, and he takes his own life rather than be subject to his empty existence. Khaym-Moyshe follows the same path; however, he is diverted at the last moment to consider the possibility of meaning through the hope of love. Begelson and Kreitman portray the existential crisis in the Yiddish world brought on by modernity. The extremity of the crisis yields extreme reactions from the characters; of the three routes explored by the characters, only one contains the faintest glimmer of a tentative hope for future redemption.

End Notes

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- 2 Joseph Sherman, *Introduction to Descent* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999), xv.
- 3 Horn, D. (2003). *Jewish Reader: Descent*. Retrieved December 15, 2008 from National Yiddish Book Center: <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/>
- 4 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 90.
- 5 Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London, Verso, 1995), 5.
- 6 Benjamin Singer, "Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism" in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, Ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwarz (London: University of California Press, 1995), 72.
- 7 Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London, Verso, 1995), 12.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn, Edited and with Introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263-5.
- 9 Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London, Verso, 1995), 146.
- 10 Ibid., 147.
- 11 Benjamin Singer, "Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism" in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, Ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwarz (London: University of California Press, 1995), 72.
- 12 Dennis Richard, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.
- 13 Guy Debord, 'Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life' (1961) in Ken Knabb (ed.) *The Situationist International Anthology*, Bureau of Public Secrets (Berkeley, 1981), 69.
- 14 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 169.
- 15 Dovid Bergelson, *Descent*, Trans. Joseph Sherman (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999), 14.
- 16 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 168,169.
- 17 Ibid., 163.
- 18 Dovid Bergelson, *Descent*, Trans. Joseph Sherman (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999), 120.
- 19 Ibid.

- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 18.
- 22 Ibid., 5, 19. Note: 'R---' is the name of the town as given in the novel.
- 23 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 10.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid., 6.
- 26 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 6, 13.
- 27 Ibid., 13.
- 28 Ibid., 33.
- 29 Ibid., 15.
- 30 Ibid., 13.
- 31 Ibid., 11, 12.
- 32 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 100.
- 33 Ibid., 115.
- 34 Ibid., 101.
- 35 Ibid., 189.
- 36 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 7.
- 37 Ibid., 5, 6.
- 38 Ibid., 17.
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- 40 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 16.
- 41 Ibid., 21.
- 42 Ibid., 90.
- 43 Ibid., 79.
- 44 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 83.
- 45 Ibid., 126.
- 46 Ibid., 127.
- 47 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 34.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid., 6, 97.

- 50 Ibid., 97.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 72.
- 53 Ibid., 191.
- 54 Ibid., 198, 130.
- 55 Ibid., 200.
- 56 Ibid., 206.
- 57 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 234.
- 58 Ibid., 237.
- 59 Ibid., 243.
- 60 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 6.
- 61 Ibid., 135.
- 62 Ibid., 251.
- 63 Ibid., 252.
- 64 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 262-3.
- 65 Ibid., 267.
- 66 Ibid., 256.
- 67 Ibid., 281.
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- 69 Esther Singer Kreitman, *Deborah*, Trans. Maurice Carr (Great Britain: Virago Press, 1983), 243.
- 70 Joseph Sherman, Introduction to *Descent* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999), xix.
- 71 Dovid Bergelson, *Descent*, Trans. Joseph Sherman (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999), 69.
- 72 Ibid., 26.
- 73 Ibid., 18.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Dovid Bergelson, *Descent*, Trans. Joseph Sherman (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999), 18.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Ibid., 19.
- 79 Dovid Bergelson, *Descent*, Trans. Joseph Sherman (New York: The

Modern Language Association of America, 1999), 239.

80 Ibid., 239.

81 Joseph Sherman, Introduction to *Descent* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999), xxvii.

82 Dovid Bergelson, "Materialn,tsu D. Bergelson bio-bibliografye" (in Yiddish), *Visnshaft un recolutsye* 1-2 (1934), 71.

83 Dovid Bergelson, *Descent*, Trans. Joseph Sherman (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999), 7.

84 Joseph Sherman, Introduction to *Descent* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999), xxxviii.

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“The Iron and the Flower”: Conceptions of Masculinity in Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry* Jordan Paul

The radical reshaping of society during and after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 ensured that the world, and especially the Russian world, would be changed forever. In the radical years immediately surrounding the Revolution, the immense upheaval and redefinition of countless social roles was reflected in both politics and literature, and one of the most drastic was “the decline of the family and the [rise of] the cult of masculinity.”¹ Additionally, the years preceding the Revolution had seen the emergence of a generation who engaged in passionate revolutionary struggle with their fathers and their past. Within the Eastern European Jewish community, this break had begun even earlier with the decline of the shtetl and the gradual loss of Yiddish language, along with the unique culture they both represented. Among Jews, the majority of the revolutionary generation quite literally could not talk to their fathers and grandfathers, as language barriers sprang up quickly with the rise of pro-Russian feeling and desire for secular state schooling.² For Isaac Babel, one such Russian-speaking and -educated urban Jew, this double alienation and active rejection was experienced very strongly and came to play a huge

role in his remarkable cycle of short stories set during the Polish Campaign of the Russian Civil War, during the birth years of the Revolution. In the wake of this upheaval a new form of masculinity had to be negotiated, a new ideal, and in the whole of Russian society fathers were flung down in favour of brothers, companions, and comrades.³ However, there is still the challenge issued by the orphaned Jewish woman of Babel's "Crossing the Zbruch:" "tell me... where one could find another father like my father in all the world!"⁴

The combined result is the impetus for the entire revised system of masculine identity under discussion in this paper: if we have murdered our literal and figurative fathers, where are we to find new ones? Will these new fathers be replaced by brothers, lovers, comrades, artists, or warriors? What form will they take: passive or active, masculine or feminine, the "iron" or the "flower"⁵? The answer, interestingly, is to some degree both; both are explored, both are needed, both are ambiguous. What Lyutov, *Red Cavalry's* narrator, admires in his commander Savitsky is "the iron *and* the flower of that youth"⁶ (emphasis mine), and although he aspires to escape his roots in overwhelmingly passive masculinity and achieve an active identity, often disdaining those he leaves behind, there is a clear and exalted place for some aspects of a new passive man clearly differentiated from the oppressive force of past kinship and traditions. "You cannot carry around on your back the corpse of your father," asserts Apollinaire, and in jettisoning the dead weight of the traditional father,

males are compelled to actively seek out new models upon which to base their definition of what it means to be a man.⁷ The search will be far from clear-cut, and in fact is deeply troubled by varying expressions of ambivalence, to be discussed below.

The most obvious beginning of any discussion of difference in Babel's *Red Cavalry* is, of course, the role played by the Jew in the stories. Numerous volumes have been written on the subject, so discussion here will be limited to that of the particular way in which Jewish masculinity is seen both as a dangerous impediment to the forging of the new fraternal masculinity, and also as a representation of one of Babel's 'ideal types' of the passive male. Three stories, "Crossing the Zbruch," "Gedali," and "The Rabbi," illuminate this disjunction.

"Crossing the Zbruch," the story that begins the entire cycle, immediately establishes itself by painting an evocative, though disturbing, picture of martial adventure and then placing its narrator, Lyutov (whom we do not yet know to be Jewish), in direct opposition to the household of Jews who billet him. Their world is one of squalor and decay, and Lyutov paints them with a grotesque, unsympathetic brush: the Jews are "like monkeys... with thin necks... swelling and twisting" and the one Jew who is "sleeping with his face to the wall and a blanket pulled over his head"⁸ seems to emphasize their willful static passivity, their othered exclusion. Lyutov treats them with anger and contempt, and while sleeping on their floor, dreams of violence and humiliation. However, when he is woken

by the Jewish woman to discover that he is in fact sleeping next to her murdered father, the full horror of this kinship anxiety comes rushing forward.⁹ Coupled with this conflict is the woman's urgent and passionate demand: "I want you to tell me where one could find another father like my father in all the world!"¹⁰

A key character to understanding the new Jewish passive male envisaged by Babel is Gedali, the blind Jewish shopkeeper. When the narrator is "tormented by the dense sorrow of memory" of Sabbaths past, he meets Gedali, the lone hold-out in the old Jewish bazaar. He runs a store containing a treasure house of antiques and curiosities and, even more importantly, imparts a vision of Revolution that is achingly idealistic and beautiful.¹¹ Lyutov is deeply drawn to him, and he is described in tender and affectionate terms as a "soft... tiny, lonely, dreamy... the founder of an unattainable International."¹² In "Gedali" and the later story "The Rabbi," Gedali offers Lyutov a gateway to his Jewish past while retaining the ability to quest after a brighter future, a balance later achieved by Lyutov's "brother" Ilya Brataslavsky ("The Rabbi's Son"). Gedali represents a heightened aesthetic sensibility who wants beautiful music as well as a beautiful future, who "feels the injustice of the revolutionaries taking his phonograph as keenly as the injustice of the Poles blinding him," and is described with delicate bird-like imagery.¹³

However, although Gedali is vastly different from the grotesque and repulsive Jews of the opening story, Lyutov cannot help but retain that

sense of disgust at all the Jews ceaseless and tragic passivity (a sensitivity echoed *ad nauseum* by Babel himself in his 1920 *Diary*). It doesn't help that the Jewish identity opened up by Gedali is perceived by Lyutov as "a long house with a shattered façade... empty as a morgue," whose table is occupied by "the possessed, the liars, the unhinged;" its Sabbath blessing, an affirmation of the Jews as God's chosen people, seems cruelly ironic in light of their corruption and desolation, and the moment the meal is over, Lyutov is "the first to rise" and return to the active modern of "the propaganda train... the sparkle of hundreds of lights, the enchanted glitter of the radio."¹⁴ The corruption and decline that comes as part of Gedali's passive masculine identity, paired though it is with an exquisite aesthetic understanding and a remarkable fortitude, is too much for Lyutov to accept and appropriate as his true ideal. So, he returns to attempt again to become part of an active masculine environment, a drama he will re-enact on countless occasions.

In *Red Cavalry* as a whole, however, the character of the passive man is not limited to the Jewish type that so troubles Babel in the above stories. In fact, his interpretations of strongly Christian, or at least Christ-inspired, masculine figures impart to them many of the same traits as the idealized Jew like Gedali, as well as the same ambiguities. The most prominent characters of this type, *Pan Apolek* and *Sashka 'Christ,'* as well as the stories that bear their names, reflect a vision of a humane, compassionate, and inspiring passive male modeled on Babel's

interpretation of Jesus Christ. At the same time, these are also characters who are sidelined by the revolution, frozen outside of its active progress, who have no role to play in it and whose philosophies, while beautiful, are largely static and contain within them unmistakable degeneracy and decay. Babel's real life perception and transformation of Grischuk, his driver during the Polish Campaign, dramatizes his particular struggle in portraying these compassionate passive males: suffering, passive martyrs hold a particular revulsion for the striving Babel, while their pacifist humanity and inherent connection with others (as well as to themselves), simultaneously ignites his devotion.

Pan Apolek is identified with many of the same birdlike signifiers as the Jewish passive males¹⁵ (for example, when Apolek and his companion Gottfried enter the story, he wears "a canary-yellow scarf" and "three chocolate brown feathers"¹⁶). However, unlike them, Apolek is not the object of revulsion or even fleeting tenderness, but instead of Lyutov's surprising and luminous devotion, almost amounting to worship. As Lyutov describes it, Apolek is "wise and wonderful" and so "surrounded by the guileless shine of halos, I [Lyutov] took a solemn oath to follow the example of *Pan Apolek*. The sweetness of dreamy malice, the bitter contempt for the swine and dogs among men, the flame of silent and intoxicating revenge – I sacrificed them all to this oath."¹⁷ Apolek espouses a new "gospel" that excites Lyutov like nothing yet narrated; his icons, painted with the faces of ordinary villagers, much

like the original gospel of Jesus,¹⁸ seem to take those downtrodden and excluded, and "peopl[e] the local villages with angels, and [even] elevat[e] lame Janek, the Jewish convert, to sainthood."¹⁹ The poor people embrace Apolek wholeheartedly, as they find their own faces in the faces of the holy and drape those pictures in "garlands of paper flowers;"²⁰ in raising their pride and their dignity, Apolek's humanistic compassion provides a respite from the aggression and corruption of the Church. "Is there not more truth," demands one "lame-footed" man from the bishop, "in the paintings of *Pan Apolek*... than in your words that are filled with abuse and tyrannical anger?"²¹

Yet, despite all this, *Pan Apolek* remains a dangerously passive male figure. Although he is likened to the founder of a "new heresy," he is still only "almost" so; Apolek is described as "unconcerned," a "gentle idler," "ludicrous... roaming the earth in blessed tipsiness with two little white mice under his shirt."²² *Pan Apolek* is a visionary, but he seems an unwitting one; above all, he is a flamboyant drunk who runs out on tabs, who whispers his secrets but then flees, groveling, from the threats of so little a man as the weak prelate *Pan Robacki*, frightened of investing too much of himself in his own message. His message contains within it the reality of vulgarity and decay: Apolek may have received his symbolic baptism in pure water, but his Jewish Jesus receives his by vomit. In turn, the real vulgarity of sex is clearly and repulsively demonstrated in this sexual "baptism" of Apolek's Jesus (as well as in his painted idols, who

are “pomaded Jesuses, many-childed Marys with parted knees”²³), whose only reward for his great compassion is pollution, exclusion, sorrow, and eventual death. *Pan Apolek*’s truths are hollow, illusory, as flat and unreal as his icons, which impose a known face on an unknown body. As a result, they cannot fully capture Lyutov, who must continue searching, must after all “return to [his] plundered Jews... nurturing within [him] unfulfillable dreams and dissonant songs.”²⁴

Even more explicitly Christ-like is the character of Sashka, nicknamed ‘*Khristos*’ or ‘*Christ*.’ As he appears in his eponymous story and in others (most notably “*The Song*”), he is another example of the beatific passive male, full of grace and beauty, loved by all and loving all. His effect on Lyutov is less than that of *Pan Apolek*, but the safety and comfort Lyutov draws from this passive male is remarkable for its tenderness and ease. In “*Sashka Christ*” Lyutov says: “I... took my little suitcase and moved over to his cart. Many times we watched the sunrise and rode off into the sunset... we sat in the evenings on a sparkling earth mound, or boiled tea... or slept next to each other on harvested fields.”²⁵ In “*The Song*,” Sashka’s presence alone is able to prevent Lyutov’s violent victimization of an old woman, and Sashka alone manages to save the situation, to connect with and soothe those around him through the power of his voice in song. The song Sashka sings, deliberately, conjures up keen memories of fraternal intimacy to Lyutov’s mind, and the scenes he describes seem more reminiscent of a shared Cossack boyhood than

a military campaign.²⁶ Lyutov's reaction to the nostalgia of the song is sudden, wrenching, an ecstatic physical experience related in terms resembling epiphany or orgasm: "stretched out... on my rotting bedding... a dream broke my bones, the dream shook the putrid hay beneath me... the dream's burning torment... I loved that song."²⁷

It thereby becomes clear that Sashka Christ's embodiment of the Christ-like passive male holds a powerful draw for Lyutov; over and over again his personal beauty, delicacy, and humanity are described. However, as with the radical dazzling aesthetic appeal of *Pan Apolek*, Sashka's generosity hides a literal and figurative corruption and decay. Again, like Apolek's Jesus, who seems to represent Babel's ideal type for the compassionate passive male, Sashka is polluted by sex. His initiation to sexuality at the age of fourteen is his symbolic baptism ("Rain on an old lady... Some crop I'll give you!" cries the elderly prostitute, in a simultaneous allusion to water and an ironic nod to her sterility²⁸). Just like that Jesus, who becomes "drenched with mortal sweat, for the bee of sorrow had stung his heart,"²⁹ Sashka's infection with "the evil disease" of syphilis bestows on him an inner impurity that keeps him distant from his goal of sainthood, and forces him to work his compassion in a very human domain. He has also been infected with some moral failings: his bartering with his stepfather, or trading his mother's purity and health (and chance for further reproduction) at the hands of Tarakanich's infected lust in return for the chance to pursue his own lost dreams of

sainthood, is repugnant,³⁰ and his seduction of the landlady in “The Song” is manipulative and devious at best, literally destructive and aggressive at worst (in fact, throughout the stories he casually infects many women).³¹ Sashka, who “had not done any heavy work since he was fourteen”³² and “was considered an invalid,”³³ is like all the other passive male types: both inspiring and magnetic, humanistic and human, yet also polluted and polluting, as well as forever sidelined from the forward push of action and history, from the revolution in its most elemental form.

The incredibly negative reality of Lyutov’s and Babel’s conception of this passive masculine type comes across vividly in Babel’s real life description of Grischuk, his driver. In the *1920 Diary*, Grischuk is unbearably and self-destructively passive, allowing himself to be starved for seven months rather than to speak up.³⁴ He is in “some kind of trance,”³⁵ full of “stupid, helpless, animal despair,”³⁶ he “horrifies”³⁷ and “infuriates”³⁸ Babel; pressed into the army after five years of slavery and fighting not even fifty versts from his home and family, Babel obsessively asks himself, again and again, “Why does Grischuk not desert?”³⁹ The answer is unknown, but Babel’s frustration and revulsion are unmistakable in response to this extreme display of passivity without redeeming radiance. However, Grischuk remains Babel’s close companion for the better part of a year, as both slowly drive each other insane.

Lyutov’s reaction to these figures is complex and ambivalent. While on the one hand he is powerfully drawn to them, as discussed above,

and revels in their earthly humanity and sense of tranquil acceptance and belonging, he is also challenged by their corruption and passivity. Corruption enables humanity, passivity creates acceptance, yet Lyutov cannot wholeheartedly embrace these traits for himself. His discipleship to Apolek is disrupted and unsatisfying; his deep friendship with Sashka still leaves him alone at the end of the day when Sashka's tranquility becomes callousness ("The Song"). Their lack of concern is impossible for the passionate and intellectual Lyutov to imitate, and their acceptance of their liminal role unacceptable to Lyutov's craving for inclusion and meaning. In reaction, Lyutov then seeks the counterpart to the passive male, the active one.

This active brand of masculinity is similarly nuanced and unconventional, encompassing far more than the traditional assumption that the Cossacks, who embody this type most clearly, do so with an unflinchingly Spartan and aggressive warrior ethos. While the violent and rugged nature of the Cossack Red Cavalrymen should not be overlooked, Patricia Carden suggests that there is also a more traditionally feminine dimension to be found in their masculinity, one brought to the fore by the dramatics inherent in the Revolution itself. As much as the passive men are aesthetically driven (*Pan* Apolek's paintings, Sashka Christ's dreamy singing, Gedali's beautiful visions of peaceful co-operation⁴⁰), the active men are driven by "a will to joy,"⁴¹ a privileging of experience over imagination,⁴² and marked by physical beauty and splendor, which they

own and display in a kind of performance. Some of them, like Dyakov of “The Reserve Cavalry Commander” and other Cossacks, are literally former circus performers, while others purposefully exhibit a “glamour and virtuosity” in their flamboyant clothing and beautiful athletic bodies that entrances and bewilders Lyutov.⁴³ The famous introduction to Commander Savitsky deserves repetition in this context:

Savitsky... rose when he saw me, and I was taken aback by the beauty of his gigantic body. He rose – his breeches purple, his crimson cap cocked to the side, his medals pinned to his chest – splitting the hut in two like a banner [or standard] splitting the sky. He smelled of perfume and the nauseating coolness of soap. His long legs looked like two girls wedged to their shoulders in riding boots.⁴⁵

Despite presenting a magnificently masculine phallic image here, as has been pointed out frequently by critics, Carden also asks us to note that it is “not Savitski [sic] but his attire” to which the powerful splitting action is ascribed, reinforcing it as a critical element of this masculine identity.⁴⁴ Additionally, other central active male figures like Dyakov and Prishchepa appear flamboyantly arrayed, their clothing related directly to their masculinity, as the side that “pictorially” celebrates “their splendor and their beauty.”⁴⁶

This ambiguous sexuality of the active man, rejoicing as he does both in his brutality and his beauty, is a definite element in the creation of

these post-revolutionary fraternal bonds. The initiation reflected in "My First Goose" is charged with "the erotic character of both the price and the reward of male community," and its terms are expressly androgynous, from the mingling of phallic and feminine in the description of Savitsky to the "substitute rape" of the woman's pure white goose, whose reward is permission to sleep "tangled up" with the male Cossacks.⁴⁷

Similarly, Dyakov's rousing of the horse in "The Reserve Cavalry Commander" is rendered in deliberately androgynous language, shifting the gender pronoun in the original Russian between the masculine and the feminine, as well as using different and differently gendered nouns meaning "horse," reflecting a simultaneous pseudo-sexual encounter and a rite of passage through which the horse earns the right to be called by the masculine noun (*kon'*).⁴⁸ Hence the entire episode can be viewed as either a sadomasochistic domination/seduction of a woman (the horse displays many of the physical symptoms of female orgasm), or as the exclusively masculine "masterful stimulation of flaccid flesh to proud erection."⁴⁹ To enter into the ranks of true comradeship, then, Lyutov, who "feels the attraction of comradeship in erotic terms," must accept temporarily the passive, "feminine" role into which his interactions with the Cossacks force him, in order to emerge as an active male from the other side of the initiation.⁵⁰ However, as is known from above, Lyutov is unable to actually accept himself as a passive male, to acknowledge, incorporate, and overcome it as the Cossacks portrayed in these stories have, and

thus he is unable to succeed at any of the necessary fraternal initiations, dooming himself to perpetual alienation from both constructions of masculinity that he perceives in the post-Revolution world.

Therein lies the central problem of Lyutov's estrangement and angst. Although painfully aware of his inability to fully connect with the Cossack-represented active males, Lyutov refuses to surrender to his passive identity. The lack of any similar angst in the perfect representatives of the typologies can be traced to the fact that they completely accept and inhabit "their lot in life."⁵¹ Lyutov, meanwhile, cannot help but find himself placed as the opposite to the Cossack in his encounters with them, and therefore it is their quality "that he longs to appropriate for himself,"⁵² which is impossible while he remains so bound yet so antagonistic toward his passive side. As a result, the stories of *Red Cavalry* reflect his challenge of negotiation, and Lyutov's dominant typology "depends very much upon his *vis-à-vis*." Thus, among the Cossacks he is weak and alienated, unable to share in the "peak experiences" that forge their camaraderie⁵³: he cannot rape ("My First Goose"); he is prone to panic; he rides into battle with his weapon unloaded ("After the Battle"); he cannot kill a man, even out of mercy ("Dolgushov's Death"); he is desperate to remain "personally undefiled"⁵⁴ in light of the inevitable corruption of the passive. However, when confronted with passive personalities, he becomes active: abusing the landladies of both "My First Goose" (a story which contains a doubled confrontation, where Lyutov attempts to inhabit both identities in quick

succession) and "The Song", and behaving like a Cossack and a Russian among the Jews with whom he is quartered ("Crossing the Zbruch", "The Kiss", "Berestechko", etc). Neither iron nor flower, he rejects the advances of those passive characters who would accept him, and yet cannot accept the terms of becoming active.

Significantly, the only other character who Lyutov describes as "like me" is Khebnikov of "The Story of a Horse," a man who is "a curious combination of characteristics. He shares the Cossack... anarchical spirit, even the customary bravery" and yet "Khebnikov has the hidden weakness of the aesthetic man" and is defeated by Savitsky; "the loss of his horse is tantamount to castration,"⁵⁵ which forces the issue of androgyny. Meanwhile, he maintains an intensity of feeling and energy that draws the respect of all.⁵⁶ Khebnikov is another liminal character, caught between two different yet ambiguous ways of expressing masculinity. Unlike all of the ideal males, neither Lyutov nor Khebnikov can find belonging anywhere or accept himself or those around him on his own terms. In fact, it becomes clear that by the very act of constantly questing after a definition of masculinity, of attempting to answer the urgent summons of the Jewish daughter, Lyutov dooms himself and those like him to a never-ending process of painful and ambivalent negotiation of what it means to be a man in the wake of the Russian Revolution and all it wrought.

End Notes

- 1 Eliot Borenstein, *Men Without Women*, 4.
- 2 Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, .
- 3 Borenstein, 24.
- 4 Nathalie Babel ed., *Red Cavalry*, 40.
- 5 Patricia Carden, *The Art of Isaac Babel*, 110.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Borenstein, 73.
- 8 N. Babel, ed., 39-40.
- 9 Borenstein, 75.
- 10 N. Babel, ed. 40.
- 11 N. Babel, ed., 63-65.
- 12 Ibid., 65.
- 13 Carden, 118.
- 14 N. Babel, ed., 70-72.
- 15 Carden, 114.
- 16 N. Babel ed., 53.
- 17 N. Babel ed., 52.
- 18 David Gillespie, *The Twentieth Century Russian Novel*, 32.
- 19 N. Babel ed., 53.
- 20 Ibid., 56.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 55.
- 23 Ibid., 56.
- 24 Ibid., 58.
- 25 Ibid., 88.
- 26 Ibid., 165.
- 27 Ibid., 164.
- 28 Borenstein, 86.
- 29 N. Babel ed., 58.
- 30 N. Babel ed., 87-88.
- 31 Ibid., 166.
- 32 Ibid., 84.
- 33 Ibid., 88.
- 34 Carol J. Avins, ed. *The 1920 Diary*, 42.
- 35 Avins, ed., 36.
- 36 Ibid., 31.

- 37 Ibid., 28.
38 Ibid, 31.
39 Ibid., 28.
40 Carden, 117.
41 James E. Falen, *Isaac Babel: Russian Master of the Short Story*, 133.
42 Falen, 135.
43 Carden, 117.
44 Ibid., 113.
45 Babel, Isaac. *Red Cavalry*. Ed. Nathalie Babel. Trans. by Peter Constantine. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002, page 66.
46 Ibid.
47 Borenstein, 97.
48 Ibid., 95.
49 Ibid., 96.
50 Ibid., 104.
51 Carden, 128.
52 Ibid.
53 Borenstein, 101.
54 Falen, 146.
55 Gillespie, 28.
56 Carden, 122.

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The Problem of Secular Judaism

Ronen Shnidman

The attempt to create a secular Jewish culture was a troubling problem for modern Jewry and a majority of the members of the Zionist movement. It is still questionable whether the intellectuals of last century ever resolved the identity dilemmas connected to a secular Jewish worldview. Examining some of the issues debated by secular Zionists sheds light on the nature of some of the problems associated with Jewish identity that are still pertinent today. This essay will examine the cultural ideas of three Zionist thinkers: Ahad Ha'am, Joseph Haim Brenner and Gershom Scholem, and their attempts to shape and provide substance to a Jewish culture outside the embrace of Orthodoxy. By presenting their arguments in chronological order, one can trace the debate's evolution as each successive thinker drew influence while distinguishing himself from his predecessor.

Ahad Ha'am and Normative Secular Judaism

Ahad Ha'am, like most proponents of secular Jewish culture,

began by critiquing the failures of traditional Judaism in his essay "Law of the Heart." According to Ahad Ha'am, rabbinic Judaism had stagnated the lives and culture of the Jewish people. In his words:

[A] 'people of the book,' unlike a normal people, is a slave of the book. It has surrendered its whole soul to the written word. The book ceases to be what it should be, a source of ever-new inspiration and moral strength; on the contrary, its function in life is to weaken and finally crush all spontaneity of action and emotion, till men become wholly dependent on the written word and incapable of responding to any stimulus in nature or in human life without its permissions and approval.¹

Ahad Ha'am was not criticizing the Jewish values drawn from the Torah. Rather, he specifically disapproved of the effect that adherence to the halachic process has on the individual and the nation. He continues:

Nor, even when that sanction is found, is the response simple and natural; it has to follow a prearranged and artificial plan... The people stagnates because heart and mind do not react directly and immediately to external events; the book stagnates because as a result of this absence of direct reaction, heart and mind do not rise in revolt against the written word where it has ceased to be in harmony with current needs.²

What Ahad Ha'am was searching for was freedom – the freedom found in the absence of a fixed process of interpretation and adjudication of issues.

This search was not an attempt to place freedom of thought and freedom of action as moral values superior to the values of traditional Judaism. Ahad Ha'am was careful to avoid criticizing the value of a consultative process for interpreting Jewish practice. Rather, his direct target was the stagnation of the halachic process itself. Had those taking part in halachic debate still been participating in a vital process, Ahad Ha'am would have found little wrong with their approach. He uses the example of the biblical doctrine of 'an eye for an eye' to make this point. According to Ahad Ha'am, the Early Sages chose to interpret this verse as an injunction limiting punitive damages for injury to compensation and not punishment in kind. Ahad Ha'am rebuked later halachic authorities by stating that "if the doctrine of 'an eye for an eye' had been laid down in the Babylonian Talmud... and its interpretation had consequently fallen not to the early Sages but to the talmudic commentators, they would doubtless have accepted the doctrine in its literal meaning."³ Ahad Ha'am's quarrel was not with the Torah or Jewish values, but with the direction of Jewish religious history.

It is notable that throughout "Law of the Heart" Ahad Ha'am, the 'secular rabbi,' is at pains to express sympathy for the position of traditionally observant Jews. In his own words, rabbinic Jews are not

‘monsters,’ yet neither are they ‘full humans’ because they subjugate their thoughts and feelings to ‘the point of the yod,’ to the letter of the law, instead of to the objective needs of the real world.⁴ Perhaps this approach was viable within the confines of the ghetto, but with the modernization of Europe it became infeasible. As these rabbinic Jews in Eastern Europe left the restrictions of the ghetto, Ahad Ha’am thought a change in Judaism would need to take place, for it was “also Judaism which has left the ghetto” with them.⁵

In Ahad Ha’am’s discussion of creating a secular Jewish culture, two key suggestions arise. His main idea was the importance of a national home for the maintenance of Jewish identity *in the Diaspora*. In his view, a Judaism purely based in the Diaspora was condemned to disappear and he was quick to disparage those who idolized it. As he scathingly writes, “Those who profess to regard our dispersion as a heaven-sent blessing are simply weak-kneed optimists; lacking the courage to look the evil thing in the face, they find it necessary to smile on it and call it good so long as they cannot abolish it.”⁶ Rather, Ahad Ha’am accommodates the reality of the Diaspora without conflating it with a moral necessity:

It holds that dispersion must remain a permanent feature of our life, which is beyond our power to eliminate, and therefore insists that our national life in the Diaspora must be strengthened. But that object, it holds, can be attained only by the creation of a fixed center for our national life

in the Diaspora must be strengthened.⁷

Thus, the creation of a Jewish state would allow for the development of an authentic Jewish culture to reinforce the identity of Jews in the Diaspora.

To solve the problem of Jewish identity, Ahad Ha'am stressed the importance of founding a Jewish State (Judischer Staat) in Palestine and not just a State of Jews (Judenstaat).⁸ It is important to point out that Ahad Ha'am predicated the idea that a State of Jews must be based on Jewish values out of socio-political necessity. He envisioned a future state of Israel as small and at the mercy of greater political powers. "Such a puny state, being 'tossed about like a ball between its powerful neighbors... maintaining its existence only by diplomatic shifts,'" would not bring national glory.⁹ Accordingly, Ahad Ha'am declared it better that the state maintain its Jewish values against the tide of cultural and political forces from surrounding nations. Importantly, Ahad Ha'am did *not* root the Jewish values of the Jewish State in any moral imperative. This is not to deny that Ahad Ha'am believed in the moral value of the Jewish tradition; on the contrary, because of his belief in this tradition, it is all the more noticeable that he did not provide a moral justification for a Jewish State (as opposed to a State of Jews). Ahad Ha'am's Jewish cultural center exists for practical, realist reasons, not for moralistic ones.

Ahad Ha'am's second proposal is the use of the synagogue as a Jewish communal center for learning, particularly in the Diaspora. While unable to sustain Jewish values on its own, Ahad Ha'am views the

synagogue as having the potential to fulfill the role of educating Jews about their national identity. In "Nation and Religion," Ahad Ha'am writes to Judah Magnes, "Experience everywhere, and especially in America, has shown the Synagogue by itself, as a House of Prayer exclusively cannot save Judaism, which unlike other religions, does not depend on prayer."¹⁰ Jewish tradition's liturgy and ritual, in Ahad Ha'am's view, takes a place of secondary importance to the more vital, practical functions synagogues can play in community life. He writes:

Cut the prayers as short as you like, but make your Synagogue a haven of Jewish knowledge, alike for children and adults, for the educated and the ordinary folk... In our day, of course, we must introduce reading better suited to modern requirements. But learning-learning-learning; that is the secret of Jewish survival.¹¹

While Ahad Ha'am displayed in his writings a respect for Jewish tradition, his concerns were of a realist orientation. Cultural ideals in their own right were not the main focus of his thoughts. The effect of this oversight on his conception of secular Jewish culture was to be exposed by his intellectual rival, Joseph Haim Brenner.

Y.H. Brenner: Everyone's Critic

Brenner, like Ahad Ha'am, received a traditional education and grew up in a traditional family in the Ukraine. To facilitate his intellectual discourses, Brenner took the creative approach of writing many of his

ideas in the format of novels. He used aesthetic techniques particular to fiction to accommodate his reflections on Judaism, namely the continual use of 'stream of consciousness' writing, and to provide the reader with a view into the mental universe of his characters. This artistic choice is interesting because Brenner was a long-time socialist sympathizer who chose to focus his writing on working class characters in working class settings. In contrast, many of Brenner's contemporaries who wrote about similar topics preferred a social realist approach to capture the suffering of the working classes and mobilize support for change. In Brenner's book *Out of the Depths*, the majority of characters are union members working in London's East Side, and a significant part of the book's plot revolves around union politics. However, the workers' struggle appears to be an ancillary focus of Brenner's work. The essence of his novels is each character's struggle with his ideals, which are made apparent via of the main character's thoughts and are rarely expressed verbally in the story. In Brenner's books the plot tends to be unresolved by the end of novel. As such, the characters are actually a means for Brenner to articulate his own intellectual views. The story is clearly less important than the intellectual issues it presents.

One of the major issues Brenner explored throughout his writing is the Jew's interaction with the world. Like Ahad Ha'am, Brenner rejected traditional Judaism. In *Out of the Depths*, traditional Judaism is consistently treated as a belief system without relevance to the modern

world's problems. The way the narrator describes the buildup to Yom Kippur in London's East End exemplifies Brenner's feelings: "Ten days of penitence. In the Jewish quarter most of the commotion is a leftover from earlier times; there is no soul in it – no longer."¹² The point is reiterated with the narrator's account of preparations for the Sabbath in the East End. He recounts, "Even the majority of secular households display external changes. Let them rejoice who find in this some comfort."¹³ Brenner clearly viewed Jewish practice in the modern world as a collection of rituals without basis, doomed to disappear.

Brenner's rejection of traditional Judaism reached its strongest point with his treatment of a very well known Jewish moral injunction. As the protagonist says, "I have become even more irritable and less just towards myself and others. Justice! Justice! To hell with it!"¹⁴ Through the narrator's feelings of frustration the author achieves a remarkable inversion of the Jewish saying, "Justice! Justice! You shall pursue."¹⁵ The character's bitter statement is symbolic of the author's (temporary) exhaustion from his struggle to help create a better world. For Brenner, it also exemplifies his exhaustion with attempts to find an objective meaning and goal in life, an approach characteristic of the traditional Judaism under which he grew up.

In Brenner's *Breakdown and Bereavement*, he also judges the apparent falsity in the neo-traditionalists' approach to Judaism. One character named Kauffman, a 'Modern Orthodox'¹⁶ Jew from Germany,

sees everything bad that happens in the world as coming from the Devil and the Powers of the Evil and likes to pepper his speech with the words of a pretentious German pseudo-intellectual. Another religious character, Reb Yosef, is also mocked, although he is presented in a much more sympathetic light. Reb Yosef is a man with an immense knowledge of the works of rabbinic Judaism both important and obscure. At the same time, Reb Yosef is well read in Spinoza, Descartes, and the other great men of Western thought, and tries to reconcile their ideas with those of the Jewish tradition. In this respect the character seems to be a representation of the philosophy of *Torah U'madda* (which can be loosely translated as Torah and Secular Knowledge).¹⁷ Schneirson, a young Zionist character in the novel, characterizes Reb Yosef as a man holding a rope by both ends, one who, in Schneirson's words, "if it weren't universally accepted at face value, so that he... was unable to find a single commentator to give him moral support, he would have said that the whole story of Israel in Egypt was simply a myth as well."¹⁸ Brenner, who has some sympathy for Reb Yosef, appears to view this approach as intellectually dishonest. Reb Yosef attempts to be a rational free-thinker but only within the limits of the ideas of men long since dead. He appreciates freedom of inquiry and its intellectual fruits without actually engaging in it.

Secular Judaism was not spared Brenner's critical view. Brenner did not find the normative secular Judaism of Ahad Ha'am and fellow travelers convincing. In Brenner's opinion, such ideas may have been

pleasing to many Jews but they stood on shaky foundations. Brenner saw the idea of normative Judaism as being dependent on a religious Judaism, a set of beliefs to which neither he nor the other secularists ascribed. According to Brenner, there never really was a normative Jewish tradition. Even a Jew who believed in Jesus would still be a Jew as such and there would be nothing wrong with it. Brenner even wrote an editorial to this extent, which was published in the *Hapoel Hatzair* newspaper and caused a firestorm in Zionist circles.

Because of his controversial opinions, many Zionists called for the censoring of Brenner and his exclusion from the *Hapoel Hatzair* newspaper. Many were outraged by the apparent contradiction between the Christian-like worship of Jesus and membership within the Jewish national culture.¹⁹ Brenner's assertion was along the lines of suggesting that the Christian religion was Judaism. Ahad Ha'am accused Brenner of insulting the sensitivities of traditional Jews and called for some sort of sanctions to be meted out against him. Ironically, this sentimental reaction is exactly the behavior that Brenner criticized. Ahad Ha'am and others were calling for the creation of secular culture, when in reality the root of their culture was within the Jewish religious tradition. It was this type of person Brenner targeted when he wrote earlier in *Out of the Depths*:

I remind him of the new winds blowing, the 'new' teaching, which advocated: Life! Life!- But that again is mere teaching, words in the mouth of people, whose

whole being, for the most part, contradicts them...

The first thing: is to be true to oneself!... The pessimist who pretends not to be is grotesque in the extreme; the pessimist who recognizes what he is – is not grotesque...

If they are any roads and paths, then at any rate they are different; the paths to the bridge must be quite different. For him, at least, the matter is simple (emphasis added).

Brenner's argument is a simple one. Beyond traditional religious Judaism, there are no determinate positions for a secular culture of Jews. Therefore, it is dishonest to judge or evaluate such a culture against any standard because there is none. Secular Jewish culture is so merely because it is the culture of secular Jews. It does not have an anchor, *so let a Jew sail where he may*. Secular Judaism's lack of a foundation arising outside of Jewish dogma was an issue that the intellectual successors of Ahad Ha'am and Brenner would try to address, particularly Gershom Scholem.

Gershom Scholem: Building a Basis for the Future

Gershom Scholem was an admitted admirer of Brenner,²⁰ yet came from a very different background. Scholem grew up in Germany as a post-assimilatory Jew and was immersed in the inner contradictions of a secular Jewish lifestyle common to many German Jews. As Scholem describes, "No Christian ever set foot in our home, even though Papa had a theory that everything was all right."²¹

Like Brenner, Scholem viewed secular Jewish culture as both

undefined and without limits. Scholem, however, viewed this in a less negative light. "I have always considered the transition through secularism necessary, unavoidable. But I don't think that Zionism's secular vision is the ultimate vision, the last word."²² Scholem also discounted both the traditional and neo-traditional forms of Judaism, which he did not consider an option for most of the Jewish people. He states quite clearly that, "A direct, non-dialectical return to traditional Judaism is impossible, historically speaking, and even I myself have not accomplished it."²³

In an interview conducted by two of his students, Scholem describes the basis for secular Judaism within the dogmatic structure of traditional religious Judaism:

I know that this is a very painful point, and many admirers of Reason (of whom I am one) do not like to hear this. But I am inclined to think – in summing up my researches in history, religious history, philosophy, and ethics – that Reason is a great instrument of destruction. For construction, something beyond it is required... I don't believe there is an enduring rational morality; I don't believe it is possible to build a morality that will be an immanent network for Reason. I confess that in this respect I am what would be called a reactionary, for I believe that morality as a constructive force is impossible without religion, without some Power beyond Pure

Reason. Secular morality is a morality built on Reason alone. I do not believe in this possibility. This is an utter illusion of philosophers, not to speak of sociologists.²⁴

Because of this problem, Scholem foresaw the possibility of the death of both religious and secular Judaism in the Diaspora and in Israel.²⁵ Scholem laments, "When you look at the secularization process, at the barbarization of the so-called new culture, you can perceive grave processes in which it is difficult to discern any seed of future, any fructifying seed."²⁶ This fear, ironically, is what motivated Scholem in his study of the Jewish tradition. Scholem tried to find a self-renewing foundation for secular Jewish culture. He characterizes his and others' work in this area as "a treasure hunt within tradition, which creates a living relationship to which much of what is best in current Jewish self-awareness is indebted even where it was and is accomplished outside the framework of orthodoxy."²⁷ It seems that Scholem was a cultural pessimist but a national optimist. His writings suggest that he believed the Jewish people would survive but the current form of their culture could not. Scholem joined Brenner in agreement over the fundamental weakness of modern secular Jewish culture, but shared Ahad Ha'am's optimistic hope that the future generations of Jews would find some solution to the problem.

Relevance of the Secular Problem Today

The development of the idea of secular Jewish culture can be seen through the works of Ahad Ha'am, Joseph Haim Brenner, and Gershom

Scholem. Ahad Ha'am's idea of cultural Zionism has many adherents today. It is interesting that the philanthropist Michael Steinhardt's first large scale attempt to strengthen Jewish identity among non-Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora was based on providing free trips to Israel. Birthright's trips are an acceptance of Ahad Ha'am's idea that a Jewish State is needed to reinforce Jewish identity in the Diaspora. However, the intellectuals examined here also found that within the idea of a secular Jewish culture was the problem of a missing non-religious normative basis. The inner contradiction this presented between the individual's freedom to determine their own connection to their Jewish heritage and a communal need for shared cultural values and boundaries was one that clearly troubled Zionists, as was shown by the general Zionist outrage at Brenner's proposition that a Jew who worshipped Jesus was still culturally a Jew. Gershom Scholem articulated in an honest manner the problem that this lack of a normative basis had created for the future of the Jewish people. Unfortunately, until this day the problem of what constitutes secular Jewish culture has not been resolved. Moreover, the consequences of this problem have not been benign.

On a basic demographic level, there has been much worry about the declining numbers of Jews in the Diaspora due to intermarriage and the abandonment of their own particular identity. These were important issues within the Jewish community before Ahad Ha'am ever wrote a single word. However, as the Jews of the Diaspora have spread out

beyond the once vibrant subcultures they built in the ports of entry in their respective countries, the gravity of these issues for the future of Jewish culture has been magnified. This presents the possibility of the actual occurrence of what Gershom Scholem predicted might be Judaism's future march into oblivion. The threat of this occurrence has also been utilized for a malignant form of politics. In fact, the flimsy basis of current secular Jewish culture is one of the key starting points for Meir Kahane's radical thought and the beliefs of his followers. For example, in his 1985 debate with Alan Dershowitz regarding the democratic character of the Israeli state, Kahane simply asked the question "Why be Jewish?" to undermine Dershowitz's points regarding the Jewish respect for democratic values. Kahane emphasized that if one predicates moral and political values upon belonging to a particular cultural identity, without justifying this foundation, then all these precepts have no determinate value and can be ignored. As a result, Kahane's followers call for what Scholem would describe as "a non-dialectical return to traditional Judaism," including the establishment of a theocratic state of Israel and the rejection of much of Western culture by Jews in Israel and the Diaspora. Clearly, the problem of whether and how secular Jewish culture can be sustained is one that will have to be reconciled in future generations.

End Notes

1 Arthur Hertzberg, "Law of the Heart," in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 252.

- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 253.
- 4 Shlomo Avineri, "Ahad Ha'am: The Spiritual Dimensions of the Jewish State," in *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1981), 115.
- 5 Ibid., 116.
- 6 Herzberg, "Negation of the Diaspora," in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 271.
- 7 Herzberg, 276.
- 8 Avineri, 117.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Herzberg, 261.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Joseph Chaim Brenner, *Out of the Depths*, translated by David Patterson, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), 83.
- 13 Ibid., 38.
- 14 Ibid., 93.
- 15 Deuteronomy 16:20.
- 16 Kauffman appears to be a caricature of some of the followers of the ideas of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. Today, these followers are most commonly referred to as ultra-Orthodox or Haredi Jews.
- 17 The term *Torah U'madda* entered into popular usage well after the death of Brenner. However, its basic approach was already common in some religious Jewish circles in Europe in the period Brenner was writing. Notably, Reb Yosef's views are seen in *Breakdown and Bereavement* as quite a rarity in the early 20th century Jewish community of Jerusalem.
- 18 Y.H. Brenner, *Breakdown and Bereavement*, translated by Hillel Halkin, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 89.
- 19 It is important to note that Brenner means that a Jew who worships Jesus is *culturally* a Jew and not merely *ethnically* a Jew, i.e., a Jew solely by birth. He makes this clear when he states that the New Testament is as much a part of Jewish culture as the Old Testament.
- 20 Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays by Gershom Scholem*, edited by Werner J. Dannhauser, (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 18.
- 21 Ibid., 5.

- 22 Ibid., 33.
- 23 Ibid., 34.
- 24 Ibid., 32.
- 25 Ibid., 20.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid., 254.

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Author Profiles

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