



American Talmud

The Cultural
Work of Jewish
American Fiction

Ezra Cappell

American Talmud

SUNY series in Modern Jewish Literature and Culture

Sarah Blacher Cohen, editor

American Talmud

The Cultural Work of
Jewish American Fiction

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To my wife, Ilisa, who always believes.

*To the memory of Charles Cappell:
Zionist, survivor, grandfather.*

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INTRODUCTION

You don't have to be Jewish to be a compulsive interpreter, but,
of course, it helps.

—Harold Bloom

PARADISE REGAINED?

The Babylonian Talmud¹ contains two distinct parts: *Halacha and Aggadah*. *Halacha* refers to any legal issues and their discussion, while *Aggadah* comprises anything outside the legal sphere. *Aggadah* encompasses roughly one quarter of the Talmud as a whole and generally consists of stories and homilies, advice on ethics, biographies of wise men, and *midrashim* or interpretations of important, as well as confusing and troubling, biblical passages. The following *aggadic* passage, taken from Tractate *Menachot*, is a typical example of the genre:

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. (Talmud Bavli: *Menachot* 29b)

This *aggadic* short story² 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 (once again, especially its *aggadic* sections) 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.

By arguing that twentieth- and twenty-first-century Jewish American fiction writers have been codifying a new Talmud, an American Talmud, I am making a value judgment: I am forcefully suggesting that the literary production of Jews in America be seen as one more stage of rabbinic commentary on the scriptural inheritance of the Jewish people. The defining hallmark of rabbinic literature is its ongoing interpretation of history. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes that the rabbis “did not set out to write a history of the biblical period; they already possessed that. Instead they were engrossed in an ongoing exploration of the meaning of the history bequeathed to them, striving to interpret it in living terms for their own and future generations” (*Zakhor* 20). Although Yerushalmi is speaking about the redactors of the Talmud, I cannot think of a more exact definition for the role of Jewish American fiction writers and the work they have produced.

Yet before we get carried away with simplistic comparisons between rabbinic thought patterns and Jewish American literature, there are those who would surely say that while the two literary modes

share certain characteristics which structure their flights of fancy (all writing must share something in common), the two part company over a crucial difference. Anyone schooled in even the basics of Talmudic argument (surely the thirteen years of Talmud lectures I endured in Yeshiva are not necessary to make this point) would say that Jewish American fiction and rabbinic literature diverge over the centering element of all rabbinic imaginative writing: scripture. Rabbinic *aggadah* and storytelling always return to the dominant force of scriptural text. It is the Old Testament that so comforted Moses in the *aggadic* Talmudic passage quoted above. To paraphrase Robert Frost: without scripture, *aggadic* literature might be parallel to writing free verse: “playing tennis with the net down.”

But this line of thought begs the question of just how free form is Jewish American literature? Do Jewish American writers also in fact have a holy scripture that they return to after each new variation on fictional form? Furthermore, what would Jewish American fiction writers place in their American Holy Ark: *Goodbye Columbus*, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, *Call It Sleep*?

The very belatedness of Jewish American writers forces them to return time and again, whether consciously or not, to a centering text in their work, and yes, they too, much like the rabbinic writers of old, are centered by scripture. Jewish American writers also, perhaps less slavishly than their Babylonian counterparts, often refer to scripture, sometimes doing so without full awareness of being under scriptural sway. I do not mean to suggest that Jewish American writers are born with an innate feel for Jewish texts, but the writers I have chosen to discuss in this book all contribute to what I would call an *American Talmud*. Each writer in this study responds to the belatedness of being a twentieth- or twenty-first-century Jew with his or her particular literary style, yet however far they may stray from Jewish tradition, these writers often return to the centering force of Judaism: scripture and the Holy Books. Although there are numerous writers who might meaningfully contribute toward the formation of an American Talmud—Philip Roth and Cynthia Ozick immediately spring to mind—I have chosen the writers studied in this book not as an exclusive set, but as representative of a particularly diverse and interconnected sample of Jewish American fiction writing. Henry Roth’s gloss on Lurianic Kabbalah, Bernard Malamud’s attempt at Holocaust representation, Saul Bellow’s ongoing engagement with Jewish history and memory (whose work might collectively be viewed as a late twentieth-

century *midrash*), Allegra Goodman's satire on the misuse of the Haggadah in contemporary Passover services, Thane Rosenbaum's critique of contemporary Jewish ritual, Rebecca Goldstein's formulation of an ethical aesthetic for Holocaust representation: all these writers are creating a new chapter to Jewish tradition and postrabbinic thought. In a postmodern, postfaith world, these writers are no longer attempting to "Justify the ways of (an increasingly absent) God to man." What they are attempting through their strong agonistic interpretive and imaginative powers, is in the words of Harold Bloom, to "open up the Bible to [their] own suffering" (*Zakhor* xxiii). In doing so they recreate, in postwar America, the vital link to a covenantal relationship, a relationship brutally damaged in the Holocaust, while they concurrently interpret Jewish history in vivid fictional color for their own and for future generations. Indeed, if Yerushalmi insists that for nineteenth-century Jews "history becomes what it had never been before—the faith of fallen Jews" (86), then I would maintain that literature, or more specifically Jewish American fiction, becomes the faith for fallen contemporary Jews searching for an artistic validation by which to understand and account for the horrific history of the twentieth century.

When thinking of the numerous parallels between Jewish American fiction and traditional Jewish texts and culture, it is important to be reminded of Rabbi Adin Steinsalz's remarks on the Babylonian Talmud: "Although its main objective is to interpret and comment on a book of law, it is, simultaneously, a work of art that goes beyond legislation and its practical application. And although the Talmud is, to this day, the primary source of Jewish law, it cannot be cited as an authority for purposes of ruling" (4). Perhaps we owe the Talmud's continued relevance for Jews in America as much to its entertainment value, as for its legal and religious purposes. *Daf yomi* (lit: a page a day) classes during which a double-sided page of Talmud is discussed in about an hour, usually after morning prayers, have proliferated across America. The *daf yomi* format has kept pace with modern and postmodern technological advancements. At first, lectures were available on audiotape; now, however, people follow Talmud classes on CD-Rom, over the internet, or most conveniently on special iPods called DafPods. To underscore the popularity of this practice, there is even a dedicated *daf yomi* car on the Long Island Rail Road for commuters to join in with on their way to work in Manhattan. The recent *siyum hashas*, a party celebrating the completion of the entire 2,711 double-

sided pages of the Talmud, a process which takes seven-and-a-half years to complete, drew twenty thousand people to a sold-out Madison Square Garden.³ Additionally, more than one hundred thousand people participated in concurrent parties held across North America, arguably the largest single book party in American literary history.

This renaissance or return to traditional Jewish texts and modes of study has much relevance to *American Talmud*. This is especially true when we consider the primary “objectives” of Jewish American fiction, which while not being didactic, perhaps inadvertently become a primary centering force in the lives of American Jews and has assumed a larger role in the return to traditional Jewish identification in America than has previously been realized.⁴

ANXIOUS INTERPRETERS

Harold Bloom has said that “You don’t have to be Jewish to be a compulsive interpreter, but, of course, it helps” (*Zakhor* xxiii). This obviously applies to Bloom himself, as much as it attaches to the only two modern writers he believes write a genuinely “Jewish” literature: Freud and Kafka. Bloom goes on to suggest that what Jewish writing attempts to interpret is the Bible, or more specifically all Jewish literature worthy of the moniker implicitly asks the difficult question, “How to open the Bible to one’s own suffering?” (xxiii).

Bloom’s negative formulation would seem to fit rather well with my conception of a theological Jewish literature. Despite the seemingly limited role the Bible and biblical themes would have within the wider scope of twentieth-century literature written in America, biblical themes do in fact animate much of *Jewish* American fiction, certainly in the Bloomian sense of opening the Bible to one’s own personal afflictions. As Bloom suggests “What holds together modern Jewish writing, whether it be in Hebrew or Yiddish, in German or in American English, is the Jewish Bible” (xxv).

Traditionally the term “Jewish writing” referred to liturgical or holy books, not works of entertainment or diversion, what we might consider as fiction writing. In fact, despite the prevalent belief to the contrary, Jews have traditionally not been interested in writing history either. To show the low esteem that medieval Jewry had for historical works, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi quotes the preface to the 1554 edition of *Dibrey ha-yamim*, to which the following lines were appended:

When the author's nephew, Zerahiah Halevi,
 saw the glory of this book, and the nectar of its honeycombed words,
 the Lord lifted his spirit and he began to speak.
 So he opened his mouth with song and hymn, and declared:
Let anyone who delights in a time that was before ours
take this chronicle and read it when his sleep wanders. (67)

In his discussion of this passage Yerushalmi makes obvious Zerahiah's allusion to the Book of Esther in which King Ahashveros's book of days is brought to him when "his sleep wanders" (67). We may conclude that by as late a date as 1554, historical works were still largely considered *bitul z'man*, a waste of valuable time which could instead be devoted to studying the sacred works of the Torah. Had the rabbis been aware of novels, how much greater a waste of time might they have found fictional works, books whose *raison d'être* is for pure entertainment without any didactic purpose at all?

A highly unlikely source, Cynthia Ozick, recently makes just such a case. Given that Ozick is one of the most prominent and highly regarded Jewish American novelists, her recent characterization of the Jewish American novel as a specious concept would seem shocking. Yet when one considers Ozick's long-stated antipathy to being labeled a Jewish American writer, her dismissal of Jewish American writing seems less a radical departure and more a reworking of her previous claims that writers must be unfettered in their creation of art. In a splashy article on the front page of the Arts section titled "What's a Jewish Book?" *The Forward* commissioned responses from two leading Jewish American intellectuals to argue the case. Ozick's response appeared side by side with noted Yiddishist Ruth Wisse's article on the same subject. Ozick begins: "What is a Jewish book? A narrow definition—but also conceptually the widest—would chiefly include the Torah and the Talmud (the Hebrew Bible and the other texts that strive to un-riddle the Job-like vagaries of the human heart while urging it toward the moral life" (B1). Fair enough. But in the very next paragraph Ozick begins to show her hand: "A Jewish book is didactic. It is dedicated to the promotion of virtue attained through study" (B1). Once Ozick has set up her straw-man definition of a Jewish book, it is not much of a reach toward her dismissal of the very concept of a Jewish American novel. What sound-minded reader would read a novel for didactic purposes? Or as Ozick says: "If a novel's salient aim is virtue, I want to throw it against the wall" (B1). Perhaps Oscar Wilde

put it best in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything” (3).

Similarly, answering the same question about just what is Jewish American literature, Ruth Wisse bitterly complains about the paucity of Jewish content within contemporary Jewish American novels. Wisse traces this “insufficiency” not necessarily to the novelist (although that has previously often been the problem) but to the Jewish American public who are largely ignorant of things Jewish. Wisse writes: “Our present anxiety about Jewish literature derives not from a slump in contemporary Jewish writing but from the insufficiencies of American Jewish life” (B1).

To whom is the “our” in the above passage referring: Wisse and Ozick, or other Jewish American literary critics? I happen to be optimistic about the current Jewish American literary scene. Not only do I completely disagree with Wisse’s “anxiety” about Jewish American literature, but Ozick’s and Wisse’s remarks beg the question of whether or not the only two alternatives for Jewish literature are either as a didactic guide for the promotion of moral virtue or as a license to indulge in the demonic freedom of a Norman Mailer novel. Are novels ever only one extreme or the other? Taking this logic one step further, do Ozick’s own novels pass her literary litmus test? If they do not, might we consider, for example, *The Messiah of Stockholm* and *Levitation*, as well as her latest *Heir to the Glimmering World* quintessentially Jewish in nature?

Momentarily putting aside Ozick’s and Wisse’s complaints, and despite the *halachic* (Jewish law) proscription of *bitul z’man* or *bitul torah*, I believe that, far from being a waste of time otherwise devoted to Torah study, the fiction discussed in this study serves a cultural purpose similar to the role provided by ancient holy texts, and would thus not necessarily be dismissed by the rabbis and redactors of the Talmud. From my literary perspective, the reading of Jewish novels might be seen as an act of Jewish renewal, and it deserves to be analyzed in light of the obvious (and well-documented) vitality of postwar Jewish life in America.

ENLIGHTENED JEWISH AMERICAN WRITERS?

More than ten years ago Mark Shechner could confidently proclaim that Jewish American literature may only be understood in light of its

internal history, a history Shechner proclaims has a dialectical framework and which can be traced back to the *Haskalah* (the Enlightenment that swept through Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century). Shechner sees all of Jewish American literature as an extension of the *Haskalah's* challenge to a traditional mode of life, the *halachah*, or Jewish law. All of Jewish American fiction may be placed beneath Shechner's rubric of "secular fiction, story-telling without liturgical intent" (84).

It is precisely the dissolution of a coherent Jewish community which is the hallmark of the *Haskalah*, an age Shechner maintains we are still within. Shechner argues: "the one enduring subject of all Jewish writing from Mendele to Philip Roth has been the end of Judea as a unified moral community" (85). Shechner suggests that if the hallmark of pre-Enlightenment Jewish literature was communal and liturgical in nature, Jewish literature in America bears the marks of Emersonian individualism and self-fulfillment—precisely the antithesis of a liturgical literature.⁵

Is Shechner's argument still relevant today? Is the Enlightenment the *mesorah* (lit: the tradition) that Jewish writers have inherited from the European masters Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Seforim, and I. L. Peretz? Did Bruno Schulz, sitting alone in his decrepit Drohobych studio, gain inspiration from the Enlightenment? Can Isaac Babel's unique contribution to world literature be reduced to a *drash* (sermon) upon Emersonian individualism? Or, in vastly different and idiosyncratic ways, have both writers (Babel and Schulz) returned to the older and more stable tradition encoded in Jewish texts, the Babylonian Talmud, and Scripture? Babel and Schulz are the progenitors of genuine Jewish American literature in America; they have indelibly stamped their style onto contemporary Jewish American literature even more so than have I. L. Peretz and Shalom Aleichem (Tevya notwithstanding).⁶

THE HISTORICAL JEWISH RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY

In the aftermath of assimilation, by the late 1960s many of America's foremost literary critics had predicted the demise of Jewish literature. Famously, Irving Howe spoke of an attenuating of material due to the loss of Yiddish in America. What Howe, Leslie Fiedler, and other literary critics failed to account for in their formulations was the traditional Jewish literary response to tragedy. Had these critics been

schooled in Jewish foundational texts—biblical, Talmudic, Kabbalistic—they would never have made their dire predictions. If Howe had understood the vast Jewish literary tradition, instead of introducing his collection, *Jewish-American Stories*, in 1977 with a dour obituary, he might have celebrated the obvious renewal of Jewish literature in America, a renewal that corresponded to a newfound Jewish identification in the diaspora after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. These critics would have laced their commentaries with pointed questions for what would become a post-Holocaust and postbiblical, but not necessarily postassimilational Jewish American literature at the close of the twentieth century. Much like Bloom, these literary critics might have asked “How does one accommodate a fresh and vital religious impulse, in a precarious and even catastrophic time of troubles, when one inherits a religious tradition already so rich and coherent that it allows very little room for fresh speculations?” (Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* 33). While I disagree with Bloom’s intuiting of a closed theological system, I agree with his mode of inquiry. Such a line of inquiry would have led Howe and Fiedler to understand along with Louis Ginzberg, who while introducing the Babylonian Talmud stated that “postbiblical Jewish Literature was predominately interpretive and commentative” (qtd. in Bloom 33), that far from ending Jewish literature, assimilation was just one more theme within the ongoing drama of Jewish literary production in America.

In other words, throughout Jewish history just when Jewish literature seems to have run its course, Jewish writers set about belatedly (to borrow a Bloomian concept) reinventing themselves. This becomes obvious to even a casual student of Jewish literature through the ages. After great turmoil, instead of laying down in darkness Jews have traditionally reinvented themselves through texts. This was true in Yavneh after the destruction of the Second Temple, it was true after the expulsion from Spain in the Middle Ages that led to Lurianic Kabbalah,⁷ and it was true in Eastern Europe in the rise of Hasidism and Hasidic literature as a counterbalance to the ravages of the *Haskalah*, the Enlightenment. It is no less true in a post-Holocaust (and postassimilation) America. Jewish American writers have for some time now been contributing to a radical reworking and a radical reimagining of Jewish texts in the new world. In this study I hope to begin an explication of some of those belated, but no less strong, attempts at theological and imaginative refashioning.

JEWISH FICTION OVER JEWISH HISTORY?

In a postfaith world, contemporary Jewish American writing is essentially revisionist in nature and is, therefore, open to numerous interpretive modes and meanings. As a result of its inherent rootlessness and its perpetual state of exile and reinvention, Jewish literature might be perceived, I argue, as paradigmatic of the postmodern condition. In *Framing the Margins*, Phillip Brian Harper has noted “postmodernist theory suggests that our sense of the individual psyche as an integrated whole is a necessary misconception, and that various technological, economic, and philosophical developments of the late twentieth century demonstrate to us the psyche’s fundamentally incoherent and fragmentary, or ‘decentered’ nature” (3). In his study Harper attempts to analyze “key sociopolitical factors” which have traditionally led to marginal groups being “decentered” in America (3). Harper critiques Fredric Jameson’s juxtaposition of the historicist versus the poststructuralist “position.” The historicist perspective assumes that a centered subject once existed, but as a result of the fragmented state of postmodern culture such a state no longer exists. By questioning the comparable effects a “decentered subject” has had on “socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised” (3) groups in postmodern America, Harper reveals the inadequacy of postmodern theory’s accounting for marginalized cultures in America. While following through the logic of his argument, Harper makes a startling observation: “Granting the historicist claim for ‘a once existing centered subject,’ it must also be acknowledged that, for certain groups in the United States—people of African descent, for instance—the historical status of such a subjectivity is precisely that of *never having existed*, due to the historical distribution of the power to conceive of oneself as a centered, whole entity” (11). In *American Talmud* I make a similar argument concerning the historically transplanted and perpetually exiled state of the Jewish people. My argument helps account for the redactors of the Talmud having shied away from historical narratives in favor of *aggadic* “fictional” flights of fancy. Not only were the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud firm believers in the divinity of scripture—Bloom has noted they “kept the line clear between text and commentary” (53)—they were also master fictionists.

Much like their Kabbalistic predecessors, the postmodern audience for Jewish American literature, as well as postmodern and contemporary writers, privilege both text (scripture) and commentary (interpreta-

tion and invention). This is certainly true for Henry Roth, who, despite painful and debilitating rheumatoid arthritis continued working on his monumental last novel *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.⁸ Furthermore, the case of Henry Roth highlights the continued relevance of commentary and interpretation by the diasporic Jewish community in America. If not for several astute Jewish American literary critics, Fiedler and Howe among them, Roth might have remained a forgotten writer. Had *Call It Sleep* not been reissued, what eventually became a sixty-year-long writer's block might be remembered as a lifelong silence; Roth probably would never have attempted his second masterpiece, the postrabbinic *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.⁹ Thus, in contemporary Jewish American fiction, we can trace the traditional dialectic between text and commentary. The paradigmatic component of both biblical and Talmudic texts remains intact, flourishing on the shores of the new world.

In a post-Holocaust diasporic world, most American Jews would prefer the salve of myth to the reality of history. This preference is in keeping with generations of Jews who, in the aftermath of the Spanish inquisition and expulsion, turned in great numbers to mysticism and Lurianic Kabbalah for spiritual sustenance. But for postmodern Jews, myths will no longer suffice. To fill the void left by Jewish history, particularly in the aftermath of the destruction of European Jewry, what postmodern Jews need now are novels. As Yerushalmi states "it is hard to escape the feeling that the Jewish people after the Holocaust stands today at a juncture not without analogy to that of the generations following the cataclysm of the Spanish Expulsion" (99).

In *American Talmud* I hope to better understand the choice that American Jews have made time and again in the difficult years after the cataclysm of the Holocaust. Jewish American society has an insatiable need for novels, and not just any novels, but fictional works that purport to explain the historical situation Jews throughout the diaspora find themselves in, works that dramatize their bifurcated identities, split between their yearning for the stability of tradition while embracing the lures of modernity—identifying what it means to be a covenantal Jew in the postmodern world.

CANONICITY IN *AMERICAN TALMUD*

In ancient Greece, an author worthy of study was called *kanonikos*, "one who comes up to the standard" (Alter, *Canon and Creativity* 1). Since

the modern era, canon formation has become a lens by which to study those who have traditionally been excluded from study, perhaps as a result of ethnicity or religious persuasion. Canon formation is also used as a critical device to reevaluate those chosen as having met the standard.

Werner Sollors speaks of the ways in which the concept of ethnicity, often perceived as an ancient construct, is in reality an invention of the modern period. Sollors says, "The invention of nationalisms and ethnicities must have been peaking in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in a period of very dramatic changes" (*The Invention of Ethnicity* xi). Following Benedict Anderson's logic, Sollors says that in the wake of the French and American revolutions, bourgeois systems developed "which relied on the more *imaginary* ways of connectedness" (xii). Sollors goes on to say that chief among these imaginary means of connection was a national or ethnic literature (xii).

While I would not question the legitimacy of Sollors's argument in relation to most ethnic literatures produced in America, his formulation is misleading in relation to Jewish culture. In perpetual exile since ancient times, for thousands of years (and not just since the modern period), Jews have relied upon *imaginary* texts and words (literature) to sustain a national (ethnic) identity in the diaspora. What are the Babylonian Talmud, and the Bible, if not compilations of the stories that have been deemed central to the history of the Jewish people, the stories worth preserving?

According to Gershom Scholem the primary determining factor for a text's canonicity was precisely its inherent need for analysis and exegesis (Alter, *Canon and Creativity* 16). In a Jewish context, analysis refers to the systematic taking apart of a text, not for the semantic game of de(con)struction, but to translate the beauty of a text into a new critical medium.¹⁰

In attempting to codify an American Talmud, a canon of secular books which merit inclusion, I take my cues from the original canon: the Old Testament. Robert Alter has convincingly argued that the Hebrew Bible, by which he means *Tanach*,¹¹ didn't include a book merely because it represented a prevailing political movement; rather each book was chosen as a consequence of its literary excellence. According to Alter, the canon makers of the Hebrew Bible were conscious of the necessity of "dialectic elements of autocritique" (29). More importantly for our purposes, Alter believes that the canon makers were more interested in forging a national literature based upon high literary merit. Thus Alter maintains "that the bible in Hebrew speaks reso-

nantly, even to the most pious readers, as a collection of great works of literature" (32). How else, Alter asks, to explain the inclusion of the carnivalesque *Book of Esther*, or the erotic *Song of Songs*?

Seen in the glaring light of contemporary biblical scholarship, my critical study of Jewish American fiction (in which I argue for a new American Talmud) seems less revolutionary and more "old school," following the very traditions it would seem, by its secularity, to violate or threaten to supplant. The writers I have chosen for my study all perform this "binocular vision": in an age which for most American Jews is postfaith based and assimilated, these writers are both highly literary and dedicated to helping shape a communal conception of a shared historical moment if not a shared history. Thus these postbiblical Jewish American writers included in this study constitute the latest link in the great chain of Jewish *mesorah* or tradition stretching back thousands of years.

MULTICULTURAL JEWISH?

Recently, several authors have asserted that a reductive multiculturalist ethos is to blame¹² for contemporary Jewish American literature's obscurity and seeming irrelevance to the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century burgeoning multicultural scene. For example, Andrew Furman has argued that Jewish American literature has been excluded from the "canon of victimization." Yet I believe the seeming irrelevance of Jewish American fiction is not the fault of multiculturalist theory, but rather is a consequence of contemporary Jewish American literary critics who often lack the cultural and linguistic tools to interpret diasporic Jewish culture in America.

In popular media Jewish American culture has often been reduced to a "Bagels and Lox," or Woody Allen *shtick* caricature (think of *Seinfeld* and *Friends*), a perspective which is not at all representative of the varied and vibrant contemporary Jewish American cultural scene. Yet there have not been many critics capable of interpreting and decoding that which is most authentically Jewish about Jewish American culture, particularly its literary production. There has yet to appear a group of critics who might counterbalance this misconception of Jewish American culture, perpetuated by popular culture. The end result has been that the vast majority of Jewish American writers have for the large part (with the exception of a "crossover" best-selling success like

Allegra Goodman) toiled in relative, and in some cases complete, obscurity. How many contemporary literary scholars have heard of dazzling Jewish American writers like Steve Stern,¹³ Mark Mirsky, and Hugh Nissenson? Forget about entering the mainstream of literary studies, many of these writers would be happy just to see their novels back in print. Previously, part of the problem with creating a sustained theoretical approach to the Jewish nature of Jewish American fiction is that such an approach requires not just fluency with traditional Jewish texts and culture, but a real expertise in the traditional texts many Jewish American writers make reference to in their fiction, as well as an understanding of the Jewish rituals and praxis which has become more and more prevalent in contemporary Jewish American fiction. Lacking these basic Jewish literary “tools” it has been nearly impossible to interpret Jewish American fiction’s content, let alone appreciate (and disseminate) its high literary art and merit.

In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter claims that the Bible is novelistic. Saying that the Bible employs many of the same literary techniques as prose fiction, Alter points to the Bible’s “artful use of language, the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else” (11). What Alter finds true of the Bible is even more paradigmatic of the Talmud, a book that reads like a gigantic epic novel, a romp through hundreds of years of Jewish diasporic culture. This study hopes to elucidate the Buberistic “I-thou encounter” between Jewish American writers and their readers. To interpret this encounter, I have found traditional biblical and Talmudic analytic tools to be most helpful. The literary “play” which this study undertakes replicates Jewish tradition without supplanting it. Having sojourned with Marx and Freud, Derrida and Foucault, I have belatedly returned to the analytic tools that haunted my Yeshiva training, PaRDeS:

1. Peshat—the literal (simple) explanation
2. Remez—using allusion to explain a passage
3. Derash—to “search” for deeper meanings, to interpret
4. Sod—that which is hidden.

In *American Talmud* my main analytic method will be *derash*, literally a “searching out” for the hidden meanings within Jewish American fiction. This is fitting because Jewish literature itself remains hidden and overlooked not just by literary critics and the academy but by an