David Mamet: The Return of the Native

View PDF



Dr. Maurice Wohlgelernter taught as Professor of English, first at Yeshiva College, and thereafter, at Baruch College, CUNY. He also served as Visiting Professor at New York University, New York Institute of Technology, City College, and Bar Ilan University. He was simultaneously active, during those years, as a practicing rabbi. This article appears in issue 6 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

*For Anthony Polimeni, on assuming the Vice Presidency of Touro College.

I. *The Native*

If by chance, a curious stranger were possibly permitted to enter David Mamet's private study, he would suddenly find himself facing, among an assortment of general works, copies of his host's many publications, all reflecting his catholic interests and tastes. Those publications consist of 36 plays and five collections of them; six screenplays; three novels; 13 prose works; three children's books; 15 film scripts; 21 critical and biographical studies of his life; and, undoubtedly, the current and past issues of the *Mamet Quarterly,* which dealt critically with his life and works.

The visitor will undoubtedly find, prominently displayed on one of the shelves, a copy of one of Mamet's latest works—at least one or two more have already appeared as we write—entitled *The Wicked Son[i],* a sequence of reflections on, among other things, the nature of anti-Semitism, hostile Jewish estrangement, and the current condition of American Jewry. And the intrigued visitor, reading that, or any other of his works, will immediately become aware that they are all written by a master literary craftsman, in impeccable prose, that captivates, fascinates, and exhilarates the common reader. The title of this work, as anyone marginally acquainted with the liturgy of the *Haggadah,* recited annually at the Passover *Seder,* will immediately recognize that it refers to the "Wicked Son," or

second of the four sons highlighted there—the other three being the "Wise" one, the "Simple" one, and the one "Unable to Formulate a Question"—who has [DEA1]

removed himself from his historic inheritance to become a menace to himself and his people.

But before tracing that Wicked Son's estrangement from his inheritance, as Mamet perceives it, the reader might be interested to learn, briefly, some of the story of our author's family life, as well as his relationship with his own past. His mother's family came from Warsaw, his father's from the town of Hrubezow, in Poland, who on arriving on American shores during the early years of the last century, would "rehearse the rituals, perform the rites of their faith," but generally did so not "without some embarrassment . . . the religious part of their Jewishness was hollowed out." Of course, they "shared Jewish food, language, and jokes, which consoled them in their strange new land, but never with a conviction of their old religion." In fact, we learn that his paternal grandfather "divorced his wife before he reached American shores, leaving her to arrive later, alone, with his child." What they all wished, ultimately, to achieve on these shores was to move into the mainstream of American life by "modifying, omitting, suppressing, and acting their old faith." Or, in Mamet's own summation: "assimilation, apparently, was their ultimate goal."

Small wonder, therefore, that it became Mamet's lot to live with that ambiguity: to deny what he was, and to live a life of hypocrisy for much of his youth. Consider this confessional:

It pleased me to think that I was putting myself over in myself . . . living in Vermont and doing things that it seemed were not acceptable behavior for a nice Jewish boy, whose family had the gene of liberalism—spending a lot of time gambling, hunting, fishing, etc. while hanging out in poolrooms, and I enjoyed life there.

Of some other memories of his youth he speaks with uncommon bitterness. Of his *bar mitzvah,* for instance, he has only this to say: "It seemed to me a watercolor of Jewishness, American good citizenship . . . with a sense of unfortunately Asiatic overtones." And of his own Reform Jewish parents, he confesses, "they were determined to be so stalwart, so American, so non-Jewish," that they overwhelmed him. To which he adds, not without some vitriol directed at his own parents: "Reform Judaism allowed faith to become a lifestyle"—including his own parents—"a mere modification of some central cultural truth out of supposedly secular but patent Christian culture.

A good number of years later, however, something occurred in Mamet's life that, among other experiences, "shook the foundations of my being." He attended the *bat mitzvah* of his niece in apparently a traditional house of worship. While there, it suddenly occurred to him that he "hadn't attended a synagogue service for some thirty years." He was chagrined and shocked to find that it had something to do with a sense not only of assimilation, but also of self-hatred that was nobody's fulfillment but his own. "And I thought I could remedy that." In fact, in some three of his pays, he actually attempts to accomplish just that: *Homicide, The Old Neighborhood,* and *The Old Religion.* And in *Some Freaks,* another play, he has one of his characters exclaim: "God bless those in all generations who have embraced Jewishness . . . we are a beautiful people and a good people."

Obviously, therefore, it is with such people—his people—that Mamet now wishes to belong. So that during a television broadcast with Charlie Rose, he proclaimed: "To deny who you are, to deny what you want, is to live the life of hypocrisy, which leads to self-loathing." Whether one belongs to the stage, or the movie set, or any other hermetic group, he finds "filial piety—a responsibility to learn and to instruct the heritage of one's people—of primal significance."

And for Mamet, what better place to begin that search of his heritage than the ancient story of the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, as described in the Passover *Haggadah,* with its famous "Four Questions" and "Four Sons"—especially the "Wicked One," who also becomes for Mamet a metaphor for all that ails American Jewry. He learned all that during the *Seder,* the "longest continuing ceremony in the history of the world."

II. *The Wicked Sons*

"Modern Epicureanism" as we know it broke out in the "Wild Sixties." American and world youth, of whatever faith and tradition, and in surprisingly vast numbers, began to assert that the long-trusted beliefs and observances of their respected faiths and practices limited an individual's freedom. Look instead, their argument ran, to *all* traditions and practices, since there is much to learn from all of them. The time has surely come, their cry rang out, when we must discard the "old" and adopt the "new," forgetting, along the way, that such an act of submission to the new has long been known as "DeClarembault's Syndrome," usually described "as a condition of individuals and society, characterized by a breakdown or absence of social norms and values, as in the case of an uprooted people."

To better understand this condition of modern Jewry, Mamet chose the infamous "Wicked Son" of the Passover *Haggadah,* who, questioning and rejecting the tradition, rituals, and practices of his people, is moved to "purge the Jew in himself in order, eventually, to identify the Jews as others." Or, as often proclaimed by these newfound Epicureans: "I'm not observant but my parents were . . . ." Yet, despite all or such similar declarations, "that Son suffers from a self-loathing, never wishing to admit that he *is* a Jew, that the world is not fond of Jews, and his only choice of safety lies *with* the Jews." In his panic to escape his alienated condition of abandoning his Jewish heritage, the Wicked Son "prefers the irrationality of some new faith imported to the danger of his psyche of the truth."

In order to clarify how the Wicked Son, without anchor, suffers from, among other sicknesses, DeClarembault's Syndrome, Mamet proceeds to present him as masquerading in three guises in certain unaccustomed roles, and in a delusional flight from his common past. They are "Apostate," *"Apikores"* (or heretic), and "Assimilationist."

The Apostate

Unlike the "Conversos" of Spain in the fourteenth century, who escaped the Inquisition by identifying themselves as Roman Catholic in public while practicing Judaism in the privacy of their homes, the Apostate remains Jewish only by identification ("I'm not observant but my parents were . . .) in order to be accepted on life's stage by the Christian community. Ignorant of all aspects of his religion, the Apostate will argue that because "my ancestors suffered persecution and prevailed, I will renounce their struggle and call my ingratitude enlightenment."

Now freed to enjoy an ongoing doctrine of lassitude and privilege by the same fathers whose religion he currently discards, the Apostate begins to believe that "ignorance and his supercilious superiority to its practices is a licensed diversion." After transferring his fealty to those he considers the stronger group, accepting their authority and many practices, he forgets entirely, Mamet claims, "that his Christian friends and neighbors will *never* accept him. As a result, he is left with a certain anomie of restlessness, of purposelessness, in order to adopt the views of his enemies, the anti-Semites, so as to be accepted by them."

The Apostate may indeed convert, and often does, but he must still "guard himself against the inevitable scorn of those to whom he proclaims his freedom from his despised heritage." To lessen that threat, he may one day seek his fellow Jews to no avail, for "the world," Mamet wisely reminds the reader, "hates a turncoat." Furthermore, in his hasty flight from his roots, the Apostate may one day adopt a new faith, and often does, but his "rejection of the old becomes anomie, a degradation of his self-image. And since the Christian may never accept him, he has adopted a new religion which offers him no peace."

And however much the Apostate might think of himself as superior to the members of his tribe because of his detachment, is he not aware, Mamet wonders bitterly, that a significant number of Arab and Hamas leaders, jihadists, and others of their ilk, often declare publicly—and multitudes privately—their plans to annihilate the State of Israel and its people? And that, sad to record, some 65

years after the Holocaust? To individuate himself, if ever, among his own people, "the Apostate must," Mamet argues, "first deal with the trauma of human savagery. Only then will he be equipped to return to the ranks of his people."

The Apikoros

In his glossary at the very end of this book, Mamet defines the term *apikoros,* derived from the name of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, "as a heretic learned in Judaism but rejects it." Truthfully, however, one is moved to remind Mamet that his definition of this term is entirely different from the one used in classic Jewish sources, with which he may be only marginally acquainted. For the definition found in the Talmud and summarized definitively by Maimonides, among others, in his *Book of Repentance* 3:8, reads as follows: an Apikoros is *anyone* who "denies the concept of prophecy, which reaches from God to the heart of man, or, anyone who denies the prophetic powers of Moses; or anyone who denies God's knowledge of man's actions, deeds, or works." Obviously, then, one need not be a "learned person" to be called an Apikoros: It is enough that he dismisses any of the fundamental principles of the Torah.

One of those principles—the ritual of circumcision—first established by Abraham, the biblical father of Jews and Judaism, has often been declared, by liberal fanatics and their cohorts, as nothing more than a "savage mutilation . . . irrational and ludicrous, an empty ceremony, which is not the continuation of Judaism but may also be some sort of ritual ceremony by a secret society." But this particular ritual has literally been central to the survival of the Jewish people. Anyone denying its validity and historical relevance Mamet calls an Apikoros, who will inevitably find himself immortalized into nothingness.

In that world of nothingness, the modern Apikoros commits, in addition, the most heinous of all sins, summarized in biblical terms, as the worship of the "golden calf." If "modern man cannot control the gods," his argument runs, "they do not exist . . . how then may I control them, through gold . . . I will therefore worship gold." The "gold" in that argument, surprisingly, is in Mamet's considered view the current *bar* and *bat mitzvah* celebration. It is standard practice, for the wealthy parents of the young celebrant, aided and directed by a professional "party manager," to plan the most ostentatious of all such celebrations. And whoever has attended such a Saturday night affair will immediately recall that, on entering the vast ballroom, two blazing orchestras are in full swing, the endless platters of hors d'oeuvres are served by gracious waitresses, the seven- or eight-course dinner, the after dinner refreshments, the dancing girls, the singers, crooners, comedians, the stacked bars every few feet, and even a professional clown for the entertainment of the little ones in attendance. All ends with the rising sun the next morning.

After that night of revelry, the previous morning's prayer service, the Torah reading, the confirmant's speech, the sermon, have long been forgotten in this consuming worship of the "golden calf." All of which results in Mamet's bitter reaction to such "idolatry," with a warning that such celebrations are "not the continuation but the death of Judaism . . . for even if parents mime their devotion, the children are aware of the sham; they will endure as they must, but most will be reluctant to impose that tax on their offspring, which the next generation may likely turn against all things Jewish."

To prevent that next generation from renouncing all forms of Jewish life, except perhaps the acknowledgment of their birth, Mamet seriously suggests that all such worshippers of this "golden calf" return to the ancient doctrine of *teshuva,* or repentance. In fact, Mamet actually devotes a chapter in this work, entitled "Lies or *Teshuva*" heralding the need for a total transformation of this Apikoros' personality from his alienated status as a Jew only by a quirk of heredity, who "refers to his forbearer, much as a wealthy man might allude to an ancestor as a horse thief."

Repentance for this wicked son must begin, Mamet insists, *not* in, say, a Temple, where the "members of the spiritually inert may praise each other's monetary contributions as true Judaism, and

still remain an unaligned Jew." Should this Apikoros truly search for authenticity, he must begin, Mamet strongly recommends, in a "classic *shul*, or synagogue, without any gilding: no golden pews, gymnasia, organ music, abbreviated services, or mixed choirs." This Apikoros might even begin his transformation, argues Mamet, in an old-fashioned *shtiebel*, or small, sometimes even unkempt room, or hall, where wealth is pointless. To be sure, "wealthy support would surely be *welcome*, but wealth is definitely not worshipped." Such services are often led by a pious rabbi, who owns a sound knowledge of Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and their commentaries, as well as "a strong sympathetic concern for the underprivileged, the depressed, the forlorn, and the poor." Were this idol-worshipping Apikoros to avail himself regularly of such an environment, he "might find himself radically transformed into a Jew again, with no false gods, no idols," and, of course, no mixing of milk and meat.

The Assimilationist

The "Assimilationist Jew," as Mamet depicts him is basically a "winter Jew." Torn between the conflicting claims of the solstice holidays—Hanukka and Christmas—the Assimilationist will argue that we dare never deprive our children of a "deserved treat" by denying them the pleasure of celebrating Christmas, "while posturing themselves before the waning sun, singing heartily a wide variety of carols," thereby confirming that "Jewish guilt" and "Jewish anxiety" are not necessarily Jewish at all but "rather a universal desire to revert to paganism." For that hurtful "abandonment of his own race and culture, the Assimilationist will suffer the pangs of his treason. For the trimming of a 'Hanukka bush' is really a desire of man to revert to paganism."

But religion came into being, Mamet argues, to supplant the anomie and excess of paganism. Humans, individually, and all religions, generally, have always been caught in a "dynamic struggle between reverting or deciding to supersede the pagan." Hence the answer for the Christian should naturally be Christianity and for the Jew, Judaism. But because the modern Jew, in the main, is less aware of his own religion and "its opportunities for the fundamental," he may suppose that the "errors he finds in his own religion can only be cured by the embrace of another," resulting, of course, in a vast increase of current Assimilationsts.

Of all the many Assimilationists roaming our present American Jewish world, Mamet chose for a healthy share of opprobrium none other than Noam Chomsky, the famous, or is it infamous, professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Displaying a special dislike of him, Mamet derides this disaffected Jew, who declares consistently, among other things, that "Zionism is criminal," and nothing more than a late twentieth-century affirmation that all Jews are "business cheats." And though Chomsky may argue that "to endorse a vendetta against the innocent based on religion is obscene criminality," he still sees fit "to understand such vendettas, as long as they are carried out against the Jews generally, and Israel in particular." Hence, our distinguished academic refuses to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, referring to it only as a "phantom state with no right to exist."

Furthermore, though Chomsky would argue that Jews in France, for example, have "a right to live unmolested lives" but that "Israel has no right to protect its citizens."
Small wonder, therefore, that those who follow Chomsky repeat constantly this jarring assertion: "My parents were Jewish but I do not consider myself Jewish . . . ." To such disoriented negativists, Mamet raises this inevitable question: "Are over four thousand years of cultural, genetic, and religious affirmatives now to be abrogated by the hearty embrace of secularity?" To which Mamet replies: "Should Chomsky and his variety of assimilationists ever find themselves in trouble in either the Arab, French, or in any other country across the globe they so lovingly admire, they should forever know that "Israel would offer them a home under the 'Right of Return.'"

Taken together these three "brotherly" representatives of the Wicked Son, seeking to acculturate or assimilate into American life, have willfully separated themselves from the faith of their fathers. The religious past of their Jewishness was, obviously, also hollowed out. How thin and fragile, therefore, their grasp of the old world they left behind and the new world they swiftly adopted. Moving rapidly into the mainstream of American life, they apparently persuaded themselves to modify, omit, or

suppress the traditions of their own people.

This de-emphasis of their heritage, cultural identity, and religious observance actually mirrors, in good part, Mamet's own life. For he too recognizes that his early disassociation with his people was the "result not only of assimilation but even of self-hatred, something that was no one's fault but his own." As indicated above, it took an attendance at the *bat mitzvah* services for his niece, among some other such experiences, to connect him with his race, people, Israel, his own history, and the wisdom and solace of his own tradition.

In addition to tradition, one is motivated to ask, is there possibly a cure for the Wicked Sons of our day? Chief among the cures, Mamet frequently suggests, is the element of "belonging." In fact, he devotes a chapter in this work to the absolute need for the same, entitled "Belonging." "To me," he begins with this glowing assertion, "life consists in belonging . . . because the opposite of tribal life is a life of anxiety, loneliness, and loss." And for him, the ultimate virtue of "belonging," of course, is the theater, movies, and the arts. Of all the hermetic groups he has ever joined in his life, the theater remains most impressive and consistent because it revolves around "filial piety." While working there, he constantly experienced its "human language, responsibility to learn, to instruct, and its sense of timelessness and history." Lessons, too, of how to control "anger, sloth, lust on the one hand, and on the other, acts of kindness, helpfulness forbearance, or even silence," all of which came naturally to him while on the set.

Needless to say, however, not everyone could be as fortunate as Mamet. Others can experience similar virtues by joining any of a host of organizations dealing with poverty, health care, senior citizens, orphans, and so forth, all of which confirms Mamet's own view that the "Jew is not only made and instructed but also commanded to live in the world and enjoy those things God has permitted him."

But we also know that, lest we continue raising additional generations of "Wicked Sons," the Jew is instructed, first and foremost, as mentioned above, to become a Jew. It begins simply, as Mamet agrees, with daily prayer, to be followed ideally with an hour or two of study of some classic Judaic texts, fully translated and annotated, of Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Jewish history, ethics—alone or with friends. And, lest we dare forget—the Passover *Haggadah*.

And if Mamet boasts that he never walked through a "stage door or onto a movie set without the thrill of belonging," he was fortunate in experiencing that thrill while attending, and participating, in the celebration of the Passover *Seder*. He proudly records that experience for the common reader: "This love of community, this love of knowledge, this joy of immersion in history, this thirst for group approval, for moral perfection, this endless variety of vertical and horizontal connection, these are all open to the Jew as both his right and his responsibility."

III. *Anti-Semitism*

Whatever their present or future orientation on the American and/or world scene, these "Four Sons" will inevitably face a condition that has plagued world Jewry for four millennia, or ever since the birth of the biblical brothers Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau. And that, of course, is the question of anti-Semitism, in all its raging and grisly forms ever since then, up to our very own day. For throughout the history of mankind, anti-Semitism "has been inevitable, at times waxing or waning, but always inevitable." What troubles Mamet most, however, is that it has become so rampant in our own day, especially since the establishment of the State of Israel, some 60 years ago, that it has "morphed into the rhetoric of reason."

In fact, Mamet actually categorizes the general arguments of our average Christian neighbors, past and present, in these terms: a) I have nothing against the Jews per se, I am merely speaking against Israel; b) I am merely stating the obvious, for I mean no harm to individual Jews or the Jewish people, but it is a fact that Jews control . . . . I do not say this is good or bad, only that it is so; c) Jews killed

the Christian god. I do not say this should influence our contemporary thinking but there it is in the Gospels." And in the Arab world, Israel is denounced as a modern instance of the "blood libel," with Muslim replacing Christian blood. And Israel's response to the constant bombings of its innocent citizens is listed by them as "reprisals and retaliation," when, in fact, they are made by Israel only in self-defense, or in its unending struggle for survival.

All of which is *not* to say that Mamet has in this, and other recent works, suddenly awakened to the ravages of anti-Semitism everywhere in the world, especially in or about Israel. It is the result, in good measure, to the recent awakening of the Jew inside himself, in addition to the continued ferment in his mind of the condition of world Jewry. For, outside the theater and movie set, he has searched his own beginnings to find not only what may be missing in his life but also the life of his fellow Jews in America. For how else explain his extended critique of American Jewry in this work—and under what authority? But when one truly cares, authority may not always be necessary. And Mamet cares.

Cares enough, in fact, that some 12 years ago, in another volume of short essays, *Make-Believe Town*, he reasoned more powerfully—for this reader, at least—than in *The Wicked Son* the shallowness of our general reasoning of the causes of anti-Semitism. It demands a careful reading:

Jew hating is not caused by Jews. It does not even arise out of a misconception. It does not even arise of a need to hate Jews. It arises from a need to hate. We Jews are not the cause of anti-Semitism, nothing we have done caused it. We are just its approved victim . . . . we cannot cure it, and it is not only folly but self-destructive to try. We can only defend ourselves against it. Explanation, reason, and, importantly, *tolerance* in response to anti-Semitism are disastrous forces . . . . It is not that anti-Semites will make the problem worse, but they will distract us from the danger of defenselessness. Reason is not a defense against anti-Semitism. The least appearance of race hatred is a questioning whose end is murder . . . . anti-Semitism is not ignorance, it is insanity—human rage against a target deemed both allowed and unprotected. It is caused by the victim.

To all that genuine reasoning, the common reader would say "Amen."

Mamet, in his sympathetic mood, adds this postscript: "Should the *Wise Son* ever ask: 'Why the Holocaust?' he is expressing a wish that this generation should be spared."

IV. *The Exogamist as Wicked Son*

Of all the fascinating titles Mamet assigned to each of the 37 short chapters of this work, none is more intriguing than the one he chose for the thirty-third: "Judaism: the House that Ruth Built." It moves the reader to wonder at once: What do Yankee Stadium in the Bronx and Babe Ruth have in common with Judaism? Obviously, one realizes immediately: really nothing. For Mamet's clever reference here is rather to the biblical Ruth, who, after much personal suffering, built a "Ruthian" home of historical and future royalty in Bethlehem, millennia ago. For Mamet, apparently, the biblical Ruth became the paradigm for "exogamy," or "marriage outside of a specific tribe, or a similar social unit."

Deciding to employ this clever metaphor to his promotion of exogamy as a possible solution to some of Jewry's problems of survival, he apparently forgot to study a little more carefully the Book of Ruth, itself a "little epic and idyllic whole," with some of its classical commentaries. Had he done so, he would have learned the historical significance of two unforgettable statements Ruth uttered when Naomi, her destitute mother-in-law, suggested sadly that Ruth, in her own widowhood, return to her Moabite people and their past. Ruth refused—utterly! She intoned, instead, her two heartrending replies, after insisting on cleaving to Naomi: "Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God." By which she obviously meant to convey, of course, her unalterable commitment to His laws given at Sinai, including, as Rashi adds, "all the various punishments for their transgressions." In other words: no compromises!

And, if destiny should decide one day that Ruth would marry the "kinsman" who would "redeem" her, he too would be required to observe the laws and customs appertaining to exogamy, as defined in chapter four of her Book. All of which Boaz, her "kinsman," performed unconditionally, of course, in front of a group of Judges and an assembly of scholarly witnesses.

What puzzles this reader, however, is why Mamet, lecturing the multitude of "fallen away" Jews on the issue of their Jewish survival, did not first cite those famous earlier lines, uttered by his own favorite biblical figure, the patriarch Abraham, the father of his people? Seriously concerned about his son's marital life, we need only recall, Abraham uttered his unforgettably restrictive words to his senior servant, before sending him on his way, to search for the appropriate wife for his son. "And Abraham said: I will make you swear by the Lord . . . that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac . . . . The Lord . . . will send his angel before you and you will get a wife for my son from there" (Gen. 24:1–6).

And Rebecca, in turn, thinking of her son Jacob's future married life, cried, in her angst, to Isaac: "I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman . . . what good would my life be to me?" (Gen. 27:46).

So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying: "You shall not take a wife from the Canaanite women. Go to Padden-Aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take a wife from the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother . . . . Jacob obeyed his father and mother and had gone to Paddan-Aram" (Gen. 28:1–6).

And even Esau, the incarnation of the "Wicked Son," realizing his parents' objection to exogamy, followed suit and went to Ishmael, and took a wife in addition to those he already had: Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael, son of Abraham, sister of Nabaioth . . . ." (Gen. 28:1–7).

Lest one conclude that the Jewish denunciation of exogamy remained forever buried in ancient biblical times, we are repeatedly reminded that what Abraham rigorously championed filtered down steadily through the ages till all the laws prohibiting exogamy were clearly enumerated at Sinai, as recorded formally in the Talmud and later incorporated in Maimonides and the *Codes of Civil Law*. And thereafter discussed endlessly, in all of its legal, social, and communal intricacies in the vast responsa literature written and published since then to our very day. What happened in Bethlehem merely reaffirmed what was previously formulated at Sinai and practiced faithfully since then in all instances.

Nevertheless, Mamet persists in believing that "Ruthian homes," built on "modern exogamy," should be spread across America. So that he opens this chapter with a little story he had often heard about a "fallen away Jew," who when asked "Why did you give it up?" (*it* meaning Judaism), replies: "I had a bad experience with a rabbi." And he defends himself further with a tautology: "I left because rabbis are bad; rabbis are bad because Judaism is bad; I know this because I met a bad rabbi." If "bad rabbis" cause that continuing "falling away of so many Jews," why then does Mamet continue to quote, approvingly, a formal statement by a large contingent of rabbis, who promote exogamy, to save the many "fallen away Jews," who continue "to give it up?"

Here, then, is that statement:

Many contemporary rabbis have written most positively about the benefits of modern intermarriage. It is not, they point out, the non-Jews who dilute and threaten the community with so many 'fallen away Jews.' We have seen frequent examples of the non-Jewish partners bringing his or her spouse back to Judaism.

One is tempted to inquire immediately whether one of these "nameless rabbis" may have been responsible for denying him a meaningful bar mitzvah celebration he laments so bitterly. Or maybe one or two of them, or more, ratified his personal experiences with exogamy? And how many of these rabbis may have added, sadly, to the countless "fallen away Jews" who now constitute some 48 to 51 percent of American Jewry and have left the fold permanently? Or, were they motivated to spread exogamy to fill some of their own diminishing membership files?

And even if, as Mamet argues further, exogamy might encourage the non-Jewish partner to persuade his or her spouse to attend Sabbath services, neither one knows or understands the barest

meaning of the prayer book, its traditions, or practices. Even the most modern translation of that book hardly ever results in any greater religious practice, unless one is first taught by competent instructors, or highly educated and concerned teachers of whatever rank the classic meaning of prayers. Otherwise, confusion and uninterest follow. “Belonging” alone, despite Mamet’s advocacy of it, shall not, as indicated above, accomplish any significant change in the exogamist. As everyone should know, the laws, practices, and traditions or any other aspect of Judaism demands consistent study, reading, practice, and meaningful experience.

Truthfully, need one really have to remind Mamet that even in the House that Ruth built in the Bronx, or in any other of such “Ruthian houses” across America, there exist any number of works—the most current being *Official Rules Book of Major League Baseball* of some 224-page length—without which nothing could proceed successfully on, or off, the playing field? And woe unto the umpire or baseball executive who, failing to recall consistently—especially umpires—any of those rules during a challenged play or other crisis, would then find themselves threatened, or verbally assaulted, by players and fans, or worse, demoted to the minor leagues, or even to the amateur little leagues. True of baseball, it is no less true—even more so, in fact—of the house that “Ruth” built in Bethlehem. All of which moves this sympathetic reader to conclude that, lest infatuation trump judgment, Mamet, in chapter 27 of this engaging book, finds himself striking out.

Before returning this book to the shelves of Mamet’s “self-authored” library, this reader was moved to recall, interestingly, Clem Yeobright, the native in Thomas Hardy’s novel *The Return of the Native.* For Clem, “inwoven” with the heath of his boyhood, severed his relations, with his roots by, of all things, working for a jeweler in Paris, a “place and occupation at the opposite pole from the heath.” In returning to the “heath,” Clem “unconsciously wishes to recover the organic connections with his roots.” But, having acquired radical ideas in Paris, he genuinely aims to educate and modernize the “heath” folk, without realizing that he would, by making them self-consciously critical, destroy the organic community he wishes to rejoin.

In some ways Mamet, too, left his people to gain national and international acclaim as one of America’s leading playwrights and movie producers. Having acquired some new and radical ideas in Hollywood, theaters, and movies across the country, including “exogamy,” he now wishes to modernize the “heath” folk of his own past with some new ideas, such as advanced in this book, by promoting “Ruthian homes” across the country. All of which would certainly have a deleterious effect on the American Jewish community. The return of this native’s ideas would surely create chaos, a chaos that would sadly rob the Jew of his identity.

And yet, it becomes abundantly clear to any Mamet enthusiast, if asked to which “House” does our renowned playwright belong, the House in the Bronx, or the House in Bethlehem, should direct the questioner to the following passage in this work: “Judaism as a spiritual, ethical, or social practice has at its core a mystery so deep that not only is its existence hidden from the uninitiated, but its practices are hated, scorned, reviled, and murdered as necromancers. What is the fear the Jew engenders that manifests itself as hatred? Perhaps it is caused by his historical absolute, terrifying with certainty, that there is a God.”

[i] David Mamet: *The Wicked Son*, New York, Schocken Books, 2006.

[DEA1]David—I don’t know how to get rid of this line. Please remove. Thanks!