Steal this Book: Jewish Literature in the Yeshiva World

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"I tell you, all the madness of the human race is in the sanctification of that book. Everything going wrong with this country is in the first five books of the Old Testament. Smite the enemy, sacrifice your son, the desert is yours and nobody else's all the way to the Euphrates. A body count of dead Philistines on every other page—that's the wisdom of their wonderful Torah." (Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, p. 75)

I

As a yeshiva boy in Forest Hills, New York in the 1980s (this was at Ohr Torah Institute—otherwise known as "the Institution," as in *house of detention*), the closest thing to a Jewish American novel we were ever required to read were the aggadic sections of rabbinic fantasy we occasionally studied in Talmud class. It should be mentioned, however, that the rabbis almost always skipped over these "story" passages as unimportant. We routinely turned the Talmud page when we came upon what my ninth-grade rebbe called "these worthless passages," and jumped headlong into the text's *pilpul* and halakhic discussion of a gored ox or a disputed *tallit*.

Growing up in Cedarhurst, Long Island, in the 1970s and 1980s as an "*aynekel* of the Modzitzer" was a strange and heady experience. Every winter we would get in my father's beat-up car and drive all the way to Brooklyn, to a *shteibel* in Flatbush where, as the only non-black-hatted Hassid in the room, I would be rewarded by being seated between my grandfather and the current Modzitzer Rebbe. I would listen with rapt attention as my grandfather's cousin, Ben Zion Shenker, sang the beautiful and haunting *niggunim* of my great, great grandfather, Rabbi Yisrael Taub of Modzitz. Each *niggun* came with a story that my grandfather would whisper into my ear as the hundreds of loyal

Hassidim swayed to the mournful strains of Ben Zion's voice; I heard history, both his and mine, unfold in each note. One *niggun*, called a "song of the homeless," was written in response to the thousands of refugees streaming through the Modzitzer's *shtetl* in the aftermath of World War I. Another terrifyingly beautiful *niggun* was penned while the Rebbe (my grandfather's grandfather) had his right leg amputated. The song, which is sung only twice a year, once at the *yarzeit* of the Rebbe and again during the *Ne'ilah* service on Yom Kippur, is a gentle reminder to God pleading with him not to forsake his people during their times of sorrow.

Needless to say, our family never *davened* at a Young Israel; my father managed to find the one shabby *shteibel* in all of Long Island—and he made fast work to move the family directly across the street from *Congregation Beis Medrash*—an insider's joke of an appropriate name for a Long Island synagogue—a *shul* without a pool (but, with plenty of Vilna *shases* for consolation). My father must have believed that proximity to a real honest-to-goodness bearded Rebbe, one who strolled down *Central Avenue* wearing a *shtreimel* and *kapotah* no less, would somehow keep me from losing my Modzitzer bearings. As it turns out—he couldn't have been more right.

Shabbos in our home not only meant traditional Jewish foods: challah for *motzi*, thick Malaga wine for *kiddush*, gefilte fish and chrain, but, as importantly, it also meant a new hands-breadth of Jewish American fiction—my reading for the coming week. Once the last strains of *benching* were sung, my father would wordlessly rise from the table and quietly descend the steep basement steps and disappear, sometimes for a half an hour or more. When he came back up to us all, his arms would be filled with dusty old paperbacks of Jewish American novels—his old yellowing musty texts from his youth growing up in Kingsbridge in the Bronx, the second son of Holocaust survivors. Other texts he had culled as an English major up in the Harlem hills of City College, that "poor man's Harvard" of the mid-1960s.

From my father's overflowing arms, I first discovered my life as a Jew in Long Island—these books spoke far more powerfully and poignantly to me than the *pilpul* sections of *Gemarah* we labored over each morning in yeshiva. From Bernard Malamud's poor shopkeepers and decrepit grocery stores, I learned deep in my soul what *rachmones* meant and the difference mercy could make in poor people's lives; Saul Bellow's thwarted intellectuals warned me of the perils of only living in one's own head, Herzog-like, as so many of my genius relatives had done and were still doing in the new world; from Philip Roth's angry bar-mitzvah boys or quisling army privates and jaded upper-class Jewish WASP wannabes, I saw transcribed in print the vain material strivings that I witnessed from a back-row seat each week at Rabbi Speigel's Long Island *shteibel*—where the yearly celebration of the glory of the ancient Torah included the selling of *atah hareta* to the highest bidder; or where each *Shabbos aliyah* in the *layning* was an opportunity to get someone to donate twice *hai*—every prayer it seemed was an opportunity not to draw closer to God, but an occasion to pander to the wealthy patrons seated comfortably at the *shteibel's* front table. Through these many Jewish American writers whom my father bequeathed to me, I discovered the meaning of commitment to a Jewish world of ideas and ideals: *tsedakah*—charity, *gemilut hassadim*—acts of lovingkindness; with each new novel devoured by the fading light of my mother's *Shabbos* candles, I learned deeply Rabbi Akiva's message: *veAhavta leRaiakha kamokha*, love your neighbor as yourself.

Shalom Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, Mendele Mokher Seforim, Franz Kafka, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Israel Joshua Singer, Chaim Grade, Edward Lewis Wallant, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick—each Friday night I would turn to these brilliant writers and learn again what it meant to be a Jew: torn, conflicted, angry, compassionate, loving, argumentative, generous. My weekly reading expanded my understanding not just of what my grandparents had gone through in Europe, but what I might at some time be required to do, think and believe as a Jewish man in the not too distant future—a future that, as I got older, seemed rapidly to be approaching the present.

Needless to say, during all my time being schooled in yeshiva—thirteen years to be exact, I was never once asked to read or reflect on a single work of Jewish American fiction. I suppose we once read Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*—sneaked into our tenth-grade world drama curriculum by Mr. Joseph Cohen, a lovely man who walked with a distinct limp, his left knee having been shattered

when, as a young boy, a horse from a Lower East Side ice truck kicked him as he tried to pilfer something cold to suck on during a particularly sweltering August day on Avenue C.

So what gives? Why is Jewish American fiction not taught in the yeshiva world? Is it fear of ridicule? Fear of allowing young, impressionable minds to be influenced by secular (read: *treyf*) thinkers? More importantly should this literature be taught in the yeshiva world or in the hundreds of Jewish Day Schools across America?

Many of the rabbis I studied under in yeshiva would dismiss such books as *shtuss*—nonsense that would lead to *bitul z'man*, a frivolous waste of time. Worse, many would label this glorious literary heritage as *apikorsus*—heretical teachings, forbidden to read let alone to savor and enjoy. Which begs the question: Why *should* Jewish American fiction be taught in the yeshiva world?

II

In her recent biography of the greatest of all Jewish philosophers, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity*, Rebecca Goldstein tells of the ways that she was discouraged in her *Bais Yaakov* yeshiva to even say Spinoza's name—let alone be permitted to study his philosophical treatise, *The Ethics*. This would not only be *bitul Torah*, but it would be heretical as well, giving the girls illicit ideas not conducive to marrying a good yeshiva *bochur*.

Much like Goldstein's grim *Bais Yaakov* experience a generation earlier, from the many rebbes I came across in my years of yeshiva in New York, I was told time and again that it would be better to sit in a room and do nothing than to waste my time filling my head with illicit ideas from that self-hating Jew, Philip Roth. One rabbi at OTI, a man who was also the English Studies Principal (I kid you not) at the major Satmar yeshiva in Brooklyn, became so enraged upon seeing me reading Philip Roth's latest offering, *The Counterlife*, he knocked the book out of my hand grabbed me by my shirt and, shaking me violently, screamed: "Cappell—you should at least read Shakespeare or the Greek myths—there is true poetry, not this filthy garbage from a self-hating Jew! If you keep reading Roth, what will your children know about Judaism?"

Not that there wasn't a library in our modified office building on
108th Street
that served us hundred and twenty Jewish boys as The Cohen Educational Center. There was, in fact, perched high on the top floor in a dark corner of the building a large steel door with the word "LIBRARY" scratched into the industrial paint. During my four years at the school, I cannot recall ever seeing that door open. When we literary-minded *talmidim* complained to the administration, we were told that in theory they supported the idea of a library hour once or twice a week, but the problem was they had no funding for a librarian—hence the room remained dark and sealed.

One morning while we were studying a particularly difficult talmudic passage dealing with the numerous issues of *shehitah* (ritual slaughter), our tenth-grade rebbe, being a top-flight educator, the type of teacher who was up on the very latest pedagogical techniques, filed us into the library, which unbeknownst to most of the boys, contained a TV *and* a VCR. The idea was for us to watch a rather gory video of a *schoichet* wrestling with a large animal. I vividly recall a recalcitrant goat being the star of this particular after-school special; I will also never forget my classmate David getting ill and vomiting all over the library floor when the *schoichet*, after explaining to his video audience the sharpness of his knife, quickly pulled his prized implement across the goat's throat. Just as a stream of hot, steaming blood shot forth so did David's lunch fly across the library floor. During all of the excitement with the vomit, my good friend Ari swiped the Rabbi's keys and quickly ran down the street to Queens Boulevard and bribing the bemused Israeli locksmith who at first (before Ari handed him a folded $20 bill) pretended to be outraged at the request, refusing to copy the official school keys which were clearly marked "DO NOT COPY." Of course, with the $20 in his pocket he did make copies of all of the yeshiva keys. Now after the *shehitah* video was over most of the boys were interested in the office keys (grade changing and other assorted mischief). But Cal, Jonathan, Shlomo, and I had other plans: we had our eyes on that shiny brand-new brass library door key.

And so began our "Rescue a Book" program from the shuttered OTI library. My friends and I would at opportune moments, while one of us acted as the lookout down the hall, sneak into the dank dark corner of the library and with just a dim natural light filtering in from 66th Street, quickly scan the dusty shelves for books worth reading. At first we made random selections: Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. As we got more bold in the dark library (an old 6 Volt flashlight helped with our courage), more thought went into the process: we systematically went through the Russian masters (a shelf not too far from the door should a quick exit be required): Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and my favorite from this lot—Nikolai Gogol. We soon worked out a system: the actual book thief (borrower) would get first dibs before passing the book(s) around our small literary club. When we were all done reading the person going in for the next book would return the previous book. We even voted Shlomo as our first underground librarian, tasked with keeping track of who had which rescued book.

Back from the Riverdale days of "The Institute"—when it had a top-flight educational program founded by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin (before he abandoned the education of New York's finest young minds in deference to the settler movement in Efrat, Israel), the library had a focus on great works of European literature. There was even a large section with French titles. Of course we, the young men of the 1980s Queens version of OTI were, amazingly, not offered any foreign language instruction: not French, not Spanish, nothing. When it became apparent to the upper administration of OTI that we needed a foreign language exam to obtain a New York State High School Diploma with the Regent's Seal of Approval, our rather enterprising principal came up with the solution that the entire yeshiva should study Hebrew language one hour a week during the rebbes' lunch hour. This way we could pass the Regents and help our Talmud and Mishnah study at the same time—thereby avoiding yet one more hour of "wasted time."

One afternoon as I was looking through the French section of the library, picking up a copy of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, I noticed a misshelved book among the French classics. There staring up at me from behind the pale glow of my flashlight was the impish grin of a man. I flipped the book over to discover a beat-up first edition of *The Adventures of Augie March* (as the dust-jacket proclaimed—by the author of *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*). I grabbed the two volumes: Bellow and Stendhal, and quickly made my way back down the hall. It sounded more like a kid's book (certainly in comparison to *Crime and Punishment*), but I opened the first page and began to read aloud quietly to myself in the near darkness:

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles. (Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*, p. 3)

And I was hooked.

III

I began this essay with a quotation from *The Counterlife*, one of Philip Roth's most important novels. Taken at face value, it seems like a rather angry and one-sided attack on ancient and holy Jewish texts. Why would any yeshiva or Jewish Day School principal want his or her students to study a text that contains such seemingly hateful words and ideas? Well, of course, one could find just as hateful ideas (taken out of context) in that (recently) much-maligned Hebrew Bible itself. After all, "an eye for an eye," sounds pretty scary and hateful as well—that is *without* interpretation. Once we understand that the Torah is speaking of the value of labor lost through blindness we can begin to see the wisdom and morality of this ancient biblical passage. No yeshiva principal or rebbe worthy of the title would

suggest that his or her students should go study the Torah without commentators such as Rashi or the Rambam. So too one must delve more deeply into Philip Roth's novel before we may interpret his work. This isolated quotation, while extremely provocative, does no justice to the larger aims and deep moral underpinnings of each of Roth's novels. Without interpretation of the Torah we could easily end up like Karaites sitting in the dark all *Shabbos* long, afraid to turn right or left. Similarly, without any critical understanding of Philip Roth, many religious leaders over the years labeled Roth as a self-hating Jew.

The truth about Roth, as well as about the many dozens of brilliant contemporary Jewish American writers, could not be further from this idea of self-hatred. Writers like Roth, those who have been satirizing the exploits of their Jewish American characters for decades, are actually the self-appointed guardians of the morals and values of the very culture they may be skewering in their fictional portrayal. Philip Roth never denigrates Judaism in *The Counterlife* or in any of the other thirty or so novels he has written in the past fifty years. Instead, he is attempting to push American Judaism (and America for that matter) toward a more perfect union of study and pragmatism, idea, and ideal.

In this quotation from *The Counterlife,* the speaker is one of Roth's most amusing characters, an Israeli journalist named Shuki Elchanan, who in this scene is goading his old friend, Philip Roth's alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman. They are out at dinner, discussing the current difficulties of Israeli politics, when his anger and frustration comes to a boil:

"I tell you, all the madness of the human race is in the sanctification of that book. Everything going wrong with this country is in the first five books of the Old Testament. Smite the enemy, sacrifice your son, the desert is yours and nobody else's all the way to the Euphrates. A body count of dead Philistines on every other page—that's the wisdom of their wonderful Torah." (Philip Roth, *The Counterlife,* p. 75)

In this scene, Zuckerman and Shuki are discussing the dangerous right-wing leader of the Israeli settler movement, Mordecai Lippman—a man who perverts the Torah to bolster his message of hate and fury. More than likely, Roth modeled Lippman on Rabbi Meir Kahane, whose real-life party "Kach," was first listed as a terrorist organization back in 1994 (as well as their splinter group, "Kahane Chai," which is still labeled to this day as a terrorist organization by Israel). A short while after this conversation with Zuckerman, Shuki corrects these distorted ideas in a heartfelt letter to Zuckerman in which he explains that he doesn't want to be misunderstood—nor does he want Zuckerman to mistake the zealots of the settler movement for the majority of peace-loving Israelis. (Lippman espouses a platform of fear and hatred: "There is nothing the American goy would like better than a *Judenrein* United States…"[p. 124].) Shuki explains in his letter to Zuckerman that he is on edge because his son, a musical prodigy who has been given an opportunity to study under the tutelage of Daniel Barenboim in New York City, would rather do his military service than continue his studies in New York. The reader of Roth's novel soon learns that Shuki is really quite a dedicated father who loves the Jewish State and loves being a Jew. We also hear from his father, a Holocaust survivor, now a welder in Israel, who pleads with Zukerman to make *aliyah*. That drunken rant against Israel and the Hebrew Bible is in fact a manifestation of Shuki's frustration with the horrors of war and the many hatreds unleashed by the Middle East conflict. Shuki, we discover, is a veteran of the Yom Kippur War, where

he'd lost his hearing in one ear and most of the sight in one eye when an exploding Egyptian shell threw him fifteen feet from his position. His brother, a reserve paratroop officer, who in civilian life had been [an] architect, was taken prisoner when the Golan Heights were overrun. After the Syrian retreat, they found him and the rest of his captured platoon with their hands tied behind them to stakes in the ground; they had been castrated, decapitated, and their penises stuffed in their mouths. Strewn around the abandoned battlefield were necklaces made of their ears. (p. 63)

After all this fighting and horror, Shuki is tired of warfare and tired of people who, like Lippman, believe that they have God on their side and therefore *all* of the answers. In fact, having witnessed numerous atrocities committed on both sides of the conflict, as these disturbing passages demonstrate,

Shuki remains somewhat shell-shocked by his experiences.
What Roth gives his readers in *The Counterlife* (and in each and every one of his novels) is a complex view of a multi-faceted religion and culture. There are no easy answers in *The Counterlife;* like the best literature, it offers us difficult questions we must contemplate alone and communally. Do not Jewish schools and yeshivas owe it to their students to present complex thinking on the many complications of Jewish life in America and Israel? Do yeshiva principals think that by barring these discussions from the *Beis Medrash* and the yeshiva classrooms that their *talmidim* do not know of the existence of alternate perspectives, varied identities, shifting levels of religious observance to Judaism and a "Torah-true" life? Do these same rebbes and principals not know of the high attrition rate of students who have been denied opportunities to discuss the complexities of individual faith and understanding of our tradition? How many of these students had Roth novels (or, like Rebecca Goldstein in her yeshiva experience being denied Spinoza's *Ethics*…) knocked out of their hands? How many of these students who were frustrated in their attempts to gain a deeper more meaningful individualistic understanding of Judaism are no longer affiliated with the faith or no longer consider themselves "practicing" Jews? How many of these thoughtful students are now "off the *derekh*"?

IV

At the end of one of Saul Bellow's most important stories titled, "Something to Remember Me By," the narrator—now an old man preparing for his own death, but barely sixteen years old in the frame of the story—is trying to prepare himself for the imminent death of his mother, a woman who has suffered for many months from cancer and who is in the midst of the very last throes of her disease. After several misadventures in the frigid cold of a Midwestern storm, the narrator has been robbed of his sheepskin overcoat; he knows he must return home, where his furious and often violent father awaits him. These are the boy's thoughts as he rides on the Chicago streetcar home:

If my father should catch me I could expect hard blows on my shoulders, on the top of my head, on my face. But if my mother had, tonight, just died, he wouldn't hit me.

This was when the measured, reassuring, sleep-inducing turntable of days became a whirlpool, a vortex darkening toward the bottom. I had had only the anonymous pages in the pocket of my lost sheepskin to interpret it to me. They told me that the truth of the universe was inscribed into our very bones. That the human skeleton was itself a hieroglyph. That everything we had ever known on earth was shown to us in the first days after death. That our experience of the world was desired by the cosmos, and needed by it for its own renewal. (Bellow, *Collected Stories*, p. 436)

The boy gets off at the
North Avenue
stop and that is when Saul Bellow's pithy *drash* on Jewish mourning rituals begins:

I got down on the
North Avenue
stop, avoiding my reflection in the shopwindows. After a death, mirrors were immediately covered. I can't say what this pious superstition means. Will the soul of your dead be reflected in a looking glass, or is this custom a check to the vanity of the living? (p. 437)

A cynical reader might say, "Why should yeshiva students have to put up with this angry dismissal of an important *shiva* ritual?" After all, Bellow's narrator dismisses this *minhag,* or custom, as "pious superstition." Yet the narrator's next two questions suggest a far more nuanced appraisal of this custom. In fact, Bellow himself is not at all dismissive of these Jewish rituals. "A check on vanity of the living"—this is in fact a brilliant interpretation of this mysterious ritual of uncertain origin. More

importantly, Bellow's entire story is focused on key ideas of Judaism and our relationship with this tradition: how to honor one's dead parents and what is bequeathed from one generation to the next.

V

Why study Jewish American literature in the yeshiva classroom? Because without it we have a very limited idea of the varieties of Jewish life in America. We cannot hide from the difficult questions Jewish writers in America ask of our community no more than we can fend off the many barbed critiques that much twentieth century and contemporary Jewish American literature presents to an early twenty-first-century practicing "Torah Jew." Nor should we. Any serious appraisal of Jewish life in America (the aim of a yeshiva education?) would be incomplete without these varied Jewish American voices weighing in. We as a community need to contend with these key ideas. So whether stolen by its students or willingly given, this body of imaginative work created by Jews in America during the past century of experimentation on these shores desperately needs to be contemplated. I have often thought that it is a yeshiva audience, those readers classically trained in the traditional Jewish texts and culture, who truly have the knowledge to "unpack" all of the hidden meanings contained in Jewish American writing and who constitute the ideal readers for Jewish American fiction writers. How sad that this perfect audience has, with an angry flick of the hand (*Shtuss!*), so often rejected this body of post-rabbinic literature, work that might be thought of as a complex commentary on traditional Jewish sources: the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud.

VI

Many of the new Jewish American writers are former yeshiva students formally schooled in Torah and mitzvoth: Allegra Goodman, Tova Mirvis, Gary Shteyngart, Shalom Auslander. Yet many of these former yeshiva students seem to use their hard-earned knowledge of Judaism as fodder for satire and ridicule. Early on in Gary Shteyngart's funny and culturally vital 2006 novel *Absurdistan*, his protagonist Misha Vainberg, a recent immigrant from Russia, is maimed in a botched adult circumcision by a group of Hassidim in Brooklyn. Late in the novel, Misha is traveling on an airplane when he spots a large Hassid sitting in first-class getting into an argument and acting rudely to a flight attendant. He enters into the first-class cabin and begins shouting at the Hassid: "Beware of their *mitzvah* mobiles, fellow Jews among you. Beware of circumcision late in life. Beware of easy faith…" (p. 109). Similarly, Shalom Auslander puts his knowledge of yeshiva to work in almost each of his stories collected in his 2005 book *Beware of God*. In "The War of the Bernsteins," the eponymous character becomes so obsessed with the mathematics and mechanisms of Jewish reward and punishment that he spends most of his waking hours calculating the number of negative commandments versus the positive mitzvoth—missing the spirit of the Torah in the process and completely ignoring and alienating his young wife, who eventually divorces him:

The spiritual mathematics consumed him.
Was obeying a negative prohibition worth the same amount of reward in the World to Come as fulfilling a positive commandment? Would the inaction of negative prohibitions really be as rewarded as the deliberate action of positive commandments? (p. 3)

Of course, all of Bernstein's anti-social behaviors are actively encouraged by his rabbis who think of his increasing concern with mitzvoth as a positive sign of his becoming a much better Jew—a true "master of repentance." Perhaps no contemporary Jewish American writer better exemplifies the need to study this literature in the yeshiva than Shalom Auslander. While his writing is uproariously funny—it is also a wry commentary on the importance of not losing track of the true meaning of the Torah as a way of living a life filled with meaning and concern for our fellow human beings. The

Torah is not a ledger sheet of virtues and demerits. Auslander's stories point out the shortcomings of a yeshiva education that does not focus on how all this Torah observance should strive to make better human beings.

Reading Auslander's stories brings me back to some of the more unsavory aspects of my own yeshiva background. At Ohr Torah Institute the rabbis would greet us in the morning with a big bear hug combined with a back rub. What was the purpose of this morning ritual? Had the rabbis missed us so much since the previous afternoon? Was this a true emotional exchange between *rebbe* and *talmid*—an emotional overflowing of powerful feelings? It was not long before we each realized that this outburst of physical warmth was really a slick rabbinical maneuver to do a quick once over for each boy: I refer to what became known in our yeshiva as the "*tsitsith*-check." During this morning ritual hug, if you were discovered to not be wearing your four-cornered, fringed garment under your button-down dress shirt, you would be required to purchase just such a ritual object proffered by the more enterprising rabbis of our school right out of their attaché cases.

As in Auslander's story "The War of the Bernsteins," these rabbinical machinations did more to alienate the recipients of all this religious attention than they served to draw people closer to God and an increased level of ritual observance. One way to read Auslander's stories would be as a cynical perspective on the yeshiva world—stories best left out of Jewish Day School and yeshiva high-school curricula. Yet I would argue that the most important audience that Shalom Auslander is writing for is precisely the world of *tsitsith*-checking rabbis—complete with frozen smiles and false embraces. Perhaps a Jewish educator reading this story, or as importantly, one of the poor unfortunate *tsitsith*-checkees like myself—just might be brought back to an awareness, a deeper sympathy with the true spirit and beauty of Judaism. At the same time Auslander's fiction forces his readers to recognize how that beauty has been perverted by numerous unthinking and uncaring religiously-motivated actions. After all, *tsitsith* are supposed to bring the wearer to an understanding and an appreciation of God's omnipresence. As it says in Numbers 15:40, you wear *tsitsith* so "that ye may remember, and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your God." Ironically, the Torah goes on to explain that *tsitsith* are supposed to serve as a reminder of God's granting the Israelites their freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Numbers 15:41)—probably not the first thought on each manhandled boy's mind during a morning *tsitsith* check. I can say with certainty that God's commandments were the furthest thing from my mind during (and long after) those demeaning (and often expensive) exchanges.

In contrast, my reading of contemporary Jewish American fiction has afforded me a deeper understanding of Jewish ritual, and it has inspired in me an appreciation for the true beauty of Judaism—an aesthetic that was often marred in my yeshiva experience. After all, satirists have always been the self-appointed moral guardians of their culture. Whether it is Philip Roth, who way back in the 1950s had his young character Ozzie Freedman scream down at his rabbi: "Promise me, promise me you'll never hit anybody about God" (p. 158), or Shalom Auslander's twenty-first century vision of a sterile Jewish Orthodoxy, these brilliant works of fiction engage young minds both in and out of the yeshiva. What great literature does is force its readers to think and reflect on their lives, their roles in shaping their culture and universe. This is especially true of literature that engages readers on their own native grounds—in this case in an Orthodox or Torah setting. It is most important to allow students within the yeshiva world to be engaged by Jewish American literature to allow their imaginations to run over the possibilities that engagement with the modern world from a traditional perspective and lifestyle entails. We owe it to ourselves and to our students not to stifle the important discussions that would ensue from these readings.

VII

One of those dusty books I rescued years ago from my moldering yeshiva library was a seminal work of literary realism: Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. Late in that book, Stendhal famously defines the novel as: "a mirror that strolls along a highway. Now it reflects the blue of the skies, now the mud

puddles underfoot" (p. 479). Morris Dickstein, one of the most important critics of contemporary Jewish culture, in his recent survey of American literature, *The Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World*, claims that in this passage

Stendhal only appears to be invoking the mirror as an impersonal mechanism, a carbon copy that displays the world as it actually is. The image itself, as he positions it, belies this simplistic claim. This is not a stationary mirror fixed upon the passing show, observing the parade as from the viewing stand, but a dynamic reflector shifting position as it moves down the road. (p. 8)

Dickstein goes on to suggest that the mirror "must be held or carried by someone, and the images it provides will be framed, constantly changing, a series of partial views contributing to a larger picture" (p. 8).

Surely the world of the yeshiva and the young minds it seeks to shape deserves just such a "dynamic reflector" to gauge its progress and its shortcomings. Thankfully this reflector already exists in the body of work Jewish American fiction writers have produced during the last one hundred years of experimentation on American shores.

In this essay, I am proposing that the yeshiva world institute a curriculum of study that not only reflects the beautiful blue sky but also the mud puddles of the contemporary Jewish American community. Our vast literary inheritance does just that—all we need to do is open the books ourselves and make them available to the youth studying in our yeshivas and Jewish Day Schools across the country. We deny our young questioning scholars of the yeshiva a glimpse into this mirror at the peril of the community. The yeshiva world is fearful of allowing young impressionable minds to delve into the dangers of contemporary fiction. But in fearing the "reflected mud and muck" of the Jewish community, the beautiful image of the blue sky is obscured as well.

VIII

Throughout her 1998 novel, *Kaaterskill Falls*, Allegra Goodman engages numerous Jewish philosophical questions. How restrictive must an Orthodox life be? Does kosher always mean kosher? What are the true ethics of kosher food? (In the midst of the horrors of Postville, Iowa, can the Orthodox Jewish community really afford not to fully engage their students in a meaningful debate about the letter of the law and the true meaning of the spirit of kashruth and holy eating habits?) How can an individual adhere to a stringent code of Orthodox behavior yet concurrently remain a committed individualist? How do twentieth-century feminist ideals jive or conflict with a Torah-true life? Goodman forces her readers to ponder and meditate on these difficult questions. Precisely because of Goodman's engagement with these tough, thorny issues, she is able, at the novel's conclusion, to powerfully evoke the *Shabbos* ritual of *havdalah*. Many of the main characters of the novel gather around the lit candle to mark the conclusion of the *Shabbos* and debate the meaning of ancient Hebrew prayer. I could not ask for a better talmudic or midrashic interpretation that would form the basis of a better understanding of this important ritual.

Goodman's novel also perfectly "reflects" Stendhal's metaphor of fiction being a "movable mirror." Throughout *Kaaterskill Falls*, Goodman's characters question their adherence to the strict laws and traditions dictated by their leader Rav Elijah Kirshner and, after his death, by the Rav's puritanical son Isaiah (who reveals more than a few mud puddles); however, by the conclusion of the novel, Goodman's protagonist, Elizabeth Shulman, finds her own place within that beautiful "blue sky"—the culture and life of Orthodox Judaism.

Kaaterskill Falls concludes with numerous characters ending their *Shabbos* with the traditional *havdalah* service:

They get up and go inside the house to make havdalah. The Landauers get out the spice box and kiddish cup. Brocha holds the braided candle, and Isaac says the prayer marking the end of the Shabbat. After he says the last words, *Hamavdil ben kodesh lihol,* Nina asks, "What do you think is the best translation for that?"

"Blessed be he who separates the holy from the profane," Isaac says.

"The sacred from the secular," puts in Elizabeth.

"The transcendent moment from the workaday world," suggests old Rabbi Sobel in his quavering voice.

"Mm." They pause around the smoking candle. (p. 324)

Just imagine the debate that would ensue in a yeshiva classroom after reading this scene. What do we make about this separation between the secular and the sacred? Just imagine the conversation a group of students highly educated in traditional Jewish texts, talmudic and midrashic, might have after reading this powerful novel. Let's debate it—is Jewish literature outside the realm of holy and in the realm of the profane? Through engagement with traditional Jewish sources, I would argue that the literary production of Jews in America should be seen as one more stage of rabbinic commentary on the scriptural inheritance of the Jewish people.

Goodman draws her readers' attention to the distractions of American popular culture and the importance of continuing to make those distinctions, those vital demarcations between holy and mundane, Holocaust memory and the noise (and comfort) of American popular culture. For pre-*Haskalah* Jews, this was not a personal concern—Judaism itself made these distinctions. However, much of contemporary postmodern Jewish American fiction seems to ask the all important question of how do we make these distinctions in a post-Holocaust world?

I, for one, after reading Goodman's novel back in 1998, would never think of *havdalah* quite the same way again. These days, when I perform this ritual, it is no longer as mere rote repetition of an ancient text. Goodman's novel began a personal questioning of just what this separation we celebrate entails. How can we truly sanctify the Sabbath as separate yet a part of our weekly lives? How do we truly sanctify the Sabbath so that the *havdalah* service can be truly felt as a demarcation of difference? As I argue in my recently published book: *American Talmud: The Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction*, I believe that this is precisely the type of work that Jewish American literature performs for its readers. What Jewish American fiction does is open the many ancient Jewish texts and rituals to a contemporary audience so that we become a part of a living breathing tradition—one that may in fact augment our contemporary American lives and not stand in opposition to it.

Instead of requiring its pupils to steal the promethean fire of contemporary Jewish literature, the yeshiva world ought to be celebrating this body of work, willingly incorporating it into its curriculum as a means of conveying ancient tradition to their contemporary Jewish students. In doing so, they will secure the relevance and primacy of ancient Orthodox Judaism for many more generations, ensuring the *mesorah* or great chain of tradition continues in a contemporary American setting.

In *American Talmud* I quote an aggadic section from tractate *Menahot*:

Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rab: When Moses ascended on high (to receive the Torah) he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing *taggin* (crown-like flourishes) to the letters. Moses said: "Lord of the Universe, who stays Thy hand?" He replied: "There will arise a man at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound upon each little letter, heaps and heaps of the laws." "Lord of the Universe," said Moses, "permit me to see him." He replied: "Turn thee around." Moses went (into the academy of Rabbi Akiba) and sat down behind eight rows of Akiba's disciples. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master "Whence do you know it?" and the latter replied, "It is a law given to Moses at Sinai," he was comforted. (*Menahot* 29b).

This aggadic short story might seem peculiar to those not regularly engaged in the study of the Talmud. Although the Talmud is often perceived as being a rigid book comprised of legal maneuverings designed to codify the intricate Mosaic laws, it might more accurately be thought of as a blueprint for modern and postmodern fictional play.

Far from being a dry legal document, the Babylonian Talmud, particularly its aggadic sections, revels in the fantastical and the ambiguous. Not merely capable of tolerating dissent, the Talmud honors and celebrates a difference of opinion; time and again the Talmud honors radical rethinking, even about its foundational concepts. In the previous passage, for example, the Talmud tells a seemingly heretical story in which Moses, the greatest leader of the Jewish people, cannot follow the basic logic of even a simple talmudic argument.

This foregoing aggadic passage reveals the storytelling aspects, the cultural work performed by the Babylonian Talmud. Through its literary passages the Talmud reinterprets the Torah anew for its own generation. This open-endedness, this celebration of multiple perspectives, is not only a characteristic of the Babylonian Talmud; it is also a hallmark of twentieth-century and contemporary Jewish American fiction. There are so many analogues between the two that Jewish American fiction writers embracing modern and postmodern life are often mistakenly perceived as radically breaking with their traditional past. Yet they are one more link in the great chain of rabbinic thought conveyed to us through the centuries as a means of interpretation designed to ensure that scripture will remain vital and new for each generation.

IX

At the end of one of his greatest novels, *The Adventures of Augie March*, Saul Bellow's hero reflects on his many-faceted identity, wondering to himself how a poor orphan from the wrong side of Chicago ended up tramping across the frozen postwar fields of Normandy. He begins to laugh, and Bellow writes: "that's the *animal ridens* in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up" (p. 536). Bellow refers to Aristotle's designation that to be human is to be able to laugh. Augie's associative mind then goes on to reflect on Christopher Columbus, who, five centuries before Augie came on the scene, set all of his personal discoveries in motion: "Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America" (p. 536).

Shutting out contemporary Jewish American voices from the yeshiva syllabus does not prove that these students will grow up without doubts—forgetting that there is an America swirling in all its contemporary glory and horror right outside the *beis medrash* doors. For me, 108th Street led directly to Queens Boulevard and *Jacey's Billiards* when, at the age of 16, I preferred shooting pool to being denigrated by my rebbes for reading a body of work that even back then I thought of as post-rabbinic literature. Yet, *hineni*: here I am twenty years later engaging in traditional Jewish texts through the very literature that was branded as *shtuss* by my supposed spiritual leaders—the well-intentioned but wrong-headed rabbis in my yeshiva.

Much of contemporary Jewish American writing eloquently voices the perils of unfettered assimilation, the withering of roots and the loss of memory that is often attendant with pursuing the dream of America. Jewish American fiction writers' morally serious work warns of the political misuse American popular culture has often made of Holocaust commemoration and tradition. Their work continues to dramatize the complex lives of their Jewish American characters, while powerfully rendering the conflicts that inevitably arise between tradition and modernity, memory and history.

That "dynamic reflector" of contemporary Jewish American literature is extremely important. It might reflect some of the less-savory aspects of our culture; writers like Philip Roth have been doing that since their first published works. But they also reflect the sky—the great promise of a life lived by an ancient code of understanding, belief, faith, and compassion. Shutting off discussion does not lead to blind adherence—and it does in fact lead to its opposite. When we stifle that discussion we threaten our viability in a contemporary world of myriad identity choices and, in the process, we destroy our own textual tradition. It didn't work in the *shtetl* as the *Haskalah* blew winds of enlightenment through

the dusty *shtetl* streets with its intoxicating air of freedom—it certainly will not work in the freest society the world has ever known. We ignore Philip Roth's blue sky and puddles of mud at our own peril.

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